

Translations & foreign editions

Le chien, tr. Margot Carlier, Edition Grandir, France 2000

Eine gelbe geschichte, tr. Natalie Weber,
ill. Krystyna Lipka-Sztarbałto, Verlag Europäische
Kinder- und Jugendbuchmesse e.V., Germany 2004

Petit conte jaune, tr. Margot Carlier,
ill. Krystyna Lipka-Sztarbałto, Verlag Europäische
Kinder- und Jugendbuchmesse e.V., Germany 2004

Dobry potwór nie jest zły, tr. Jiwone Lee, ill. Maria Ekier,
Changbi Publishers, Korea

Wo ist mein Traum?, tr. Natalie Weber,
ill. Krystyna Lipka-Sztarbałto, Verlag Europäische
Kinder- und Jugendbuchmesse e.V., Germany 2005

Sen, który odszedł, tr. Jiwone Lee,
ill. Krystyna Lipka-Sztarbałto, Munhakdongne, Korea 2006

Duh stare hise, tr. Jana Unuk, ill. Martina Ljubic, Založba
Mladika, Slovenia 2006

Anna Onichimowska, Tom Paxal, Norrskensbarnen,
Sahlgrens forlag Ab, Finland 1999

Anna Onichimowska, Tom Paxal, Mellan dem, Forfattarnas
Andelslag, Finland 2000

Anna Onichimowska, Tom Paxal, Goggel Moggel...,
Sahlgrens forlag Ab, Finland 2002

Maticsek in Lovci na duhove, tr. Jana Unuk, ill. Martina Ljubic,
Založba Mladica 2008.

Rights sold

Hera moja miłość; Therry Magnier (France)

Hera, moja miłość; Clio (Bulgaria)

Anthologised work:

Sei autori in cerca di registi, Edizioni Creativa, Italy

Wo die Bücher vom Himmel fallen, Polnische Kinder- und
Jugendliteratur der 90er Jahre, Villa Decius, Stiftung Kultur,
Germany

Stories from Across the Globe, Scholastic India Ltd. 2002;
Fujian Children's Publishing House, China

Im Alphabet durch die Welt, Domino Verlag 2003, Germany

Es war einmal ein Zweihorn, Patmos Verlag 2004, Germany



The Dream that Departed

For the good sleepers who have strange and beautiful dreams, and those who long to have them.

This book, excellent as a work of literature, is a subtle interweaving of reality and make-believe, an account of a night-time journey embarked on by a boy and his toy hare in search of a dream. During their journey they meet real (or fairly real) and imaginary characters which children know very well, and in the end, on a mystery train, they see a muchloved grandma, the keeper of the keys to the space between dreaming and waking.

The unique "dreamy" illustrations by Krystyna Lipka-Sztarbałło were honoured by an entry into the Hans Christian Andersen Honours List in 2001.

[EXCERPT]

We were sitting huddled together, partly because we were cold, partly out of sympathy, and partly anxiety about what would happen next, and neither of us said a word, or rather each of us was waiting for the other one to start. And I'm sure we would have gone on waiting like that until the fellow with whiskers and the sharpened pencil came back, if it weren't for the Cat.

"Hello," he miaowed, emerging from the bushes. "If you go on sitting on the bench, you'll never catch him up."

"How do you know?" I said in amazement.

"He was eavesdropping," muttered Filip.

"Not in the least," the Cat protested. "Cats know that sort of thing."

"Then maybe you also know where we should look for him?" I asked sneeringly, but I failed, because he replied in a calm and dignified manner: "Of course I do."

"So tell us," squeaked Filip.

"Wait a moment," I objected, "we've got to sit here and wait for the Policeman."

"Naaah," laughed the Cat, "you don't have to do that at all."

"He's good and he listens to his elders..." Filip began to praise me.

"How do you know he was older than you?" the Cat interrupted him. "He was just bigger and fatter."

"That's true," I said, cheering up. "He never said he was older."

"But he had whiskers," insisted Filip.

"So what," I said crossly. "That doesn't prove a thing. You've got whiskers too. And so has he –" I pointed at the Cat.

"Stop arguing," he miaowed. "You must go to the station immediately. It's very near by. Straight down the avenue, then turn right." He glanced at a black tunnel between the poplar trees.

"And then what?" asked Filip, moving his ears anxiously. It was an expression of extreme hurry.

"Get on the train, of course," said the Cat, seeming fed up by now. "You can't catch up with him on foot."

"Will you come with us?" I asked.

"What for?" he purred lazily. "He comes to me at every call. I only have to roll into a ball."

"Then maybe instead of going to the station I should try rolling into a ball too?" I asked timidly, but the Cat had already changed into a round bundle of fur and it looked as if he had forgotten about us.

"Let's go." I felt Filip's paw in my hand.

"For the ball to be the way it should, a tail would be useful. But you haven't got one," miaowed the Cat unexpectedly, without opening his eyes.

We set off. At last I knew where to go, and I was no longer quite so lost.

"Remember, turn right, not left!" the Cat's voice came after us. "Turn right!!!"



Bedtime Stories with Micky the Cat

A perfect book to read at bedtime, as here the probable blends with the imaginary. In search of a small ginger kitten, Misiek the Cat sails to Pernambuco, flies a plane, plays tag with the captain of a submarine, talks to crocodiles and to an invisible farmer. Gifted with a vivid imagination, the author teamed up with a superb graphic artist whose paintings excellently convey the spirit of the book. The attractive layout, highlighting the qualities of the text, won the acclaim of the IBBY jury.

[EXCERPT]

8. The Top Model

Micky peeped into all the cabins twice in a row, but he didn't find a living soul in any of them.

"Mister Wizard!!!" he miaowed. "Let's not play hide and seek!"

"He doesn't know how to play that," screeched something behind him. "He could never find me. He didn't even try! And now he's run off!!!"

The cat spun around and saw the ugliest person he had ever seen in his life. The person's nose was covered in moles and hung down to its knees, its head had green stubble growing on it, and its nails had probably never been cut.

"He won't get far!" he said, waving a paw. "You must have noticed this is an island."

"What am I to do now?" The mysterious figure didn't seem to be listening to him.

"I was once a top model, can you imagine?"

"No, I can't," admitted Micky.

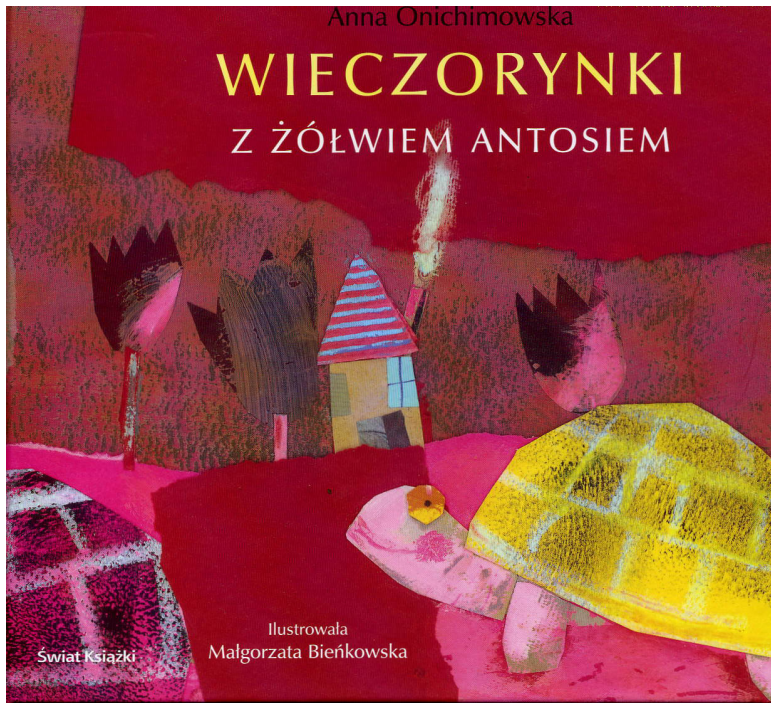
"The wizard kidnapped me from the catwalk during a swimming costume show in Paris. He upped and

married me, then out of jealousy he did what you see. He said it didn't bother him, because he could still remember what I used to look like. Finally he changed his mind, but he'd forgotten the spell and didn't know how to release me from it. And now he's taken the opportunity to do a runner. By ship."

"No!!!" cried the horrified Micky, and rushed for the shore. "It's impossible for them to have left me here – my cousin would never allow it," he thought in panic.

There was no trace of wind now, and the air was hot and still. On the beach, all that was left of the recent presence of the crew were lots of footprints and a bag marked "Lemon wafers".

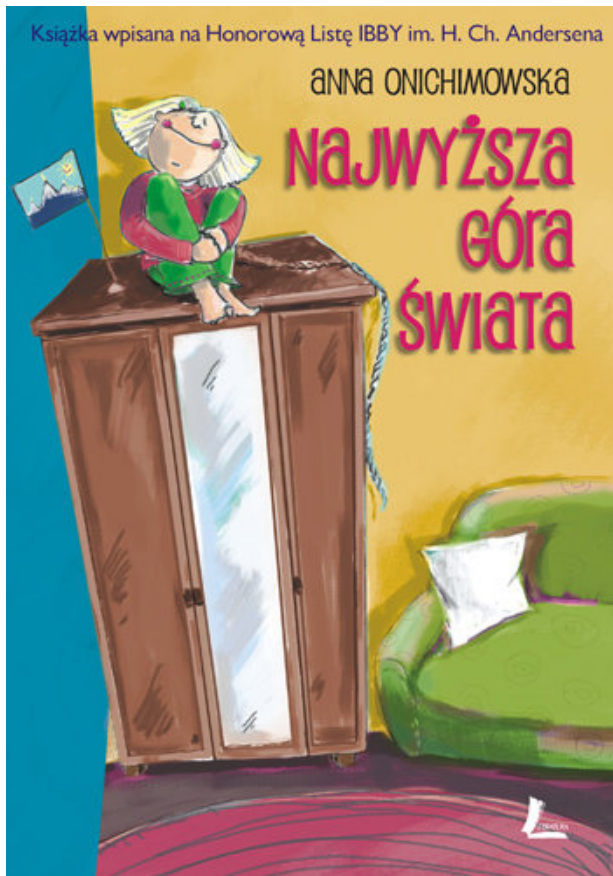
"Maybe he left me a message," Micky the Cat deluded himself, as he ran along the shore. He found a couple of shells and an empty carrot juice bottle. His heart began to beat faster. It must be a sign! His cousin was addicted to carrot juice and drank it from dawn to dusk. He peeped hopefully inside, then out of the bottle he pulled a card, slightly sticky with leftover carrot juice.



Evenings with Anthony the Tortoise

A continuation of Evenings with Misiek the Cat. It is a funny and slightly absurd story for 5–7 years old, perfect for bedtime reading.

Amelka dreams to live with her husband Anthony and they are trying to find their perfect home...



The Highest Mountain in the World

A collection of stories about school-age children experiencing difficult times: the illness and death of a grandmother, the separation of their parents, loneliness and a feeling of rejection, the necessity of choosing between the parents and a grandfather, first love. There are also passions which seem less important from the adult point of view: the desire to have a pet or the drive to overcome one's own weakness by climbing the symbolic "highest mountain in the world." Superbly crafted, the book is graced by subtle lyricism and delicate humour; predominantly realistic, it does contain elements of fantasy. It speaks the child's own language and takes the child's side, affirming that a young person's problems need to be taken seriously, yet the tone is never preachy. This book will give both parents and children food for thought.

Hans Christian Andersen Honors List, 1998

[EXCERPT]

I'll be brave

Yesterday Mummy left us. Me and Daddy. It was a dreadful day. We cried all afternoon. All three of us. First Mummy cried. She took various bits of clothing out of the wardrobe and stuffed them into bags. She didn't look to see what she was taking at all. Whenever she went out somewhere she always took ages to choose, according to the colours, and made an outfit, so everything went with everything else. And sometimes she used to try it on in front of the mirror and ask me if she looks nice. And she'd hum while she did it, sometimes bounce, just like me, because she was so happy she was going out.

But now she packed her cases and cried. And once she had closed the bags, I saw that she hadn't taken her prettiest dress and the shoes for a suit I could just see sticking out of one of the cases. So I brought them to her, and she burst into even more tears and hugged me tight. Then I got teary-eyed too, and started sniffing, though I'd promised Daddy I'd be brave.

And as Mummy and I were standing like that, hugging each other, Daddy came in. He looked at us and went out. I ran after him – I wanted to tell him I was brave, but I didn't say anything. Daddy was standing by the window with his nose pressed to the glass, which had a drop slowly flowing down it. I stood next to him, but it was no good like that because

I couldn't reach the glass, so I ran to fetch a small stool. And I pressed my nose to the window too, though a bit lower down. And now the drops flowing from above caught up with my ones, combined with them, and together they dripped onto the windowsill. Once the puddle on the windowsill was the size of a five- zloty coin, the door slammed. Then Daddy picked me up and we moved away from the window.

Then we tidied the flat, that is we moved various things from one place to another, and then Daddy said: "This sort of tidying is small beer. We've got to put our life in order. From tomorrow. Or maybe from today, what do you think?"

"From tomorrow," I asked.

Next morning Daddy woke me. He was already dressed and shaved, and he smelled nice, of cologne.

"Get up, it's time for nursery school," he said and smiled at me.

"You're going to take me today, aren't you?" I asked, though I knew that was the case. Normally Mummy used to take me.

"That's right. Hurry up, your milk's getting cold." Daddy kept glancing at his watch.

"Isn't there any cocoa?"

"I don't know," said Daddy, getting flustered.

"Perhaps you'll just have milk today, OK?"

I agreed, though I don't like milk much, especially the kind with a skin on it. I went to have a wash, all on my own,

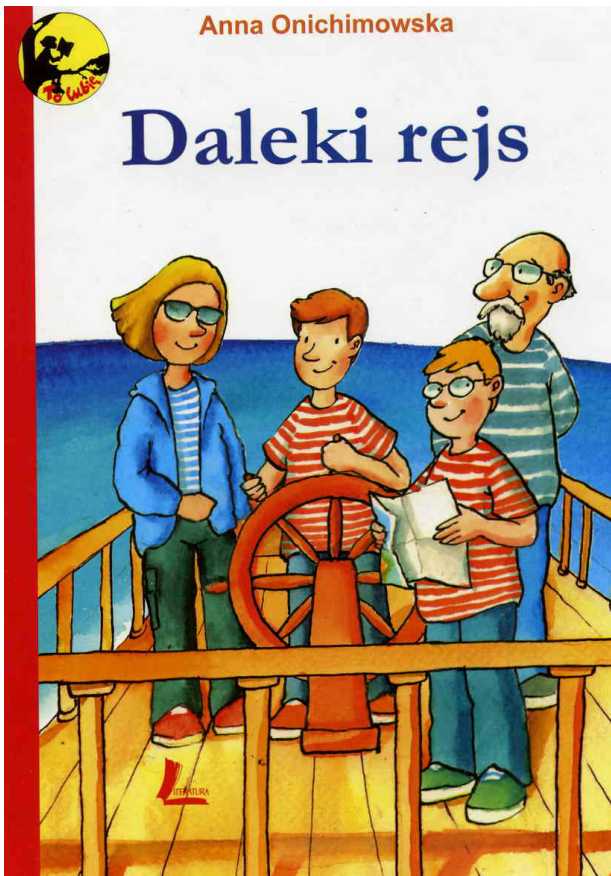
and though no one was keeping an eye on me, I even brushed my teeth. Then I wanted to get dressed by myself, but yesterday's dress was still lying on my chair.

"Daddy!" I called out. "What should I put on?"

"Your clothes are right there," said Daddy in surprise, and I was even more surprised he was telling me to put on the dirty ones. I told him that straightaway, then he ran to the phone, and I heard him calling work and saying he'd be late. Then he brought me some green trousers, a pink sweater and blue socks. At first I wanted to cry, but I quickly changed my mind when I remembered I had to be brave. I swapped the pink sweater for a white one, but I couldn't find any white socks, and just as I was looking for them Daddy came in and started getting angry with me. He even said he'd smack me, though it was completely unfair. It made me feel very upset, but Daddy immediately noticed, gave me a hug and said we must try to understand each other and help each other, because otherwise it'll be bad. And I explained that I couldn't suddenly start dressing awfully, because everything had to be just as before. And Daddy looked for my white socks himself, while I drank the milk with the skin though it was cold by then, but I gulped it down so fast I didn't notice it at all.

On the way to nursery school I looked to see how many children went with

their mummy and how many with their daddy. I'd never thought about it before.



A Long Cruise

A story full of wisdom and warmth, about a boy called Paweł who learns how to establish a good relationship with his younger brother Kuba. The two brothers quarrel constantly and the only thing they seem to have in common is that they cannot cope with the absence of their father. One day Paweł gets a letter from someone signed Mystery Jakub, who seems to know everything about him. The two start to correspond and before long Mystery Jakub becomes Paweł's best friend. After a while Paweł finds out that it is his younger brother who writes to him. The brothers become friends and plan a long cruise to find their father together with their mother and grandfather and some friends.

[EXCERPT]

The Long Voyage

Chapter One

Every day when I get home from school I look in the letterbox. It hangs on the garden side of our gate, and it's not very convenient for the postman to put the letters in there, because he has to shove his hand through the railings. He once even complained to our Mum, but it stayed the way it is. Mum doesn't know how to do the sort of things you need a hammer and nails for, and we haven't got a dad. That is, we do have one somewhere, but he went away ages ago and we don't know anything about him. That's why I always look in the box – because I keep thinking one day he'll write to us at last. Whenever I see an envelope, my heart beats faster, but so far nothing has ever come. It's always junk mail and bills, except in the summer holidays when there are cards from friends with pictures of mountains or lakes, and at Christmas or Easter, when they show Christmas tree decorations or Easter chicks. Sometimes Grandpa sends normal letters, but very rarely. And whenever they arrive, it means he's coming to see us.

I thought Grandpa must be coming soon when I saw a white envelope through the holes in the letterbox. Somewhere else inside, very deep down, I thought of Dad. And when I saw my name on the envelope, I didn't know what to think, it just made me feel awfully

hot, because I've never received a letter before. At first I felt so scared I put it back in the box.

I sat down on the grass by the fence, but I could see my brother spying on me from a window, so I pretended my shoelace had come undone, and then, as if there was nothing odd about it, I took out the letter, put it in my pocket and went into the house.

"Was there anything in the letterbox?" asked Mum, and though I don't know why, I said no, and ran off to my room. Jack was already waiting for me there. I told him to go to his own room (after Dad left each of us got their own room), but he just stared at my pocket, which had an edge of the envelope sticking out of it, and refused to budge at all.

Mum's always saying I have to look after Jack because he's my younger and only brother, but I don't like him much. He's not that much younger than me, only a year and a bit, but he's a fat drip and he wears glasses.

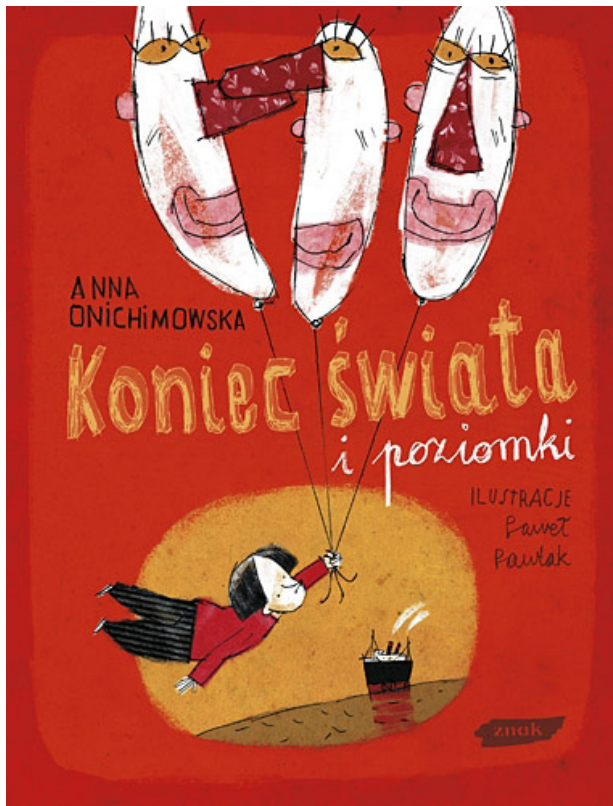
I couldn't open the letter for ages. As soon as Jack left, Mum called me down for lunch, then I had to go shopping with her, and after that she helped me with my homework. It was the evening before I took out the envelope again, smoothed it because it was a bit crumpled by now, and started taking a good look at my name on the front. It was all correct – there could be no question of a mistake. But at once I knew it must be a boy or a girl writing to me, definitely not an adult.

The handwriting was a scrawl, like mine. Curious I hadn't noticed that earlier, probably because I was too surprised.

Inside there was a folded piece of lined paper torn from an exercise book, and on it was written: "Hello Paul, I've never written a letter before, but now I'm going to write to you, and you can answer. Except that I can't tell you my name or where I live, because it's a secret." (After that something had been crossed out, and it was so smudged I couldn't decipher it.) "Maybe one day I'll tell you, but I don't know when. I know all about you, but I'd like to know more. On the corner where you turn to go to school there's a chestnut tree. And it's got a hole in the trunk. I've already hidden a sandwich bag in there, and you can put your letter to me in it. I'll collect it, and then put my next one in the bag. So no one will intercept them. Now I've got to finish. If you don't have a chance to answer me tomorrow, maybe the day after. Oh, and I don't have any more envelopes, so I'll put the letters straight in the bag, and you can do the same."

And that was the end of the letter, except that at the bottom there was a greasy mark and a signature with flourishes: "Mysterious James".

That night I spent ages tossing and turning in bed, wondering what I could write to this James, because I was sure I would write to him. After all, it's so nice to get letters! And if you don't know who they're from, it's rather unusual. And I like unusual things.



The End of the World and Strawberries

A novella about a family who travel to all sorts of strange fairytale places. They hike, fly and sail to the most extraordinary destinations, but every story ends at home. Home, one of the most important elements of a child's world, is shown as a safe haven, a place that is always there to come back to.

[EXCERPT]

The Steamer

I don't know what woke me first – Albert's fierce growling or a sharp sense of anxiety somewhere deep in my heart. I opened my eyes. It was incredibly dark. The rain has stopped falling, I thought, not hearing the familiar drumming against the flysheet. Albert started growling again, and then he began barking. I heard him yapping away as he galloped towards the lake.

"He's gone crazy again, I can't bear it," complained Mummy, wrapping her head in her sleeping bag.

Dad sat up and started untwisting the wire blocking the tent zip.

"I'm going to see," he said, put on his trainers and went outside.

"Hey!" we heard him shout a moment later. "Give back that boat, you thief!" In reply came a mighty sneeze and some hideous laughter that echoed down the river. Albert started to bark again. We ran out of the tent. It was a dark night with no stars and no sign of the moon. We had a hard time seeing our way through the darkness, but then we caught sight of the boat, already disappearing in the distance, with the silhouette of a figure on board.

"Maurice?" asked Mummy, shivering.

Dad just hugged us in reply, and Albert came closer, whining softly.

"He's saying sorry," I said, "for failing to keep our boat safe. Don't worry, Albert," I comforted him, stroking his

white head. "You were very vigilant, you really were..."

"Let's get in the tent," said Mummy quietly. "I'm cold."

"Let's light a bonfire," suggested Dad. "We won't be able to go to sleep now anyway. We must have a meeting. Come on, Charlie." He tugged my hand. "Let's collect some brushwood."

"But it's all wet from the rain," Mummy reminded us. "You won't be able to get the fire going."

"We'll see."

We put on track suits over our pyjamas and got down to work. Once the pile was as high as the tent, Dad sprinkled petrol on it and lit it. There was a hiss, and then one branch started glowing with a cheerful flame.

"We've got a bonfire!" I jumped for joy.

"Just a minute, Charlie," asked Mummy, putting a finger to her lips.

"Can you hear that?"

"Something like..." Dad wondered.

"A sort of buzzing noise..."

"Getting closer," I admitted, "It's buzzing and sputtering."

"From the river." Mummy set off towards it. We went after her. The mysterious noises were getting louder, though there was absolutely nothing visible. The river was flowing dark and calm, lit up here and there by the red glow of the bonfire.

"Look!" I shouted so suddenly that an alarmed bird started flapping its wings in terror.

"A ship..." said Mummy in amazement.

"A steamer," I added.

"Quick!" commanded Dad. "We've got to stop it. Shout with all your might!" he cried, and raced to the bonfire.

"Yooohoo!!!" we shouted, first just Mummy and I, and soon after Dad joined us, waving a burning branch.

It already looked as if it must have sailed past us without noticing, when suddenly there was a whirring noise, a grating sound, and the engines went quiet. The steamer had stopped.

"What is it?" a voice rang out from the ship. "Castaways?"

"Our boat's been stolen!" we cried, one after the other. "Take us away from here!"

"The dinghy will sail out to fetch you," the voice decided.

"Thank you!!!" we cried in chorus, and quickly ran towards the tent.

We hurriedly packed up. The sky was starting to lose its deep blackness, and the silhouettes of trees were appearing with increasing clarity. Joseph didn't even wake up when we pulled him out of the tent and put him in the sling.

"Want some help?" A skinny little man in a sailor's cap had sprung up next to us.

Mummy said thank you and handed him the rolled-up sleeping bags.

"Where is the ship going?" asked Dad, as we were loading our things onto the dinghy.

"The day after tomorrow we should be at sea," said the sailor, arranging the luggage to leave as much room for us as possible. The dinghy wasn't very big.

"Then what?" Dad enquired.

"The Island of the Sad Shoemakers. Have you ever been there?"

"No." Mummy shook her head as she got on board with Joseph.

"Where's Albert?" I asked anxiously.

"I last saw him when we were rolling up the tent," said Dad, looking all around.

"Albert! Albert!" I shouted as loud as my lungs could bear.

"Who's calling me?" came a booming voice from the ship.

"Our captain's called Albert," said the sailor.

"Sorry!" shouted Dad. "We weren't calling you!"

"Stop making a racket, you'll wake up all the passengers!" roared the Captain. "And by a hundred barrels of smoked herrings, do hurry up!"

"Ready?" asked the sailor.

"Albert, Albert," I kept saying, and the tears were streaming down my cheeks.

"Don't worry," said Mummy, hugging me. "He's a clever dog. And very self-reliant. Remember how we met him?" I nodded. "Well, exactly. He'll manage. Maybe he knows we don't need him any more?"

"I'm sorry," put in the sailor. "Has one of you got lost?"

"A dog," said Dad. "A big white dog."

"Even so the Captain wouldn't agree to take him.

He thinks a dog on board brings bad luck. Especially a white one. Let's set sail." He pushed the dinghy off the shore.

"You see." Mummy wiped my sad little

face with a handkerchief. "Albert must have sensed that, and he didn't want to cause us trouble."

"I feel as if we'll meet him again one day," said Dad to comfort me. I didn't reply, because it was just as if he were reading my thoughts. There was nothing in the world I wanted so badly. Well, maybe just for Maurice never to turn up in our sight again.

From below, the steamer seemed as high as a mountain, and the rope ladder we climbed up to get on board was very wobbly. It flashed through my mind that Albert wouldn't have been able to get up it.

The Captain was large and fat, and smoked the biggest pipe I had ever seen.

"Finally," he puffed, once we were standing in front of him, and our luggage was piled next to us. "I've got one empty cabin left. You can take it. And tomorrow you'll tell me the whole story." He let out a cloud of smoke. "Take them to number nine," he addressed the sailor who had brought us.

"Thank you very much," said Dad, bowing. "And good night," he added in farewell.

It wasn't all that appropriate, because the sky was already going pink as dawn broke and the birds were waking up as they do at sunrise.

I can't remember how I got to the cabin and who changed me into my pyjamas. All I could hear, as if in a dream, was the humming of the ship and the steady rattle of the engine.



Chocolate Day

This is a poetic, magical story of a boy whose sister drowned and parents got separated. He learns to cope with this with the help of a next-door girl and a tricolour cat. The real world blends with the magical, populated by such strange creatures as time-eaters, hags, talking cats and hula dancers. The author tackles such problems as death, divorce and adoption in an extraordinarily subtle way; she acquaints children with such difficult situations through stories which are both moving and optimistic.

The dead sister reappears

in the guise of a cat, the adoption agency worker turns out to be a witch, a time-eater feeds on unwanted dates from the calendar and a time-leaper allows the children to forget their problems by jumping forward to the future.

Chocolate Day was awarded a prize in the Astrid Lindgren contest organised by the All Poland Reads to Children foundation.

[EXCERPT]

A Day of Rain

I was woken up by raindrops drumming on the tin roof. I could tell it was morning already, but I didn't feel like opening my eyes yet. The remains of a dream were going round my head. I was sitting cross-legged on the shell of a giant turtle, with the ocean waves rolling along underneath us. Far away in the distance loomed an island. We were approaching it at lightning speed. Under a solitary palm tree, ever more clearly I could see someone jiggling to the rhythm of the beating rain. She was wearing a colourful striped skirt.

"Monika! Monika!!" I cried, but she can't have heard me.

"That's her granny," muttered the turtle and started going underwater. I can't swim, so I got frightened, and raised my head from the pillow.

There was smoke rising from the chimney of the yellow cottage, not high, as if the low clouds were stuffing it back inside again. I opened the window. The rain smelled of meadows, mushrooms and wet fur. A little girl in a blue cape was swinging on a high swing. I could have sworn it wasn't there the day before.

"It fell down with the rain," said Monika, once I was standing by her fence. "In the night. You can sit on it too, if you like, David..." She stopped the swing.

The garden gate creaked, and soon I was wading through the tall grass.

I sat down next to Monika on the wide board, hanging on thick ropes. When I looked up, it almost made my head spin. It was fixed to the highest branch in the pine tree. We started swinging, squealing partly out of fear and partly joy. I only stopped squealing out of amazement.

The cat was sitting in a fork of the apple tree. I hadn't seen her yesterday evening or this morning and I had been starting to get worried. "I filled the bowls for you. They're in the usual place," I said in my mind. "Why are you getting wet? Go and shelter on the porch..."

Monika followed my line of sight, but probably didn't notice her. She stopped waving her legs, so I stopped too and the swing came to a halt.

Then we looked for mushrooms in the meadow, and I told Monika about my dream.

A Day of Anger

Knowing where she was was enough to stop me feeling worried.

"Why do you call her 'Susie'?" said Mum crossly. That's what my sister was called. Before she went away for ever. No one ever used the word "died", although that's what they all meant.

If I'd known someone was listening, I wouldn't have called the cat. It was a she cat, not a he.

I didn't answer Mum, and she didn't insist. Only much later, when I was helping

her make dumplings, I explained: "When a cat has a coat with three colours, that means it's a girl – did you know that?"

"A girl?!" Mum frowned.

"I mean a she-cat..." I corrected myself reluctantly.

I shouldn't have gone back to the subject, because

Mum suddenly lost her temper.

"I'll close my eyes to the fact that you're feeding him... her," she corrected herself, "but I forbid you to call her that.

Understood?!" She turned away abruptly and ran out of the kitchen, despite the fact that we had only just started to sprinkle sugar and cinnamon on the plums.

Then I lost my temper. So badly that I threw all the plums on the floor, the ones we'd already stuffed as well as the empty ones. And then I started stamping on them, until they'd changed into a sticky mess. Then I slipped on the mess and banged my elbow on a stool. I was still lying there, licking the blood and plums off my arm when Mum came back.

"My God," was all she said, then burst into tears. And so did I.

Monika's Day

"Tomorrow's Monika's birthday," said Mum. "I bumped into her auntie in the shop. She's invited us to tea. We must buy a present. Got any ideas?"

"Yes," I nodded, and then we went to town. But none of the shops had a hula

dancing skirt.

I wanted Monika to have a new one, in different colours, for a change. In the first shop the saleslady was just having a cup of coffee and eating a bun. She didn't answer us at all, she just looked goggle-eyed and shook her head. In the second we found out that they'd never had anything like that, and in the third the lady behind the counter asked us how you do the dance. I tried to show her, but then a man came into the shop so I felt silly and ran away.

There weren't any more shops in our town. Finally, instead of a skirt I decided on a globe. My favourite was the one that lit up from the inside, but it was too expensive, so we bought an ordinary one.

At Monika's, besides us there was another little girl called Julia, with her mum. She was wearing a denim skirt, kept chewing gum and never stopped pressing the buttons of her Play Station. She took no notice of us at all.

"Who's that?" I whispered in Monika's ear.

"My auntie's friend's daughter..." she whispered back. "Auntie invited her so I'd have some company. But she's from another planet."

"It's you that's from another planet!" exclaimed the girl, and ran to her mum.

Monika and I looked at the globe, turning it in all directions. We talked a bit about other planets, and a bit about ours.

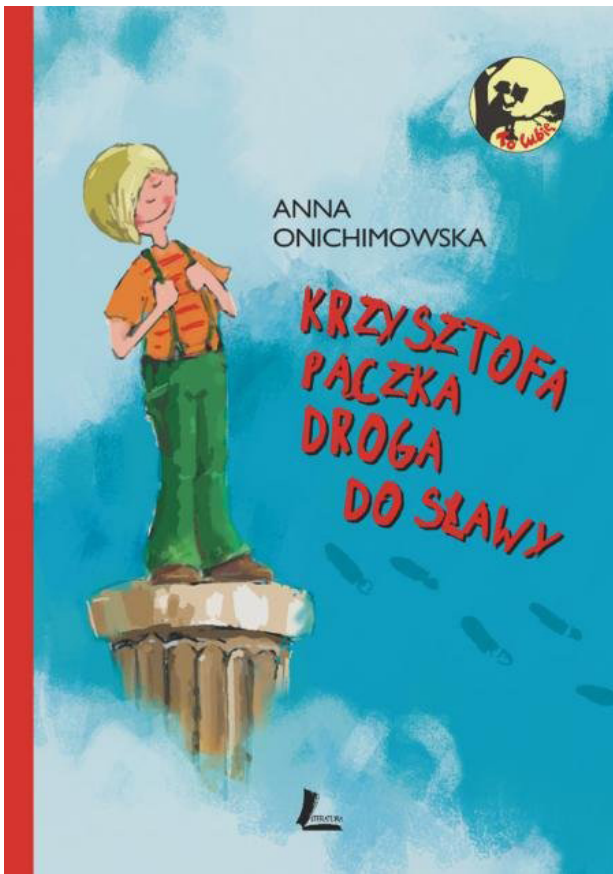
"Where does your granny live?" I asked,

and Monika tapped the globe with her finger.

I stared at the tiny spot in the blue ocean. Then I asked Monika to put on her hula skirt. I noticed she was keeping it in her backpack, and when I asked why, she replied she'd be leaving soon. That made me terribly sad.

"You've only just arrived," I said. "Don't you like it here?"

"Yes, I do," she said, nodding, and began to dance. "But I miss my granny."



Krzysztof Pączek's Way to Fame

The story of Krzysztof, a boy who decides that he wants to be famous. After much consideration he decides to become a writer. The book takes the form of his diary, where he describes all that happens in his life. Since he aspires to becoming a writer, his diary is written in 'semi-grown-up' language. This humorous story is accompanied by funny black and white illustrations.

[EXCERPT]

Christopher Doughnut's Road to Fame

4 October

There's a saying that the way things are on Monday is how they'll continue all week long. Today is Monday, and terrible things are starting to happen. Lucky we haven't got a dog, because it would definitely have gone crazy. We're all sitting in a heap in the biggest room, which although it's the biggest, isn't that big at all, all the more since the furniture from the entire flat has been put in it, so it seems extremely small and horribly cluttered. To go out into the hall I have to squeeze between a wardrobe and a bookcase, then walk around the couch that my parents are sitting on right now, then tell Magda to leave the room (that's my sister). She's occupied the only scrap of space that's free of junk and she's aking advantage of our enforced presence to stage a concert. On the violin of course.

I wanted to help the decorators, but Dad instantly went on at me to stop bothering them and getting under their feet, or there'd be a disaster. By chance, I even happen to know what he was on about. I was just telling the foreman how I'd like to paint my room. Not the way it's usually done, with the whole wall all the same boring colour – white, grey or bright yellow, but for something to be going on there, a jungle for example. Or at least a zoo, or the sea. And when I told him about the colour of the sea and how

it should look, he got all muddled up. Instead of dipping his brush in the white paint, he pulled the other pail towards him, which had blue paint for the kitchen in it and started daubing it on the wall. But at that moment I stopped talking, and he got terribly upset, because only then did he notice what had happened, and he complained to Dad that I was getting in the way of his work. As if that was true. I was just making his life nicer and trying to stop him from getting bored.

In fact I haven't even written that we're having the house decorated, but by now that's all pretty obvious anyway. Well, maybe not all of it. I didn't write, for instance, that our three bedrooms are going to be hopelessly painted white, and the kitchen blue.

Only the bathroom's going to be navy blue for some unknown reason. It's my Mum's idea. And she always does everything the wrong way around. I mean different from other people. At Bart's and Les's houses and at Pete's too the bedrooms have coloured walls and the bathroom's white. But Mum's always a bit topsy-turvy, and I've got used to it by now. I even like it. There's always something more interesting going on. But if she did want things to be different, she could listen to me and paint at least my and Magda's rooms like the jungle. Then it'd be really different from at other people's houses. But Mum refused. Maybe she was afraid of Granny, because

when Granny comes to stay with us and sees the bathroom, there might be a disaster anyway. And if she saw walls covered in palm trees and lions, I'd rather not think what would happen.

Here I am quietly writing about Granny, and Mum has just said there's no point sitting here like this, so she's taking us to Granny's. Dad's staying here with the decorators.

25 October

I haven't even said what I'm called. I'll do it now. And I'll write a bit about my family too. So my name is Christopher Doughnut. My Dad's called Doughnut too, but his first name is Peter, my Mum's called Eva, and my sister's Magda, and they have the same surname too. And we're not at all bothered by the fact that it sounds a bit funny. I mean I don't think it's funny, but at school for a long time some boys used to laugh at me and call me names. When Magda started going to school it was the same. But now they've all gone quiet about it. Luckily I'm not fat, because I'm sure they'd never have stopped bugging me so soon. I'm even pretty thin and tall with it.

The tallest in my class – well, only Big Ant is a centimetre taller. And he stands in front of me in PE. And I'm in the fourth class. Now I'm not sure what else to write about myself. Maybe I'll start on my family, but...

I broke off in that stupid way because Mrs Hoodlum called me up to the blackboard. Because I was writing this in Polish class.

But I don't think I will any more, because the boys keep asking what I'm doing, and taking it in turns to peep over my shoulder. Until as a result Mrs Hoodlum nailed me. And what I'm writing is a sort of secret for now. That is, I don't want anyone to read it, although I'm going to write the truth. But the truth might not turn out to be convenient for everyone, because I'm not going to whitewash anyone. One day they're sure to read this diary, but not just now. They'll read it once I'm famous. Or maybe even later, after my death. But I'm going to be famous in my lifetime. That's what I've decided. For now I can't write any more because I have to go and get some potatoes. And that's great. Magda's been at Granny's since yesterday and is going to be there a bit longer.

26 October

Now I'll say clearly why exactly I'm writing all this down. Because yesterday I wrote that I want to be famous. But I don't yet entirely know what to do to become a famous person. But then I've got my whole future ahead of me, as my Granny says, so I think I've still got time to decide. Because there are an awful lot of possibilities. I could paint something, or model something out of clay, or sail across a sea for instance, or even an ocean. There are even various ways to do that: in a canoe, or a dinghy, or in a lifebelt, or just by swimming. Anyway, you have to do something

in a way no one has ever done it before. Or maybe discover something: an island or a new planet, or some new metal or coal (I mean something instead of coal, because what will happen when it runs out?). Sometimes you read about the funny things people do to get their name known. For example, they spend ages sitting in a dark box or up a tree, or they dance the samba for a month, or run a long way in a sack. But I already know they're not famous at all. My Dad once explained to me that exploits like that don't guarantee fame, just popularity. And that's very short lasting. So it doesn't suit me.



Hera, My Love

This is a deeply moving story based on real events. In the first part of the book the reader is introduced to the main character, Jacek, the teenage son of rich and successful parents. The family lives in a big house, the parents are always busy, the housekeeper looks after Michał, the younger boy, and Jacek is basically left to fend for himself. He has a girlfriend with whom he smokes dope, and when she dumps him, he starts to smoke more, and then dabbles in hard drugs too. Things take a dramatical turn when one day Michał steals a joint from Jacek, hides in the attic, smokes the joint, has visions and, not realising they are not reality, hangs himself.

Part two shows the family trying to deal with the tragedy. The parents blame Jacek for killing his brother, Jacek falls in with a bad lot, takes hard drugs and loses control over his life. His parents are unwilling and unable to help him. Everything disintegrates; it seems that things will never come back to normal. However, after a long struggle, the family musters the strength to build their relationships anew.

This book is a powerful and deeply moving account of real events. Told in a simple language, the story is shown from four different perspectives: that of the mother, the father, Jacek and Michał. It is a forceful reminder of the fragility of human life and of the potential of seemingly trivial situations to bring about grave consequences.

[EXCERPT]

Christopher Doughnut's Road to Fame

The worst thing is, this is a true story.

I once read a brief, impersonal note about it and it has been haunting me ever since.

I will not be free from it until I have imagined it in the smallest detail; until I have told it.

I am piecing this world slowly from tiny shards, as the glass that had mirrored it once was shattered. It is crucial that I do not miss a piece, because if I did, the picture would never be complete.

Part I

The House in the Garden

THE MOTHER

Name: Grażyna. Surname: Niwicka.

Marital status: married.

Height: 167 centimetres. Eyes: brown.

No distinguishing marks.

'What does it mean, 'no dis-ting- uish-ing marks?' asks Michał. Ever since he learned to read, he reads anything he can get his hands on.

'Exactly what it says: that there is nothing in my face that isn't in other people's,' she explains.

'Like what, two noses?,' giggles Michał.

'No, like a scar, for example.'

She takes a quick look in the mirror. Her face is perfect. Even if she did happen to have a scar, she would be sure to remove it, plastic surgery can work wonders

these days.

She hears Michał say something, but she doesn't have the time to listen.

'Take him for a walk, will you?' she asks Natasza, adds a touch of lipstick to her lips and rushes down to get the car.

'What time would you like me to serve dinner?' the housekeeper calls after her.

'I'm eating out tonight. Don't wait up.' The remote control isn't working properly again, she has to push the tiny button a few times before she can see her lovely car. She winds the roof down, it would be a shame not to in such a weather, and starts the engine, lighting up a cigarette. She steps on it as soon as she turns out of the driveway. She enjoys driving. It's a lot of fun to catch other drivers' stunned looks in the rearview mirror when she leaves others far behind, starting at the green light.

She has less than an hour to spend in the gym today.

She does the chest expanders and then pedals hard, as if the stationary bicycle would get her to the end of the world.

'Wouldn't it be more pleasant on a real bike?' her trainer asks.

They talk a bit about the scarcity of cycling paths but he insists that he knows a fine quarter where it's great to cycle, and offers to go with her if she wishes. She declines gracefully and then rows for a while – rowing is good for your bust, then showers, puts her makeup on, lights up and gets into her car again.

She leaves the roof closed this time, it's

only April after all.

Her phone rings. It's her husband, from London. '

Hi, honey. Where are you?'

'Out, meeting a client for dinner.'

'Should I be jealous?'

'You will be anyway, won't you?' she says, laughing. Then they talk about what he's up to.

The client is a washing powder magnate. They're going to discuss a highly original promotional campaign. That's what Grażyna is best at.

They had covered everything and reached an agreement by dessert. The client looks happy but he wouldn't feel man enough if he didn't suggest that they spend the rest of the night together too.

'I never see my clients privately, even the ones I really like,' she gives her diplomatic answer, the one she always gives to the overly keen ones.

Then she's back in the car, lights up another the cigarette and puts on a CD with a Spanish course: she has decided to learn this language too.

The light is on in the living room and in Jacek's bedroom, only Michał's windows are dark. She is priceless, that Natasza, thinks Grażyna, letting herself in.

Natasza is watching the TV.

'Should I go to my room?' she asks, without looking up.

'No, you can stay and watch till the end,' says Grażyna, even though she doesn't like Natasza to sit around in the evenings. They put a TV in her bedroom so she can watch it there rather than in

the living room.

She needs to relax. And when it comes to relaxation there's nothing like jacuzzi.

'Everything OK with the boys?' she asks, out of duty.

Natasza nods, her eyes glued to the screen.

Grażyna hesitates for a moment whether she should look up on Jacek, but she doesn't feel like talking, all she wants is a bubbly bath, a good cigarette and some classical music.

'I'm going downstairs,' she says curtly. 'Don't switch any calls. Good night.'

She has to be at the agency at nine o'clock sharp on the next day. She wonders how working mothers manage without a housekeeper, but these are not happy thoughts, or maybe it's just that her imagination is pre-programmed in a certain way.

She thinks back on her own childhood home, the cramped space and the harried artist mother. A good painter, supposedly, but always short of cash. Grażyna decided to be good at something that would bring money. She can still smell the turpentine and the oils, the pervasive smell of their tiny flat. Her mother ran art workshops and managed to sell a picture once in a while, but most of them were stacked in every spare corner, and there was not a bit of space on the walls. Her father rarely came to visit, he moved out when she was a young girl. Grażyna used to admire the wealthy villas in the lush green gardens when she saw them on the television, and

their inhabitants, well-groomed businesswomen with husbands and children there, nice and proper. I will be one of them, she vowed at eighteen.

I'm coming straight home from work tomorrow, she decides, wrapping herself in a soft dressing gown. We will all go to meet Kamil at the airport, give him a nice surprise.

Back in the living room, she notices the light flashing on the answering machine. It's her sister. 'Please call, I will be up till midnight.'

She probably wants to borrow money again, thinks Grażyna meanly, dialling the number.

'Thanks for calling back,' says Ewa. 'I need your advice. Can you believe it, I've found contraceptives in Justyna's stuff. I'm totally shocked.'

'Early starter,' says Grażyna with a yawn. 'She's only what, fourteen?'

'You couldn't care less, could you,' Ewa sounds hurt. 'You're her aunt, for God's sake.'

'But of course I care,' lies Grażyna. 'It's just that I'm tired. How old is she, again?'

'Fifteen.'

'You should be glad she's protecting herself,' she says, lighting up a cigarette. 'That means she's a clever girl. You can talk to her, of course, but don't lose your cool.'

'It's easy for you to say, you've got boys.'

Michał was supposed to be a girl, Grażyna thought, hanging up. Perhaps it's just as well that he isn't. Boys really seem to be less trouble. In fact she can

hardly remember any trouble at all. Ah yes, he played football with the boy next door once and smashed a window. And once he was bent on having a cat so they got one. Puff lived with them for three months, but he scratched the furniture and snagged the curtains. She was afraid it might get worse in time. Cats are mean creatures. She heard of one that peed into his owners' shoes. The fleas, the vets, the cleaning up, I won't have it, she decided at last and, making use of Michał's runny nose, she persuaded the family that he was allergic to cat fur. She found Puff another home and that was that, end of trouble. Michał despaired for a week and then stopped talking about the cat at all.

And Jacek? He's almost a man now. seventeen. He's doing well at school, got a nice girlfriend, he'll probably be in college next year.

She listened to stories about arrogant, misbehaved youth and child-parent conflicts as she might listen to UFO stories. Her children were brought up properly. They always said 'excuse me' and 'thank you,' had perfect table manners and showed respect to their elders. They were obedient.

And her sister was always having some sort of problem with Justyna.

Yes, I'm lucky to have boys, thought Grażyna with satisfaction, stretching lazily. One last cigarette and it's time for bed.

THE FATHER

Name: Kamil. Surname: Niwicki. Married. Height: 182 centimeters. Nationality: Polish.

The clerk at the passport office looks at him again, she knows the face and the name, but she can't remember when and where exactly she saw it last. Only on her home from work, flipping through the paper again, she notices the interview and the accompanying photo.

A successful man, if there ever was one. CEO of a big international company. Hobby: tennis; main problem: always short of time; approach toward women: partnerlike, ideal of a woman: the wife, who else; assessment of family life (on a one-to-six scale): five and a half. Why not six? We don't see enough of each other. Why so much as five and a half, then? Hard to say. Problems with children? Only one: they grow up too quickly.

Kamil takes his bag off the conveyor belt, intensively happy for a moment just because it's there, he will never forget how he was stranded in Australia once, having to wear the one suit for an entire week. But someone snatches the bag from his hand, well ok, steady on, so I got the wrong one, what's the big deal. It's bingo at the third attempt. He wipes the sweat from his forehead.

'Fancy just one more before we go home?' tempts Piotr, his assistant, but Kamil feels he can hardly stand up straight, so he declines.

The sliding doors between the world of travel and the world of everyday life open.

'Now that's some welcome committee.' Piotr sounds jealous; there is no one to meet him.

Kamil seeks out his wife's face in the crowd, and the sons standing next to her. Why are there three boys, he wonders.

'What a surprise!' He tries not to show how awful he feels. 'I'm so glad you've come, honey!' He gives Grażyna a hug. Michał reaches out to him, wanting his father to pick him up. 'Better not, son, my head's spinning.' He ruffles his hair and gives Jacek a pat on the shoulder. The third boy has luckily vanished.

He closes his eyes in the car, he hears them all talking, but he can't focus, he blacks out.

When he wakes up, it is morning. He lies on the bed. Fully clothed. His head is throbbing like a nightmare. He can hardly remember what happened last night, the last thing that seems more or less clear is the hassle at the conveyor belt.

A look at his watch makes him jump. The house is quiet, but Grażyna hasn't left long ago, the cigarette that she failed to stump is still smoking.

A quick shower. The face looking back at him from the mirror is rather crumpled, but there's nothing he can do about it. Two aspirins, a glass of water, lots and lots of water.

'Natasza! Coffee, please! Quick as you can!' he calls out from the bathroom,

combing his wet hair.

Apart from the coffee there are, as always, a few pieces of toast and a boiled egg waiting for him on the table.

The housekeeper glances at him furtively and then looks away. He would like to ask her a question or two, she must know how he wound up at his own house, but there is no time.

'Are you going to be back for dinner, sir?' The standard morning question.

'I'll call and let you know,' he promises, grabs his briefcase and is off to the car.

The remote is not working as it should, it never is.

I should call Grażyna, he thinks, but decides to put it off. He'll call when he knows his schedule for the day. When he's had a shot of brandy to clear his mind and loosen his tongue.

You shouldn't drink at all when you drive, she keeps saying, but he knows better. He never drives drunk. But a bit of alcohol has on him the effect that strong tea does on other people. It helps him concentrate, his senses get keener.

He receives five phonecalls before he gets to work. Number four is her.

'You've made a fool of yourself again,' she says, and fills him in. 'The boys shouldn't see you like this. I was none too pleased either.'

'It's because I'm scared of flying. I wanted to relax. I'm sorry, I really am.' It's true. He hates situations like that. He likes to be in control. 'I have brought you all little gifts,' he adds. He always brings back things. And it was the first time

that he blacked out on the way from the airport.

Why did she have to come and bring the children, too? But then again, I hate to think what would happen if I got into a cab.

'Don't be mad, please.'

'You should have seen Natasza's face. We had to lug you into the house.'

'We'll talk about in the evening,' he cuts this unpleasant conversation short. There is another call waiting. 'I'll call you later.'

Finally they agree to meet for dinner at home.

'You were drunk,' says his younger son instead of hello. When he bends down to kiss him, the boy averts his cheek.

'Well, I'm not anymore,' Kamil tries to turn it into a joke, and hands his son a playstation.

Michał brightens up immediately, but in a moment his face is solemn again.

'Promise me this won't happen again,' he says.

'Of course it won't happen again.' He sincerely wants to believe his own words.

Kamil catches Jacek looking at him, and he doesn't like that look. Maybe I'm imagining things, he calms himself, giving his son a CD he bought in London.

'I have no idea what this is.' He shrugs. 'But I was told it was what the young are listening to now.'

'Thanks, dad.' Jacek unwraps it and looks at the cover. 'Looks cool. Haven't heard of them.'

'Let me.' Michał reaches for the CD.

'Leave it!' Jacek starts up from the table. Michał chases him, almost tripping up Natasza with a loaded tray, and finally snatches the CD from his brother.

'You've got this already, don't you remember? Dad got it for you!'

Silence.

'Why didn't you say something?' asks Kamil.

'What's the point? It's cool. I'll give one as a present to someone. Nothing to worry about, really.'

'You can give it to me. So I will have two presents and you won't have any,' teases Michał.

'I could, why not,' says Jacek, sitting his brother in his lap. 'And now eat.' He starts to spoonfeed him like a toddler. 'And one more, there's a good boy.'

Michał laughs so hard he almost chokes on the food.

It's so good to have a family, thinks Kamil and again feels sorry for making a fool of himself. He reaches for the wine, pours a glass for Grażyna and himself, then hesitates for a second, looking at Jacek.

'Would you like some?'

'No, thanks,' he declines.

The dinner is very good. A bit rich, though: it's impossible to teach Natasza to cook differently than they do in her native Ukraine, but then one shouldn't expect too much.

It gives Kamil genuine pleasure to look at Grażyna; all his friends envy him for having such a wife. He has brought her a new perfume. He wished it was after

dinner already and he could smell it on her.

Grażyna glances at her watch.

'Ewa is popping in for a coffee in half an hour,' she says, and Kamil's good mood vanishes without a trace.

'What, tonight?' he asks incredulously.

Jacek thanks for the meal and gets up.

'Come on, bro.' He scoops Michał on his way. 'Let's play one of your new games, ok?'

Kamil gives him a look of gratitude, he so wanted to have at least a moment alone with his wife.

MICHAŁ

'You can't even make out my name, look!' Michał shows his brother his school ID. Natasza washed it with the jacket it was in.

Jacek studies the bleached piece of cardboard.

'This is it, then. You don't exist.' He lifts up his hands in a helpless gesture and makes a mock-sorry face.

'I do, too!' says Michał, upset. 'I'll get a new one tomorrow, you'll see.'

'Ok then, but today you don't exist,' teases Jacek. Suddenly he sees that his little brother is about to cry. He never meant that. 'You know what, why don't we fix you an ID right now,' he says, pretending he didn't notice the tears. 'Go find me a photo.'

Michał fetches four albums and opens one at random.

'Look here!' he laughs. The photo shows

a six-month-old baby playing with a rubber duck in his bath.

'But it's me, not you,' says Jacek. 'Besides the photo has to be recent, or at least you have to look like you in it.'

'I know that.'

Jacek sometimes thinks that I don't understand anything, thinks Michał. But it's funny that a person changes so much. So completely. I wonder what I will look like when I'm Jacek's age. Will we look alike? Or when I'm grown-up, like dad. Michał tries to imagine himself in a suit, with a briefcase.

'Why are you suddenly so quiet?' nudges Jacek, so he tells him, even though it isn't easy.

Jacek can't see himself in twenty years either. He flips the pages of another album.

'What about this one?' He points to a photo in which Michał is fishing by a lake.

'But they only show the head on the IDs,' protests Michał.

'Not a problem. Bring me the scissors. And some cardboard.' Jacek would be glad to move on and do his own thing, but he hates to leave Michał feeling helpless. 'I'll take new photos of you soon. I can't now, I've run out of film.'

Michał is watching as Jacek makes him a new ID.

Name: Michał. Surname: Niwicki.
Height: practically a midget.

They don't put your height on a school ID! And I'm 1,34 tall now!, cries Michał. 'Just put in the address and the name

of my school. And that I'm in grade one.'

Checking the new ID all over, Michał knows something's missing.

'What about the stamp?'

'You'll stamp it at school tomorrow,' says Jacek with a wink. 'Now go on, play in your room for while.'

Michał watches his brother get up. 'You are going to smoke now, right?' He wants to keep him a little bit longer.

Jacek freezes.

'Has no one told you what happens to those who sneak and peep?' he asks in a threatening tone, and his little brother shakes his head. 'They grow long ears like donkeys and a third eye, too. Right between the eyebrows.'

'Cool, so I will see the better,' retorts Michał and looks out of the window. 'I'm going out to play,' he says, seeing Krzyś, his next-door friend, on the other side of the fence.

'Put on a jacket!' Jacek calls after him, but he's already at the door.

'Where are you off to?' Natasza stands in his way.

He explains that just to the garden and she zips up his jacket.

Michał feels a warm breeze on his cheek. He calls out to Krzyś to come over and a moment later they are both on the same side. First they shoot the basket which Kamil put up some time ago, but they don't score a single hit.

'The wind's too strong,' decided Krzyś, losing interest. He is crouching by a thingy jutting out of the ground. 'What's this?'

'A mole repellent,' Michał replies in a whisper, for some reason. 'Mum is mad with them for ruining the lawn. She tried to poison them before. And she was surprised that the poison didn't work. But I hunted all the bits and threw them into the bin.'

'You didn't!' Krzyś was utterly wide-eyed.

'Course I did. Think of a mole, it has to be in the earth all the time and it can't see a thing, how can you poison it too? I don't like the idea. And when you don't like something, you have to act, that's what Miss at school said.' A moment later Michał plugs the repellent from the earth. 'I don't like those either. I don't want them to get scared.'

'If they're scared here, they'll crawl to our garden,' thinks Krzyś aloud, and, after giving it some thought, Michał puts the repellent back in. 'And then my mum will buy a repellent and they'll all come back to you. And so they will be going back and forth till they go crazy.'

Michał closes his eyes. He imagines being a mole, running around in the dark, with a low booming noise coming at him from all over the place.

'I know what I'll do! I'll put old batteries in. Because if I take these out, they will know I did it.'

Krzyś goes home, his mum calls him for dinner, and Michał is left alone.

When he has made sure that the moles have their peace and quiet, he climbs on a plastic dustbin and looks in through the kitchen window. Nothing interesting there. Natasza is chopping vegetables

and staring at the tv. Mum bought a small set especially for her, because Natasza always says that she can't do without television. And mum wanted Natasza to do well.

Michał moves the dustbin under Jacek's window, thinking, I wish Danka was there. Danka is Jacek's girlfriend. He saw them kiss once, and even Jacek unbuttoning her blouse. He would have seen more, perhaps, but then mum got back.

Jacek is filling rolling paper with something he can't see from so far away, and is making cigarettes. I wonder why he doesn't buy ready-mades, like mum, thinks Michał. I must ask him one day.

But then he remembers what Jacek said about those who sneak and peep. It would be hard for him to explain why he thought of the question. Just to make sure, he touches his ears, but they don't feel as if they've grown any longer.

Mum! He's happy to see her car on the driveway and runs to meet her.

'Hi, baby.' Mum stops for a second to give him a kiss and hurries inside.

Michał follows closely everywhere she goes.

'Natasza, have you ironed my blouse?' Oh no, she's about to leave again.

'But mum, the cinema, you promised,' he starts whining. He doesn't want to go to a cinema at all, but he would like to be with her.

'I didn't say we'd go today.' Mum changes quickly. 'But I'll ask Natasza to take you, if you like. Or Jacek, if he's free.'

JACEK

Name: Jacek. Surname: Niwicki.

Nationality: Polish.

Danka goes through Jacek's passport. So many stamps! It's good to have parents who are filthy rich, she thinks, looking out of the window with envy. A large lawn, rose bushes, a rock garden, a pond.

'I'll buy you a dwarf for your birthday,' she says impishly, when Jacek comes into the room with a carton of juice.

'A dwarf?' Jacek frowns, not seeing what she means.

'A garden dwarf, half a meter tall. Can't afford a bigger one.'

'You've almost a year till my birthday. You'll manage to save.'

He comes up to her and kisses the exposed neck. Danka puts her hair up ever since he told her he liked it best that way. 'I once watched a programme about dwarfs on Discovery. Do you know there are hundreds of their fans and collectors? Unbelievable, how can anyone surround themselves with such eyesores.' He takes the passport back from her. 'Where did you find it?'

'In your drawer,' confesses Danka. 'I was looking for grass.'

Jacek pours the juice into glasses, and she slips her hand under his sweatshirt.

'Come on, give me a smoke,' she purrs, pulling him onto the bed.

Jacek is over the moon that she likes it so much. Danka has taught me everything I know, he thinks sometimes, in awe that he found such a treasure.

He had always been quite shy. He would normally never dare to approach her. Six months before, at a party at Teresa's, they began to dance together. Then she talked him into smoking a joint. He was a bit unwilling, he had snatched a cigarette from his mother once to see how it tasted, and he found it foul.

'This cigarette is different. You'll like it, trust me.' She tempted him until he finally tried.

He wasn't sure if he liked it or not, rather not. Neither that one nor any of the ones he smoked later. But he did feel more relaxed than ever before. He could kiss her now, even feel her up in the dark. A week later she saw him at his place, they smoked a joint each and did it for the first time. Since then, to him marijuana equals satisfaction. He always tries to have at least a few joints at hand, for himself and Danka. Sometimes he thinks the grass gives her more pleasure than sex.

'Let's go to the cinema on Friday,' he proposed when they got dressed again and Danka reached for another joint. He was about to tell her that she smoked too much, but he bit his tongue. He didn't like to be criticised himself, so he spared her. 'They're showing the *Nouvelle Vague*.'

'It's the day of Bartek's party, remember?'

'I'd like to do the film marathon. Three absolutely cult films in a row.' Danka looked as if she didn't listen, so he put his arm around her and drew her near. 'We'll be sitting so close in the dark, it

will be fun, you'll see.'

'I'd rather go to Bartek's,' she said firmly.

'We still have two days to decide,' he said in order not to wind her up.

'I have already decided,' she snapped, getting up to leave.

Whatever, he thought angrily. We're not Siamese twins. Each of us does what they want to do. But he didn't say it out loud, he just reached for the camera and took a photo of her stubborn face.

'You're mental.' She shrugged, and he took two more to immortalise the moment.

They went to same school, different classes, though. Everyone knew they were an item and that made Jacek proud. The guys said Danka was supercool.

She was fun to talk to, she read a lot, she liked riding. School was necessary evil to her, but still she didn't do half bad.

They didn't have the same ideas about things, but their relationship was all the more interesting for it. She couldn't understand why Jacek planned to go on to study psychology. She wanted to do an MBA.

'You won't get a decent living out of being a psychologist.' She shrugged. 'Work is not a hobby.'

Jacek was fascinated by other people. He watched them avidly, all the time. In the street, at school, at parties, at home. He observed how they behaved to each other and when they thought they were alone. He waited for such moments, armed

with his camera, and snapped photo after photo. Then he got them developed and hang them on the wall in his room. It took him days to select the best. Most of them were portraits. He liked imagining what the faces hid, what were the stories behind them.

Sometimes he put two photos together at random and imagined what would happen if the two people met. He once wanted Danka to join in such a game, but she wasn't keen.

'Who's this?' asked Michał once, pointing to a picture of an old man in a woolen cap.

'Take a guess.' He was curious what his brother would come up with.

'Our grandpa?' he asked and Jacek confirmed it with a nod. 'Where does he live? Why doesn't he ever come to visit?'

And so Jacek made his brother a grandfather; he had had none before, both were dead. The grandfather he created was a fisherman working on his fishing boat far in the North. He often regretted it later, but he couldn't take back what he said.

'You make him believe utter nonsense,' Grażyna scolded. 'You two have a full family, why do you think he misses a grandfather?'

Jacek almost told her then that he too missed a strong man with whom he could talk. His dad was no use.

He put up the pictures of his mother and father on two opposite walls once and wondered how it was between them. Mother was the boss. She made

and executed the rules. He couldn't tell if she liked it this way or if she had no choice. But she did take this man for her husband years before. Was he different then? And she? What was she like?

He looks at the familiar faces, only twenty years younger.

Do people change so much or is it just that the roles they play change? He looks at an old photo of himself, unable to tell now: did he look like Michał then?

His grandmother paints portraits. She depicts people the way she sees them, not attempting to show them objectively, if this should be possible at all. All her models look alike in a way, probably because of her style, her favourite colours.

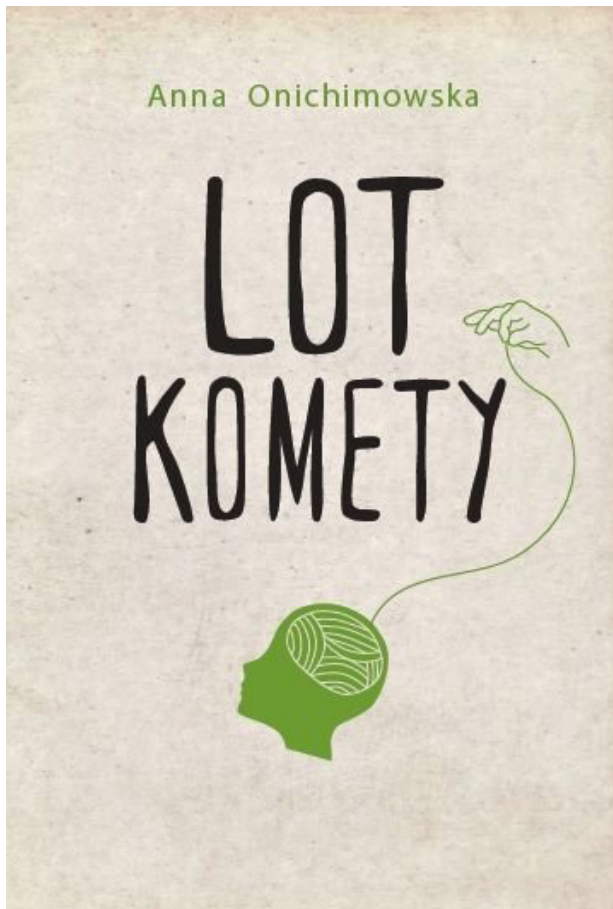
You can watch the human face most closely on the silver screen. That's why Jacek loves the cinema. He loves the theatre too, but not nearly as much.

He studies himself in the mirror. Tall and thin, slightly stooped, the long hair in a ponytail, a face like any other. The worst thing is, I'm nothing special, he thinks. I couldn't be an actor, no one would remember me. I couldn't be a director either, because he remembers his Polish teacher's harsh words: 'You're not creative.' That's what she declared after reading a paper he wrote on a topic about which he didn't give a damn.

'You're nothing special.' He makes a face at himself and the glass mists over with his breath. 'You can only observe others unobserved, build your knowledge on that.'

You have absolutely no self-confidence, his mother told him once. They rarely talked, so perhaps that's why this sentence stuck so firmly in his mind.

When he smoked, he felt as if he could do anything he wished, his dreams suddenly became bold and everything seemed within his reach. And afterwards it was back to normal.



The Flight of the Comet

A sequel to the shocking novel about young drug addicts, *Hera, My Love*. It covers the difficult process of rebuilding the shattered lives of the family of a girl who underwent intensive detox. *The Flight of the Comet* is a story of the experiences of the two main characters, girls lured into joining a sect. It shows how cunning sectarian mechanisms destroy the personality of an individual, and how positive actions are subject to drastic manipulation. A novel of quality, it is targeted at young adults.

Distinction in the literary competition Book of the Year, 2005

[EXCERPT]

Comet's Flight

Nowadays Comet introduces herself differently, as Ala. She looks different and she behaves differently. Comet has changed.

It's a miracle, says her mother, and runs to church to thank God for the miracle. Comet's father doesn't believe in miracles. He's on his guard.

Dorota gets weird e-mails from her sister. She doesn't know what to think of them. She hasn't seen Ala for almost six months, since she started studying in Spain.

"The main thing is that since her detox she has changed her social environment and she isn't doing drugs," writes Dorota to her father, who tries to get information out of her.

Even if I knew what Comet has got herself into I wouldn't tell you, she thinks. All she needs is to grass on her sister.

Comet's taking her high-school graduation exams this year.

"It's a miracle," her mother keeps saying. Like her father, Comet doesn't believe in miracles. If it weren't for Nonarkon, she'd still be up to her ears in shit. They picked her up off the street, all covered with blood. She kept scratching herself, she couldn't stop. They had to tie her up and immobilise her for two days. She spent half a year at the unit.

She knows what she owes the sect and she intends to pay back her debt. With

interest. "You're our brave little soldier," says Janas, and she just smiles. She's noticed it works on people. Her smile. You don't have to say anything, you only have to have a permanent smile on your face. And think your own thoughts.

Comet still has terrible dreams. Some of them recur. Especially often the one where she's bald. She's sitting by a river, and there are sticks floating along in it. It's empty, but there's no peace in that emptiness.

A funnel forms in the water, the sticks disappear into it, and she, Comet, knows she's heading after them. To stop the whirlpool from swallowing her she has to recite a spell, but she can't remember it. Her feet, knees, stomach and arms already belong to the river, it's terribly cold. Her own scream wakes her, and she's covered in sweat. Sometimes, half conscious, she's still trying to call out the spell, as if it's the only thing capable of driving away the nightmares for ever.

One night, when she opened her eyes, she saw her father sitting on the edge of her bed. She felt even more frightened, because it reminded her of Dorota's fantasies.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I heard you scream. Several times."

"I thought I only did it once..."

"You only screamed once yesterday night." "I wake you up, do I?"

"Only me. Nothing can wake Mum, as you know."

"It's nothing. Leave me alone..."

mumbles Comet. She can feel the spell was close by, but her father barging in has scared it away for good. She can also feel that the words Dorota once spoke are becoming flesh, and that her father's closeness makes her nervous. It doesn't matter that Dorota was lying. What matters is why, and that Comet doesn't know. She can guess, but she doesn't know for sure. It's not easy to ask about it straight out.

She closes her eyes, trying to form in her mind a question for her sister. "Why did you tell Jacek that our father abuses me?" She imagines Dorota's face, the model twin sister. Well, of course she can't ask her that sort of question in an e-mail, she's got to see her face and her eyes. One day I'll ask you that, you can be sure, she thinks, shifting as far away from her father as possible. He has never made a move towards her that he might be ashamed of, but Comet feels as if he's always following her.

"Can you remember the dream?" asks her father.

"No. Go away now..." she says, and when he leaves, she slowly gets out of bed and slips into the bathroom.

She wants to freshen up a bit and change her sweaty nightshirt. The mirror takes her into its frame; above her left breast there's a letter H in a heart made of leaves. I wonder if when I get to seventy the leaves in the tattoo will wither along with my skin... She thinks about Jacek again, and remembers another night, light years ago, the night

of the tattoo and a scream. She sometimes passes Jacek's mother in the school corridors nowadays, but Grażyna always walks past her without reacting.

"I've got the same mouth, eyes and nose, but you don't recognise me..." she whispers to the mirror. "Was a change of haircut and clothes all it took?" She glances at the mirror again. A clean shirt covers her body, and her well-cut hair rests on the infantile little collar. What a good little girl.

"What are you doing in there?" comes her father's voice under the bathroom door. There's a crude answer on the tip of her tongue, but she replies in a sugary tone: "Wee wee."

And comes straight out – she knows that if she doesn't he'll hang around like that. He must suspect I'm shooting up again, or something of the kind, she thinks angrily. That Dorota's got it good – she got the hell out of here straight after school...

She was properly awake now, and the worst thing was to start thinking – that could mean tossing and turning sleeplessly till dawn. She could have surfed the net now, or read a bit, but fear of another visit from her father stopped her from doing it.

She had a tough day today. Even though she'd run round half the district she'd only sold two books. And earned five zlotys in four hours. Fabulous. I must tell Janas they're too expensive, the idea lingers in her head. "You're our brave little soldier." Brave maybe, but not very

effective... For now she has more income from the questionnaires.

She's already managed to encourage ten people to take part in the courses. That's a lot. She gets a percentage of each person's payments. She can only hope they don't back out too soon. The longer they keep improving themselves, the greater the profits for Comet.

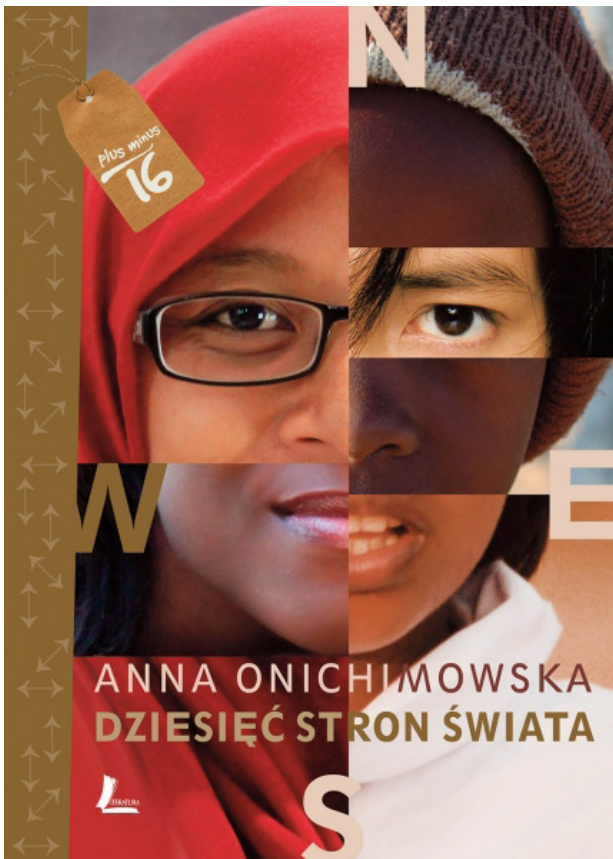
She should earn a lot on Grażyna – everything points that way. Thanks to the money she's already earned she's become a student. That's what the instructors call all the participants in the courses.

I wonder how Jacek's doing? That's the third time tonight she's thought about him. She doesn't even know if he's alive. Maybe he drugged himself to death. It happens. She's never tried looking for him. Because even if he came out of it, what would they have in common nowadays?

In the box of keys that she keeps in the linen basket there's a key whose look she remembers extremely well. Not just its look, even its weight and the sound it makes when Sesame opens. The garden Sesame. The kingdom of the moles. No one has tended the grass here for ages... Other locks in the Niwickis' house have been changed, but not this one. She checked, out of pure curiosity, as she tossed Grażyna's questionnaire into the letter box, or rather several copies of it, because Jacek's mother filled it in and only sent it the fifth time. Fifth time lucky. Sometimes even tenth time.

You should never give up, if you know exactly what you're after. And Comet knows. She has a clearly defined goal she's aiming for.

No one's going to get in my way, she mutters, partly into the pillow, and partly in the direction of her parents' room.



Ten Parts of the World

This book consists of ten stories from different parts of the world. The heroes are fifteen-year-olds from countries such as India, Ukraine, Finland, the USA, etc. Growing up, they all face their problems, related to their place in the society, their religion, the country they live in.

The Colombian girl Cesaria is a prostitute involved in the drug trade, but she dreams to become a samba dancer.

Emma's mother is preparing for the first Danish homosexual marriage.

Anla from Senegal is a maths genius, but she cannot study and has to work as a servant.

The Palestinian boy Madhid is forced into a suicidal terrorist attack.

In Tokyo, Aki tries to help his brother, who is addicted to the internet and has lost touch with the world.

[EXCERPT]

CESARIA

Queen of Samba

Cesaria is a brilliant samba dancer. She has no equal in rocking the hips, feeling the rhythm and in sheer stamina. I will break out of this dump one day, she thinks, and be someone.

For a year now Cesaria has been Rodrigo's girl. He is the owner of the bar she works in. Her friends don't understand why she has stuck with him for so long. He is no hunk, it's true, he isn't fun either, but he almost never hits her, gives her a roof over her head and keeps her stomach full. Rodrigo also sees to it that her clients treat her decently, once or twice he even got into a fight over her.

Cesaria believes that she couldn't have hoped for a better fate. She likes dancing and she likes making love. Yeah, OK, maybe not with all those guys, as some are really ugly, but then every job has its ups and downs.

If not for Rodrigo's bar, Cesaria would have to work in the street, which is no way to earn regularly, plus it does get dangerous. And if not for Rodrigo, she wouldn't have met Manolito.

Ah, Manolito... The day when she first saw him is her favourite memory.

Sometimes she picks her clients' pockets. She's careful not to take too much, the most important thing is that they don't notice. She has nicked fifty dollars from the last one: the biggest money she's had

in a long time. Half of what she makes goes to her family back home: she doesn't want her younger sisters to end up doing what she does. "Work hard at school," she tells them as often as she can. Paola is doing fairly well, but Manuela doesn't seem to care. Cesaria herself can barely read, but Rodrigo likes her to be stupid. That's what he sometimes calls her.

She resents it, as she's not stupid. She'll show him one day, just watch her.

Rodrigo never pays her at all, but he does take her out shopping once in a while, and sometimes he is even quite generous. Cesaria has to look pretty so he buys her lipstick, nail varnish and bars of fragrant soap, shoes, tights, underwear and bright-coloured clothes. He always picks these things himself. She can't decide about anything at all: she had tried early on, but now she knows that having her own opinion is perceived as insubordination, and Rodrigo punishes all guilty of it.

What she minds most, though, is that she is never allowed to go out on her own, never. It's just like prison.

'I'll drive you anywhere you want to go, when I have the time,' Rodrigo offers, but she would like to chat with her friends in the street, and it would hardly be possible with him standing there.

She hadn't been home for quite a while. No one had visited her for a month. They probably can't afford the bus fare, that's all, she consoles herself. But she would

like to know if everything back home is all right.

It is a languid afternoon, the bar is empty. Cesaria is sitting on a bar stool and looking out of the window. There is a ginger dog lying on the pavement, someone passes by on a bike once in a while, an old lady in a straw hat is tugging an enormous basket. Suddenly there are cries and gunshots not far away. Cesaria springs up and rushes to the door to close the bar, just as Rodrigo does when these things happen, but it's too late. A boy barges in, his wet shirt stuck to his torso, his eyes bloodshot and wild.

'Hide this, quick.' He pushes a large packet into her hands and runs out again.

The blinds are now lowering with a whirr. Through a narrow slit she can see men chasing the boy, then there are gunshots again.

The packet is wrapped in a paper and weighs about a kilo, maybe just a bit more. Cesaria goes up to her bedroom, shuts the door and peers inside. Little plastic bags of white powder don't even try to look like something else. They're worth a fortune.

Someone is banging on the front door so Cesaria hurriedly buries the packet in a drawer, under her underwear.

'Coming!' she shouts.

The blind is jamming as usual. It's really lucky it doesn't do that when you lower it, thinks Cesaria, her heart thudding. Rodrigo should be back by now. It can

also be Carlos, the bartender, or one of the clients. Unless it's the boy, come to get his stuff back. Or someone who saw him go in here... She gets scared.

She can tell by now that it's a girl. White shiny boots, fishnet tights, a short mini-skirt...

'Look at you!' She is angry. Even though she had missed her sister, now she feels like spanking her, like a little brat.

Manuela laughs and makes a loud pop with her chewing gum.

'I told you to study, you get enough money from me...' Cesaria steps back as Manuela walks in and sits down on a stool. Stupid girl, thinks Cesaria with a pang of regret. She's not getting another cent from me.

'When did you leave home?', she asks.

'This morning,' says Manuela, eagerly looking around.

'How's everyone?'

'Mum's grown a bump...'

I wonder who the father is this time, thinks Cesaria.

She has lost track of her mother's boyfriends.

Manuela turns the radio on, shimmies off the stool and begins to move her hips to the samba.

Cesaria is looking at her sister's bold makeup.

'Get out of here,' she says gently. 'I don't want Rodrigo to see you.' And then, against her better judgment, as she doesn't believe the money will go to her mother, she hands her sister ten dollars. 'Go on, take this home.'

Manuela laughs again.

'You jealous, huh? Afraid that he'll like me better than he likes you?'

If I didn't know you were thirteen, I would think you were at least eighteen, maybe even older, Cesaria thinks and then remembers that, starting out she too had tried to look more grown-up than she was. Now, at fifteen, she is just the right age; fifteen is what all the men are most keen on.

'I'm not jealous,' she replies truthfully. 'But this is not your turf. When the other girls come back, you could be in trouble.'

The music from the radio is muffled by the sounds coming from the street. Cesaria walks up to the door. A huge battered limo with a loudspeaker on top has stopped at the crossroads. 'Qualifications for the queen of samba contest are going to be held in Cartegena de Indias on the fifteenth of September. Girls aged between fourteen and eighteen are requested to...' The car drives on, taking the rest of the announcement away with it.

It's a sign from heaven, Cesaria thinks. I am going to be fifteen on September the fifteenth. Two lucky numbers, I can make it work. Only what the hell are the girls requested to do? I must find out, she decides, and takes a look at the girlie calendar on the wall. It's just two weeks away... I have forty dollars and, if all goes well, I'll have enough not just for the journey. Suddenly she remembers the packet sitting in her drawer. If only she sold that...

The sign from heaven must be her grandma's doing. She had almost won such a contest once.

'The girl who wins can have anything in the whole wide world...' Cesaria remembers her saying. She also remembers seeing such a contest on the TV once, she can still see the girl who won, her shiny costume and dangling earrings. The face is a blur, but she can still hear the soft clinking of the earrings and the snaky movements of the oiled body to the music.

She had almost forgotten her sister was there.

'Uhm, look who's come to visit.' Rodrigo's voice wakes her from the reverie.

He's ogling Manuela drinking her beer. Cesaria feels a sting of fear, he may think that the beer had been her idea... Rodrigo slams the empty cash register and slowly looks from one sister to another. Cesaria knows that leer and cringes inwardly.

'Time for a siesta,' he says, lowering the blind with one dexterous move and pointing with his thumb to the bedroom upstairs.

Cesaria is shaking her head in protest, but Manuela is laughing: she seems all for it. She is climbing the stairs slowly, swaying her wide hips.

'Don't do this...' Cesaria takes Rodrigo by the hand, but he firmly shakes her off.

'I want you both, understand?' he whispers and she knows that pleading will be no use.

In the evening Rodrigo is nicer to her

than usual, he lets her watch a soap opera on TV and offers her a beer. You won't bribe me, thinks Cesaria vengefully, I'm leaving you soon anyway. Even if I don't get to be the queen of samba, I'm not coming back to you.

'Want to go for a ride?' he asks, dangling the car keys.

You won't bribe me, repeats Cesaria in her head, and nods.

It is hot and sultry outside. They get into the lemon Ford, Rodrigo pushes back the roof and reaches for a cigarette. When he starts the engine, the radio automatically starts playing. Neither of them speaks, the car is moving slowly, rolling down the street and then is stuck in a traffic jam.

The lively music suddenly stops. 'Qualifications for the queen of samba contest...' Cesaria is blushing, but luckily Rodrigo doesn't pay attention to her, he is busy cursing some guy in a sports car who cut in front of him. 'Girls aged fourteen to eighteen are requested to pay an enrolment fee of twenty dollars to the bank account...' Cesaria takes a blood-red lipstick out of her handbag and notes the number down on her thigh. Rodrigo had gotten out of the car, she watches him have a go at the driver of the sports car. With the horns honking like mad, Cesaria has to turn the volume up so as not to miss anything. Now that she knows what she'd wanted to know, she pulls her skirt down, breathless. The two men are fighting and a small crowd of onlookers is standing by.

Cesaria notices a hunched figure in a gaudy dress, there is something familiar about her, could it be...? The fight is in full swing so Cesaria feels free to get out and approach the young woman.

Natasha is no longer the blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked blonde that the clients used to fight for. She's pale and thin as a rake now.

She must have lost her job, Cesaria thinks, smelling cheap perfume. That's how they end up sooner or later, the girls who do drugs. She herself would never try that shit, she knows only too well what the effects might be.

'Do you know, Juan is in jail', her friend tells her in a teary voice.

'Juan?' Cesaria frowns. She can't remember anyone by that name.

'My boyfriend,' says Natasha. 'Remember? We popped into your bar once.'

Cesaria recalls it only vaguely. Natasha did visit her once, it's true, but she can't remember the boyfriend's face, let alone the name. It's nice of him to still want you... She isn't pleased with herself for that thought, but she can't help wondering, looking at the girl's scabbed veins.

'He was supposed to deliver the stuff to someone. The dogs got wind of it. He escaped, but they got him. If they'd found it on him...' Natasha is sobbing. 'I don't need to tell you.'

Yeah,' nods Cesaria, trying to sound casual. 'When did this happen?' 'This afternoon,' says Natasha with

a moan. 'I'm terrified.'

I'm terrified too, Cesaria thinks. Just as much as you are. If it was him, he can bring the dogs to my door. Unless he is afraid to name any names. It's very likely that he should keep his mouth shut. Maybe he will get released for lack of proof? Either way, he's finished. He'll get hammered. And of course they will want to reclaim the stuff. It's just worth too much.

Natasha has wiped her nose and is looking from Cesaria to the yellow Ford.

'You're so lucky', she says. 'What a life. You've made it.'

Not yet, thinks Cesaria. But I will.

'Can you spare a few dollars? I'm hungry'.

Natasha is looking at her pleadingly.

Cesaria shakes her head but then she feels bad about saying no. She gives her friend a coin and goes back to the car.

The fight isn't over yet.

'I was afraid you have forgotten all about me.' Cesaria puts her arms around the man in a white jacket. Tenderly, she touches his hair, stiff with brillantine. He smells so good, the very smell makes her knees go weak and she leans into him. 'You've been away all week!'

Manolito laughs. He has beautiful teeth, he is all oh so beautiful; Cesaria would give anything to belong to him and no one else.

'I'd like that too, baby,' he says, taking off the silk tie and unbuttoning his shirt. 'But you know what life is like. It's no fairytale, baby. Maybe one day, when we

have enough money...'

'I do have money.'

Cesaria makes sure the door is locked and takes the stuff out of the drawer.

Manolito's smile fades away, little drops of sweat are forming on his brow.

'Where did you get this?' he whispers.

'I was alone in the bar yesterday in the afternoon...' Cesaria begins. The man is listening carefully while she's telling the story; she could always speak her mind in front of him. 'Do you think I stand a chance in a queen of samba contest?' She is looking at him pleadingly, afraid to hear "no".

But he nods and sits her in his lap.

'What are you going to do about this?'

He points at the packet.

'Sell it,' she purrs.

'No, baby, don't do that.' They lie down on the bed. 'Take it to the police like a good girl.'

Cesaria sits up, astonished.

'Are you crazy? I thought you would help me.'

'Help you how?'

'Sell it. You could keep half the money.'

'I'm not than keen to die yet.' Manolito gets serious and sits up too. 'Have you told anyone?' Cesaria is shaking her head. 'Rodrigo doesn't know?'

'No.'

'Good. When does he usually leave you alone in the bar?'

'At two.'

'OK then, I'll be waiting for you round the corner tomorrow at two. Take this stuff and pack all your favourite things.

Do you have a large enough bag?’

The girl is staring at him.

‘I’m not coming back here?’

‘If you want to take part in the contest, then you’d better not. We’ll hand the stuff over to the police, you’ll receive a big reward and you’ll be safe. Then you can pay for the contest and I’ll put you on a bus to Cartagena.’

Cesaria closed her eyes: it all seems so absolutely impossible. She doesn’t want to talk about it now, all she wants is to be close to Manolito, as close as she can, so it can be as always when he comes to visit.

‘All right,’ she says. ‘Now come here.’

‘Easy, baby.’ He laughs again and plays with her hair. ‘We’ve got plenty of time.’

No, we don’t, thinks Cesaria, her heart is bleeding. If I go away, I’ll never see you again. Right now is all we have.

There are loud voices coming in from the bar, Rodrigo is mad at someone again, something gets smashed. A glass? A bottle? Cesaria turns the radio on and there’s samba. They make love to it and then dance to it, what a shame that contest is a solo contest, oh, how Manolito dances!

‘Remember, baby, tomorrow at two round the corner,’ he whispers as he’s ready to go, pushing a few banknotes into her hand.

‘No,’ protests Cesaria. ‘You don’t have to, I told you ...’

‘But I want to.’ He is straightening his tie in front of a mirror. ‘Make sure Rodrigo doesn’t suspect you want to get

away.’

After he’s gone Cesaria locks the door carefully and opens her wardrobe.

She had shoved the duffel bag under her bed. At night she couldn’t sleep, she just lied there, motionless, looking at the artificial roses Manolito had given her once.

‘They’ll never wither,’ she remembers him saying. And then the words he said today: ‘Life is no fairytale, baby...’

Oh, but it is a fairytale, Cesaria thinks, smiling to her thoughts. You’ll see for yourself, Manolito, just you wait... She imagines herself in the limelight, in a diamond crown. There will be no man who wouldn’t want her then.

She imagines calling Manolito the second she gets off the stage, and what she would tell him. His astonishment and his joy.

Rodrigo is snoring softly. Cesaria looks at his strong masculine neck, remembers yesterday’s scene with her sister and balls her fists. You won’t be seeing me again, she mouths to that neck, to the greasy hair, to the disproportionately small ears with ridiculous tufts of hair sticking out.

She nodded off for a bit when it was already dawning. In her dream she was running away, clutching a newspaper -wrapped packet under her arm.

A pack of dogs was chasing her, mongrels big and small. ‘Give them that thing or they’ll never stop the chase. They can smell blood,’ advises Rodrigo, going

alongside her in the yellow Ford. 'No!' she shouted, the packet slipped away and the torn paper revealed its content: Manolito's head.

She was woken by her own scream, drenched in sweat.

'What's the matter?' asked Rodrigo, yawning.

'Nothing,' she said hoarsely. 'I had a nightmare.'

She thought he would never leave. The minutes seemed to stretch into eternity, a few times she felt that time must have stopped, she put the watch to her ear to see if it still works, or looked at the hands to make sure they keep moving.

'Are you in a hurry? Off somewhere?' Rodrigo noticed her doing that in a mirror.

She shook her head.

'No. Just bored.'

'I'll try to think of some entertainment for you.' He winked. 'A few mates are coming over, they'd be happy to meet you. Get ready.'

She was relieved to see him reach for the car keys. Carlos was already out for his siesta, now if Rodrigo leaves, she will be free.

She waited to hear the door shut before packing her cosmetics from the bathroom and taking the duffel bag downstairs.

She left the bar at two thirty, terrified that Manolito had already left, or that he might not have made it at all.

But he was there, sprawled comfortably

in the driver's seat, reading a paper.

'It's all right, baby, it's all right.' He laughed as she wet his shirt with tears of joy. 'You've got the stuff, yeah?' he asked.

She nodded.

'Untouched?'

'Yes.'

'Clever girl.'

He started the engine and soon they were moving slowly in the busy traffic.

'Rodrigo always used to call me stupid,' she blurted.

'He was wrong, baby.' He took his right hand off the wheel and patted Cesaria on the thigh. 'He was dead wrong.'

At the police station an overweight man is typing something on the computer. Next to him there are piles of paper; those on top are slightly ruffled by the rotating ceiling fan.

'Hi, Fernando.' Manolito holds Cesaria by the hand, as if afraid that she might leg it, or as if to reassure her. She is clutching the packet tightly. 'The lady here has something for you. Could we go somewhere more private?'

Fernando is slowly looking from Manolito to the packet and back again. He whistles softly and shows them to a small room in the back. An older man with a moustache replaces him at the keyboard.

'Tell him, baby. Tell him how you got this,' encourages Manolito and Cesaria sits close to him, as close as she can, and begins to tell the story.

They are back in the car, only instead of

the packet Cesaria is holding a wad of banknotes.

She had never seen so much money before. Even at the bar at the end of a particularly good day.

'Here, this is for you.' Manolito hands her a small, flat wallet embroidered in tiny beads. There is a heart and flowers, and a bird of paradise.

Cesaria is close to tears; she puts the banknotes carefully in, and then caresses the pink lining with her finger.

'It's absolutely lovely, thank you.' She sighs and suddenly sounds serious. 'If I win the contest, we'll have even more money.'

'I'll buy you a new one then, as this will be far too small,' says Manolito, laughing.

Now they are laughing in unison. 'He'll buy me a new one, he'll buy me a new one,' sings a voice in Cesaria's head. That means I will see him again! There is samba playing on the radio, life is beautiful and rich in delicious surprises.

They're close to the bus station now; Manolito is glancing at his golden watch.

'Your bus is leaving in fifteen minutes, we have to hurry,' he says and when they pull over, he takes a carefully folded piece of paper out of his pocket. 'Here's the name and address of a hotel.'

'But I have an aunt who lives in Cartagena.'

'Forget the aunt. No one should know where to find you. At least for some time.'

Manolito gets out of the car, takes her bag and starts toward the station. Cesaria can barely keep pace with him. They

make their way through the crowd. The bus is there, ready to depart.

The mirror in her tiny room is not big enough to reflect her from head to toe. She tries on the feathers first: green and peacock blue, they are swaying over her head, as if saying "you look fine, baby." Then the bikini, glittering with sequins, setting off the dark skin of her body. In order to see her feet in the brocaded shoes, Cesaria has to climb on a chair.

The shoes were the trickiest part of the costume. She had tried on fifty pairs or so: after all, they had to go well with the whole outfit and be comfortable enough to dance in for hours.

'A dancer must feel comfortable in what she's wearing, nothing can pinch or hold her up,' she remembers her grandma saying.

She hops off the chair and starts moving her body to the sexy rhythms. It doesn't matter that there is no radio: she has listened to enough samba to know the music by heart.

'Incredible competition. Over five hundred contestants...' she complains aloud, imagining Manolito by her side. She had tried to phone him, but didn't succeed.

'Five hundred isn't that much, baby.' She can easily picture him saying that, but she badly misses the smell of skin. 'You'll do fine...'

All the girls are wearing a lot of makeup, their bodies are shiny, their heads adorned with feathers. They are

standing in a big hall, clicking impatiently with their high heels.

'You're not from here, right?'

A dark-skinned blonde in a pink outfit asks Cesaria.

'No,' she admits. She can sense that the other girl is as afraid as she is. And as eager to win. 'How did you know?'

The blonde's answer is drowned in the din of drums and pipes.

'You should never pay attention to the other dancers, if you want to stay focused,' her grandma used to say. And Cesaria is doing her best not to notice anyone or anything around her. There is just her and the rhythm.

After each series of dances a group of girls is eliminated. The tension is building. Today is my birthday, Cesaria keeps saying in her mind; she also takes the number she was given for a good omen: fifty one, yet another one and another five.

The blonde in pink is still around. They both hold their breath and then sigh with relief when it's other girls' numbers that are being read out and they are asked to leave the room.

For the grand final there are to be only ten of them left.

It would be great if we could both make it to the final, thinks Cesaria, smiling to the other girl. Her right shoe has started to pinch a little, but she tries not to think about it.

There are only fifty dancers.

'They're going to play batucada now,' says the blonde, wiping the sweat from

her brow.

'How do you know?' Cesaria wonders.

'I did this last year. I got as far as this too, but...' She shrugs.

After two hours only the best of them can keep up with the lively tempo.

'What's your name?' asks Cesaria, taking off her right shoe and massaging the hurting toes.

They are all offered a glass of water, a quick respite.

'Concha,' says the girl, watching Cesaria's foot. Then the drums start rolling, now they're in for fifteen minutes of the most difficult samba.

Cesaria is woken from her trance by sudden silence. The music has stopped as abruptly as it had started. Has it really been fifteen minutes? Only the aching foot suggests that indeed it may have been that long. Cesaria is looking around for Concha.

She sees her sitting in a chair, a man in a white coat leaning over her. Waiting to hear the jury's verdict, she limps over to her friend.

'My ticker's conking out...' Concha says tearfully, gesturing at her heart.

Through the loudspeakers come the numbers of the dancers who haven't qualified to the next round, but fifty one is not among them.

Concha is quickly taking off her shoes.

'Go ahead, try them on,' she offers. 'See if they're a better fit than yours. I'm out now anyway.'

The shoes are heavenly.

'I wouldn't have done it without you...'
Cesaria is shaking her head.

The girls are lying down on the grass in the shadow of a palm tree and eating chocolates.

'Yes, you would. You're brilliant. You'll be the queen, you'll see! You're famous already.'

No, I'm not famous yet, thinks Cesaria, but I soon will be. She is invited to a TV show for tomorrow. Along with her nine rivals.

'Today is my birthday,' she confesses suddenly.

'Happy birthday, then,' says Concha, giving her a peck on the cheek. 'How old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

'I thought you were older.' Concha smiles. 'I'm seventeen. That was my last chance...' she adds sadly. 'I'll be serving soup for the rest of my life. Unless I meet a rich guy.'

'So you're a waitress?' asks Cesaria and Concha confirms with a nod.

'If you were interested in a job, I mean...' she stumbles. 'If you somehow don't get to be the queen of samba, my boss is looking for a new girl. He's just fired one.'

But I will get to be the queen of samba, thinks Cesaria, and then feels tremendously tired.

'With such strong features you hardly need makeup.' Cesaria feels the delicate touch of the powder brush on her cheeks.

She will step in front of the cameras any minute now. And she will dance.

She had let Manolito know.

'Congratulations! I knew you would make it, baby!' he said, promising he would watch.

She wanted to ask about Rodrigo, how he was doing, but the connection was broken.

She imagined her ex-boyfriend sitting alone with a bottle of beer, deeply regretting that he hadn't always been nice to her. Missing her.

One last look in the mirror: it's such a lucky coincidence that Concha's shoes match her own outfit. She is such a good friend.

'Oh come on, you've nothing to thank me for,' Concha cut her short last night when Cesaria voiced her doubts. 'It's the only way for a piece of me to go on the telly.'

Every girl is dancing solo tonight; they are eyeing each other coldly: after all, the stakes are very high. The contest is still a week away, but this is an important prelude.

Someone is touching her arm. 'It's your turn,' she hears, and then someone says her name and she is bathed in bright light.

Looking into the cameras, she's smiling at Manolito, at Concha and a bit at Rodrigo too. Manolito is surely wearing the pink silk shirt, the one she likes best, light trousers and no shoes. Concha is probably stuffing herself with chocolates, fretful and excited. Cesaria is

Rodrigo, slumped on the bar stool, is picking his teeth with a toothpick, a beer sitting on the counter in front of him. Next to him Manuela is lazily chewing gum and moving her body to the samba. I am no worse at it than those girls on the TV, she thinks. What a shame I'm too young to take part in the contest...

A mate of Rodrigo's comes in, they have some business to do and leave the girl alone in the bar. Seeing the next contestant, Manuela freezes. So that's where you were off to, she thinks with a mixture of anger and awe. I hope you don't even think of coming back, ever.

Fortunately Carlos is busy in the kitchen and Rodrigo is out with that mate of his. She doesn't want them to gawk at Cesaria. Reluctantly she admits that her sister is looking fabulous.

The samba over, Cesaria takes a bow and turns back to go offstage. Rodrigo has suddenly put his arm around Manuela; she hadn't heard him come over.

'Who was that?' he asks, his eyes on the screen.

'How can I know? Just some girl. They all want to become the queen of samba, you know.'

'Another stupid one, then.' Rodrigo laughs and reaches for his beer.