

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

A Hole in the Bathtub

Monica loved to take a bath. Sometimes, while being in the warm and transparent water, she would close her eyes and imagine herself floating on her back in a lake in the middle of the forest.

...the lake is round, and its smooth mirror-like surface reflects the perfectly blue sky and white clouds... golden glittery dragonflies scurry across it, and reeds rustle silently offshore, swaying in a light breeze.

Monica gets awakened from her dreams only when grandma or grandpa slams the door to the living room. Then she reluctantly leaves the lake in the forest and opens her eyes to find herself in the familiar bathroom with dark blue shower curtains and the ceiling that had become black from the constantly moist air.

Monica was ten years old and she lived in the centre of the city in an old brick house with her grandparents. Yet they seemed not to be quite right to be grandparents.

Monica's grandma was constantly complaining about something, and her grandpa had given up arguing with her and one day had stopped talking altogether....

Monica liked to take a bath for several reasons. To begin with, it was a place where she could warm up during the cold autumn breezes, when the rest of the apartment was constantly cold and unpleasant. Also, when submerged in the warm water, she completely forgot about the outside world and drifted into fantasies...

One of her favourite dreams was about the mid-forest lake. But there were other dreams too – sometimes she was swimming through colourful coral reefs, where tropical fishes in astonishing colours darted back and forth.

Monica's grandma was glad to leave the girl on her own and, as it sometimes seemed, she would pass her without even noticing her. It wasn't like the grandma would shout at Monica; she just simply didn't talk to her. Since her grandpa wasn't uttering a word, Monica was left with a choice of either talking to herself or her dog – a big, mop-headed mongrel named Ben.

On one Sunday afternoon Monica was again getting ready to take a bath. Everything was as usual – grandpa was resting and reading in his massive armchair in the bedroom, and grandma was making an apple jam in the kitchen, muttering something under her breath.

Monica went to the bathroom and bolted the door to ensure that nobody would disturb her. While watching the water filling the tub, she warmed up her cold hands against the hot water pipes. The water was noisily gushing in, and Monica, her eyes closed, pictured herself in a jungle, standing on the banks of a wild river that was filled with a massive cascading waterfall...

Then she approached the bath to check the water.

It turned out to be exactly right, and Monica threw her clothes in a cluttered pile by the bath and descended into the warm water. Soon Monica's black curly hair embraced her and floated around like independent creatures. It felt as though they could swim away any minute.

A few toys lay beside the bath. The green crocodile, which looked and behaved as if being alive, was the most important among them all. There was a hole in his white tummy, which most likely had once been a place for a squeaker that had now fallen out. After the crocodile had swum for a while, it got filled up with water and then gradually started to drown. Then it was

time for Monica to come to the rescue and squeeze all the water out of it, and the green and impressive predator was able to paddle proudly around the bath again...

When the crocodile had drowned three times in a row, and Monica had also rescued it three times, she got bored and placed it on the edge of the bath. Then she turned on her back and lay very still without even wiggling her hands or feet. This felt as comfortable as if she was sitting on a chair.

Now she was swimming in the lake again...

She detected storm clouds gathering in the sky and immediately changed her position turning on her stomach. To become used to the new scene, she left her eyes shut for a while and when she finally opened them she perceived a magnificent underworld stretching all beneath her.

The water was no longer the pale, transparent tap water but had turned into a shimmering turquoise blue. The bottom of the lake was covered with yellowish sand with various dark-green coloured water plants edging out and soundlessly swaying in harmony with the water. Suddenly this underworld silence was disturbed by a strange sound, somewhat muffled by the water. For a moment Monica couldn't grasp what was happening. Then she revolved on her back and thrusting her head out of the water, she realised it was Ben scratching behind the door.

Once Ben had slurped lots of the soapy bath water, then later in the evening it was followed by a constant throwing up. Since that incident Ben was banished from the bathroom. In addition, he had a bad habit of snatching the green crocodile. Most likely this was the reason Ben was yearning to get into the bathroom...

Ben was a pretty strange dog, who liked radio more than anything else. Day after day, he could sit by the old radio in Monica's room and change the radio stations, turning the knob with his teeth. At times he was carrying it out without any sense, but when he managed to capture a

piece he liked, he lay down by the radio and howled along in a breaking voice. As long as his favourite tune was on, Ben kept on wailing but as soon as it changed to a ‘no howling tune’, Ben set to the handle again with a deep sigh...

Ben was sitting behind the bathroom door and scratching it occasionally, letting out harrowing sighs. Still Monica remained firm and tried not to pay any attention to him.

“Ben, hush now!” she finally called, but Ben wouldn’t cease. In fact, he ignored the “hush” completely and carried on fooling around.

“Oh, come on! Go listen to the radio instead,” Monica called out. But Ben, who had been listening to the radio all day long, was left completely hoarse from the howling and it was no longer fun if he couldn’t sing along! Therefore, he kept on wrecking the bathroom door, as he could sense behind it the much hated green crocodile...

“What’s happening over there?” an angry yell came from the kitchen, and the furious grandma hurried down the hallway. For a while there was a real tussle behind the door accompanied with grandma’s scolding and dog’s growling. At last there was a soft sound in the hallway as if somebody was pulling a heavy sack filled with rags, and that was followed by a strange squeaking. Monica chuckled. She could vividly picture her grandma sweating and panting while dragging the massive dog away from the bathroom.

Gradually the scratching and shuffling noises settled down, and a door slammed somewhere. Shortly ‘Hey Jude’ was sung by Ben along with ‘the Beatles’.

Monica kept giggling and realized that the evening’s swimming was over. Ben had scared away all the miracles of the underworld and now it would be rather tricky to recoup them. Thus Monica started to wash and later pulled out the plug.

For a while water was flowing out smoothly and silently, and Monica gazed at the transparent water swirl that had formed above the dark hole. It spun around as a miniature tornado slowly sucking in all the water. And only when the last drops were left in the tub, a swirl formed and with a loud gulping sound disappeared into the plughole...

Only then Monica realised that she was still standing in the bath. Although the water had been warm, Monica had goose bumps and she was trembling. She was gawking at the plughole in the bath and thinking what a powerful force was hiding within it since it had vacuumed dry the whole bath in no time! Now the black hole seemed completely normal, but she recalled with what force it had gulped down the remaining water and suddenly felt uneasy.

She kneeled down, leaned closer to the plughole and peeked through it with one eye.

It was pitch dark inside, and she couldn't see a thing.

She got on her feet and felt somewhat embarrassed. After all, what did she expect to see down there? It was just an ordinary plughole in the bath that was joined to a pipe – the same old rusty one that continued all the way down the wall and then got connected to other pipes until finally discharging into the sewers...

Monica pulled a towel from the rail and wrapped herself in it.

“Truly, I'm funny,” she muttered to herself. “The water has always been flowing through the same hole and there is nothing wrong with it...I ought to talk about this later with Ben,” she decided and stepped out of the bath, put on her pyjamas and went to look for Ben.

But first she headed to the kitchen to see if she can get something to eat. Grandma was standing at the stove and secured a lid on the twenty fourth can of apple jam.

Monica went to the fridge, opened it and gaped inside for a while but couldn't see the butter.

“What are you looking for?” called grandma.

“Butter,” replied Monica.

“Butter’s on the table. And don’t keep the fridge open for so long!”

Monica slammed the door, and grandma grunted: “Is it really necessary to slam the door every time you close the fridge? One day you’ll break it...”

Monica sat at the table and made two sandwiches. Then she stacked them into her pocket and darted to her room.

Ben was standing by the radio, desperately changing the stations back and forth, but didn’t have any luck capturing a decent one. It was precisely eight in the evening, and the news were being broadcasted everywhere. Momentarily Ben stumbled across a classical piano concert, but he hated piano more than anything, possibly even more than the green crocodile. Now he released the handle and barked at it clearly irritated.

Monica approached the radio, switched it off, and Ben gave her a peevish look because his intuition was telling him that the news would be over any minute, and the day’s best howling repertoire would begin.

Nevertheless, when Monica pulled out the flattened sandwiches from her pocket, Ben was suddenly in a better mood. He bent his head, pricked his fluffy ears and looked at the sandwiches apprehensively.

Monica stuffed one sandwich into her mouth and gave the other to the dog. For a while, they were both sitting and munching greedily. Ben finished his sandwich considerably faster than Monica and now gazed at Monica finishing off her last pieces.

“You really are quite a beggar,” she told the dog, swallowing the last bit of the sandwich.
“If only you could, you would haul that bit out of my mouth!”

The dog bristled up at such an undeserved insult and turned his back to the girl. Then he touched the red switch in the lower left corner of the radio. The radio switched on, and a solid hiss came out. As soon as Ben tried to reach for the handle, Monica switched it off again.

The dog gave a bark, but Monica kneeled down next to him, seized the dog's head with both hands and looked intently into his brown, moist eyes.

"This is not a time to fool around with the radio," she said, "I need to talk to you. Do you understand? Talk!"

She was still holding the dog's head in her hands and nodding it upwards and downwards as if he confirmed with "yes". Ben squeaked quietly and tried to free himself discreetly. Monica released him and, with her legs crossed, sat on the floor in front of the dog.

"Do you remember the hole in the bathtub?" she asked Ben. "It was when you wrestled your way in and almost ate my crocodile."

Having heard the name 'crocodile', Ben growled furiously.

"Ah!" exclaimed Monica, "You do remember!"

She thought briefly and then admitted somewhat perplexed: "But then we had a plug in it, didn't we? So how come you remember it?" and she gazed suspiciously at the dog. He lay down and rested his head on the front paws. If he wasn't allowed to listen to the radio, he might just as well doze off for a moment.

But Monica didn't let him sleep.

"Hey, don't get sleepy!" she called and poked the dog slightly. He opened one eye and let out a long sigh.

"Do you think that all plugholes are like ours?" she questioned him. But all Ben had on his mind was how to find a decent bone in a bowl. He hadn't had bones for so long. True, the

sandwich was also good, still a bone would be much better, and he started to dream about Monica coming to the room with pyjama pockets stuffed with tasty bones... Then he would sit and gnaw on them all night long. And later he would hide a few under the bed for rainy days...

“That swirl of water ...” Monica said thoughtfully. “It seemed to have originated from the plughole... And that peculiar sound... It was as if someone was sipping the last froth from an empty cocktail’s glass.”

The dog growled approvingly. He couldn’t understand what she was talking about but neither did he want to get another poke in his ribs...

“Do you think the plughole can only suck in water?” Monica enquired.

Ben raised his bushy eyebrows to show that he hadn’t understood the question.

“For instance, I wonder – if the crocodile was left in the bath – could the plughole swallow him as well?”

That crocodile again... It appeared to Ben that finally the crocodile had done something nasty. Well, it wasn’t a surprise... He had sensed from the very beginning that the crocodile couldn’t be trusted! Now Monica will likely let him get even with that villain!

Ben got up on his front paws and barked.

Monica stared at him. “You think so? You think it could swallow a crocodile?”

Now everything was perfectly clear to Ben – the crocodile was to be blamed for everything. He jumped on all fours and started to bark heatedly.

Monica observed Ben worriedly. It seemed like he wanted to tell her something... But what could the dog possibly know? He hasn’t even seen the plughole and the way it sucks in water... But who knows...? They adopted Ben as a fully-grown dog – so who knows what he

had experienced before... Possibly all his former family got sucked down a plughole and now wandered through the sewers' endless tunnels in dirt and darkness...

Monica shrugged. It was too scary...

Ben yawned. Suddenly he realised that the crocodile could wait till tomorrow...

"Well, then," Monica finally exclaimed. "We shall wait a while and see what happens!"

She pulled the bedspread off the bed, bundled it into a ball and tossed it on the floor. In no time Ben lay on it, while Monica huddled up in the bed. She wished Ben a good night in a sleepy voice and swiftly went to sleep. Ben also fell asleep and dreamed he was fighting an angry, green crocodile in a bath and the prize for the winner was a huge bowl filled with tasty bones...

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The next day Monica couldn't settle for one moment. She couldn't wait for the evening to come so she could take a bath and continue examining the plughole. Grandma, who was used to Monica spending all day in her room, either playing with the dog or reading books, found her presence oddly hampering.

"Can't you stop fiddling?" she asked Monica, when she almost dropped her meatball on the floor during lunch.

As usual, grandpa was silent and only glanced up inattentively.

"I don't know. I feel itchy," Monica snapped.

Grandma eyed her suspiciously. "Where does it itch?" she asked. "Have you caught fleas? It's that shaggy dog..." she mumbled. "When was the last time you gave him a bath?"

"What?" prattled Monica, stuffing her mouth full of meatballs.

Grandma watched her surly. “Ben, of course,” she explained. “And please don’t talk with a full mouth.”

“I don’t bath him usually,” mumbled Monica. “He is far too big for that, besides he likes to drink soap water.”

For a while grandma stared at the girl with disgust, then continued with her lunch.

After lunch Monica sprinted to her room and to her grandma’s relief spent the rest of the afternoon there. As soon as it was dark, she went to the bathroom and, having carefully plugged the hole in the bath, turned on the water. Ben followed her, hoping to sneak into the bathroom, but Monica pushed him away. Despite that, he managed to catch a glimpse of the green crocodile, provokingly resting on the edge of the bath and scoffing at him. The dog growled, but the door slammed in front of him, leaving him outside whining weakly.

Peculiarly, bathing that night ensued swiftly. Initially Monica tried to swim on her back, however, when she opened her eyes, above her was only the dark dampened ceiling. Then she turned on her stomach, yet again, there was not a sign of the familiar underworld. She could only observe tedious water, the bottom of the bath...and the plug.

“How silly,” she exclaimed disappointingly.

At that moment grandma was passing by, and she heard Monica’s voice.

“Are you talking to yourself, girl? It’s no good,” she grunted.

“What happened to all the fishes and tiny turtles?” Monica muttered.

“Must have lost her toys again,” grandma mumbled crossly. “Most likely that flea covered dog gnawed them – the apartment is in a complete havoc...” and she grumbled away to lecture grandpa who had emptied his pipe on her favourite china saucer.

Something like that had never happened to Monica before, and she felt quite uneasy.

“Maybe I’m becoming ill,” she speculated and touched her forehead to check whether she had a temperature. But it was difficult to tell as her forehead was wet.

“Most likely it’s so,” she decided. “Tomorrow I’ll be truly ill and will stay in bed for a week, and grandma will feed me all kinds of poison. Argh.” She shuddered, visualizing this appalling option.

The green crocodile was sitting on the edge of the bath and listening carefully.

“What is it?” Monica asked. “Do you want to swim now?”

Evidently, he did.

Monica pushed him off the edge, and he plunged into the water. The hole in his belly let out a few bubbles, and the crocodile gradually started filling up with water and sinking.

“Are you diving or sinking?” Monica asked. “There isn’t any fish down there! That means you must be sinking...” She fished out the sinking crocodile and squeezed the water out of him with a loud squelch.

“For once, you need to learn how to swim“, Monica told him. “How come such a big and frightful crocodile can’t swim!”

She had almost forgotten what she had been thinking about all day until she finally pulled out the plug. Only when the water twirl spun ferociously as never before and let out a pop-like sound, did she jump in shock and glance at the plughole. It seemed darker than usual, and Monica suddenly got the feeling that it wasn’t leading to something as ordinary as a drainpipe. Suddenly it seemed to have become a real black hole where everything disappeared...The water twirl spun like a spinning top and hissed.

Monica could only stand there and stare at it. Occasionally, she thought she saw a shift in the hole, but she convinced herself that it was only the flowing water.

Only in the last moment when water level was already subsiding sharply did she remember her planned experiment.

She grabbed the crocodile and threw it in the shallow puddle that was still left in the tub. Already all the water was being gulped down with a thump and it almost seemed to Monica that the plughole was munching satisfactorily. The crocodile's tail was being pulled towards the twirl and was now spinning on top of it. The hole pulled it even closer and belched...

"Hold on, hold on," Monica encouraged the crocodile, her fists clenched.

Indeed, the crocodile was trying to resist it, but the force was far too strong, and the poor toy was being pulled closer and closer to the plughole.

And then something odd happened. For a moment there was a silence when the last drops were sucked in. The crocodile was lying across the plughole and apparently resting after the exhausting battle. Then all of a sudden there was a squelch, the plughole let out a high waterspout, and the crocodile was trapped again. Initially the waterspout just twisted in the air then it regained a twirl's shape and snatched the crocodile and tossed it up in the air. The crocodile's tail vanished into the dark hole, and the water twirl howled, pulling it ever deeper.

Monica returned to her senses only when the crocodile was almost sucked in and began to rescue it. She grabbed it by its long nose and pulled it out. At first it seemed rather difficult, but suddenly the crocodile was released and still holding it in her hand, Monica reeled backwards.

The hole became quiet and silent as the water twirl had disappeared, and now it seemed just like any ordinary plughole. However, Monica couldn't forget how it had tried to swallow the crocodile.

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With time the feeling turned into fear because with passing days Monica started to exaggerate the whole event.

The day after rescuing the crocodile she even thought she had spotted something similar to dragon's head in the hole. She consulted Ben if he hadn't heard anything about dragons living in sewers but his reply was only a yawn.

On another day Monica could have sworn she had seen a black paw that had grabbed the crocodile's tail when it was being sucked in.

During the whole week she hadn't taken a bath even once.

Certainly this seemed odd to others.

Grandma was astonished, but given that with her frequent bathing Monica was consuming a great amount of water, this change was welcomed. And grandpa hadn't muttered a word, since even if he had any opinion about it at all, something much more significant than that should have had to have happened for him to start talking again...

Nonetheless, after a week and three days grandma started to assume that Monica's behaviour had become more than odd.

"You need to take a bath," she told her.

"I could wash in the washbasin" Monica retorted sulky.

That was too much! Even grandpa began pondering if he maybe should say something after all but decided to wait a little longer.

After a week and five days Monica started to consider that maybe she really should take a bath. Of course, she didn't think one could catch fleas from not washing, yet she wasn't completely sure about it either... Moreover, she hadn't seen the forest-lake, motley fish and funny, tiny turtles for a while and was longing to see them again.

“Truly, only babies can be scared of a plughole!” she told herself. “And since I’m not a baby I don’t have to be scared,” she decided and headed to the bathroom to turn on the water.

When the bath was finally full, Monica stepped in and dived into the warm water. In no time all her fears vanished into thin air and she felt better than ever. She dived in and surfaced, sputtering like a seal and was splashing water all over the place, even on the floor.

After she’d romped enough, Monica floated in the water and closed her eyes. And at that very moment she felt a pleasant and warm sun stroking her nose and heard birds chirping loudly in the forest. Water was silently washing against the reeds on the shore. Glowing with happiness, Monica opened her eyes.

Yes, she was back!

The sky was bright blue, a bright yellow sun blazed right in the middle of the lake and gleamed on the calm surface. Three metallic green-blue dragonflies bolted across the lake and disappeared at the other side. The smooth surface of the lake suddenly vibrated and a tiny fish darted out next to Monica.

Monica floated on her back till water started to turn cold. Then she firmly winked her eyes and opened them to find herself in the bathroom.

Indeed, the water was getting colder.

Monica got up, turned on the hot tap and waited till the water turned warm again. Now it was time for the coral reefs.

Inhaling deeply she held her breath, turned upside down and opened her eyes... and became dizzy.

She hadn’t seen such a colourful scene before. It seemed as though the water was shimmering as if being alive – it was full of sunlight and seemed more yellowish than green.

Multicoloured parrot-like fish swam back and forth, and in their midst minuscule turtles slowly paddled their legs. Long and lean fish with long noses, which reminded Monica of needles, elegantly swam through the fish schools and turtle bales.

Soon Monica had to return to the bathroom because all the wonders had dazzled her.

She closed her eyes and surfaced.

Again she was back in the bathroom. These sudden changes usually baffled her, and she needed a minute before she came around.

“Enough for tonight,” she decided. Normally she didn’t revisit the reefs or the forest-lake twice in one night.

She lathered three times as skipping bathes for almost two weeks seemed not that beneficial. Absent-mindedly she pulled out the plug before having a shower without even paying attention to it. She showered extensively and thoroughly, closing her eyes now and then and picturing herself standing under a warm and vast waterfall.

Meanwhile the water was flowing away.

The usual water swirl formed above the water hole and soon the bath was dry...

Monica was pulled towards the hole while she was standing with closed eyes under the shower and humming something under the jet of water...

For some reason she didn’t even become scared as she felt herself being pulled away and there was actually no time for being afraid. Within two seconds she felt a little bit of everything – swimming, falling and flying... There was nothing to see since she hadn’t opened her eyes.

And then she was no longer swimming, falling or flying.

A complete silence surrounded her.

She had arrived.

Chapter 2

The Forest

“Open your eyes now and put something on,” a rather old voice said. Monica opened her eyes immediately and stared at what lay before her.

She was sitting in grass in a tiny meadow, surrounded by a forest. Wherever she turned to look, there were only trees and behind them even more trees. Someone had put a soft towel around her because she was still wet from the bath.

In front of her a short, tiny old woman was standing, no taller than Monica. Nevertheless, she was an old woman. She was wearing a yellow blouse and a dark, long skirt. A multi-coloured scarf was wrapped around her grey hair.

A granny from a fairytale, thought Monica and chuckled.

The tiny granny-like old woman was holding a T-shirt, jeans, socks, shoes and underpants. Now she was handing it all to Monica.

“Perhaps at home you’re used to wandering around naked,” the old woman said, “however, this is the Forest and it would be better to put something on.”

“Those aren’t my clothes,” Monica objected.

“If you’ve brought your own clothes, go ahead and put them on! But if you don’t have them, put on these ones,” the old woman said.

Monica took the clothes and got dressed. Everything fitted perfectly. *Hmm*, thought Monica. *I am not imagining this...*

The forest and the strange old woman didn't feel like a dream. Everything was too real. However, that didn't seem strange to Monica which by itself was unusual.

Since I'm here, I need to be here, Monica decided.

The old woman observed her eagerly and finally asked: "Don't you want to find out anything?"

"Like what?" Monica inquired.

"For instance, how you ended up here," pointed out the old woman.

Monica frowned and thought for a moment. "Well, that's clear. Surely, through the plughole," she said.

Surprisingly, the old woman whistled through her teeth. *This* did seem odd to Monica.

"Truly, you're a sensible child," the old woman said and raised her eyebrows.

"I've had my suspicions about that hole for a while," Monica explained. "I had a chat with Ben, and he agreed with me because I believe he has had a previous incident. And then it almost sucked in the crocodile, and I got scared. I thought a dragon or something like that was hiding there... By all means, not a grandmother," and she chuckled again.

"It was a mistake with that crocodile," the old woman replied grudgingly. "As if I needed your crocodile," she pouted and continued: "But what were you saying about talking to Ben?"

"Ben is my dog," Monica explained. "Big and extremely cute!"

"I do agree with him being big," mumbled the old woman, "however, regarding being cute..."

"My dog!" Monica suddenly cried out. "I left him at home!"

"He isn't at home," said the old woman and whistled. Immediately Ben sped out from a lilac thicket, wagging his tail like a duster, and dashed towards Monica.

“I can’t understand how you managed to talk to him,” the old woman said and gave Ben a puzzled look. Meanwhile the dog was jumping around Monica and barking from excitement. “I spent so much time trying to talk to him that my mouth got dry. But he didn’t utter a single word...”

Ben growled at the old woman.

“How did you manage to get Ben here?” Monica wondered. “He didn’t take a bath, did he?”

The old woman eyed the dishevelled dog quite scornfully. Pieces of small thistles and withered grass stalks had become entangled in his black coat. He seemed to have been wallowing in mud which had later dried up.

“No way,” the old woman said. “He isn’t one of those who might take a bath or wash...” she added quietly.

Monica kneeled down next to the dog and started picking thistles out of his coat. The dog did smell odd... Indeed, the stench was almost unbearable. Monica made a wry face and sneezed.

“However he is one of those who crawls through rubbish and sniffs sewer pipes,” the old woman continued.

“Ah, so when he was walking by such a sewer pipe you just pulled him in!” Monica exclaimed.

“*Pulled him in...*?” the old woman puckered her eyebrows and stared at the girl. “Well, I guess, you may call it anything you like.”

When Monica had finished cleaning Ben’s coat, she got up, shook off grass stalks and asked: “What are we going to do now?”

“If you’ve finished fiddling with that dog,” the old woman said, watching the dog disapprovingly, as he was now rounding on some bush while barking, “we could finally set off.”

“Where to?” Monica enquired. “I can’t just wander around here for heaven knows how long. My grandma will become furious when she notices my absence! *If* she notices it at all, of course...”

“Listen,” said the old woman, flashing her eyes cheerfully and looking at the girl, “do you truly believe she’s your real grandma?”

Monica stared at her and thought for a moment. Then she said: “Oh, then she isn’t... Right, I had my doubts for a while....And who is my grandma then? Yourself?” she called out and started to gape at the old woman curiously.

But the old woman only snorted and snapped: “No way! I’m not a grandma for anybody! Thanks to the Forest, I have missed that doubtful luck...”

“Oh, I see...” Monica uttered. “Who then is my grandma? And *where* is she?”

“That’s exactly the problem! Somehow she has managed to vanish,” said the old woman and spread out her hands. “At one point she got somehow exchanged with that old hag with whom you now live. And now she is roaming somewhere around here...”

“I see,” Monica concluded. “Then I need to find her otherwise she’ll wander off too far.”

“Exactly,” agreed the old woman.

“All the same, I need to go home”, Monica said shortly. “My current grandma can become angry pretty easily.”

“You don’t need to worry about it,” said the old woman. “We’ll send you home at exactly the same time as you left. Have you heard anything about time travel?”

Monica frowned and thought for a while. Obviously, she had heard about it. She wasn't a fool; many of the books she read talked about time travel. She knew that everything was possible with regard to time travel and stopped worrying about home.

"Then everything is fine," said Monica and whistled to Ben. The dog hurried to her and started wagging his tail fiercely. He was suspecting that now he'd have a decent run around.

The old woman and Monica set off. Ben sped in front of them barking loudly at squirrels.

It was a warm and sunny day. There was not a sign of the cold, windy and wet autumn that Monica had left behind. Here the weather reminded her more of the middle of summer. Tall trees with big trunks were stretching their dense green foliage towards the sky, and white sunlight was shining through them. Yellow sunbeams bounced up and down the moss, heather and cowberry. There was no underbrush, only gracious and old oak trees, maples and beeches. The ground was covered with soft moss. Overall it felt more like a park rather than a forest.

Now and then a huge, black bird rustled its wings above them when flying from one tree to another.

At one point, Monica had a feeling of being watched. She frowned and looked around cautiously. Hiding behind a big beech and only sticking out his head, a tiny and funny racoon was examining her. Seeing that Monica had spotted him, the racoon sneezed, snuffled his muzzle and disappeared behind the tree.

Monica chuckled as she had never seen such a hilarious racoon. "Hey, did you see that racoon?" she called joyfully.

"They're egg thieves and chicken butchers," the old woman muttered irritably. "I hate to look at them, but unfortunately they've multiplied like hell and nobody can escape them."

Then she snapped her fingers as if having remembered something. “Listen,” she asked Monica, “couldn’t your dog hunt down a racoon?”

“No way,” Monica said, “I really don’t think so. I doubt if he can hunt at all unless it’s the green crocodile...”

“If he can hunt down a crocodile, then a racoon would be a simple task!” the old woman cried gleefully.

“Not really... It was a rubber crocodile,” explained Monica.

“Do you keep a dog that hunts rubber crocodiles?” the old woman marvelled. “And what do you need him for? Do you pillage a toy store with him or something?”

“Certainly not!” retorted Monica with indignation.

“All right, then your dog is useless for a racoon hunt... Don’t even dream that I’ll buy hundreds of rubber crocodiles for him to tear up.”

Monica glanced at her perplexed. What was she talking about? It didn’t make any sense. Finally she decided to ignore her – after all, everybody had their own peculiarities.

They walked for a while till Monica got tired of it. “Where are we heading?” she asked.

“To my house,” said the old woman. “I don’t know about you but I’d like to eat something.”

Monica thought it was a good idea and that she would gladly eat something. While walking she had gathered a handful of bilberries but it wasn’t enough.

“And where do you live?” Monica asked. It didn’t seem like anybody could actually live here as there was only forest all around.

“Right here,” the old woman said and pointed forward. And indeed, when Monica looked ahead, a building came into sight among the trees.

When they approached it, it turned out that the house was rather peculiar and looked somehow muddled. It had a handful of extensions, flanks and turrets – and they were all joined by passages, some of which were built outwards like balconies. Here and there on the outer wall there were winding wooden stairs, and one could use them to climb up directly to the rooms located on the first or second floors.

A massive pine tree was growing right in the middle of the building, and it seemed like the house was built around it. In order to give room for the trunk to grow as it should, a hole was sawed through a balcony. An arched staircase obliquely linked the two turrets and entwined around the trunk.

Close to the entrance, a mailbox, looking like a miniature copy of this bizarre house, was attached to an aged and faded trunk. The old woman scurried to it, tore off its roof and thrust in her arm, rummaging through it. Apparently there was no mail today, because she pulled out an empty hand and replaced the roof.

Monica had halted and with her mouth wide open gaped at the house. Finally she said: “This is quite something... Who built it?”

“I did. But it’s not finished yet. Sometimes I think it’s never going to be finished... This house is growing bigger and bigger and... Do you see that pine?” the old woman pointed to the tree in the middle of the house. Monica nodded.

“This pine is a part of the house, and the house is a part of the tree. Once a storm tried to break off the tree, but the house resisted it and nothing happened, so the pine is still standing.”

For a while the old woman was standing and inspecting her house as though she was seeing it for the first time. Then she leapt up and called to Monica: “Let’s go, there is no time to

waste!” and she rushed into the house with its entanglement of countless extensions, stairs and balconies. Monica and Ben hastily followed her.

It turned out that inside the house there was the same chaos of stairs and rooms. Monica was only able to follow the old woman by her squeaking steps. Finally they entered a room that resembled a kitchen. Several wooden shelves were attached to the walls with bent nails. They were packed with various jars, tins and clay pots. A firewood stove loomed in the very distant and dark kitchen’s corner. Next to it there were buckets filled with water. This kitchen was as distorted and messy as the rest of the house – with lots of odd corners and startling turns.

When the old woman noticed that Monica was looking for a bench, she called out: “No, no! You fetch your dog and go to the sitting room until I prepare something to eat!”

“What are you going to make?” Monica inquired.

“I’m not sure yet... But go, go!”

“Where is the sitting room?”

“Take that passage and at the end you’ll see it,” and the old woman pointed at one of the dark corners.

Monica took the way that, according to the old woman, was supposed to be a passage. Indeed, behind the corner a dark corridor appeared and at the end of it something bright emerged. Monica called Ben and headed that way. This passage was so dark and narrow that Monica could scarcely see where to step. Even the dog seemed to be cautious and slowly trailed along behind his mistress. Apparently, the passageway was covered with a carpet because the floor underneath seemed fairly soft and muffled their steps. Finally they entered a rather large room.

Bookshelves filled the walls up to the ceiling and scarlet armchairs and couches covered with velvet cloth were placed everywhere. There was a floor lamp next to each armchair and

couch. Apparently, everything was arranged for the comfort of sitting and reading. Across the room there was a large table with many drawers in it, and suddenly Ben pricked his ears with excitement when he saw what lay upon it. Then he let out a delighted howl.

The biggest radio Monica had ever seen was there upon the table and under the frequency band there was a handle. This handle was as big and round as if designed for one purpose only – so that Ben could snatch it easier.

Ben, carried away with such incredible luck, panted out an obscure howl. Then with big leaps he dashed to the radio, growled, snapped the handle and set about turning the handle back and forth.

“It would be helpful to turn the radio on, first,” Monica said. “Surely, if you don’t want just to chew on it...”

The dog released the slobbery handle and started to examine it, trying to understand how to turn it on. Monica found the button and switched the radio on. Immediately there was a loud and terrible crackle, so Monica turned down the sound. Ben observed Monica’s every move with pricked ears and a bent head. Then he set about turning the handle anew.

Nothing happened for a while, the radio crackles became either louder or weaker, which was followed by a strange and sorrowful tune performed by a number of people. Ben snapped the handle and growled.

The usual crackling continued for a while when suddenly a high-pitched voice filled the room as though someone was yodelling.

Ben hated two types of music most of all – piano and yodelling. As a result, he snatched the handle with rage and turned it so swiftly that it broke off. Subsequently he lost his balance, staggered backwards and sat down sideways on the carpet.

“Wonderful,” said Monica. “Now, you’ve gnawed off the old lady’s radio handle. What are you planning to do now?”

Holding the handle in his teeth, the dog carried on whimpering. He approached the radio, replaced the handle and released it. However, the handle didn’t want to remain in its place and fell off again. But the yodelling music, in its turn, was really loud now so that even the windowpanes started to vibrate.

Monica turned off the radio and the room was filled with silence.

Ben approached the handle and pushed it under the table with his muzzle.

Monica giggled.

Ben wrinkled his muzzle and looked sullenly at the radio. He was somewhat ashamed of having wrecked someone’s radio. Nevertheless he was more vexed about the fact that now he wasn’t able to find a good howling tune.

Monica went to one of the bookshelves and started to examine the books. There were loads of them and the shelves were completely stacked up. It seemed as if she wanted to take a book it would be quite difficult because all the books were pressed tightly together. The titles had faded with age, some having no titles at all.

Ben sighed, rested his head on his front paws and lay down. It was clear that radio was damaged beyond any repair. Mumbling to herself, the old woman entered the room. She was carrying an oversized tureen with something hot and steaming inside it. Ben was fervently sniffing the air when the steam reached him and his black, damp nose twitched. Then he leapt up and started wagging his tail approvingly.

Monica was watching him with a contorted expression. Then she said: “Ben just wanted to sing but eventually he nearly swallowed the radio handle.”

“It’s a good thing he didn’t succeed,” the old woman said, placing the tureen on the table. Then she took out three plates from the cupboard. “I don’t have an extra handle.”

She frowned glancing at the radio and asked: “Are you sure he didn’t swallow it?”

“Absolutely,” Monica replied. The dog was glancing in turns at Monica and the old woman with a guilty expression. Then he whimpered and ceased wagging his tail.

“What did he do with it then?” the old woman inquired.

“He pushed it under the table,” Monica explained and went to the table. Then she kneeled down and fished it out from underneath. It was covered with dust and she thought she could see Ben’s teeth marks upon it.

“No one has cleaned under that table for some time,” the old woman said. “But I couldn’t possibly know that today your dog would fancy hiding a handle down there.”

She took the handle from Monica, cleaned it against her long skirt, went to the radio and put the handle on the protruding dowel. This time it was holding in place. The old woman mumbled contentedly and turned the radio on. Soul threatening sounds came out – obviously the performer was just starting to get the hang of it.

Enraged Ben growled and darted to the radio.

“Don’t swallow the handle,” the old woman warned.

Filling plates with something resembling pea porridge with sausages, she said: “Tell your dog to stop messing about and come to eat.”

For a while they were sitting at the table and eating. Indeed it was pea porridge with sausages.

“Are you a Forest Granny then?” Monica asked. “And what’s your name?”

“That is my name,” the old woman retorted.

Monica had finished her porridge and now was glancing at Forest Granny.

“Do you have any sweets?” she asked her.

Forest Granny went to the table with the radio and opened one of the many drawers. Then she returned to Monica and handed her a box. Monica panted excitedly because it was full of chocolate candies. She had never set her eyes on such a huge chocolate box before. At least she had never seen anything like that at home.

“Don’t eat them all, you’ll get sick,” Forest Granny warned.

For some time they were just sitting and eating the chocolate while Ben was lying next to them and sighing occasionally. He hadn’t had any luck with the radio. Ostensibly, the entire world had decided suddenly to turn to either yodel or piano music and these weren’t enjoyable sounds.

Finally Forest Granny cleared the table and took the dirty dishes to the kitchen. Monica heard how she flung those into the sink with a loud clatter. Then she reappeared in the door. “Let’s go!” she called out. “There is no time to waste otherwise Forest knows how far your grandma will wander off!”

“Aren’t you going to wash the dishes?” Monica enquired.

“No,” Forest Granny snapped. “No worries, they will dry up and perhaps a dwarf will come and wash them while we’re gone...”

“Do you have dwarfs around here?” Monica called out astonished.

“Well, generally no one has seen them yet,” Forest Granny replied reluctantly. “However one can always hope that there is one roaming around unnoticed. Just like your grandmother,” she gave a laugh.

After that she swung on her heel and ran off.

Ben and Monica hurried after her.

“And where are we going now?” Monica asked.

“We won’t be walking,” Forest Granny said. “I’m too old to run around the whole day. We’ll use a vehicle.”

“Oh!” Monica said. “Do you have a car?”

“What?” Forest Granny questioned. “No, neither of them is called ‘a car’.” She talked while walking around the house. Monica followed her. “Actually, they don’t have names at all.”

Forest Granny finally halted after they had made a detour around all the possible corners and extensions of the house. Monica repeatedly managed to trip over some lower steps which were impossible to see since they were overgrown with grass. Apparently, they had ended up on the other side of the house, and Monica was stunned to spot two small donkeys there, trudging in a paddock.

“The vehicles,” Forest Granny said and beckoned to the donkeys.

Monica giggled. “Are these your vehicles?” she asked. “These are just two tiny donkeys.”

“They’re big enough for you and me. Ben can run along. After all he has more legs than necessary...”

Ben barked. He didn’t think that he had more legs than necessary.

The donkeys deliberately tripped around. They were brown and lovely with huge, fluffy ears. Every so often, their ears twitched as if having minds of their own. Then the donkeys spluttered in surprise and looked around to ensure their ears weren’t trying to escape secretly.

Forest Granny came holding two collars with handles. She smacked her lips and walked up to the paddock. The donkeys raised their heads and were genuinely surprised as if they had

just noticed their mistress. Most likely, they had been so occupied with their ears that didn't have time to spare for anything else.

Forest Granny seized one of the donkeys by his long, fluffy ear and slowly tugged it closer. At first the donkey resisted but finally toddled to her. Presumably he considered that his ear might easily tear off. Forest Granny put the collar around its neck and used the same method to lure the other donkey.

"It's all set," Forest Granny announced. "We can ride now."

She opened the gate and walked the donkeys out while holding them by their collars' handles. The donkeys, having hung their heads, slowly trudged along – it seemed that they could barely walk.

Monica frowned, observing them and said: "Your donkeys don't look like they could go anywhere."

"It's exactly their intention to look like that," Forest Granny explained with a grin. "They are pretty shrewd, those cute little donkeys... But I know them too well. Actually they're not that smart if they think I can be so easily fooled."

Presumably one of the donkeys understood that they were being mentioned and in order to hear better raised one of his fluffy ears.

Forest Granny pointed at him with a finger and whispered conspiratorially: "See? Now you know what I mean."

Monica nodded. The donkey lowered its ears and regained its unhappy and tormented look. But one couldn't fool Forest Granny. She skilfully mounted the donkey and called Monica while holding the other one by the collar: "Go on, mount him!"

Monica obeyed and as soon as she was on donkey's back it seemed to have curved its back. Frightened she asked Forest Granny: "Aren't I too heavy for him? Perhaps I should walk?"

"No way!" Forest Granny retorted. "This is just one of his tricks. Wait till they get truly tired and then you shall see some more!"

"Really?" Monica marvelled. She would love to see donkeys performing tricks.

"Oh yes," Forest Granny carried on. "Then they fall down, turn on their backs and twitch their legs in the air. It looks like they are about to die! Also they moan from the top of their heart... Forest only knows how but sometimes they even manage to produce some foam on their lips..."

Realising that cheating wouldn't help them remain in the paddock this time, the donkeys became active. They pricked their long ears, raised their heads and started trotting rather briskly on the path that led into the forest. Ben wound about behind them, trying to catch the tiny swarms of yellow butterflies that fluttered around.

*

It appeared to be late afternoon because the sun was starting to set and shone diagonally through spruce and pine trees. The Forest was dotted with light and shadows so that sometimes it was hard to distinguish between fallen tree trunks and long, dark shadows.

Evening was drawing closer and in some dusky places swarms of mosquitoes started to form. Occasionally they swirled silently above bilberry bushes. When the donkeys happened to run through such a mosquito cloud, they spluttered and munched for a long time after that.

The forest was filled with a variety of sounds. Mint bushes rustled as frogs or toads were leaping across them. And to Ben's great surprise sometimes there was even a hare. Thicket

branches cracked deeper in the forest. Obviously some bigger animal was wandering there. Big, black birds that Monica had spotted before flew from one tree to another.

“Where are we heading?” Monica asked, stroking her donkey’s fluffy ear.

“To look for your grandma, of course,” Forest Granny replied. “Have you forgotten already?”

“Certainly not,” Monica replied. “I just wanted to know if you had any idea where she might be?”

“And you?” Forest Granny asked in turn.

Monica pouted. How would she know? She was in a completely strange world, and she had no idea whatsoever where her granny might be.

“If you were a granny,” Forest Granny said, “where would you go?”

Monica reflected. Despite her efforts she couldn’t picture herself as a grandma. Therefore it was impossible to visualise what she would do in that case.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “And where would you go?”

“We’re heading that way,” Forest Granny answered.

“I see...” It wasn’t a thorough reply, Monica thought. But she was too lazy to interrogate Forest Granny. *I’ll see where I have arrived once I get there*, Monica thought philosophically. She was getting rather sleepy because she would’ve been fast asleep if she was back home right now. Yet here the sun was still up whether she liked it or not, and she had to keep her eyes open since her grandma hadn’t yet been found.

“Why haven’t you named your donkeys?” Monica asked after they had been riding in silence for some time.

“Why should I have?” Forest Granny wondered.

“They could run up when you called them by names!”

“They wouldn’t,” Forest Granny announced sulkily. “And the entire Forest’s creatures would round up to see what’s wrong with me while I would be yelling until getting hoarse. Whilst those rogues would splutter somewhere in the bushes...”

“Ey-aahhhh!” Monica’s donkey neighed, twitched his left ear and immediately got shy.

“That’s right,” Forest Granny said. “Moreover, why should these goblins have names if even I don’t have one?”

Monica didn’t think they were goblins, she thought of them as being the cutest donkeys she has ever set her eyes on.

Suddenly the bushes rustled next to them, and Ben started to bark furiously.

Something black-grey dashed through the shrubs and darted across the field towards the thicket. For a moment Monica could thoroughly scrutinize the sprinter when he halted and froze in the middle of the field, looking their way. It was a rather porky racoon with black and gray stripes and he was carrying a white chicken in his teeth.

“You, rascal!” Forest Granny yelled. Judging from the way he cleared off, he had no rights to the chicken. Apparently, he was very much aware of it.

Ben continued to bark loudly but he still didn’t chase the racoon. Presumably he wasn’t certain what could be hunted and what not in this strange Forest.

“My best chicken!” Forest Granny cried out desperately. “It’s gone!”

For a while she mumbled angrily to herself. “Should I really move in with my chickens into the henhouse only to ensure this scoundrel racoon can’t run off with them whenever he pleases to?! Did you see how fat he was?” Forest Granny added furiously. “He was stuffed with

my chickens! My only hope is that one day he will get so fat he won't be able to run anymore... And then I'll catch him!"

"Huh!" Monica said. She didn't think Forest Granny would ever be able to catch him no matter how fat he might get.

Amidst the dark tree trunks something fawn-coloured flashed, and Ben barked, dashing that way.

"A fox," Forest Granny said. "We've plenty of those around here," she said in a sad tone. "Foxes, racoons, wolves, skunks and other rogues... Don't even expect to see something loveable and sweet like prairie dogs or koalas..."

Monica knew what koala bears are. She thought they only lived in Australia. While she had no idea about prairie-dogs.

"What are prairie-dogs?" she asked.

"Obviously, those who live in the prairie," Forest Granny retorted. "However those aren't like real dogs... They're just named that way and they're really lovely."

The donkeys trotted further when Ben sprung out of the thicket, wagging his tail and sticking out his tongue. Apparently, the fox had escaped. After all it had an advantage of knowing the Forest better than Ben.

Monica started to ponder about her grandma, her *real* grandma. Not the one who grumbled while making apple jam.

Why had she disappeared and why was she now roaming alone in these forests? Monica had never heard that grandmothers tend to disappear like this. Evidently, they did. She decided to ask Forest Granny.

"Why did my granny get lost like this?"

Forest Granny was daydreaming and now looked at Monica startled. “What?” she asked.

“My grandma,” Monica repeated. “Do all grandmothers wander off like this?”

“No, not all. Just some. They haven’t really intended it, it just happens.”

“And who’s then the granny left home with grandpa? Or is he not the real one either?”

“No, no everything is fine with your grandfather,” Forest Granny said. “But that other grandmother doesn’t even know that she’s not supposed to be there at all. She truly thinks that she’s your real grandmother and is trying to behave that way. And since she isn’t real, she can’t actually succeed.”

How complicated, Monica thought. She couldn’t comprehend a thing. Well, it’s better to leave it as it is.

Something shone through pine trees in front of them.

Everything else revived with a warm yellow light and pine bark recovered its golden shine. Lichen now resembled odd, white creatures that seemed to be crawling on the mossy, green carpet.

Approaching one could distinguish a light coming from a small house’s window.

This, in turn, was a totally ordinary house. The house was built of stone and its dark red tile roof had grown mossy with time.

“Who lives there?” Monica asked.

“Anyone who wishes to,” Forest Granny said. “Predominantly the Forest Guard. But when he sets off to one of his Long Wanders, anyone who wishes can settle in at any time. The Forest is full of diverse creatures, and they consider it a great honour to live in the Forest Guard’s house at least once.”

“What is the Forest Guard guarding?” Monica questioned.

“The Forest, of course,” Forest Granny replied. “Occasionally a pine can decide to wander off somewhere. Then a special skill is required to lure it back...”

Monica listened and couldn't stop wondering. What kind of pines wander off and roam in the forest?

“Do only pines do that?” she asked.

“No, of course not!” Forest Granny exclaimed. “All the trees are crazy ramblers. Still, pines seem to practise this habit the most. And when such a pine decides to make a tour around the Forest, Forest Guard has lots of running about...”

“Wow...!” Monica said. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Meanwhile, Forest Granny's donkey had stopped and kept still as if he had become bored to death with this uneventful trotting.

Monica, sitting on her donkey, hacked ahead, and then, realizing that nobody followed her, stopped and turned around.

Forest Granny scolded her donkey. She called him lazybones and pulled his collar. Nonetheless, the donkey remained motionless and only hung his head so low that his fluffy ears almost swept the ground. At last, Forest Granny dismounted him, took him by the collar and started to drag him. But the donkey pushed all his four legs into the moss and didn't move.

Forest Granny leered at the donkey.

“Come on, just a little bit!” she cried. “See the light behind those trees – it's almost a stone's throw away.”

For an instant the donkey raised his head to take a look at the light, but then he cast down his eyes again and pretended to be asleep. He probably thought that since it was so close, Forest Granny could manage without him.

Yet Forest Granny didn't concede defeat. She didn't want to leave her donkey all alone in the middle of the Forest, but neither could she persuade him to move.

Ben, standing nearby, lowered his head so that one ear was raised but the other one was hanging loose and awaited with interest what was about to happen.

When Forest Granny had tried out everything without any results, she eventually gave up and set about to try the last resource.

Carefully she gripped one of the donkey's ears and slightly pulled it. As soon as the donkey realised that something nasty was happening with his ear, he suddenly startled from his slumber and spluttered anxiously.

Forest Granny slightly pulled it again.

Reluctantly, the donkey took a tiny step forward.

Forest Granny pulled his ear a little bit more.

The donkey sighed and started trotting after Forest Granny. Forest Granny felt relieved, and soon they both caught up with Monica and her donkey.

"It's not right to pull their ears," Forest Granny explained. "They can lose the ear's hair; and the ear will hang down and will never be as fluffy again. However sometimes it's the only way to get them moving..."

Monica visualised how a donkey's ear would look hanging loose and having lost all its hair. He would look like a basset dog, she thought to herself. Perhaps, Ben also had been pulled by his left ear when he was little because it was always hanging down.

The sun had hidden behind a hill now and darkness was starting to emerge from bushes, spruce trees, hollows and fox burrows, colouring the entire Forest in bluish-grey. Only Forest

Guard's house's window was glowing bright yellow while the Forest was becoming darker with every minute.

The donkeys stumbled across pine roots as it was rather difficult for them to see in the dusk. Thus they were dragging along until finally they reached the door, and Forest Granny dismounted from her donkey. Then she energetically hammered at the stout oak door three times and yelled at the top of her voice: "It's me! Let me in!"

She waited for a while, and Ben growled quietly, hiding behind Monica's back. Generally he wasn't scared. Still it seemed he wanted to stay on safe ground and keep his distance. Everything was rather peculiar in this forest. Nothing smelled ordinary to him. Moss didn't smell quite like moss, nor did spruce smell of spruce. Even the fox, which he had chased, didn't smell right.

Forest Granny started to shuffle when nobody answered the door and banged once again. "Is anybody home?" she yelled. "We want to get in!"

The door was set ajar and a person who opened it was grinning and standing on the threshold. "It's unmistakable," he said. "I don't think you would be shouting like this if you wanted to sneak by unnoticed."

Monica examined him. This must be Forest Guard, she thought.

He was a tall and gaunt old man with greyish ragged hair and a dishevelled beard of the same colour. He was also wearing something grey, but Monica couldn't tell what kind of garment it was. Anyhow, her grandpa never wore something of the kind. It was half suit, half coat and it also had something from a cloak. If only these things had anything in common at all. He was wearing round glasses that, funnily enough, reminded her of Santa Claus.

"Hi," Forest Granny said. "I almost thought a half-deaf badger lived there."

“No, it’s just me and I can still hear pretty well. Who’s she?” Forest Guard pointed to Monica and asked.

“Monica,” Forest Granny explained.

“I see,” Forest Guard replied.

“That one over here is Ben,” Forest Granny said and beckoned.

“Where?” Forest Guard asked, trying to make out who was sitting behind Monica.

Carefully Ben stretched his nose towards Forest Guard and sniffed him. And again! He didn’t smell exactly like ordinary people. There was something of moss, resin, a scent of hare and a bit of fresh air similar to that during thunder. It was a rare mix of scents Ben had never smelled before. It was hard to decide how to behave. Finally he whined, wagged his tail and slithered backwards while growling quietly at the same time.

Forest Guard knitted his tousled eyebrows while observing Ben’s odd behaviour with astonishment. “Does your dog usually behave this way?” he asked.

“No,” Monica rejoined. “He has never acted like this before. But he’s never seen a Forest Guard before.”

“No?” Forest Guard was even more shocked. “Where does he come from? The moon?”

“No, the sewer pipe,” Monica said.

Forest Guard just stood and gaped at the dog. Evidently, he had no idea what Monica was talking about.

“I, on the other hand, was sucked in through a plughole,” Monica kept on. “Since Ben isn’t taking a bath he glided down a drain-pipe. Eventually at the end it’s all the same.”

“What is she talking about?” Forest Guard softly asked Forest Granny. “Is she okay?”

“She doesn’t have chickenpox, nor does she have cold,” Forest Granny said. “She might only have a sweet tooth, that’s all.”

“I have one too,” said Forest Guard. “But it isn’t an illness.”

“Where can I tie up my donkeys?” Forest Granny asked.

“At the back of the house,” Forest Guard said.

Forest Granny went to get the donkeys that had fallen asleep upright while people were chatting.

“Come on in,” Forest Guard invited. Then he cast a glance at Ben. Peculiarly, dog shook his head and his ear flipped over revealing its pink inside. “Does he want to come inside as well?”

Ben did. Still clinging by Monica, he entered a room.

Everything inside the house seemed ordinary except for the big stove at the other end. Given that it was summer, a fire wasn’t burning. Obviously Forest Guard was using it as storage place as pots of all shapes and sizes were crammed inside it.

In front of the stove there was a rug, and a tiny racoon was lying on it. When he caught sight of Ben who was just entering the room, he barked and jumped out of the half-opened window. Then he disappeared in the dark.

Ben sneezed.

Forest Granny slammed the door and dashed inside. She said nervously: “A racoon just jumped out of your window. Or am I imagining things?”

“Do you tend to imagine racoons jumping out of windows?” Forest Guard questioned.

“No,” Forest Granny said. “But everything happens for the first time at some point.”

“It was my racoon. And this wasn’t his first time jumping out of the window. To be honest, I think if he ran out through the doors then that would be his first time.”

Monica examined the room.

A light wooden table with six identical chairs was standing in the middle of the room. A couch, covered with a green and red striped throw, was placed near the wall. Suddenly Monica had an urge to sit upon it before she collapsed on the floor.

“Can I sit down?” she asked.

“I’ve no idea,” Forest Guard retorted bewildered. “Have you never tried? Certainly, you *may* sit down, if that’s what you mean.”

Monica didn’t really grasp what he was saying, nevertheless it was clear to her that it meant sitting. She fell into the couch and concluded that it was far more comfortable than sitting on a donkey.

“You shouldn’t busy yourself with those racoons,” Forest Granny said worryingly. “They eat my chickens.”

“Well, there aren’t any chickens in the Forest,” Forest Guard explained.

“Why would they need to eat them at all – that’s the question?” Forest Granny said. “Why can’t they eat birds or lizards or something like that?”

“Evidently, the chickens taste better,” Forest Guard snapped. “Why don’t you eat lizards yourself?”

Forest Granny mumbled something. Then she said: “After all, if they like chickens that much, they should breed them themselves! As many racoons as there might be, I can’t provide them all with chickens.”

“Nine hundred and forty eight. Plus or minus three,” Forest Guard said.

“What?” Forest Granny was confused.

“Racoons. You asked me how many there were.”

“God gracious, I don’t care how many there are. One thing is clear though – there are far too many. And since they have started eating my chickens they’re getting way too fat.”

“I don’t agree that there are too many of them,” Forest Guard rejoined, after reflecting. “They are exactly as many as needed. Still I shall have a word with them about breeding chickens.”

Sitting on the couch, Monica was idly picking Ben’s ear. He was lying next to her with his head resting on the couch. Every so often, without even raising his head, Ben looked up with sorrowful eyes and sighed sadly. Most likely, even he himself didn’t know the reason behind it. Monica examined Forest Granny and waited for her to start talking about her grandmother at last. It seemed as though Forest Granny had forgotten about her grandmother since she was so preoccupied discussing the chicken and racoon problem. Hence, Monica decided to do it herself.

“We’re looking for my grandmother,” she said.

“Did you say something?” Forest Guard asked. He was standing by something that looked like a tool box and was rummaging vigorously through it with all the tools clattering and clanging.

“Yes,” Monica replied. “I said we’re searching for my grandma, and Forest Granny thought to find her here.”

“Here?” Forest Guard called out perplexed. “Why would she be here? Does this look like a boarding-house for grandmothers?”

“No,” Forest Granny retorted. “In fact, it’s closer to a bear’s lair. But since all kinds of animals, racoons and other creatures come here, I presumed that grandmothers might as well.”

“A grandmother isn’t any kind of an animal,” Monica said infuriated. “Have you ever seen a live grandmother before?”

“Sadly,” Forest Guard said, “More than one.”

“I see,” Monica said.

“Yes, lately grandmothers have started to multiply in the Forest for some unexplainable reason,” Forest Guard said.

“Wow, you talk as from a podium,” Forest Granny chuckled. “Wait, when did we catch our first grandmother? Roughly six years ago?”

“Ten,” Forest Guard said. “Well, since then we have three to four grandmothers every year. Moreover, last year we got hold of eight.”

“Yes,” Forest Granny agreed. “From the beginning of the year we’ve already seized a total of ten. Presently, there are at least four scurrying about the Forest. Before long grandmothers will outnumber the racoons,” she snickered.

“Probably racoons aren’t the only ones stealing your chickens.” Forest Guard mentioned significantly.

“Nonsense!” Forest Granny shouted. “If a grandmother wanted a chicken, all she had to do was knock at my door and stay for lunch.”

“Possibly she’s ashamed. And she finds it much easier to sneak into your henhouse and pinch one at midnight.”

“Rubbish,” Forest Granny said. “You’re just making this up to protect your racoons.”

“Well, somebody has to protect them, since it definitely won’t be you.”

“Absolutely not! However, don’t forget to remind me if they become too many – I shall be happy to hunt them down to renew the ecological balance of the Forest.”

“Don’t you worry about the ecological balance, I’ll take care of it,” Forest Guard said firmly. “In fact I believe that grandmothers are exposing more threat to it than the rapid breeding of racoons.”

Despite listening intensely to the conversation, Monica couldn’t make much sense out of it. She had heard somewhere about ecological balance though. An ecological or environmental balance might be messed up if one breed multiplied excessively. Still how could grandmothers have an impact on ecological balance? It was the first time she heard something like that. Then again, the balance probably would be lost if hundreds of grandmothers were scurrying around the Forest. Then there would be a need for a few hundred grandfathers. And what had Forest Granny mentioned about racoon hunting if they become too many?

“Don’t you dare to hunt grandmothers!” Monica called out suddenly.

Forest Granny and Forest Guard exchanged bewildered looks.

“No one is hunting them,” Forest Guard said. “If you meant hunting with a shotgun or likewise.”

“I see...” Monica muttered. “Well, it’s fine then.”

“No, it’s not fine,” Forest Granny said. “There are loads of grandmothers who senselessly roam in the Forest and according to you, this is fine!”

“Why are there so many of them?” Monica marvelled. “I presumed there was only mine.”

“Ha-ha! That would be way too simple. Well, at the moment we have four of them and we must get hold of them and return them home.”

“Do the rest of them also have grandchildren?” Monica asked.

“And what do you think?” Forest Granny was perplexed. “Do you think the racoons were their grandchildren?” she chuckled. “Though it wouldn’t be bad if racoons had grandmothers. Then they would be looked after and wouldn’t have time for my chickens.”

“In that case they would just pinch your chickens together,” Forest Guard sniggered.

“Where are those other kids?” Monica suddenly asked.

“What?” Forest Guard was puzzled.

“Well, the grandchildren of those other three grandmothers,” Monica explained. “Where are they?”

“Ah, those...They’ll be here soon. After that the Forest won’t only be full of grandmothers but of their grandchildren as well. And racoons will become extinct since they don’t like to brawl in the Forest.”

“Do grandmothers brawl?” Monica wondered. She couldn’t imagine grandmothers doing that, especially when she thought of the grandmother she had left back home.

“Oh, yes it’s one hell of a hullabaloo!” Forest Guard cried. “Moreover, they frighten trees and after that I have to spend months returning all the wondering pines, junipers, willows and alders back to their places. Especially alders, they are very sensitive.”

All of a sudden Forest Granny bustled as if ready to leave.

“Well then,” she said. “We’ll go now. When we return, the rest of the children will be here as well.”

“Are we leaving already?” Monica wondered. It seemed odd – after all they had only just arrived a short while ago.

A black camouflaged and sad looking muzzle appeared in the window, and Monica jumped, taking it for a burglar. Then she realized it was only a racoon and settled down. Ben

started barking ferociously and dashed to the window, but Monica called him off. Ben fell silent and the racoon's sad face vanished.

“That dog is too loud,” Forest Guard recognized. “He'll scare away all my racoons.”

“That would be sensational,” Forest Granny said. “Still I'm afraid nothing can keep away those rascals.”

“How are you going to get home?” Forest Guard inquired. “It's pitch black outside.”

Indeed, it was a complete darkness outside, and the moon no longer shone. Owls hovered and hooted loudly. Monica wondered why there were so many owls in a forest...

“I hope you'll give us some lamps,” Forest Granny said.

And again Forest Guard went to his tool box and started rummaging in it. At last he pulled out something similar to collars with delicate, semicircular wires attached. Round violet lamps swung at their ends.

Forest Guard handed one to Forest Granny and the other to Monica. Monica squeezed it clumsily in her hands, not knowing what to do with it. Meanwhile, Forest Granny put her “collar” on her head. Monica did the same with hers but it turned out to be too big and fell on her nose.

“The hook needs to be pulled tighter,” Forest Granny said adjusting it and replaced the “collar” on the girl's head. Now it was holding properly, and the lamp nearly hung to the tip of her nose.

“Well, we'll see you soon!” Forest Guard said and opened the door.

Ben seized the opportunity and ran outside first. Monica said goodbye to Forest Guard and followed Ben.

“When will you be back?” Forest Guard asked when Forest Granny was already on the threshold.

“I’d say tomorrow. Around that time all the other children ought to be here and then we can come to grips with the search for the grandmothers.”

“Yes. Why did you come here today at all?” Forest Guard was somewhat bewildered.

“Oh, I just thought that Monica’s grandmother might actually be here,” Forest Granny snapped slightly embarrassed. “Then we would have only three left.”

“But you know that it has never been that simple,” Forest Guard said. “Moreover, the Evil Spirit is busy in the Forest, have you forgotten? He will never miss an opportunity to stalk a grandmother and to take her around in circles till she’s too tired to dash.”

“Are you coming?” Monica asked, emerging from the dark, “It’s so dark out here that I can’t see a thing.”

“You need to push this button,” Forest Granny said, clicking on some switch on her ring. Immediately at the end of the wire a violet lamp lightened up. It wasn’t too bright, yet it lightened up the road sufficiently.

Monica also turned on her lamp and instantly saw a violet circle of light in front of her. It moved together with her wherever she turned.

“All right, goodbye then,” Forest Granny said. “Let’s go and fetch the donkeys!” she called Monica.

“Bye,” Monica said to Forest Guard. Then she leapt and ran after Forest Granny.

“Bye, bye,” Forest Guard said. He was still standing on the threshold and looking after them until they couldn’t be seen anymore and only a pair of violet shadows was left. Then those too vanished behind the corner and disappeared completely.

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The donkeys were spluttering in their sleep. Forest Granny poked them and they lowed quietly while yawning. Nevertheless, when Monica and Forest Granny got upon their backs, they started tramping back home slowly. The violet lamps, which from a distance looked like two twitching caterpillars, were shining through the dead of night.

Occasionally Monica dozed off, but when she was awake she was thinking about everything that had happened that day.

“What kind of place is this that grandmothers like it so much?” Monica asked.

“This is the Forest,” Forest Granny retorted.

“I can see it’s a forest,” Monica said and yawned. She was very sleepy. “But what kind of place is this?”

“The Forest,” Forest Granny repeated. “This is the Forest and that’s its name. It’s not one of those forests you have at home. Back home you have forests, cities, countryside, deserts, savannah and oceans – and you call it the Earth, don’t you?”

“Well, yes,” Monica agreed.

“But this is the Forest.”

“I see,” Monica said. She couldn’t really understand what Forest Granny wanted to say, but she understood there weren’t any cities, countryside or anything. Only the Forest.

“It’s good,” Monica said at last. “I like forests.”

“You don’t understand,” Forest Granny said. “It’s not the same forest you have at home.”

After reflecting a bit Monica agreed. “Yes,” she said. “Normally trees don’t move at home and I suppose we don’t have as many racoons either.”

“The difference isn’t only in racoons. Our Forest is far more diverse. We have a number of things you can’t even imagine.”

Suddenly something white and clearly visible in the darkness screeched and laughed. It bolted across the path and disappeared into the thicket. This wasn’t an ordinary laugh – it was piercing and continuous, and Monica thought for a second that lunatics might laugh like this.

The donkeys neighed in fright and startled, making Monica nearly fall off backwards.

Forest Granny started to soothe her donkey. When Monica had somewhat recovered, she also started stroking her donkey’s ear. Finally it calmed down and continued trotting.

“Now do you understand what I was talking about?” Forest Granny said.

“What was it?” Monica asked.

“A puffball creature,” Forest Granny replied. “Lately they’ve multiplied excessively.”

In that instant another puffball creature fell off the tree with a soft thump right behind them and, letting out a screech, scurried in the darkness.

This time the donkeys just jerked and continued to trot.

“Phew,” Forest Granny spitted. “Anyone can become nervous from this. Honestly, I’ll have to have a word with Forest Guard so that he takes the matter in his hands. Except that he doesn’t have time for this right now – not with all that grandmother business and those trees.”

“Why are there so many grandmothers here?” Monica asked again.

“Who knows?” Forest Granny retorted. “Nothing like that has happened before. Back then, ten years ago, the first grandmothers started to appear. And since then it has never been quiet here anymore, because grandmothers chased about after the animals in the Forest. In turn, puffball creatures chased them about and we had no choice but to find their grandchildren so they could collect them.”

“Why do you need grandchildren?” Monica inquired. “Do they find them better?”

“Finding them would be the least of the problems,” Forest Granny beckoned. “You see, we simply don’t want to make any mistakes. If several grandmothers wander around here, it’s so easy to mix them up and send them to the wrong children. And at the end we’ll be the ones who get all the blame. Do you understand?”

“I don’t know,” Monica said. “Not really.”

“It’s okay. Even if you did understand, it wouldn’t change anything.”

Finally the donkeys had reached the spruce thicket and were now forcing their way through, breaking dry branches.

In places peculiar shining green blotches were scattered in the murky darkness. They reminded Monica of lustrous signs in shop window displays.

“What’s beaming over there?” she asked Forest Granny.

“Moon toadstools,” she retorted.

“Why are they called moon toadstools?” Monica asked. “Do they come from the moon?”

“Certainly not. Forest knows where that name comes from...Most likely the name is due to their mysterious shining. Even though they shine in a variety of colours and not as pale as the moon.”

When the donkeys approached one of the shining blotches, it started to dim and eventually faded away while other moon toadstools reappeared all around. There were so many of them, it seemed as though someone had laid out garlands of Christmas lights.

“Do you see how they go out when we get closer?” Forest Granny asked.

Monica nodded.

“They’re camouflaging,” Forest Granny explained. “Surely, if they don’t glow it’s far easier to tread on them accidentally. This camouflaging is rather silly, bearing in mind that nobody eats them. Still, moon toadstools have never been truly intelligent.”

Suddenly a light emerged ahead of them.

The indented turrets of Forest Granny’s house came into sight. A number of tiny, yellow lights glowed around the house, its windows and on the countless balconies – as if enticingly inviting those wandering in the Forest.

“Ha!” Monica said. “Somebody’s at home!”

“No, no,” Forest Granny replied. “When it gets dark, those lanterns light up every evening. Initially I put them on to lure in grandmothers. Even though frankly, not a single grandmother has ever been enticed in this manner. Then I got fond of them and decided to switch them on every night. Hence grandmothers can do whatever they want.”

When the donkeys spotted the lights of the house, they neighed and hastened their steps. In less than a minute they had arrived. First Forest Granny let the donkeys into the paddock and then she, Monica and Ben entered the house.

“I can’t wait to go to bed,” Monica said. “I think I could fall asleep standing.”

They went through the kitchen and reached the room with the radio that Ben had damaged. Monica fell into the couch and closed her eyes. Immediately she felt as if she was sitting on a donkey and saw dry spruce branches flashing by and moon toadstools beaming somewhere in the darkness.

“Hey, wake up!” Forest Granny called and shook her by the shoulder. Startled from her dream Monica gave Forest Granny a frustrated look.

“What is it?” she asked sleepily. “Why are you shaking me?”

“There is no time to sleep right now, so get up!” Forest Granny shouted and poked her again impatiently. “Wake up!”

“Do we need to hurry somewhere again?” Monica mumbled and stood up with difficulty.

“You must take a bath!” Forest Granny yelled. “Hurry up! I’m going to run the bath!”

“What?” Monica wondered. “Do I really have to take a bath so late? Listen, can’t I skip it this evening? I think I could fall asleep right here...”

“What do you mean – not take a bath!” Forest Granny cried out. “I must get you back home! Right now!” She dashed out of the room, and Monica could hear her footsteps pattering above. Apparently she was in one of the many turrets.

Monica was too sleepy to understand what Forest Granny had been talking about. As soon as Forest Granny was out of the door, the girl collapsed on the couch again and was immediately puffing.

When Forest Granny dashed into the room a minute later, she saw Monica sleeping soundly and Ben lying on the rug next to her, snoring. She clapped her hands. “You’re sleeping again!” This time she spared the shaking part but instead grabbed Monica by the hand and started dragging her out of the room. Monica, who was still half asleep, tripped over Ben who howled and woke up.

“What’s happening? Where are you dragging me?” Monica mumbled with her eyes half closed.

“I told you already – to the bathroom. It’s time for you to leave.”

Ben growled and trailed along behind Monica and Forest Granny. It seemed to him that something bad was going to happen to his mistress.

“Where to?” Monica was bewildered.

“What do you mean “where to”? Home, of course! Your home! I can’t spend the whole night with you here.”

“But you don’t have to,” Monica objected. “I shall sleep quietly until the morning.”

“No, it’s no good... I must return you home at this very instant otherwise it’ll be too late and we won’t manage to get you back at the same time you left.”

“What?” Monica was too sleepy to grasp the details of time travel.

“I’m saying that you must leave now otherwise I’ll only get you home a couple of hours after you disappeared from home.”

At this Monica became instantly awake. “Surely then grandmother will lock me in my room forever!” she exclaimed frightened.

“And what am I talking about?!” Forest Granny exclaimed. “Thus, there is no time to waste. Hurry up the stairs!”

They had arrived at a dark and narrow passage which was leading up a similarly winding and narrow staircase. Monica darted up the stairs, and Ben pushed past Forest Granny to run after her, barking loudly. Forest Granny followed them at a slower pace, mumbling something under her nose.

Monica ran up to the very top and came across a half-open door. Steam was coming out. She could hear water pouring into the bath. Entering the bathroom she stopped and ruminated. Without delay, Ben dashed in and a moment later Forest Granny entered too.

“What’s going to happen to Ben?” Monica asked.

“And what should happen to him?” Forest Granny asked back.

“How is he going to get home? Obviously you don’t have any sewage pipes here?”

“No way,” Forest Granny laughed. “He shouldn’t even think that I’ll install drainage because of him. He’ll have to follow everyone else’s example.”

Monica frowned, immersed in thought.

“He will never take a bath,” she finally announced. No one would make the dog take a bath even if he had wallowed in the mud for the whole year.

“Not to worry. He’ll do what must be done,” Forest Granny said, turning off the tap. The bath was full and Monica tossed off her clothes and slid into water. Ben hurried to the bath and lapped water hurriedly, then spat it out immediately. Obviously it didn’t taste like soap water.

“Perhaps you want to take a bath since you are already there?” Forest Granny asked.

“I just want to sleep,” Monica said. Warm water was making her even sleepier than before.

“All right, then get ready and pull out the plug!”

“Already?” Monica wondered.

“Do you want to go to bed or not?”

“I do.”

“Then pull out the plug, you can’t sleep in a bath!”

“Wait, you didn’t say when will be the next time we meet,” Monica reminded.

“Take a bath tomorrow night,” Forest Granny said. “There’s no need to wait – the sooner we find the grandmother the better.”

Monica pulled out the plug and water flowed out rapidly. The usual twirl spun above the hole becoming bigger and bigger as water was leaving the bath. When practically all the water had gone, it squelched loudly and belched – and Monica disappeared into the plughole.

Ben started to bark furiously and jumped into the bath. He pressed his muzzle right to the hole where Monica had vanished, sniffing fervently, and continued to bark, since he couldn't smell anything peculiar.

"Perfect," Forest Granny said contentedly and turned on the shower.

Abruptly Ben stopped barking when unexpected streams of water poured over him. He was so unsettled that he didn't even think of jumping out of the bath. Not being able to comprehend where such quantities of water were coming from, he shivered and trampled frantically in the bath.

A rather small twirl spun around the plughole and sucked in water from the shower. Ben was being pulled towards it and at first he tried to resist it. Yet his paws slipped on the enamel and he was being pulled closer and closer to the plughole. And then in a second he was gone, and Forest Granny was left alone in the bathroom.

"Phew," she sighed and turned off the tap. "Thank Forest, dogs only need a shower."

Then she left the bathroom, turned off the light and went downstairs. Indeed, this had been a very tiresome day and she suspected that the worst was still to come. For some reason she thought that it will be far more work with the grandmothers this time than ever before.

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Monica came to her senses in her bathroom and in a few moments Ben showed up next to her out of a nowhere. It was a sappy and totally terrified Ben. Apparently, being sucked into a plughole turned out to be far more frightening than getting into a sewage pipe.

Ben barked and looked around. Then he growled and bristled up when he saw that the green crocodile was sitting on the bath's rim and seemed to be grinning nastily. Water was dripping from the dog and splattering in the bath making a small paddle. Ben reckoned that his

dog's pride didn't allow him to be this sappy and in a very doggy manner he shook off all the water from his muzzle to tag. Monica yelled and jumped out of the bath while huge drops of water splashed in every direction.

"You know what," she said to Ben. "This isn't some sort of a beach. I would have dried you in a towel but now, of course, it's pointless."

Ben snatched the crocodile, jumped out of the bath and snorted.

Monica took a towel from the rail and wrapped herself in it when she noticed the crocodile that was rather helplessly hanging from Ben's mouth. Ben growled quietly and with his tail between his legs and a guilty expression upon his face he looked sullenly at Monica.

Obviously, his look was saying, "I know you don't like it, still I have to deal with him once and for all."

Monica seized the crocodile by its tail and pulled, but Ben didn't want to let it go. Monica pulled stronger and Ben moved closer to her, but he didn't loosen the hold of the crocodile.

"Let it go!" Monica cried, clutching the toy with both hands. "Release it or you will never see the radio again!"

Ben growled, showing his attitude towards such ruthless blackmail, and reluctantly released the crocodile. Monica staggered backwards and hit the door. She was holding the slobbery crocodile in her hands and Ben's tooth marks were all across its tummy.

"What's happening in there?" a familiar yell came behind the door, and grandma opened the bathroom door.

She lost her voice for an instant when she saw Monica wrapped in a towel and clutching the sloppy, bitten crocodile in her hand, and wet, fluffy Ben who was still trampling and growling angrily at the crocodile. Sadly, she recovered too quickly.

“What’s going on here?!” she cried. “Back to your room! Now!” she yelled.

Monica dropped the crocodile and managed to grab the pile of clothes from the floor. Then she called Ben and disappeared eagerly in her room. Ben dashed after her, and water, dripping from his coat, left a wet trail on the floor.

Monica reached her room, slammed the door and jumped into the bed. Ben lunged to the radio at once, but Monica held him off.

“No, Ben. Not tonight, we must go to sleep – I’m awfully tired.”

Having said that, she snuggled down under the blanket and turned off the light. Ben sighed and shook off the remaining water, then lay down next to the bed. In no time, they were both fast asleep.

Chapter 3

Ben and the Manhole

Next morning Monica woke up terribly late. That was clear without even checking the clock since the room was filled with bright sunlight. Apparently the day was in full swing because it was pretty noisy on the street.

Ben was awake and was anxiously sitting by the table and paying a close, yearning look at the radio.

“Turn it on!” Monica called and immediately Ben was on his feet, ran to the radio and tapped on it. Then he snapped the handle and busied himself changing radio stations, trying to find something pleasant.

Monica got out of the bed, dressed and went to the kitchen to have breakfast.

The kitchen was empty. It looked like everybody had already eaten, so Monica found bread, took milk, butter and jam out of the fridge and made herself a few sandwiches. Grandma entered while the girl was sitting and eating. Without saying a word, she sat opposite Monica.

It was nothing special that grandma kept silent, but her sitting at the table just like that and doing nothing seemed odd.

Monica looked sullenly at grandma. Grandma was staring right at her. Quickly Monica cast down her eyes again and looked at the sandwich.

“There is no need to sulk,” Grandma said. “Do you actually know how it looks?”

Monica continued chewing her sandwich. How was she supposed to know what it looked like! It wasn't as though she sat for days in front of the mirror and looked sullenly at herself just to find out how it looked. Grandma tended to ask such silly questions! Well, given that she wasn't her real grandma, she could be excused.

Then Monica giggled silently. Just imagine...This old woman truly believes herself to be her real grandma! How silly.

“There is no need to giggle,” grandma said coldly and continued to gaze surly at her. “Once you've finished with that sandwich perhaps you could pay a little attention. I need to tell you something.”

As if Monica couldn't listen while she was eating. She wasn't eating with her ears.

Still grandma didn't utter a word before the girl had finished eating. Only when she swallowed the last bit and raised her eyes, did grandma start talking at last.

"About that dog..." Grandma began. "I forbid you to take him with you in the bath. Dogs can be washed in a washbasin. I couldn't bear taking a bath after some filthy dog had used it."

"He wouldn't be a filthy dog if he could have a bath," Monica said. "Moreover, I don't think he has ever been in a bath because he wouldn't have let it happen. I believe he has only taken a shower, haven't you Ben? You didn't take a bath? Certainly, not ours..." she added.

"Don't lie to me girl," grandma said severely. "The dog was standing in the bathroom, soaked from muzzle to tail, and you want to convince me that he hasn't been in our bath? Whose bath has he been in then, I'd like to know?" she asked.

"I'm not lying," Monica snapped. "And I'm not the one to blame – he couldn't get back through the manhole because there simply wasn't one."

"Oh, there wasn't a manhole, was there?" Grandma repeated. "Why are you telling me fibs? Anyhow, what difference does it make...your usual stories... And don't even try to put that dog in the bath again!"

With these words of warning she left the kitchen, and Monica relieved made another jam sandwich.

Ben thrust his muzzle through the half-open door. Monica poured dog food into his bowl and watched him amazed as he ate it greedily.

"How can you eat something like that?" she wondered.

With his muzzle buried in the bowl, Ben growled back contentedly.

“Grandma is cross with you,” Monica told Ben. His reply was a scornful sniff. “She doesn’t like you taking a bath,” she continued. “As if you had been doing that! Still, she didn’t believe me about the manhole – well, it’s her own fault...”

Ben growled and kept crunching his food. It looked like last night’s shower had been good to him. His black fur was shining now and looked soft and silky as never before.

Monica couldn’t wait to recount everything about last night to her friend Helga. When she was done with her last sandwich and Ben had emptied his bowl, she dashed to her room to fetch Ben’s collar.

She heard the front door being banged while she rushed through the rooms – apparently grandma had left. She had probably gone to the store. *Very well then*, Monica thought. *It’ll be easier to handle grandpa alone*. She fished the collar from under the bed, put it around Ben’s neck and went to look for grandpa.

He was sitting in his room and reading a thick book. It seemed to Monica that he had been reading it for two weeks already.

“Listen, grandpa,” Monica said. “I’m going out with Ben for a while, is that all right?”

Grandpa grunted approvingly, got up and went to let them out. Ben sensed that he’d have a good run around. He was wagging his tail like a propeller and whining impatiently. Then he darted to the door with such speed that Monica, who was still holding his collar, was dragged along too.

“Be quiet!” she called, galloping behind the excited dog. But Ben wouldn’t stand still until he had reached the door. Now he whined even louder, fidgeting and occasionally touching the door with his paw. Still it remained closed until grandpa finally came and unlocked it.

As soon as the door sprung open, Ben threw himself forward with such a force that he broke loose from Monica. She yelled and scurried down the stairs after the dog.

The main door was ajar and a turbulent wind kept shutting and opening it. Monica ran outside and looked around, but Ben was nowhere in sight.

Cars were busily rushing back and forth in the street, and shivering people were hurrying by, tucking themselves up in their coats. Ben had disappeared.

For a moment Monica stood by the door trying to think which way the dog might have run, when she heard a high-pitched bark around the corner.

Not surprisingly, after she got there she spotted Ben lying by a manhole, barking loudly and sticking his nose into it. People, seeing the huge, barking dog, hurried to the other side of the street.

Monica dashed to him, grabbed his collar and hissed: “Bad Ben! How dare you run away from me? Don’t you know that dog hunters roam around here? They’ll spot you wandering around the city all alone and in no time you’ll be sitting behind bars!”

Ben whined guiltily and then focused on the manhole again and, wagging his tail, barked joyfully.

Monica got down on her knees and looked closely at the dark manhole. She was able to hear water running loudly down there, and a really bad stench was coming from it.

“Hmm...” Monica said, “Ben, is this the same manhole?”

Ben was happily whacking his tail against the pavement. Obviously, he was now thinking about the forest which he knew was hiding behind this insignificant manhole. Surely, it was much more pleasant to run across moss-covered hills rather than in the city. Here he constantly

had to watch out for either cars or people who seemingly only intended to step on his tail or poke him with an umbrella.

“No, Ben,” Monica said firmly. “We won’t use this, that’s certain.” At that moment a particularly repugnant stench evaporated, and Monica’s nose twitched. “But I think you’re going to take a shower this evening.”

Ben stopped wagging, whined and sprung to his feet, pleadingly looking at her with his yellow eyes. He suspected that ‘shower’ meant that unpleasant jet of water which had poured over him without any warning. It had soaked him thoroughly in an instant and he had needed endless hours to dry his coat afterwards.

“Don’t even try to beg,” Monica said and glanced with disgust at the black, dirt covered manhole grating. “Besides, last night you smelled unbearable.”

Protesting, the dog pricked his ears and barked loudly. He grasped that quite clearly! Monica just imagined that he had smelled. What nonsense!

He stuck his nose to the manhole again and sniffed it. Surely, nothing smelled bad here! It smelled of half-rotten lime-tree’s leaves, old newspapers, mice, rusty pipes and... Wait, what was that?

He lay down once again, stuck his nose into the hole and inhaled deeply through his nostrils.

Right...just as he suspected...a dead rat! And it had died quite recently, because it hadn’t been here yesterday...He had never seen a dead rat in his life! He definitely had to get closer and examine it...if only Monica would let him.

Ben leapt to his feet and with sleek ears, wagging his tail and whining, looked at Monica and the manhole. He thought he had made his intentions quite clear.

“I said no! No!” Monica said strictly. “If you want to return to those forests, you will have to use the plughole. And no manholes! You shouldn’t be surprised that Forest Granny took you for such a filthy dog. You didn’t give a good impression of yourself smelling as foul as that.”

Ben didn’t care what Forest Granny thought of him. He needed that rat. And he needed it right now.

He watched Monica for a moment. He considered that the rat was worth a little cheating. While Monica chats with Helga, he’d sneak away unnoticed...and Monica wouldn’t even notice as he’d be right back.

Ben pricked his ears and barked as if he had become excited with the idea of the plughole, and Monica examined him suspiciously. “What are you plotting there?” she inquired with raised eyebrows.

Ben’s ears sagged and their fluffy tips slipped forward as he wagged his tail innocently. He didn’t resemble a dog that was plotting anything anymore, he was just happy to be outside in this fresh day.

Briskly he jumped up to her and poked her sleeve with his nose as if inviting her to play.

Still, it wasn’t that easy to fool Monica.

“I shall keep an eye on you,” she warned. “So be good. Grandma didn’t like you taking a bath, but I’m sure that she’ll like it even less if you turn up smelling like mice, dirt and who knows what else.”

Ben pretended to not understand and, snatching his dog lead, he offered it to Monica. She continued to observe him distrustfully and then finally took the lead and laughed. “Well then, forget that manhole and let’s run!”

And she dashed down the street but Ben, barking loudly, outpaced her and was now galloping ahead. Now and then he stopped and waited for Monica who was lagging behind. Running at such a pace, they bumped occasionally into pedestrians who sprang back alarmed, giving way to the running little girl and her huge, dishevelled, black dog.

They turned around the corner after having run for a block and Monica halted in front of a dark-grey, five storey stone building. Her cheeks blushed from running and the harsh wind, but her long, dark curls fluttered around her head looking like a strange crown. Since grandma didn't want to bother with the girl's hair, she didn't cut it often, thus the hair grew wild. Monica always wore her hair loose because her dark curls were impossible to comb – therefore at times she looked even more dishevelled than Ben.

Ben had lain down and, wagging his tail excitedly, he stuck out his pink tongue and panted. Eventually they recovered their breath, and Monica went to the door. She reached up on her tiptoes and entered a code on a plate. A familiar tune was played and the door unlocked with a loud click. Monica had to push against the door because it was rather heavy, then she whistled to Ben and entered the building.

She went up to the second floor and rang at her friend Helga's door. Ben sat down on the landing, bent his head and focused on the apartment door.

They waited for a while but nothing happened. It was quiet behind the door and there was no sign of the familiar shuffling belonging to Helga's grandma when she came to answer the door.

Monica rang again. The bell resounding inside the apartment was perceptible yet there was no other sound. Monica rang again just to be on the safe side and then went downstairs again.

“Nobody’s home,” she told Ben.

He barked approvingly.

“They must have gone to the park or to the store. I should have called first.”

They went outside again and headed towards the park. It was nearby, only a few blocks down the street. Monica took off Ben’s collar as soon as they had entered the park, and the dog ran down the path exalted. In a few minutes, Monica spotted Helga and her grandmother. Helga was running down the path, collecting the last yellow leaves. Not far away, her grandmother was sitting on a bench. She was the first to notice Monica and called out: “Hey, Monica! Ben!”

Ben barked and dashed to them to say hello. Helga’s grandmother ruffled the dog’s ears and asked Monica: “You’re all alone again, huh? Where is your grandma?”

“Which one?” Monica asked automatically as both of her grandmothers came into her mind simultaneously – the real one who was now roaming somewhere in the peculiar forest and the fake one – who apparently had gone shopping.

Of course, Helga’s grandmother was perplexed as she hadn’t expected such an answer.

“What? Do you have two grandmothers?” she asked. “I presumed you only had the one with whom you lived right now – your dad’s mother?”

“What?” Monica was also bemused. “Oh yes, yes, certainly, only her... I just got confused,” she explained hastily. However Helga’s grandmother continued to examine her suspiciously.

“She went somewhere,” Monica said, realizing that she hasn’t answered Helga’s grandmother’s question yet.

Meanwhile Helga had joined them and was now trying to make Ben sit down and shake hands with her. But Ben simply couldn't grasp what Helga was expecting from him, so he just stood there, wagging his tail and gazing at the girl completely perplexed.

"We'll go to that knoll, all right?" Monica told Helga's grandmother and winked at Helga.

"All right, all right," Helga's grandmother said. "I'll stay here as there is plenty of sunshine."

Monica seized her friend's hand, whistled to Ben and headed towards the knoll. It was convenient that nobody was there because Monica didn't want anyone eavesdropping accidentally. However, it wasn't as if all living souls had abandoned the knoll.

A little black cat that seemed a little woozy darted from one tree to another. When he reached a tree, he ran up its trunk a little, then froze for a second and was hanging there by his front paws only. Then he let go and fell down, curling his tail, and then darted to the next tree.

Ben barked and set off chasing the cat but Monica yelled and called him off. Still Ben didn't intend to obey this time. An opportunity to chase a cat presented itself too rarely. Finally Monica understood that there was no point in yelling and gave up.

"How is it going?" Helga asked.

"Rather peculiarly." Monica replied and told her friend about her adventures the previous night.

Helga was listening open-mouthed and, when Monica had finished, she didn't say anything for some time.

"Well," Monica encouraged her impatiently. "What do you think about all this?"

“I don’t know,” Helga said thoughtfully. She was plucking at a maple leaf she had just picked up. “I have never heard anything like this.”

“That’s the point!” Monica exclaimed. “I bet nobody has a clue what’s hiding behind those plugholes and manholes!”

“Do you think that we can end up in that forest through any plughole or manhole?” Helga asked after reflecting briefly.

“Do you think so?”

“Perhaps it depends on those in the forest,” Helga said. “If they want, they can get you in, but if it’s only you wishing for it...”

“Do you think I couldn’t get in there if it was only my wish?”

“Well, honestly I don’t believe it.”

“And why on earth did they have to use a plughole?”

“Obviously, it was the most convenient choice,” Helga laughed. “You spend all your time in the bath!”

“Not all of it,” Monica grunted.

“Most importantly, you’ll finally be able to have a good grandmother. Your current grandma couldn’t even cope with a stray cat...”

Meanwhile, Ben had chased the cat up the tree and was now sitting there and barking at it. But the cat had found a comfortable place amidst branches and was ready to take a nap, completely ignoring the rampant dog. Finally Ben gave up and decided to go and check what was happening with the dead rat.

Casting a glance at both girls, who were whispering intensely, their heads drawn together, Ben quietly sneaked away taking the other side of the knoll. He left the park and galloped towards the manhole where the enticing rat was hiding.

Once Ben had reached the manhole, he lay down and, lowering his nose close to it, sniffed the air.

Exactly! It smelled of nothing but the rat. Ben tried to thrust his nose through the manhole's grating but didn't succeed. Either his muzzle was too chubby or the gaps between the gratings were too narrow.

Ben growled bewildered, and leaped up. Something was wrong here. He could clearly remember that last night when he was busy at the manhole, an instant later he had found himself on the other side of it. And then he had been in the forest. Still, none of that was happening now.

Ben tried again.

And again nothing happened. The rat stayed on that side but Ben on this.

Well then... If the manhole wasn't willing to let him in, he needed to try out something more serious.

Ben dug his teeth in the manhole's grating and tried to move it. He growled and pushed against the pavement on all four legs and pulled. But the grating didn't even budge. Ben was disappointed. He let go of it and winced. It tasted bad. He would have to chew some grass now... At last he gave a sigh, left the manhole and dashed back to the park.

Unfortunately Monica had noticed his absence and when she spotted the dog, she called him angrily.

Ben, still smacking and wagging his tail apologetically, ran up to her. Even the grass hadn't helped to get rid of the nasty taste.

“Where have you been mucking about?” Monica scolded the dog. “And why are you smacking so strangely? Spit it out, whatever it is,” she ordered, clutching the dog’s muzzle.

Ben just continued to smack and didn’t spit out anything as there was nothing to be spat.

Monica leant closer to the dog, trying to discern what it was he was eating, and then sprung back with disgust.

“No!” she cried out. “He has been fooling with that manhole again! I can’t comprehend what he is finding there!”

How could she understand that such a mighty dead rat was hiding there!

“Didn’t you say that Ben was pulled into the forest through the manhole?” Helga asked.

“Indeed, that’s what Forest Granny said. And he did stink disgustingly... Just like now... Hey, stop it!” Monica shouted and pushed away Ben’s muzzle that was attempting to lick her nose as if begging for forgiveness. Ben bristled up and stepped aside. Then he pulled out another cluster of grass and started chewing on it stubbornly.

“Surely, he must’ve now been trying to get to the forest through the same manhole,” Helga said. “But he didn’t succeed. Apparently it’s not the right moment yet.”

“Do you think so? Perhaps, you’re right. Forest Granny told me to take a bath this evening again.”

“All right! Then she’ll pull you in again!” Helga cried anxiously. “That’s amazing! Who would have thought that plugholes could take you to such a mysterious place like that forest!”

“And the manholes...” Monica added scornfully.

“What?”

“Also the manholes,” Monica repeated.

“Well, that’s just for the dogs,” Helga responded.

Helga's grandmother turned up on the path and beckoned the girls to come down from the knoll. "I need to go home now and make dinner," she said after the girls had come closer. "Why is that dog smacking so weirdly?" she asked, observing Ben chewing something. Grass stalks were hanging out from both sides of his mouth, looking like a ragged, green moustache.

"Well, he must have eaten something bad," Monica said elusively, and Helga chuckled.

"Don't you want to come around this evening?" Helga's grandmother invited Monica, yet the girl eschewed.

"No, no, I can't tonight... There's something I need to do tonight..."

Helga's grandmother gave her a puzzled look.

"What do you have in mind, you two?" she inquired, but Helga and Monica shrugged innocently. Even though Helga's grandmother was a sensible old lady, it was clear that there was no use in explaining anything to her. Not a single adult could possibly take it seriously.

Monica waved farewell to Helga and her grandmother and hurried back home. Ben galloped after her with grass stalks still hanging from his mouth.

Grandpa and grandma had already finished their lunch when Monica and Ben arrived home. Monica was happy about it since it meant that she wouldn't have to sit and listen to grandma's endless muttering.

Now grandma was mumbling something like "why is she always late for dinner", when she noticed that Monica was back home, and shuffled to the kitchen. She took the frying pan that apparently contained Monica's helping and abruptly turned on the stove.

Monica entered the kitchen and sat at the table, waiting for her dinner to be ready. Meanwhile Ben panted and ate from his bowl.

Grandma was stirring mashed potatoes and making a wry and queer face, smelling the air. Then she grimaced.

“What is that repulsive stench?” she asked irritably.

At first she eyed Monica suspiciously, but the girl didn’t look like someone who could smell so terribly foul. She fixed her eyes on Ben. “You, dog,” she called him sternly. “Come here!”

Ben raised his head from the bowl and, tail between his legs, advanced anxiously. Grandma leant closer to Ben but recoiled instantly as if being stung.

“Good lord!” she screamed and seized her nose. “What has he done?!”

Indeed, the chunks of grass that he had been chewing following his attack on the manhole hadn’t made any difference – on the contrary. Now he smelt even worse. But grandma thought the problem wasn’t the fact that Ben might have eaten something bad – but that he might have wallowed somewhere. Therefore she urged: “You must bathe him this evening.”

“In the bath?” Monica asked and was almost delighted. It meant that she wouldn’t have the trouble of getting him into the bathroom secretly.

“Certainly not,” grandma hissed. “I believe I told you already my opinion about bathing dogs in the bath. You’ll wash him in that big, old wash-basin that is lying somewhere in the hall cupboard.”

“May I do it in the bathroom?”

“Do as you please just make sure there’s not a single dog’s hair in the bathroom tomorrow,” she threatened.

“Okay, okay,” Monica snapped and was already considering different ways of luring Ben into the shower this evening. It would have been an insignificant problem if she only had to deal

with grandma's objections. However, this time it was Ben who was against it and opposing a dog's fancies was far more complicated.

Finally grandma put some mashed potatoes and the last slice of meat on Monica's plate. The slice of meat was tiny and Monica looked askance.

When grandma left the kitchen, Monica started to eat. To start with, she tore the slice of meat in half and dropped one half to Ben. Instantly, Ben snatched the slice and devoured it. Monica also finished her half and only then ate her potatoes. Ben, however, began consuming his dog food. Seemingly, neither of them enjoyed the rest of the meal.

As soon as Monica had emptied her plate and Ben his, she tossed her dirty plate into the sink and went to her room. From her experience she knew it was now safe to leave the dirty plate in the sink – grandma would prefer to wash it herself rather than lecturing Monica for not washing it, because she had been talking too much today already.

Monica spent the rest of the evening sitting in her room and reading a book while Ben played with the radio. Ben's voice had turned hoarse from howling and the enraged grandma poked her head through the door at least five times. Then Monica asked him to switch the radio off, as she was also getting a headache, and Ben, looking quite disappointed, obeyed.

Around six thirty grandma poked her head through the door again. At that time Monica was about to go to the bathroom and turn on the tap, as she could no longer sit still.

"Are you going to take the dog for a walk or should I do it again?" grandma asked angrily.

Monica, who hadn't been listening carefully, retorted idly:

"Yes, yes, do so..."

After a while, she jumped, realizing that grandma's angry face was still in the ajar door.

“What? What did you say?” Monica asked again.

“I asked if you were going to take the dog for a walk or should I do it?” grinding her teeth, grandma repeated.

“Ah, the dog... Yes, certainly, I’ll take him out.”

Of course, Monica had had no intention of taking Ben for a walk now... Anyhow they’d be in the Forest soon. Yet now she had no choice but to take the dog out, since she couldn’t explain any of this to grandma.

Monica grabbed Ben’s collar and whistled. Then she pushed past grandma who was still standing in the doorway. As soon as Monica was gone, grandma grimaced, went to the window and flung it open. It seemed to her that the room was still filled with that foul smell.

*

Autumn had arrived and it was dark outside. Of course, street lamps and window displays projected light and prevented the city from being left in a complete darkness, yet, unmistakably it was night. Most likely, no other grandmother would have thought of letting out their grandchildren on their own so late. Whereas it didn’t even occur to Monica’s grandma that she shouldn’t have done so... And grandpa was so absorbed in his own world that he wasn’t even aware of what was happening outside his room.

Monica headed down the dark street, her hands tucked in the coat pockets, and her teeth clattered from the harsh wind that had turned stronger with the night. Ben, who apparently wasn’t bothered with the wind, was jumping around her. The street was deserted and only rarely did some pedestrian dash past her. It seemed that tonight everyone was anxious to get inside sooner. Street lamps swung in the strong wind and glowed with white, erratic light. The swinging lights looked rather spooky, given that all the sounds were baffled by the howling wind. It

seemed as if someone was sitting on the rooftops and flashing down a huge, white lantern to frighten pedestrians.

“Tonight we won’t be strolling for too long,” Monica told Ben. “We must save our energy. After all, we still have a long day ahead of us.”

She reached the end of the block and turned back home. She reckoned it should be sufficient to convince grandma that the dog had taken his walk. As they drew closer to the house, it appeared that Ben still hadn’t forgotten about the manhole. He was now staring towards it and whining miserably, but Monica called him sternly. She was afraid Forest Granny could pull him in by accident. Then she would have to explain to grandma where Ben had disappeared. That is, if she noticed his absence at all, of course.

At home Monica went immediately to the bathroom and turned the tap on. Grandma looked inside the bathroom when she passed by and in a short while she returned, holding a huge, dusty wash-basin in her hands.

“You forgot this,” she told Monica, throwing the wash-basin into the bathroom. Monica tripped over it when she went to check the water and almost landed in the bath fully dressed. She brushed the wash-basin aside and picked up the green crocodile from the floor. Then she put it into one of the cabinet’s drawers. It was difficult to predict the outcome if Ben started fighting the crocodile in the bath full of water.

Finally the bath was ready, and Monica went to get Ben from her room. The dog was excited as soon as he realised that he was being allowed to enter the bathroom. He still had the hated green crocodile on his mind. However, when he was inside the bathroom, the crocodile was nowhere in sight and Ben got anxious. Instantly he recalled the frightening waterfall where he had ended up being in a similar bath.

However, it was too late, because Monica had already bolted the door and there was no way out. So he had to put up with it. Ben sighed and lay down, resting his head on front paws.

Monica stepped into the bath. Certainly, she had no intention of using the old and ridiculous wash-basin. It looked terribly filthy, as well as rusty.

“And grandma wanted me to bath Ben in this,” Monica fumed. “If she wants, she can use it herself but Ben is going to take a shower!”

Ben growled at the word ‘shower’. It didn’t sound any good.

Not even once did Monica think of the forest-lake or coral reefs. There was no time to waste for any fantasies – for too many amazing things were happening in reality.

For a short while she lay in the bath, then bathed quickly and pulled out the plug. Next, she turned on the shower and rinsed herself. Meanwhile, Ben was just gazing at the gushing water, coming from the thin, long hose. It seemed like his worst nightmare was about to happen.

The dog whined and tried to hide under the bath, but unfortunately it was already full of all kinds of wash-basins. Thus he couldn’t possibly squeeze in there, no matter how hard he tried.

At that instant Monica called him sternly: “Ben! Come here!”

Ben growled and cringed back towards the door.

In the meantime the water was swiftly flooding away, and Monica felt that at any moment she could be sucked down the plughole. Above all, she didn’t want to arrive in the Forest without Ben.

“Ben, COME HERE!” she yelled.

Ben, frightened from such a scream, slowly crept closer.

“Quicker, quicker....Ben!” feeling the water pulling her towards the hole, the girl cried.
Finally, spotting Monica sliding away, the dog barked and jumped into the bath.

The last shower jet poured over them, and they were in the Forest.