



J. R. PAVELIĆ

LETTERS FROM HEALVILLE

A story about feeling feelings

Family
Tales



“Why do you think it is your right to reveal
such great secrets to children?” he asked.

“Because, sir, somebody has long ago convinced you
that it is your right to keep
those secrets from them.” I answered.

Letters from HealVille

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Family Tales
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The Safest Place in the World

When she was just shy of two years old, Lana Fisher came to love the Moon. Every evening she'd watch it change from her window, wanting to come closer.

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“Mummy, I want to hug the Moon!” she said one evening.

“Ah, but that’s impossible. The Moon is far, far away and we cannot give it a hug!” said Lana’s mum. But even before she finished the sentence, she felt guilty, so she gathered the girl into her arms, sat her down in her lap and admitted: “You know what, I chose my words poorly. It’s just that I’ve never heard of anyone hugging the Moon before. Then again, just because I don’t know how it’s done, that doesn’t mean it cannot be done.” She was trying to sound as if she were saying something really, really important – and she succeeded, first and foremost because she believed every word she was saying. Lana was still quite young at the time, so she has no memory of this conversation, but her heart remembers it quite well. For the heart of every child remembers and celebrates each and every moment the world allowed it to be free.

Lana’s parents, Eva and Mak Fisher, did everything they could to nurture freedom in their child. The reason was twofold: they were good people and it was their legal obligation. For upon receiving a child, every parent is obliged to sign an important document – A Parenting Contract – that says:

Today we became parents and were given a great honour of continuing our lives together with the child who trusts us. By signing this contract, we promise to give our child everything we loved in our childhood, spare it what we did not love, and do our best to provide them with everything we lacked when we were children.

We shall protect our child and ensure a happy, safe and free childhood

for them. In this contract and in our hearts we promise to never tell our child how to feel or what they can or cannot wish for. We promise to be honest when speaking to them and make sure that all they hear from us, see in us and feel because of us – is love.

Although the contract is signed by every single parent, wherever they might be in the world, there are those who forget about it. There are also those who've never taken it seriously, so they break it unknowingly. Normally, children have no knowledge of this contract, but now the time has come for the secret to be revealed.

8 Having parents who observed every word of the Parenting Contract, Lana Fisher firmly believed she could make all her wishes come true. That belief, along with many other things, was the reason her childhood was safe, free and warm – just what a childhood should be like.

Lana lived in Forhill, the safest place in the world. Surrounded by hills covered in thick pine forests, the town was protected from all the troubles imaginable. Not only was Forhill the safest place in the world, but sometimes also the only safe one. For centuries, and for reasons unknown, Forhill had been protected from wars, fires, floods, earthquakes and other hardships of the world. No disease or worry marred Forhill in ages. Thus protected, the citizens of Forhill could smell the smoke of fires burning in faraway places, but no spark ever touched them. They could hear dams being broken by floods, but not a single drop ever reached them. They could hear people crying out in fear during earthquakes, but not a single tremor disturbed their peace.

Now, you should know that all the citizens of Forhill, including Lana's parents, are the descendants of a relatively unknown, but very important, knightly order named the Knights of the Noble Gaze. These Knights are a special kind of people whose eyes are full of immeasurable love for others. If you were to meet them, you would only have to gaze into their eyes for ten seconds to receive all the love you need.

No one knows how they came to have this infinite love for others, but everyone in the world knew that every single person living in Forhill was good. They gladly shared the safety of their town with people exiled from parts of the world that haven't been spared from troubles. Since they could remember, they had built big houses so they would always have room for those who came to them sad and scared. Each first Saturday in a month,

the main street of Forhill would be closed for traffic to make way for files of grieving people coming from every part of the planet, from dangerous, devastated and horrible places. Some called them refugees, but not Lana Fisher. She felt that that name was too cold, too general and too simplistic to express how special each of them was. If she were to describe them at all, she'd say they were sad, but courageous people.

Lana lived in the safest place in the world, but the sadness of people living in her home taught her about a different side of life. Day by day, their stories, gazes and silence told her that the world wasn't safe for everyone, that it wasn't as equally magical and fair to everyone. Learning about this scared her, so she tried to comfort herself by saying that her life was here and now, that the world was still good to her, still gentle. Even so she felt increasingly helpless, for there were times when she could neither comfort her guests nor cheer them up. She didn't dare tell them that someday they would be happy again, even if she firmly believed it. Everything she could think of sounded inappropriate, disturbing and wrong, and she suspected they wouldn't believe anything she said.

By the time she turned seven, not knowing what to say to people they had welcomed into their home troubled Lana so much that instead of insecure words, she began to offer silence. And to make up for silence, her noble eyes spoke for her. In fact, her eyes were sometimes even a bit too loud, for she'd catch herself staring at the people who shared her home. Listening to them speak, she noticed they didn't always believe what they were saying – for example, when they'd say, "Everything will be fine" or "It will be better tomorrow." Sometimes they prayed in silence or in nearly inaudible whispers. She'd watch them as they sat quietly looking at the floor, so she'd look at the floor herself, but there was nothing there. Because of that suffocating mood, Lana felt grateful that she didn't have to experience what those people were going through. And for the first time in her life she was afraid, that if she were ever that sad, she wouldn't be brave enough or strong enough to still see the world as a beautiful and kind place to live. She was afraid of living without believing that peace and happiness were somewhere close by, right in front of her. That she was walking towards them.

In those days Lana clearly saw all the colours of life, even the sombre ones. In a house full of sorrowful people, there were moments when she

thought she could touch sadness, see it seep into the walls and wooden floors. Each day, each room she went through felt more and more sorrowful. In the end, Lana began to suppress joy for fear her happiness might offend someone.

Her one relief was her dog, a black Labrador named Darko. Whenever the oppressive atmosphere of the house would become too much to bear, she would run outside to play with him. He was always happy to see her, whatever mood she was in. When she was outside with him, far from judging eyes, she could run freely and laugh and scream her heart out, 10
revelling in the simple feeling of being alive. In time she came to see him, if not in so many words, as the embodiment of the very freedom she had been unknowingly locking away, a key she could use to unlock it.

One Sunday in September when Lana and Darko went out to play, a large white doe ran across the meadow at the back of the house. White roe deer lived only in the forests of Forhill and they only rarely ventured outside their borders. As soon as Darko saw the doe, he chased after her. The doe darted into the forest, and Darko followed. Worried, Lana called out his name, but nothing happened. She did not know Darko could no longer hear her, for in her attempt to flee, the doe left the forests of Forhill.

Although her parents had already told her that someday she could leave the safety of Forhill if she wished to do so, at the age of seven she wasn't ready for it. She was forbidden from entering the forest and going near the town borders. But she was a child. All she could think was how to get Darko back to safety, so she followed him, her parent's bidding slipping from her mind. She was delighted by the shadows gathering beneath the entangled branches hiding the sun from view, but at the same time slightly apprehensive of this landscape she barely knew.

She was wandering the forest, calling for her beloved dog, when in between the trees she spied a city. It was Wellsdon, one of the oldest cities in the world. Running and out of breath, Lana never noticed that the sky above her changed at some point. Quite suddenly, she found herself in the city, under the red canvas of the biggest umbrella in the world – so big that it completely hid the sky from view. She stopped in the middle of the road, stunned. She knew nothing about this place. Everything around her was grey and coloured by ruddy shadows. The street was wide and completely empty, surrounded by tall buildings the likes of which she'd never seen in

Forhill, and the cars parked by them were bigger than any she had seen. There was no one outside. The only people she could see stood behind the windows of the featureless buildings, and they looked sad, grim, some even angry. They didn't shout in greeting, didn't wave at her, weren't happy to see her. The silence of the big city was disturbing, but even so Lana remembered why she came here, and she started to run again.

She didn't know how long she'd been running when she found herself close to the sea. The houses here were still grey, but smaller and more modest, with grim and worried people also standing in their windows. Watching them, Lana spied a boy motioning for her to come closer. Suspecting that he wanted to tell her something, she approached him. The boy opened the window – and Lana never knew how much courage it took him to do something so apparently simple.

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“What are you doing here all alone? With no umbrella or raincoat?”

“But it's not raining...” said Lana, confused.

“Oh, you don't know if it's raining or not. Haven't you heard of toxic raindust?”

“No. I've heard of plain old rain, but I don't see it. And even if it did rain, I should stay dry under this odd umbrella above your city. At least that's what it seems to me,” she finished insecurely.

That's when the boy realised the girl had never heard of the troubles he had just warned her about, so he decided to start the conversation over. Now he was speaking more slowly and evenly.

“I'm Eli, what's your name?”

“Lana Fisher, pleased to meet you.”

Eli and Lana were the same height and the same age, but they had lived completely different lives.

“Where did you come from?”

“Forhill.”

Hearing that, Eli understood everything. He began to explain. “Listen to me carefully, Lana Fisher, because I have to tell you what's happening. At this very moment, there is a great cloud moving around the world. Its direction is unpredictable, and what comes from it is dangerous. Strange drops fall from the cloud, and when they touch a living being, they disperse like dust and do terrible things. Whoever was touched by even a single drop falling from the cloud instantly grew worried, hopeless, sad,

sometimes even angry.”

“That’s terrible!” Lana said. “Why does the cloud do that?”

“No one knows, but it’s very dangerous. At first, we walked the city in raincoats, but they weren’t enough to protect us from raindust. Then the city officials ordered the biggest umbrella in the world to be made, to protect us while walking the streets, but that wasn’t enough either. Even the slightest of breezes could carry drops of raindust. The situation got so dangerous that our mayor, Milo Zaid, had to invoke Article 3 (7) of the Regulation on Safety of Citizens that says, ‘If the city officials cannot

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protect their citizens, they are obliged to put life on hold.”

“Put life on hold?” Lana repeated in dismay. “What does that even mean?”

“Exactly what you see. All citizens, both people and animals, have to stay in their homes. All the shops are to be closed, all restaurants, schools, kindergartens, parks and playgrounds. Everything. Life literally stops.”

“That’s awful! How long have you been locked in?” Lana asked with concern.

“Life has been on hold here for two weeks now, but it seems it will last for a long, long time.”

“I’m sorry, Eli. Are you at least safe, locked in like that?”

Eli shook his head. “I don’t know. Living like this is weird. I can bear it if I remember that someday I’ll play outside with my friends again. But the thing is, no one, not even my mum and dad, knows why this is happening, and that scares me. They won’t admit it, but I can see they’re scared and worried too, and that’s new to me. There’s a lot I don’t understand, but for now I still manage to wake up with hope it will all end soon. It’s getting harder and harder, though... But I guess I’m fine,” he concluded suddenly. He was afraid he had been talking for too long. He had only called Lana here to send her home. Not waiting for an answer, he said, “Listen, Lana, I really shouldn’t be opening windows, but I had to warn you. You have to go back to Forhill. You’re safe there. You should return to the forest right now and go straight home.”

Fear had crept into Lana as soon as she started talking to Eli. She wanted to go home, but she knew she couldn’t – not without Darko.

“But... my dog, Darko... I have to find him!” she said in a panic.

“Lana, I’m sorry, you can’t go on looking for him. You have to go. If I

see him, I'll send him home.”

Even as Eli was saying this, Darko came running from the distance, barking unconcernedly, as if ready to play. Lana bent down to hug him, but the playful moment was interrupted by Eli:

“Run to the forest, both of you! You'll be safe there. Hurry, hurry!”

Heeding his advice, the girl and the dog ran for the forest. Lana was relieved to be safe again, but the place was confusing and it took her a while to remember which way to go.

Just when she had finally found the path that led to Forhill, Darko began to bark. A man was approaching them, big and burly. Lana had never seen him before, but she didn't dare ask his name. She was afraid of him – not only because, compared to her, he was so big and grim, but also because he was holding a rifle.

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His hackles rising, Darko stood in front of her and barked at the man, approaching him step by small step. The man said nothing – he just kicked the dog, and Darko attacked him in return. And in a second, Lana's beloved dog and the man she feared were on the forest floor, covered in leaves, wrestling.

Even if she had dared, Lana wouldn't have been able to stop the fight, for in the midst of commotion the rifle went off and a bullet hit Darko. The man stood up, took a step back, grabbed his rifle and ran. Lana threw herself on the ground and looked at Darko with fear in her eyes. She was so worried that she no longer feared the strange man. All she could think of was the dog in her lap that was returning her gaze, wheezing. Before she knew what was happening, he closed his eyes and passed away.

Lana had no idea how long she'd been crying, but when she stood from the ground covered in leaves, it was already getting dark. She picked some Herb-Robert flowers, put them on the ground next to Darko and ran home, not turning back.



When she entered the house, everyone living there could see something terrible had happened.

“Hey, are you OK?” her dad asked.

The girl sobbed, trembling. Her dad hugged her firmly, and so did

her mum. Lana felt protected in their arms, but even so anxiety and sorrow continued to grow within her, unstoppable. Still in shock, she told them what had happened. Knowing this was the first time she was truly suffering, her parents held her for a long time, letting her feel whatever she needed to feel in the safety of their embrace.

As she cried, someone knocked on the door. It was the police, and not the police of Forhill who wore uniforms of dark red, but the police of some other city, dressed from head to toe in black.

14 The two men said they were the policemen of Wellsdon, the city Lana had just escaped. They wanted to talk to her parents alone. When the three of them went to the yard, Lana stealthily approached the window to hear what they were saying, for she didn't like the way they had looked at her while passing by.

The police first explained that the man Lana had met in the forest, Grogli, was one of the Wellsdon guards. According to them, Grogli reported the incident himself. They explained it was an accident and that Grogli was simply making routine rounds along the border.

"What does that mean, making rounds?" asked Lana's mum.

"Well, we don't know why you people are protected here in Forhill, but not all of us are so lucky to be that safe. In Wellsdon, we protect our borders from people from other parts of the world, because you never know who might bring trouble. Especially these days, when we're so hopeless and troubled by that terrible cloud. That's why we have guards walking the streets and woods. To make a long story short, Grogli wouldn't have hurt the girl, he'd simply send her home – but that dog made a mess of things when he attacked him. What can I tell you... the man was simply defending himself."

"Then what are you doing here?" Lana's dad wanted to know, his voice strict and protective.

"We came to tell you we know what happened. The girl can sue Grogli if she wants, but she won't win. Facts are facts. What was the girl even doing in the forest in the first place?"

"We won't sue, and we're not obliged to explain anything. Could you leave now, please?" Lana's dad asked.

"Of course," agreed the policeman. And yet, when he stood up, he said: "Listen, I know the girl is in shock, but things did end well. The dog was

hit, but it could've been her. She should calm down. It's inappropriate to whine like that because of an animal – especially when you have a house full of people who've lost more than a dog. You know, their loved ones, houses and such. She might offend them...”

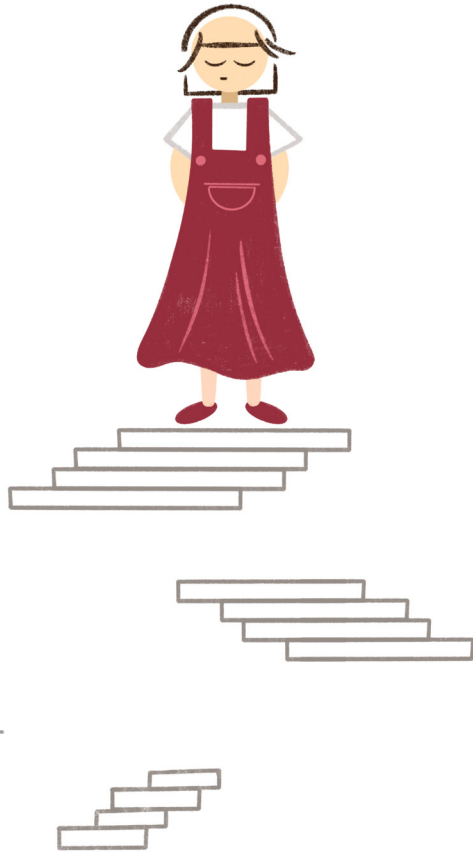
“No, you listen,” Lana’s mum interrupted. “My child is sad and she won’t stop being sad just because I say so. If she’s sad, in this house she’s allowed to be sad.”

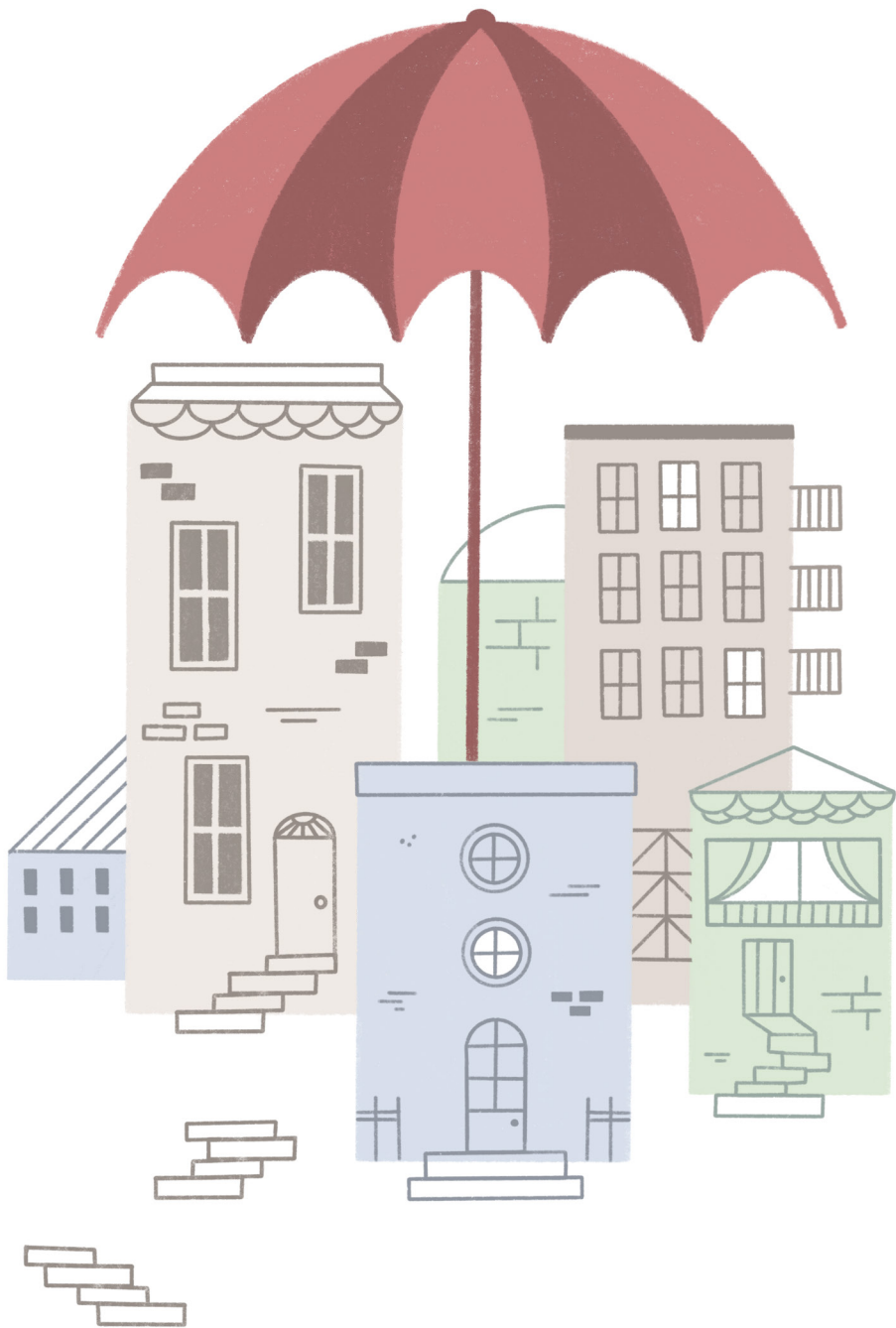
“Alright, that’s your business,” the policeman conceded. “If I were in your shoes, though, I’d tell her to calm down...”

“But you’re not in my shoes. Goodbye!”

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Her parents never told her about that conversation, and Lana never told them that she heard everything the policeman said. But his words wormed into her mind, changing everything she ever knew about sorrow.





The Place for Feeling Feelings

In the days that followed, Lana battled her feelings a great deal. She tried to believe she'd feel better in time, but she found no real consolation in that. She couldn't imagine anything would ever be beautiful again. It was as if her entire being was governed by sorrow and fear – fear that the pain she was feeling, that surrounded her, was actually life. She cried a lot, and when she didn't, she was quiet, deep in thought, at times even ashamed.

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She didn't completely believe the words of the Wellsdon policeman, but they did significantly affect her grieving. As if she could no longer allow herself to be sad. Part of her truly feared the possibility that, compared to sorrows of some others, her sorrow was simply too small and insignificant. What if her tears truly did offend some of the people who shared her home? Even though she felt increasingly ashamed of what she was feeling, she didn't completely give in to that feeling. Instead of surrendering to shame, Lana tried to understand it. She began to ponder big questions. How exactly do you measure grief? There had to be some appropriate metrics, she thought. If not, who decides, and how, whether her grief is too small or too unimportant for her to cry? She asked, but no answers came, and shame for feeling so strongly and deeply grew louder. As she spoke to no one about her worries, she was going through her first agony completely alone. The fear of being shamed for feeling her feelings was now very real, and so more often than not, Lana held back tears and smiled while being sad. Doing that was so hard that she began to hide from people, and then leave the house to be alone and let herself feel, at least for a little while, what she was truly feeling.

The place she went to was a meadow near her house, where an old oak grew. Lana would sit beneath the oak and just breathe, cry, exist. At first, she didn't know what she should do, but soon she realised that she felt

better there, easier. That small piece of meadow under the oak became her place for feeling her feelings. She decided to go there every day and allow every feeling inside her to live and be free. She often felt things she had no name for, but she tried her best to get to know them. At the time, she might've not understood why a few minutes there brought her such peace, but today she knows that that place has saved her life.

20 One day, however, it was raining incessantly, and Lana knew she wouldn't be able to feel her feelings in the wet and muddy meadow. Having firmly decided not to skip a single day, she remembered there was a place in the house where she could be alone – the attic. She liked the idea of having a place for feeling feelings under her own roof, but her excitement dwindled when she climbed up and saw layers of dust and cobwebs that had been gathering there for years. She didn't give up, though. She opened the window, to let the air in and the dust out. Then she rearranged the boxes to make room for sitting, but even that wasn't enough for her to relax. It was as if the place wasn't suited for feeling feelings. Several times she tried to close her eyes, but she still couldn't feel a single feeling.

When she finally gave up, she remained sitting for a while, and then she absentmindedly opened one of the boxes. It was filled to the brim with old notebooks, her dad's name written on the front page. As she leafed through them, a letter fell from one of the notebooks. It looked old and important. On the envelope, the likes of which Lana had never seen before, the beautiful handwriting simply read: "For you". The postmark on the back said "HealVille". Lana had never heard of such a place before – but when she read the letter, she thought that maybe HealVille had heard of her. It read:

Dear child,

We're writing to tell you we have been notified that your first suffering had begun. We're sorry about everything your sad eyes have seen, your ears have heard, and your heart has felt.

We want you to understand this letter as an official statement that everything is fine with you, that what you feel is normal and that it is not your fault that unpleasant feelings are running your life at the moment. They came uninvited, suddenly and without your permission. We know that a part of you simply wants to chase them away, but we must tell you that

heavy feelings leave us when they are ready, not when we want them to or when others demand it of us. It's important to know that they will leave – but for now you should learn how to live with the feelings inside you. We'll help you with that.

Having studied sorrow and other unpleasant feelings for centuries, we have learned that every child deals with suffering in their own way and that each child's suffering stops at a different time.

The entire HealVille is observing your courage with admiration. We have been watching you, so we know how persistent you are in trying to understand your feelings. What you're doing requires great courage, for only the brave dare seek peace each day anew, knowing that they might not succeed, that maybe they'll be disappointed and become even sadder in the process. You should continue doing what you're doing for your heart, regardless of what others might say. If what you're doing is helping you, then it is the right thing to do. Every creature in the world feels sad from time to time – but everyone handles it differently, and the time a person needs to free themselves from sorrow is different for everyone. Yes, a person can free themselves from sorrow – that's why it's important that you read this letter to the end.

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To begin with, try to accept your feelings. If you allow them to live within you, they won't have to fight you and they'll sooner do what they have to do. You can accept your feelings like this: imagine that you're speaking to them. If you feel sorrow, tell it: "Fine, I accept you in my life right now. It's true that you make me uncomfortable, but I can't chase you away because I don't know how. I'll allow you to live in me, but remember: you can't stay forever. I don't know you. I don't know what you want from me, but I hope you do. I believe you'll leave once you get what you need. When you're ready, I'll let you leave. In the meantime, I'll do my best to live with you without a struggle and give you all the attention you need."

It will probably take you a few days to succeed, but it's important that you try. Once you manage to accept your sorrow, we'll write to you again to help you be well until all the heavy feelings leave you.

With love,

In the name of the citizens of HealVille,

Martha

That day, that moment, is something Lana will never forget. She read

the letter at least five times, and each word felt as if it were meant for her. Every letter of every word seemed to understand how she felt and know what to do about it. It would be a lie to say that she immediately understood what it meant to accept her feelings, how exactly you do that – but she still felt relieved. For the first time in what felt like forever she felt nothing was wrong with her. Despite feeling so loudly, she was normal. She also began to feel safer, for the words implied that there was a protocol for suffering, an advice that could help her, someone to show her the way.

22 She put the letter in the pocket of her crimson corduroy suspender dress and ran to the first floor. The round clock on the kitchen wall was showing 3:13 PM, so she quickly calculated that dad would be home in less than an hour. She could hardly wait! In the meantime, she climbed to the attic again and read the letter three more times. Then she heard dad’s car through the open window. She rushed downstairs, grabbed an umbrella and ran out the door just as her dad was stepping out of the car.

“Can we sit in a car for a bit?” she asked. “Dad, that’s the only place we can talk alone. Please! It’s important!”

Lana began to speak as soon as they sat in the car.

“Where’s HealVille?” she asked. His face told her he knew about the place and was surprised she had heard about it.

“Where’s this coming from?” asked dad. Lana took the letter out of her pocket and handed it to him. He was silent for a long while, but in the end Lana’s curious gaze prompted him to speak: “I don’t know where HealVille is, but I know it exists. This is the first letter I got when I was a boy.”

“You don’t know where it came from?”

“No. But HealVille certainly exists. When I was a boy, many other children got similar letters.”

“Dad, it feels like this letter was written for me! These words know exactly how I feel!”

Dad gave a kind laugh. “That’s how it felt to me, too...”

“So it was hard for you, too, when you were a child?”

Dad nodded and sighed deeply, as if the mere memory of sadness he used to feel weighed on him.

“What happened to you, dad?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you some day. Now’s not the time.”

“But did you manage to stop being sad?”

“Yes. These letters certainly helped.”

“Letters? There were more?”

“Yes, there were many. I only kept the first one. The rest were sent to children who needed them. At least I hope they were...”

“I don’t understand. You sent your letters to other children?”

“Well... something like that. I don’t know exactly where they ended up, but I hope they helped someone.”

Lana still didn’t understand what children dad was talking about. In any case, she was more interested in what the letters had said. But dad didn’t tell her that. He only said:

“The letters made me realise that every child hurts at some point. Hurt comes in many ways and forms. Many things can make a child sad – but I’ve learned that every child has a special power to get over everything that troubles them.”

“But how?” Lana asked.

“It’s different for everyone. But the first step to the inner peace is the same for everyone: however heavy they might be, we shouldn’t neglect or belittle our feelings. You know, ignore them, sweep them under the rug, keep quiet about them and just wish they disappeared on their own. If we ignore and silence the sadness within us, it will be quiet for a while, but sooner or later it will try to find its way out. That’s why it’s important to accept each feeling as it comes and allow it to live in us, and eventually leave us. Sometimes it leaves sooner, sometimes later – depending on the kind of sorrow we feel and many other things. In any case, while you’re waiting, you should learn to live with your feelings. I know it sounds complicated and hard, but it’s possible. And the only way it can be done is by not forgetting to love yourself.”

“What do you mean, love myself? Like, I should give myself a hug or something?”

“That’s one way,” dad confirmed. “I mean, it takes only a few seconds to hug yourself every day. As you do, think about how important it is to give yourself something nice, and how nice it is you haven’t forgotten to do that, even if you’re not sure if this is the right way. That thought goes through every part of you, your every cell. And it’s a nice thought, Lana. It’s powerful and strong. A person can love themselves in many different ways, and every child can discover a completely new way of doing it. By the way, would you tell me what you’re doing in the meadow every

evening?”

“You know I go there?”

Dad smiled. “Lana, your mum and me are your parents. We love you and take care of you, so of course we’d want to know where you are – but that’s why we’d also like to know what you’re doing there.”

So that’s how it is, Lana thought to herself. To dad she just said, “I feel feelings!”

“Well! That sounds great! How do you do that? How do you feel feelings?”

24 “Well, I’m not sure I can describe it. All I can tell you is that it helps. I don’t know how, really. I guess I feel safe to feel in that place, and I have to feel, for something in me makes me. In the meadow I can feel without fearing someone will interrupt me, disturb me or shame me...” Lana replied, her voice growing quieter with each word she said.

“Why would you be ashamed to feel?”

The girl hung her head. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

“Lana, it does matter. I don’t know what made you feel that way, but let me tell you, people will say many things, especially adults. A lot of what they say will be nonsense. You know, adults like to pretend they know answers to all the questions, even the tough ones. They rarely admit that they have no idea. It’s important that you remember what I tell you: everybody has both the freedom and right to say whatever they want except one thing – no one has a right to tell you how to feel. No one! Ever! Remember that. Your feelings are your own. If you feel happy, let go and enjoy it. If you feel angry, let it out. If you feel sad, cry! There are no rules to feeling feelings. However you choose to deal with your feelings, there’s no shame in it.”

“Okay, dad,” Lana said, just to let him know she’d heard him – but she wasn’t quite sure she believed him.

“Come, let’s go inside,” dad said, opening the car door. He could see Lana was still full of questions, but he believed the conversation would continue some other day.

They ran to the door sharing the same umbrella. When Lana reached for the door knob, dad decided he still had something to say.

“When you go there to feel feelings, do it in your own way. If it’s hard, try asking these three questions: What is it that I feel? What am I trying to say with these feelings? What do they want from me? The first two

questions you can answer yourself. Your heart will give you the answer to the last one. You'll hear it, just be persistent. You know, feeling feelings is also loving yourself."

"Is that what you read in the letters you won't tell me about?"

"Actually no, I realised that on my own while I was trying, just like you're trying now, to figure out where sad things come from and where they go when they leave us."

Before coming in, Lana gave her dad one last warm look. She was happy because of the letter and the conversation they'd just had, but she still felt strange.

25

For Lana, dad was Dad – a person who knows everything, understands everything and solves everything. It was strange to think he too was once a child, just like her, especially knowing that he used to face the same difficulties she was facing now.

That day during dinner, Lana's dad watched the girl with more tenderness than he had ever felt before. She knew he was watching, but she couldn't return the feeling. She still struggled with an inexplicable anger because he didn't tell her more. She wondered what the other letters said. What if it could help her?

The next day dad watched her go to the meadow near the house, where she sat under the oak and closed her eyes. In the days that followed she went there more and more often. Dad asked her nothing, knowing she was trying to do what used to be so hard for him: accept her feelings. And he was right. Accepting was hard for Lana, but the more time she spent in the meadow, the easier it was to recognise the feelings within her. There was sorrow – the most powerful feeling within her. She also recognised helplessness – when you know you have to do something, want to do something to change the reality around you, but you know neither what nor how. Sometimes she felt anguish – when you feel like there's a heavy rock within your chest, not moving, not saying anything.

In time, the place for feeling feelings stopped being just a place. It was no longer a game – it became Lana's daily ritual. The same way she took care of her body by washing her teeth, eating healthy and exercising, Lana took care of her heart by feeling feelings. By the spring before her eighth birthday, Lana could find her way to the oak blindfolded. It was exactly 509 steps from the room she shared with her parents. Although she never told them what exactly happened when she sat down and breathed, her

parents knew the place was doing her good. They were right, of course. By going to the meadow, Lana gave herself the freedom to simply be. In those moments she could be anything she wanted to be and feel whatever she needed to feel.

In time, what dad promised would happen, happened – Lana heard her heart speak. However, instead of telling her what these feelings wanted from her, her heart told her: “Take note of what is unusual.” Lana didn’t exactly understand what her heart was trying to tell her, but she was happy to finally hear it.

26

That night she had a strange dream. She was sitting in the meadow when she saw three geese wearing green boots walk by her backwards. They walked one after another, at a brisk, somewhat nervous pace, never looking away. She couldn’t understand what they were talking about, but it sounded like a quarrel. They were white, and the only way to distinguish them was by the colour of their scarfs. Curious, Lana asked them what they were doing and why they were walking backwards.

“We’re travelling to the past,” said the goose with a pink scarf.

“We’re going to change it,” added the goose with a green scarf.

“So we can finally live a normal life,” added a goose with a yellow scarf.

That was all she could remember of the dream, but she couldn’t stop thinking about it all next day. Going to the past by walking backwards sounded silly, but still it intrigued her. What if it worked? If she could go to the past, she could change the day she lost Darko.

What if that was the unusual her heart had warned her about?

The thought filled her with hope. Quickly, before she had time to doubt, she went to the meadow, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and began to walk backwards.

It took her only a few steps to realise she was no longer in the same place. Excited, she opened her eyes.

Nothing looked familiar. Not only there was no crate she had brought there so she could sit under the oak even when the weather was bad – there wasn’t even an oak. There wasn’t even a meadow. She wasn’t in the past – she was in an entirely new place, somewhere she’d never been before.



III

Centennial Lands

She was on a small purple island covered entirely with soft, thick lavender bushes the likes of which she'd never seen before. There were no birds or butterflies, and all she could see beyond the island was the sea. She was completely alone in an unfamiliar place.

29

Before she had time to panic, she heard a familiar sound. It was a distant whistle of a locomotive that was approaching her from the sea. The locomotive looked rather normal – dark green, old-fashioned and grandiose – but it was running on the waves instead of a railway. That alone should've convinced her she was in another world, but there was a part of her that refused to believe it. It was only when the train stopped and the engineer leaned out the locomotive window that Lana was struck by the realisation that she was in a place that was governed by different rules and customs, where odd creatures lived and the word “normal” had a different meaning. The engineer, you see, was a big green owl that, like everything else in this place, smelled of lavender.

“Name and surname?” the engineer asked. He was wearing a kind of uniform engineers wore on Earth.

Lana took a breath to calm herself. „Lana Fisher,“ she replied confidently, as if she spoke to owls every day.

The engineer checked his little red book, looking for her name. “That’s right, Lana Fisher. Come on in. I see you’re travelling to HealVille.”

“I knew it existed,” Lana said quietly to herself – but the engineer heard her too.

“Excellent! So you know where you’re going?”

“Oh, sir, I really don’t know where I’m going. To be honest, I don’t even know where I am.”

“You’re on the island of Panatone – a reception centre of the Stu

Domain – and you're travelling to HealVille, the rehabilitation centre for tears."

"Excuse me, Mister Owl..."

"Kan the All-knowing is my name."

"Alright, Kan the Owl – the rehabilitation centre for what?" Lana asked, confused.

"Tears. You know, the drops that come out of your eyes when you cry?"

30 "I know what tears are – I'm not quite sure I understand why tears would need to be rehabilitated?"

"Do you know that tears are beings?" Kan asked.

"Well, no."

"But they are. Don't you worry – when you arrive in HealVille, you'll understand. Now come on, get in the train. There's a long way ahead of you."

Surprised by this quick turn of events, Lana paused to decide how she felt about that. Then she did the brave thing and admitted, "I don't think I'm ready yet."

Kan smiled at her honesty. "Alright. Then I suggest we talk some more. Tell me, what do you want to know?"

"Well, you still haven't told me where I am?" she started uncertainly.

"Of course I have. This is the island Panatone, the starting point of every journey through the Stu Domain."

"Stu Domain?"

"It's a Galactic Domain of Centennial Lands," explained Kan.

"I understand," Lana said politely. Then she gave it another thought and shook her head. "No, actually... I don't understand at all. Centennial Lands – are they on Earth?"

"No, but they're closely connected to this Earth you're talking about. Centennial Lands are the lands founded by children."

This took Lana by surprise. "I never knew children had such powers!"

"Oh, yes. Children have been founding their own lands for thousands of years." Kan paused, thinking. "Actually, now that I say it out loud, I don't remember when the last Centennial Land was created, but roughly speaking, it has to be at least a century. Something must have happened on Earth that made children stop using their powers."

“Well, maybe we would be founding our own lands if someone had told us we could do that,” Lana suggested reasonably.

“Yes, that makes sense,” Kan agreed.

“How many Centennial Lands are there?” Lana asked, curious.

“That’s classified, I’m afraid. All I can tell you is that thousands have been founded. Now, the number is... well... quite smaller.”

“I don’t understand. How is that possible? What happened to the thousands of lands you had mentioned?”

“They disappeared,” Kan said. “You see, when a child founds their own country, the country must have a purpose – and the purpose must be related to the improvement of life on Earth. When a Centennial Land is founded, it is given a concession in duration of a hundred years. If at the end of its first century the land still fulfils a purpose, the land is given another hundred years, and so on... That’s why some lands don’t last a day longer than a hundred years, while the most important ones last much, much longer.”

31

Lana didn’t comment on Kan’s last answer immediately. She didn’t even bother finding the right words, for there was another question that was holding her attention. “OK, wait – why am I here? I’ve never founded a world.”

“Exactly. You are in the process of enlistment. I don’t know what kind of work you are meant to do, but that is not something for me to know. I’m just here to give you a pass and direct you towards your destination.”

“Pass? What pass?” Lana asked curiously.

“That reminds me,” Kan said, moving away from the window. Lana couldn’t see what he was doing inside the locomotive, but a moment later he motioned her closer and put something in her hand.

“This is your pass for Centennial Lands,” said Kan, nodding at the bracelet he’d just given her. The bracelet had seven black beads in its centre, but Lana quickly lost interest in it. There were other things she wanted to know.

“How exactly am I supposed to get to HealVille?” she asked.

Kan nodded, pleased by her need to know more. “Everybody who comes to this island follows their own, special journey. For example, in order to reach HealVille, you will go through the famous Domain route called the Path of Truth. You’ll pass through as much as seven lands that

have for centuries been travelled by sad and hopeless people. Each land has a unique magic that you will get to know as you go along.”

“What? I have to travel through seven lands?” Lana asked in wonder.

“Yes. Exciting, isn’t it?”

“How long will the journey last?”

“You mean, time-wise?”

“Yes,” Lana said, thinking to herself: *Is there another kind of lasting?*

“I can’t tell you that. There are no clocks in Centennial Lands.

Moreover, the journey is different for everybody and it lasts as much as it takes a traveller to believe.”

32

“Believe what?”

Kan tilted his head and gave her a gentle look. “You know, Lana, I can see love in your eyes quite clearly – but I can also see sorrow. In order to receive the magic of HealVille, you have to enter it believing that your life is magical too. I know that’s hard to believe if you’re sad, and that’s why it’s so good that you came to this particular place. This journey will help you a lot.”

Deep in thought, Lana said nothing. Everything about her past few weeks had been about trying to explain her feelings to herself and finding names for them, and Kan’s words seemed to suggest that the answers to these questions were now just within reach. Naturally, Lana was looking forward to them, but she was still slightly worried by the fact that she was all alone in an unfamiliar place. The worst day of her life had happened when she had last left Forhill, so she couldn’t quite overcome her fear of the unknown. On the other hand, the thought of the magic the engineer had just mentioned was incredibly compelling.

Meanwhile Kan, being All-knowing, saw where the problem was and continued to talk, doing his best to clarify where she was and why.

“Island Panatone is called a reception centre of the Stu Domain for a reason. You see, for every guest and traveller coming to our Domain, the journey starts here. All of you come here to be examined for the purity of heart.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like it,” Lana said in wonder.

“That purpose was given to this place many, many centuries ago, when the members of the Great Security Council of Stu Domain realised that only those who are truly good should be allowed to travel through

the countries as pure as the hearts of the children who founded them. That is the only way to protect these lands from malice, lies, greed and envy. I was chosen by the Security Council to examine the hearts of travellers and sign permits that would allow them to reach their respective destinations. Wherever a child may be going from here, they will reach their destination by following the path that suits them best. That's why I suggest you continue on your journey believing that whatever happens, happens for the best."

This complicated explanation didn't really help Lana. She still didn't quite understand where she was or how things worked here, but she didn't want to go home either. Dearly wanting to know why she was here, and why her in particular, she said: "Fine, Kan the Owl – I'm ready to be examined!"

"Oh," Kan said, giving a benevolent laugh. "You've already been examined, Lana."

"I have?" she asked. "How? When?"

"My name is Kan the All-knowing, and I was given this job because I have a special gift – I only have to look at someone five times to know the quality of their heart. If your intentions are wicked, all the information related to those intentions come to me and become my memories. If that is the case, the visit to the Centennial Lands ends where it has begun – here on Panatone. But that won't happen to you."

"So my heart is pure enough?"

"Yes. Your heart is very pure." Kan pointed at the bracelet Lana was twirling in her hands. "Now all the beads are black, but they won't stay that way. In each land, you will go through a different experience, and when you start to believe in the magic specific to that land, the memories of what you will have seen, heard and felt will colour the bead belonging to it. When that happens, you'll see the exit and go to the next land, continuing your journey."

"Will you come with me?"

"No, I'll only take you to the border of the first land on the Path – the Land of Hale. From there you'll continue on your own. But don't worry, you won't get lost. Your experience in each land will take you right to the next one until you reach HealVille."

Lana nodded, took a deep breath and walked to the door of the first

car. Inside, everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. It had clearly been a long time since anyone had been here. The thought made Lana uncomfortable, so she knocked on the locomotive door, where Kan was already done with the preparations to continue the journey.

“May I stay here while we ride to the Land of Hale?” she asked.

“You may.”

“Thank you!” Lana smiled and continued with the questions. “You said each Centennial Land has a purpose. What is the purpose of the seven lands I’ll be travelling through?”

34

“Well, although their purposes are different, all lands have the same goal – to teach the traveller that life is greater than a single moment and that it has to be nurtured. You nurture your life by doing nice things for yourself, by taking care of yourself. If you take care of yourself, it means you love yourself. And when you love yourself, there’s no sorrow you can’t overcome, no wind that will knock you down.”

That reminded Lana of the conversation she’d had with dad. “And how do you love yourself?” she asked, hoping that Kan’s answer would be a bit more specific than her dad’s.

“You love yourself by being truthful, by using your imagination, by thinking beautiful thoughts, by forgiving and resting. We sometimes forget to give ourselves these things, but the lands you’ll be going through will leave you no choice. Their magic is so strong that, for as long as you’re there, you can only be gentle to yourself.”

“I must say I like that magic,” smiled Lana. “Tell me more about the Land of Hale – what will I be doing there?”

“Breathe!” Kan said simply.

“Breathe?” Lana frowned. She was expecting a more colourful answer.

“Yes. Breathing is very, very important.”

“Of course it’s important. We live only as long as we breathe,” Lana concluded.

Kan nodded. “Yes, but breathing does more than keep you alive. If you learn how to breathe, you can use it for many different things.”

“Learn how to breathe? Aren’t we born knowing how to breathe?”

“We are. But breath can be quick, slow, heavy, short, long, deep and shallow – and those are just some of the types. Each type has a purpose. You’ll soon see for yourself.”

As soon as Kan finished speaking, the locomotive stopped. Lana was startled. She was so engaged in conversation that she didn't even notice when they have started to move. Looking out the window, all she could see was whiteness. The dense white light made her think they were up in the clouds.

"Lana Fisher, we're here! But before you start your journey, I'd like to ask you something," said Kan the All-knowing.

"Go ahead, mister Kan!"

"The next time you see me, don't call me 'mister'. Just call me Kan!" he said, laughing.

35

Lana smiled. "It's a deal. Anything else?"

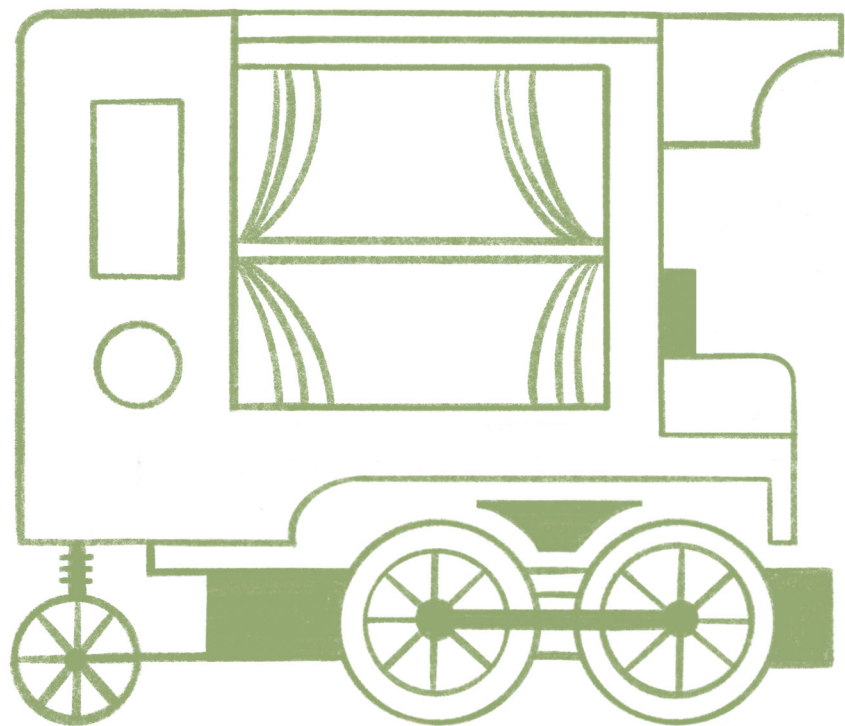
"Remember what you see in each land you go through. If you do, you'll be safe for the rest of your life, no matter what world you may be in."

"I'll try!" said Lana.

"I'm glad we've met," Kan said honestly. "Now go! Step into this soft whiteness and breathe!"

Lana waved at him, thanked him for the conversation and the ride with a smile, and boldly started for the exit.





The Path of Truth

Walking down the steps into the whiteness, Lana was slightly afraid, but not of this place – it was the well-known fear of the unknown. On the bottom step she realised that she was actually on the sea. It was an unusual sea, milky white and viscid, and it rose and fell in a precise, even rhythm. Lana wasn't sure what she was supposed to do – swim, perhaps?

39

Just then, a green wooden boat swiftly drifted towards her, and she climbed in it without thinking. She took a deep breath, and the boat headed into the unknown. The magic of the Land of Hale prevented people from speaking. Lana had no knowledge of this, but then again, she didn't even try to speak. The silence that surrounded her suited her, soothed her.

A deep, calming voice soon graced the silence. She couldn't see where the voice was coming from, but she listened intently. It was the voice of Calm – the founder of the first Land on the Path of Truth. He spoke slowly, steadily. Each word took just as much time as it took Lana's heart to understand it.

“Welcome to Hale, the Land of magical silence. Your thoughts will now become quieter, and your heart more serene. You will stay here until you start believing that you know how to feel at peace. Now close your eyes and focus on the rhythm of the white sea that's watching over you. Allow it to carry you. When the sea rises, take a deep breath and imagine that you're breathing in love and gentle white light. Hold your breath for three seconds. Then, as you feel the sea falling, breathe out for three seconds. As you breathe out for three seconds, imagine that something heavy, like pain or sorrow, is leaving you. Everything you breathe out; the sea will take and purify. Each time you breathe in, heaviness within you will lessen and your heart will feel lighter.”

Lana did everything Calm told her to. The voice she trusted guided her through breathing for several minutes. Each time she inhaled and exhaled, she could hear a voice from the distance saying, “One, two, three.” and with each inhale and exhale Lana felt calmer. Then, completely unaware that Calm has stopped speaking, drifting across the milky sea in the green boat, not counting, not thinking, Lana simply continued to breathe in silence, inspiring love and expiring pain. When at last she opened her eyes, she was completely at peace.

40 Calm noticed that. “Thank you for believing me. Now look ahead – you will see a small bottle. Fill it with sea water and carry it through life, for every drop contains magic that will remind you, whenever you feel bad, that you already know how to be at peace. When you start thinking you’ve forgotten how to feel calm, just look at this little piece of sea and breathe. Just breathe.”

Lana filled the bottle with sea water. Even contained in the glass like this, it was moving. The rhythm of its movement was in exact harmony with the ebb and flow of the waves she could feel sitting in the boat. She put the bottle in her dress pocket and, still wordless, directed her noble gaze at the sky above, hoping that whoever had spoken to her felt her gratitude. And when she looked at the bracelet she’d tied around her wrist, she saw that the first bead had turned green.

When she raised her head, she saw a shore ahead. The closer it got, the more it sparkled and gleamed, and when the boat landed, Lana saw there were hundreds of mirrors placed upright all over the ground. Happy and at peace, she walked around, trying to guess their purpose. Some had simple monochrome frames, others were multicolour or curiously patterned, and some were framed in gold, making them shine even more. Finally, she found a mirror inscribed with the word “Lumington”, so she assumed that must be the name of this place.

She was right. In Lumington, just like in Hale, silence ruled. The voice of Tia, the founder of the Land, only briefly interrupted the quietude.

“Welcome to Lumington, the Land of joy – joy within you. Pick a mirror and stand in front of it. You’ll see yourself, but not the way you imagine yourself now – you’ll see who you were before your pain had begun. Before you began to fear that what you were feeling was in fact life. Now you will learn that life is greater than a single moment. That applies

to everyone's life, yours included. However hard the moment, remember that you've existed before. It did not erase everything you've been and felt before you came to know pain. You will walk this Land until you believe that, whatever you might feel at the moment, you know how to feel joy."

Lana walked Lumington with a smile on her face. In each mirror she saw a moment of joy she had previously lived through. There were many – from her first smile when she was a baby, to the joy she felt when she first saw a dandelion and admired it in wonder. Mirrors reminded her of the joy she felt during all eight of her birthday mornings, and the happiness she felt when she made mum happy by giving her a bouquet of flowers for no reason at all. There were many moments Lana had spent dancing or playing elastics with her friends. In at least a hundred mirrors she saw herself joyfully running into her dad's embrace simply because he had finally come home from work. Walking through Lumington, she saw every bit of happiness she'd ever lived through, and watching them, she lived through them again. In time her heart became so full of joy that she couldn't feel anything else. And Lana realised that not only she believed she would feel happy again, but that she already was.

41

As soon as the thought formed in her mind, Tia spoke again: "Thank you for believing me. Now look at what's right in front of you: a small pocket mirror. Take it and carry it through life, for your reflection in it will forever remind you of this experience and the fact that you know how to feel joy. Remember to look at it and you will never forget who you are in your entirety."

Lana put the mirror in her pocket and once again directed her noble gaze at the sky.

Suddenly, one mirror began to flash strongly. The beauty of the light it created drew Lana closer, closer yet. When she stepped into the mirror, a bead on her bracelet turned red, and Lana's foot touched a new magical ground.

Through the mirror Lana walked into the Land of Possibell, but she did it somewhat clumsily. Not ready for the mischievous Possibell ground, she tripped and fell as soon as she touched it. It didn't hurt, though, for the ground was soft and oddly elastic.

When she carefully stood up, she saw that she was standing on an impossibly large trampoline. Grinning, she jumped and ended up more

than a hundred and fifty feet above the ground. While she was in the air, she saw she was surrounded with hundreds of floating meadows. Some were square, some round, but on every single one of them there was Lana – a very, very happy Lana.

42 The first time she landed, the voice of Bella, the founder of this mischievous land, explained everything. “Welcome to Possibell – the land of possibilities. The purpose of this Land is to remind you that everything you had dreamt about, wanted and hoped for, before you came to know sorrow, helplessness and hopelessness, still exists. Even though you may not be thinking about them right now, your dreams haven’t disappeared. All of them may still become reality. On these floating meadows they already do exist. You will remain in this land until you start to believe that you can become anything you want.

“During each jump, your gaze will rest on one of the meadows where you are happy. Each meadow will show you what’s waiting for you, what you can become if you’re daring and patient in your belief that happiness is within reach. Everything you see here will be etched in your memory. You will be able to come back to these meadows, in your thoughts, whenever you want. Yes, life will sometimes bring you Sorrow – but if you don’t forget to dream about happiness, Sorrow will not defeat you.”

In Possibell, Lana must have jumped at least thirty times, and each jump was a real and clear reminder of everything she had ever wanted in life. Thus, she saw a meadow wherein she became a dog doctor. In another she was a teacher, in yet another a pilot. The more she jumped, the more she believed she could become everything she wanted. In some meadows she walked between fragrant lines of wild cherry trees, in others she was playing with dolphins in the shallows of a faraway sea. In each meadow, in each scene Lana saw herself in a different dress, in each something she had once wished for. And in time, Lana’s heart came to believe that a happy and colourful life was indeed ahead of her, so she started to look forward to it.

Then Lana jumped one last time and ended up on the very top of a mountain. She hadn’t even noticed it until then, but there she learned something new: that clouds smell like strawberries.

The mountain was high above the clouds and covered with strawberry bushes, the ripe, fragrant fruit peeking between the green leaves. The

mountain was tall, but narrow. At the top there was just room enough for Lana to safely walk. When she approached the edge of the narrow path, Bella spoke again:

“Thank you for believing me. Before you continue your journey, look down and commit the sight to memory. All the meadows you have seen are waiting for you to visit them in future. You can arrive to any of them you choose! Now pick a strawberry and smell it, then take it with you and carry it through life. If at any moment you start to doubt yourself, smell it. Its fragrance will remind you of this place where you were able to reach high above the clouds simply because you believed.”

43

Just when she picked and smelled a strawberry, a star emerged from the clouds, landed on her bracelet and gilded the next bead in line. While she was admiring the sparkly bead, a true rain of stars began to fall from the sky. Thousands upon thousands of glimmering stars lingered in the air, connecting the edge of the mountain to the unfamiliar ground below. Hugging closely, they formed the longest and fairest slide Lana had ever seen. As brave as she was, back home on Earth she would've thought carefully whether she wanted to go down this brilliant slide into the unknown. Now, however, she didn't even stop to think. Her eyes wide open, she just boldly indulged in the moment and began the exciting, sparkling descent into the fourth land on the Route – the Land of Forgivnia.

The Land was founded by August, and at the very entrance, on a dark green meadow, he had planted a wooden door at least twenty times taller than Lana. Walking through, Lana thought she must have entered the reception area of an expensive hotel. At the entrance, there was an antique writing desk with a chair, but no one was sitting there. While Lana was inspecting the things on the desk, a paper stood up and strode towards her. An elegant green fountain pen followed. She wouldn't meet people in this Land, she realised – instead, every object here was alive, but only enough to fulfil its purpose.

Not scared in the least, Lana looked at the paper. It was actually a form that required her to fill in her personal data – name and surname, date of birth and address. When she did so, the paper walked into the next room, and a big key approached her. It had a number attached to it: 77. As soon as she took it in her hand, a door opened that led to a wooden spiral

staircase. As she climbed, Lana saw that there was a single numbered door on each floor. When she finally climbed high enough, she unlocked the door number 77, stepped inside – and fell.

Trying to ignore the pain – the first pain she had experienced since the beginning of the journey – she carefully stood up and looked around. The room was full of sharp stones; there were so many of them that she couldn't even see the floor. That would make walking difficult.

44 But there were other things in the room, pleasant things. On the shelves covering the walls peacefully sat things she recognised. There was the bunny Bill – the first toy she had come to love. There was the dress with two hundred coloured squares that Lana had worn on her first day of school, the green bicycle that had first taught her the importance of balance, and the soft blue blanket with an embroidered dinosaur that reminded Lana of the winter evenings she had spent by the fireplace, reading stories with mum.

But there was also a red umbrella, dry leaves and a bunch of Herb-Robert flowers, which evoked anything but pleasant memories. They so vividly reminded her of the moment she lost Darko that she found herself on the verge of tears. She needed some explanation, something to soothe her.

Fortunately, August, the founder of Forgivnia, felt her need and addressed her.

“Welcome to Forgivnia – the Land of Forgiveness. While traveling here you've already started to believe that life is greater than all the sad moments put together. But even as you know that Sorrow will eventually leave you, you should know you will always remember the time you have lived with it. Now you are in your Room of Memories, where all your experiences live together – both those that are difficult and those that are joyful. Whenever you remember something beautiful, the room becomes brighter. Whenever you think about your hardships, the room becomes narrower.

“The stones you see have been brought here by none other than you. Stone by stone, you carried them here each time you were hard on yourself, each time you blamed yourself for something bad that had happened in your life. It's fine to think about the past and ask what you could have done better or different – but as soon as you start blaming

yourself for not doing better, your thoughts become punishment, for then you deny yourself the right to make mistakes. Each time you think that, the thought becomes a stone that stays in this room. The more stones you collect, the narrower the room becomes. Eventually the stones begin to hide other, pleasant memories. That's why this land is important. Here you will stay until you start to believe that you have a right to make mistakes and that you know how to forgive yourself.

"Now sit on this pile of stones and pick one. Hold it close to your heart and close your eyes. You will see the moment you brought it here in your mind."

45

Indeed, as soon as Lana did that, she heard the Wellsdon policeman accusing her for whining over an animal. What surprised her more, however, were the words she in her sadness had whispered to herself. Until now, she wasn't even aware of them. She had said: "Back in the forest, Darko was protecting me – and I did nothing to save him. What kind of a friend am I? I should've taken him by the collar, then he wouldn't have bitten Grogli. I should've jumped in as soon as they started fighting. I should've taken him to the dog doctor, maybe they would've been able to save him."

Just when Lana was beginning to abandon herself to the unpleasantness of the moment she had called back by holding the stone, August spoke again: "Now repeat after me: 'I did the best I could. Had I known better, I would've done better.'"

Lana repeated the words, but she didn't believe them.

Feeling that, August continued: "Repeat these words over and over again until you believe them in your heart. Once you believe, the stone will turn into a pearl, and you will forgive yourself for doing what you did in a situation that brought you pain, knowing that in that moment, you couldn't have known better. Be patient and forgiveness will come."

Lana did everything August told her to do. This was the first land on her journey along the Path of Truth that was making her uncomfortable, but Lana still firmly believed that everything that was happening was happening for her own good. So she persevered.

Her persistence paid off. After a while, Lana felt the stone in her hands growing smaller and turning into a pearl. She had only taken one stone out of the pile, but already the room felt bigger and brighter.

August spoke again. “Thank you for believing me. And thank you for being gentle to yourself. Now take this pearl and carry it through life. Seeing it will always remind you that you have a right to make mistakes and that you know how to forgive yourself for making them. It is certain that in the course of your life you will continue to make mistakes and decisions that will not make you proud, so it is perfectly fine to come back to this room and question them. But do so gently – exactly the way you did now. And each time you leave this room, remember to tell yourself that you did the best you could. When you learn how to do better, do better. And always be kind to yourself.”

Lana felt relieved – as if she had taken the stone not out of the room, but out of her heart. One bead on her bracelet turned blue, and the door opened.

When she exited the room, she was no longer on the spiral staircase – instead, she walked straight on the macadam road. There were no houses, no living beings – only lush green fields as far as the eye could see. She stood in place, patiently waiting to find out why she was here. And indeed, the next moment the founder of this land, Berta, offered an explanation:

“Welcome to Safeborne – the land of safety. Sometimes it’s hard to talk about Sorrow, but you should remember that you are never alone, neither in joy nor in suffering. You will stay in this land until you reach your haven – and your haven is wherever there are people who allow you to be, feel and say whatever you want or must. Each child has at least one person they can trust. Sometimes those are their parents, sometimes a teacher, a neighbour or a friend, and sometimes a child does not yet know who that person is. What’s important is that a child never stops looking for them, for every child has a right to grow up next to someone who is willing to listen, who is accepting and who loves them exactly the way they are.

“Start walking along the road. You will reach your haven when you believe in your heart that you are never alone in your suffering.”

As she walked the macadam road, Lana realised it’s been a long time since she told someone how she felt. She was afraid that if she did, someone would again tell her that what she was feeling was wrong. She doubted her heart could take that. Only a moment later, however, she realised there were people who would never do that to her – her parents.

That’s when she saw the door in the distance. It looked familiar, and

she found out why when she walked through it. It was the door to her room, back in her house – the same room where she had been told a thousand good night stories, where she had received a thousand hugs and kind, noble gazes.

“Thank you for believing me,” Berta said. “This is your haven. People connected to this space will always be on your side. Those are the people who will hug you the strongest when you feel the worst about yourself. When you make a mistake, they’ll remind you of everything nice and good you have ever done. When you don’t know what to say, they will accept you in silence. However you feel, whatever your state of mind, you can always come to them, and you will always come away feeling accepted and respected.

47

“In the drawer beneath the bed you will find a photograph. Take it and carry it through life, so that it can always remind you that you’re not alone.”

Following the instructions, Lana took the photo from the drawer – and saw herself smiling from it, from within her parent’s arms. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, held the image close to her heart and felt deeply grateful that her haven were her mum and dad.

When she opened her eyes, the next bead on her bracelet turned purple, and the door behind her creaked, inviting her to a new magical landscape. It was Neesketch – the land of need.

Neesketch looked just like a supermarket – only instead of cartons of milk, biscuits and bread, on the shelves were rank upon rank of glass bottles filled with colourful liquids. Each bottle had a different label, like *Support, Love, Courage, Strength, Peace, Kindness, Warmth, Embrace, Hope.*

As she was looking around, the founder of the Land, Giver, addressed her. “Welcome to Neesketch – the Land of Need. Everything you see before you is free – but you can only take one thing each time you visit. You will know what to take when you ask yourself, ‘What do I now need to feel well?’”

He continued to explain that, according to the research he had been conducting for centuries, as much as 86% of travellers chose Support during their first visit. He didn’t find it surprising, for he already knew that support is being accepted for who you are at the given moment,

without judgement or expectation. With such support it's easy to be yourself and you never feel like there's something wrong with you.

On her first visit Lana chose Courage. The liquid in the bottle was orange, but Lana wasn't sure if she should open it.

"You chose Courage," Giver said. "Open the bottle and take a sip of the orange liquid."

Taking a sip, Lana truly did feel a bit braver, but she did not understand how.

48 "Now you are encouraged," Giver said. "Starting with this moment, you will have courage within you for the rest of your life. Everything you see on these shelves exists in your world too. Sometimes, however, you have to ask for these things openly – because no one, not even the people who know you best, can always know what it is that you exactly need to be happy. Embraces, support and encouragement sometimes do come on their own, but not always. Whenever you miss something from these shelves, ask someone who can give it to you. That is everybody's right, yours included.

"Today you have chosen Courage – therefore, every orange object in your world will forever remind you that you are brave. For this reason, all you need to take from this land is the knowledge that the magic you need to live bravely is already within you – you only have to remember it."

When the next bead on her bracelet turned orange, Lana spied an automatic glass door that looked just like an exit from a supermarket. It led straight to RestNest: a large, soft, fragrant meadow strewn with pillows. Yes, pillows! Round and square, big and small, soft and hard. Lana was immediately drawn to a round pillow that was much bigger than her and more comfortable than any she had at home.

Titza, the founder of Rest Nest, sounded sleepy as she explained where Lana was.

"Welcome to RestNest – the Land of Rest. To allow ourselves rest is one of the best rewards we can give our soul, body and mind. Lie comfortably and sleeeeep! Sleep to your heart's content, we don't count hours here. In this Land you will stay until you are well rested."

When she lay down on a soft round pillow, Lana realised this was a great opportunity to sort her impressions of this unusual journey – but as soon as her thoughts wandered to the Land of Hale, she yawned. All she

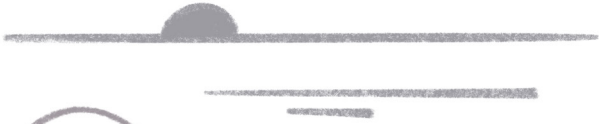
could think was how pleasant it was to just lie there, to feel the warmth that had flooded her body. Smiling, she closed her eyes... and fell asleep.

What woke her was the tickling of a feather that must have fallen out of a pillow. She had no idea how long she had slept, but she felt amazing. The last bead on her bracelet had changed colour, this time into white. Absentmindedly putting the feather in her dress pocket, now full of keepsakes of the lands from the Path of Truth, she sat to look at the bracelet more closely – and realised she was no longer in RestNest.

She was sitting on a gentle slope covered with lush green grass, just next to a wooden bench, and in front of her stretched a vast lake, so clear she could easily see each tiny, colourful pebble at its bottom. On the right, on a motley pebble beach, there were seven wooden houses, each a different colour.

49

The moment she stood up to look at the hills that surrounded the lake on three sides, she was greeted by Ernest, the founder of the land she had been looking forward to the most – HealVille.





Welcome to HealVille

“Welcome, Lana Fisher!” Ernest said. He was tall, much taller than six feet, and he was wearing a top hat the likes of which Lana had once seen on a magician whose name she had forgotten. Ernest’s skin was much darker than hers, so much so that it nearly blended with a black dinner suit that fit him so perfectly it must have been tailored especially for him. He was wearing a necklace with seven multi-coloured beads big enough to conceal his neck. That it looked exactly like her now multi-coloured bracelet had to mean something, but Lana couldn’t guess what. In any case, she didn’t dwell on it, for something in her was celebrating.

53

“I’m Ernest,” the man introduced himself with a smile. “I’ve been looking forward to your arrival.”

“Pleased to meet you! Am I in HealVille?” Lana asked, barely able to contain her excitement.

“This is most certainly HealVille,” Ernest confirmed. “Tell me, how did you come here?”

Lana shrugged. “I’m not quite sure. I think I arrived to Panatone quite accidentally, and I came here by the Path of Truth.”

“I see. Could you, perhaps, tell me more about this accident?” Ernest asked.

“Well, first I had a dream about three geese that were walking backwards...”

“Ruth, Greta and Linda,” Ernest interjected.

Lana was astonished. “They’re real?”

“Of course they’re real,” Ernest said. Seeing that the girl was lost for words, he explained, “Just because you see something in a dream, does not mean it isn’t real. They’ve brought you here, haven’t they?”

Thinking it over, Lana had to agree. After all, the dream was by no

means the most unusual thing she had experienced.

„Most children have their first experience of Centennial Lands in their dreams,“ Ernest added. „For you it was the geese.“

„I see,“ Lana said. „Do you know them?“

„I do. I’ve met them a few times, but it’s been years since I last saw them.“ He looked away for a moment, giving a fond smile. „So they still haven’t given up on travelling to the past, have they?“

Lana shook her head. „Apparently not. I think they said they wanted to change it?“

54 „Indeed,“ Ernest nodded. „They are three sisters who ran off the path they had been forbidden to leave, so they got lost. When they realised what happened, they were scared their mother would be cross with them, so they decided to walk backwards to the moment they made a wrong turn. Were they to reach it, they would have chosen the right path. It would be as if they had never got lost in the first place, so their mother wouldn’t have a reason to be cross with them.“

Lana pondered for a moment before replying. „Well, I think it would’ve been better if they had decided to find their way home.“

But Ernest wasn’t so sure. „Hm... It’s not up to me to say what’s better for them. If they believe that’s the best way to solve their problem, I can only support them and believe in them. Besides, if I’m not mistaken, you walked backwards yourself, didn’t you? Wanting to go back to the past?“

Now Lana was no longer as sure of her answer either. Reconsidering, she admitted, „Well, yes. Although I doubt walking backwards is the right way. I don’t know.“

Ernest nodded. „When we want to fix something in our lives or make it better, we all do so in our own way. There’s no such thing as a universally good or a universally bad way to do something. Everybody has their own path that they travel in their own time. What’s important is to never give up on one’s way to happiness, even if it sometimes seems illogical.“ He shook his head. „But enough about that. Tell me, what do you do?“

„Well, sir, I’m a girl. That’s my occupation,“ Lana said seriously.

„Is that so?“ Ernest smiled cheerfully. „I didn’t know being a girl was an occupation.“

„Well, to be honest, no one has asked me about my occupation before.“

The first thing that came to mind was that I was a girl.”

“Fair enough!” Ernest decided. “I don’t know much about occupations of little girls, but I do know that no two girls are alike.”

“I agree. At least I think I do,” Lana said.

“What were you doing before you saw the travelling geese?”

At first, Lana was confused by the question. Hadn’t she just said that she had been dreaming? But then she remembered how she decided to try their method, what her heart had told her and what she had been doing when she’d heard it. “I was feeling feelings!” she said in quiet awe.

Ernest smiled knowingly. “Ah, so you know feelings?”

55

Lana shook her head, still reeling with the realisation. How had she forgotten about that?

“Not at all,” she said, looking at the lake. “I know very little about feelings, but I’ve been looking into them, trying to get to know them.” She sighed. As exciting as her previous realisation had been, this was still very confusing. “To be honest, I don’t know how to call most of what I feel, but knowing names is not that important anyway. I’d much rather know what they want from me,” she concluded.

Ernest tilted his head and stroked his chin. “Well, I think I can help you with that, if you’ll let me. You might be surprised by the answer, though.”

Lana looked at him, hopeful. Was she finally going to get some answers? “That’s alright. Tell me, please!” she said eagerly.

“They want to tell you that everything is going to be alright, that they are protecting your heart, that you should trust them not to harm you, and that they will leave as soon as they complete their mission.”

Lana frowned. That was hard to believe. Unsure of what to think, she looked back at the lake. Its surface rippled, as if caressed by a gentle wind – only there was no wind. Then transparent drops began to rise from the lake. They were alive, and some of them entered the multi-coloured houses on the beach. Lana would later find out that the houses were direct passages to the lands on the Path of Truth and that anyone staying in HealVille could visit some of those gentle lands any time they wanted. That was exactly what the transparent drops were doing now.

“What you see are Teardrop Aides,” Ernest said. “They live in children in the place you come from.”

“Teardrops? The tears that come out of our eyes when we cry?”

“Exactly!”

“But I don’t remember them being that big!”

“Well, on Earth they are small, but they grow on their way to HealVille. You’ve grown a bit as well.”

But Lana didn’t care much about her size right then. “Wait, then this lake in front of us, that’s...”

“The Lake of Children’s Tears,” Ernest finished. “When children cry, this is where their tears go.”

56 Looking at the vast expanse of the lake, Lana thought: *That’s a lot of tears.* A moment later she asked, “How did they get here?”

“I’ll tell you soon. But maybe it’s better if we start with how they arrive in children’s hearts in the first place, hm?” Ernest suggested. As she agreed, he sat on the bench and tapped a place next to him. “Come sit,” he said.

“A long, long time ago,” he said when Lana settled on the bench, “there was a girl who founded a Centennial Land called Tearopie. The purpose of the land was to produce tears that would remove from children their Sorrow, Anger, Fear and Unease. Feera, the founder of the land, named them Teardrop Aides and ensured that they reached children’s hearts whenever necessary. Upon arriving to their child, Aides would help Sorrow, Anger, Fear and Unease leave the heart they had settled in. They’d put them in transparent white balloons and hold on to them tightly. At the time, all it took for Aides to leave a child, together with their balloons full of not so popular feelings, was for the child to cry – and immediately the child would feel relieved, feel better. But you see, even if Tearopie produced these noble tears, Feera never wondered where the tears went once they left their children’s hearts. Before HealVille was founded, tears had aimlessly walked the Earth. As they always travelled with Sorrow, Anger, Fear and Unease, no one wanted them around, so the life of Aides would become pointless as soon as they left their child. Then HealVille was founded, a Centennial Land that is a rehabilitation centre for tears. That changed everything for tears. Now, when a child cries them out, the tears go to the sea, where a good wave picks them up and carries them to the Land of Hale, where they start their journey on the Path of Truth and eventually come to HealVille.”

Lana nodded. It was true that she felt better every time she had a good cry. “So what happens when they arrive?” she asked.

Ernest turned sideways on the bench to point at the hills forming a crescent around the lake. “These three hills are called BeHill, HealHill and FeelHill. In BeHill, tears can do whatever they want and simply be. They can play, read books, rest – whatever gives them joy. In HealHill they can participate in groups activities. Sometimes they exercise together, but mostly they lovingly talk to other tears about the children they belong to. You know, Aides love their children a great deal – that’s why they stay here until they feel they’re ready to return to them and help them again. They watch their children’s lives from FeelHill. It’s where Sorrow Observatory is, where Aides can feel and see the children they belong to.”

57

“And where do Unease, Sorrow, Anger and Fear end up?” Lana asked.

“Well, before HealVille was founded, they came with tears to Centennial Lands and continued their life on a certain floating meadow bordering Tearopie. That’s where bimalis grows – a kind of flower – that is the only food these feelings like. But once HealVille was founded, things changed for both tears and the feelings they carried. As Aides could come here to rest from their last task and then go back to their child once their strength was renewed, Tearopie no longer had to produce so many new tears. Instead, Feera suggested Tearopie should welcome all the feelings the Aides bring to Centennial Lands. Fears, Angers, Sorrows and Uneases now travel the Path of Truth as well, going from RestNest directly to Feera. I don’t know how she does it exactly, but I’ve heard she thought of a way to turn those feelings into hope that can be sent back to children the emotions had come from in the first place.”

Lana liked that idea so much that she had to smile. Thinking on it some more, she said, “I’m still glad I came here, and not to Tearopie. I’m sure I wouldn’t feel well among all those feelings.”

“Lana,” he asked slowly, “do you think Sorrow, Anger and Fear are evil feelings?”

“Why, yes. How else should I explain the heaviness I feel while they’re inside me?”

Ernest have her a serious look. “What I’m about to tell you may sound unbelievable, but please listen till the end.”

Lana nodded and looked at Ernest with curiosity.

“First, I must tell you that Sorrow, Anger and Fear actually belong to the feeling family of Peace Keepers. For as long as they dwell within us, they protect us and take care of us.”

I'm not so sure... Lana thought, but said nothing. She was trying to respect his request that she listen till the end.

58 “There is a wind in your world that is invisible to the eye, but known to every heart. It’s called unease, and there’s one for every being. Whenever a new creature is born, it gets assigned its own unease. The purpose of unease is actually quite noble – it moves into us whenever we experience something that makes us feel unwell. It enters us when someone hurts us, when life takes something away from us, when it unpleasantly surprises us or brings us something we do not want. The wind called unease enters us when we make mistakes as well – then it tries to tell us that what’s important right now is that we be kind to ourselves. But unease has never learnt how to speak, so he does the only thing he knows how to do – he flies. That’s the only way he can draw our attention. But unease has also never learnt how to move gently, and that’s why, when he enters us, it feels like he’s making a mess. And he does. Within us, he flies through everything, toppling, smashing and destroying everything in its path. But unease knows he’s not gentle – that’s why he always carries Sorrow, Anger and Fear in his backpack. They are here to clean up after him.”

Ernest looked Lana in the eye and explained. “You see, Lana, as they fly around, the shards of what Unease has broken graze our hearts, leaving them wounded, scraped, sometimes even broken. That’s when Sorrow comes in. Sorrows are noble and diligent beings with a degree from the School for Heart Repair. They visit our hearts carrying special tools and stay within us until they fill every crack, stitch every wound and heal every scratch. So, when you feel Sorrow inside you, be patient! Remember that she came to do something good. Allow her to heal your heart, don’t chase her away!

“Now, whenever we get hurt, either by someone else or by our own very selves, the wind called unease makes noise to warn us. All the while he releases thick black dust that pollutes every cell in our bodies. That’s when Anger comes in. She goes through every cell and cleans it, putting all the dust she has collected in unease’s backpack. So, when you feel angry, be angry! Remember that you’re allowing anger to help you. Allow

her to cleanse you. Don't chase her away!

"When someone or something threatens us, unease begins to shake, and everything within us starts to shake as well. That's when Fear comes in. Everything Unease has shaken, Fear gently and slowly embraces so as to soothe it. So, when you feel Fear within you, remember that he is there because something is threatening you, and it's already embracing everything that shivers within you. He needs time to do this properly, so don't chase him away – just trust him and allow him to embrace everything that is shaking within you."

Ernest smiled warmly at Lana. "You see, each feeling has a task and a mission. Those you don't like actually come to your rescue. Remember, no feeling comes to us so as to wound or punish – they come only to help us. But in order for them to succeed, we must understand what they are. You see, Unease and Sorrow and Anger and Fear can only dwell within us for a certain time. If they stay too long, they grow hungry and start to feed on the only thing they have – us. But we're never enough for them, for the only food that satisfies their hunger is the juice of bimalis flower that only grows in a single floating meadow bordering Tearopie. That's why we have to let our feelings out when they ask us to do so. If we don't, they eventually give up. Hungry and powerless to get out without our permission, feelings stay within us, sometimes forever. And they don't belong there. They have to move along. They should only ever be passing through."

59

This made Lana think about her daily ritual of feeling feelings. So far, what Ernest had said made a strange kind of sense.

"How exactly do they leave us?" she asked.

"The easiest way is to cry. When we cry, Teardrop Aides come. They collect Unease, Sorrow, Anger and Fear, put them in their balloons and carry them out through our eyes. That's why it's important to cry. There are other ways, though. One is to talk about them with someone we trust. When we name the feeling in front of someone else, a part of the feeling goes away. But feelings never leave in a single conversation – you have to have at least a few for them to leave completely. It's also important to know this: sometimes, when they're in a hurry, feelings will show us the exact manner in which they want to leave. So, if you feel like screaming, scream. If you start shaking with Fear, look for someone who will hug you. And if

you feel like crying, cry.”

After he said everything he had intended to say, the girl fell silent. Ernest watched her patiently. It appeared she had believed him, but he could still see a spark of curiosity within her.

A moment later Lana gave in to it and asked, “What is Shame? What does it do?”

Ernest nodded. “I intended to talk to you about that. I know you have felt Shame. And Guilt. They’re actually the reason you are here.”

“I don’t understand. Can you help me here?”

60

“It’s actually the other way round: you can help us.”

Lana was astonished. “You must be joking! How could I help you?!”

“Listen well, Lana: Guilt and Shame are feelings that should never have reached the hearts of children. They don’t belong there.”

“So they don’t do anything good?”

“No. The only power they have is to freeze everything they touch. Once they enter us and meet Sorrow, Anger, Fear and Unease, Guilt and Shame only have to brush against them to freeze them. Then they can’t leave us anymore. They continue to dwell within us as shards of ice. As they accumulate, we feel them as an immovable heaviness within us that we fail to explain.”

“That’s awful!” she exclaimed. Then she remembered she had felt Shame herself, and wondered how much he had frozen within her.

“It was terrible,” Ernest stressed, drawing her attention. “Until Shame visited you, Lana Fisher.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shame did freeze feelings within you, but you managed to thaw them without even realising. We know this. Your tears told us so when they reached HealVille, carrying the feelings that had been temporarily frozen within you. It’s rare for something like that to happen, so we’d like you to help other children do the same. That’s why you’re here!”

Lana lowered her eyes, uncertain. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I really don’t know what I did.”

Ernest, however, didn’t seem disappointed. “Then we’ll learn together – and we’ll help somebody along the way, too” he said cheerfully, jumping off the bench. “Come with me. Let’s go to FeelHill, I want to show you something.”

Lana got up. Ernest appeared to have no doubt she could finish the task they had intended for her – and as she walked by his side, her own doubts lessened. She still didn't understand the complexity and magic of this world, but she knew that she wanted to stay longer. She also felt honoured that she, out of all people, had been given an opportunity to learn that feelings within us aren't just passing strangers, but part of an enchanting world of its own that is here to protect us. Not only that, but to learn in such a unique way!

As they climbed the slope of FeelHill, the multi-coloured stones grew bigger and bigger. There was a magnificent view of HealVille from the top. The hill itself, though, looked a bit empty. There were neither houses nor yards – only rocks, big and colourful. It was a beautiful place, but it looked almost too plain for a magical land.

Then someone called her name.

“Lanaaaa, here we come!” she heard a resounding cry.

It didn't take her long to discover where the voices were coming from. There was a plum pink cloud in the soft airspace between the tops of FeelHill and HealHill, and on it there were three teardrops waving at her. The moment they jumped down from the cloud, the tears ran towards Lana and embraced her as if she were a friend they hadn't seen in a while. A part of her felt like she knew them too. She looked at Ernest, expecting an explanation.

Ernest easily obliged. “Lana, Meet Orka, Vera and Orlo – your Teardrop Aides. They used to live in your heart.”

Lana laughed and looked at the tears with amazement. They might have been tears, but they looked rather jolly. Orka wore a floral dress, Vera a denim suspender dress, and Orlo a silver glitter jacket. Lana greeted each of them by name. Now that she understood how important they were, she said, “Thank you for protecting my heart.”

“Thank you, Lana!” the tears replied in unison.

“Maybe you can tell Lana what's been happening to her?” Ernest suggested to tears. Turning to Lana, he said, “You may have thought you were alone in your suffering, but Orka, Vera and Orlo have been with you the entire time. They've lived through everything with you. It would be good if you listened to them.”

“I'd love to!” Lana said, turning towards them. “Tell me, what did you

see, what did you feel?”

“That day... you know what day I mean...” Orka started carefully. “Unease went wild within you, so we knew we were about to go on a journey. Sorrow, Anger and Fear immediately began to clean unease’s mess, and in the meantime we patiently waited. As much as we knew they needed time to do everything correctly, it was hard for us to wait. Knowing that we’ll soon have an opportunity to help you was our only comfort. But then the policeman came and Shame appeared and...” Orka stopped, took a deep breath and continued. “Lana – his coming was terrible!”

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It was clear that just remembering what had happened made the tear sad. Vera and Orlo took over, allowing Orka the time to regain her composure.

Vera explained that tears know exactly how powerful Shame is. There’s no speaking to him, no negotiating with him. Once he comes, everything bows before him.

“That’s the worst thing,” Orlo added. “At first, you didn’t want to cry because of Shame, remember?” he asked Lana.

“I remember very well,” Lana confirmed grimly.

“That’s why we had no chance of escaping him,” Orlo said. “You couldn’t have known this, of course. As soon as he moved into you, Shame sought ways to touch us and freeze us. We’d hide, but each time he’d find us. Then we did the only thing we could – we embraced each other and waited. We knew we could help you, but when Shame appeared, we had to accept the possibility that we would never get a chance. It was one of the saddest moments of my life.”

“Mine, too,” said Vera.

“Mine, too,” Orka agreed and continued with sadness in her voice. “Then the worst happened: he froze us all.”

For a moment, Lana’s tears were swept by the memory of that terrible day.

Then Vera took a grip on herself and looked at Lana with admiration. “But you refused to let Shame beat you!”

Lana shook her head, confused. “What have I done, exactly? I still don’t know.”

“You did the only thing that can disturb Shame – you ignored him!”

Vera said.

“Did I? Really?” Lana asked in amazement. “How?”

“Well, once Shame gets into you, he really wants you to believe there is something wrong with you. That’s why he freezes all emotions and tears within you – so nothing could dissuade you from believing him. When he succeeds, he no longer has to fight for dominion over your thoughts. Knowing nothing can chase him away, he relaxes, settles comfortably near your heart and falls asleep without a care in the world. But you, despite feeling him intently and accepting his rule over your thoughts, have decided to take charge from him, if only for a few minutes a day. When you went to feel feelings, you paid no attention to Shame, giving it instead to Sorrow within you, asking her questions – and Sorrow has heard you.”

63

“We’ve all heard you, Lana” Orka said. “Whenever you spent time under the oak feeling feelings, you woke Shame from his slumber, which irritated him. He tried hard to speak to you and convince you that what you were feeling was your own fault – but you simply ignored him. Even if it was for only a few minutes a day, you ignoring him irritated him more and more, so he started to shout. Until then we didn’t even know Shame could shout that loudly. Then his voice broke the ice, and we, together with the balloons full of feelings ready to take the remains of unease’s mess with them, found our way out of you. Because you paid attention to your grief day by day, because you allowed yourself to cry even when people told you that you shouldn’t – that’s why we are here. That’s why you are here, dear Lana. Did Ernest tell you why you’re here?” Vera asked.

“He mentioned something, but I didn’t really understand,” Lana said. Turning around, she scanned the slope for Ernest. He climbed higher while she was talking to the tears. She knew she was supposed to follow him, but first she wanted to know what happened to Shame within her. Did he stay in the end, or leave?

There was no time, though. The cloud that had brought the tears here was now calling them, announcing they were leaving FeelHill.

“We’ll see you soon,” said Orlo, hugging Lana.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

“To HealHill. More precisely, to the Library of Experiences.”

“The library of what?”

“Experiences,” Vera repeated. “That’s where you can find the stories of

children whose tears have reached HealVille. Those are the most beautiful stories in the world, for the tears writing them describe the lives of their children and the way they have lived through unease within them with infinite kindness.”

“Visit it sometime,” said Orka. “You know, the three of us are writing a story about you.”

“It will be the most beautiful story ever told!” Orlo said.

Once again, Lana felt special. She waved at the tears that had climbed the cloud and began to climb uphill towards Ernest. He had stopped to wait for her.

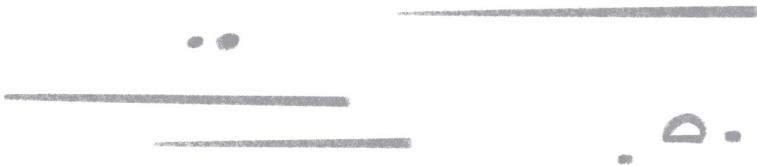
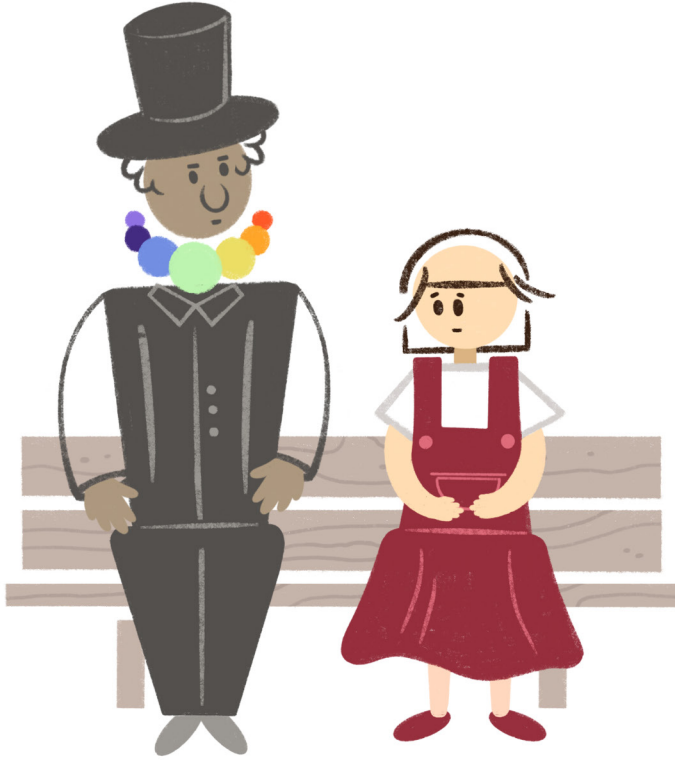
64

“Sorry about that, sir” she said when she reached him.

“No need for that,” he said. “You can just call me Ernest.”

Lana agreed with a smile.

He smiled back. “Come with me! Let’s go to your future workplace. If you accept the offer, that is.”



The World Within Us

At the centre of FeelHill Ernest stopped in front of a big crimson rock and moved it aside. It turned out there was a doorway behind each great rock on FeelHill. This one led straight to the long, narrow corridor; its end lost in the distance. The floor was the colour of mint, shiny and sterile, like in a hospital. Many doors ran down either side of the corridor, placed close together and evenly spaced. On each door there was a low, wide opening, right at the eyelevel of an eight-year-old girl. In front of each door there was a pair of shoes – by their size, clearly belonging to children.

67

“What is this place?” Lana asked watching the shoes. Each pair was different: some were old and worn out, a few even had holes; others were brand new, perfectly clean and shiny.

“This is the Sorrow Observatory. That is, one section of the Sorrow Observatory. Similar corridors run underneath all of FeelHill, and behind each door we can see and feel children whose tears came to HealVille. That way each tear can keep track of the child it belongs to. Aides often write to children, to let them know there is someone who sees them, hears them and feels them, who wants and knows how to help. Someone who believes in them.”

“Oh, now I understand. It was his tear that wrote to my dad?”

“Are you talking about the letter you found in the attic? We’ve heard about that.”

“Yes, but... I mean other letters too. Dad said there were many.”

“And did he tell you more about them?” Ernest asked carefully.

“Not really. Could you?” Lana suggested uncertainly.

Ernest hesitated. “I’m sorry, but it doesn’t work that way. Maybe another time. Anyway, don’t you want to know why you are here?”

Lana beamed. “Why, yes! I’m listening!”

Ernest smiled at her and invited her for a walk down the corridor. “Now we’re in the section of the Sorrow Observatory called the Section of Guilt and Shame,” he clarified. “The children who live behind these doors have all at some point been shamed for their feelings, needs or wishes. That’s why they believe that there’s something wrong with them, that they aren’t good enough, that they’re worthless because they can’t live life the way the world expects them to.”

“Oh. Have they done something wrong to feel that way?” asked Lana.

68 Ernest looked at her, tilting his head. “Were you doing something wrong when you felt ashamed?”

She thought about it. “At first, I thought I did – but now I don’t, not any more. I just reacted to what was happening in my own way.”

“Exactly. To make a mistake, to do something wrong, to misjudge – that’s quite different from shame. You know, Lana, everyone makes mistakes throughout their lives. And still, when children do something wrong, they are shamed for it. That’s not right. Nor just.”

“What is just, then?” Lana wanted to know.

Ernest looked her in the eye. “Listen to me, Lana: when you do something wrong, whether intentionally or unintentionally, you’ll feel it’s wrong. Always, without exception. Then all you have to do is be careful not to repeat the same mistake. Sometimes this will take you longer, but it’s important that you try. And people who witness your mistakes should remind you that we all make mistakes. Instead of blaming you for making them and telling you you’re bad at something or guilty of something, they should remind you of everything you do well in life, so you never forget what you are capable of. Remember the Path of Truth – we’re not just a moment, we are also everything that has come before and everything that is yet to come.”

Pondering this, she said, “You know, what you’re saying makes sense. But I must admit I don’t understand why we, the children, have no knowledge of this?”

The question took Ernest by surprise. “I don’t exactly know why,” he said evenly.

Lana tried a different approach. “Why has no one told me that I have the power to create a world of my own?”

Ernest nodded. “It seems the world has forgotten something very

important – that children have always been the guardians of the world. Long, long ago, people knew that what comes from a pure and honest heart creates new worlds. They also knew all children are born with pure hearts, so they wanted to learn what kind of power that gave them. That’s why every child in the world was told they were magical and believed it. Adults watched them with curiosity and excitement. They told children stories about the world, but they always chose their words carefully. They made sure every child understood that there is no single right way to live and that each child has their own, unique way. And so, with curiosity, they awaited the day a child would find their own way to live.”

69

As true as that sounded, it still wasn’t comforting, only confusing. Lana was aware that children on Earth knew nothing about this – they did not know they were magical, did not know what power they possessed. After all, she herself had found out only a moment ago.

Sensing what was happening to her, Ernest decided to go into more detail. He told her that the world she came from no longer saw children the way he had just described. He clarified that for some reason adults began to think they’d mastered living, so they began to write guidebooks and textbooks for living, drawing maps and fashioning signposts for future generations. There they explain what they believe is success in much detail. Wanting children to master certain skills, they have defined deadlines for them to do so. They have even defined beauty. They are no longer curious to find out what children will become – instead they tell them what they should become. Because of these stories in which adults tell children how to live their lives, childhood has stopped being a colourful period of life intended for playing with the magic within them. Instead, childhood has become a long, tedious preparation for future, filled with obligations, expectations and rules. When obligations become too difficult, when they fail to meet expectations, children start to believe they are not successful enough or beautiful enough, and sometimes they even think they are worthless.

Ernest leaned closer and looked her in the eye, as if about to tell her something very important. “Please, Lana, remember this: there is no child who isn’t beautiful or successful. There is never anything wrong with a child – any child, ever. The world is hiding this truth from children, so many feel ashamed for who they are. And you already know what Shame

does to them! Not only does he freeze everything a child feels – Shame tells them there’s something wrong with them, that who they are is not enough. And many children believe him.”

This, Lana thought, better described the world she came from. Immediately she felt the need to do something, to find a way to right this wrong.

Then she realised, “But wait, just because the world didn’t tell them they are magical, children didn’t stop being magical. Is that right?”

70 Ernest smiled slowly, contentedly. “That’s right, Lana. Stories about the world of their own, about life of their own still continually grow in children – but children also feel no one wants to hear them. That’s not true, however. There are still people in the world who want to hear these stories – it’s just that sometimes a child needs to look for them.”

“I understand. But they can’t look for them if they don’t even know they exist. Someone has to tell them they exist.”

“How would you like to be the one to tell them?” Ernest asked, smiling.

“Really? Yes! Yes, I’d love to!” Lana had no idea how to do that, but she felt ready. She felt she could do it.

Ernest went back to the entrance to the corridor, approaching a small wall cabinet hung above the writing desk with a matching chair. He flattened his palm against the cabinet door; the lock clicked, and the door opened. Inside there were various things, but Ernest only picked one – a red shoelace that he put in Lana’s hand.

“Take this shoelace and choose a pair of shoes. Tie the lace around one of the shoes you’ve chosen, put them on and close your eyes. You will feel exactly what the child behind the door feels,” he explained.

No longer wondering what powers she might possess, Lana set out to do as Ernest had asked. Observing all the shoes in the corridor, she chose a pair by the ninth door to her right. They were brown, well-worn, and they looked slightly sad. She tied a lace around one shoe, slipped her feet into them and closed her eyes. And then, for the first time in her life, Lana felt someone else’s unease.

“Today, your task is to describe what you feel,” Ernest told her.

“I’m lonely,” she began as the feeling washed over her, words spilling out of her almost on their own. “I don’t want to be alone. I want to have

friends, but I can feel people watching me. It doesn't feel nice. I don't think I'm beautiful. I'm not beautiful enough for this world. I feel powerless because I can't change how I look. Why can't I make myself more beautiful? I feel ashamed, and I did nothing wrong. But there's nothing I can do to feel better."

Lana opened her eyes. They were moist, as if they wanted to pour forth the unease of the girl she had just felt.

"Thank you, Lana!" Ernest said earnestly. "Now look through the opening on the door and you'll see who the feelings belong to."

Though curious to find out who it was she had felt, Lana approached the opening carefully. There was a girl standing in front of the mirror in the left corner of the room. Judging by the toys on the shelf above the bed, the room belonged to the girl. She looked no older than ten and she was beautiful, with silky blond hair and a stunning face, but she was wearing a T-shirt that was at least five sizes too big for her. The girl was pulling it over her knees, as if trying to hide every part of her body, as if she were truly ashamed of herself – exactly how Lana had felt only a few moments ago. Soon, however, the scene began to rewind – so fast that Lana's head spun. She stepped away from the door and looked at Ernest, expecting an explanation.

71

Ernest obliged. "What you've just seen is happening right now on Earth. What you'll see next is what has led to this moment."

Once again Lana approached the door. Now the girl was walking with her mum down the pavement next to a wide road. A woman approached them, greeted them and asked: "Is this your daughter?"

"Yes, that's Mia," mum answered proudly. Mia smiled.

"Oh. I wouldn't have guessed," the woman commented.

"Really? You're the first to say that. Everybody says we look alike," said mum.

"Oh, you do, but it appears you like to eat more than your mum," the woman said looking at the girl. "Look at those fat little legs and chubby cheeks," she crooned.

Mia blushed. Her mum curtly said that Mia was a beautiful and healthy little girl, but watching the scene unfold, Lana knew that Mia no longer remembered these words.

Stepping away from the opening, Lana admitted that she didn't

understand what had happened. Ernest explained.

“The woman said that Mia was chubbier than her mother, so Mia concluded that she shouldn’t be. The seemingly harmless comment opened a door to Shame, and he immediately began to convince Mia that the woman was right, that there was something wrong with her. Wanting to find evidence for what he was telling her, she tried comparing herself to other girls in school. Naturally, they looked different than her – but Mia told herself that they looked better. Ever since then, through similar situations, she has been presenting Shame with evidence that he was right. That’s why Shame now rules her thoughts – and thoughts determine everything in life. It’s her thoughts ruled by Shame that make her feel what you had felt but a moment ago. Unease is still trying to tell her that isn’t good for her, but it’s only a matter of time before Shame freezes him, and Mia declares herself to be ugly.”

72

“But why did she believe her?” Lana asked, confused. “The woman didn’t appear like an important person in her life.”

“Why did you believe the Wellsdon policeman?” Ernest turned the question on her.

Lana said nothing.

“The way Shame enters children isn’t necessarily powerful. What’s powerful is the way a child handles Shame once he enters. But that’s why you’re here,” Ernest said, leading her back towards the writing desk at the entrance to the Sorrow Observatory.

“If you want, write Mia a letter,” he suggested.

“What should I write?”

“Whatever you think she needs to hear,” Ernest said simply.

Lana sat at the table and closed her eyes, looking for something tender to say. Then she opened her eyes and wrote:

Dear Mia,

Once you believed the words of a person you didn’t know, who told you that you weren’t beautiful enough. I know you don’t know me either, but I beg you to listen, for I have to tell you something very important. I want to tell you that you’re beautiful and enchanting. BEAUTIFUL. AND ENCHANTING. Say these two words to yourself at least once a day. Get to know them; because they describe you perfectly.

I know this letter is not enough to convince you, but I’ll write again. If

you'll allow me...

With love,

Lana, a girl from HealVille.

Standing behind her, Ernest was reading what she was writing, and with each word his smile grew wider. When she was done, Lana put the letter in an envelope with the watermark of HealVille, and he stamped it. Then she went back to Mia's room and slipped the letter through the opening, hoping her kind words would let Shame know he hadn't won within the girl she had written to.

She dearly wanted to stay and see what would happen, but Ernest gently pulled her away. „Thank you!” he said. “What you did was very important.“

73

Suddenly she was in no mood for talking. Respecting that, Ernest silently walked with her back towards the entrance. Outside, he took a whistle out of his pocket and blew it, and a few seconds later, the same pink cloud that had been carrying Orka, Vera and Orlo appeared before them. His name was Flu-Flu, as she found out when Ernest introduced them. The good cloud took them back to the bench next to the Lake of Children's Tears, where they'd met, and Lana knew this meant it was time to go home.

Before that, however, Ernest made her an offer. “Lana, from this moment onwards, you're welcome to visit HealVille whenever you want. The decision is yours, but I'd dearly love you to come back. I want to offer you a job in the Section of Guilt and Shame. I'd like you to come here daily and feel the feelings of children who are threatened by Shame. You could write to them and help them believe they truly are enchanting and beautiful.”

He continued to explain that, if she decided to come back, she wouldn't be obliged to do anything for others. It is important to do something nice for ourselves each and every day, he reminded her, stressing that she had all the magic of his land at her disposal. Through the door at the beach, he said, she could go to any of the lands on the Path of Truth. She could spend time with tears or read books in the Library of Experiences.

“Here, you truly may and can do anything you want,” he concluded.

Lana's heart had already decided she would accept, but as she was

not yet aware of it, she didn't say yes right away. The question she asked, however, revealed her feelings about the offer. "How do I come back here?"

"You can always reach HealVille by walking backwards. From now on, you won't come to Panatone, but directly here."

They sat on the bench looking at the lake of Children's Tears.

"From this bench you can go home whenever you like," he said.

"All you have to do is close your eyes, take a deep breath and whisper something nice to yourself."

74 Lana grew curious again. "Is that how tears come to their children on Earth?"

Ernest shook his head. "No, this gateway is just for you. Tears have their own way of getting there. They're taken there by Hugger, the owner of Galaxy Taxi – the only taxi service licensed to transport tears to Earth."

"Is he some sort of train?" Lana asked.

"No, Hugger is a cloud. He belongs to the family of Good Clouds, like Flu-Flu. But you won't see Hugger now, he's taken some days off."

"Days off?"

"Yes. I think the last time he took a break was seven centuries ago.

Ever since then he's been taking tears to Earth every single day, so it's no wonder he grew tired. We all get tired sometimes. If we feel we need rest, it's important that we take it. Hugger did this a few weeks ago."

Lana grew worried. "Does that mean Aides aren't going back to their children on Earth?"

"That's right. The transport of tears to children is not possible at the moment. But don't worry about it, we'll find a solution. Hugger knows how important he is to HealVille and to all the children of the world, but we have to allow him to be important to himself as well."

That's right – despite being magical, HealVille wasn't perfect. If someone had told her that she had already met this much respected cloud, that she had ran away from it in fear, she would never have believed it. She didn't know the only reason she hadn't seen it was the red umbrella over the sad city of Wellsdon. Untroubled by any of this, she closed her eyes and whispered that she was important to somebody. Completely unaware that this magical place was in danger, the kind of danger Centennial Lands had never seen before, Lana opened her eyes under the oak in her

meadow for feeling feelings.

She ran to the house to look at the round clock on the kitchen wall – and was astonished to find out it had been only fifteen minutes since she had left. It was true, then – in Centennial Lands time really did flow differently.

She happily ran to her room, stored the keepsakes from the Path of Truth in a biscuit tin, hid the tin under her bed and sat to admire the seven-bead bracelet around her wrist. Little did she know that from now on, she would never forget to be kind to herself – not because of the magic of the objects that would forever remind her of where she had been, but because the journey had truly made her believe she was enchanting.





The Boys of Wellsdon

Just like her heart had decided, the next day Lana returned to HealVille. And the day after that. And the day after that. When he realised that Lana was going to spend a part of her childhood in his land, Ernest decided to decorate her road to HealVille. Wanting what had been leading her to him to look like the magic she herself had been bringing to HealVille, he sprinkled the path from her house to the meadow with a thick layer of glitter. Whenever she walked it, she left deep, sparkling little footsteps behind. Her beloved tree was now adorned with colours. Dresses and small suits hung from its branches so she could pick one for work, something different for each day. And there was an armchair under the oak – elegant, comfortable and hefty. It was intended for Lana – so she could feel her feelings in comfort before each trip to HealVille.

79

By winter, that fluttered into Forhill on tender snowflakes, Lana had visited HealVille 207 times. She would always come to work at the same time and in the exact same way – at 5 p.m. she would sit in the armchair under the oak, feel her feelings, and then get to the bench by the Lake of Children’s Tears walking backwards. There she would go to work and affectionately put on the shoes of children who regularly fell asleep with the feeling of Guilt and Shame. And then she would write them a letter.

Feeling the children across the world, Lana realised that Ernest was rightfully worried. Each new visit to HealVille confirmed to her what she had been suspecting for a long time: that the world wasn’t equally kind to everyone. She learned that many children carried heavy baskets of expectations on their back. They were expected to always be obedient, calm, hard-working, excelling in at least three things, reasonable and accepting that their lives would be admirable only if they lived it the way they were told to. If they failed to live according to somebody else’s

standards for several days in a row, they'd fall asleep feeling guilty – and that, Lana decided, wasn't a feeling appropriate for childhood.

80 During her 207 visits to HealVille, Lana had felt hundreds of children who believed they weren't good enough – precisely what children should never believe. She had felt girls in sparkly and tattered clothes; boys who were only a step away from believing they were stupid, just because they couldn't solve math problems, play violin or basketball with ease. There were many girls who constantly questioned their worth on account of their hair, eye colour, or the thickness of their lips. Searching for the proof that they were worthy of acceptance despite having features that did not fit the mould of beauty someone had prescribed in so much detail, those girls grew quieter each time they looked in the mirror. But that didn't apply only to girls – there were also boys who were convinced they weren't handsome enough. There were children who were mocked for reading books, for not having the latest sneakers or phones, and children who were reproached for supposedly being too fat or too thin. There were boys who were criticised for not loving sport, and girls who were criticised for loving sport too much. There were boys who were despised for being emotional and shy, and girls who were despised for being supposedly too smart. There were girls who were begrudged behaving and playing “like boys”, and boys who were begrudged behaving and playing “like girls” – as if there were such a thing as a single right way to be a girl or a boy. Lana had also felt girls who fell in love with girls and boys who fell in love with boys, only to have their love mocked, condemned, even called twisted – as if there were such a thing as loving wrongly, loving badly. “Love is love,” Lana would tell them through her letters.

Some days she could feel the ice covering children's hearts so acutely that she herself would feel cold. Through the openings in doors in the long corridor, she could see children drawing the curtains closed in their large and small rooms. Window shades, worn and modern, white, wouldn't be raised for days on end. She could see despair muting the light in the lives of dejected and anxious children. All of them lived in different houses, environments, silences, but they were all equally close to believing that they weren't good enough. But Lana had been teaching them, reminding them that there was a world bigger than the one they could presently see – the world that existed within them, alive and well. Sometimes they

believed her.

With each new visit, the corridor in the Section of Shame and Guilt seemed longer, the end farther away. Lana's desire to help every child whose shoes she could see was beginning to feel more and more unattainable. There were truly many, many doors waiting for Lana to touch them, and just as many children in need of hearing the truth. At some point it all became too much for her.

Sometimes she would see children opening their curtains, raising their blinds and letting light in their lives after the very first letter. That was her greatest reward. But some children would throw her letters in the garbage without even finishing them. They would press their curtains even more tightly together, as if wanting the darkness in their lives to become permanent. Seeing this worried Lana deeply.

81

For these reasons, despite the fact that her work in HealVille agreed with her more than well, there were moments she wondered if she should come back at all. And moments she wished she'd never go back to Earth again.

For example, at the end of her 38th visit to HealVille, Lana felt unease rising within her. Now that she knew how to recognise it, she also knew how important it was to find the true reason for its flight. Fortunately, she could speak about her feelings with Ernest and get the answers she needed. That day, she told him about her unease and explained that she was starting to feel helpless because she wasn't able to save all the children she had felt.

Ernest explained that her task had never been to save anyone. "You can't save people. You don't need to. But you can give them support. Don't speak to them expecting them to reward you by becoming happier – speak to them only to let them know that you see them and acknowledge their pain. Sometimes, it is enough to know that somebody accepts us exactly the way we are without expecting us to change. Sometimes that is all we need to continue on our way."

His answer soothed her for the time being. Then, at the end of her 53rd visit, unease came to Lana again, and again she knew she should attend to it. This time, however, her words surprised even Ernest.

"Can I move here for forever?" she asked.

Ernest could see how discouraged she was, so he carefully started to

examine the cause of the feeling. He was calm, but very direct. “Where did that come from?” he asked.

“The world is ugly. I don’t want to go back. It may be true I’m safe in Forhill, but now that I know what kind of troubles have access to children’s hearts, I’m afraid. I’m afraid of living in fear that something like that could happen to me,” she said bleakly.

“Start from the beginning,” Ernest said steadily. “Why do you think your world is ugly?”

82 “Feeling children in the last few weeks, I realised how lonely they are when they are sad. You know, some parents leave their children home alone. Literally alone. Those children think that they must have done something wrong if even their own parents don’t love them enough to stay with them, to protect them. Some of them even told their parents how hard that was. They’ve been gathering courage to do that for weeks – but their mums and dads did nothing to help them. The children were still alone. What kind of people are they? What kind of parents are they?” Lana spoke, sounding more and more angry.

“You tell me: what kind of people are they?” Ernest turned the question on her.

Pondering this shortly, she confidently said: “Evil. Those people are evil.”

Ernest nodded. Taking a deep breath, he said, “No Lana, they aren’t evil. They simply don’t know any better.”

“That’s not an excuse! There’s always something you can do for a child who’s in pain.”

“I see,” Ernest said gravely. “So, what do you think those parents should do?”

“They should be honest,” she said decidedly. “All they have to do is say to a child: I can see you’re hurting, but I can’t help you, for I don’t know either, no one had taught me how. But maybe we can find someone who knows together. There, that would be enough.”

Ernest’s face softened. “Yes, Lana, that would indeed be a nice, powerful and true thing to do.”

Giving a deep sigh, he took out the whistle and called Flu-Flu. Lana wanted to continue the conversation, but Ernest didn’t speak again until they reached HealHill. He didn’t want to tell her she was wrong to think

adults were evil, nor did he want to comfort her, nor did he want to convince her that her world wasn't as bad as she thought. He said nothing, knowing that the beauty of the world cannot become visible just because someone talks about it – the beauty can be seen only once it's felt.

Fortunately, in HealHill that was easy because of The Library of Experiences. Lana was expecting a majestic building with thousands of marble stairs – instead, the library was the biggest tree she had ever seen. It grew in the valley surrounded by hills so its crown couldn't be seen from other parts of HealVille, and its leaves were many-coloured. Later, having looked at them more closely, Lana would see that each was a handwritten, leaf-bound book that magically opened to the touch. Each contained a story of a child whose Aides had visited HealVille at least once, and there were more leaves in the tree than Lana could ever count. The magic of the place hid not only in the fantastic idea that the stories revealed various ways children could deal with Unease – it was also practical, for whoever approached the sensitive tree would be presented with precisely the story they were meant to read. Besides, the story didn't come to the visitor – the visitor went to the story. When the tree felt what kind of story the visitor needed, it would send sparkling dust to lift them up from the ground and carry them to the appropriate book.

83

When they approached the tree, the sparkling dust embraced Lana and soared with her high into the air – but it didn't stop in front of any story. Instead, it carried her to the far side of the tree, soon to be joined by Ernest. Sitting high in the air in the chairs of sparkling dust, they began perhaps the most important conversation yet.

“In this part of the tree grow the stories of children who have, unfortunately, never been able to chase away Guilt and Shame. They belong to those who aren't children anymore, but adults. Some of them are themselves parents to some of the children you have felt.”

That's how Ernest began, and Lana wasn't delighted. “To be honest, I don't know why you have brought me here,” she said. “Haven't you noticed that I need hope and encouragement to continue my work here? It doesn't seem likely that stories of failure would give me what I need.”

But Ernest wouldn't be deterred. “You know, Lana, encouragement and hope are weakest when they come from words alone. They are strongest when they come from understanding. When we understand why

and how something is happening, we can make it right more easily. Would you allow me the chance to make this outing into something encouraging for you?”

“Alright,” Lana agreed. Although she still wasn’t convinced that she would get what she wanted at this place, she trusted Ernest, so she continued to listen.

84 “Parents of the lonely children you had felt, whose stories grow in this part of the tree, had never been told they were magical – not by anyone. Or perhaps they had, but they hadn’t been treated as such. And children can recognise that. Adults can say many things, but if what they do does not align with what they say, children won’t believe them,” Ernest said.

Lana didn’t understand what he was trying to say, so he explained further.

“They aren’t evil”, he said. “They just don’t know any better. They don’t know any stories about magic; because the world didn’t treat them like magic when they were children. And now that they themselves are parents, how can we expect them to tell stories about magic they don’t believe in? How can we expect them to deal with their children’s emotions when they have never learnt how to deal with their own feelings? Those people aren’t evil. They just never had the kind of childhood they were supposed to have.”

This made Lana think. The moment she told herself nobody was born evil, she thought of Grogli and the Wellsdon policeman. She had considered them to be evil, but now she wondered what had happened to them to become that way? A moment later she shook her head, deciding the two of them didn’t belong in this conversation. Keeping these thoughts to herself, she asked Ernest: “What happened to those parents when they were children?”

“Oh, I could talk about that for days. All of them felt everything you are feeling, everything all children feel – it’s just that they had no support in their attempts to understand their feelings. When the heart is wounded – and by now you know that happens to everyone – if we don’t allow Sorrow to heal it, it will stay broken,” Ernest said.

“You can actually live with a broken heart?” Lana asked worriedly. The very thought of that was horrifying.

“Of course,” Ernest said. He reminded her of her stay in the Land of

Forgivnia. “You’ve seen how many stones had accumulated in your room of memories in only a short time. Now imagine what such a room would look like if no one had entered it in decades – everything beautiful in it would have been hidden from view. So yes, you can live with an unhealed heart, but it’s not a particularly nice life. If we do not see the beauty of life, it is unlikely we will ever be truly happy.”

Lana understood, but something was still bothering her. “Wait. Even if they have grown up, they can still go back to their room of memories and hug the stones there. They can still clean the room up, right?”

“Of course! It’s never too late to be kind to yourself. Still, once they grow up, only the brave decide to do the work, for they know cleaning the memory room will take a long time. Given how persistent they have to be, however, many of them unfortunately give up. But some succeed and realise that each attempt to be kind to yourself is worth it. When they forgive themselves and others, when their memory room is clean, the keepsakes of their childhood remind them of the world that exists within them, so they want to go back to it. And when they do, wherever they might go from there, they arrive somewhere beautiful.”

“And when they remember how important it is for children to deal with their feelings, they start to teach them and support them?” Lana asked, now visibly encouraged.

“Exactly,” Ernest confirmed and looked her in the eye. “Perhaps you should take a break from other people’s feelings.”

Lana took his advice to heart. She started spending her time in the Library of Experiences, reading about the parents of the children she had felt. Through their stories, she came to understand that none of them had been born evil, that malice had begun to build up in them because of what life had been handing to them. Now that she had started to feel empathy, she could no longer judge them – she just wanted to help them. Even not knowing how to achieve that, she did what she was best at: she wished for something. Full of hope, she silently said, “I want adults, especially parents, to gather the strength to clean up their memory rooms. I want them to realise that they can treat their children better than their parents had treated them, to realise that they know how to do that.”

When she visited HealVille for the 104th time, Lana realised that at times, Shame entered children through the words of other children.

Although she was surprised, in a way she also understood. By then she knew that children who make other children afraid aren't mean, but were taught to behave that way by someone else. She knew parents had the great honour of presenting the world to children coming into it, of telling them about it and teaching them how to be kind to anyone and everyone – but she also knew that parents often forgot to do that.

86 And while Lana's life in HealVille was all about feelings, on Earth she rarely spoke about them. No one there knew about her secret job. Even if she tried to explain what she was doing, who would believe her? At the end of the day, she felt no need to share it with anyone.

Still, her parents noticed that the girl dedicated part of each day to doing something good for herself. Let us be clear, they still talked to Lana about her feelings, but they also noticed her answers were becoming more precise – almost too precise for an eight-year-old girl. Realising she must have found her own way of learning about her inner world, her parents decided not to interfere, for they began to suspect she understood feelings even better than they did.

They also noticed that on the first Saturdays in a month, Lana no longer paid attention to adults – instead, her eyes sought children in the crowd. No one suspected that she was trying to find out if she had felt any of them in HealVille.

That never happened. Rather, she saw a child she had met before. She never knew how much trouble she would go through trying to feel him or how many unsavoury secrets she would learn.

But first things first. What preceded the meeting was an incandescent and loud morning. That day Lana was woken up by a loud noise that sounded like an explosion even here in Forhill. When she went out on the balcony with her parents, she saw that the sky beyond the Forhill forest was flushed red. It was clear something terrible had happened in Wellsdon, but at the moment neither her nor her parents knew who had caused it.

And then Saturday came. It was the first Saturday in December, so there were no cars on the main street of Forhill. Dusted with white snow, the street awaited the footsteps of dejected people that were approaching from the forest protecting Forhill. Lana had already noticed that the files of people coming to Forhill never grew smaller – on the contrary, it

seemed they were getting longer and more sorrowful.

That day Lana was looking for none other than Eli – the boy she had met prior to the worst event of her life. As soon as she saw him, she waved at him. He hadn't grown much since she had last seen him, he was even wearing the same dark green jumper. Their eyes met, but the boy wasn't rejoiced to see her – he lowered his head as if he were angry. Lana was certain that was him, but something had changed about him.

When they noticed she was watching him, Lana's parents waved at him too. Their noble gazes met the sad gazes of Adeline and Tomas Malik, Eli's parents, and soon they were all sitting together at the round kitchen table at the Fishers'.

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While their parents talked, Lana watched Eli who was silently looking at the floor, a large jar filled with small papers in his lap. She didn't know what the jar was about, but the way he was cradling it made it clear it was important to him.

At some point Eli looked at her grimly. "What are you looking at?"

Taken aback, Lana lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry," she said.

All she knew about him was his name. She wanted to know more, for even without being able to magically feel him the way she could in HealVille, it was clear the boy was suffering. But he was also angry, and Lana, not knowing what happened in Wellsdon, couldn't understand why. She glanced at Eli's shoes – black with yellow laces – stored the image in her memory and left the kitchen.

The need to help him, to make it easier for him or at least explain how the world of feelings worked, had by then turned into instinct for Lana, so the next day she began to look for Eli's shoes as soon as she came to HealVille. She searched several corridors, but she couldn't find black shoes with yellow laces. Then she looked for Ernest, but he wasn't there either.

She found out why when, searching for him, she ran into her Aides. Vera explained that Ernest went to a meeting of the Founders Council of Centennial Lands in the Land of Ballbeck. Orlo added that HealVille had encountered a problem. "You know, Hugger has been absent for a while now. Teardrop Aides cannot leave HealVille at the moment, and new tears keep arriving. The land is becoming overcrowded. Ernest went to ask for permission to expand the land, for there's little room left in the Lake of Children's Tears, and he wants to prevent flooding."

Worrisome as that was, Lana felt no need to know more about it. *Ernest will find a solution. Ernest knows everything, there's nothing he can't do!* she told herself. Changing the subject, she asked the Aides what she had been planning to ask Ernest: "Is it possible that somewhere in the world a child is hurting and that we don't know about it?"

"Of course it is," Vera replied. "Why do you ask?"

"There's a boy named Eli living in our house who is visibly sad, but I don't know why."

"Do you know when he last cried?"

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"Sadly, no."

Orka suggested they go to the Library of Experiences. "If Eli's tear has reached HealVille, the tree will know and send us his story. Even if the story is unfinished, we'll know in which corridor you can feel him," she explained.

Arriving at HealHill, Lana spoke loudly to the tree: "Eli Malik from Wellsdon!"

The Aides looked at her, puzzled. "Lana, the tree will feel you, you don't have to shout," Vera said.

"Wait, wait," Orlo chipped in. "Did you say Eli is from Wellsdon?"

"Yes," Lana said. Noticing the worried looks of her Aides, she asked, "What's going on? Why are you looking at each other like that?"

Orka sighed. "Unfortunately, we won't find Eli's story here."

"How do you know? Why are you so sure?" Lana asked.

"Because no tear belonging to boys of Wellsdon has ever reached HealVille," Orka explained sadly.

"I don't understand. How is that possible?" Lana asked, disturbed.

"Wellsdon is one of the oldest cities in the world. Maybe one of the most beautiful, too. But it got stuck in certain traditions that aren't good for children," Vera said.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a rule that's followed blindly in Wellsdon schools and homes: boys don't cry!"

Lana laughed in disbelief. "Oh, come on! What kind of a rule is that?! Why wouldn't boys cry? We all cry!"

"Alas, this is not a joke," Orka said. "It really is that way. In Wellsdon, generations have been brought up believing that tears are a sign of

weakness in a boy. Those boys grew up with parents who had been taught the same thing by their parents. It's been happening for generations. No tear of the sons of Wellsdon has reached HealVille in centuries.”

“But that's horrible!” Lana exclaimed, exasperated. There was a heaviness in her heart that she couldn't quite explain. Apparently, the Aides felt the same way, for they didn't even try to lessen her disappointment with the realisation that there are children in the world who aren't allowed to cry. That day Lana went home finding no comfort in HealVille.

Although they were the same height and the same age, Lana Fisher and Eli Malik lived very different lives. Being raised like all the other boys in Wellsdon was just one of those differences, but Lana still knew next to nothing about it. She returned home not knowing how to approach the boy who'd clearly been through a lot of hardship, while never being able to release his pent-up emotions. Given that Lana had always found it hard to deal with helplessness, she ran to her room and, for the first time since her adventure in HealVille had started, she took her keepsakes from the Path of Truth out of the box. Placing the bottle of white sea in front of her, she began to breathe. She was upset by the realisation that her experience in HealVille made it impossible for her to be next to a hurting child and not try and help. And she realised that here, on Earth, she had no idea what to do.





Life on Hold

Having learned that Eli had never cried, Lana better understood why he was so angry. She understood him even more when she realised it had been more than a year since they had first met, a year he had spent shut away in the house. What she couldn't have known was that Eli was growing up in a family in which people had many strong feelings, but they always, without exception, felt them in silence.

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Eli's parents had never uttered certain things, like: we're tired, we're worried, we're sad, we're angry, we're scared. Just because they never put those feelings into words, however, didn't mean they didn't feel them. Likewise, whenever they felt them, Eli felt them too – and that was why he was confused so often. Although he didn't know much about feelings, like any child, Eli could recognise when words didn't come from the heart. He felt the tremor in his parents' voices when they'd tell him everything was fine. He felt insecurity in their words when they tried to prove everything was going to be alright. Eli felt both their worries and their fears, but he never told them that.

Because his parents never talked about emotions, the boy was growing up believing that feelings aren't something you talk about. Let us be clear: his parents never forbade such conversations, they weren't evil – on the contrary, they thought that by keeping silent about hardships of life they were protecting him. They believed no child, including theirs, should deal with hardships of adults. Sadly, they didn't actually protect Eli by keeping quiet about their worries – they had simply taught him, by power of example, that feelings are something we should handle on our own as best we can.

You should also know that until the first Saturday of that December Eli had never left Wellsdon. Although most people don't see Wellsdon

as the happiest place on the planet, since it's often visited by trouble – from hurricanes to civil wars – for Eli the city represented all kinds of happiness and ways of life he was familiar with. Eli's mum Adeline worked in a local store, and his dad Tomas worked at the docks, moving from job to job because, as he explained to his son, there was always a place that needed him more. Eli's house was near the main port of Wellsdon, in a neighbourhood that was known for poverty. Still, Eli never considered himself to be poor. He was so focused on good things in life that sometimes he wouldn't even remember the less fortunate days. He had developed this sense of gratitude thanks to a game he'd learnt about one summer morning while riding a bus, sitting in front of some girl and her grandmother. He never regretted eavesdropping on them, for the grandmother told the girl a great secret: that life gifts everyone at least three happy moments each and every day. She also stressed how important it was to list those things and give thanks for them each night before falling asleep. Eli took this advice to heart, and the very same evening he listed this: "I ate pancakes for breakfast, I played with my neighbour Nicolo, I've learned a secret."

Eli had never learned the official name of the game, but he called it "Gratitude", and he played it every night. And little by little, the feeling of gratitude and respect for the small things in life took firm root in Eli's heart. Each day brought him new reasons for happiness, and each evening he remembered to list them. He did it with ease – until life in Wellsdon was put on hold. The Malik family faced this trouble, like any other, in silence. And for the first time in his life, Eli felt that it was wrong.

While life was on hold, Eli got to know some new unpleasant feelings. One was the fear of the toxic raindust. Another was helplessness, for knowing there was nothing he could do to change the situation they were in he'd been feeling unwell ever since their "imprisonment" had begun. He was also angry, but he didn't know with whom. With the cloud raining raindust, for one – but anger was slowly spreading to his parents as well. Like all children of Wellsdon, he simply wanted to hear that he wouldn't spend the rest of his life caged within four walls. In his parent's eyes he searched for proof of what they'd been repeating: "It'll all be fine in the end!" But Eli found none of that. For the longest time he tried to believe that even in these exceptional circumstances, life would daily gift him at

least three happy moments that were his by right, but listing them was becoming harder and harder. In time, even the memories of happier days began to seem stupid and banal – in any case, not real enough to cheer him up. In a way, happy memories made him even sadder, so he began to believe that in such difficult and precarious circumstances it was bad to even think about beautiful things.

At one point Eli's need to express his feelings grew so strong he just had to do something. Not daring to speak about them and being forbidden from crying, he did the only thing he could: every day he wrote what he was feeling on small pieces of paper he was tearing out of an old notebook. While life was on hold, Eli recorded his fear and helplessness and anger and sorrow, and then he put them all in a big glass jar that used to contain candies. In the last weeks of life on hold, the jar was full to the brim. Even looking at it made Eli uncomfortable. Yes, it reminded him of the fact that he had never given up on finding a way to feel better, but is also reminded him of how many days he'd been alone in his pain – and the very thought chilled him to the bones. Something within him was screaming for help, but he had no idea what to do about it.

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At last, he decided to tell his mum how hard it was to think about anything beautiful and how much that scared him. It took him a full month to work up the courage to talk to her. Then, on the morning he finally headed towards kitchen to tell her, Eli heard a siren. It was a joyful sound, for he recognised the voice of Milo Zaid, the mayor of Wellsdon, who happily announced that the terrible cloud had left the city sky and that life was no longer on hold. All the windows and doors opened that morning in Wellsdon, and thousands upon thousands of dejected people walked out into the streets and took a breath of freedom.

When Eli's family finally opened the door to their house, the boy's father immediately ran towards the port to ask about his job. His mother just stood in the street, her face smiling. And Eli ran straight to the end of the street, hoping his friends were already there. How many times in the past few months had he rejoiced just thinking about the encounter!

Apparently, he was the first to come, but he wasn't worried about that. He watched workers climbing the colossal red umbrella above the city to close it, and when he finally saw a piece of the sky, Eli took a deep breath. As if he knew he should enjoy each and every moment of freedom. As if

he knew this happiness would last no more than a few minutes, that what began as the celebration of freedom would soon become the most terrible day of his life. Watching the sky, he listened, hoping to hear the footsteps of his friends arriving to see him. That encounter never happened. Watching the sky while looking forward to playing his friends was the last pleasant feeling he can remember. More clearly than that, much, much more clearly, he remembers what happened a moment later.

96 A terrible noise resounded through Wellston, like an explosion. In the first seconds of the event Eli thought his heart would leap out of his chest. Unease forcefully flew into him, shaking his every cell, so he began to tremble. And he wasn't the only one: all the people were trembling, big and small. The trees were quaking. Cars and the neighbour's bike were shuddering with fear. Houses, roads and fences were shaking, traffic lights and windows, birds and butterflies, stones and grass. Even the great red umbrella above the city, now closed, fell in a single tremor. Earth and sky were quaking, and above Eli's beloved city swirled dust, smoke and ash.

The inexplicable noise was horrifying, but what followed was even worse. For as far as he could see, houses lay in ruins. Frightened people were calling for help. There was a noise of fire sirens and the sound of asphalt crackling in the distance. Eli was standing still as stone, aware this was no nightmare, but reality. He turned around, looking for his mum. She was fine, he realised with relief. The very next moment, still shaking with unease, Eli moved, then ran.

He was running faster than ever, towards the port, towards dad. Because of the dust flying in his face, half the time he ran squinting. Then a shiver ran up his legs and Eli fell on the dusty ground. Before he could stand up, he felt somebody's presence nearby, raised his eyes – and saw the red cloud.

It was the same red cloud that had forced him to spend a year of his childhood shut away in his house. Still, he wasn't afraid of it now. The big plump cloud twisted his body and came face to face with Eli. Now that he was looking him in the eye, Eli could detect neither rage nor anger. The cloud's gaze was woeful and much too kind to belong to a fearsome creature.

“Forgive me!” the cloud bewailed, sobbing. “I won't harm you. I never wanted to harm anyone. Forgive me!” In horrible despair, as if aware of all

the trouble he had caused, the cloud whom no one on Earth knew or loved flew away, disappearing in the dust of Wellsdon.

Eli got up. He had no time to think about what the cloud had said, for he heard a voice calling him from afar. He recognised his dad pushing through the dust. Relief washed over him: dad was fine.

The next few hours were a blur. Everything was happening too fast, in panic, fear and with a sense of emergency he'd never known before. Late at night, after 11, Eli undressed and bathed in a periwinkle blue bathroom at the other end of the city. It was cold and unfamiliar and strange. Eli still has no idea whose house he had slept in that night, but he does remember the conversations they had had there. Done with bathing, he put on a pyjama and went to look for his parents. He found them in one of the rooms sitting on a bed. Eli's mum was crying, hiding her face in her hands, and his dad was just staring at the wall, motionless – but as soon as they saw him, they both smiled. To Eli the change looked unreal.

97

Walking in to stand before them, on a nightstand by the bed he saw a jar full of his feelings. He couldn't remember taking it with him.

His mum spoke his name, drawing him from his thoughts. They'd stay in this house only till Saturday, when they'd go to Forhill, she explained. "We'll have a new home there, at least for a while."

"What do you mean, a new home?" he asked with a heavy heart.

Mum went down on her knees to look him in the eye. Cupping his face in her hands, she spoke the bleakest sentence he'd ever heard: "Listen, Eli. Our home is in ruins. We don't have a house anymore."

"But mum, that's our home! How will we live without a home?" Eli asked. He wanted to cry, but he didn't dare.

"We'll build a new one. I still don't know when or how, but we will have a home. I promise! Till then, until we decide where to go and how to proceed, we'll live in Forhill. I bet it's beautiful there. What do you think?" mum asked.

His father was still staring at the wall.

"Mum, we don't have a home!" Eli said seriously, loudly, fearfully. He couldn't answer her question, couldn't continue this conversation. Not today.

"Oh, Eli..." His mum sighed and pulled him in her arms.

Eli no longer had his home, his room, his street. He no longer had

his toothbrush or his blanket, or his teddy bear which lay buried under the rubble. All he had left was a jar full of sad little papers. He couldn't remember why that was the only thing he had taken from his broken home. Of all the memories on his life in a little house on the shore of the Wellsdon sea, he was holding the one that reminded him of the most terrible year of his life. Still, he held it tightly. It might have been full of sorrow, but it still smelled like home, and that was something Eli wasn't quite ready to forget.

98 It was well past midnight, but Eli couldn't sleep. Lying in the dark, in an unfamiliar bed, he asked, "Dad, what happened today?"

"I don't know, Eli. No one knows, not yet. Apparently, the terrible red cloud exploded with rage," his dad said, adding, "In any case, what matters is that we're all fine. Imagine what could've happened. We were lucky."

"Why would I imagine that? Will you ever say something that makes sense?" Eli snapped angrily.

Taken aback by Eli's outburst, his dad said nothing. Before he could regain his composure, Eli continued, "You know what I think? The cloud may have exploded, but I don't think it's evil at all."

"What are you saying, Eli?"

"I'm telling you what I saw while I was talking to it. As I was running towards the ports, I fell down, and then the cloud came near me and began to apologise. He was honestly sad," Eli explained.

For a moment, his father was silent. He didn't understand what Eli was saying, nor did he have the strength to continue the conversation. Instead, he said, "Come on, snuggle down. It was an intense day, try to get some sleep."

Eli wanted to scream in anger at his family for describing the most terrible day of their lives with words such as 'intense'. No, the day wasn't intense, it was terrible! But he didn't even try to say it aloud.

For a while, silence ruled the room.

"Eli," mum spoke, "put your hands on your heart, close your eyes, take a deep breath and say, 'I'm grateful that me and my family are fine, that we're alive and together!' Can you do that?"

"I suppose," Eli said reluctantly. The truth was, he didn't even try to feel grateful that night. Wasn't it wrong to be grateful for terrible things?

In the time it took them to arrive in Forhill, Eli's parents never once asked him how he was feeling. That angered him. It also angered him that he was leaving for a town that was by some miracle always protected from all troubles. It seemed unfair that some children should live in safety, while others, like him, had to deal with the hardest parts of life. There, in that thought, lay Eli's anger towards Lana. Besides, Eli knew nothing about her pain and her life after escaping Wellsdon. That's why he felt no joy when he saw her from the line of people in the main street of Forhill. In that moment he was angry at the entire world. The last thing he needed was the cheerful greeting of a girl who had been protected all her life.

99

Since they started living under the same roof, Lana tried to speak to Eli several times. He never reacted, but Lana didn't give up. Although she accepted the fact that she'd never be able to feel him the way she could feel other children in HealVille, it occurred to her that perhaps she could still help him the same way she helped them. One evening she went to her room, sat at her desk and wrote Eli a letter.

Dear Eli,

If you ever want to talk about birds, cakes, bicycles, scooters, maths or feelings, you can count on me. Feel free to come and see me!

With love,

Lana, the girl from the next room

She pushed the letter under his door. She did the same the next day, and the next, and at least ten times more. Eli never replied, but he read them all and understood every word. So, in a way, Lana did manage to get through to him. Only Eli wouldn't admit it.

Then one Tuesday morning Eli woke up and calculated that he hadn't been sleeping in his own bed for twenty-seven nights. He took a deep breath and focused on the task he had given himself before going to bed, when he had decided that today he would forget about the most terrible day of his life. He could deal with the memories of what he had seen, heard or smelled – but feelings, oppressive, vague feelings that were holding him in his grasp, they had to disappear.

As there is no universal procedure for driving out feelings, Eli improvised. He wouldn't admit it, but he wasn't doing so well. As decisive as he was about feeling well that day, that same afternoon he was overwhelmed by rage at his helplessness. He grabbed the jar; he took a

shovel out of the garage and strode to the meadow at the back of Lana's house. Putting the jar on the ground, he began to shovel the snow and dig through the hard ground – hastily, angrily, restlessly.

Lana, too, felt some of these feelings when she noticed what he was doing in the place she that was sacred to her. She walked towards him, disturbed. “What are you doing? Who gave you permission to dig here?” She snatched the shovel out of his hand. Eli hung his head – and the gesture somehow appeased her. She was no longer angry, for it was clear Eli had no bad intentions.

100 “What are you trying to do?” she asked, not understanding, even though she doubted he'd answer. She looked at the jar filled with papers, back at him, and sighed. She was just trying to think of what to say, wondering whether speaking would do any good, when she got an unexpected answer:

“I'm sorry if I offended you. I know you come here every day and that you always radiate peace and happiness when you come home,” Eli said quietly.

“That's true. But I don't come here to dig holes. What's on your mind, Eli? Why are you doing this?” Lana asked. Perhaps she should've been gentler, but she couldn't help it.

Eli fell silent again, as if trying to decide whether he should tell her about the part of himself he never talked about. Maybe it was the letters she had sent him, or maybe he just knew he could no longer deal with troublesome feelings on his own; whatever it was, he spoke.

“When life was on hold, for some reason I decided to write down how I felt on pieces of paper. Not knowing what to do with them, I stored them in this jar. Somehow, I thought that, if I closed it tightly, the feelings would no longer be able to reach me. I know it's stupid, but I didn't know how else to let these feelings out, so I thought of this.”

“It's not stupid at all,” Lana said. “In fact, I quite like your idea. I think it's original.”

Eli replied with neither a word nor a look.

“May I read what you've written?” she asked, trying to find a way to continue the conversation.

The boy just nodded.

She took off her gloves, crouched in the snow and carefully opened

the jar. One by one she began to unfold the papers and read Eli's painful words. Helplessness, sorrow, fear, listlessness, worry... Each emotion was recorded at least ten times. Then she found the paper that contained the most words. It read: *Today I wanted to tell my heart to stop beating so I'd no longer feel pain. I didn't do it, but I thought about it a lot. And that scares me.*

The words scared Lana too. She knew there was a way to turn a child's Sorrow into Hope, but only if the child believed it. In front of her was a boy who could hear his heart, but still he had no idea how to help it, and that terrified her – not because she doubted he was strong enough to endure what he was feeling, but because she sensed he was slowly giving up.

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Unable to think of anything to say, Lana got up, walked over to Eli and embraced him. At first, he just stood there, still as a statue in her arms, but a few seconds later his arms moved to wrap around her. She began to cry.

"Lucky you, you're allowed to cry," Eli said.

Wiping her tears, Lana gently moved away. "You know, Eli, you're allowed to cry too."

"Oh no, boys don't cry. We have to be strong," Eli replied, his eyes moist.

"But tears have nothing to do with strength!" Lana protested. "Tears bring out all the emotions you've written down. That's why you're not only allowed to cry – sometimes it's really important that you cry."

"I don't quite understand what you're saying," Eli admitted. "But even if that's true, even if tears do take some feelings out of me, where do they take them? Is there a depository of sadness?"

"No, there is no depository of sadness. But I do know where tears can go and become hope," Lana said.

Eli's eyes grew in amazement. So, there was such a place.

"Eli, why did you want to bury this jar?"

"I wanted to bury all my worries, problems, sadness, hardships and troublesome thoughts. You see, the jar became too heavy to carry, but I didn't know where to put it. It contains ugly things."

"Ugh, it doesn't work like that," Lana said. "There are no ugly feelings, you know. They might seem ugly, but all they really do is travel around your heart to clean it up when unease makes a mess flying about inside

you.” Even as she was speaking, Lana wondered if her words made any sense to Eli. Was there a quicker and easier way to teach him everything she’d learned in Centennial Lands?

To Eli, however, understanding her wasn’t a priority. What he wanted to know was how to reach a place that would accept his feelings.

He was just about to ask her where it was when Lana’s mum called them home. Perhaps this wasn’t the right moment. He closed the jar and headed for the house. Lana reluctantly followed.

102 When they entered the kitchen, they were greeted by their parents. They looked serious. She sat at the table, sighing inwardly. “What’s going on?” Whatever it was they wanted to say, better to find out sooner than later.

“We have good news!” Mrs Adeline Malik said.

To Lana it sounded like an introduction to some complicated matter.

Indeed, Eli’s mum explained they got a call from Wellsdon City Emergency Centre. They were told the final report on the damage the explosion had inflicted on their home was ready, so they were supposed to come and get it as soon as possible. The family was also promised help and a recovery plan.

“We’re leaving Forhill?” Eli asked – and Lana couldn’t decide whether he was happy or sad at the news.

“Yes, we’re leaving tomorrow early,” Eli’s dad said.

“But where are we going to live?” Eli asked. “Our house is in ruins.”

“The Emergency Centre provided temporary accommodation, where we’ll stay until we renew our house,” his mum explained.

That wasn’t enough for Eli. “When are we going to renew it?”

“I don’t know, but the good news is that we will. We’ll know everything when we get to Wellsdon.”

Eli fell silent. The thought that he’d have to sleep in yet another new, strange bed bothered him – but as soon as he realised he would be closer to home, his street and his friends, he cheered up.

“When are we leaving?” he asked curiously, and Lana could see joy sparkling within him.

“Tomorrow morning, right after breakfast!” his father said.

Hearing that, the boy got up and ran to their temporary bedroom. Lana didn’t follow, but she did imagine him running into the room,

taking out his suitcase and packing. It felt both happy and nostalgic. Why did he have to leave now; when they finally began to speak? There was so much more she had to tell him!

Then the clock struck five, reminding her she was supposed to go to HealVille to work. “Excuse me!” she said getting up.

As soon as she ran out of the house, a glittering path appeared in front of her in the snow. Preoccupied with the question how to get Eli’s jar to Tearopie, Lana barely noticed it happening. She sat in the velvet armchair and began to feel her feelings.

While Lana was taking care of herself, Eli was packing. As he was putting his clothes in his suitcase, he realised that this was his last night in Forhill – and his last chance to find out more about the place that accepts difficult feelings.

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As soon as the thought appeared in his head, he dropped the clothes on the floor, took his jar and ran back to the kitchen – but Lana was no longer there. Eli quickly put on his jacket, hat and scarf, stepped into his boots and ran towards the oak. He couldn’t see the glitter, the clothes or the armchair, but he did see Lana walking backwards through the snow – and then disappearing.

Eli stopped in his tracks, astonished. A part of him wanted to ask questions, but his desire to find out where sorrows go quickly silenced it. His focus laser-sharp, he continued to the place her trail ended. It was clearly visible in the fresh snow, so it was easy to find where exactly she had changed directions. Placing his feet in her footsteps, he closed his eyes and began walking backwards.

Only a few steps later he realised he was in a place he’d never been, on an island surrounded by the vast expanse of sea.





The Tempest

Eli had arrived to Panatone, but it was a Panatone quite different to the one that had greeted Lana. The dense, fragrant lavender was no longer peaceful – it was convulsing and undulating, as if resisting the rain and wind blowing from the sea. The sea was restless too, white horses crashing violently against the shore. And above him, circling the slate-grey sky, was what appeared to be a giant bird.

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Hearing a voice calling through the wind, Eli looked away from the bird. Someone was approaching him. Perhaps he would be able to get some answers from this person, he thought, not afraid in the least. What was a bit of weather compared to what he had been through? Besides, he had a good reason to believe Lana had been here too, and she appeared to be just fine. What could go wrong? He would just go along with it, he decided, walking in between the rows of lavender to meet the person.

Hidden under a yellow umbrella was Kan the All-Knowing. He greeted the boy, pulled him closer under the umbrella and turned to go back to where he'd come from. Just next to the shore, on the very edge of the seething blue, there was a locomotive riding the restless waves.

"That's better," Kan said once they were inside, putting down the umbrella. "You know, it's been a while since a tempest like this has hit Panatone. It's all quite unusual. But I can deal with that later," Kan concluded. He introduced himself to the boy and opened the red notebook.

"Name and surname?" he asked.

"Eli Malik, sir," the boy replied somewhat insecurely. He was speaking to an owl!

Kan found Eli's name in no time, but the boy's destination surprised him. "Hm..." he muttered, looking up from the notebook to regard Eli.

“You’re travelling to Tearopie?” he asked at length.

“I don’t know where I’m travelling,” Eli admitted. “I came here walking backwa —”

“Backwards, I know,” Kan interrupted and proceeded to tell the boy where he was, watching him all the while. Given that his talent was limited to revealing only ill intentions, which the boy didn’t have, all he could know about Eli was what he could see and hear. He was under the impression the boy had never heard of Panatone or the Domain of Centennial Lands – and yet, he asked no questions. Finding it strange,

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Kan decided to examine the boy’s knowledge about this place. “It’s been a long, long while since anyone had travelled to Tearopie. Do you know anything about that land?”

Eli shook his head.

“Let me rephrase,” Kan said thinking it through. “Do you know why you have come here?”

“Oh, sir, I really don’t!” Eli replied honestly, even as he feared he’d be forced to return to Earth if he didn’t know the answers.

Kan paused before continuing. “You see, children go to the Domain of Centennial Lands for only two reasons: one is to found their own land, and the other is to travel to the land which will provide them with answers to their questions.”

Eli shrugged, saying nothing. It was then that Kan noticed the jar Eli was pressing tightly against his chest.

“Tell me, what’s that in your hands?” Kan asked.

Eli looked down at the jar. “That’s the jar with my feelings,” he said shyly.

Kan nodded, as if that had made everything clear. “So that’s how it is. Tell me – are there, perhaps, Fears, Sorrows, Angers and Unease among these feelings?”

“There are, yes,” Eli admitted honestly, hanging his head. Now he was almost certain that he wouldn’t be allowed to continue the journey. Other people’s Sorrows and Fears probably weren’t welcome to a place such as this.

But Kan’s reply immediately soothed him. “Fine, then. They’ll accept your feelings in Tearopie. Even if your destination is unusual, I understand why you want to go there.” Kan looked at his red notebook

again, muttered something under his breath and said, “You’ll reach the land travelling the road that is assigned to you.”

“Alright. Is there a map that can help me find a way?” Eli asked.

“You won’t need a map,” Kan said. “I’ll take you to the Wellspring myself.”

“Well-what?” Eli asked, perplexed.

“Wellspring. It’s a well, you see,” Kan chuckled. “There are seven doors at its bottom, each a different colour. Each door leads to one of the stations of Wellspring. When you visit all of them, you’ll reach Tearopie.”

Now that he knew he would be able to continue, Eli tried to better understand Kan. “And what will I do at these stations? What’s their purpose?”

“Well now... In order to receive the magic of the land that turns Sorrow into Hope, you have to be hopeful before entering. But don’t worry, the Wellspring stations will help you with that.”

Kan took a bracelet with seven beads out of a chest and offered it to Eli. Eying it wordlessly, the boy tied it around his wrist and looked back at Kan.

“The Wellspring stations look like petrol stations you on Earth use to fill your cars. Do you know what I’m talking about? Can you imagine them?” Kan asked.

Eli nodded.

“Great! When you enter a station, you’ll go through an experience that will give you a certain kind of hope.”

“A certain kind of hope?” Eli asked, confused.

“Yes, a certain kind of hope. There’s hope of love, hope of happiness, hope of forgiveness, hope of peace, hope of strength, hope of wisdom,” Kan listed.

“I’ve never heard of so many hopes,” Eli admitted.

Kan laughed. “Well, there’s a first time for everything. Behind each door you’ll spend as long as it takes for you to start hoping for the things I’d listed. It may seem hard and complicated now, but don’t worry, at each Wellspring station you’ll get everything you need to start hoping. When you do, a charger at the station will glow. Allow it to fill a bead of your bracelet with the colour matching the given hope. When all the beads turn appropriate colour, you’ll be safe in all your adventures on this journey.”

This explanation gave Eli courage, so he smiled. Seeing that the boy still asked no additional questions, Kan said, “I think we’re ready for the journey. What do you say?”

Eli nodded and took a deep breath, and the locomotive whistled and rose up in the sky.

110 Eli stood during the journey that would, as he believed, set him free from difficult feelings. Firmly clutching seats to his either side, he watched raindrops hitting the windows of the locomotive and sliding down the glass. Although he didn’t think travelling the magical lands would equal riding across the gloomy sky, he wasn’t afraid. On the contrary – he was joyful. After many months of doubt, he began to hope there was a way to make himself feel better.

As soon as the locomotive began to slow down, Eli opened the window to see what’s outside. The rain was sparser now, gentler, but he was much too surprised by the size of the well they were landing by to notice. When they got off and approached the well, he realised it was much, much bigger than he imagined. It was as wide as a meadow, walled in with colourful rocks. There was a long ladder leading from the stone edge to the bottom of the well. Peering in, he could see the seven doors Kan had told him about.

He thanked Kan for the ride and the welcome, took a deep breath and began to descend. Wondering what he’d find behind the seven doors, he never even noticed that Kan the All-Knowing was still watching him.

Although Kan knew Eli’s heart was pure, he could sense there was something unusual about the tempest at Panatone and the boy’s destination. There was something suspicious about this whole situation.

As he waited for Eli to reach the Wellspring, at the bottom of the well Kan saw Feera, the founder of the Land of Tearopie. She looked the same as one century ago when Kan had last seen her, but it took him only a few glances to realise why Feera had been hiding her face all these years. The fifth time he looked at her, her memories and intentions reached him – and what he found out shocked him and terrified him. He stood motionless for a moment, deliberating. Should he save Eli or fly to Ballbeck to tell the founders what he had just found out?

But he had no time to decide, for Feera saw Kan as well. Knowing he could read her intentions, she had to incapacitate him at once, for he

probably knew too much already. She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled for her faithful servant Layla.

Answering her call, the bird Eli had seen upon coming to Panatone swooped down from the sky, clutched the good green owl in her talons and swiftly flew away, taking him to the sullen sky. Kan was shouting for Eli to come back, but the bird was already too high for the boy to hear him. Not only did he not hear Kan – Eli had missed the entire drama taking place at the top of the well, for he'd been focused on Feera ever since she'd whistled.

Feera was a tiny woman dressed in a long orange frock. Although she looked like an adult, she was much shorter than Eli – so short she barely reached to his knees. *Is this a good fairy?* he wondered. If fairies existed, this would be how he'd imagine them. But the woman was neither a fairy nor good. Despite being the founder of one of the first noble lands in the Stu Domain – the Land of Tearopie – she had long turned her back to anything resembling nobility.

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But Eli couldn't have known that. Reaching the bottom of the well, he regarded Feera more closely. She was smiling at him, which reassured him that he had come to a friendly place. Never suspecting how wicked she really was, not knowing it was her glooms that had touched his life, he entered the conversation fully trusting something nice and magical would happen to him – something that would help him feel better.

“Hello, I'm Eli!” he addressed her politely.

“I'm Feera,” the woman replied. Giving him a brief look, she concluded he must have come from Earth. That was just what she needed, a child from Earth! “Where do you come from?” she asked curiously, wanting only one answer.

“From Wellsdon. Well, at the moment I live in Forhill, but not for long. You know, something terrible has happened in my native Wellsdon. Have you heard of the big red cloud that occupied our sky a few months ago?” Eli got chatty.

Feera couldn't believe her luck. She was just about to go fetch a child from Wellsdon!

“The cloud?” she asked innocently. She knew the cloud more than well; it was only that she hid it from the boy.

Eli began to describe it. “Yes, a big cloud. A red cloud that rains

poisonous raindust. It was contagious, spreading gloom across the city.”

“That sounds like a fearsome cloud,” Feera concluded.

“Yes, it was horrible! No one was spared from gloom, not even children.” Eli shook his head to chase away disturbing memories. Then he continued in a different tone. “But I have to tell you something. I came face to face with this cloud, and I wasn’t afraid of it. It was more sad than scary. That’s why I think it’s not evil at all, because —”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s evil or not,” Feera interrupted. “If he did harm to children on Earth, it doesn’t deserve compassion,” she said decisively.

112 “Yes, you’re right. I guess...” Eli said insecurely.

Feera stepped closer and gave him another fake smile. She was very careful in talking to Eli, for she couldn’t reveal her true nature neither by word nor by look. So she began to sing the praises of Tearopie, of the land as it once was.

“You know, before Tearopie came to be, tears were empty and useless. Then I came up with the idea of Teardrop Aides. Those are tears with soul and purpose,” Feera boasted.

“Purpose?”

“Yes. The purpose of tears is to bring Fear, Sorrow, Anger and Unease out of children’s hearts.”

“Ah, so that’s why we cry... that’s what Lana was talking about,” Eli muttered. Remembering his conversation with Lana, he was positive that now he understood everything.

Feera, on the other hand, trembled at the sound of Lana’s name. She had to focus well not to reveal the anger she was feeling towards Lana and everyone connected to HealVille. She was just trying to think of what to say next when she spied Eli’s jar.

“What have you brought us, dear boy?” she asked.

“Oh, those are my Sorrows, Angers, Fears and Unease. And much else...” Eli said. Estimating he could now be openly curious, he asked, “Tearopie, that’s the land that can turn my feelings into hope, right? At least that’s what I’ve heard...”

Feera laughed. “Oh, yes, here in Tearopie we do adore Fears, Sorrows, Angers and Unease. In fact, I suggest we go there right now.” She raised her head towards the sky, looking for a sign that the bird called Layla finished the task she had given her.

“Wait, don’t I have to go through the Wellspring stations first?” Eli

remembered. “Kan the All-Knowing said —”

“Kan the All-knowing is a nerd, don’t listen to him,” Feera interrupted. “The very fact you came here, bringing all your difficult feelings with you, is sign enough that you’re full of hope and belief in magic. Now come with me.”

Not waiting for an answer, Feera began to climb the ladder leading to the top of the well. With a bracelet full of black beads around his wrist, Eli followed.

Once outside he was greeted by the sight of Feera caressing the neck of a giant bird.

“This is Layla,” Feera said, clearly content about something. “She’ll take us to Tearopie.”

Eli nodded. So this was the bird he had seen when he had come to Panatone.

“We’ll make a short stop on the way to Tearopie,” Feera said when they climbed on the bird’s back.

Eli nodded again. He had no reason not to trust her, no way to foresee how much pain he would bring by visiting this mysterious stop.

The bird spread her wings, kicked off the ground and soared up into the gloomy sky. What with cold, what with pain pelting his face, flying turned out to be far from a pleasant experience he might’ve expected in magical lands. Still, the boy gave it no mind. His desire to reach the place that would take his troubles away grew so strong he could no longer see something had gone wrong with the magic of this place.

At some point he spied a big bell in the middle of the sky. It was the official bell tower of the Domain of Centennial Lands, placed high above the ground, yet close enough to all the existing lands for the founders to hear it. The bird called Layla flew right into it, and the bell tolled.

As Feera offered no explanation, Eli asked, “What’s the bell for?”

“Ah, that... nothing important. You’re a new Earthling child in Stu Domain, so I used the bell to call the founders of Centennial Lands to Ballbeck to meet you. Nothing unusual, just a formality,” Feera said, belittling the importance of the situation. For the truth spoken by a child from Earth is never questioned in the Domain of Centennial Lands. There, each child is trusted unreservedly.

Meanwhile in HealVille, no one yet knew about the dangerous intentions of the founder Feera. Still, by the time the bell Layla had struck resounded throughout the Stu Domain, Lana had already suspected something unusual had been happening in HealVille. She'd grown worried as soon as she'd arrived, for Ernest was waiting for her on the bench by the Lake of Children's Tears. He looked worried. It was a feeling she could hardly associate with Ernest.

"What happened?" she asked, sitting next to him.

114 At first, Ernest deliberated whether he should share his worries with her, but in the end, he decided to tell her everything. He believed he should never withhold truth, whatever it might be, from the girl who trusted him so.

"Hugger disappeared!" he said shortly.

"What do you mean, disappeared? I thought he took some days off," she replied.

"That's what I thought, but it turned out no one had seen him for almost a year." Ernest paused, then added, "You know, the hundred-year concession for the existence of HealVille is running out soon."

Lana was scared by that. "What does that mean, soon?" she asked.

Taking a big breath, Ernest admitted it was a matter of days. "I wasn't aware of this myself. You know we don't have clocks or calendars here. But tears haven't been leaving HealVille in a long time, so I had to ask permission to expand the Land from the Council for the Stu Domain Space Planning. Because tears aren't leaving, and the new ones keep coming, the lake is becoming too small."

"So, did you get the permission?"

"No. That's not the worst that happened, though. When I presented our case, the Council told me that they received an anonymous tip regarding a suspicion that HealVille was no longer living up to its purpose, so now we're under investigation. It was then that I found out our concession was running out. It's all becoming too much for me," he admitted.

Even though she wasn't sure she understood, Lana tried to find something positive about what he had said. "Wait, the Land has a purpose as long as it helps Teardrop Aides, right? I don't think you have to worry about the new hundred-year concession."

Ernest tiredly shook his head. “Unfortunately, I’m not sure you’re right. The Council decided it had to re-examine the purpose of our land, for if tears no longer go back to the children they belong to even after they’d been rehabilitated, the purpose of their recovery is questionable.”

Lana was upset by this. “How can a purpose of anyone’s recovery be questionable? It’s not important why someone feels better, the point is that they do. What purpose?” she asked.

Ernest sighed deeply. “It’s not that simple. Our lands are magical, but they’re not perfect. Besides, there are clear rules.”

“I don’t understand. What does it all mean?” Lana asked, now visibly worried.

“It means that in order to prove our purpose is persistent, I have to find a way to transport part of the Aides to Earth, those who are ready – but Hugger is the only one who has a licence for such important transport, and I can’t find him. Neither me, nor Flu-Flu, not even Kan the All-Knowing managed to find him.”

“So why did you start searching for Hugger only now?”

“He asked for some time for himself, and I respected that. If he asked me now, I’d do the same. Hugger didn’t even say goodbye before leaving, he just wrote me a letter. He must’ve been really tired if he didn’t even have the strength to talk,” Ernest explained.

When Lana asked what he wrote in the letter, Ernest pulled it out of his pocket and gave it to her. The letter read:

Dear Ernest,

I have to rest. I know you’ll understand. Please, don’t try to find me. I’ll be back when I’m ready for my important task.

Yours,

Hugger

Ernest added he had only just learned that Hugger’s family from the village of Good Clouds had got the same letter. “Even Flu-Flu got one. That’s why we didn’t look for him – we’ve all been respecting his decision.”

Now Lana understood, but that by no means lessen her worries. It wasn’t only that she couldn’t think of a solution – Ernest couldn’t do it either. It was a disturbing sight to see Ernest helpless.

That was when the bell of the central bell tower echoed through HealVille. Ernest got up, explaining that was an invitation to Ballbeck.

“Perhaps there’s news about Hugger!” he said optimistically.

Lana smiled at him. “I’ll stay here. I’m going to feel Earth children for a bit. See you when you come back. I hope everything will be fine! Maybe we’ll even have time to talk about something that has nothing to do with this problem?” she asked, remembering Eli and his jar. Little did she know that Eli was just about to seal Ernest’s fate.



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The bell calling for meeting in Ballbeck was always taken very seriously by the founders of Centennial Lands, so they promptly gathered in a great arena that covered the entire territory of the land. Eli watched them from the sky in admiration, amazed by the diversity of creatures below.

Following Feera, he dismounted the bird and stepped on the stage, full of pride and excitement. The murmuring in the arena immediately stopped. Feeling proud and important, Feera stood at the lectern and addressed the gathering.

“My dear colleagues, founders of Centennial Lands, I’m glad to see you all today. I’ll be direct – it’s about our beloved Hugger.”

Hearing that, Ernest got up, eager to hear the news about his friend. Eli watched him with interest, but his curiosity about the founder of HealVille only prompted Feera to finish what she had intended as soon as possible.

“Sit, Ernest,” Feera said seriously. “What I’m about to tell you will be especially hard on you.” When Ernest sat, Feera continued. “We all love our... your Hugger very much. But the information I have undoubtedly shows that our beloved cloud has taken a devious path. It’s clear that his heart has been swayed by evil forces, for he was the cloud that raged across the Earth spreading gloom. You’ve all heard what happened in Wellsdon, but none of us dreamt that the evil cloud from Earth was actually our beloved Hugger.”

There was a murmur in the arena. Everyone was standing up and looking at each other in disbelief, as if searching for evidence that what they’d just heard wasn’t true, that it was a nightmare or a terrible misunderstanding.

But Feera didn't allow their hopes to live long. "Hear me out, please," she said.

When the founders settled a bit, she continued. "Hugger is the cloud that's been travelling Earth for months, spreading gloom among the local populace. At the end of this terrible journey, which I cannot understand, Hugger raged above Wellsdon – raged so loudly that houses and schools and cars and bicycles and scooters all trembled in fear."

As she was telling the terrible news, shock, disbelief and enormous sorrow were spreading among the founders. Although she knew some of them still doubted the veracity of her words, Feera didn't worry, for she'd brought a witness.

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"Your reaction is understandable, for we all love Hugger," she said. "But, for the sake of safety and sustainability of other Centennial Lands, with a heavy heart I must ask he and those closest to him be punished in a most severe fashion."

She then turned to Eli and, with a glance, invited him closer. Eli climbed the stage.

"This boy has lost his freedom on account of Hugger and his rainindust. For months he'd been shut in his house, and then, when it seemed Hugger was done with his tragic mission, the cloud destroyed Wellsdon. The boy now standing next to me has lost his home and precious days of his childhood. I'm grateful that despite all the pain he'd been through, he still found strength and courage to come here and tell us what he'd seen."

All eyes rested on the boy who now looked both scared and confused, so Feera hurried to ask the important question she had prepared.

"Eli, honey, you don't have to tell us everything. The memories must be disturbing. Just tell us, is this the cloud that has brought suffering to your world?"

Perplexed by the disquiet moment and the worry of the founders watching him, Eli briefly looked behind. From the pillars, at least 150 feet high, a poster began to unfold depicting Hugger's face. And Eli indeed recognised the cloud his entire world feared.

"Yes, that's the cloud," he said insecurely. Not because he doubted that was the cloud that had raged above his city, but because he sensed what he'd done something wrong. He opened his mouth to tell the founders that he didn't think the cloud was evil. He wanted to tell them about the

short encounter they had had and say he wasn't sure the cloud was guilty, but Feera stood in front of him, preventing him from speaking.

The murmur was once again spreading through the arena, and Feera just watched, allowing the moment to escalate. The arena in Ballbeck was more sorrowful than ever. Some creatures covered their faces in disbelief, others were holding each other, crying. No one wanted to believe Hugger was capable of the atrocities he'd been accused of, but having heard the witness, they knew something bad was going to happen.

118 Ernest was at first silent, but then he decidedly climbed the stage and addressed the founders. "Listen to your hearts. You know this is impossible. It's Hugger! Please, don't lose faith in him," Ernest implored, almost crying.

But before the founders had time to react, Feera asked him to return to his seat. He reluctantly obeyed. He hadn't even sat yet when Feera began to read the terrible verdict that was required by the Stu Domain Safety Law.

"According to the Stu Domain law, the testimony of a child from Earth is not allowed to be questioned. Our Domain believes children fully, never questioning their truth. Unfortunately, after everything we've heard today, what this brave boy has confirmed, we have no other choice but to enforce the appropriate punishment. I'll remind you that, according to the paragraph 16, Article 1 of the Stu Domain Safety Law, a creature harming a child in any part of the Universe is subject to the most severe punishment – a life-long banishment from the territory of our Domain. Besides, the Centennial Land that the creature belongs to must be undone. Therefore, I ask you to revoke the Land Hugger belongs to. HealVille has served children for centuries, but this is unforgivable. Those in favour, please raise your hands now!"

Despite being sad, shocked and still doubtful, all the founders of the Centennial Lands raised their hands because they didn't want to question the truthfulness of the testimony coming from a child from Earth. All but Ernest.

Pleased by the result, Feera spoke again. "I must add that, according to the Law, the founder of the Land that is being brought to judgment has a right to prove their innocence in front of the Council by the end of the current hundred-year mandate."

This gave the founders some hope that this would indeed happen – but only briefly, for Feera wasn't done yet.

“Now that we've voted for undoing of HealVille, I want to thank you all for honouring the Law of our good Domain, even if you did that with a heavy heart.” She turned to Ernest who, shocked, still as stone and silent, wasn't ready to hear something even more terrifying. “Hugger is on the run. No one knows where he is, and I don't believe we'll see him again. But your Land, Ernest, is now befouled by the evil he'd done, and we cannot tolerate the foulness of evil. Still, you can use your right to prove Hugger's innocence by the end of your hundred-year mandate. In that case Hugger will be cleared of all charges and HealVille will continue to exist. Although I wish you can prove all this was a mistake, I must honestly tell you that I doubt you'll succeed, for you only have a day left before your mandate ends.”

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She was planning to present the Council with a child from Wellsdon on the morrow, but she could work with this. The law was on her side.

She swept her gaze across the arena. “However, the law also says that, if the crime is serious enough, punishment is to be meted out the same day. Given the severity of the crimes committed by Hugger, the voted punishment shall enter into force today, as soon as the sun sets. That's when the protocol for the undoing of the Land will begin.” She looked at Ernest. “Do you know what that means?” she asked.

Ernest just nodded. It meant that the Land would be surrounded by the thick celestial roots that would press on it from all sides until the Land ceased to be. The magic of HealVille would come to an end, which included Ernest's youth. For in Centennial Lands, founders could stop growing or aging whenever they decided – but that also meant that once the magic went out, they'd rapidly grow old. Moreover, to prevent the founder of the dying land from rebelling against the other founders, his heart would be overwhelmed by hopelessness so that he would more readily accept the fact that the end had come.

Feera searched the gathering for the Timekeeper. “Bruno, if you please.”

Normally, there were no clocks or calendars in Centennial Lands. Everyone lived in the now, going about their business in their own time, in their own way. But they also had the rule about a hundred-year mandate,

so somebody had to keep track of time. That task was given to Bruno.

The Timekeeper stood up. Thanks to his magic, the clock that was normally only in his awareness appeared in the sky for everyone to see. The clock immediately began to tick, counting time until sunset.

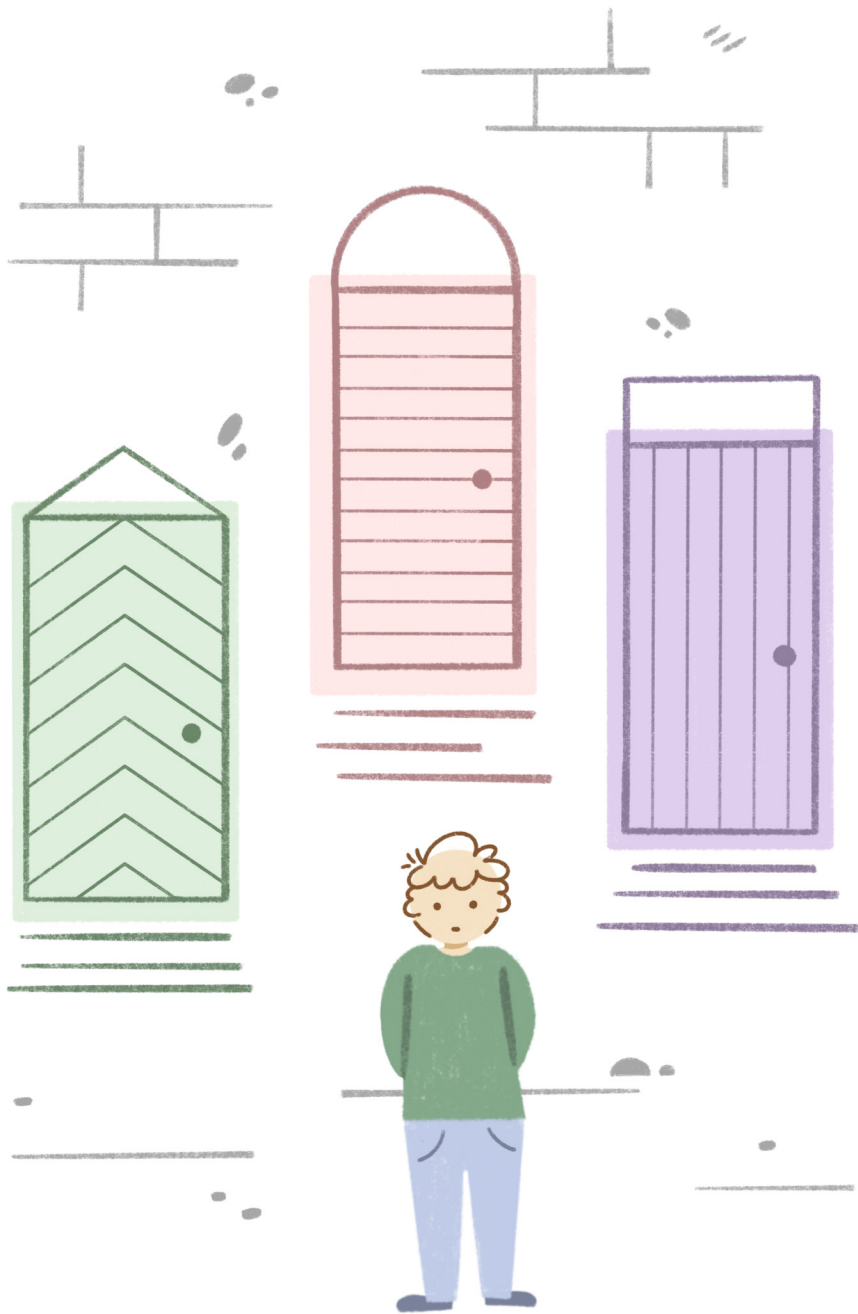
120 “Ernest, I’m sorry it ended this way,” Feera said, faking compassion and benevolence till the bitter end. No one suspected that none of this was a coincidence. If Hugger had been accused only a day later, when HealVille would have entered a new mandate for existence, Ernest would have had a hundred more years to prove it had all been a misunderstanding. What had just happened was just a part of a detailed plan to destroy HealVille, by none other than Feera. No one in Centennial Lands, however, knew a thing about it.

Before ending the saddest meeting in the history of Centennial Lands, Feera suggested that Ernest start urgent evacuation of tears currently residing in HealVille. She “generously” offered them sanctuary in Tearopie so tears would have a safe place to stay and recover during the protocol of undoing. Ernest accepted, and Feera promised to immediately send Layla to HealVille, along with railway cars for the transport of tears. Still feigning benevolence, she stepped off the stage to embrace him, deceitfully whispering how sorry she was.

Then she climbed the stage one last time and said, “Until the protocol or the undoing of HealVille is finished, all the doorways to Earth will be closed. For the safety of other Centennial Lands, Earth creatures will not be able to enter our Domain.”

That also meant no one would be able to leave the Domain, but she chose not to say that. If she did, Eli would be upset, and her plan ruined.

She grabbed the boy by the hand, climbed on the bird’s back and headed for Tearopie. Leaving hundreds of sorrowful beings behind, Feera left Ballbeck without saying goodbye.



X

Feera from the Land of Tearopie

Eli sensed that he took part in something wrong during his stay in Ballbeck – and the closer the bird called Layla got to Tearopie, the stronger the feeling grew. He still didn't know what was going on, but he was sure of one thing: however magical this place might be, its magic wasn't bringing him the feelings he desired.

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Darkness shrouded them when they entered Tearopie. He couldn't see much of the land because of the speed, but what he did see, he didn't like. Least of all he liked the castle they seemed to be flying towards, dirty and grey and looming in the distance. By then he was sure that accepting this journey hadn't been the best decision of his life. A place whose purpose is as noble as Feera said, *can't be this gloomy and dusty*, he thought. Indeed, Feera could no longer hide the sorry state of her land, but to be honest, she didn't even try.

They landed in front of the iron castle gate. He had no time to look around, for as soon as they entered, Feera took him to a room just next to the gate that she presented as the Chamber of Truth. The only truth, however, was that the boy was becoming increasingly afraid of this place. The chamber was cold, with no room for even a single ray of light.

Before he had time to calm down, Feera began to talk. "Why are you cowering? You did a good deed by condemning that cloud." Trying to make him feel guilty for the end of HealVille, she viciously said, "If someone had told me a single word from an Earthling child would be enough to destroy HealVille and drive the tears into exile, I'd never have believed them. But there, it happened. Tell me, what does it feel like to live with the knowledge that your actions made even tears cry?"

Feera had been preparing her land for the new hundred-year mandate during which she planned to introduce some changes, so she invented an

advanced tear-making machine. She wanted to produce tears that would constantly agitate children's hearts, thus making it impossible for children to have even a moment of peace. Then she would speak to the Council for Concessions of the Centennial Lands and propose a solution for the problem she herself had created: to form an army that would pull the Agitators out of children. Thus, she believed, she'd have continuous access to children's hearts, which would enable her to do whatever she wanted both within them and around them – and Feera, as she was then, simply wasn't capable of wanting anything nice.

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But for the machine to work, she needed a fresh child's tear. Even though she had already used Eli for something wicked, she wanted to take even more advantage of him.

Eli, however, didn't react to her taunts, especially not in the way she wanted. She did manage to discourage the boy and make him feel guilty, forcing Unease within him into a flight faster and more unpleasant than any other, but she didn't get the one thing she wanted – Eli's tear.

When she realised she wouldn't get a tear out of a boy who never cried, Feera grew furious and began to shout at him. Pronouncing him useless, she took him by the hand and began to drag him along. She was incredibly strong for such a small creature. No matter how much he tried to break free, he couldn't. He was forced to follow her to the far side of the castle, where she dragged him through another gate that creakily opened to the other side of Feera's kingdom.

Eli found himself on a large meadow. He barely noticed the dark woods on its other side, for his gaze was glued on someone whose vicinity he never even dared to imagine. In one part of the meadow stood the Moon. Big as he was, though, he barely shone. To Eli he looked terribly sad, like he was going to wink out any moment – but when he saw the Moon was chained to the ground, the boy's heart was gripped in terror. *Why would anyone chain the Moon?* he wondered as Feera pushed him forward.

Soon Feera stopped, looked at the ground and said, "Through seven cells of shade ye glooms that crawl, turn this boy into your eternal thrall."

The ground responded to Feera's dreadful words and began to open, and Eli found himself standing on the edge of a well. This well, however, was nothing like the one Kan had led him to. It was like a gaping mouth in

the ground, ready to swallow him.

“There are seven doors at the bottom of the well,” Feera said. “One will lead you home, to Earth. The others lead to beautiful cells of gloom. The longer you seek the right door, the more your hope will shrink, along with your chance of returning home.”

Numb with fear, Eli said nothing.

Eying him, Feera gave him an ugly smile. “There, there, I’m not that evil, you know. I’ll tell you which door leads home – the one opposite the ladder you’ll now take to descend to the bottom. Now go before I change my mind!”

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Eli obeyed. As he descended, Feera spoke again. “Hurry, boy! You only have until sunset, for the doorway to Earth will then be locked, and you’ll stay in the darkness of this well forever.”

Eli hurried towards to bottom. As soon as his feet touched the ground, Feera pulled up the ladder. Knowing there was only one way out, he ran for the door on the opposite side – but just before he reached it, a wicked laughter resounded from above and the well began to spin. Faster and faster it went, like an out-of-control merry-go-round. Eli lost his balance and fell to the ground.

A moment later the well stopped turning. He got up, dismayed. Even as dizzy as he was, he knew there was no longer a way to tell which door was which. He couldn’t know which one he should go through to go back. Back to his life that, seen from this new place of darkness, no longer seemed terrible at all.



Even as Eli, all alone in the darkness of an unfamiliar land, tried to convince himself there was a way out, Lana was impatiently waiting for Ernest in HealVille. When he had left for Ballbeck, Lana had still believed that Ernest would be back with good news and a solution for the biggest problem his land had ever encountered. Still, that day she didn’t feel children as she’d said she would. Now that she was alone, the danger Ernest had told her about seemed louder, clearer and more real, so she felt Unease. Knowing how important it was to be gentle to herself during gusts of Unease, instead of going to the Observatory of Sorrow, she

decided to go to BeHill.

She hadn't visited the third hill of HealVille yet, she'd only heard about it. She knew, for example, that tears go there to set themselves free from their own expectations to be well. Our desire to feel better is sometimes stronger than our momentary ability to make it happen, so Unease rises again to remind us that just because we're in a hurry to reach peace and happiness, that doesn't mean we can shorten our journey there. That's why BeHill was a magical place – just staying there was liberating. There, one could simply be, regardless of one's pervading feeling, regardless of one's state of mind.

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When she reached the top of the hill, Lana saw tears reading books, playing chess, playing hide and seek, sleeping on big leaves of exotic plants, walking, running, exercising, drawing, making biscuits, eating cake, swinging on wooden swings. Today she couldn't even tell you everything she saw there, but she does clearly remember the moment someone new approached her. It was a tear, but a tear unlike any she'd seen before. She looked older, more mature, more serious. She wore big round glasses and she radiated kindness that for some reason seemed very familiar to Lana.

"Lana Fisher, finally we meet!" the tear said smiling sincerely.

"Hello," greeted Lana. As it was clear the tear had heard about her, she wanted to know more about the tear. "Are you from here? You live here?"

"Yes, I do," the tear replied, gesturing at her home with both hands.

"Everything you see before you is my home! But long ago, I too lived in a child's heart, you know," she said, her eyes filling with warmth.

Lana smiled. She did want to hear the tear's story, but as she couldn't stop thinking about the problem with Hugger, she unknowingly included him in the conversation. "So... you too are waiting for Hugger, so you could go back to your child?"

"Actually, no. It's been a long time since my boy had been a child. Besides, he learned how to keep his heart pure and free without my help long ago, so he no longer needs me."

Just when Lana wanted to ask how to keep one's heart pure and free, Ernest appeared on BeHill.

"Hello, Director," he said when he approached them, nodding to the tear. "Hello, Lana. Would you two care to join me in my home?"

Lana followed the two of them, worried. It was clear something went wrong, but she couldn't tell what. Ernest looked sad, but not upset. Whatever could that mean?

They stopped on the very edge of BeHill. Until then Lana never thought about where Ernest lived, slept and woke. As it turned out, his home was a modest wooden cottage with a fire merrily crackling in the fireplace. Next to the fireplace there were two armchairs that reminded Lana of the one Ernest had brought to her place for feeling feelings.

"Please, sit," Ernest said. "What I'm about to tell you won't be pleasant, but it's important that you understand and accept what's about to happen."

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He was direct and short. He didn't hedge, so Lana and the Director clearly heard that HealVille was about to be extinguished. Silently, in complete shock, they listened as he recounted what had just happened in Ballbeck. Even though he didn't mention the testimony of the child from Earth, both Lana and the Director knew there must have been evidence hard enough that Ernest didn't even try to dismiss it.

"This is the end of HealVille. There's nothing we can do," he said hopelessly. Looking them in the eye, he added, "I must ask you to leave HealVille immediately, for your own safety. Listen well: Director, you and the rest of the tears are leaving for Tearopie. There you'll be given sanctuary until a new land is founded for you. And you, Lana, you have to go straight home. And I mean now, immediately. When night falls, all the doorways to the Centennial Lands will close. If you stay, you'll be in great danger, and that – I could never allow that."

Ernest's voice was different now, and his choice of words was strangely hopeless. They didn't have much time to talk, though, for they all saw Layla pulling a long series of wagons across the sky. Its flight above the territory of HealVille portended darkness, and with it came the first tremor of the dying land.

As big, powerful roots sprouted at its edges, HealVille began to shake. Ernest's hands shook as well; his skin started to shrivel, his face feeling time more and more acutely. He was aging by the minute.

The ground shook again, more strongly now. And again. The tremors were now coming in shorter and shorter intervals, so Ernest became unyielding in his intent to evacuate everyone from HealVille.

He summoned Layla with a hand gesture and spoke to the Director in a commanding voice. “Climb the bird’s back and gather all the tears in HealVille. You have to do it now, for HealVille is already disappearing. Please, for your safety and everyone else’s, do it now. Layla will take you to Tearopie.”

The Director reluctantly obeyed, flying away on Layla’s back only a few minutes later. With sadness in her eyes, aware this might be the last time she saw Ernest and HealVille, she spoke, “Thank you for everything, my friend!” But she was already too far for him to hear.

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While urgent evacuation of tears from HealVille was under way, Ernest was trying to think of a way to send Lana home. She, however, disobeyed all his requests and ignored all his pleas. Since he came back to HealVille, everything was happening so that fast Lana had no time to collect herself. She wanted to calm down and focus on a solution, but the ground was shaking more and more strongly. Finally, wanting to soothe her, Ernest suggested they go to the lake.

When they both sat on the bench next to which they’d first met, by the lake that was now completely dry, Lana started to cry.

Ernest was silent for a long moment before admitting, “I don’t know how to do this without falling apart myself.” He took a deep breath. “These are your last moments in HealVille, Lana.”

The girl looked at him with tears in her eyes. “What’s going to happen to you?” she asked, still not wanting to admit this was the end of the land she had come to love so deeply, the land that loved her in return.

Ernest paused to think and curtly answered, “I’ll be fine.”

“Will I ever see you again?” Lana asked.

Ernest just smiled and stroked the girl’s head.

“Ernest, I never thanked you!” Lana said. “I know you know how much you mean to me, how much you’ve enriched my life, how much you’ve helped me grow, but I don’t know if I ever properly thanked you.”

“I know, Lana. You thanked me each time you visited HealVille. Even now you’re thanking me, by sitting here with me at the end of this part of my journey.”

Placing his shaking hand over Lana’s, he told her to close her eyes and take a deep breath. But Lana remained disobedient till the very last – instead of closing her eyes, she embraced him tightly. At some point she

raised her head. From the warm circle of his arms she could see the trails left by the wagons Layla was swiftly pulling across the sky. Knowing that the bird had taken all the tears out of HealVille made her sad, but she was also grateful that she had an opportunity to say goodbye to Ernest.

Finally, she pulled away and put her hand back into his, and behind the tears in her eyes Ernest could see all her kindness and nobility. He gave her a smile that told her everything words could not. She watched him for a moment longer, then closed her eyes and whispered, "I had the great honour of having my moment in the most magical part of the Universe."

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She was ready to go home, but the journey wouldn't start. She sat on the bench with her eyes closed for a few minutes, but nothing happened – she was still at the same spot. Distraught, Ernest took out his whistle and called Flu-Flu. As soon as the cloud arrived, Ernest told him to take Lana to Panatone.

Then he addressed the girl. "Lana, it appears the doorway to Earth is already closed. Go to Panatone, Kan the All-Knowing will know how to get you home. You'll be safe there."

He took her under the arms and lifted her on Flu-flu's back. Crying, she waved at him. As they flew high into the sky, she took one last look at HealVille and tucked the image away in the warmest place within her memories.

The further they flew, the colder it got. She would've expected it to be warmer on Panatone, but the island was being pelted by an icy rain. Wet and chilled to the bone, Lana hugged Flu-Flu goodbye and watched him leave. Then, all alone, she embraced herself and looked around. The smell of lavender was still intense on Panatone, but the island looked sad now, even frightening. The sea seethed all around her, and the rain was falling in dense, heavy curtains.

Ignoring the changes in the area, Lana began to call for Kan the All-knowing. As no one answered, she ran along the paths separating the rows of lavender bushes pelted by rain and wind. What had happened here? And where was Kan the All-Knowing? She walked the island from shore to shore, but found no trace of the owl. Anxious, she stepped on the rocky ledge, hoping she'd see the train on the sea, when a wave splashed her from head to toe. She stepped back, rubbed her eyes – and noticed one of

the lavender bushes close by was moving in an odd fashion. She carefully stepped closer, parted the branches and saw... Kan the All-Knowing. His hands and feet were tied with thick black rope, his mouth gagged with a scarf.

As soon as she set him free, Kan took a deep breath. "Lana!" he cried out, hugging her tightly. "Dreadful, dreadful,... something dreadful has happened!" he said in a panic, tripping over words.

"Kan, are you alright? Are you in pain?" Lana asked.

130 "No, I'm not in pain. Lana, where's Ernest? And what are you doing here?!"

Lana told him what happened, and Kan held his head crying in despair. She knew she was supposed to go home at once, but she didn't want to leave Kan, or this place, so perturbed. If only she knew what happened! But even if she knew, would she be able to grasp it in this chaos, in wind and rain?

"Can we get away from the rain?" she asked Kan.

Kan nodded and hurried towards the bush in the very middle of the island. Parting the lavender flowers, he revealed a small wooden door in the ground. Opening it, they descended on a long slide to Kan's haven, a small, warm room filled with soft carpets and blankets.

Kan went to light a fire in the fireplace. Then he made lavender tea for Lana and himself and pulled two chairs closer to the fireplace.

"Have you ever heard about Tearopie?" Kan asked when they finally sat down.

"Yes, Ernest told me about it," she replied.

Kan huffed. "I won't even ask you what you know, for knowing Ernest, he must have told you the best possible version of the story about that land."

"I don't understand. What do you mean, the best possible version? There's only one truth, isn't there?"

"Perhaps – but the problem with Tearopie is that no one knows what's been going on there for the past hundred years. And when I say no one, that includes Ernest."

"That's rather... unusual," Lana said.

"Unusual, yes... But that's how it is. We don't have time for looking back now. What matters is that our not knowing anything about Tearopie

led to this catastrophe. I don't know what you know or where I should begin," Kan said, still desperate. "When I saw Feera today, I learned everything. It's over, Lana..." Kan began to cry again.

"What's over, Kan? Look, I know HealVille is dying, but please, I beg you, tell me everything you know. Maybe there's still something we can do."

Kan was silent, but Lana was persistent. "Kan, what's happened?"

Kan took a sip of his tea and gave a heavy sigh. "Fine, I'll tell you – but then you're going home. There's a secret passageway for emergencies. Deal?"

"Deal!" Lana said.

"To make a long story short... today I saw Feera for the first time after nearly one hundred years. When her memories and intentions reached me, I learnt everything she'd been hiding from me all this time."

"Tell me, I'm listening," Lana said.

So Kan told her everything from the beginning. Before the foundation of Tearopie, Feera was, just like Lana, a little girl on Earth. Feera, however, was growing up with parents who violated all the articles of the Parenting Agreement. Their harsh words were often followed by blows, and Feera understood none of the things they listed as reasons for their cruelty. When she was a girl, Feera was guilty for everything, which made her cry a lot, but her tears were no more than drops of colourless liquid that ran from her eyes.

One day, wanting to get rid of her difficult feelings, Feera began to imagine those drops taking all her Sorrows away. She never imagined where they were taking them, but she felt better nonetheless. Fearing she'd be ridiculed for the way she grieved, she spoke to no one about what she was doing, but she continued to do it anyway, and in time she began to feel better; easier. Then, only hours before her childhood officially ended, Feera dared to use her power to found her own Centennial Land. That's how Tearopie came to be – a Centennial Land that produced special tears Feera called Teardrop Aides. They were made by a special machine, from which they dropped straight into Feera's palms. Feera would then gently breathe into them a soul and a purpose, and give them transparent balloons they used to bring the unpleasant feelings out of the children they visited. For centuries, Feera had indeed been making sure there were

enough Aides for every child on Earth, so tears could free children from all their Fears, Sorrows, Angers and Unease right until they grew up.

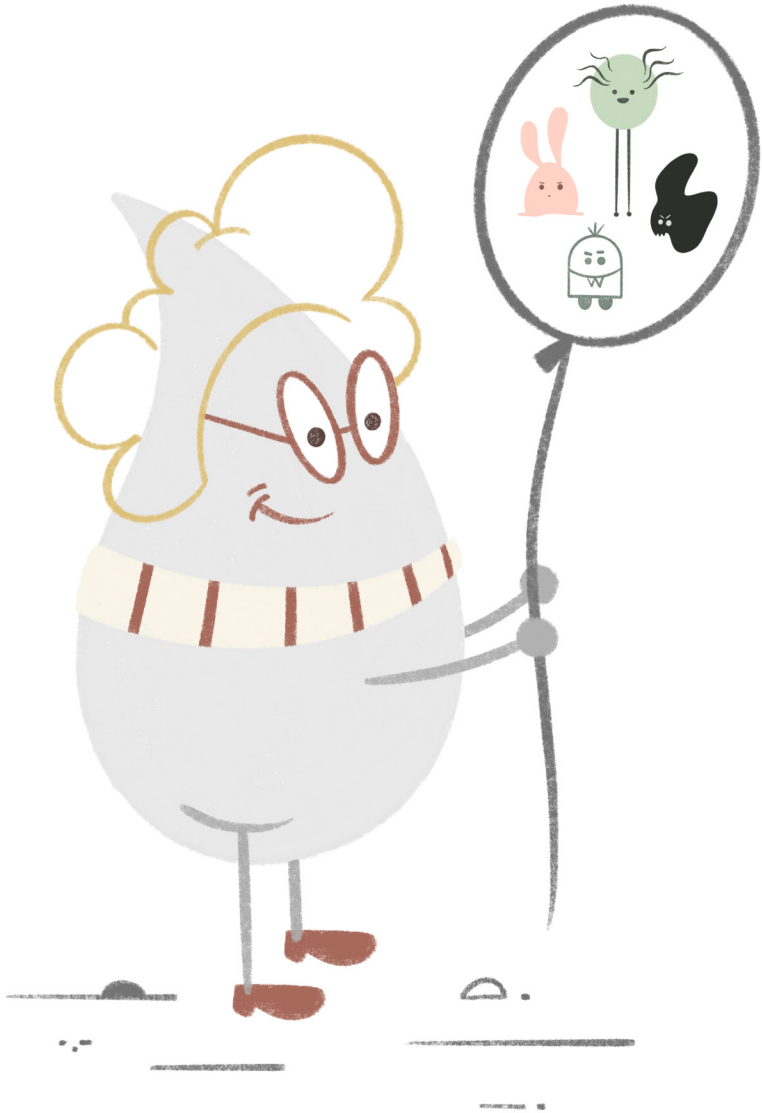
“You see,” Kan said, “the purpose of Tearopie was noble in the beginning, but the system wasn’t perfect. Feera didn’t think about the fate of the Aides, so upon exiting children’s hearts they wandered the world without hope or purpose.”

“That’s why HealVille was founded,” Lana interrupted.

132 “Exactly. When Ernest founded HealVille, tears got a chance to recover from their difficult task and, if they so wished, go back to the hearts of children they belonged to and help them again. But that’s when Feera’s problems started. You see, as more and more tears went back to their children upon being rehabilitated in HealVille, the demand for production of new Aides drastically declined, so there was less and less work to do in Tearopie,” Kan explained.

With the founding of HealVille an important tradition came to an end. Every hundred years, the Domain Council for Appreciation gives awards to Centennial Lands in various categories. Tearopie had been winning in the category of the most important lands for centuries, but with changes brought by HealVille, Feera left the last award ceremony in Ballbeck empty-handed, while Ernest went home with the first award and the feeling of pride that he was the founder of the most important land. For the first time since she came into the Domain of Centennial Lands, someone was more important than Feera – and she didn’t like that.

Feera was used to awards, yes, but the knowledge that Tearopie was no longer the most important land wasn’t the worst that happened to her. Not only did every child now always have enough Aides, Aides could also go to other children once their children grew up – so there was a danger that Tearopie would lose its purpose and disappear altogether. That made Feera afraid, and Fear led to Anger. Anger then turned into Rage, and Rage into Malice. At the time, Feera didn’t deal with her own emotions. The only thing on her mind was to urgently find a new purpose for her land – but she had forgotten that nothing beautiful ever grew out of Anger, Rage and Spite.



The Scream of the Good Cloud

Years passed, and Feera was unable to come up with an idea for the new purpose of her land. Feeling trapped, she directed all her Anger, Rage and Malice at HealVille and Ernest, for she believed it was their fault she was in this mess. Her desire to punish him grew until she hatched a grand plan for the destruction of HealVille.

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“Lana, what you’re about to hear is a terrible story. It takes place in Centennial Lands, but also where you come from, on Earth,” Kan said, as if wishing to warn her about the arrival of Unease.

Lana simply said, “Continue, I’ll hear you out! I have to know...”

Kan nodded. The first move in the execution of her terrible plan, he explained, Feera had made at the beginning of the current hundred-year concession of the existence of Tearopie. Hiding behind the remnants of the goodness and nobility of her character, she decided to gather all the founders in Ballbeck and suggest great changes. For until then, Sorrows, Angers, Fears and Uneases that Aides brought out of children’s hearts finished their journey in a special part of HealVille where they underwent a special rehabilitation program.

“As there was less and less to do in Tearopie, HealVille was becoming more and more crowded,” said Kan. “That’s why Feera suggested to the founders that Tearopie should welcome Sorrows, Angers, Fears and Uneases and offer them a brand-new recovery program so they could become Hope and return to children’s hearts.”

“That sounds... noble,” Lana noted.

Kan regarded her with worry. “Yes, it does sound noble. But at the time, no one asked Feera how exactly did she plan to turn Sorrows into Hope. No one asked about the details of her recovery plan. Everyone liked her idea. It all sounded very practical. You see, out of all the Centennial

Lands, Tearpie is the closest to the field of the bimalis flower that feeds the feelings that have no land of their own. That was why that day in Ballbeck the founders unanimously accepted her offer. They believed her suggestion was just another evidence of what everyone already knew: that HealVille and Tearpie complimented each other marvellously.”

136 Kan then proceeded to the most difficult part of the story. “The truth, unfortunately, is something entirely different. Feera’s goal never was to feed bimalis to the feelings, for she ploughed the field and uprooted the precious flowers. Her goal never was to help Sorrows and other feelings – she just wanted to bring them into her land so she could create the first army in the history of the Domain of Centennial Lands – the sorrowtroopers. According to her plan, they would help her destroy HealVille.”

Lana’s eyes widened in shock. “Wait, Hugger isn’t at fault for the end of HealVille? It was Feera’s fault? Kan, we have to go to Ballbeck right now! The founders must know!”

Kan sighed helplessly. “Slow down, Lana. No one would believe us – not even me. Hear me out, it’s important that you know everything.”

Feera was greatly encouraged by the acceptance she’d received from founders, for she learned that she could indeed hide her Malice from them and deceive them. But she also knew that she should see them as little as possible – especially him, Kan the All-Knowing. That day he wasn’t present at the meeting in Ballbeck because, as he explained to Lana, he wasn’t a founder of any land, he just worked there. Still, Feera feared him the most, for Kan would be able to feel the impurity of her heart in only five looks, which he would then be obliged to report to the Great Security Council of the Stu Domain. Not only would then her plan fail, Tearpie would be doomed as well. For all these reasons Feera decided to remain out of sight and make both herself and Tearpie practically unreachable. As soon as the first Sorrows, Angers, Fears and Uneases came to Tearpie, Feera began her recovery plan – but no one knew that the purpose of the program wasn’t to turn feelings into Hope, but into Gloom.

Feera told the feelings they would recover best in solitude. Convincing them that they should protect Tearpie from all outside views and influences, she ordered the land be enclosed with great rocks, so big that in a mere few years whole mountains grew along the edges of Tearpie.

Steep slopes and sharp peaks prevented any good traveller from even peeking into her land, let alone entering it. Pointed mountains grew taller and taller until they all but touched the sky. Their sharp edges drove even the Sun from the sky of Tearopie, and Feera soon realised that Gloom and darkness suited her beloved land well.

She knew, however, that she wouldn't be able to realise her plan in complete darkness. Only the Moon still granted Tearopie some of his light at night, but as that wasn't enough, Feera ordered the abduction of the Moon. Her sorrowtroopers chained the Moon to the ground with thick, heavy chains. At night they lifted him up into the sky so no one in the Domain would notice anything unusual, but during the day, when the Moon should be resting, Feera would bring him low into Tearopie and make him glow. It wasn't long before the Moon grew so tired he began to go out. For no one, not even the mighty Moon, should be made to shine for others when they have no strength to shine for themselves. Feera, however, cared nothing about that. She put a guard around the Moon, and their task was to keep the Moon awake at all times. In order to do that, the sorrowtroopers hit the Moon, tickled him and yelled at him – but his glow only continued to fade.

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Years passed in the land bereft of light and goodness, and Sorrows, Fears, Angers and Uneases grew bigger and fiercer. When Tearopie became completely isolated from the rest of the Centennial Lands, Feera ordered the sorrowtroopers to dig a deep well, so deep that light could barely reach into it. At its bottom she founded the seven cells of Gloom. There she would send Fears, Sorrows, Angers and Uneases and force them to face, day after day, the most sorrowful stories from Earth – all because she wanted them to believe that life without suffering was impossible.

“And she succeeded,” Kan said. “Fears, Angers, Sorrows and Uneases entered the well as feelings from the Order of the Peace Keepers, and they returned to Tearopie as Glooms. Feera would then take them into her tear production facility, but there she no longer breathed life and purpose into tears that fell into her hands. Instead, she'd take fresh Glooms and force them into tears, as much as a single tear could take. Thus, condensed in a single drop, they only had to brush against a being from Earth to disperse. Through years and years of this process Feera had filled all the barrels and bottles she had in her possession with Gloom-packed tears. These she

stored in great containers where they awaited their moment to fulfil their purpose somewhere far away on Earth.

138 “When she estimated that she had enough Glooms to realise her plan, Feera boldly left Tearopie to visit the most renowned traveller in the Domain of Centennial Lands – the cloud Hugger. Before that, she armed herself with an abundance of lies, sly looks and well-rehearsed deceits so she could convince Hugger she was presenting him with an opportunity to do something noble. She told him she’d made every effort to perfect her latest invention – the good waves departing lounge. There, she explained, Teardrop Aides would have a warm and safe place on Earth where they could await a good wave that would bring them to the Land of Hale – a place where they’d be protected from rain, wind and bad weather. Hugger believed her every word. He began to doubt a little when she showed him the containers that supposedly held the parts for the departing lounge, but only because he thought the containers were too heavy for him to carry. ‘But no one can carry them but you!’ she said. ‘Think of the good you’ll bring to the Aides! Besides, the trip will only last a short while.’ So Hugger agreed to all of her demands, and when the last container was placed on his back, he was ready for what he thought would be an important and noble flight. Only a few minutes later, however, Hugger would understand that he was a victim of a fiendish fraud.”

Lana listened carefully, growing more frightened with each word Kan said. Unease was flying through her with increasing speed and volume.

“How is it possible that no one’s learned about her plan for a full century?” she asked, upset.

“Lana, there’s something you should know: in the Domain of Centennial Lands no one ever brings into question the nobility of founders. You already know that Centennial Lands are founded only if they bring benefit to the children of Earth. Besides, personal needs of each being, including founders, are truly respected here – and Feera’s behaviour made it clear that she needed privacy. We respected that,” Kan said in a sad, but determined manner. “That’s simply how things work here,” he concluded.

“Wait... I though Hugger needed a break. Is that when he helped Feera, during his days off? I know he asked for them, I saw the letter.”

“Ah, yes, the letters...” Kan sighed. “Before he went to Earth, Hugger

wrote a letter for Ernest that simply said he'd be gone for a while and not to worry. He asked Feera to give the letter to Ernest, but Feera threw it away as soon as he left. Instead, she wrote three new letters: one for Ernest, one for Flu-Flu and one for Hugger's family. You've seen the content of these letter..."

"What about the signature? Hugger signed the letters."

"He didn't. Feera forged his signature." Kan said. "Hugger realised he'd been tricked as soon as he arrived on Earth, but unfortunately there was nothing he could do. The containers began to open, and tears filled with Gloom rained upon all the creatures whose path they crossed. As soon as they touched them, the tears dispersed, and Glooms crawled into the hearts of innocent creatures."

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"The raindust drops are really Glooms," Lana concluded in a whisper.

Kan heard her, but did not reply. He simply continued to tell a story that was already taking too long; he was in a hurry to finish.

"As soon as he realised what was happening, Hugger tried to do something to prevent it. In vain. Even knowing that each word Feera had said had been a lie, with a million Glooms on his back, Hugger was powerless. He thought about flying above the sea, but he feared the Glooms might infect all the life in the sea. He tried to fly above the desert, but the Glooms pinched him, tickled him and tortured him so fiercely that in the end he was forced to fly where they wanted. But then, when he arrived in Wellsdon, he felt hopeful again."

"Hopeful?" Lana asked, confused. "Do you know what Hugger did in Wellsdon? For I do, and to be honest, I don't see any hope in that."

Kan was silent for a moment. "Hm... hope..." he murmured. "Yes, Lana, Hugger was hopeful again. Despite being unable to do anything, the citizens of Wellsdon hid in their houses, and that gave him hope that he wouldn't hurt them. That's why he gritted his teeth and refused to move even when Glooms tried to move him by torture."

"I see," Lana said shortly.

"When the citizens of Wellsdon put the umbrella above the city, Hugger decided to stay. As he couldn't protect the innocent creatures of Earth from the raging burden he was carrying on his back, he decided it was better to stay above the city that was at least partially protected than to go somewhere else. And when life was put on hold, he was in relieved in

a strange way, for he knew Grooms would now have a hard time reaching the citizens of Wellsdon. Indeed, as there wasn't a soul was in the streets, and walls prevented them from reaching even a single heart, the Grooms grew bored and fell asleep. And after a period of peace and quiet on the cloud above the city, the city leaders thought the danger was over and declared the end of life on hold.

140 "But the real danger was yet to come," Kan said dejectedly. "Going out in the streets, all the creatures of Wellsdon took a breath of freedom. After being shut in their houses for nearly a year, the citizens of Wellsdon were eager for company, conversation, laughter and clamour. But the joy of freedom echoed not only in the Wellsdon streets, but also in the sky. The mirth roused all the Grooms on Hugger who, trying to prevent them from swooping on Earth, began to twist and fidget. There were less Grooms on him now, so he hoped he'd be able to resist them and go where he wanted regardless of what they did to him, regardless of how much it hurt. But just when he managed to regain his balance and was about to fly somewhere far away, above desert, Feera's mighty sorrowtroopers appeared before him in the sky."

Lana closed her eyes. Was there an end to this? It was all too much for her. At the beginning of the story she still hoped that, once she knew everything, she'd get an idea how to save HealVille. Now, though, it was as if Grooms Kan was telling her about weren't raging across the skies, but within her heart.

"During Feera's training, numerous Sorrows, Angers, Fears and Uneases grew until they began to look like shaggy monsters," Kan continued. "Sorrowtroopers were black and blue and green and grey and very much alive. When the tired cloud tried to escape, the sorrowtroopers rushed him and began to hit him, tickle him and disturb him in every way. As he was trying to resist, the Grooms suddenly descended on Wellsdon as one, and Hugger screamed in helplessness. Some heard the scream as thunder, some as an explosion."

Kan leaned towards the girl and clarified, "You need to know, Lana, that it wasn't an explosion, but pain greater than any pain your Earth remembers. The power of Hugger's scream made the entire Wellsdon tremble in fear. The entire city fell into ruin from the strength of the tremors, and all Hope was crushed under the debris of the citizens' homes."

Lana was lost for words. She couldn't move, couldn't even blink. But Kan continued to talk, so Lana, still as statue in her seat, heard that the sorrowtroopers brought Hugger back to Tearopie, where he's still imprisoned in impenetrable darkness.

"Hugger didn't give up until the bitter end, and he managed to escape the sorrowtroopers for but a moment and descend low over the Wellsdon ground. There he met a boy whose eyes reflected the Sorrow he knew he was guilty of. He may not have wanted to hurt anyone, but it was still he who'd brought this trouble to the world, and that made him at least partly responsible. Seeing the despair in the boy's eyes, Hugger decided to surrender. He knew that, if the sorrowtroopers took him away, at least he'd no longer contribute to the suffering."

141

Kan sat in thoughtful silence for a moment. "And then this same boy for whom Hugger had surrendered came here today. It was he who testified against Hugger in Ballbeck."

This roused her. Shaking her head, Lana got up and took a step towards Kan, asking him worriedly. "A boy. A boy from Earth? He was here?"

"Yes. He came to Panatone with a jar full of feelings he wanted to take to Tearopie."

Lana got upset. "Eli? Is the boy's name Eli?"

"Yes," Kan replied, quite surprised that Lana knew the boy's name. "Lana, do you know him?"

"Yes. Yes, I know him. I told him about Tearopie. Actually, I'm not sure if I told him the name of the land and where it is, but I did tell him there was a place that would accept his Sorrows," Lana said in a panic. Then she grew worried again. "Kan, where is Eli now?"

"I'm sorry, Lana," Kan said sadly. "I couldn't save him. There was no time."

"What happened? You couldn't save him from where?"

"Well, when I led him to Wellspring where he was supposed to begin his journey to Tearopie, I saw Feera. Unfortunately, she saw me too and realised that her memories and intentions had reached my heart, so she signalled the bird Layla to grab me in her talons. She was flying so fast I could neither see nor speak nor scream. When we reached Panatone, the storm grew stronger, so Layla put me down, tied me up and threw me into

the sea. As I was sinking to the bottom, I felt desperate and helpless and scared out of my mind. But the seas of Centennial Lands are too good to hurt anyone, so they sent the biggest seaweed, sea stars and all kinds of fish to help me and bring me to the surface. Layla didn't see that, so I managed to crawl back among the lavender bushes. Tied up as I was, that was all I could do. But then you came. Thank you, Lana!"

But Lana's thoughts were already far away. "Where's Eli now? Kan, I have to help him!" she said decisively.

142 "I don't know, Lana. I hope he managed to get away. Unfortunately, all that reached me about Feera's intentions for the boy had to do with his testimony in Ballbeck. That's all I know."

Lana grew still and thoughtful. The story she'd just heard was horrific, and she knew she wouldn't leave Centennial Lands until she made sure Eli was safe. At the moment, however, Eli was far away, in a place dangerous and dark. Darker than the pitch-black night.



The Magic Within Us

At the bottom of the well, Eli didn't even question if he should try at least one of the doors that surrounded him. He knew his chance of finding the door that would lead him home on his first attempt was slim, but knowing there was a chance was enough for him to try. Besides, the only other choice he had was to surrender to eternal darkness of the terrible well, which he refused to even consider. He circled the well several times, watching the mysterious passageways, hoping to see a clue, a sign that would show him the way home – but there was nothing. Realising no door spoke to him, Eli put the jar with his feelings on the ground and decided to let fate decide for him. He closed his eyes and started to spin. When he stopped, he opened his eyes in front of one of the doors. He took a deep breath, whispered, "You'll be fine!" and headed for the cell.

145

In two steps he approached the door and opened it – but all he could see was another horrible darkness. *This cannot be a way home*, he thought, withdrawing, hoping it wasn't too late to change his mind. But there was no time. A gust of wind tore at him; a black vortex followed, grabbing him. Three times he circled the bottom of the well before the vortex threw him into the cell. When his jar rolled in after him, the door slammed shut, and the vortex put Eli on the ground and disappeared in the darkness.

The room was cold. The wind was still gusting, so strong that Eli barely managed to open his eyes – but the dust in the air forced him to close them again. He sat huddled on the ground for a while, not knowing where he was or what would happen to him. "Shh-shh-shh," the wind howled.

A moment later the wind spoke. "Welcome, boy. In this cell of Gloom live the shadows of the most sorrowful children in the world. Everything you see, hear or feel in this room will help your heart do the brave thing

and stop beating.”

Eli was horrified. Not only because the words reminded him of the thought that even on Earth caused him fear and pain, but also because he could feel his hopes of being saved fading.

Presently, the wind died down, the dust settled and Eli finally opened his eyes.

He saw nothing.

146 Afraid there was something wrong with his eyes, Eli opened them and closed them a few times – but there was no difference. The darkness was as thick as ink. The bottom of the well had been dark, but he could still see something – in the cell of Gloom total darkness ruled.

“It’s just a cold, dark room,” he told himself, his heart pounding. “I can still find a way out,” he encouraged himself. He took a few steps, but soon realised that without something to orient against he had no idea where he was going, so he tried to go back to the door.

He couldn’t find it. He no longer knew where he came from. Equally deep in all directions, the darkness seemed infinite.

Feeling his chest tightening with panic, Eli took a few deep breaths. When he calmed down a bit, he told himself reasonably, “This is just a room. If I walk straight ahead, I have to reach a wall.” Doing just that, a short while later he felt stone underneath his fingertips and leaned against the wall in relief.

He’d just decided to circle the room keeping close to the wall so he could find a door, when the darkness filled with sounds: rustling, whispering, soft footsteps. Eli’s heart was beating against his chest, trying to attract his attention – but Eli barely heard it. The disturbing sounds drowned everything that lived within him, everything that wished him well.

“Go home, whisper to your child that they should help their heart stop beating. Go on, you know that will spare them the suffering,” he heard a voice in the darkness.

Remembering what he’d written on a piece of paper a long time ago in Wellsdon, Eli’s breath hitched. Was the voice talking to him?

“There’s no other solution,” another voice said. “Your child will never be happy. It’s over. Go and tell them that, they’ll believe you.”

This voice was softer, further away. *They’re not talking to me, they’re*

not talking to me, Eli comforted himself. But whom were they talking to?

As he stood in the darkness as still as stone, Eli heard hundreds of such doleful, terrible words. His legs betrayed him; he silently slid down the wall and curled up, hugging the jar with his feelings. He didn't understand this place. He could only hope the voices in the dark wouldn't approach him, wouldn't speak to him. *Don't believe them!* he told himself over and over again, trying to drown the voices with his thoughts. *Don't believe them! It's not over! You'll save yourself!*

The more time passed, however, the harder it was for Eli to whisper words of encouragement and comfort. Who knows what would've happened if Spark hadn't reached him. She was a tiny firefly whom he hadn't noticed until then, for she had put out her light – but as soon as she began to speak, she glowed.

147

“Psst, psst,” she whispered, holding her tiny finger to her mouth. “Follow my glow. I'll help you!”

Eli wanted to reply, but Spark silenced him again. “Psst, psst, just follow me. I'll explain everything once we're safe.”

Eli just started after her, when a narrow strip of grey cut through the darkness. Spark had opened the door leading out of the cell of Gloom, and everything he could see – the dusty ground, damp stone walls – came as a relief compared to the recent Gloom. He reached for the door, took a step – and realised that now he could see what was going on in the room, who was speaking in the darkness. Torn between fear and curiosity, Eli hesitated, turned around...

What he saw rooted him in place. The room was full of children's shadows, and next to each stood a terrible creature. Eli no longer remembers what colour they were, for in darkness all colours hide. He no longer remembers their voices, for all voices sound the same in Malice. What their presence made him feel, however, he remembers quite clearly. Just like the wind had said, the creatures were trying to convince the children's shadows to go back to Earth and whisper to the hearts of children they belonged to that the end was nigh, that the best they could do was – go out, stop beating. The shadows listened without a word. They didn't look at Eli. They didn't even notice him, for their heads were hung low, full of Grief, empty of Hope.

Eli took in all of this in a glance. It took him perhaps two heartbeats to

realise what was going on and what he'd just witnessed, but even that was enough time for the horrifying creatures to notice him. All eyes turned towards him – and a moment later the creatures turned away from the shadows and rushed towards him.

“Move!” Spark yelled.

Eli flinched. Just as the cold hands of sorrowtroopers were reaching for him, he ran through the door.

“Oof, that was tense!” said Spark slamming the door after him. “I’m Spark!”

148 “Eli,” the boy answered automatically. “What was that?!” he asked in shock.

Spark’s face softened in compassion. “The creatures you just saw are Feera’s sorrowtroopers. You’ve heard what they were saying to the children’s shadows – they do so according to Feera’s orders.”

Eli said nothing. He couldn’t believe he trusted that woman.

Then he looked around and saw that he was back on the bottom of the well, surrounded by doors. “I’m here again!” he cried in despair. “Can you show me the way home?” he asked Spark.

She gave him a worried look. “Oh, I’m afraid none of these doors lead towards Earth.”

“But Feera said one of these doors —“

“I know what Feera said,” Spark interrupted him. “She lied. The only door that could take you from here to Earth are at the far ends of the cells of Gloom. By the time you reached them, the sorrowtroopers would discourage you so deeply that you wouldn’t even want to go through them, and so you’d stay here, in eternal darkness.”

Eli fell silent. Then, for the first time that he could remember, he started to cry. Spark watched him quietly and let him weep his heart out. He cried for a long time, loudly and bitterly. He cried so many tears that they covered the bottom of the well.

When he could cry no more, he said to Spark, “Forgive me for asking this, but... why didn’t you show me the way out? Why did you lead me here? Why didn’t you save me?”

Spark didn’t answer. She just watched him, wondering how to explain the horror of this place without discouraging him further. After a few minutes of silence, she knew she had to give him some explanation, so she said:

“Eli, listen well: the cell of Gloom where we just met is the most frightful of all. Especially for you.” Eli glanced at her, now even more scared. Spark continued. “Trapped in that room there are shadows of the most sorrowful children in the world. Those are the children who suffer, but are alone in their pain. For years now Feera has been sending sorrowtroopers to Earth to abduct their shadows and imprison them in this cell of Gloom. Without their shadows, the children on Earth can no longer see who they are, so they’re left to their suffering. You know, in order to survive when things are bad, it’s necessary to remember that life is more than just the moment we’re experiencing. The most sorrowful children on Earth have no one they could talk to about their pain. They don’t have anyone to tell them that they too, like any creature, are capable of feeling happy and at peace. That’s why their shadows embrace them, make them laugh and comfort them whenever the children see them. When Feera takes their shadows away, they’re left with nothing but thoughts coming from a hopeless heart. Those are the saddest thoughts in the world.”

149

Listening to her, Eli could easily make a connection between her words and the sounds, images and feelings he’d felt in the cell of Gloom. He understood everything but this: “Why did you tell me that cell was especially frightful for me?”

Spark looked at him gently. “Because, Eli, that’s where your shadow is too.”

Unease rose in Eli. “My... my shadow?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes, Eli. If you and your shadow meet, I’m afraid you’ll never escape this Gloom.”

“I don’t understand,” he managed.

“Your shadow has been listening to sorrowtroopers telling it to go back to you and help your heart stop beating for a long time. If you meet now when you’re discouraged, and your shadow convinces you that the stillness of your heart is what’s best for everyone, you won’t even try to find your way back home, your way to happiness.”

This sent chills down his spine. “In that case,” he said, trying to compose himself, “I can only say thank you for showing me a way out.”

Spark smiled gently. “I should thank you. I can go into that room only when someone wants me there. While you were sitting there in the dark, you tried your best to keep your hope alive. You decided to save yourself.

That's why I came. Even though you wanted to get out, you couldn't do it alone. We can't always get out of the dark alone, but sometimes, a single grain of light is enough to keep believing we'll succeed. A single spark is enough to get us going. The new place we reach may be equally dark, but the very fact we managed to reach it is a clear sign that we haven't given up on our journey." Spark smiled at him. "Today, I was your spark of light."

Eli smiled back. They watched each other gently for a moment before Eli stirred.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked suddenly.

150

Spark grew serious. "I can't get you out – I don't have that power. I can only help you with advice." She flew closer to Eli until she illuminated his entire face. "Whatever happens, don't cry in front of Feera. For her plan to succeed, she needs a fresh child's tear – your tear. If you deny her that, you'll thwart her plans."

After she explained everything Feera intended to do, Spark said, "I have to go now. Unfortunately, I can't stay with you, for children's shadows are calling me. You'll think of something, though."

"What?! Don't leave me alone, please!"

Spark explained that wasn't possible. "Eli, now that you know I exist, that I come whenever you need me, be brave on your journey home." She gave him a bright smile. "Here, I'll give you a gift. Close your eyes."

As soon as he did, the boy felt warmth on his eyelids. The firefly had touched his eyelids, giving some of her magic to him.

"Now you'll be able to better see in the dark," Spark said. "Not even the darkness of Gloom will be absolute. If you need me, call me. As long as you remember how important it is to keep your hopes alive, I'll hear you. And I'll come, I promise! Just keep your hopes alive."

Eli wasn't exactly comforted by that, but like so many times in his life, he could do nothing to prevent what would happen next – to prevent her from leaving. They said a short goodbye, and Spark flew back into the cell of Gloom. Eli imagined her speaking to the shadows and wished they believed everything they might hear from her. Then he shivered; his feet were wet, for he was standing in the puddle of tears he'd cried. He was looking at the ground, crestfallen, not knowing what to do or how to get out, when from the bottom of the well, among the tears, he spied someone tiny waving at him.



In the meantime, by the hearth underneath the fragrant ground of Panatone, Kan was trying to explain to Lana that she had to go home right away. He told her about secret passageways he would lead her though and stressed how important it was that they leave now. Lana heard none of it. She was trying to think of a way to find Eli, save him, and then save HealVille too. *The magical land won't perish because of lies and deceit. There must be a way to prevent it*, she told herself. Everything Kan was saying sounded like unnecessary noise, so she finally cut him off. "Enough, Kan. I'm not going home. In any case, I'm not going home until I find Eli," she said confidently.

151

"But Lana..."

"No but, not today," Lana was decisive. "Listen to me, I have a plan."

"Lana, anything you try will lead you directly into danger. I can't allow that! Come on, let us go," Kan said starting for the slide they'd used to come here. Lana didn't move. When he wanted to speak again, Lana extended her arm. Not understanding her meaning, Kan shook her head.

"Look – the bracelet," Lana said.

"Yes, I see it. What are you trying to say?"

"When I came to Panatone, you told me that once the beads turn their appropriate colour, I'll be safe in my adventures no matter what world I might travel."

Kan heaved a deep sigh. "Lana, that's not exactly how it works..."

"What, then you lied to me?" Lana got upset.

"I didn't lie!" Kan protested. "But in special circumstances all magic in Centennial Lands goes out. Meaning, what's been keeping you safe here doesn't work at the moment. That's why I can't send you where you want to go, for I can't be sure you'll be fine."

"What does that mean, all magic goes out?"

"A Centennial Land disappearing is a rare, very sad event for all the creatures in the Stu Domain. By now you know that we can't be magical to others when we're sad. That's when we need to give all kindness, goodness and magic to ourselves. Sometimes we do find strength to give even when we're sad, but no one should ask or expect this of us," said Kan, proceeding to conclude that all creatures in the Domain had closed their

lands and retreated to their sacred places.

“Sacred places?” Lana asked.

“Yes. Those are places where they can feel whatever they need to feel without fearing someone will ask them to feel less, process their feelings in a different way or faster than they can.”

This made Lana think. Kan glanced towards the exit, but she still didn’t react. Looking at her bracelet she said, “Wait a minute... That the founders can’t help me save Eli and HealVille doesn’t mean I’m not safe.”

“I don’t understand,” Kan frowned.

152

“Centennial Lands are magical, that’s clear – but it’s not just their founders that make them magical, it’s also the experiences the lands have to offer.” Lana extended her arm again. “Before each bead turned different colour on the Path of Truth, I’d learned something, I came to believe something – and you cannot unlearn what you have learned. You cannot stop knowing what you already know. Do you understand? Not even in special circumstances.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Kan agreed, still somewhat confused by this conversation.

“You see,” Lana continued pointing at the orange bead on her bracelet, “when I was in Neesket, I drank courage. It’s in me. Special circumstances didn’t take it away from me, that’s not how it works. I’m still brave, and that’s why I won’t give up on what I want.”

“I understand that, Lana, but I can’t send you into danger. I simply can’t,” Kan persisted.

“You’re not being fair.” Seeing that Kan was shaken by this statement, she clarified, “When I was sad and discouraged, back on Earth, Centennial Lands offered me support and gave me back my hope in happiness. And now... now I’m fine, and you’re the ones who are sad. May I not give you hope the way you’ve given it to me? I know I can, but you need to allow me, just as I’ve allowed you.”

She sounded so confident, brave and composed that Kan knew going home was the furthest thing from her mind.

“Lana, it’s nice of you to want to save Eli and help us. I understand what you want to say, but I’m scared,” Kan admitted.

“What are you scared of?”

“I’m scared of the dark in Tearopie. I don’t know what we’ll find there,

but I do know that darkness can be very, very powerful and scary. Not even I, the owl, can be certain that I'll be able to see clearly enough to get us out of it."

"But that's exactly why!" Lana was persistent. "If Eli is somewhere in the dark, then we have to get him out. No one should be alone in the dark. Everyone needs a friend in the dark."

Kan gave a soft sigh. "Oh, Lana..."

Seeing he was still worried, Lana continued. "Let me ask you something: do you believe, like everyone else in Centennial Lands does, that we children are magical?"

153

"Of course! I'm sure you are," Kan answered readily.

"Then I beg you to believe in me and my magic – just as I, when we met, believed in yours. Believe that even in the dark I'll see the signs leading to freedom."

Kan was so touched that he was on the verge of tears. "She's right, you know," his heart whispered to him.

And so Kan agreed to all her requests. Turning away from the slide, he went back to the fireplace, sat, looked at Lana and asked, "So, what kind of a plan did you think of?"

Lana smiled. "For starters, I suggest you drop me off at Tearopie. I'll stay there, and you'll go to Ballbeck and explain to the founders exactly what happened. We still have time, it's not night yet."

"They won't believe me, Lana. Children's testimonies are never questioned here," Kan reminded her.

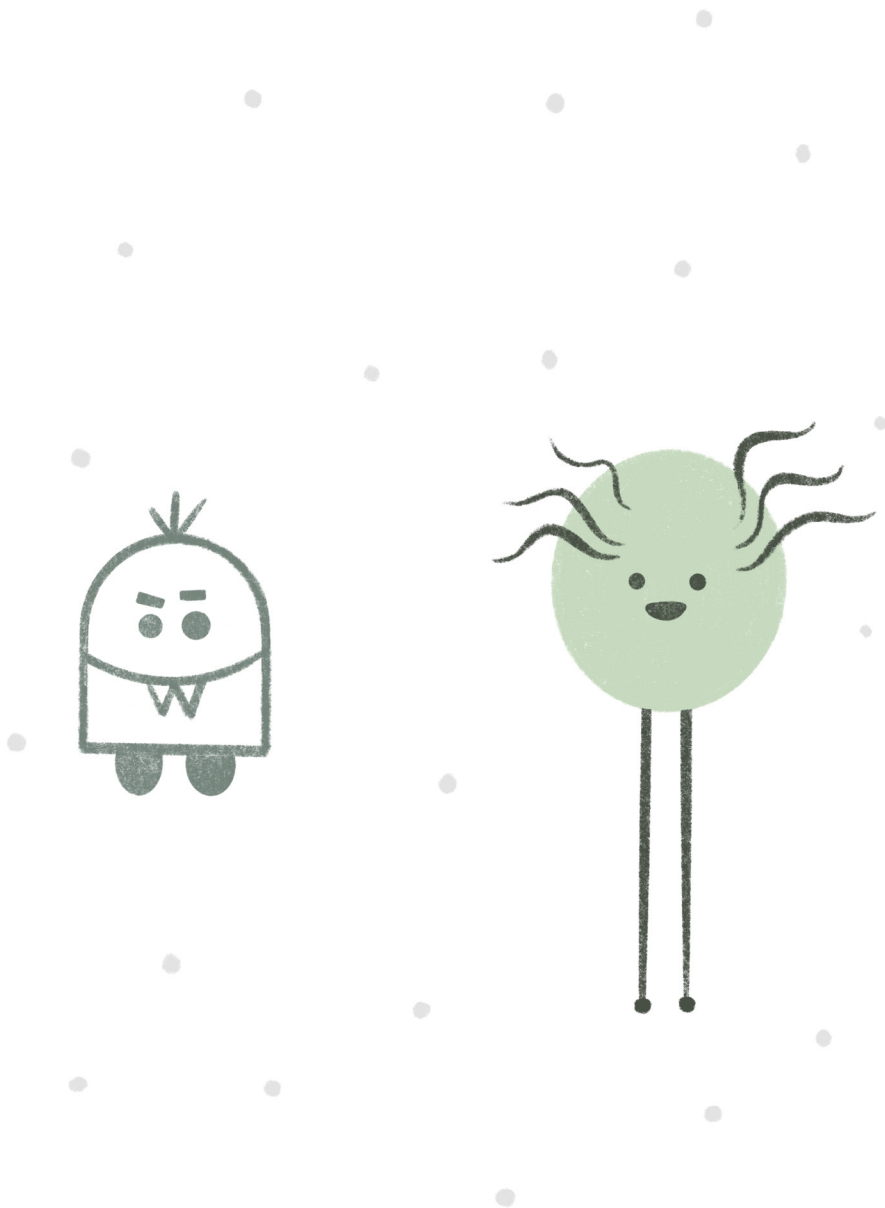
"Then go there and tell them the child from Earth that has testified will soon come again. For he will, I'll bring him."

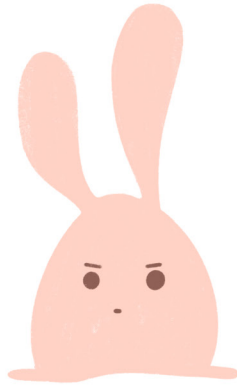
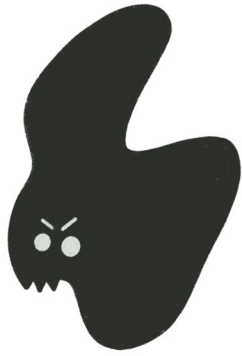
Kan laughed. Despite being afraid, the presence of the brave girl helped him hope these terrors might still be prevented. He went back to the slide and sprinkled it with a few dry lavender flowers that he kept in a jar in his pocket – and the slide turned into stairs.

Lana was just about to climb the stairs when Kan stopped.

"Well then, are you coming?" she asked impatiently.

Kan didn't move. He was standing rooted to the spot, quiet.





To Hug a Moon

In the darkness of the well, Eli had to rub his eyes three times to believe what he saw – and now, just as Spark had told him, he truly did see better. From the very bottom of the puddle of tears waved Timothy, his Teardrop Aide. The boy didn't recognise him. At the time he still didn't know enough about tears to conclude who it was, so he didn't speak to him. Clutching the string of the balloon, inside of which someone was fidgeting, Timothy spoke to Eli.

“Hey, can you help me out?” he asked.

There was something friendly about his voice and appearance, so Eli bent down and extended his hand for the likeable creature to climb on.

“That's better!” Timothy said.

Eli shook his head, understanding nothing.

“Eli, it's me, Timothy! Don't you recognise me?” the tear asked.

Eli shrugged.

“Alright, let's start from the beginning,” Timothy said - and proceeded to tell Eli about Teardrop Aides and their purpose. Then he admitted, “I'm so glad you finally let us out of your heart!”

“Us?” Eli asked, confused.

Timothy looked at the puddle. Following his gaze, Eli saw thousands of tears waving at him. Timothy smiled at him and returned his gaze to the balloon in his hand. “I'd like you to meet someone else, if you'll allow me?” the tear was direct.

Looking at the balloon, Eli saw a tiny creature that seemed to be made entirely out of ash. He quickly looked away and said to Timothy, “I don't want to meet him. I don't like him. I'm fed up with grey,” Eli admitted boldly.

Timothy didn't protest, he respected his decision. “Fine, maybe later. I

think I rushed things a bit there. It's too early for you to meet, for I haven't told you about your Unease and his mess yet. It's important that you know that too."

When Timothy told him about all the creatures living inside him, namely Sorrow, Fear, Anger and Unease, Eli looked at the balloon more closely. "Wait, I don't get it. Where are these feelings you're talking about? There's only one of them in the balloon. They aren't still inside me, right?"

158 Timothy was glad that the boy was now talking to him with interest. He wordlessly looked at the puddle Eli was standing in, and then towards the jar in Eli's hands. Following his gaze, Eli said, "So the feelings I wrote down are truly in this jar? Let me be clear, that's where I wanted them, but I wasn't sure that was the proper way to get them out of me."

Timothy gave a gentle laugh. "You know, Eli, there is no proper way to deal with feelings – everyone does it in their own, special way. Even if you weren't sure whether you should put them in a jar, you never gave up on doing whatever you could to make things easier for yourself. In doing so you came up with an idea that might not have helped some other child, but it was a right thing to do for you. The fact you persisted in trying to help yourself – that, Eli, is a brave and important thing. Bravo!"

For the first time since coming to Centennial Lands, Eli laughed. Now that he knew he did something right, he felt a bit better. He slowly returned his gaze to the balloon and the creature within. The way it fidgeted made him uncomfortable, but he was curious to find out who it was and why he wasn't in a jar.

"Why did he stay in me?" he asked at length.

"That, Eli, is your Fear. He entered you alongside Unease, and it took him a long time to clean up his mess so you could feel better. I know you wanted to put him in the jar, but he didn't want to leave because he wasn't ready. He first wanted to embrace every part of you that had been shaken that day in Wellsdon. He could feel you trying to chase him away, but he still stayed, knowing that you wouldn't be able to find peace until he soothed every little tremor within you."

"So now that he's out, I can hope to find peace again?"

"Exactly." Timothy looked at the creature in the balloon and back to Eli. "So, what do you say? Do you want to meet him after all?"

Eli hesitated. It all sounded great, but the thought of him spending time with his own Fear was still unattractive. Finally, he shook his head.

“No. I don’t want to meet him. Can you send him somewhere else? There, he’d fit nicely into that room – it’s dark there,” Eli suggested pointing at the door to the cell of gloom full of children’s shadows.

“Listen, Eli,” Timothy continued calmly. “Could you please ignore his ashen body for a moment? Just look him in the eye and you’ll understand everything. He’s neither dark nor evil.”

“What?” Eli grew upset. “You want me to look my Fear in the eye?”

“That’s right. Please believe me, I know something about Fears. In any case, I know that once you look him in the eye, you’ll find something quite opposite to what you expect.”

159

“I’m not ready yet,” Eli said briefly.

“Alright. Do you want to talk some more?”

“I want to leave this terrible place. That’s all I want,” Eli said, at the same time resolutely and helplessly. He was just a step away from believing Timothy, from believing nothing bad would happen if he looked his Fear in the eye... but then he remembered that he got here by trusting someone whom he believed wished him well. Not knowing what to do, with the jar in his lap and Timothy and his Fear on his hand, Eli curled against the wall of the well. He was so tired...

It wasn’t long before he felt a bit better. He was no longer alone in the dark, and that gave him hope that he’d find a way out. A moment later he carefully lowered his gaze to the balloon. The Fear within was now still, but he was looking down.

“Hey, please look at me! I want to get to know you!” Eli said softly. The Fear lifted his ashen head, and his white eyes brought peace to the boy who couldn’t stop looking at him.

“Your eyes are so... gentle,” Eli said, surprised.

The Fear nodded. “Just like yours,” he said.

And just when Eli wanted to thank the Fear for everything he had done for him, a terrible noise echoed through the well. The scream, loud and painful, was coming from the cell of Gloom closest to them. Eli sat up in shock, and Timothy and his Fear pressed close to the boy, themselves afraid of the well-known sound. It was the same scream they’d heard in Wellsdon on the most terrible day of Eli’s life.



“Kan, are you coming?” Lana asked again when Kan didn’t reply. Still saying nothing, Kan started for the wooden chest that was sitting in the corner of the small kitchen. With her foot still on the first step, Lana impatiently watched Kan as he dug through the chest, carelessly throwing things he didn’t need behind his back.

160 “Aha! There it is!” Kan said at length, carefully taking a small bottle out of the chest. It was smaller than Lana’s thumb and it looked important, like the bottles chemists use to store precious potions. It reminded Lana of the bottle she’d chosen in Neeskot, not so long ago, from which she had drunk courage – except this one was filled with green liquid. Kan approached Lana saying,

“Lana, I do believe in the magic within you, but I’d still like to give you something. A long time ago I myself travelled Centennial Lands in search of the courage to accept the job I’d been offered. This is one of the keepsakes from that journey.”

Kan held out his hand so Lana could better see the tiny bottle. Only now did she see it was hanging from a thin string necklace.

“This bottle is filled with Hope,” Kan said. “If hopelessness touches you, a single drop from this bottle will be enough to help you get up again and boldly continue on your way.”

Lana lit up. “Wonderful! You see, Kan, the magic hasn’t disappeared completely after all!”

But Kan didn’t look convinced. “You know, hopelessness is a complicated state. When Gloom possesses you, it takes away your faith – and without faith all obstacles in your way seem greater than they are, so you convince yourself you cannot continue. And if you don’t dare even try to get out of a difficult situation, your chances of succeeding become small indeed.”

Kan’s words gave her a scare, but only briefly, because Hope was very much alive within her. Rather than simply accepting that things were the way they seemed, she wanted to truly understand them. “Well, Kan, what are you trying to say? Is this bottle magical or not?” she asked.

“Hmm... You know that everything is only as magical as much as we believe in magic. I’m trying to say these drops won’t save you if you drink them when you’re hopeless, for then you won’t be able to believe some green liquid could save you. That’s why it’s important that you listen to

yourself all the way. As soon as you notice that Hope in you is fading away, drink one drop, and then allow yourself to flow with the events. Trust me, as long as you believe that magic is serving you, you'll be fine."

Lana nodded and ducked her head so Kan could tie the necklace around her neck.

"There," he said. "Now that I know I've prepared you for the journey the best I could, I feel better. Let's go!"

Lana laughed and headed for the stairs with Kan. When the wooden door opened, the wind, rain and cold tore at them again, but now Lana wasn't discouraged by it. As soon as Kan untied the locomotive from the shore, they both went aboard and rose up to the sky in silence.

161

Soon Lana spied the pointed mountain tops. The locomotive stopped, hovering in the air.

"Lana, look out the window," Kan said seriously. "Can you see that the darkness we're about to enter is different than any darkness you've known before?"

Lana nodded.

"Do you still want to continue?"

"Yes, I do," Lana confirmed.

Kan took a deep breath, as if summoning the courage to face the events they were about to enter, and got the train moving again.

When they flew over the pointed mountains, the sky turned black such as she'd never seen before. There were no stars, only darkness. Still, the Gloom didn't scare her so much as it saddened her. *What is this place? What happened here?* she wondered – and just then the locomotive swayed so violently that Lana flew into the air and forcefully hit the floor. The bird Layla had crashed into the locomotive as soon as she'd seen it in the sky above Tearopie. When she hadn't succeeded in bringing it down in the first try, she grabbed the locomotive in her talons and began to shake it. Lana was sliding across the wagon, hitting the seats, trying to grab onto something. Then the door to the locomotive suddenly opened, and Lana began to slide towards them, terrified.

"Kan, I'll fall out! Help me!" she cried out in panic.

But Kan couldn't help her. If he were to let go of controls, they'd both be doomed.

"Lana, whatever happens, you'll be fine! Please believe it!" he yelled.

As they descended into chaos, their frightened eyes met once more. Then Layla shook the locomotive with all her might; and Lana slid out the door disappearing in the dark sky.

“Nooooo!” she heard Kan scream before the wind drowned all sounds. All but one. “You’ll be fine, Lana!” her heart spoke to her – and she believed it.

162 Layla continued to shake the locomotive, not even noticing that Lana had fallen out. The girl fell to the ground, but she didn’t get up. She turned her eyes to the sky in trepidation, waiting so see what would happen to Kan. It appeared his locomotive wasn’t yielding to enraged Layla, which gave her hope that Kan would manage to escape.

Then a whistle echoed through Tearopie, and Lana turned her head to see where it came from. There was a castle nearby, and on one of its balconies stood Feera. That was the first time Lana saw her, but despite knowing about all the atrocities she’d committed, Lana wasn’t afraid of her, for Feera was wearing an orange dress. Layla, the faithful servant, was flying towards the castle. It was her that Feera had called with her whistle, Lana realised. Then she saw Kan climbing out the window and up on the locomotive roof towards Layla’s talons. One by one he began to bite them, scratch them and detach them from the locomotive.

Flummoxed and upset, Layla tried to shake him off with one leg, but that way she only made it easier for him, for now the locomotive hung by only two talons. Jumping at the opportunity, Kan bit the bird’s leg viciously. The bird cried out. Before she knew what was happening, the locomotive was falling through the dark air.

Kan plummeted after it. At the last moment, just before it hit the ground, Kan managed to fly into the locomotive, get in under control and turn it towards the exit from the terrible land of Tearopie. Lana, who’d barely managed to sigh in relief, felt her heart flutter again when she saw Layla flying after him.

Then another whistle echoed and Feera spoke. “Let him go, Layla, no one will believe him anyway. Not even his words can void a testimony of a child. Speaking of children, come here, there’s something you must do right away.”

Layla glanced back at Kan’s locomotive that had already flown over the peaked mountains, then flew towards the castle.

Lana finally got up and looked around for a hiding place. Only then did she realise that the ground she was standing upon was soft, shimmering and gentle. Walking about, she noticed that the surface was round, as if she was standing on a giant orb. Then she caught her foot on something. The dark web that criss-crossed the dull light of the ground were chains.

A whisper drew her from her thoughts. "Hey, my ear! Go to my ear!"

Lana nervously looked around, trying to see who was speaking to her.

"I'm right here, you're standing on the crown of my ear. Go left, climb down the chain and you'll reach my ear. Hurry!"

163

Following the instructions, Lana began to climb down the curved surface holding on to the chain. She must have been on an orb, for the curve was becoming steeper and steeper. Her heart was beating fast as she tightly clutched the chain and tried to feel for some foothold. Then she saw a protrusion beneath her and carefully descended upon it. She was indeed crouching on a giant ear, she realised, observing the form of the hollow she was in. Grabbing what must've been an ear lobe, Lana quietly looked down. The ground of Tearopie was far below, and it was covered with formations of sorrowtroopers. Some guarded metal wagons, the same wagons Layla had used to evacuate tears from HealVille. "Are the tears alright?" she wondered aloud, not even thinking whom she was speaking to.

"Unfortunately, they're not alright. They've been locked in those cars ever since they got here. I shudder to think what will happen to them," the voice said.

"Who are you?" Lana finally asked.

"The Moon," replied the voice.

Lana was silent for a while, astonished by the realisation that she was sitting on the ear of someone she'd come to love long ago, whom she wanted to get closer to, whom she wanted to hug. In the dark land, sitting on the ear of the great Moon, Lana Fisher was not afraid. Knowing everything that had happened to her beloved Moon, she heaved a deep sigh and hugged him without saying a word, exactly the way she'd always wanted. The Moon started to cry.

"I'm not well. I'm so tired," he sobbed quietly, fearing the sorrowtroopers would hear.

Lana grabbed another chain, then another. She moved to the Moon's nose and looked him in the eye. "Hey, look at me," she said. "Take all the love you need from my gaze. I know what's happened. I'll set you free, I promise."

The sorrowful Moon looked into her eyes. He was just about to speak and tell that he'd already felt the love in her eyes, long ago while she was watching him from her mother's arms, when Feera flew from the balcony on Layla. Lana quickly returned to the Moon's ear and pressed close against it.

164 "If only I could shine on the world a little more brightly... everything would be different," pleaded the Moon.

"Don't do this to yourself. Don't make yourself shine on the world when you're barely shining for yourself. It's not your fault," Lana comforted him.

"Thank you, Lana, but I'm afraid you don't understand. The sorrowtroopers can't abide light. If I could shine more brightly, they'd be blinded, and we could escape," the Moon explained.

"I see... So, if we bring light to Tearopie, the sorrowtroopers won't be able to harm us?"

"Exactly. But the Sun and stars haven't been here in decades, and I... I can't shine more brightly. I'm trying, every day I try, but I can't..." The Moon was desperate.

"Moon, listen to me. We'll think of something – but now we have to be quiet. Look, she's getting closer. She mustn't hear us," Lana whispered watching Feera fly to the well on Layla's back.

As the bird alighted on the edge of the well, Feera jumped off her back – and for the first time since she came to Centennial Lands, Lana heard the sound of malice and corruption.

"That useless boy from Earth has finally started to cry. Imagine that, Layla! Now get down and bring me his tears. They won't stay fresh long, hurry!" Feera commanded the faithful bird.

Layla hesitated. She carefully looked down the well, as if afraid of the deep darkness. Then she drew herself up, sprang and plummeted towards the bottom. There she paused, perplexed, hopped around a few times and cried out, "Mistress Feera, I see neither the boy nor his tears! Not even his stupid jar is here. There's nothing and no one."

Feera was furious. “Ugh, the sly dog! He must’ve dared to enter one of the cells of Gloom. Forget it, the Glooms will finish him. We’ll find a child’s tear somewhere. Get back up here, Layla!”

Too impatient to wait for the bird, Feera rushed towards the castle.



The scream coming from the cell of Gloom woke painful memories in Eli. In the silence that followed, pressed against the wall of the well, he listened to his heart beating in his chest, afraid to move. A moment later he heard the flapping of wings above him and Feera shouting commands.

165

At that moment Eli reached a decision. He got up, grabbed the jar with his feelings, opened it and spoke to tears in a haste, fierce whisper, “Get in, quick!” Understanding the urgency of the matter, the tears scurried into the jar. When they were all in, Eli closed the jar and squeezed it to his chest. “Hold on!” he said to the tears, Timothy and his Fear. Then he opened the door to the closest cell of Gloom and went through saying, “Whatever is waiting behind this door can’t be worse than Feera’s intentions.” The thought of Feera using his tears to start her new machine and produce ferocious tears made him angry as well as afraid. He knew that nothing and no one coming from his heart should end up like that. “That’s not their destiny! The purpose of tears and Sorrows and Fears and Unease is not to cause new suffering,” he said to himself. He didn’t even know that by saving his tears he’d just begun the journey of rescuing himself.

The rush of courage made Eli forget who it was behind the door he’d just barged through – but now that he was on the other side, he remembered he was in the same room with Hugger, the cloud that had brought so much trouble to his world. He was still for a moment, but the fear he was expecting to feel never came. Eli’s heart remembered the encounter with the cloud, the feeling of sadness it had brought him and the thought that had occurred to him then, that at the moment surprised even him: “I’m not afraid of this cloud!”

Somewhat braver, but still careful, Eli walked the dark and silent cell of gloom. Suddenly, rattling of fetters and chains echoed through the room. Eli stopped. Then he heard a sad plea.

“Help me, please! I have to go to Ballbeck. I’ll admit everything! The founders must know the truth!” Hugger spoke.

He was only a few steps away from the red cloud, Eli realised when he saw the gleam of Hugger’s crying eyes in the darkness. Without Spark’s magic and his own hope he wouldn’t have seen even that much – but now, if he looked more closely, he could discern the outline of the cloud in the darkness. “Help me!” the cloud implored again.

166 Timothy and his Fear pressed more closely against Eli, and all the tears in the jar gathered in a group hug. Only Eli didn’t recoil in fear at Hugger’s plea for help. Instead he stepped closer to the cloud.

“I’m not afraid of you. Why aren’t I afraid of you?” he asked in astonishment.

“Oh, Eli!” Hugger cried out. “You’re not afraid of me because you see me. Thank you for seeing me!”

Eli admitted that he still didn’t understand.

“May I tell you the truth, Eli?” Hugger asked. He looked at the jar with Eli’s feelings, at Timothy and Eli’s Fear. “May I tell you all the truth?” he corrected himself. Only Eli answered with a silent “Yes,” but everyone listened as Hugger told them about the terrible reasons Feera had used to send him to Earth – and everyone knew that each word he was uttering dripped pain, regret and horrible guilt for everything he’d done. Now that they listened to him and understood him, Eli and his feelings were no longer afraid of the cloud. Full of compassion towards the deceived creature they got to work, taking off fetters and chains – and when the last piece of iron fell to the ground, they all sighed in relief.

All but Eli. He was much troubled by something.

“Eli, why are you so crestfallen?” Timothy asked. “Hugger will now take us out of this dark and everything will come to light!”

“Well... you see... I have to tell you something,” Eli said looking at the floor. He took a deep breath and said, “It was me who blamed Hugger for the evil deeds he’d done on Earth in front of the Council in Ballbeck. I was the witness in front of the Council. Because of me, an entire Centennial Land is now vanishing. It’s... it’s all my fault.” He began to cry.

“Oh, Eli,” Hugger said. “Please look at me!”

The warmth in the cloud’s voice prompted Eli to raise his gaze.

“Listen to me, Eli,” Hugger said. “No one knows the price of trusting

Feera better than me. What you did was neither your desire nor your decision. Feera used you, just like she used me. I know it feels terrible – trust me, I know... But now we have hope that truth will come to light. We all have hope.”

“Where do you see hope?” Eli asked, heartbroken.

But Timothy understood. “Yes, Eli, Hugger is right. Now that we know how much your word, your testimony is worth, we can go to Ballbeck together and tell everyone the truth.”

“That’s right!” Hugger said. “Come on, climb on my back! I’m going to get you out of this well, and then we’re going to Ballbeck. My strength has returned thanks to you!”

167

Just then there was yelling and footsteps on the other side of the door. The sorrowtroopers had realised something was happening with Hugger, so they rushed at him and those in his company.

“Quick! Jump onto me, Eli, we’ve got to run!” Hugger said in a rush.

Knowing this was not only his chance to get out of the dark, but also to right the wrong he’d been unknowingly part of, Eli hurried to do just that. As soon as he was on the back of the cloud he’d once been afraid of, a feeling of strange, inexplicable certainty washed over him.

As soon as they barged out of the cell of Gloom, Eli and others stopped in their tracks. Layla was there, waiting for them. Or was she? Instead of pouncing on them, she was desperately flapping her wings, trying to fly – in vain. She’d reached the bottom of the well in an instant, but the way up was a problem. Even she could feel how hard it is to fly when you’re at the bottom, how difficult it is to get out of the dark. Desperate, she realised she was in no better position than Eli and his friends. She gave them a look of such sadness that it was easy to empathise with her misery.

“She used me for her evil plans, I’m so sorry!” the bird spoke. “I didn’t know what she was up to.” The bird hung her head and asked for their forgiveness with tears in her eyes.

Remembering how terrible it was to be used, Eli and Hugger exchanged glances. A moment later Hugger told her to climb on his back so they could get out of the well together. Layla perked up, thanked them and jumped on Hugger’s back.

Hugger climbed through the darkness of the well with difficulty. Now he was close to the top, but instead of swiftly flying out into the open, he

wisely lingered and looked over the edge. All he could see was darkness, Gloom and the tired Moon, but that only gave him more strength to flee this land. “Hold on tight,” he said to his passengers, flew out of the well and shot into the sky like an arrow, intent on flying over the peaked mountains as soon as possible.

As he was flying, he didn’t even notice that Layla had left him. Before anyone realised what was going on, she swooped down on him laughing menacingly. She tore at his side with her talons, made a loop in the air and swooped down again. Trying to evade her, Eli took a step back – and fell. The jar with his feelings fell right after him.

168



Watching all of this from the Moon’s ear, Lana felt Gloom touching her for the first time. She saw Eli hitting the ground and sorrowtroopers rushing him before he had time to get up. Surrounding him, they trampled him and tickled him. Eli dropped the jar with his feelings, curled up and covered his eyes with his hands, completely helpless against their attack. Soon after him Hugger fell to the ground too, wounded by Layla’s claws. As soon as he was in the dust, he met the same fate as Eli: the sorrowtroopers surrounded him, attacked him and disabled him as evil Feera roared with laughter on the balcony of the filthy castle. “There’s nothing you can do, you wretches! Darkness is your fate, you can’t escape it!” she cried out, petting Layla that had just joined her on the balcony.

Lana was overwhelmed by helplessness. She hung her head in despair. The bottle Kan had hung around her neck swayed, drawing her attention. The girl smiled. Just when everyone else had given up on ever being saved, Lana took a sip from the bottle and filled herself with Hope that light would win. Now what? she wondered, calmly watching the scene unfolding underneath. Spying the cars full of tears, she quickly got up.

“Moon, I’ll be right back,” she whispered.

“Lana, where are you going? Please stay here, it’s dangerous out here!” the Moon said.

“Moon, I’m going to make light. You stay here and wait for my signal,” she said boldly.

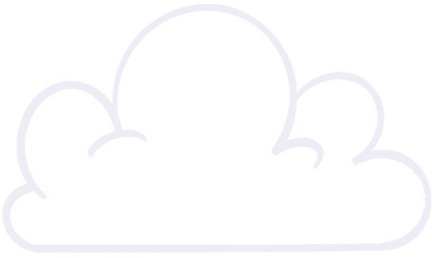
“Signal to do what?” the Moon asked – but Lana was already gone.

She carefully climbed down the chains holding the Moon to the ground and ran towards the first wagon with tears. In the middle of the assault on him, Eli managed to open his eyes and see Lana hiding behind the car. She put her finger to her lips, letting him know he shouldn't speak.

"We'll get out of here!" he read the words from her lips. Immediately he remembered Spark and the grain of Hope she'd brought him when he needed it the most. Now that grain was Lana, the girl he'd envied bitterly only a little earlier that day.

Just then, a sound of bell echoed the land. That meant Kan had managed to get out, Lana knew, and that help would come.





The Return

The founders gathered in Ballbeck – all but Feera. She too had heard the bell and assumed Kan had struck it, but she was confident nothing would happen to her as long as she had the boy who'd testified and the convict Hugger under her control.

173

That was what Kan was afraid of too, but he knew he had no choice but to continue. So he told the founders everything about Feera's intentions and feelings, all the while looking at Ernest with a heavy heart. The founder of HealVille no longer looked like himself, but all the years that assailed his face and body weren't as awful as his resigned gaze. Forcing himself to look away, Kan concluded, "I'm aware my words aren't worth more than the words of the boy who confirmed Hugger's misdeeds – but please, take into account that Hugger himself has been deceived!"

Silence fell upon the arena. A moment later the founders began to whisper among themselves, and the discussion soon became heated. With every word that reached him Kan felt worse and worse, for he knew that as much as the founders might have wanted to save HealVille, it all came back to the absolute trust in the testimony of the child from Earth.

Then the voice of the founder of the Land of Hale pierced the clamour. "Your words wouldn't have been worth more than the boy's if you had said different things," Calm said getting up. He turned towards the founders and stressed, "Kan the All-Knowing said the same thing as the boy: that Hugger did do all he'd been accused of. But Kan also explained how these things came to be. The boy never said Hugger was evil – he simply said what he had done, which means Kan's words simply confirm the boy's testimony. Therefore, dear founders, I ask you to raise your hands if you think that HealVille's punishment should be immediately withdrawn!"

All the founders sighed in relief and raised their hands – and the thick

celestial roots that had been pressing HealVille immediately lost all their strength. Drying up, they fell to the ground, lifeless. HealVille was safe and not a thing in it trembled any longer.

“Now there’s a question of what to do with Tearopie,” Calm continued. “Who’s in favour of it being immediately revoked?”

Disturbed by everything they’d heard; the founders raised their hands.

“Nooo! Stop!” Kan cried out in panic, seeing that celestial roots had already begun sprouting around Tearopie. “We can’t revoke Tearopie until we save the children and the tears!”

174

“Children? What children?” Ernest asked, standing up with difficulty. He was still weak, but resignation disappeared from his gaze as soon as Kan mentioned children. “Lana... Where is Lana? Have you sent her home? Tell me you sent her home!” Ernest implored.

Kan heaved a deep sigh.

“Kan, what children are in Tearopie?” Ernest persisted.

“Lana and Eli,” Kan said. “I’m sorry, Ernest, I couldn’t save them! But we can try together! We have to get them out before Tearopie is torn apart by celestial roots, before the land becomes even more dangerous than it already is!”

The founders grew anxious, especially Ernest.

“We have to help them! Kan, look into your memories and ask yourself what is Feera’s weakness? We must quickly find something that’ll help us defeat her, or at least incapacitate her.”

“I don’t even have to think about that,” Kan said readily. “Feera’s sorrowtroopers hate light.”

“In that case – founders, we must bring light to Tearopie!” Ernest said.

It was a good idea, but no one knew how to carry it out. While they were discussing this among themselves, Ernest thought of a solution and sent most of the founders to Tearopie. “Go to the mountains and wait for Kan the All-Knowing, he’ll tell you what to do,” he told them. Then he gathered the rest of the founders and together they boarded Kan’s locomotive, which flew them straight to HealVille. As soon as they arrived, they began to load the train with dry celestial roots. “You’ll tie the roots around the mountain peaks and hand their other ends to the founders waiting there. Then you’ll all pull the roots towards you and

bring down the mountains that keep Tearopie in the dark,” he explained as they toiled under the light of stars.

“What about you?” Kan asked. “Aren’t you coming along?”

“I haven’t the strength for even a single step, let alone for moving mountains,” Ernest said wearily. “But I believe you’ll succeed, and with that faith I’m going back to my cottage. I’ll wait for the children there. I know they’ll come.”

Not wasting a moment, Kan flew the train full of founders and celestial roots to the mountains of Tearopie.

175



Hidden behind the wagon with tears, Lana knew she had to act fast. She opened the first wagon with Aides; as soon as they recognised her, the tears cheered up.

“Lana, what’s going on?” an Aide asked.

“Shh,” Lana whispered. “I’ll let you out, you just hug tightly.”

“What? We don’t understand,” the tears said in unison.

Lana silenced them again and whispered, “I don’t have time to explain, but I beg you to trust me. Once you’re outside, go to the Moon, and when you get close, just hug tightly.”

“Oh, Lana, I don’t know. What if the sorrowtroopers attack us? You can see how dangerous they are!” a tear said.

“They won’t attack you. They won’t see you. Please, do as I tell you. Now it’s time for you to believe in me!”

Not knowing what else to do, the tears agreed.

Lana jumped off the first wagon on to the next, took another look around and said, “Now! Go, hug tightly!”

She moved to the third wagon, then fourth, and so on until she freed every single tear. But for the tears to hear her, she had to be loud. Thus Feera heard her too and immediately flew towards her on Layla’s back.

A moment later everything changed. The tears, just like Lana had asked them to, surrounded the Moon and embraced, creating a thick watery membrane around him – and the Moon’s glow, although weak and wavering, reflected in the tears and created a whole new light, a light of salvation. Reflected in tears, the Moon shone and gleamed so powerfully

that the sorrowtroopers fell to their knees in despair, covering their eyes with their hands in an attempt to hide from the sudden light that was spreading through Tearopie.

Disabled as they were, they couldn't prevent Hugger and Eli from escaping. Eli grabbed his jar and called out to Timothy and his Fear. He couldn't see them, but their muffled voices called back from his right-side pocket where they'd hidden.

176 Just then Layla, with Feera on her back, landed on the Moon with all her might and tore at it with her talons. Although weak and weary, the Moon did not give in to the attack. Eager for the sky and freedom, he fought and evaded the talons with growing vehemence – and then he accidentally struck the tear membrane. The tears lost their grip on each other; they fell out of their embrace and spilled over the entire Land of Tearopie.

As they couldn't control their speed and direction, the torrent of tears swept Lana away; it rushed along Tearopie like a perilous river rapid, throwing Lana here and there until a wave of tears cast her out, throwing her against a rock. In the darkness that fell over Tearopie as soon as the tears spilled, covering the last hope that the good creatures of this land would be saved, the girl lay unconscious.

“Lanaaaa!” Eli cried out running towards her, but in darkness he tripped and fell. Hugger wanted to help him, but he couldn't find him in the Gloom. The Moon, too wounded to fight, stopped resisting as well. And before they knew what was happening, the sorrowtroopers chained all the tears, Hugger and Eli in a single file, and the bird Layla picked up the still unconscious Lana.

“Bring her to the castle,” Feera ordered. “It's not too late for her tear yet!”

When Layla flew away, the evil founder spoke to her prisoners. “You wanted to trick me. Have you forgotten that I'm the founder of the most important land in the Stu Domain? Have you forgotten the extent of my power?” She flicked her hand angrily. “Go to the well. Its bottom is the last thing you'll see. Come now, don't resist!” Feera yelled as the sorrowtroopers pushed them, pinched them and drove them to the well.

Scared, Eli furtively looked back to see if Lana had woken up. He thought the sight of her would give him hope, but when he saw the girl

lying unconsciously in the talons of the evil bird that was now close to the castle, Eli felt even more hopeless. Hanging his head, he continued to walk in the file of the imprisoned good creatures.

Reaching the well, Feera jumped on the edge of the well and glared at them. She was just about to speak when the ground of Tearopie shook. Feera frowned and looked around. "What was that?" she asked, not knowing celestial roots had already begun their work. As the sorrowtroopers just shrugged, she turned her attention back to Eli, Hugger and the tears.

This time, however, she didn't even have time to open her mouth before the ground shook so violently that Feera lost her balance and fell into the well.

The sorrowtroopers flocked to the edge of the well, but they could do nothing but watch their evil mistress fall into the darkness she herself had dug. "Noooo, Laylaaaaaaa!" she screamed, falling. Hearing her cry, Layla dropped Lana in the castle yard and flew towards the well. "Layla, get down here and help me!" Feera screamed from the bottom of the well.

"But I can't save you, mistress," Layla said, dismayed. "I can't get out of that dark. The last time I fell, I wasn't able to fly up on my own."

"Nonsense! Get down here this instant!" Feera raged – and Layla, although aware she'd never be able to save either herself or her mistress, jumped in the Gloom after her.

The sorrowtroopers watched in dismay. All they knew was to obey Feera's orders, for she was the one running their lives and purpose. At a loss for what to do, they went back to the prisoners to keep watch lest they set themselves free.

In all this they forgot about Lana. When Layla dropped her, the force of the fall woke the girl, so she saw everything that happened. As her hands weren't tied, she ran towards the meadow and freed her beloved Moon from the chains.

"Go, save yourself!" she whispered. "We'll be fine! See you among the stars!"

But the Moon wouldn't listen. "Lana, my light, however weak it may be, is still the only light you have. No, I will not leave you!" he said.

As if agreeing with his words, the ground shook again – but with the new tremor came light and hope. The mountain peaks began to crumble

and fall, letting through the light of stars that pierced the darkness like spears. Weakened by live celestial roots from below, the mountains yielded to the force of the hundreds of founders who were pulling them to the other side with the dead roots.

178 The light the founders had let into Tearpie brought the sorrowtroopers to their knees, so Lana ran, joyful, to free Eli, Huggers and the tears. The founders were already running towards them. While she was untying Eli's hands, Lana heard a whistle from the sky: Kan the All-Knowing was waving at her from his locomotive. He'd hooked up all the wagons Layla had brought into Tearpie, and Lana laughed as tears boarded the train.

Instead of bringing them home to HealVille, however, Kan proceeded to fill the wagons with sorrowtroopers whose eyes were still closed against the light that had finally arrived in Tearpie.

"Kan, what are you doing? They're evil!" Lana pointed out, confused.

"Lana, they're evil because no one showed them how to be anything else. Until now. Now we'll teach them," Kan explained calmly.

"But how? They can't stand light."

"Just like they got used to the dark, they'll get used to the light. It'll take time and kindness, but never forget – they all came from children's hearts," Kan said, concluding, "Nothing and no one coming from the heart is made to be in the dark. It's not their destiny."

So Kan flew out of Tearpie together with tears and sorrowtroopers, and Lana, Eli and all his feelings jumped on Hugger's back and took off to the skies. The great Moon followed them in their flight. All the founders of magical lands applauded from the ground, joyful, before they too followed suit. And when the light of some happier sky caressed their faces, peace came over Lana and Eli; they knew darkness could no longer harm them. The Moon soared into the embrace of good, shimmering stars which instantly began to heal his wounds. "Thank you for the hug, Lana!" he yelled in a goodbye to smiling Lana.

When Hugger was far enough, Tearpie was gripped by mighty celestial roots and ground into dust. Lana and Eli didn't see this. As they sat on Hugger in silence, Lana noticed that Eli felt comfortable on the back of the cloud he used to fear. Eli, on the other hand, knew that the girl he used to envy was the most pleasant company he could wish for.

But Lana couldn't feel completely at peace, not yet. She still didn't know what happened to Ernest. Besides, as Hugger approached HealVille, it became painfully clear how much the land had changed in such a short time.

"Lana, are you alright?" Eli asked, worried, when Hugger left them on the ground and flew back to his family of Good Clouds. He could tell by the sorrow in her eyes that HealVille wasn't supposed to look like this.

Lana shook her head, dismayed. "This... this can't be..." she said in disbelief. HealVille lay in ruins. The houses with gateways to lands on the Path of Truth were demolished. Each colourful stone of the magical land was covered in dust, and even the Lake of Children's Tears, now full again, looked colourless under the starry sky.

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Then Kan the All-Knowing came flying towards them. Before she could ask the question that bothered her the most, Kan told them, "Lana and Eli, go straight to BeHill. Ernest and the Director are waiting for you. Hurry, it's important!"

Lana immediately ran up the hill. Eli just stood there, confused, for there was something else that bothered him.

"Kan, are the sorrowtroopers there too?" he asked carefully.

"No, Eli, they've already entered the rehabilitation program. They're travelling the Path of Truth so they could learn that they, too, are able to feel peace and joy and understand that darkness is not their destiny."

Although Kan's answer calmed him down, Eli wanted to know where Feera was too.

"On the bottom of the well she herself has dug," Kan said. "Layla can't rise from that dark, so the only exits left are those in the cells of Gloom. I don't know whether they'll manage to save themselves, but they are responsible for their own destiny. Magic can't help them now. In any case, all that's left of Tearopie is dust and a single well, and it's possible no one will ever get out of it again."

"Not even the shadows of children from Earth?" Eli asked, worried.

"We saved them already, Eli. I can't tell you where they are, but you can be sure that the place they're at is good for them."

"But why didn't Feera disappear too? When I testified in Ballbeck, you said that HealVille would disappear, just like Ernest. Why didn't Feera disappear?" Eli wanted to know.

“Everyone disappears in their own way. She’s disappearing through the darkness she herself has created.”

Eli wasn’t completely satisfied with the explanation, but seeing that Lana was already close to the top of BeHill, he ran after her.



180 In front of Ernest’s cottage Lana was greeted by the Director. She didn’t beat about the bush. “Lana, Ernest is quite unwell.” When the girl wanted to come in, the Director stopped her. “We should wait for Eli.”

The boy was just climbing towards them. “Here I am!” he said, catching his breath.

“Welcome to HealVille, Eli! We’ve been waiting for you!” the Director said, returning his smile. “Come with me,” she said, opening the door.

The crackling of the fire in the hearth graced the silence of the cottage. Seeing the top of Ernest’s hat peaking above the back of the armchair, Lana came closer. She was shocked to see him. The founder of HealVille was shrouded in helplessness, sorrow and hopelessness. His once colourful necklace was now black. They watched each other in silence for a while, then Lana stepped closer and embraced him.

“What’s going on?” she whispered. “Why are you sad? We saved HealVille! You just have to... clean it up a bit.”

Ernest smiled gently. “True, HealVille is saved. But it wasn’t us that saved it, it was you – you and Eli. Where’s Eli?” Ernest asked, turning his head.

Eli stepped in front of him.

“Eli, I’m so pleased to see you! We’ve all been waiting for you for so long!”

Eli smiled uncertainly. “I’m glad. I’ve heard about you. I saw you too, you know, back in Ballbeck... But I don’t understand... I didn’t know you were waiting for me?” he admitted, confused.

“Oh, yes, we’ve been waiting for you since ever since you first set your foot on Panatone,” Ernest said.

“But I came to Panatone so I could go to Tearopie,” Eli protested.

“You came to Panatone in search of Hope. Tearopie was never your destination, only a stop on your way towards peace and understanding.”

Eli was silent for a moment. He knew he needed Hope, but... “I still don’t understand. I’ve never been through Wellspring—“

“No,” Ernest interrupted. “You haven’t; because the magic of Centennial Lands has suddenly vanished. That, however, didn’t interrupt your search for Hope.” He looked at Eli’s bracelet, and so did Lana. It was colourful.

Eli was astonished. “But... how?!”

“You came to Centennial Lands in hope of being at peace and happy again. Although the magic went out, you didn’t lose Hope. Even in the deepest darkness of the galaxy you managed to find a grain of it. And when the grain was gone, you found Hope in yourself, by facing your own Fear.”

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Just then, Timothy peaked from his pocket. He was still a tiny tear, but his eyes were burning with desire for growth. The Director approached him and took him in her arms.

“Welcome, Timothy! Are you ready to grow?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, I’m quite ready!” Timothy said looking at Eli.

The Director looked at the tears in the jar that Eli was still pressing to his chest. “What about you?”

“We’re ready too!”

The Director smiled. “You’ll stay in HealVille and join the other tears.” She turned her gaze to the Fear in the balloon and the other feelings in the jar. “And you’ll travel the Path of Truth until you reach the bimalis field where you can eat. I can see you’re hungry.”

“Hasn’t Feera ploughed the bimalis field?” Lana piped up.

“She has, but we have the seeds. We’ve heard everything from Kan. Many founders are working at sowing the field anew even as we speak. By the time Eli’s feelings reach the field, bimalis will be ready.”

Lana smiled in relief.

Eli looked at Timothy, his fear, all his tears and feelings in the jar.

“Thank you for everything! Thanks to you, I wasn’t alone when I felt the worst.”

“Thank you, Eli!” they responded as one.

“I hope to come back to you soon, in case you need me!” Timothy said.

“We too, we too!” the other tears spoke up.

Ali laughed. “I’d love that!”

Touched, Eli gave the jar to the Director, who took it with a smile and left the cottage with tears and Eli's feelings.

"Go on," Ernest spoke up. "Now that you're finally free and at peace, go and enjoy HealVille. It may not be at its best right now, but staying here will still grant you everything you need. Look for Kan the All-Knowing, he'll be your guide."

Eli nodded. He was just starting for the door when Ernest called his name again.

182 "Eli, thank you for everything you did. Thank you for the Hope you brought to our land!" Ernest said honestly.

When Eli went to look for Kan, Lana was alone with Ernest.

"My dear girl, listen well," Ernest said her looking in the eye. "I must leave HealVille for a while. The Director will make sure the land is put in order and made magical again, just like before, just like it was this morning. But I can't stay. I'm too tired and too sad. Too old. You and Eli are going home today. You won't be able to come back to Centennial Lands until they recover from the troubles they've been through, that you and Eli saved us from when we didn't have enough Hope. I'll find a way to thank you yet - but now I have to go."

"But where are you going? Will I ever see you again?" Lana asked, on the verge of tears.

Ernest shook his head, smiling kindly. "Lana, I'll be fine. I promise. But now you have to let me go. Do you see my necklace? It's black because I haven't done something nice for myself for one single day. For only one day I've forgotten to tell myself that I know how to feel peace and joy, that my dreams didn't vanish, that I'm not alone and that I have courage inside me. I've allowed a single horrible event to erase all colours from me. Do you understand? I can't stay in a magical land if I myself don't believe I'm magical," he explained gently.

Lana nodded. "I understand." She knew everything Ernest said was true. We can never expect people we want to help to be well, for when it comes to feelings, someone else's conditions, rules and demands don't apply. All we can do is support them on their way towards peace and happiness.

"Where will you be? Can I at least know that?" Lana asked, sighing.

"I'm going on the journey to myself. I don't know what lands I'll

have to go through to do that, to come to know myself, love myself and embrace myself; to believe I'm magical again. But I do know I'll persist. I can promise you that!"

"Alright. I believe you." Pausing, Lana admitted, "I'm still sad."

"Hmm..." Ernest grew thoughtful. "That's not Sorrow. Those are just our hearts saying goodbye, full of gratitude that they had an opportunity to meet. I can hear them too." Then he started to cry and pulled Lana into an embrace.

"Come, help me stand up," he said after a while.

Leaning on Lana's shoulder, Ernest walked to the door and stopped to look at his beloved HealVille in the light of the Moon and stars. To Lana it seemed as if he were looking upon what he'd created for one last time with pride and wistfulness. As if he were saying goodbye. The thought once again brought her to tears.

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Then the Director approached them. Ernest took a deep breath and smiled bravely. "I'm ready!" he said, and the Director whistled for Flu-Flu.

"Stay magical, Lana!" Ernest said gently when he climbed on the cloud's back – and he flew off into the sky.

"Where's Flu-Flu taking him?" Lana asked the Director as she watched him disappear into the distance.

"To the stars. They'll embrace him and send him off on his journey into himself." The Director put an arm around her shoulder. "Come, we have to send you and Eli home."

Together they started to walk towards the Lake of Children's Tears. They didn't speak at first. Lana was watching her beloved land turn ruddy again. She saw tears picking up stones one by one, carefully and gently dusting them off, only to embrace them and put them back where they belonged. As they did, they sang to the Sun, the Moon and the stars. They celebrated light in all its forms and rejoiced at each moment in the land that no longer shuddered. That was when Lana finally realised that HealVille was safe and that it would stay safe for at least a hundred more years.

"Have you been long in HealVille? Since the beginning?" she asked the Director.

"Oh, no – just a few decades. Three, to be precise. I came from a heart of a certain boy when he was nine years old. I'm proud to say I was the

first tear who wrote to her child. That's how I became the Director of the Sorrow Observatory," the tear boasted.

"You founded the Sorrow Observatory?"

"Actually no. The observatory already existed; it was just that children didn't get letters. But when I saw how much my boy struggled to understand his feelings, I couldn't just watch and say nothing. He was so close to understanding everything that I wrote him a letter to help. When the other tears in HealVille saw what I was doing and how much it helped my boy, they began to do the same. Ernest supported us."

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"Thank you for doing that. It was thanks to you that I had an opportunity to feel hundreds of children," Lana said earnestly. "How is your boy today?"

"Oh, he's no longer a boy. Now he's a dad!"

"Really?" Lana asked curiously. "What happened to him? And why was he sad?"

"Well, he was born in a family of the Knights of the Noble Gaze. When he was just a little boy, his parents fell ill and died, and he became an orphan. Sadly, of all the families that could've adopted him, he ended up in Wellsdon where, as a boy, he wasn't allowed to cry. He struggled with his feelings in various ways. Several times he nearly stopped believing that he'd ever be happy, but he persisted. When he started to search for a place where he could cry without fear of being shamed for it, he found a certain meadow in Forhill. He went there every day, and one summer he met a girl who became his friend. When they grew up, they fell in love and started a family. As years went by, I wrote to him less and less, for the girl I mentioned also came from a family of the Knights of the Noble Gaze, so my boy had as much love as he needed. Then, one night in July, a girl was born and my boy became a dad. That night was the first time an Aide came to HealVille not carrying sadness, but a wish from the boy's heart. When he became a dad, my boy wished that his letters, all the letters that ever helped him, ended up in the hands of children who needed them."

"Why did he do that?" Lana interrupted.

"Because in the eyes of his child he saw love and began to hope that he'd know how to be well for as long as he had her in his life. He no longer needed the magic of other worlds, for he was holding his magic in his arms," the Director said.

“You see, Lana, because of that wish the founders of Centennial Lands joined their magic together. Each of them sent a single magical grain from their world to Earth, to bring the letters to children who need them. The letters are still travelling – all his letters but one. The first one we kept for a very special girl, so it could light her way if it were ever shrouded in mist.”

Lana asked with tears in her eyes, “And what... what was the boy’s name?”

The Director looked her in the eye. “Mak. Mak Fisher.”

Crying, Lana hugged her.

“Now you know everything, Lana. Now you’re ready to go home.”

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Lana said nothing else. She approached the bench and sat to wait for Eli and Kan, watching the land come back into health.

It was close to morning when Kan brought Eli to Lana. He gave Lana a hug, sat the boy down and explained that if he wanted to go home, he should whisper something nice. Eli nodded, took a deep breath, closed his eyes and whispered, “You’ll be fine. You’ll always be fine.”

Just before Lana was about to do the same, she saw Orka, Vera and Orlo jumping and cheerfully waving at her from the lake. Laughing, she returned the greeting, inhaled and closed her eyes. What she whispered today was different. “You’re somebody’s magic,” she told herself.

A moment later they both opened their eyes on the meadow under the oak. They quietly looked towards the hole Eli had dug in the ground so long ago, only this morning – and then they ran home, laughing.

The round clock in the kitchen showed that their adventure in the magical lands lasted, as usual, only 15 Earth minutes.

“Hey, you two!” Eli’s dad said entering the kitchen. “Are you alright? What made you so happy? And what are these bracelets? Where did you find those?”

The children exchanged looks, smiled at each other and ran to their rooms, not saying a word. Lana stored the bottle of Hope she’d gotten from Kan in the box with her keepsakes from the Path of Truth and lay on the bed, wanting to go over what she’d just been through in her heads. But, like Eli, she couldn’t. Both children quickly fell asleep, dreaming about magic.



When Lana awoke the next day, she ran to the kitchen in hope she didn't miss Eli. She wanted to see him off – but there were only mum and dad in the kitchen, hugging. Their eyes were full of tears, but they looked happy.

“What’s happening?” she asked, confused. Her parents motioned her closer and embraced her, saying nothing.

There was a familiar looking letter on the otherwise empty table. Pulling out of their arms, Lana took it and started to read. The letter said:

Dear Mak,

186 *I'm so proud of you and Eva. Just so you know, yesterday Lana hugged the Moon! Thank you for never telling her it was impossible.*

In the name of the residents of HealVille,

Martha, the Director of the Sorrow Observatory

Lana raised her eyes from the letter to look at dad. “Now you know,” she said.

“We know,” her dad replied.

“So... Even then you knew. The day I asked you about HealVille, you knew? Why didn't you tell me?”

“Because I didn't want to get in your way. Of course we were here, are here for you whenever you need us, but you were already finding your own way, getting to know yourself, and you were doing well. You did more than well. That's all we wanted for you – to find your own light, to follow it and guard it.”

Her dad put his hand on her shoulder; her mum embraced her.

The happy moment was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. It was Eli with a suitcase in his hand. His parents thanked the Fishers on their hospitality and began to walk across the meadow towards the forest, towards Wellsdon. Before that, Lana and Eli shared a firm hug. Lana whispered to him how happy she was to share such an important adventure with him, and he said he'd allow himself to cry even if he was forbidden to do so.



Today, Lana Fisher and Eli Malik are ten years old and they live completely different lives. Still, when they met in the darkest moments

of their lives, searching for light, magic and peace, they were close. Even though they hadn't seen or spoken to each other since Eli had left Forhill, Lana remembered the boy every time she went to the meadow to feel feelings, and Eli remembered Lana every time he wrote his feelings down.

Until her tenth birthday, there wasn't a day that Lana didn't feel her feelings. That day in July she sat under the oak as usual, closed her eyes and began to breathe the way she'd learned in the Land of Hale – but instead of feelings, she felt a touch. She knew the hand that had covered hers, she recognised its warmth. Opening her eyes, she found herself sitting on the bench by the lake – and next to her sat Ernest.

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He looked younger than the last time she'd seen him, as young as he was when she'd first met him. "Didn't I tell you?" he asked, smiling.

Overjoyed, Lana threw her arms around him, and he hugged her back.

A while later Ernest pulled away to tell her the happy news. "We won't stay in HealVille today. I have to take you somewhere. They're waiting for you."

"Where are we going?" she asked happily.

"To the opening ceremony of the new Centennial Land!"

"A new land?" she asked, elated. "What's its purpose?"

"That's something its founder should tell you," Ernest said mysteriously.

Lana wriggled in excitement. "I can't wait! Who is it?"

"Someone you know well," Ernest said. "Someone who's still wearing that same green jumper, even for this festive occasion."

Lana stared at Ernest in astonishment. Her smile grew wider, spilled into laughter. A moment later Hugger joined them, happy and at peace. Lana gave him a hug, and then she and Ernest flew on the cloud's back high into the sky, towards the land of the boy who long ago had been forbidden from crying.

And you, dear child, you'll go there someday too. I'll take you. But before we start the journey, I need to know you believe me when I tell you that you're magical, that you're enough, that you're beautiful. Can I count on that?

Acknowledgments

In the saddest period of my life, I found myself in a room full of people I knew and whom I was, at the time, deeply convinced were more beautiful than me, better than me in everything, more valuable than me. And then, a question crossed my mind: what do I have, that no one else in this room has? The answer surprised even me, and it was: a happy childhood. In those two words, I found the strength to come out of the darkness I was in and to breathe peacefully, happily and fulfilled today. That night, I declared my happy childhood to be my superpower. And only then did I become aware that I have a family and a home where I can go when I'm sad and my sadness will be accepted there. I could go there with my mistakes and they were understood. I could and was allowed to come there in any condition, and leave from there to continue with my life with a little more love for myself. With such a home, I walk bravely and with ease to this day. And that's why, when I started writing this story, I wanted it to pay tribute to my happy childhood. But, while I was writing it, I realized that passing through it were also the parts of all those other beings that I met outside of my birth home. And I want to thank them all:

Mom and Dad, thank you for hugging me, supporting me and believing in me, even when you didn't understand exactly what I was trying to do; when I still didn't understand it myself.

To my sisters, Iva and Katarina, thank you for hugging me the hardest when I was at my worst. And for still doing it today.

Thank you to my husband Jurica for looking at me as if I were magic, when I wasn't magical to myself.

Jana, Lena and Bruno – it is a great honor to grow with you, thank you!

To Damir, my Ernest from this world, thank you for always making me understand what is happening around my heart and for embracing in me everything that I sometimes forget myself.

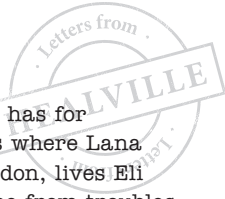

To my editor, Iva – you were the guardian of this story, its tenderness and purity. Thank you for making sure I didn't lose my way.

To my mentor and friend Leonor, thank you for the knowledge, support, inspiration and trust you give me. I will forever remind you of how important you are in my life.

To the guys from Studio Size, thank you for your friendly support, but also for your patience, flexibility and great skill in encasing my words in covers that I am proud of.

All of you are in this story, I hope you recognize yourselves.

Jelica



On one side of a pine forest stands Forhill – a little town that has for centuries been free from all the troubles of the world. That is where Lana Fisher is growing up. On the other side of the forest, in Wellsdon, lives Eli Malik - a boy that sometimes feels that he has never been free from troubles.

Eli and Lana are the same height and the same age, eight years old, but they live completely different lives. But, when they meet each other, they share the same problem – they are both going through their first great suffering. While exploring ways to deal with the feelings confusing them, Lana and Eli end up in a magical province of Centennial Lands. Delighted to learn that these Lands have been founded by children throughout centuries, Lana and Eli bravely give in to a magical adventure with completely different experiences. While Lana spends her time in gentle conversations with the tears she once cried out, Eli is surrounded by the tired and sad shadows of invisible children from Earth.

When a great danger befalls the Centennial Lands, Lana and Eli urgently need to return home, but it turns out that will not be easy. Because, in these extraordinary circumstances, all magic in the Centennial Lands is being extinguished. In order to get home safely and save the Centennial Lands, Lana and Eli will first have to find the magic within themselves.