

**Biography:** Writer and journalist Sabīne Košeļeva (1989) has a Bachelor's degree in Communication science with specialization in journalism, Master's degree in Humanities with specialization in creative writing and has experience as an exchange student in Vilnius University, English Studies (Literature, Linguistics, Culture). Sabīne Košeļeva Participates in prose readings and publishes in cultural media, covering topics such as spiritual growth, trauma healing, moral values of society, physical and psychological violence and sexuality, and other aspects of relationship. She works in online media since 2012.

**Synopsis:** This is the story of a cucumber who has grown up unlike any of the other residents in his vegetable patch. He is uncomfortable with the fact that he is small and curved and this plays constantly on his mind. His sense of self-dissatisfaction is amplified by his cousin's bullying, resulting in him withdrawing into himself and then worrying he will become bitter. His mum's words of comfort do nothing to help but luckily an enterprising girl cucumber, Alina, comes to his aid. This story is about the importance of cooperation and finding a common language to ensure not only that life is more joyful but also more emotionally fulfilling.

### Excerpt

Elmer the Cucumber was born in a vegetable patch in the very middle of a garden along with various other cucumbers – his brothers, sisters and cousins of varying degrees, many of whom he had never actually met but only heard of from his mum and dad. This is often the case in large families, even more so in a very big vegetable patch.

On one side of the patch, pink-cheeked strawberries spread out their runners while on the other some scruffy garlic bulbs were lined up like tin soldiers. All the vegetables knew their places and stuck to them, with no trespassing on other vegetables' space, so there was never any bad feeling amongst neighbours. They all lived alongside each other as friends,

greeting each other politely and exchanging news about what was going on in other corners of the garden.

In the spring, when Elmer the Cucumber was still a tiny seed and living under the soil, the vegetable patch was covered with plastic sheeting so the cucumber children wouldn't catch cold or have their stalks frozen off. Then, when the summer really set in and the sun caressed the ground with its warm hands, Master Albert removed the plastic sheeting and stored it away in the garden shed along with his rakes, hoes, spades, big red watering can and rumbling green wheelbarrow, until the following spring when he would plant new cucumber children again.

If it wasn't for Toby the dog who would often come into the garden and lie down on top of the cucumbers, life in the vegetable patch was otherwise very pleasant and peaceful. There was plenty of space for everyone and leaves shielded the cucumber children from harsh raindrops, gusts of wind and the possibility of sunstroke. Besides, no one could ever be bored or sad – they were all surrounded by friends and relatives to chat to and play with. Every so often they could even go and visit other garden residents and even get up to some mischief.

Elmer's second cousin, Renar, was the naughtiest of rascals. He would tug at the hems of the girls' skirts then turn away as if he didn't know who had done it – certainly not him. Of course, the girls all knew it had been Renar, who else did things like that? But no-one ever actually saw him do it so they couldn't prove it had been him. Renar was sly but cocky at the same the same time – no one could stand him. They all just put up with him for a quiet life. Strangely, he had a greater say on what went on in the vegetable patch than those who

grew nicely in their own places and didn't set out to get on other people's nerves. That's what Elmer's mum used to say – that Elmer liked to get on everyone's nerves. She must have been teasing him.

Renar used to tease Elmer, too, who was much smaller than him and had grown to be rather curved in the middle. Renar was actually quite a bully, calling him curly sausage, bendy worm and garden hose. Elmer was so hurt by these taunts that he grew ever more withdrawn. He laughed less and less and played listlessly, worrying about why he had been born different, unlike all the other cucumbers.

Elmer had been curved in the middle since he was born and nothing could be done about it. Every morning he did plenty of stretching exercises, trying to pat the bulgy underbelly of the clouds, reaching up to brush the warm cheeks of the sun with his fingertips and bending down to touch his toes but, for all his best efforts, he didn't get any straighter. Elmer the Cucumber's mum would comfort him, saying there was nothing wrong with being curved. Mother Nature made some cucumbers curved and others long and straight, some had hard, knobbly bumps and some never grew very much whilst others got far too big. None of these things were either good or bad. It was just the way things were! In the same way that you had to clean your teeth before bed to stop pesky tooth decay monsters munching on your teeth at night or how you had to eat porridge in the morning to grow up strong and healthy.

'If truth be told, there's no right or wrong when it comes to the size and shape of cucumbers,' mum told Elmer as he lay beneath his leaf, sullen and unhappy. Stroking the back of his head, she said, 'The most important thing for a cucumber is to keep his cucumber heart sweet, to be happy and make others happy, too, and not to try at all costs

to look like the cucumbers on supermarket shelves. Renar is in no way better or more of a cucumber just because he is big and straight. He probably really wants to be friends but just doesn't know how to and ends up trying to get everyone's attention by being annoying to stop feeling so lonely.' She comforted her sulking son, telling him that it was no doubt because Renar had a hoard of younger brothers and sisters who took up all their parents' time and energy as they were still too young to look after themselves. They couldn't really play with him so he poked fun at them instead, calling them 'the midgets', showing off and throwing himself about the vegetable patch, letting off steam and trying to stop feeling lonely. Elmer the Cucumber loved his mum dearly – she was the first one he turned to when something was worrying him or he had a tummy or toothache and she always did her very best to help him. But on this occasion, what she said about cucumber specifications did little to reassure him. Elmer the Cucumber knew very well that every child was perfect in his mother's eyes. He continued worrying and the bigger he grew, the more he worried. At times, Elmer the Cucumber worried so much that he couldn't sleep at night. On such nights, he would lie on his bed of light soil with his eyes wide open, watching the starry sky while grasshoppers chirruped in the grass and fireflies flitted here and there. He used an imaginary magic pencil to join up the dots of the constellations: Ursa Major, Canis venatici, Leo minor, Cygnus, Delphinus, Grus, Volans, Draco or even Apus. They were all Elmer's friends as they never made fun of him and never mentioned his curved shape. The following day, Elmer the Cucumber found it very difficult to wake up. His head felt as if a metal bucket had been squeezed inside it, but that was clearly impossible – there weren't any metal buckets small enough to fit inside his head!

'What's the matter with you, Elmer?' the pretty cucumber girl, Alina, from the cucumber bed next to his asked when he was still in his furrow at noon the next day. Alina was worried about him. For quite some time, Elmer had not seemed himself and wasn't the usual lively, kind cucumber he had been.

'Nothing much. I just have a bit of a headache,' he answered weakly, rolling onto his other side so Alina wouldn't notice his eyes were red from crying. Alina was one of the most beautiful girls in the cucumber patch, straight and hard, with a tiny yellow flower on top of her head. She was very popular as she was enterprising and always ready to help, on top of which she had such a beautiful, clear singing voice that even Renar the mean cucumber shut up and listened, enraptured, when she sang. He really liked Alina but he could never muster up the courage to tell her so.

'Why is your head aching?' She wasn't giving up. 'Perhaps you spent too much time in the sun yesterday?'

'No,' he replied drily. 'I just worried too much yesterday.'

'And what was worrying you so much?' Alina pressed her friend.

'Being so curved,' he confessed shyly.

At that, Alina giggled. Not unkindly like Renar would have done, but in surprise that he should say something so odd. Why worry about being curved, straight or rotund? So what? There are so many other more useful and more exciting things in life to think about, like multiplication tables, music scores or swimming, for example'

'Elmer my friend! Didn't you know that cucumbers turn bitter if they worry too much?' Alina exclaimed, clapping her hands.

'I couldn't care less about that,' Elmer the Cucumber muttered.

Their little chat was over.

Elmer's last answer gave Alina all the more cause for concern and she couldn't stop thinking about it. No cucumber wants to be bitter! It was the worst thing possible for a cucumber as then no one would want to eat you. And that was what cucumbers came into this world for - to be eaten! To be cut up into salads and tossed together with a dressing, to be made into pickles or preserves for the winter or to be crunched just as they were, peel and all, straight from the vegetable patch. No cucumber ever wanted to turn bitter!

An idea popped into Alina's head. She ran back to her furrow where other cucumber children were playing a ballgame. She waited for them to finish then, in her melodious voice, called all the hot and sweaty cucumbers to come and sit in a circle. She had something important to say.

'My dear friends!' the spirited cucumber girl began, stepping up onto the raised edge of the patch. 'We cucumbers are renowned among all vegetables for our exceptional talent for being united, caring for each other and helping each other out, even when we are not going to be rewarded for doing so. It is what we strive for, viewing our lives as successful only when we live together harmoniously.'

The other cucumbers, sitting in a circle in front of the persuasive young speaker, nodded in agreement and murmured their support. 'Yes, yes, she is right! We cucumbers would never turn our back on someone in need. We'll not allow anyone worry. We are team players and team work is only successful if every player feels good.'