

## Tuffy Owl Saves the Day! (or Everyone Can Be Different)

by Zsófia Bán

### Chapter 1.

*In which Edward, who is not Edward, can at last be herself*

There's this city, you know the one, and next to it there's a wood, and in the wood, there's an owl. Yup, seriously, an owl. She used to be called Edward. "Edward?!" I hear you say. She was a girl owl, and she was called Edward, all right? Get over it!

"All the men in our family have been called Edward, so that's that!" spluttered Edward senior, ruffling up his feathers, when little Edward was still wriggling out of her egg.

"But, darling!" said Mama Owl in astonishment. "It's a girl!"

"Poppycock!" Papa Owl snapped back at her. He was stern, but also thick as a plank. Being plank-like, he blended right into the trees, and in the woods you could hardly see him.

"I haven't thought of a girl's name!" grumbled the brand-new father. In his view, the matter was closed. Mama Owl's big, round eyes grew even bigger and rounder, but she didn't dare argue with him. This was how the little owlet got stuck with the name Edward, even though she was a girl. Apart from that, there was nothing special about her. She was neither too large nor too little, more sort of average; just the size of baby owl that children like to draw.

Edward, though, was a real owl, very real indeed. Sometimes, she was amazed herself at how real she was. Like the time she had just woken up, and her stomach started to rumble like crazy.

KRRRRUM!

"Eek! What's that?" said Edward, when she first heard it.

KRRRRUM!

"Yikes! There it goes again! Now what shall I do?"

By then Edward was the only owl in the wood, and there was no one she could ask for advice on owl affairs. Her mother had been finished off by a stray cat the previous winter, so she couldn't ask her. Her father, Edward Senior, had been shot by a poacher, so she couldn't ask him either. There was a rumour going around the round wood that

Edward Senior was in the city now, standing in a shop window, and that he was stuffed.

OH MY GOD!

There was another rumour going around that the shop was owned by a wicked stepmother called Taxidermia or something like that. That her name was there over the door in big, bold, red letters.

“You’d better behave, my boy, or ‘whoosh!’ Taxidermia will whisk you away!”

This was the kind of thing the woodland birds and animals told their children when they were young. Or they would say the young animals would be taken away in a sack to South America.

“And what’s it like, this South America?” asked a fox cub, anxiously.

“Well...it’s a bit rusty on the outside... but gorgeous on the inside!” Edward told the little fox.

She didn’t think parents ought to scare young birds and animals by saying such things.

In fact, she didn’t think the grown-ups ought to be scaring the little ones *at all*. She thought it was the animals who were saying these scary things who should be taken off in a sack to South America!

GRRR!!!

Edward had *firm* opinions on everything. An owl should be firm, she believed.

Shouldn’t she?

There was no-one to give her an answer, though, because some time ago, all the other owls had moved to another wood further away, one that didn’t have so many humans wandering about in it. These humans were always so noisy. They didn’t let the owls sleep during the day, they dropped litter, and, to make matters worse, they frightened off the tasty, furry little rodents the owls had been hoping to gobble up GULP! for dinner. When the owls were going cross-eyed with hunger, they moved over to the next wood.

But nothing could persuade Edward to leave the round wood. Believe it not, she really liked the humans who lived nearby. She was especially fond of the gaggles of happy, raucous children who came to the woods. Whenever she heard them, she felt less alone. And another thing, every time the children caught sight of Edward, they would get super excited. This was pretty flattering, of course. After all, who wouldn’t be excited to see a real, live owl?

“Over here, over here!”

“I saw it first!”

“Oh, no you didn’t!”

“Oh, yes I did!”

This was something the children always argued about, because you got *owl points* for being the first to spot the owl, something Edward found very funny. It was like the game they played called ‘War of Numbers’ when you had to be the first to call out someone else’s number, only with owls. Once, a tiny, ginger-haired girl in glasses had insisted on getting an owl point. She had claimed that she, *yes, she* had been the first to see the owl!

“Yeah, right, Foureyes! Like you could make anything out with those coke bottles on your nose!” the others had scoffed.

At this, the little girl blew her top. Edward, perched up high in a tree, looked on with dismay. She had seen the whole thing, and the girl was right. Edward didn’t like it when the children behaved like this towards each other. *Tut-tut*. If something displeased her, she always said,

TUT-TUT

She’d learned this from her mother.

As she sat there feeling sad and tutting, Edward suddenly had an idea.

She flew down to a lower branch just above the children’s heads, and stuck out her wing, just like a linesman holding out a flag at a football match. She was pointing at the little girl. The other children were so surprised, they almost choked on their chocolate bars.

“What’s it doing?!” the children wondered uneasily. “Is it going to attack us?”

“No, but it *is* trying to tell you that I beat you all!” shouted the ginger-haired girl, her face all red with excitement. She gave a triumphant stamp.

The other children called this little girl Nanah Nobut, because she started every sentence with ‘No, but’. Nanah Nobut and the other children went to the Bear School, which was at Bus End. The bus went no further than Bus End, because beyond it there was only the round wood. After lessons, the children would go into the wood to play.

Edward nodded approvingly at Nanah Nobut’s whoops of triumph. The other children just gaped at her.

“Did you see that?!” they said.

And

“Wow! An owl taking charge of the game! That’s wild!”

“Let’s see if it’s really doing that!” said one of the boys, whose name was Hugo Rabbit. “Let’s play a game of football and make the owl the referee!”

Edward had absolutely no problem with that. She'd watched plenty of football matches being played in the clearing. The children had called the place Treasure Grove, because up till now they'd found:

a penknife

a hipflask

a pair of scissors

a mobile phone

a bunch of keys

a disposable camera

and even a telescope in the grass.

They had kept a careful record of these treasures, using the disposable camera to take a photograph of each one in turn. But then they had nothing they could take a picture of the camera with! This had the children scratching their heads, until Valentin Bilibock decided to make a drawing of it. He was the best at Art. Then they hid the whole lot in a big, rusty skip someone had left at the edge of the woods. This skip was called South America. Telling anyone else about it, especially children from other classes, was forbidden *on pain of death!!!* They had got this expression from *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, when they had seen it at the cinema where Vili Popper's father, Géza Popper operated the projector. The children had seen the film at least ten times, and the whole class knew it by heart. Later, they acted out what they had seen, taking turns to play the parts *because that way it was fair*.

They couldn't let Hugo Rabbit be Johnny Depp every time now, could they?

The children called this game 'The Woodland Cinema', and again, only those who had been in it from the beginning could take part. The children of 3B could beg the children of 3A all they wanted to please let them play at least the enemy, just this once. 3A just dug in their heels and said, "No way!" The Woodland Cinema was sacred. Once in, always in, no matter how stupidly you behaved afterwards. But if you weren't in, no amount of moping and sighing would help you. The rule was that you would only be barred from the game if you gave away any kind of secret to the kids from Class 3B. That was the *Pain of Death*. Luckily, no one had ever had to suffer such disgrace. Which was just as well.

Edward was delighted to be made referee. She even had a sound grasp of the offside rule, though the boys were always complaining that the girls never understood it. What on earth was so difficult about it? huffed Edward, who was a girl herself. See, *that's* why people shouldn't say that kind of thing, she thought. That all girls were like this, and all boys were like that. In the woods, for example, they were always saying that wild boars were dangerous. Well, Vendelin was a wild boar, but he was all right. The

thing is, everyone's different, mused Edward. She was in an especially philosophical mood that day.

When the boys took their places out onto the pitch, the girls protested loudly.

“And what about us? Come on! Seriously? That's not fair!”

At this, the boys, somewhat grudgingly it's true, let the girls in too. The game got under way, and Edward signalled the first foul with a wide sweep of her wings. By raising her left or her right wing, she signalled which team could have a free kick. When she called the first goal by lifting her wings parallel to each other, the children couldn't believe their eyes. When she sent Hugo off for a handball, and Hugo's team crowded round her to complain and to plead with her to think again, Edward stared them down, and pointed off the pitch very firmly with her wing.

“Man!” cried Hugo's team captain, “This owl means business. It's a real toughie!” And from that day forward that's what the children called Edward: Tuffy Owl.

Tuffy Owl was glad to be free of the name Edward, and finally be able to be who she really was. Someone else.

## **Chapter 2.**

### *In which Sleeping Beauty Falls on her Feet*

This was how Tuffy Owl got to know Class 3A. She became great friends with them all, but was especially fond of Nanah Nobut, whom the others – let's be frank – often liked to wind up. They wound her up because they could. Because she let them. They knew that if they wound her up, she would always blow her top, and that gave them a huge kick. When she was fuming with rage, Nanah Nobut's face would go as red as a poppy, her freckles would dance about wildly, and her hair would get even redder (if that were possible). Oh, and her glasses would steam up, too.

That's pretty TUT-TUT, thought Tuffy Owl, shaking her head. She didn't like that kind of thing. At first, she shook her head rather tentatively, then more firmly, and in the end very determinedly indeed. She was getting more and more into this 'tough\_owl' thing. And she didn't need anyone to tell her how to do it. It just came to her, like flying.

One afternoon, the children decided they would go into the woods and play at Sleeping Beauty. But who would be the sleeping princess? Bright-eyed Rozika Lakatos, Sandy's little sister, who he was looking after that afternoon? She wouldn't do, said the children. Like most Roma girls, her hair was too black and her skin too brown, whereas Sleeping Beauty was blonde, with pale, fair skin.

But why can't Sleeping Beauty have black hair? These children can be pretty thick sometimes! thought Tuffy Owl, who had been listening to their discussion from high up in a tree.

"Then let's have Cass Ablanka!" shouted Vili Popper, but the others voted her down too, saying Cass was a bit of a fatso, and Sleeping Beauty was nice and slim.

Unbelievable! These children sometimes really *are* as thick as two short planks! fumed Tuffy Owl to herself, who apart from anything was a bit of a fatso herself. In her opinion, there was no reason why Sleeping Beauty couldn't be too. Unbelievable.

"Liza Varga then!" said Boniface Hirlemon, at which Liza Varga told them all there was no way she was going to be Sleeping Beauty, because she'd promised her mother she'd go home after school and feed the dogs, and they were probably starving by now.

The only girl left was Nanah Nobut.

"Well, she'll have to be Sleeping Beauty," said the children. "After all, she's wimpy enough to be a princess."

Which was not in the least bit true, by the way. Nanah Nobut was actually really sporty and daring. She loved doing PE, dancing, running, and even climbing trees. But none of this stopped her flying off the handle when the children wound her up. And what was worse, she never knew what to say back! So, she just cried and stamped her feet in frustration. Afterwards, of course, when she was already on her way home, some perfect little retort or other would always come to her mind. *Now that's what I should've said!* But then it was too late. And that just made her even crosser, of course.

At the edge of Treasure Grove, there was a lovely rosebush, covered in beautiful, red rosehips. Beside it was a large horse chestnut tree. The children decided that Sleeping Beauty's tower bedroom would be up in this tree. As Sleeping Beauty was also sometimes called Thorn Rose, this prickly rose bush would be like a nameplate on a door telling passers-by who lived there. The princess would be up in the tree sleeping her apparently endless sleep, or at the very least keeping her eyes strictly closed until the prince turned up. Then he would wake her up with a kiss, as was right and proper.

The boy they chose to be the prince was Valentin Bilibock. Valentin and his parents had moved to Hungary a few years before from beyond the faraway mountains, from the Land of the Vampires. At least, that's the story that went round the Bear School. Whether or not it was true, Valentin commanded a great deal of respect in the class. What if it *was* true? they thought. What if he really does know a vampire or two? To be on the safe side they treated him with respect and were also a little afraid of him. As for making friends with Valentin... well... they didn't really.

There was something else about Valentin that was so secret that NOBODY could ever know about it: Nanah Nobut really liked him... She liked his curly, black hair and his

flashing blue eyes, and she liked the way he talked, which was different from the rest of them. He used funny words like *punga* for a bag, and *pityóka* for potatoes. Whatever he said to the others he said in a kind way. If someone didn't have any elevenses, he was happy to split his with them. He was even sometimes prepared to swap when he had brought bread and goose dripping! This was something the boys were ready to fight over, if necessary. But Valentin would reassure them that he'd bring more tomorrow and swap with anyone who hadn't got any today. That's the kind of boy he was. And there was something else about him that the other boys couldn't get their heads around: Valentin was willing to make friends with *girls!* That was so *weird!* What could you do with a girl? they thought, but Valentin clearly had different ideas about this. When, for example, Ifyoo Pleez hid Nanah Nobut's hat, Valentin helped her find it. He told her to ignore Ifyoo Pleez and the others. They didn't do it to be mean, said Valentin, they were just *mischievous*. Ifyoo Pleez was particularly mischievous, though he was the best at English. The word *mischievous* alone cheered Nanah Nobut up. From that day on that's what she and Valentin called the other children. The *Mischeefs* they said, laughing, as if Ifyoo Pleez and the others were something out of a comic book. Nanah Nobut was pleased to be sharing a secret with Valentin. All secrets are good, but a secret you can you share with someone else is the best!

Valentin Bilibock agreed to be the prince right away. He blushed a bit, but he agreed to do it. The *Mischeefs*, however, were once again cooking up some kind of mischief. They put their heads together and whispered conspiratorially. What they were whispering to each other was that they would act out the events leading up to the long sleep, and when the time came for the prince to wake up Sleeping Beauty, they would tell Valentin his mother had sent a message asking him to go home. They knew that Valentin always did what he was told, and if he got a message like that, he would go. And that's what happened.

It was just that Nanah Nobut, who was crouching up in the tree, had no idea about any of this. Of course. As soon as Valentin was out of sight, the others crept quietly away. She'd realise sooner or later that her prince hadn't come, they chuckled to each other. At the same time, they gave strict instructions to Nanah Nobut not to open her eyes until she was kissed.

Really, sometimes these boys were not just mischievous. They were downright mean.

Tuffy Owl had overheard the whole secret plan, of course, and now it was her turn to blow her top. The little rats! she thought. Where did they get their wicked ideas from? Well, she couldn't leave poor Nanah Nobut sitting there all day, could she? She had to do something. But she didn't know what.

Valentin Bilibock really did go home, just as they thought he would. And when all the children had left, and the wood was quiet, Tuffy Owl swooped over to a branch above Sleeping Beauty, who was only pretending to sleep. Hearing the flapping of wings so close by, Nanah Nobut opened her eyes before she could stop herself. She smiled

happily when she saw Tuffy Owl. But she didn't understand what the owl was saying to her. Tuffy Owl seemed to be pointing downwards very firmly with one of her wings.

From the top of the tree, you could see pretty far. And what Nanah Nobut saw was that there was no-one nearby at all...

But rules were rules! She had promised that she would only climb down from the tree when the prince woke her up. She waited a bit, in case she could hear voices coming from anywhere, but the only sound was the warm, early summer breeze in the leaves of the tree. Tuffy Owl gestured towards the ground more and more energetically. Then Nanah Nobut started to think aloud.

"Am I asleep, I wonder? No, I'm very much awake."

Tuffy Owl nodded firmly.

"Is there a prince or such like anywhere here? No, it looks like everyone's gone home."

Tuffy Owl nodded even more energetically.

"Is anyone going to help me get down from this tree? No, but I can manage just fine all by myself!"

At these words, Tuffy Owl slapped her wings together in delight, as if she were clapping. Nanah Nobut sat up, and with no further ado, or princely kiss of any sort, she climbed down from the tree and went home. By the time she finally came through the door, both of her mothers had started to worry about her. Two mothers worrying is twice as bad as one mother worrying. And Nanah Nobut had two. Just as well she turned up when she did!

For her part, Tuffy Owl spent the whole night hooting loudly near the *Mischeefs'* houses, which meant they didn't get a wink of sleep.

TO-WHIT TO-WHOO!! TO-WHIT-TO-WHOO!!

They suspected, of course, that it was Tuffy Owl who had been scolding them all night long, and they knew she had a right to. The *Mischeefs* weren't stupid. They weren't wicked either, just mischievous. The next day at school they were very good, suspiciously good. Their teacher, Miss Mimi, glanced uneasily from one face to another.

What was going on with these boys? she wondered. What was this big, neatly-combed silence all about?

Valentin Bilibock didn't hear what had happened until he got to school, and then he promptly presented Nanah Nobut with ALL his bread and goose dripping! That was even better than a princely kiss. Nanah Nobut gobbled it up in the blink of an eye. The others looked on longingly, but of course they didn't dare ask for any themselves. The



corners of Nanah Nobut's mouth positively gleamed from all the goosefat. The only things brighter were her eyes. At that moment, Tuffy Owl peeped in at the classroom window and was satisfied with what she saw.

The bread and goose dripping, however, reminded her that she had never seen a live goose. What did they look like? she wondered. (*That's how ignorant a city owl is.*)

Still, she found it somewhat reassuring that she'd never heard anyone talk about eating bread and owl dripping.

### Chapter 3

*In which Dini the Fox discovers South America, and gets into trouble, but then why does he have to go sticking his nose into everything?*

One day towards evening, after the children had gone home and were already getting ready for their tea, Dini the Fox happened to be cutting across Treasure Grove when he noticed a strange twinkling off in the distance. Oh no! Don't tell me there are extraterrestrials or zombies in the woods! thought Dini, alarmed, though he couldn't think why an extraterrestrial or a zombie would twinkle. Lately, Dini had often been seen near the houses on the edge of the woods, and some unkind people had spread the rumour that he had rabies. He had been spotted near where Sandy Lakatos and Boniface Hirlemon lived for example, (their families kept hens) even though, supposedly, no self-respecting fox would do that kind of thing, keeping instead a proper distance between the woods and the city as his parents had taught him.

"It's dangerous to get too close to humans, son. You never know what they'll do!" he'd been warned when he was still a fox cub. Young foxes, however, are just like children: if you forbid them to do something, it only makes them all the more curious about it.

The woods were full of dangers, of course they were, but at least the foxes knew how to negotiate them. You could never be sure where you stood with humans. Ever since Edward Senior had been shot down by a poacher, the foxes were especially cautious and wary.

"Watch out!" they would say. "Taxidermia, the wicked stepmother is ready and waiting to jump out any minute!"

And now the humans had made up this story about Dini having rabies... Dini was really put out when he heard about it, of course. He absolutely didn't have rabies. He was just terribly hungry and thirsty. Even though it was still just the beginning of summer, and the children were still going to school, everywhere was so hot and dusty that it was harder and harder to find anything to eat or drink.

The fact of the matter is, thought Dini indignantly, that when wild boar go into the city searching for food, no-one says they've got rabies. When humans talk about them,

they speak only with fear and the greatest respect. Is there any justice in this world? he thought. And after giving the matter some thought, he decided that

NO. THERE'S NO JUSTICE.

He even made a mental note of it:

THERE'S NO JUSTICE.

(It wouldn't do any harm to remember this, thought Dini, if he ever needed to know what there is and what there isn't.)

To make matters worse, people weren't satisfied with spreading false rumours. That had been bad enough, but now they were scattering poison disguised as food, hoping he wouldn't notice and would eat it up. But Dini the fox wasn't beaten yet! Not to put too fine a point upon it, he was convinced that, when it came to cunning, there wasn't an animal in the whole wood that could beat him. The truth was, however, that the only animals taken in by his tricks were the twins Goatcalf and Swallowkid and the Little Fork-Tailed Mouse. The other animals were simply tired of Dini's bigheadedness, and they all gave Dini a wide berth. What's more, they knew all his little wiles inside out. They'd heard, of course they had, that foxes were always cunning, but in their view, THIS fox was most definitely not cunning; he was, in fact, a bit stupid.

For example, he was hopelessly attracted to anything shiny, and though they said to him, "Look here Dini, that's such a *bird* thing!" it was no good. If he saw anything catching the light, he couldn't resist it.

That is precisely what happened now. The sun was going down, its weary rays stretching over the land. Far away, something glinted, and Dini felt he had to go over there and see what it was. As he got closer, it seemed that the twinkling was coming straight from the rusty skip. Dini found this very odd indeed.

Old rusty skips aren't usually shiny! Hoho! he thought to himself. (See how cunning he was?) But this skip *is* shiny. So, what's going on?

He crept closer to the skip, which he had never noticed before. Perhaps precisely because it had never glinted before.

I wonder what's inside? thought the fox.

As, yet again, he didn't know the answer, he decided that whatever it was, he was going to take a look, yes sirree!

Hoho! he thought to himself. Wait just one minute, what if this is also something poisonous? No-one's going to poison Dini the Fox! Yes but, he figured, poison doesn't twinkle!

With this conclusion, Dini felt he had arrived at a satisfying general truth and outsmarted everyone else.

“Poison doesn’t twinkle,” he reassured himself, and stuck his nose into the skip. “Ow ow owww! Then why is it so sharp?”

Poor Dini actually yowled with pain, though he’d been told that was something only dogs did.

What had happened, of course, was that Dini the fox had discovered South America!

And the thing that had glinted in the rays of the setting sun was none other than the pair of scissors the children had hidden there along with the other things they had found. Poor Dini could only run round and round with the scissors sticking out of his nose. He was so silly that it didn’t occur to him to try and pull them out. Poor thing, he really was only the tiniest bit cunning.

So there he was, just dashing round and round, howling like a dog, the scissors stubbornly refusing to fall out of his nose. On and on he went, until Tuffy Owl took pity on him. She’d been watching his sufferings from the top of the Sleeping Beauty tree, but then she suddenly had a thought, and flew off towards the houses where the children lived. Because, besides anything else, this was a case of an unauthorised individual entering South America! And she couldn’t allow that! And anyway, she wouldn’t have been able to help Dini the Fox alone, and it was horrible seeing him suffer. Maybe the children would know what to do.

Then *whoosh!* off she flew, first to Sandy Lakatos’s house, then to the others’, tapping on a window with her beak three times at each house. That was the signal for an *EMERGENCY!*

The children came running, one after the other, until the whole of 3A found itself on the shores of South America. There, a strange sight greeted them. Dini the Fox was dancing round and round like a maniac and something shiny was poking up out of the top of his nose.

“Wow! Is that an egg whisk sticking out of Dini’s nose?” gaped Hugo Rabbit.

“No, but it is a pair of scissors! And my pair of scissors at that!” cried Nanah Nobut crossly, marching up to him. “Or rather,” she corrected herself quickly, because she knew very well that the treasure belonged to everyone, “that’s the pair of scissors I found.”

Cass Ablanka felt very sorry for the fox, who was spinning round and round and yowling.

“We’ve got to help him,” she said, “The poor thing’s in pain!”

“No way!” retorted Vili Popper. “He attacked South America. We’ve got to take him prisoner.”

“Can’t you see he’s already been taken prisoner?” Valentin Bilibock remarked calmly.

“What if he’s got rabies?” said Ifyoo Pleez, with a shudder.

“What makes you think he’s got rabies? If you had a pair of scissors stuck in your nose, wouldn’t you yowl?” said Géza Tordai, turning on him. He had two dogs himself and felt very badly for Dini.

“Let’s take the scissors out of his nose and see if he keeps on spinning!” said Liza Varga, who adored experiments.

“Fine, you take them out then!” said Vili Popper, thinking yeah, like she would dare!

To everyone’s astonishment, Liza Varga walked straight up to Dini the Fox, muttering to herself three times over like she was saying a spell, “Foxes and scissors don’t mix! Foxes and scissors don’t mix! Foxes and scissors don’t mix!”

Then, with one swift movement, she tugged the scissors out of Dini’s nose!

3A watched for a moment in complete silence, curious to see what would happen next.

Dini heaved a great sigh of relief. Nothing beats finally having a pair of scissors pulled out of your hooter, whether you’re a human or a fox!

He was just about to say some kind of thank you, when Tuffy Owl started to lay into him.

“Haven’t you got anything better to do, than to go around sticking your nose into everything? Haven’t you got anything better to do than to go rummaging in other people’s treasures?”

Dini hung his head in shame.

“But I was just...” he sniffed.

“You were just what?” Tuffy Owl thundered at him. She was a very fair owl, but she could also be very firm. Only, of course, if it had to do with someone else, not herself...

“I was just, because... well, it was twinkling,” Dini confessed.

“And what’s that got to do with you? You’re not a magpie!” retorted Tuffy Owl, knitting her brows, though it’s by no means certain that an owl has brows.

“I know...” said Dini ruefully. “It’s not a fox thing...”

“It *was* pretty funny though!” said Tuffy Owl less stiffly.

Both the fox and the owl started to giggle and then to guffaw.

“Don’t tell the other animals in the wood, promise!” laughed Dini, shamefaced.

“I promise, so long as you promise not to stick your nose into everything!”

“Even if it twinkles?” asked Dini.

“Even if it twinkles and crinkles, even if it flickers and flashes, even if it scritchies and scratches, even if it has silken sashes and satin eyelashes!”

Tuffy Owl was a little surprised herself, coming out with all this, but hey, it was probably better out than in. She felt calmer already.

“All right, then. I’ll try,” promised Dini, and Tuffy Owl praised him for not saying ‘I promise’ right away. If he tried and didn’t succeed, that was worth more than an empty promise, wasn’t it? Because at least he’d tried.

The children understood none of this, but they did notice that Dini had suddenly perked up. He had stopped his crazy spinning, and he didn’t look at all like an animal with rabies when he sloped off accompanied by Tuffy Owl. 3A even cheered Tuffy Owl and thanked her in chorus for warning them about South America. Tuffy Owl waved back a little self-consciously. She wasn’t used to this kind of noisy appreciation. The children returned the scissors carefully to South America, and then set off for home.

Meanwhile, the sun also called it a day, the evening rustles and whispers of the woods died away, and the animals slowly settled down for the night.

## Chapter 4

### *In Which Someone Turns Up and By the End Even Arrives*

One morning, Miss Mimi came into the classroom holding a girl none of them had ever seen before by the hand.

Who’s this then? thought 3A.

“Good morning, children,” Miss Mimi sang out brightly.

“Good morning, Miss Mimi,” the children chanted in reply.

They stared at the newcomer. She had long hair, black as night, and gleaming brown skin.

“This is your new classmate! Please make her feel welcome. She already knows a little Hungarian.”

Curious and a little wary, the children looked the new girl up and down. That is to say, there were some (a few of the boys) who pretended not to be looking at her at all, while actually looking at her very hard indeed, and some who heaved a great sigh as if to say ‘Hmph, another girl, what can you do with a girl?’ (There were also boys like that.)

The girls were looking at her too, of course, very intently! Some of them with bright eyes, thinking ‘She might be someone I could make friends with’, others anxiously,

thinking ‘Is she prettier than I am?’ A few girls regarded the new arrival with suspicion, wondering whether their friends might go over to her.

The new girl stood there in the middle of this torrent of looking, and then, to top it all, Miss Mimi added, “Her name is Kohinoor Hardtmuth, but you can just call her Nórika. Isn’t that right, Nórika?”

“Yes,” replied Nórika, in a barely audible whisper, but not before Vili Popper had whinnied with laughter, and whispered loudly to Géza Tordai, whom he shared a desk with, “Whooh! How’s that for a name!” Two or three other children giggled along with them.

This was a little rich coming from Vili, because people often laughed when they heard his name. “Ha ha! Popper the Poppy!” they would crow, and Vili would turn as red as a poppy and go into a foul mood. But this was far from his mind right now, and he was sniggering away happily with the rest of them.

Miss Mimi gave the children her usual hard stare, and they quickly settled down.

“Nórika, you sit here,” said Miss Mimi, pointing at an empty seat next to Nanah Nobut. “This is Hanna Huszti. I think you’ll soon be friends.”

Then Miss Mimi went back to her desk.

“Turn to page 8 in your reading books, everyone,” she said, before starting on the opening sentence of a story called *The Cat and the Fox*.

The author was supposedly some kind of count, which was probably something like a prince, only he had a long, bushy beard like Santa Claus.

But princes don’t have beards, mused Nanah Nobut, who really loved reading and was a bit of a know-all. She couldn’t let her attention wander, though, because from time to time, Miss Mimi would stop and point at someone and then they had to take over, NO IFS OR BUTS. It was mortifying if someone didn’t know where the class was in the story, even if Miss Mimi never ever gave out black marks like Mr. Karl in the next classroom, even if she never raised the prospect of specially selected punishments (extra homework!) and never gave anyone an ‘F’. It was simply that it was embarrassing not to know, and this had been the case since Year One. Only it was so difficult to pay attention now, because of course everyone was watching the new girl.

Nanah Nobut smiled at her and showed her what page to turn to. Nórika glanced back at her gratefully, but as she stared at the reading book, her eyes glazed over. She understood so little of it. Miss Mimi called on Nanah Nobut too, who read aloud the few sentences she was given about the fox and the cat nice and clearly, even doing voices for the characters a little bit. Nanah Nobut had already announced several times that she was going to be an actor, and she wouldn’t hear anything to the contrary! If anyone laughed, red blotches would appear on her face, she would stamp crossly and pointedly ignore the culprit. She was a firebrand, but not one to bear a grudge, for by

the next break she would be happily playing with whoever she had been angry at, just as if nothing had happened.

“Are you going to be Hermione in the next *Harry Potter* then?” Peekinglish had teased her once. He loved to poke fun at people.

“No, but I’m going to be Voldemort, so there!” shouted Nanah Nobut crossly, who could easily have played Hermione, as it happens. They both had a good laugh at this and ran off to play dodgeball. Because that’s what 3A were like. Harboursing a grudge was such a kindergarten thing, and they were now big third years, you know. Of course, when something more serious was at stake, things didn’t always go so smoothly. Like, for example, when Sandy Lakatos cut off a piece of Liza Varga’s plait in the Art lesson. Well, you should have heard Liza scream! She went bright red and told Sandy she’d cut off his ears. Or at least not speak to him for weeks. Then Sandy said sorry, Liza’s short plait grew out, and the matter was forgotten. But that was a special case, really.

The reading lesson went on, and poor Kohinoor looked more and more despairing as she sat at the desk. The corners of her mouth turned down like the ends of a crescent-shaped *kifli* bread roll, and she looked like she might start crying any moment. Then, when they got to the bit where the fox says he has seventy-seven ruses he can employ against dogs, the first, fat tear rolled down her cheek. What on earth could a ‘ruse’ be? She’d never heard that word before, and there were so many others she didn’t know either! The story was nothing but new words. She would never get the hang of Hungarian. There were so many, many words to learn!

All of a sudden, Kohinoor was running out into the corridor, then out into the schoolyard, then straight out into the early afternoon woods. There, at the foot of a beech tree, she sank onto the ground, and started to cry bitterly. Sunshine filtered down through the branches and soothed her as it stroked her lovely brown skin.

Back in the classroom, the children were muttering and whispering to each other. Imagine! Walking out in the middle of a lesson, just like that, the idea!”

“Even if she needed to go to the toilet, she still had to ask permission!” fumed Ifyoo Pleez.

“Who does she think she is?” said Cass Ablanka indignantly. “Some kind of high and mighty princess?”

“Children, children!” cried Miss Mimi. “Nórika’s father is German, and her mother is from a far-away island off the coast of India.”

She showed them on the big globe where the two countries were.

A far-away island, thought Vili Popper, impressed. Just like in *Pirates of the Caribbean!*

“Her father is a hydrologist, and they’re here in Hungary because of his job. Her mother is dead, sadly, and her father is bringing her up by himself. They only got here a couple of months ago. That’s why Nórika doesn’t know much Hungarian. Be patient with her, and help her as much as you can, all right?”

Most of the children nodded magnanimously. Only Cass Ablanka and Liza Varga were still uncertain whether this new girl might not topple them from their hard-won position as the most popular girls in the class.

“I need a volunteer to go after Kohinoor and bring her back to school. She can’t go wandering about alone in the woods, especially in the middle of the school day!”

Hands went up, one after the other. First Valentin Bilibock and Ifyoo Pleez volunteered, then Nanah Nobut, then Boniface Hirlemon, Vili Popper, Géza Tordai and Sandy Lakatos. Even Hugo Rabbit stuck his skinny little arm eagerly in the air. When they saw this, Cass Ablanka and Liza Varga felt ashamed of themselves and they put their hands up, too, exactly at the same time.

Miss Mimi ran her eye over the class with satisfaction.

“Now, that’s what I like to see, children! Off you go, chop- chop, and bring her back. We’ll press on here till you return!”

The rescue team scrambled to their feet, and a moment later they were gone. A chance to go out into the woods during lessons! Who wouldn’t have sprinted away?

“We’re organising an expedition!” shouted Vili Popper and set about dividing them into twos.

“Comb the woods!” he shouted, like a proper pirate king, although the nearest sea was hundreds of miles away. “Full steam ahead!”, he added, despite this, which sounded a little silly there in the woods, but the children knew what they had to do.

Sandy Lakatos, who had ended up without a partner, set off to search alone.

“Don’t you worry,” he said, somewhat haughtily, “I’ll soon have this sorted out.”

Then he disappeared into the bushes.

MEANWHILE...

Nórika was sitting at the foot of the beech tree crying bitterly, when suddenly she heard a loud flapping of wings. She looked up, and saw an owl perched on a branch, right above her. It wasn’t very large or very small. It was just right – an average-sized owl.

But!

It was wearing a red T-shirt with the letters T.O. picked out in gold, and it even had something that looked very much like a medal pinned onto it. At first she was very



alarmed, because her mother had told her that owls were sometimes a bad omen. An omen, she'd explained to Nórika, was like a sign, a forecast of what was to come.

Nórika's eyes had lit up when she heard that.

“Like the weather forecast when they say it's going to rain tomorrow? Or that it won't. Or at least that it's highly likely it won't rain and if it does, then we got it wrong, sorry.”

“That's right,” Nórika's mother had said. “But an owl is often the first sign that something bad is coming.”

When she remembered this, sitting there under the beech tree, Nórika's heart began to pound, and she even forgot to cry.

Not another thing... she thought. As if I didn't have enough to worry about!

Yes, but... thought Nórika., *this* owl can't be a bad omen, because it's got a red T-shirt and a medal, and it looks suspiciously like it's smiling.

She wasn't really sure how an owl could be smiling, but she could have sworn that *this* particular owl really did look especially cheerful! It was practically grinning!

Just then, a very peculiar thing happened. Tuffy Owl spoke to her! And what was even weirder was that Nórika understood every word...

“Don't cry, Nórika! (How did it know her name?) I saw everything and heard everything. You'll get the hang of it. You just need to be patient!”

“But Hungarian is so hard!” said Nórika (and she didn't even wonder at the fact she was talking to an owl) “It's not like any other language!”

She started to sniffle again.

“Owl-Speak isn't like any other language either, but you seem to understand it fine! Where did you learn it?”

“My father taught it to me. I put my hands together and blow like this...” She blew into the little gap between her palms and hooted twice.

Tuffy Owl clicked her beak together appreciatively.

“Awesome!” she said, a word she'd learned from the children.

“When we go out walking, we always signal to each other with owl-hoots,” said Nórika.

“There you go!” said Tuffy Owl. “You only need to hoot a couple of times, and you already understand Owl-Speak. Hungarian will be child's play, I'm telling you!”

“But I hardly understand a word the children say, and I can’t read or write it at all. And they all laughed at me today...” Nórika said, her mouth turning down at the corners again.

Before Tuffy Owl could explain to Nórika that 3A weren’t mean, just sometimes a bit daft, they both became aware of a loud cracking sound. It sounded like someone was moving around very close to them, like a stick had snapped under someone’s foot (or was it a hoof?), like SOMEONE or SOMETHING wanted to attack them!

Oh no! thought Nórika. Why hadn’t she listened to her mother? Why hadn’t she run away the minute the owl had appeared above her head? T-shirt or no T-shirt, medal or no medal, she should have got out of there as fast as her legs could carry her! She should have gone zigzagging through the trees like lightning! Instead, she’d stopped to talk to an owl! What am I like?! she thought, and again there came a

CRACK and a SNAP!

Nórika’s heart was pounding so fast she thought she would faint from fright. Just then, with a great crashing and smashing of branches, a tousled, honey-blonde head of hair emerged from the bushes. Sandy Lakatos, like a real commando, had been slithering along on his tummy, looking to left and right. Then, looking straight ahead, he had finally spotted the tearful Nórika and Tuffy Owl perched triumphantly above her.

“Aha! There you are!” shouted Sandy. “What are you doing here?”

“I... I was just... because I not so... not like you children...”

“So what?” laughed Sandy. “I’m not like them either. Look, I’ve got brown skin too.”

“And they don’t... uh... how do you say it?”

“Make fun of me? They don’t, but sometimes other people do.”

“And then, what you do?”

“Me?” asked Sandy cockily. “I bash their heads in!” But he was already shaking his head. “Ah no, don’t worry. I talk them round, use a bit of banter, see?”

Nórika shook her head.

“No, sorry, I don’t understand.”

“No problem,” cried Sandy. “You’ll soon get the hang of it.”

“And you?” he said, looking up at Tuffy Owl. “What are you skulking around up there for? This is Tuffy Owl,” Sandy told Nórika. “She’s really wild! She can do all kinds of cool stuff! Has she done any of her tricks for you?”

Nórika nearly told Sandy, very nearly told him that the owl had been talking to her. Then she decided to keep quiet about it. She didn’t want him to think she wasn’t right in the head. Or that she was showing off. That she knew more than he did. Nórika

wanted to be just like the others. Nothing more, nothing less. Of course, she knew very well that she could never be exactly the same, because she was very different, but she still longed to be the same as them. Just to be one of them. That's why she decided not to say anything. Tuffy Owl was visibly relieved at this. She lifted her wing to her beak, as if signing to Nórika to keep mum, then circled their heads once by way of farewell before she flew away. Dazed, Nórika watched her go, unsure whether she had just imagined the whole thing.

Just then, from out of the bushes there appeared one head, two heads, three heads, four heads, and out came the children, crashing through the branches one after the other!

“Nórikaaaa!” they yelled. “Where did you get to? You didn't wait to hear what happened to the cat and the fox!” they said, laughing.

Hearing that, Nórika began laughing too, because she had finally understood something they had said. She understood their laughter and their good-humoured cheering, even though they were laughing in Hungarian, cheering in Hungarian and grinning in Hungarian. Then they all went back to the school together in Hungarian, where the bell was just ringing for the end of the lesson. They played dodgeball in Hungarian, and tig in Hungarian, and climbed on the playground equipment in Hungarian. In a (Hungarian) word, she began to enjoy herself at last!

Maybe not every owl is a bad omen, she thought, but only to herself. Sometimes an owl can come in very handy indeed. Then the bell rang again, and the next lesson was English, where everyone's jaw dropped in wonder. Because Nórika was better than all of them at English, of course!

## **Chapter 5.**

### *In Which Miss Mimi Realises Something*

That day the excitement in the class was at fever pitch. Miss Mimi had announced they would be writing a composition!

Nearly all of 3A were there. Only poor Peekinglish was at home in bed with a nasty case of tonsilitis. It was just as well they didn't have to write their compositions in English, as there wouldn't have been anyone to whisper the words to them.

Peekinglish was even better at English than Ifyoo Pleez, though he was pretty clued up. Now they had Nórika, however, and she could beat them both hands down.

To cut a long story short, Miss Mimi was about to make them write a composition.

The topic was ‘What do you plan to do in the summer holidays?’

Miss Mimi added, to help get them started, “Write down what you're going to be doing in the summer holidays with your parents, your dads and your mums, your brothers and sisters, where you're going to travel to, what kind of games you'll be

playing, what you'll be seeing and hearing. You can keep writing until the end of the lesson."

She pointed at the big round clock hanging on the classroom wall.

"When the big hand gets to the number 12, you must hand in your compositions, no ifs or buts!"

This was one of the expressions Miss Mimi used a lot, NO IFS OR BUTS, along with CHOP-CHOP.

Freshly sharpened pencils, erasers, biros and rulers lay lined up on the desks like an army ready for deployment.

Hugo Rabbit set about breathing on his glasses and rubbing them eagerly, as if he hoped this would mean he could see his way forward.

Ifyoo Pleez (whose real name was Richárd Tragomán and who was always too polite to come straight to the point) was gnawing the end of his pencil, an unhealthy habit of his that usually resulted in it being chewed to a mush by the end of the lesson.

Nanah Nobut (down in the register as Hanna Huszti) was twisting a lock of her curly red hair round and round her index finger as if the sentences would wind down out of her hair into her exercise book. Her face was afire with excitement.

Valentin Bilibock was leaning back in his chair, his face pale. Although he looked more like he was sleeping than anything else, he was just thinking.

Vili Popper, Cass Ablanka and Géza Tordai looked at each other in desperation, as if each was hoping the others would solve the task for them – and let's face it, that's just what they were thinking.

Liza Varga, who I'm afraid the class called Liza Gargles, was already concentrating so terribly hard her tongue was sticking out. When the other children stuck their tongues out at her, she pulled hers in, but it was obvious this would make it even harder for her to write her composition.

The beautiful, black-haired and brown-skinned Kohinoor Hardtmuth, otherwise known as Nórika, stared out of the window dreamily, as if she was already under the calming spell of the approaching summer, as if she was already listening to the chirruping of the crickets and the buzzing of the bees in a sunlit meadow, as if she had bread and honey and lemonade beside her in her snack box. She was unconsciously puckering her lips, as if she could already taste the plasticky flavour of the rim of her sun-warmed water bottle. Nórika didn't know enough Hungarian to write a composition, so Miss Mimi had told her she didn't have to. But that didn't stop her imagining what she would write if she could.

Sandy Lakatos was anxiously sinking his fingers deep into his tousled, honey-blond mop, while Boniface Hirlemon was sharpening pencils feverishly, one after the other, like an out-of-control beaver.

Miss Mimi ran her eye over them contentedly.

“Now then,” she said. “You can start!”

CHOP-CHOP!

In the intense silence that followed, the big hand of the clock clicked loudly as it moved forwards. The minutes went by.

Sandy Lakatos stared at the lined page of his exercise book. Every line on the white paper seemed to be prancing around in front of him, parading its emptiness, posing and strutting before him as if to say, ‘Come on Sandy, get on and write something!’ This made Sandy super nervous, and he started to stab the tip of his compasses into the desk in between his five spread-out fingers, even though Miss Mimi had expressly forbidden him to do it. The further the hands on the clock moved forwards, the more furiously he jabbed the compasses in and out between his fingers, and it began to look less and less likely that Sandy would get anything at all down on paper before the end of the lesson, and more and more likely that he would end up at the hospital’s accident and emergency department.

When Boniface Hirlemon had sharpened every one of his pencils to a fine point, he sat there helplessly staring into space. Now what? His compositions were always brilliant. He knew that Miss Mimi would be expecting the same now. More than once, she had read out a particularly successful one TO THE WHOLE CLASS, making Boniface Hirlemon’s chest puff up with pride like an overinflated lilo.

When he got home, he told Mamóka about it every time, and she was prouder of him than he was himself, if that were possible. That kind of thing really made a grandmother’s day. In fact, secretly, they even did a little jig to celebrate, a kind of old-fashioned Hungarian folk dance. One step to the right, one to the left, wayhay!

‘Summer plans, mother, father, brothers and sisters, friends’, Boniface wrote at the top of the page, because, just as Miss Mimi had taught them to, he always planned out what he was going to write. Then he propped his chin on his hands and sank into thought. On the desk before him, his finely sharpened pencils trembled as they awaited deployment, gripped by both a desire for glory and a fear of failure.

Nanah Nobut already had poppy-red patches on her face and her neck. They appeared whenever she was excited, first on her face and then on her neck. She really wished they wouldn’t, but there was nothing she could do to stop them. They appeared when she had to answer questions at the front of the class, even though she was always prepared, and they appeared whenever Valentin Bilibock or Vili Popper said anything

nice to her, like, for example, “Hey Nobut, I’ll pull that ponytail of yours, if you don’t watch out!” or, “That cross-eyed owl on your rucksack looks really silly!”

Vili and Valentin sometimes even came to blows over Hanna, though they would never admit to it, of course. They always had some *excuse* or other, but anyone who dared to suggest that Nanah Nobut was the reason they were bashing each other so energetically would be sure to get a *whack* in the face.

And all this even though Valentin really wasn’t the scrapping type.

No sooner had Miss Mimi announced the topic of the composition, than red patches appeared on Nanah Nobut’s face and neck *at the same time*, a sure sign that this was a serious situation. She was racking her brains feverishly, and this showed on her skin right away.

The others were all sitting deep in thought too, their eyes fixed on their exercise books or on the clock or on the sunny scene outside the classroom window. Then, slowly, they stopped fidgeting and got down to writing, and soon all that could be heard was the soft scratching of pencils on paper.

SHRRR, SHRRR, TSSSS

Then, all of a sudden, the bell rang for the end of the lesson!

“Time, children! Hand in your compositions, please. Chop-chop!” cried Miss Mimi.

When they heard this, the children began to whine, “Oh no!! Not already, Miss Mimiiii?!”

And

“Can’t we have just a little bit longer?”

But Miss Mimi was not to be moved.

“We had a deal, didn’t we? No ifs or buts, hand in them nicely please!”

So, each of the children put their pencil down and got to their feet. Ready or not, they all took their exercise books up to Miss Mimi’s desk. There was quite a pile of them by the time they had finished!

Then Miss Mimi tucked the whole lot under her arm, and said, “We’ll talk about them tomorrow!”

And out she strode out in true, determined, Miss Mimi style. The class stood around for a moment, gazing after her a little uneasily.

Then out came the slices of bread and butter. And the pale Hungarian peppers. And the chocolate covered cream-cheese bars called Túró Rudis. And the books. No mobile phones because Miss Mimi was always careful to collect those in at the beginning of the first lesson, and she only gave them back at the end of school. Miss Mimi wasn’t

too keen on mobiles, but she understood you had to move with the times. That's how 'with it' Miss Mimi was.

The next day, Class 3A had Miss Mimi for their last two lessons. Everyone was on tenterhooks, wondering how they had done in their composition. Some of them, it later turned out, were more anxious than others.

"Now then, pipsqueaks!" said Miss Mimi at the beginning of the last lesson. "It's timetogetdowntobusiness!" Every time she gave compositions back Miss Mimi would say '*It's time to get down to business!*' If she didn't, they would all begin to think something was wrong.

There *was* something wrong, as it happens, but she still said it like she always did.

Miss Mimi told the class what she thought of each child's work and why, and she even read out Vili Popper's and Cass Ablanka's compositions to them all. Vili and Cass looked dazed and went all pink.

"However..." said Miss Mimi, and here she paused for dramatic effect, at which everyone's heart *skipped a beat*, "there are three exercise books here, in which I found no composition of any kind!"

Miss Mimi looked up at the class to see how this shocking news was going down. The children exchanged glances and twisted round in their seats in search of the reprobates who had dared to hand in their exercise books empty. Because, to disobey Miss Mimi... well...

The class respected Miss Mimi enormously. She never had to shout for silence (there was silence already), even the naughty boys would put their hands up, and if it was her birthday or her name day, they would pick the loveliest flowers in the wood for her. Sometimes they would bring her flowers 'just because'.

To cut a long story short, the children would have gone through hell and high water for Miss Mimi! There, I've said it now! It was a mercy there wasn't a fire at the school while they were there, because if Miss Mimi had got trapped inside, the whole class would have perished with her. Admirable maybe, but sad, nevertheless.

"This one belongs to Boniface Hirlemon," she said, waving it like some kind of incriminating evidence. "And yet Boniface," went on Miss Mimi with a troubled frown, "has always produced such wonderfully interesting compositions! I don't understand it! Boniface, my dear, can you provide some kind of explanation for this?"

"Ummm..." stammered Boniface. "Uhh, the thing is... what I mean is... the situation is that..."

Miss Mimi and the whole class looked expectantly at Boniface Hirlemon.

“Yes?” said Miss Mimi, encouragingly. Her eyes were smiling, but there was no doubting the seriousness of the situation.

“The thing is... you said we should write down what we were going to do in the summer holidays with our fathers, our mothers and our brothers and sisters, where we were going to travel to, what games we were going to play, that kind of thing. And I...” said Boniface, hanging his head. “I... you see, I live with my grandmother, and... we don’t usually go anywhere because Mamóka can’t walk very well, and who would she leave the hens with for all that time? There’d be no-one to feed them and collect the eggs. So Mamóka and I spend the summer holidays at home with our dog, Crumbs... That’s why I didn’t write anything.”

By the time Boniface had finished, Miss Mimi’s eyes were no longer smiling. Instead, they were glistening a little.

She was trying to find the right words (where *do* those words get to at times like these?!). Then she just said gently, “I’ll give you back your exercise book. Take it home and write me a composition all about your own special summer with Mamóka.”

Boniface’s eyes lit up, and he ran up for his exercise book.

“But be sure to put your all into it, my little bear cub! Like you always do!” said Miss Mimi. Her eyes were still shining, but in a different way.

*My little bear cub* was another expression Miss Mimi used a lot, and the children, who thought it was funny, liked to hear it.

“However...” went on Miss Mimi, and at that moment everyone’s heart *skipped a beat* again. “I have another empty exercise book here, two in fact! One of them belongs to Sandy Lakatos, who might have been able to write a composition if he hadn’t been putting all his energy into sticking his compasses into the desk. Isn’t that the case, Sandy?”

Sandy stuck his fingers into his tousled, honey-blond hair, and lowered his eyes.

“Umm... we only... I mean, the thing is that... I have a father and a mother,” burst out Sandy, twisting his ear lobes all the while, “but in the summer I play in the garden with my brothers and sisters, or here in the woods. But that’s way too boring to put in a composition...”

“Sandy, my little bear cub” said Miss Mimi, “I’m the one at fault here, no-one else. I didn’t explain myself clearly enough! I am interested in *everything* that any of you do, whatever it is! Whether it’s serenading your dog on your mouth organ, or hunting for mice on the meadow, it’s all good, see? Even if you just think or dream about it, that’s good too!”

Sandy grinned happily. He probably had the sweetest smile in the class.



“I’ll give you back your exercise book too. Take it home and write me a composition, all right?”

“Awesome!” whooped Sandy and dashed over to get his exercise book.

“Now then, here’s our last empty exercise book...”

Everyone waited with bated breath to find out whose it was.

“Nanah Nobut, are we to understand that you have no plans for the summer?” asked Miss Mimi, looking completely non-plussed.

As always, Nanah Nobut’s face and neck turned bright red. The little red blotches on her neck appeared one after the other like a group of islands emerging from the morning mist. Now, as always, she was twisting a fiery-red lock of hair around the index finger of her right hand.

“No, but, I... er... you know miss, I don’t have a father and a mother. I have two mothers, and...”

Miss Mimi actually became shrill,

“Of course, I know, pipsqueak! Little bear cubs! Imagine, my own little roly-polies,” she went on. (She always stretched out the ‘o’s) “just imagine,” and here she waved her arms in the air like a hoopoe learning to fly,

“how

STULTIFYINGLY BORING

it would be if everyone had PRECISELY the same kind of  
family,

and if everyone wrote PRECISELY the same thing in their compositions!

Well, wouldn’t it?

Isn’t it PRECISELY the fact that we’re all different

that makes life interesting?

See? PRECISELY!

The children hooted with laughter when she said STULTIFYINGLY. Miss Mimi was always so funny when she said certain words. Her voice would go all deep and hollow. When other people said them, they weren’t nearly so funny. It was strange!

“Stultifyingly boring! Yes, stultifyingly!” they chorused, and by this time the whole class was rolling about laughing, though *stultifying boredom* is really not *so* very funny, when you stop to think about it.

But right now, it was. Down in the gym, 3B heard their raucous laughter and were envious that other people got to have so much fun with their teacher. They'd got Mr. Karl, who was always ordering them around and barking out commands.

“Get a move on, children! No falling asleep!” shouted Mr. Karl, his muscles showing through his sports top. 3B started to toss the brown medicine ball around in a leisurely fashion. It was big and heavy and made them think of a brown bear.

The summer was almost within arm's reach, and now no-one could think about schoolwork, only those endless two months of holiday stretching ahead of them. The great disc of the sun was even bigger than the medicine ball, and at least you didn't need to toss it.

## Chapter 6.

### *In Which the Truth is Revealed*

One day, after school, the children were out in the woods playing War of Numbers. Each of them was wearing a headband with a number written on it, and the aim was to get the other team out by finding them and calling out their numbers.

Two thousand and twenty-three!

Six thousand, nine hundred and eighteen!

One thousand three hundred and eleven!

The children's cries rang out across the whole area, with numbers coming thick and fast like raindrops. A veritable downpour of numbers in the fresh, green, early-summer woods!

“No turning your faces to the sun, no sun worshipping!!” shouted Vili Popper, quickly calling out Cass Ablanka's number. The truth was the children were all sun-worshippers. They could hardly wait for lessons to be over so they could run out into the fresh air and sunshine and immerse themselves in the colours, scents and sounds of the wood. It must have rained in the night, because throughout the wood there was the wonderful smell of damp earth. It hung in the air like some kind of intoxicating spell. The birds were perhaps even merrier than the children, as the whole wood rang with birdsong.

“Two thousand, four hundred and twenty-three!”

Nanah Nobut sighed, pushed her headband up onto the top of her head and moved away from the others. Not again! That was her number!

She couldn't say 'no, but' this time, because that really *was* the number on her headband. She was stomping crossly off through the woods when she suddenly heard a

strange noise. She stopped and listened. What could it be? There were no children playing War of Numbers here, so it had to be some kind of animal!

What went through her mind was, Oh my God, a wild boar! but all that came out of her mouth was,

“AARGH!”

Slowly, she turned around and started to walk back, trying to make as little noise as possible. She slunk along, you might say. Or at least, she tried to slink along. I don't know if you've ever tried to slink along unnoticed or slink away from somewhere; it's really not so easy.

And then, AARGH, there it was AGAIN!

A twig snapped, the branches whispered overhead, and in among the bushes Nanah Nobut caught sight of a strange, scruffy figure with two antennae sticking out of its head!!

No sooner had she seen it than the strange figure vanished, whoosh, into the dense undergrowth. All the fine, golden hairs on the back of her neck stood up on end, there's no use pretending otherwise.

Oh my God, a Martian! she thought, but all that came out of her mouth was

“AAAARGH!”

And then she was running, scrambling back to the others as fast as her legs could carry her.

“A Mar... a Mar... I've just seen a Martian! There's a Martian in the woods!!” yelled Nanah Nobut at the top of her voice. The others started to shush her furiously. Can't we even have a game of War of Numbers in peace? they thought, but they didn't dare say a word, because that would have given away where they were hiding, and then the enemy would be able to call out their numbers. Oh, why couldn't that girl just keep quiet? they thought. Was she really going to spoil the game for the rest of them just because her number had been called out?

This was a seriously unjust accusation on their part, of course. Nanah Nobut was convinced, after all, that she *had* seen a Martian, and wanted to save the others from danger.

“This is serious! I'm not kidding! Stop the game, this is an

EMERGENCY, I swear!”

When she said that, of course, the others could hear that she was genuinely afraid, and a little reluctantly, they popped up one by one out of the bushes and from behind trees, still wearing their numbers on their foreheads. First came Vili Popper, then Sandy

Lakatos, then Cass Ablanka, then Valentin Bilibock, then Liza Varga and Kohinoor Hardtmuth, with Ifyoo Pleez and Boniface Hirlemon bringing up the rear.

The only one missing was Hugo Rabbit, as his mother was ill, and he'd had to go straight home after school. They all looked intrigued, but also worried. A Martian, here in the woods? In *their* woods?

Stop right there!

Hold your horses! (They had learned this from Miss Mimi!)

Let's not get ahead of ourselves! (This they had learned from Mr. Fryup, the school caretaker.)

The children fired questions at Nanah Nobut. What had she seen? What was it like exactly?

The problem was, however, that she couldn't say exactly what she'd seen. She'd only glimpsed a colourful, blurry shape in the bushes with an antenna on its head. And it had scampered off like a startled rabbit when it saw her. The children made her tell her story over and over, and each time they heard it, they shuddered.

"We've got to do something!" cried Valentin Bilibock, the most practical of them all.

"Let's make it walk the plank!" yelled Vili Popper, once again a pirate king.

"I say we run away from it," suggested Liza Varga, and immediately put this brave plan of hers into action, at least as far as she was concerned.

"We should lure it into a trap and capture it!" whooped Sandy Lakatos, already scratching his tousled, honey-blond mop in an effort to decide the best way to trick a Martian.

"And we'll demand a ransom, of course," said Ifyoo Pleez, but the others poured cold water on that suggestion, asking who precisely they would be able to demand a ransom from, given the individual in question was a Martian? What a load of rubbish, they said, having got themselves into a bit of a huff. Ifyoo Pleez was offended and took himself off to the Sleeping Beauty tree to sulk.

"In any case," said Valentin Bilibock, thinking hard, "we've got to find out where it's hiding, and whether there are any more of them, or if it landed here on Earth all by itself. It might be in trouble, poor thing, and need some help. It might want to go home but can't."

"Chubakka looking for Solo," said Nanah Nobut in a sappy voice, but the others gave her such an ugly look that she shut up.

"Ok. Single file, everyone! Not a squeak from now on! We're going to comb the woods!" shouted Valentin Bilibock.

First, they went and sniffed around Sleeping Beauty's tree, where Ifyoo Pleez, who'd been sulking there all the while, joined the line.

Hmm, hmm, hmm.

Nothing to be seen.

Then, crawling forward commando-style, they crept along into Treasure Grove (it's common knowledge that creeping is at least as difficult as slinking, probably more so). They found nothing there either, so little in fact that it looked just as if someone had been going around carefully collecting up all the little treasures the walkers always left behind. There was nobody to be seen at the Grove, but more importantly, I'm sorry to say, there was *nothing* to be seen.

"Oh my God! South America!" shrieked Cass Ablanka. The others glared at her and told her to stop yelling, but then they too suddenly looked very alarmed.

What if the Martian had raided South America? What if it had taken all their treasures? The children set off at a run towards the rusty skip. They'd forgotten all about crawling commando-style and were scrambling and sprinting and dashing over there as fast as they could. When they got closer to the shores of South America, they began to fear the worst. Rubbish was scattered all around the skip: rusty, broken pots and pans, burnt-out portable water heaters, camping chairs without legs and a whole load of other useless junk, just thrown here and there. But their precious treasures were nowhere to be found! Boniface Hirlemon gave Vili Popper a leg up so he could peek into the skip. Dismayed by what he saw, Vili then jumped right in so he could properly assess the damage.

Which was incalculable. Beyond anything they could have imagined.

Every one of their treasures was gone.

The evil Martian had stolen everything.

With great difficulty, Vili clambered out of the skip and, looking downcast, spread his hands wide.

"There's nothing here. They're all gone, every last one. South America has been plundered!"

The others stared at him in disbelief.

"No penknife, no hipflask?" asked Sandy Lakatos.

Vili shook his head.

"And the scissors?" asked Cass Ablanka, hoping against hope.

Vili shook his head again.

“But the mobile and the keys must be there, at least? I made sure to hide them away good and deep,” insisted Boniface Hirlemon, but he already knew the answer.

“The telescope and the camera too?” asked Nanah Nobut, the ends of her mouth turning down, and really, only shyness was keeping her from bursting into noisy sobs. She couldn’t hold back her tears, however, and they rolled freely down her freckled cheeks. She felt a bit embarrassed that the others could see her crying, but nobody made fun of her, nobody said ‘crybaby’ or ‘turn off the waterworks’ or ‘blubbering again’, because the others all looked like they were on the verge of tears too, even Valentin Bilibock, though he was the bravest of them all.

And, as they stood there rooted to the spot and totally bewildered, all of a sudden, they heard a loud flapping of wings. Looking up into the highest branches, they spotted their friend, Tuffy Owl.

Somehow, she had sensed that the children were in trouble. A sudden silence had fallen over the woods and this had aroused her suspicions. It was odd that no-one was whooping, no-one was singing or even humming, or laughing or making fun of anyone else and no-one was yelling out numbers: the woods had suddenly been plunged into a silence as deep as the one you notice immediately before a storm.

But there was no sign of a storm approaching. The sun was blazing away, and only a few plump, white clouds were drifting across the azure blue of the sky.

“HMM” said Tuffy Owl to herself. “HMM. I don’t like this one little bit. HMM. This is very suspicious indeed.”

If she’d had a pipe, she would have looked just like Sherlock Holmes. As it was, she looked like an owl straining her brain.

She set off straight away to see how things stood with the children. When she saw them standing around despondently on the shores of South America, she knew exactly what had happened.

Up where she was, Tuffy Owl was able to see much more than the children could down below. Much as if she was in a box at the theatre, she had a good view of everything that went on in the forest. She had seen how the little fox cub had gone wandering off away from home even though Dini had made it very clear to her that she should stay right where she was until Dini got back. Dini didn’t want his cub to fall foul of that pesky pair of scissors in the way that her father had, to his shame.

She had seen how Bernard the Bear had stuffed himself so full of raspberries again that he was lying under the fruit bushes, unable to move beyond licking his lips.

She had seen how Goatcalf, Swallowkid, and the Little Fork-Tailed Mouse were splashing around at Snake Lake, where there were so many snake’s head fritillaries nodding on their stems that you’d never spot a real water snake hiding among them.

She had seen Puddle the hedgehog rolling around in another muddy patch of water.

She had seen Miss Mimi picking mushrooms.

She had seen Sandy Lakatos's mother hanging out her washing at the edge of the woods.

She had seen Vili Popper's dad, Géza Popper, taking photographs of his favourite plants, mosses and ferns, and examining their spores under a magnifying glass.

From high up where she was, Tuffy Owl could see everything that went on. And she also knew who had plundered South America.

She flapped her wings noisily, and the children looked up at her. They smiled, but were unable to be as relaxed and happy to see her as they usually were.

They just kept on standing there, looking lost and broken.

Tuffy Owl then beckoned to them with her right wing, as if to say 'follow me!'

She beckoned once: no reaction. She beckoned twice: no reaction.

Then she lost patience with them, flapped her wings wildly, and set off very deliberately for the Fox Feller. She looked back as she flew to see if the children were following her. They stumped along after her despondently.

The walked and walked.

And walked and walked.

The children didn't know this part of the woods so well, as it was far from the school. They'd heard about the Fox Feller, and how there were caves there among the rocks, but they, like the foxcubs, were forbidden to go there, because near it was a dangerous ravine into which, years earlier, a little boy had fallen and nearly died. Luckily, Tuffy Owl had quickly led the rescue team to the boy, who had been lying there unable to move. Without her, the team would not have known where to find him.

That was the year Tuffy Owl had been decorated by the mayor, Dr. Aron Baron. The owl had been presented with a lovely red and gold coloured T-shirt with the letters T.O. on it and a gold medal which she wore pinned onto the shirt. It was still there, glinting on her T-shirt as she flew towards the Fox Feller with the children trailing after her.

The children's hearts were beating more and more loudly. They knew they were straying into a place they weren't allowed to go to. But they also suspected that Tuffy Owl knew exactly where she was leading them, and that made them even more excited. They knew that the ravine wasn't far away, and that the caves were also somewhere nearby...

If they'd stopped even for a moment, they wouldn't have been able to hear anything except their hearts pounding away.

BA-BOOM, BA-BOOM, BA-BOOM

At last, they got to the top of a hill, and found it was covered in curiously-shaped rocks. Here and there, in the clefts of these rocks, they found the entrances to caves. In front of one of these, what should they see but a fire, with two or three logs and a faded, stripy sunbed placed around it! In a pot hung over the low flames something was bubbling, and on some flatter rocks beside the cave entrance there were some rags laid out to dry. Only by a great effort of the imagination could you guess what kind of clothes these had once been.

When the children saw all this, they stopped in their tracks.

To be frank, they were pretty frightened.

They were pretty scared.

They were shaking in their shoes.

Even Valentin Bilibock was white as a sheet as he stared at the cave entrance.

“A Martian that lives in a cave?” asked Sandy Lakatos quietly. Sandy was always the first to say anything when there was trouble.

“So? Where’s it supposed to live? In a hotel?” snorted Boniface Hirlemon, but Valentin Bilibock gestured at him to be quiet.

“Shh! Not so loud. It’ll hear us!”

Just then, however, Tuffy Owl started to flap her wings furiously again and the next moment – oh my Lord! – out of the cave came the Martian!!!

It looked to the right and looked to the left: nothing. Then it looked straight ahead – and, blow me down, there stood a whole bunch of children! It would be hard to say which was more astonished: the Martian or Class 3A.

The children stood rooted to the spot, staring at the cave-dwelling Martian. His grubby clothes were alarming enough, but his shaggy head was even more frightening. And yes, Nanah Nobut had been telling the truth. He did have two antennae on his head! But now that they were able to take a closer look, they could see that at the end of each antenna there was a small fan. In the silence that followed, the only sound was the whirring these fans made.

SHRRR, SHRRRRR

Ifyoo Pleez plucked up all his courage and addressed the following words to the extra-terrestrial being:

“If yoo pleez, vee arr... vee arr duh vurld... vee arr duh children...” then he stopped, uncertain how to go on. Boniface Hirlemon started sniggering involuntarily, but quickly pulled himself together.

“All right there, kids?” said the Martian suddenly.

“It speaks Hungarian!” said Vili Popper, astounded.



Ifyoo Pleez looked disappointed.

“What’s up? Need help with something?” asked the shaggy creature.

“Well, err...” Sandy Lakatos began, “the thing is, South America’s been completely ransacked ...”

“Come again???” said the Martian, in surprise. “Last I knew, we were in Hungary, but feel free to correct me if I’m wrong!”

“No, you’re absolutely right, but you see,” said Nanah Nobut, rushing to his aid, “our treasures were in South America.”

“Isn’t that a bit far away?” said the scruffy figure, perplexed.

“No, no, it’s not where you’re thinking. Just at the edge of the woods, in fact. In a rusty skip, to be precise,” said Nanah Nobut, finishing what she wanted to say, and then quickly looking down at her feet.

The truth was, she was frightened of this strange creature. Considering it came from Mars, it spoke pretty good Hungarian.

The scruffy Martian’s eyes seemed to light up, all of a sudden.

“They can’t be.....? Hmmm...” it muttered helpfully. “What will you give me, if I can guess what was in the skip?”

The children looked at each other. They had no idea what would make a Martian happy. Tuffy Owl, who had been watching the whole scene unfold from the top of a nearby tree, once again started to flap her wings.

SHRR, SHRRR

“Well, what did you have in mind exactly?” asked Valentin Bilibock, who always took a no-nonsense approach to things.

“Hmm, in return for guessing correctly, I would like... six eggs, let’s say,” said the Martian.

“I can bring those!” cried Boniface Hirlemon. “We’ve got hens!”

“But we’ll only let you have them,” put in Vili Popper, who again had plenty to say, it seemed, “if you can guess every last thing that was in South America.”

“All right!” said the thing with antennae. “Now then... er... let me see...”

It closed its eyes as if it were scanning the things in its mind’s eye.

“A... penknife, a... hipflask, a... pair of scissors, a... mobile phone, a... bunch of keys... aaaand a disposable camera.”

Boniface Hirlemon was just raising his finger in triumph, to say, no, no that wasn’t everything, when the scary creature quickly added, “Oh, and a telescope, of course!”

3A's collective jaw dropped.

This was CRAZY!

This was UNBELIEVABLE!

HOW ON EARTH?

They gaped at the thing with antennae as if it was some kind of unearthly vision. And who knew? Maybe it was!

Sandy Lakatos was the first to come to his senses, as usual.

“Okay, so it got them all right, but let's bargain it down to five eggs.”

“Sandy, you can't bargain somebody down after you've made a deal!” Nanah Nobut told him.

“Okay, but still. Six eggs... that's a lot,” said Sandy looking over at Boniface Hirlemon ruefully.

“And what would you give me,” went on the creature, “if I could show you all those things?”

Now really, thought the children, what does he take us for? A bunch of idiots? **HOLD YOUR HORSES! STOP RIGHT THERE!**

“What would you want?” asked Valentin Bilibock determinedly.

“Four AA batteries,” said the thing, pointing to the fans whirring away on its head. “For these.”

“All right!” cried Vili Popper, “I'll bring those. My dad always has some at home.”

At this, the Martian turned on his heel, went into the cave and brought out the treasures, every last one! All of South America, just like that! The whole shebang!

It laid them out on the logs, then gave a stir to the potentially poisonous concoction bubbling away in the pan.

“And what will you give me,” it went on again, “if I return all of these to their rightful owners?”

“But that's us!” burst out Géza Tordai, who everyone thought had gone home hours ago.

“I thought as much,” said the creature, jabbing its wooden spoon towards them.

“Well...” Valentin Bilibock began, a little warily, “what would your Horribleness desire in return?”

The Martian pondered for a moment or two, then it said, “I'd like you all to have lunch with me.”

The children glanced at each other, alarmed. They'd always been told not to accept anything from strangers, especially food. Now what should they do? Tuffy Owl started to flap her wings madly again. With one wing, she pointed downwards, with the other upwards. This meant yes and no. This gave Cass Ablanka an idea.

"We can't accept any food, but we'll be happy to sit here with you while you have your lunch."

The Martian's sad eyes lit up.

"That means more to me than any treasure," it said, and offered them seats round the fire right away. "You know," it said, heaving a great sigh, "I always have to eat alone. I've got no friends any longer, no family, not even anywhere to live except for this cave."

"How come?" asked Géza Tordai, who, having reappeared, now seemed very much in his element. "Aren't there any flats on Mars?"

"On Mars?" said the Martian, surprised. "Is that where you think I'm from? Mars?"

"Yes," nodded Cass Ablanka, "You've even got antennae."

"Antennae? Oh, these?" it gestured to the top of its head. "These are only my little battery-powered fans! To keep me cool. I found these in the grove too, the one where the walkers have their picnics."

"In Treasure Grove?" cried the others, a little indignantly. "But that's our hunting ground!"

"The woods belong to everyone, don't they?" said the Martian, at which the children felt ashamed of themselves. It was right about that, no question.

Valentin Bilibock brought the conversation back to the point in hand.

"So, if we stay here while you complete your repast, you'll give us back our treasures?"

Valentin Bilibock was always using such fancy words. The others just stared at him.

"That's right," said the Martian.

"And six eggs will really be enough?" asked Boniface Hirlemon, a little sceptically.

"You know what?" said the Martian, who, it seemed, was less of a Martian than they'd thought. "If you were all to visit me once or twice a week and sit round the fire with me, that would mean more to me than any treasure. I don't want anything else."

"You mean you're not going back to Mars?" asked Nanah Nobut.

"No, no, I'm not. I'm so far from everyone here I might as well be on Mars," he said sadly. "But if you're here with me, then it won't seem so far anymore. I'll be here again, in this world."

Nanah Nobut was glad one of her mothers had reminded her to take some tissues with her that morning. Everyone had come over a bit snuffly.

“So, you’re not a Martian anymore?” asked Sandy Lakatos, sounding a little disappointed.

“No, I’m not,” said the creature.

“Then, who are you?” asked Cass Ablanka.

“László Mátrai, HGV driver, at your service,” said László Mátrai, straightening up a little. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had wanted to know who he really was. In fact, he himself had almost forgotten who he was.

He gave a final stir to the liquid bubbling in the pot, then ladled some out into his bowl. He took a metal spoon out of his trouser pocket, wiped it on his trouser leg, and settled down by the fire. The others all took a seat around him.

László Mátrai was just about to lift the spoon to his mouth, when Valentin Bilibock said, “Bon appétit, László Mátrai!”

“Thank you, my boy!” said László Mátrai.

Then he dipped his spoon in the potato soup and blew on it a little. The children’s mouths watered as they looked at the steaming soup. And it was hard to say whether it was the steam that made László Mátrai’s eyes go all cloudy, or something else altogether.

Up in the treetops, Tuffy Owl was watching the goings-on down below with great satisfaction. The rays of the afternoon sun made her medal glow with a golden light. She felt this had been a particularly successful day. Just, what on earth could that strange noise be?

KRRRRUM! KRRRRUM!

Then the penny dropped: it was only her stomach rumbling again!

She had learned what that was too. So, off she flew to catch herself something nice for dinner.

Be afraid, mice! Be very afraid! thought Tuffy Owl.

And off she flew towards Treasure Grove.

And the sun went on shining brightly over the woods.

THE END