

Listening to Sophie

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*For the Muses in my life
And for the Children listening:
The Muses of the World*

Foreword

“To travel is to live” said one of the world’s most famous story-tellers, H.C. Andersen. I was about to understand the power behind those words as I was packing my bags for Australia. Suddenly the door bell rang. It was my friend Louise stopping by, to wish me a good trip. I showed her my packing – all I needed for the stay – and suddenly she looked at me in disappointment. “But Olle, where is your notebook?” The obvious question still lingers in my head, even now, six months later. She reminded me that we all have different ways of remembering and sharing our past. My way has always been writing; hers had always been photography. Yet I had forgotten to pack what I treasure the most – my voice in the form of pen and paper. “Of course I was going to bring it!” I replied, shocked at how I could have forgotten to pack it. But the truth was that if it wasn’t for Louise I would never have packed that notebook – which is funny – because it was in that notebook the first ideas to this book were born.

The ideas of Sophie and the homeless man turned into my project work as I got back to Kungsholmen’s Gymnasium for my final year. I was eager to find out more about them and the world they lived in. The ideas in the notebook grew into the book you are holding in your hand, but it was a long and strenuous process. It takes both time and

effort to make a book, especially since I had never made one before.

Like so many others I have had a life-long dream of publishing a book, and I thought to myself that project work was the perfect time to fulfil that dream.

I encourage everyone to write down your thoughts on a piece of paper. It is magical to see them come to life and get together in a way you could never have imagined. Not only do I want you to write the stories down, but I would also like you to share them with friends, family and anyone who would like to listen. I know they will enjoy the stories as much as I do. Without stories the world will quickly become a boring place. That is why we must listen to them, because without someone listening there will never be a story.

Enjoy reading!

Olle Lindholm

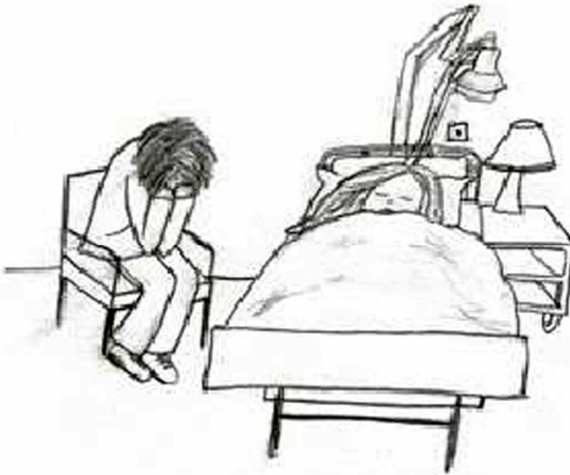
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New Year's Eve

The girl was on her way to the train station with the pink bag in her hand. The air was cold, evening was quickly approaching. Celebrations for the New Years were already underway, fireworks filling the still sunlit sky. A group of boys fired Roman candles on the pavement as she passed. They missed the emerald green notebook that shone in the weakening sunlight. She was very proud of it and couldn't wait to share the stories with her older brother Joseph. She continued to walk down the street, and tried not to think about the screaming children and their fireworks. She walked carefully, because the streets were covered in a thick layer of crystal white snow with slippery ice hidden beneath. It was dangerous to walk outside, and many people had injured themselves badly lately. Worst were the unwatchful people, those who were in too much of a hurry to slow down and be careful. They caused many accidents, including the accident of the little girl.

So Joseph did not get to see his sister at the station, but in a cramped hospital room. The room was small and noisy, but it did not matter to him. He could even hear the clock ticking and feel the walls shrinking around him. There was chaos everywhere; doctors and nurses scurrying around with desperate looks on their faces. They knew the hospital was running out of blood, the one and only ingredient that humans could not make.



Blood must be given – from one human to another – or else lives will be lost. The nurses were searching for blood to the little girl, not knowing if she could be saved. She had a very rare blood type, the rarest of them all. Since there were so many accidents at this time of year there might not be enough blood to save her.

Joseph sank pale-faced into a chair when the nurses told him. *This is not happening*, he thought. *Not to my sister...* Tears streamed down his face. He cried until there was no one else left in the room but him and his beloved sister. He went to get some fresh air from the window, when suddenly a green notebook caught his sight. The notebook was in his sister's bag, the same she had been carrying at the accident. From the moment he laid his eyes on it,

he knew what it was. He even remembered the night he had given it to her, the same night he had left for New York. It was a magical journal, the beginning of a new voice taking form. As he took it up from the pink bag, a gust of wind came through the open window and hit Joseph in the face. He hesitated. Then he began to read its magical content out loud, the only thing left of his younger sister's caring voice.

October 29

My name is Sophie Juliette Brookers and I am twelve years old. I am rather skinny and quiet, not the kind of person who makes a lot of noise, so I do not really get that much attention.



There is no one who listens to me now, because my brother Joseph is in the US. We have always been very close. He has only been gone for a day, but I miss him already. I think I miss him the most because of all the stories he used to tell me. We used to sit down by the harbour and look into the water. When the full moon popped out and lit our faces, he told me stories about ghosts and evil spirits, and about pirates living in my room. I had nightmares for weeks after hearing those stories. Sometimes I do not know if I miss Joseph, or if I simply miss his stories. He said his own stories grew from a diary, which is why he gave me this emerald green notebook. He told me to write down my thoughts in the journal. He said it was important because thoughts are so easily forgotten.

As I lie in bed late at night, tucked in under my warm blanket; I pick up my pen and I start to write. I promised Joseph to do so. I love writing, for it is the only time when I can hear my own voice. It is hard sometimes, because

there are so many people around me screaming. I can barely hear my voice then. Every time I try to speak up, there is always someone who shouts louder. I cannot help that my voice is not that strong. But I am doing my best, even though I find it hard at times. That is why I will write my secret diary. Because I will listen to what my voice has to say. Joseph told me I should try it. He said I will be amazed at how much I would hear.

I cannot help but to look at the front page from time to time, where a message from my brother is neatly engraved:

To Sophie, my princess

Seems kind of boring I suppose.

An empty notebook,

That's not the case though.

Look again and you'll see what it's filled with.

It's your own voice.

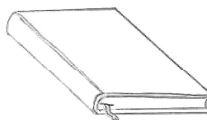
Good luck with everything!

I love you!

Fondest regards

Your older brother,

Joseph



P.S. Remember DS.

October 30

I hate how everyone is leaving! It is not fair! Joseph has just left, and today my Mother took off too. This means I am left alone with Father for the first time. The house is feeling so empty without Mother and Joseph around. But I know it is not for too long. My Mother is coming home in a month or two, I hope. You never know with her. She is one of those people who serve coffee on airplanes, and help rich people get their newspapers. She loves her freedom more than anything, and I admire her for that. All I am saying is that it would be nice if she could have stayed at home. Father and I will miss her a lot. Just before she left, he told her how she did not need to carry out that job anymore, that it is not worthy of her. Then Mother and I laughed because it is so ironic, for that was how they once met, when Mother accidentally poured coffee on my Father's trousers. The truth is that Father was only afraid of being left alone in the house. He is not used to take care of me or the household. The only thing he cares about is his company. It would be nice if he would care about something else.

The worst part with Mother being gone is not that I am not used to it, but rather to see what it does to Father. I can hear how he stays up all night, gambling on that stupid computer. Sometimes he invites friends over to play poker. I wish he could stop, but I am too scared to tell him. He only plays when Mother is away. That is why I

wish Mum can come back, and soon. He has to stop before he get us into trouble. If only Joseph was here. I miss him because he is the only one who can talk some sense into Father.

I hear Father coming up the stairs, slow and heavy thudding. I must hide the notebook now, because he must not find out about it. He would hate it. He thinks it is a waste of time. This is my voice and I hope you can hear me.

October 31

I met a homeless man today because I listened. Let me explain. I woke up early, like I always do, but I was not feeling too well. My throat was sore and my stomach was feeling funny. I told Father about it and he said I should stay home from school. The funny thing was that we had no food at home, and the girl who usually watches me when my parents were working late is at school. Therefore I had to go with Father to work – not very exciting. When people ask me what my Father does for a living I do not really know what to say. I answer numbers, because I know he works with numbers. He loves numbers, but I do not. Not very exciting, told you so, but far better than staying at home all alone with nothing to eat. Besides, Father's office is enormous, and it is in the tallest building in town. It has a great view with windows facing the harbour and the horizon. However, that is not where I met

the homeless man. I met him on the way to the office. Father's car did not work, so we had to walk. This had never happened before, and I found it pretty funny that the car was not working. It made Father very angry, and his face turned red like a tomato. It is not too often I see him like that. Except for days like today, when he was late for an important business meeting. I like the times when he shows his emotions, and proves to me that he is not only a robot who loves numbers, but a human with feelings. Today was an adventure, the walk into town – finally something new.



It was the coughing which made me stop on the gloomy city street. The sound came from a man lying down with a brown portfolio next to him. His head was tilted forwards, and it looked as if he was sleeping. I was shocked, for I had never seen anything remotely like this before. His tattered jeans, his worn-out leather jacket and his cowboy

hat made me curious. I am a very curious person in general, I just cannot help it. I took a step closer and decided to put a five dollar bill into his cowboy hat, when suddenly two large eyes stared at me. I looked into the eyes of a stranger, a true stranger.

I let out a scream, but no one heard me, except for the old man. "Surprised?" the rusty voice asked, "that no one pays attention? Welcome to my world."

I did not know what to say. I stood there, speechless and paralysed. The next thing I felt was the strength of my Father's arm pulling me away. I wanted to scream, but I knew it was useless, for my voice could not support the pain in my heart.

Father told me that those people are not to be trusted, and said he couldn't for his life understand why I had tried to give him money. He said they use it for all sort of crazy things, but I do not agree. I think the man would have bought food. He looked hungry. Something my Father will never understand. Besides, it was only a five dollar bill. We have plenty of them.



November 3

I spotted the homeless man many times during the week I was ill. I saw him from the office window, and I must say it felt nice with some company. My illness kept me from seeing my friends from school, and I was feeling a bit lonely. The only one who popped by the office was Amy, my closest friend. She lives on my block so we usually meet up a lot. She gave me the homework I had to do, and the books I needed to read, so I would not fall behind. We always help each other when one of us is ill. Amy and I also swim together. We have been swimming for quite a while now. I love swimming. I feel so light in the swimming pool, like I was made to be in water and not to walk on land. Sometimes I dream about living under the sea in a big castle together with my friends and family. I love that dream because no one can rush in it. Not even my Father who has to go slower and slower until he roars like a bear. But like everyone else he gets used to slow down and by the end of the dream he loves it.



Then Father wakes me up and I am on dry land again. It is morning and my favourite dream is over. So I long for swimming practise when I can feel light again. That is why I do not like being ill. I never get anything done and I feel so worthless. Swimming is the only thing I think I am good at. Amy just told me I got chosen to swim in the all-star division! Amy did not get selected, so she is pretty angry. But what can I do about that? I do feel sorry for her. I think she wanted to be a part of the all-star division more than I did. But it is only a team, right? I will soon go to my first practise and if I am lucky Father and Mother and Joseph might come to see the swimming competition on New Year's Eve.

November 4

After I heard the wonderful news from Amy I began to feel better and better. I pictured myself in the gigantic swim hall with a gold medal hanging around my neck. I told Joseph about it over the phone, and he said he was really proud. He was the one who taught me to swim all those years ago, so he has got a really good reason to be proud.

I asked him how he was, but he did not sound too good. He said he had a lot of work to do, and that he did not have much time to talk. I got upset with him. He was beginning to sound like Father. He said he worked on a story for the school paper. If it was any good he might get to work for one of the most brilliant newspapers in New

York. I asked him what the article was about, but he only muttered that it was about the homeless. "I've met a homeless man!" I replied in joy. "Maybe I can help you!" Joseph got quiet. Then he uttered: "I know you want to help me, Sophie, but this is not an article about *a homeless man*. This is an article about *a homeless woman who is no longer homeless*." I could hear the despair in his voice. He was annoyed. I wanted to think it was only stress. Perhaps there was something else. We hung up and I went to bed, feeling a bit disappointed.

At least I am feeling better and my stomach is not hurting anymore. I am getting my voice back – so I can no longer stay home from school. Tomorrow I will be going back.

November 5

It is scary how easy we forget things. I had almost forgotten about Nathan and his stupid gang, and now they are worse than ever. I guess the worst part of being back in school is having the gang picking on me. Nathan Johnson always chooses his victim, and his gang always follows. He has not always been like this, I force myself to remember. There was a time when he was very kind and a close friend to my brother. We used to hang out all the four of us: Joseph, Nathan, Amy and I. Joseph was the oldest and took most of the decisions. We were two sibling pairs hanging out because both our parents worked a lot and thus had bought us a playhouse by the

harbour. We had a lot of fun there with pyjama parties and sleepovers. Then something bad happened. Joseph and Nathan got into a fight; I think there must have been a girl involved. Joseph never told me the whole story, and ever since he went overseas Nathan has picked on me. It has usually been small details, like calling me funny names when no one heard him, but today was different. Today was worse because Amy was no longer standing by my side.

The bullying began during the morning break, when the teachers were having their Monday meeting. Amy, a few friends and I were playing basketball when Nathan stepped up to us, his long legs making him tall as the Eiffel Tower. "Give me the ball!" he said threateningly. Everyone else disappeared. Amy went to stand next to her brother. I stood there alone, the basketball in my hand. The school yard seemed bigger than ever before. There were so many students, but nobody cared. I hated how my body trembled. I was scared. Everyone is scared of him because he is big, strong and has many supporters. People used to joke and say that he had the muscles and Joseph had the brains. Ever since my brother left, Nathan has ruled the school yard with his own fists. He knows that he can pick on anyone for as long as he wants. Sometimes I even think the teachers fear him because they never do anything to stop him. They pretend they do not hear or see anything, and therefore we also pretend there is nothing going on. But of course there is, at least for me and all the others who get bullied by him. He is the only

person I fear, and the only person I truly hate. I know hate is a strong word, but I hate him. I hate him because I know he can be nice. My body boiled with rage when I was forced to give the basketball to his sweaty hands, leaving the basketball field behind. There was no point of staying; the gigantic school yard was already his anyways. I went to the backyard to play hopscotch before the school bell rang. What hurt me the most was seeing Amy and my other friends playing with Nathan and his gang. They acted as if though nothing had happened. The only comfort I had was the swimming practise with the all-star team that will start tomorrow. I only hope it is worth it. I never thought I might lose my closest friend because of it.

November 6

I cannot believe what has just happened. I went to my first swimming practise in the all-star division. The practise was in another part of town, close to Knightingale Forest. It is a beautiful part of town that has a swimming resort and a sports and culture hall. It is huge and the hall makes me feel so small. The practise went really well, a lot better than expected. It was not the practise that stunned me though, but what happened after. We ended earlier than planned, so I had finished changing long before my Father came to pick me up. Everyone were leaving, and they asked me if I needed a ride, but I replied that my Father was coming soon. The sports hall was shutting down as it was getting rather late and I began feeling worried. Why

did it take so long? I had to go out and stand on the porch, the janitor told me in an irritated voice. He seemed eager to go home himself. Suddenly I saw Nathan standing before me. My blood froze to ice. What could he possibly want from me this time? I did not have his basketball, the basketball which was not even his. Behind him stood his gang, waiting for their leader's command like a pack of hyenas. I felt like the lonely prey waiting to be eaten. But out in the wild you never know what will save you. In my case it was going to be a flying stick.

The moment Nathan and his gang formed their vicious circle around me; I knew they were going to play their favourite game, where the victim was pushed around in the middle. It was only a matter of time. "Well, well, would you look at that? Isn't it the ugly little mermaid?" He made a pause, letting the words sink in. "What are you doing outside a sports hall this late at night? Don't you know it's dangerous to be out on your own?" I hated how he made me feel, so small and lonely. I could not say a word, not even utter a sound. I merely stood there, wishing Joseph would pop out from the bushes and save me, but I knew it was all in vain. *Joseph is not here. Joseph is in New York, you are on your own now.* They began pushing me around like a pinball, and they were laughing while I was screaming. "This is what happens when your Father owes us money!" Nathan shouted loudly. I thought I was going to cry. I tried to fight the bigger arms, but they were too many, too strong. I never thought I could write this, but I hate my Father. I know what he is up to. I have heard

Nathan's father on the phone; he has even stopped by our house. The cost of my Father's gambling had finally reached the fists of the biggest and scariest guy at school. I cannot help but to blame myself as well. I wish I had never gotten chosen to swim for the all-star division. Then Amy and I would still be friends and I would not be alone. Before I hit the ground I think I saw her blue eyes hiding in the bushes.

Then something strange happened. It went really fast, all I remember was a rusty voice screaming, a flying stick, and a broken circle. I was lost in the middle, left lying on the pavement with some bruises hurting on my upper arm. The first thing I felt when I opened my eyes was the softness of a wagging tail. Then I felt the face of an German shepherd licking my bruises, and I saw a brown stick in the corner of my eye. I was safe because Nathan



was afraid of dogs. I could not stop laughing. It was so ridiculous. Nathan was afraid of dogs. I realised then that we are all scared of something, just like Joseph had told me.

It took some time before I got up. The dog dropped the stick in front of me and his playful, innocent eyes warmed my heart.

"Do you want to play?" I asked.

The dog barked, wagging his tail in the air.

"Isn't he wonderful?" the rusty voice asked. It was the homeless man.

"I'm sorry if I..."

"There is absolutely no need to be sorry," the old man interrupted.

"Especially not after what those boys did to you." He smiled as he saw the relief in my face. I did not know what to say, or how to express my gratitude, so after a while I asked:

"Did you throw the stick?" This time it was the homeless man's turn to feel surprised. "Wow, you're a smart one, aren't you? You see, I might appear old and useless, and I know my legs won't carry me as fast I want, but I still got the eyes of a hawk." The man laughed. Even his laughter was rusty. "Lucky, this fellow is way faster and scared those boys. Isn't that right, Podgy?" The dog licked the man's face and barked at me. "I think Podgy wants to play."

So I threw the stick as hard as I possibly could and it soared through the air like a bird. I have always been able to throw things, another of my useless traits. "Wow, what a throw! That will surely keep him occupied for a while," the man said and sat down on a wooden bench. "Why do you call him Podgy?" I had to ask, the name was so strange and I am such a curious person. The question affected the man in a way I could never have guessed. One could see the sorrow in his eyes had he not glanced away. "Oh... It's because he gets more food than I," he

said in a voice very different from the one before. This one was mysterious, almost story-like. He continued: "People feel more empathy and compassion with dogs than they do with people of their own kind. But Podgy is a good dog, and we usually share."

"So, for how long has he been your dog? When did you get him?" I see now how this must have been the silliest question one can ask a homeless, but I was too eager to get a reply. I guess I was still in my own little world, where things were owned and anything could be bought for money. "He's not my dog," the man answered, smiling at my question but was kind enough not to remark on it. "Nothing is. We don't own anything, we borrow." I was stunned. The man spoke in terms I had never heard before. What did he mean? *We don't own anything, we borrow.* I owned a lot of things, and always got anything I wanted...apart from that expensive evening dress, but I am sure I am going to get it in time for my cousin's wedding. But the way he used his words and the way he spoke amazed me. I did not know of anyone that spoke like that, not even Joseph. Silence fell and it was quiet for a while. We listened to the sniffing of the German shepherd still searching for the stick, which had landed in some bushes. I found myself smiling again. Nathan was afraid of dogs. From this moment on, I promised myself to forever remember the look on his face when Podgy came charging. I would treasure that memory in a special place in my heart.

"Thank you," I finally said, and for the first time in my life I actually meant it.

"Thanks for everything."

"Anytime," the man replied. "Glad to help and for once not being the one causing all the trouble..."

"You're not trouble!" I protested wildly. "You're... nice. I mean, you saved me," I continued. "I'm afraid not everyone shares your opinion," he said miserably, but was interrupted by his friend who returned from the bushes. Podgy was carrying the stick proudly in his mouth and wanted to play. The old man got up on his feet. I joined them and played too. We took turns throwing the stick. Meanwhile, I was thinking of how I could help him. We were still playing when a black Volvo drove up the road. It was Father and time to go.

"I have to stop now. My Father is coming."

"Oh, you are going home now? Good for you! I mean, at least you have a roof over your head..." He looked up at the clouds that merged into a dark grey sky. It was going to rain. I did not want to leave the homeless man and the dog behind and I must say I felt horrible at the thought of letting them stay outside. At the same time the Volvo was getting closer. Then I finally got an idea. "I have to go! Meet me at the harbour in two hours." The man looked surprised. "Whatever you say, it's not like I've got anything else planned! It sounds like a great idea!" I felt a rush of excitement running through my body; I was going to meet this man again, the man who saved me. I thought I could save him too. My legs carried me away from the gigantic sports hall to the black car. I saw the eyes of the dog and the homeless man as I jumped inside.

"Hi, sweetie" Father said softly. "Sorry I'm late, but I was caught in traffic and a business meeting ran over... Did you have a good day?"

"Mm," I hummed for an answer, still thinking about the plan. It had to work. I still could not grasp the whole day: Nathan was afraid of dogs and I had been saved by the homeless man. A man I now was determined to save. From that moment onward he was my friend and I cared for him. When the Volvo crossed the bridge, small droplets of water hit the window. Two hours to go.

"Dad?"

"Yes, what is it, darling?"

It must be cold outside.

"Could you drive faster?"

"Why sweetie, is something wrong?"

And then it hit me.

"No, I'm just hungry, that's all."

I do not even know the man's name.

There were some things I needed to fix for the homeless man as I got home. I have already found the keys to the little playhouse by the harbour. It belongs to me and my brother. I remembered Joseph complaining about not having a playhouse like all the other children, and eventually Father finally got us one. I love that house, although it is not the same when Joseph is not there. But I do not think he will mind me using it; I am only providing shelter for a homeless man and a dog. Maybe I ought to pack as well? What would I pack for a stranger who is

homeless? Perhaps clean sheets and some pillows, so he can sleep in the bed, and some warm clothes, and some food. I will have to do a lot of sneaking around now. I know it sounds crazy, but why does it feel so right? I must not let Father know, he would get so upset. I wonder what to tell him. I will sneak out quite a lot. I do not like telling lies but I think I have to this time. The sad part is he will probably believe me, because he is so busy and I never lie. I hate lying. I will try not to. I will stay quiet instead. I have to go.

November 8

His name is Roger Davies. He was so happy when I brought him food and gave him the key to the playhouse, that I cannot describe it in words. I have never seen anyone so happy, not even when Joseph got accepted to the school, or when Father won a lot of money on poker. I showed him around the playhouse. It is actually pretty small, but Davies said it was huge.



“You’ve got everything here! A bed, a small kitchen and even your own bathroom! This is not an ordinary playhouse, this is a home.” I have never quite seen it that way, of course we had a bed, and of course we had a small kitchen. We used to spend so much time here when we

were younger, my brother and I. Especially when Mother was away, and when Father had a lot of work to do. "Who is this?" Davies suddenly asked. I turned my head and saw the photo hanging on the wall. It was the picture of my family at my brother's graduation. "That's my older brother, Joseph. He's in the US now," I said and tried to look away. The photograph only made me miss him more. I usually hate photos, but not that one. That is the only one where I look like myself. On other photos I always look so false, like I am not me but I know I am because it has my name under it. "What is the matter?" Davies asked. "Is something wrong?" I do not know how he does that, but he always seems to know when something is bothering me. "It's only my brother, I miss him." "Oh, I see. Well, he is coming back, isn't he?" I nodded. "Not until New Years." "New Years is not so long away. It will say swish, then it's here. Trust me, time goes fast when you don't think of it." I guess he is right. New Years is not so long away.

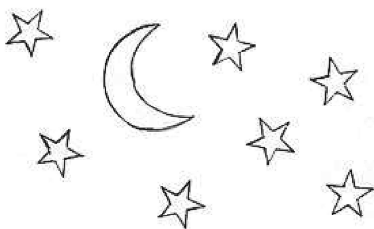
November 10

I like the homeless man a lot. He is a daydreamer like me. He loves stories as well, and he told me one last night. It was getting rather late and we sat down by the oak tree. I told him this was the place where I and my brother used to sit and tell each other stories. Davies said he understood that, because it was a very magical place. "Some places are magical," he said. "This is one of them,

the sea is magic too. Many years did I spend on the seas, letting the waves take me wherever it lead. I know I was only running from the life I left behind. My life was very different back then, it was the end of the Second World War and the world was left in ruins. My Father was dead, being one of the many courageous heroes never mentioned in the war. He was a skilled shoemaker, who went out on the battlefield and died, leaving his family with nothing but a shoe shop. I was the oldest of four siblings, but my hands were never meant to grasp anything but a brush from the very beginning. I know I let my family down, and the shoe shop finally had to close. My Mother got a job at a textile factory, and only made enough money to support my younger brothers and sisters. I was forced to leave. We must remember I was considered old back then; I was a fifteen year-old man and I could take care of myself. I packed my belongings, which weren't that many, only some clothes and my brown portfolio that my Mother gave me. I promised her to keep my drawings in there, no matter what happened. I drew each one of them a self-portrait so they would never forget me. I remember my siblings loved that picture. We sat up all night, our Mother singing for us. She had the most beautiful voice in the world. My younger brother asked me where I was going, but I said I did not know. Early next morning I took off to sea with a ship called Helena, which was destiny's own way of laughing at me. It was the name of my Mother. I haven't heard from them ever since."

"That is such a sad story. Do you think they are still alive?"

"Maybe, I hope so. When I was younger and off at sea, I used to look up at the night-sky and think we saw the same stars. We were in the same world under the same night-sky, I told myself before going to sleep every night. At least I knew that, which had to be enough for me."



I thought of Joseph in New York and that I could simply pick up the phone and call him. I could hear his voice wherever he happened to be. Davies could never have done that, hearing his Mother's voice from distant lands. He has not heard her voice in years. He cleared his throat and we watched the night-sky. It was truly magical and it made me feel so small and insignificant, but still a part of something big. I was so glad Davies told me his story, the story of his past. I told him about my journal and asked him if I could write it down. He looked at me and smiled. "Of course you can. It would be an honour." He looked at my journal and asked me what I had planned do with the empty spaces. I said I did not know. He wondered if he could paint them. I got overwhelmed when he picked up

my pencil and started drawing. He made my words come to life.

While he was painting I told him more about my family; my Mother's travelling and my Father's gambling. For some weird reason I felt like I could talk to him, like he cared. He warned me about the gambling, how it could destroy people's lives and how it had destroyed his own. It was an evil circle you had to break. I told him about Amy, and he listened closely, nodded his head from time to time. "She is not your friend if she does that. Friends should be proud of each other, support each other. Not be jealous and mean because of your success." How wonderful it felt to hear those words. "Have you tried to talk to her?" I just realised I had not. I really should. Because that is what friends do to each other. They talk.

November 12

We are on a class trip to the forest today. Our teacher, Mrs. Sullivan, says it is important, that there might not be any forest left soon. She calls the forest a National Reservation Park, a term I have never heard before. Then again I did not know the forests were under any serious threat. During class Mrs. Sullivan told us that if the forests disappeared terrible things would happen. There would be no paper to write on, and many animals would lose their homes as well. I could not help but to feel guilty. I write so much that I help the forests go away. After class I told my favourite teacher I was sorry for chopping down

all the trees. "It is not your fault," she told me. "Never apologise for a gift." She nodded at my desk, where my journal was sticking out from underneath. Mrs. Sullivan knew I loved writing, and I had told her I kept a journal. "The forests can still be saved. That is why we are going to the National Reservation Park so we can learn how to save it."

The National Reservation Park lay outside town. It was far from school so we had to go there by bus and leave early in the morning. The Reservation Park was very big, which made Mrs. Sullivan and the tour guide look very small. In the midmorning the guide spoke about the park, and what could be done to save the forests in the world. I tried to sit next to Amy, but she only switched places. I guess she did not feel like talking. In the afternoon we were split into smaller groups, and funnily enough Mrs. Sullivan paired me with Amy. We still had not talked about the basketball thing. Actually, we were just ignoring each other. Now we had to work together, walking around a park looking for animals that could die out because of the disappearing trees. We received a map of a route from the guide. *Whatever you do stick to it* was the main instruction from the guide. Amy and I started arguing about who should hold the map. We fought so loud we did not hear the guide's warning about the deep holes lurking in the forest.



The trees were so tall and their branches so big that only a little sunshine passed through. It was dark on the path where Amy and I walked. We had to be quiet in the forest or else we would scare the animals. Amy pinched my arm. "What is it?" I whispered. She told me about eyes hiding in the forest. I did not know if I could trust her, or if she simply wanted to scare me. "There are no eyes hiding in here. Don't be silly!" But Amy was not joking, she only pointed to the eyes hiding in the forest. "Let's keep on walking." I brought out the map. We were not sticking to the route. How could that have happened? Amy was supposed to tell me where we took off. I checked the clock, in half an hour we were supposed to be back where we started. We kept on walking, when we should have stopped, and got lost after walking in what felt like circles. I asked Amy if she knew where we were, and I gave her the map. "But I thought we said you were in charge of where we were, while I was looking at all the animals!"

"That is not fair!" I replied. "Mrs. Sullivan said it was the group's responsibility to know the location. C'mon Amy, this can't be that hard! We know this!" I tried to stay calm and collect my senses. "We should be somewhere here, and if we can take us to the main road there shouldn't be any problem." I tried not to think about the eyes hiding in the forest, but it was difficult not to. They could be anywhere, waiting to creep up from behind.

"I'm glad I'm not alone, Amy."

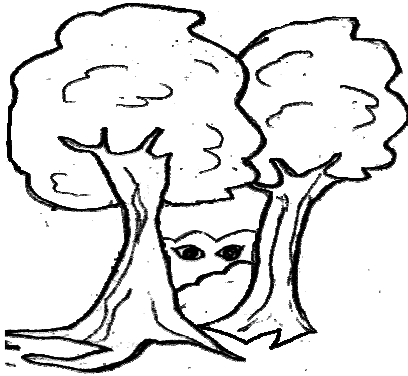
"Me too."

Those were our last words before we fell into a giant hole in the forest.

"Are you alright?" The ground was damp, and luckily soft.

"I'm okay," a voice answered. At least neither one of us was hurt, I reassured myself. But we were all the same stuck in this big hole. It was rather deep, and it must have been hidden under some branches. We had not seen it before it was too late. I could not help but to wonder if it belonged to an animal. I looked at my watch, which was now dusty, and it had almost reached three o'clock. Everyone were supposed to be back by now. They should start looking for us soon, if only it would not be so dark they would soon find us. Minutes felt like hours and Amy and I screamed: "Help, help!" No one heard us except for the birds in the trees. They looked down at us, curious of what sort of creatures we were. I have never in my entire life been so envious of birds, who could fly away and search for help. "What can we do?" Amy's voice echoed in

the dark. "Is there any light left in the pocket torch?" I asked my friend. There was enough light to see our faces. "I have a rope in my rucksack. Perhaps we can tie a knot and throw it on to something. We could heave our way out from here." We lit up the surroundings to find if there was any such place. I did not find any, but could only picture my warm, cosy bed in front of me. "There!" Amy shouted. "Up there, I see a stone!" She took out the rope from the rucksack, and carefully tied a big knot which could fall around the stone. It was a scout knot, and I was happy Amy knew how to tie it. I did not. She threw the rope, and for every throw a light of hope glowed within me. She was really close, annoyingly close, but the knot never made it all the way. "Here, let me try." I took hold of the rope and threw it as hard as I could. It reminded me about the stick I threw to Podgy, and it soared across the sky. On the fourth try our hearts were filled with hope. Maybe being able to throw things was not that useless after all. The knot had fallen around the stone, and Amy began climbing. She climbed up the metres we had fallen. She was up! I went after her, and dragged myself to the ground. At least we were not in the hole anymore. We forced ourselves to remember the way back to the route, where some light was still waiting for us, but we were truly lost. I could not help but to think about the eyes. It felt like I had seen them before. I pinched Amy's hand, whispered in her ear. "Over there, the eyes!" They were hiding inside some bushes. I held tightly on to Amy's hands. She held firmly on to mine.



The animal moved the bushes. It was close now. He barked. It was Podgy.

Amy and I were in shock. It was Podgy! We hugged him a thousand times over. He wagged his tail. He barked again, and again. It echoed in the forest. It did not take long until we heard the worried screams of our classmates and our beloved teacher, Mrs. Sullivan. When she spotted us the relief in her face was indescribable. "Oh, thank God you made it! I've been dying of worry. You got lost in the forest! If it wouldn't have been for the barking we would never have heard you... Oh, why did you not stick to the route, oh why? Do you want your teacher to get a heart attack? But you are here now, it is all good. You are here now and it is all good. It's all good." On the way back home everyone wanted to hear the story of the eyes hiding in the forest, and of the giant hole. Everyone wanted to pet Podgy. He loved it. Both Amy and I were treated as heroes. But most importantly, we sat next to each other.

Roger Davies said he had been worried about Podgy. He had run away early in the morning, and been gone the whole day. When I came back with him, he got really pleased. "Oh, there you are. What have you been up to?" I told him about the adventure in the National Reservation Park. Davies did not look too surprised. He petted his friend on the back. "So you missed home. I miss the forest too sometimes."

November 15

It is surprising how easy it is to hide big things. I never thought it was going to be this easy to hide an old man and a dog. No one has asked me anything when I go out to visit them. Sometimes I lie and say I go to a friend's house, but I really do not know if that is a lie. I think I have not been discovered because Father is very busy at work, and my Mother is still away. So I only have to fool Father, which is easy. I cannot say I am proud of it, but I have made him believe I have a friend called Podgy, which is in fact true, I just have not told him Podgy is a dog. Luckily he never asked me that question so I do not have to lie about it. The only thing he asked me was if his name really was Podgy, and I said of course not, it is only a nickname. It is funny how much we pay attention to details, but always ask about the wrong ones.

Nathan and his gang have stopped harassing me now, because Amy is standing by my side. Ever since the homeless man and the dog moved into the playhouse by the harbour he has made sure to always be around when I have swimming practise. They have moved on to pick on someone else. I guess they felt too embarrassed when Podgy scared them. It feels nice, and I cannot explain in words how I feel when I look at him. Dogs are nothing to be scared of, I want to tell him. They are much nicer than you. I only wished I could have the courage to step up to him and make him stop bully the other children at school.

November 16

Amy's father and some others are coming over for a poker night. There is a group of some middle-aged men in the neighbourhood, who like to play. They bet on everything you could possibly imagine: horse racing, dog racing, sports games, and now they like to play poker. They call it skill when they win a round, I call it stupidity. Amy does not like the fact that her Father is playing either. We try to talk some sense into them, but it is worthless without Joseph around. At least I am with Amy, when my Father and the other men are playing downstairs. The night usually starts off pretty good with everyone being happy for the big pile of chips lying on the table. After an hour or two things begin to change; they curse and begin to stink of alcohol and the smoke from cigar. You know they are having a bad night, when the piles of chips on the table

become smaller. By the end of the night it can get really bad. Amy told me about this one time two weeks ago, when they even started fighting, her father and mine. There were chips involved, and Amy's Father accused mine for stealing them. He said it was at least a hundred dollars. Nathan played poker that night as well. He was convinced he saw my Father cheating. I am scared he was right, which is why he was mean to me at the basketball field, and all the other days as well. Amy told me how Nathan threatened her to believe him. She did not dare to stand up against his fists to choose my side. She said she was sorry. I forgave her because I understood what it was like having to choose side. I hate being the one who always have to do so. I always chose Joseph's side when he was home, because he was the only one who could debate Father. Without Joseph in the house it is pointless. I feel like calling him again. I do not know what to do anymore. I am worried about Father. He is cursing from downstairs. He is having a bad night.

November 20

I tried to call Joseph after what happened at the poker night. Father played and played, but only lost. He got into debt and owed money. Luckily he closed a good business deal earlier this morning, and earned a lot of money. Now he is happy; at least he is not in debt anymore, but that will not keep him from playing. I knew he would play again soon, which is why I called Joseph. However, I

could not get hold of him. He did not answer his phone or reply to any of my e-mails. Mother was not reachable either, a woman at the airline office informed me. She was still up in the air, flying somewhere in the world. She would not be reachable until tomorrow night. I knew from before she would be too tired to talk by then. Besides, she was still not on her way home; she was in the middle of her trip. Maybe Davies could help me.

On Wednesdays Davies works at a flea market, where he helps out a friend. Rex is a craftsman and he does all sort of handiwork. He is a lot older and looks scary. I am a bit afraid of him. He has a scar on his face. Davies tells me he is a nice fellow, don't mind the scar. I ask him about it, but I bite my tongue every time I do so, because I know he hates talking about the scar. Instead he tells me about how they first met on Helena, where they both had found work. He loves talking about all the adventures they have been through together. Like one time when they got



thrown into jail because they helped the poor people of an island to fish. Davies and Rex escaped from prison and built their own boat so they could sail away from the crazy island. I think that is my favourite story.

Davies only tells me about those sea stories, never about his life on the streets. All I know is that he is very close to Rex, and he lets him stay inside sometimes. But Rex said he did not need any help. He told Davies he was doing just fine.

At the flea market they have their own booth where they sell things my Father would call crap. I think they look lovely. Davies usually sits and paints the handiwork with lush landscapes of distant lands, way beyond the seas. They usually sell enough to make money so they can buy food afterwards. I think Davies should paint and sell his own paintings instead, but he does not believe anyone would buy them. He does not believe in himself and I do not know why. He is a great painter. "You could sell these paintings!" I yelled at him, but he only said no. It will never happen. Then I asked if I found an exhibition if he would display his paintings there? He said no. Then I gave him the looks and he changed his mind. "Maybe, I might. But there is no exhibition now is there? So why get your hopes up for something which doesn't even exist?" I have looked for an art exhibition ever since, but I still have not found any. Maybe Roger Davies is right, there are no art exhibitions. But I am his friend and friends never give up. I know he is a great painter, so I will keep looking. I believe in him. I only wished he would.

When I found him at the flea market he looked surprised, but glad to see me. "What happened?" he asked as I got to

his booth. "It's Father. He is playing again. And he is losing." Davies looked concerned. I must have looked petrified. "I promised myself to never get involved with... such things again. I lost my home, my wife, my entire life because of it." I looked straight into his eyes, which were like gateways to his soul. "Please! I need your help. Maybe this is the time to make it right." I have heard Joseph saying so to our parents many times before. Davies got quiet, looking as if though he had a hard time to make up his mind. It was actually Rex who turned around and was the one to break the silence. "Of course you are going to help her. It seems to me you were having the same problems her Father is having. He only happens to have more money to save him. You know what to do." He glanced at Podgy. "You were different back then. You if anyone should know what gambling can make you do." The man looked at his scar from the mirror hanging on the booth. Davies looked down on the ground, like so many times before. This time was different though, because the man looked guilty. He kept on drawing the spoon Rex had made earlier, as if the drawing would keep him occupied. Davies eventually nodded, and cleared his throat. "I'll do it. I promise. Does he owe anyone money?"

"Not now," I replied. "But it is getting worse. They play more often, and Father always loses. Sometimes he wins, and he thinks he is unbeatable. He thinks he will never lose. All he thinks about is the stupid gambling, the stupid numbers."

Davies grunted. Perhaps he recognised himself. "We need to get him to think about something else. Does he like

anything else *besides gambling*? Does he like sports or maybe he plays an instrument?" I could not think of anything because lately all he did was work and gamble. Rex stared at him. Davies stared at Podgy. "Does your Father like dogs?" I would never have thought of it. I told Davies my Father loved dogs. Maybe this could work. It was worth a try. He only looked at me and smiled. "We don't own anything, we borrow. Podgy is still by the playhouse. Take him with you. Tell him you found him on the streets, and that a homeless man couldn't take care of him. He's all yours. Promise me you'll take great care of him." I promised. And so I took him home.

November 21

Amy helped me wash the dog before Father got home from work. I do not think he had ever taken a bath before, because it was hard to get him inside the bath tub. Besides, he smelled bad and he needed to smell good if we were to have any chance of succeeding with the plan. Podgy looked like a fresh new dog, when we heard the slamming of the door later in the evening. Father yelled at me. He was mad like a volcano. "What did you do?"

"He's been abandoned," I explained. "He does not have anywhere to live."

"What is wrong with him?" he asked. I got angry, and for the first time in my life I screamed at Father. "What do you mean 'what is wrong with him?' Why do you always think there is something wrong? The dog was abandoned!"

He never did anything wrong. Can't we please take care of him? Otherwise we have to throw him out on the streets." I know my Father's weakness, and the dog's playful eyes gazed at him. I saw how they filled the room with warmth. "Your Mother is arriving to Singapore this evening. I'll talk to her and see what we can do. Until then, he can stay here." I let out a joyful scream and embraced my Father. Podgy wagged his tail in the air, and Father petted him on his ears. "Does he have a name yet?" he asked. I said I did not know. "Do you have any name in mind?" I looked at Podgy.

"How about calling him Podgy?"

"Podgy, that's an unusual name! But it sounds familiar. From where have I heard that before?" Father really did too much gambling. He needed to have something else on his mind. "Well, it's the horse racing on TV, I should go and watch it," he said. I was not going to give up this easy. "How about taking a long walk with Podgy instead? I really have a lot of homework to do. Here, I bought him a leash." Podgy barked, and before I knew it the door had closed behind me.

November 22

Father really loves having the dog in the house. Podgy is a very good dog and he makes Father happy, and helps him keep his mind off the gambling. Almost as if though he knew he has an addiction to fight. Davies told me Podgy helped him too, and that it was Rex who had found him in

an alley three years ago. I like his company as well because it makes our house feel less deserted. When I get home from school he is always there, with his tail wagging in the air. Most importantly, Podgy is taking up so much of Father's time that he is no longer gambling. Instead he thinks of all the things he can do for Podgy, like taking walks, buying dog toys, and food bowls, and maybe some of that dog candy? His latest idea is to train him to listen to his command. If that goes well he says he is thinking of agility. I never thought there was so much you could do with dogs, but I am glad Father is doing something else.

Father talked to Mother on the phone last night. She missed us and said she could not wait to see the dog. However she did have some bad news. There were thunderstorms in Singapore so her flight got cancelled. This meant she would not be home until much later, in the beginning of next week. "But it also means I will have more time to get you something nice from Singapore," she told me over the phone. "Mum, you don't have to!" I told her. I did not want any more sweets or teddy bears from all over the world. All I wanted was a Mother who would stay at home with me, and that was the greatest gift of all. Too bad I never got around telling her that.

December 1



I do not know what made me tell Mrs. Sullivan about Nathan and his gang. It was during the snowball fight at lunch. The



rain had slowly turned into crystal flakes of snow, and the entire school yard was shining in white.

People made small igloos and snowmen. Then Nathan came and threw the first snowball. I saw it well because I was standing on the porch next to Amy. She said she did not want to be a part of this again, that she had had enough of Nathan's tantrums from home. I remembered Joseph telling me about it, but it was such a long time ago I must have forgotten. I followed Amy inside to knock on the teacher's lounge, and Mrs. Sullivan opened the door. She carried a big bowl of warm soup in her hands, but the second she heard our news she rushed outside. I heard her mumbling to herself about some other teachers who were supposed to stand and watch the school yard. I have never seen her that upset. Mrs. Sullivan was usually a very kind teacher, the one who most students never saw angry. I had never seen her angry before, but only worried like a Mother. She said violence did not solve anything and if people wanted her angry she merely told them the stories of her childhood. She told us about her school, where teachers hit the children whenever they pleased and how they locked them up in small cupboards. Once Mrs. Sullivan stood in a cupboard for three hours, because she could not stand eating the porridge the school served. It

was in that dark room that she decided to become a teacher. These stories made anyone get goose bumps on their back, and afterwards everyone said they rather liked a kind teacher.

When we got out on the school yard the once upset face of Mrs. Sullivan quickly turned into concern. For a short second I think she even looked scared. Nathan was holding a student upside down, pouring in cold snow up the student's sweater. Mrs. Sullivan walked up to talk to him, and the entire school yard turned quiet. I did not know what she did or how she did it, but Nathan let the other boy go, and the snowball fight was over. Mrs. Sullivan asked me and Amy to stay. She talked to Amy first then she turned her head to me. "It was very brave of you to tell me about the snowball fight and Nathan. In the future I would like you to do it even sooner. I hope you know you can tell me anything." She made a pause. Then she continued: "I must also apologise, Sophie. I could not help but to overlook your journal, as you left it in school the other day. Don't worry, I only saw the page that was left open. It said that you are helping a homeless man. Is that true?" I nodded. She smiled. "Keep writing in the journal and keep help him. Just be careful. Can you promise me that?" I promised. "Good. We need more people like you."

Mrs. Sullivan returned my journal and left.

December 4

Mother is finally coming home tomorrow, Father told me over the breakfast table. This was the first breakfast we spent together since Mother flew away. It feels weird to sit next to Father and actually talk to him. But then again after a while we only talk about him. Sometimes, like today, we ended up talking about my swimming practise. "Isn't it great fun that you're in the all-star division now? I am so proud of you." My ears grew bigger, I wanted to hear more. I loved the attention. He usually stops though, as he flips the page in the newspaper and finds an interesting article that is "important for the firm." Today his mobile phone rang instead. At times I wonder if the company is his real baby, it seems to me as if it always comes first. I know he loves it. He loves the numbers I will never love. "I have a very important meeting, Sophie. I am sorry, but I have to go. Can you walk the dog? I don't have time." He gave Podgy a treat. "We will take a long afternoon walk, you and I. Promise, I'll make some time." Father never has time. Sometimes I wonder what he does with it. All of a sudden he was able to make time. He has never done that before or else he would pop by practise like other parents. Mother is coming home tomorrow. I hope she can make some time. I miss her, but it also means that it is not long until New Years. Time truly goes by fast when you do not think of it.

I took Podgy to see Davies, who really misses him. He said the playhouse felt lonely without him, like something was missing. I told him Podgy was just on the other side of the hill, and that he could come by any time. Davies said he was happy about that, but the truth was he did not look any happy at all. "What is the matter?" I asked. He looked down on the ground, where he hid his face. "It's Rex." He looked up, I wish he had not. His face was covered in tears. "He's at the hospital. The doctors say he is ill. Rex says he is going to die." I was shocked, my eyes slowly filled with tears. "How does he know he is going to die?" I asked. I am scared of death. No one ever talked to me about it. It is almost that if you do, then you will die. "I visited him last night. At the hospital." He paused. "And I said he looked fine, that everything was going to be okay, the blood could cure him. Then he looked at me, those brown eyes staring at me, and he told me he might look fine, but he didn't feel fine. He knew he was going to die. He told me there was no blood to save him. It was too late. It was too late." I cried and I could not help but feel scared. Rex was dying because he came too late, the blood could not save him anymore. Blood is magical and scary, I think. It runs through all of us and if we put our palm on the left hand side (for some it's on the right, I've learnt) we can even hear it pumping for life. Mrs. Sullivan taught us the scary part of blood, which is that we cannot make it, like we can do other things. We can produce TV sets and build cars or construct computers and make spaceships so we can fly to the Moon, but we cannot make blood. Our bodies can make blood, but if your body is incapable of

such a thing, then we need blood from someone else. So the magic of blood is that we must give it – from human to human – and if it is healthy it can save a life. Isn't that magical? I think so; I even think it is cool. It makes all of us – all the six billion of us – connect. I know that we are connected somehow, you and I. Do not tell me how, but we are. The sad part is that we always tend to forget that, especially the grown-ups who always have other matters on their mind. They never take time to do anything good. That is why I felt the least I could do was to pay Rex a final visit. A final visit before he is no longer with us.

I do not like hospitals. I think it is because it is a house of life and death. Then I tell myself that I forget something, which is that hospitals are made to save people's lives and often they do. So in one way they make me feel safe. The people working there are also usually nice, I like them. I just do not like death. I guess no one does. I have only been to one funeral, which was my grandmother's. Her funeral was different though, because she died very old. She was over a hundred and she wanted to die. It is very different with Rex because he is not over a hundred, and he probably does not want to die. He wants to live.

St Agatha Memorial Hospital lay in another part of town. Davies and I took the bus. I was hoping we were not too late. It was a big hospital with many rooms and a lot of people. They had a cafeteria and a reception desk. Rex was on the third floor. It was a very small room. He had a lot of hoses around him, and a machine like they have in

movies. It was scary. It felt real. Rex smiled at me, and he really did have brown eyes. They were friendly and made me forget about the scar, but not that he was dying. What was I going to say? Almost as if he read my mind he asked me if I was scared. I said I was. "Don't be, dear. Death is nothing to be afraid of. It is only the price we have to pay so we can live." I asked if it hurt. "No, and even if it did hurt, do you think you would be alive to feel it? Do you remember the pains you felt when you were born, or when you were inside your Mother's belly? Or have you perhaps felt such an intense pain where you can no longer feel the pain? Pain and death is nothing to be scared of. See it as a natural end. A beginning must always have an end, doesn't it? Then what happens after the end no one knows. Not even I. Not even Roger. Not even your Mother or Father. Not anyone. It's like an open book. Are you still scared?"

"A little."

"Do you want to know a secret? I think everyone are scared. I am a bit scared too, because I don't know what will happen. And we always fear what we don't know. It lies in human nature. Whatever it is, it won't hurt, I can tell you that much. See it more as a release, or that death is envious of life because it is so beautiful." He paused; I caught my breath even though I was not talking. "Promise me to never be afraid of life simply because it will someday end. That's what makes it so beautiful. Imagine if you would live forever!" I cannot imagine how long forever would be like. It must be very, very long with no end. I do not know if I would like to live for forever. Think

of all the friends who would leave you behind. Perhaps death is not so bad and scary after all. Hospitals are still a bit scary. I know they are good because they cure a lot of people, but they will never be able to cure my fear.

December 5

Rex is gone. He died last night. Davies is painting more than ever. He says it has always been his way of dealing with things. He still has some handiwork which needs to be drawn. He says he wants to be left alone for a while. So I left him alone at the playhouse with Podgy. It is harder to visit him now because Mother is home. I do not know what we would do without her, what Father would do without her. He is a lot calmer when she is around. The big house is full of life again. My Mother wants things to be done; I guess I am a bit like her in that sense. It also meant I have a harder time to sneak out from the house to meet Davies. Mother always keeps an eye on me. She still feels bad about being away for so long. She usually does, which is why she always comes home with a lot of sweets and gifts from the airport. This time there was no exception. She had bought heaps of candy, and like always a teddy bear. This one came from Singapore. When I was younger I loved those teddy bears, but now I would rather like my Mother home. She promised me this was the last flight she would ever take, but I am not so sure of it. She always promises things, but has problems keeping them. I wished she would. At least she is home now and

that is what matters. She might even have time to watch me swim before she takes off again.

We wrote poems in school today. Mrs. Sullivan told us it was good for the soul and the heart to do so. I know Joseph wrote amazing poems and I have read many other poems as well. I like poems. I have not written that many myself. I thought of Rex and Davies, and I began writing. Mrs. Sullivan looked pleased, and moved. "You truly have the gift of writing." I love hearing those words, the feeling of someone believing in you. Here is my poem:

Who Am I?

*You don't know me, the rhythm of my song
I wander the streets, the malls and the forest
Longing for a place to belong*

*Our eyes meet, but yours look away
I keep walking down the street
To find someone else who may*

*Look into my eyes
The gateway to my soul*

*Don't leave me here alone to die
I see you everyday
Who am I?*

By: Sophie Brookers in Mrs. Sullivan's class

Roger Davies loved it. He was very proud and said Rex would be too if he was alive. It was a very good poem. He also told me I had the gift of writing, and I should cherish it well. I told him he had the gift of drawing and he should do the same. He muttered. I still have not found an exhibition.

December 9

With Mother home everything changed. She just told me she is going to the harbour to clean up the playhouse! "It was such a long time ago since you were there. Besides, we could make it nice so by the time your brother comes home we can surprise him." I panicked. She was going to find out about Davies! She would tell Father and he would kick him out. I am sure of it. I guess it is hard to hide big things sometimes. Especially if you have a Mother who can never be stopped. I ran after her and tried my best to make her change her mind. It was worth a try, but it was hopeless. I do not know if I could have forgiven myself had I not tried. So here I am in my room writing in my journal once again. I am writing this as Mother is down by the harbour to meet the person I have been hiding. I am waiting for her to come, but I still do not know what to say. My journal seems to be the only thing I have left.

She said nothing about Davies as she got back home and started preparing for dinner. I stood in the kitchen

hallway, waiting for her to say something. Father was working at home that day, but when he went out with Podgy, Mother began shouting. "Do you have any idea what I found in the playhouse? A MAN!" I tried to explain. "He was the man who saved me," I continued. "He's really nice." But Mother did not listen. She stood dazzled on the kitchen floor. "You have lied to us, Sophie. I thought we could talk about anything. Why didn't you tell me about this...homeless man?"

"His name is Roger Davies! And he's my friend!"

"Your friend! Sweetie, you can't have a friend like him. He's old, he's different from you. He's homeless! Who knows what he's like, what he's done... Oh baby, has he tried to hurt you? Has he..?" My Mother held me in her arms, and I never wanted to let go. "No, Mother. Davies has never hurt me. I know I did wrong. I am sorry; I should have talked to you first. I was just scared when I couldn't get hold of you. I know how much you love those trips, but can't you stay home for now? I miss you."

"I will take a break from the flying, I promise," Mother told me. For the first time in my life her promise felt real, not like only words coming from her mouth. "At least Joseph knew about Davies. We've talked about him over the phone," I told Mother after a while. She looked relieved. "At least Joseph knew," she reassured herself. "At least someone in the family knew. But you know there are people who get paid to take care of the homeless. Sweetie, I hope you know you didn't have to do this! We have our own share of problems, and the man has his own. You can't always help other people, Sophie. The

world does not work that way. Tell me you understand." I said I understood, but I knew I did not agree.

It did not take long until the front door was opened by Father and Podgy ran in. "What a lovely walk! It was truly refreshing, and all these ideas you keep getting!" I had never seen Father this relaxed before. "You should have seen the night-sky! It was full of stars! Look out the window!" We looked outside, where small, tiny dots filled the heavens. Maybe Rex was one of them. It was amazing to watch, and I remembered Davies telling me about it. Perhaps Joseph is looking at the same stars. I know Davies is from the other side of the hill. I also know he is safe, because Mother would never tell Father. It was to be our secret, our one and only secret. The secret was to protect Roger Davies from Father. Together we could make sure he would never find out. At least for now until we know where he can go.

December 13

It is nice to share secrets. Mother is doing a really good job. Father still knows nothing about the playhouse. I guess he is too busy at work. Mother had entered the playhouse when Davies was painting, and she had been stunned to see how talented he was. So now we are two who are looking for an exhibition, and today we found one! The ad was in the paper, and it was actually found

by Father. Both Mother and I had forced Father to look for art ads in the newspapers as well. The little note to the art fair was next to the page with all the numbers, the one Father always reads. It was barely visible for the naked eye. It said:

*Art Exhibition in Knightingale
The 20th of December!*

*We are looking for displayers for the annual art
exhibition in Knightingale Sports & Culture
Hall. **Anyone can show up!**
Free entrance!*

Time: 10:00 – 15:00 Place: Hall B
A prize of \$10,000 will be awarded.

How we have waited for this moment! Now Davies can finally display his paintings! I better be off and tell him straight away. I think this is the best Christmas gift I will ever give, the chance to a new beginning. It is funny how I might never have discovered the exhibition had it not been not for Father.

It took quite some time before Davies actually grasped the ad he was holding in his hand. “Does this mean I can actually display my paintings?” I nodded. He seemed like he did not know what to do. I reminded him about the promise, and that we are going to an art fair. We were

going to the art fair where his paintings would be shown! I reminded him it was only a couple of days away, and that we had a lot of things to fix until then. I have never been to an art fair before. This will be my first one.

December 18

Joseph is coming home soon. I talked to him over the phone again. He apologised for not answering my e-mails or his phone. He said he had bumped in to some problems and wanted to talk to Father. I told him he had to wait. Father was taking Podgy for a walk. "Is it about the article?" I asked. He told me it was about some other boring business. "Is the article any good? Do you think you can get to work for the newspaper you told me?"

"I don't know, Sophie. There are many people who are applying, but the story behind the article is very good. It took me ages to write it though. Journalism isn't like telling ghost stories by the oak tree." We both laughed. "What's it about?"

"It's about this opera singer. She came from Britain originally. She lost her husband in the war, like so many others, and to help her grieve she began singing. Every Tuesday she was at Trafalgar Square singing about her dead husband, and her son who had taken off to sea. He had taken a ship to the US, and when her other children died, the lost son was the only one she had left. She sang even more and did it so beautifully that one day a man asked her to sing at his opera house. When she got to the

States, she looked for her son everywhere, but he was nowhere to be found. It wasn't so hard to believe for she merely had a self-portrait of the son to help her on the way. She's been looking for him ever since." I thought I was about to drop the receiver on the ground. Could Joseph be talking about Roger Davies' mother? This could not be. After all these years apart and now they were closer to each other without even knowing. It was as if though they were under the same night-sky, but were looking at the wrong stars. "...and now she's a famous opera singer, but her highest wish is still to be reunited with her long-ago lost son. When I interviewed her she said she hadn't given up yet, that she never would. 'There is still hope out there,' she said. Helena Davies, what an amazing woman! Wouldn't you agree?" I did not know what to respond. "Did you say Helena Davies?" My brother answered yes. I tried not to lose my breath. "Tell her that she doesn't need to wait anymore. Tell her that you've found her son." Joseph dropped the receiver from the other end.

I went over to tell Davies. I did not know what to say. I felt like I was living in a dream that was coming true. As I got inside, he was working on his final picture for the exhibition. I looked at it with a smile, because it was a painting of us, sitting by the oak tree by the playhouse. "I loved that moment," he said. "It changed my life. All of a sudden I had this person who believed in me. You were the first person who ever looked at me and spoke to me from the outside world. I never thought it would be

someone like you, a young girl." I know what he meant for I felt the same. I remembered when I looked into the eyes of a stranger for the first time. I was feeling sick and the gloomy city street was full with people. Still no one heard my cry, but the homeless man. No one cared like the homeless man, whose face looked like an angel. The stranger finally became my friend, a friend who cared. He finished the painting, his hands moving the brush with an incredible ease. I would almost have been jealous had he not been my friend. Roger Davies was truly never meant to grasp anything but a brush. He put some other paintings aside, while the oak painting was put on the wall. The drawing had to dry, he told me. "Do you still look at those stars and wonder if your loved ones can see the same ones?" Davies was a bit taken aback by the question, but he nodded. "I think about it every night, even when the clouds and the mist cover the sky."

"What if you were watching the same stars, without knowing it?"

"Then that would be sad, but we would still be seeing the same stars. It doesn't make too much of a difference. What's your point, Sophie?" I took a deep breath. "It means my brother Joseph has interviewed your Mother. She has tried to find you for a very long time, and she is dying to see you. She's an opera singer now." There was no air left in the room, because Davies took it all. "Is what you say really true? Have your brother actually met my Mother – Helena Agatha Davies?" Indeed, he had. There was some bad news though, Joseph told me over the phone. Helena was not allowed to fly because of her heart

problems, and Davies did not have any money. The day at the art fair felt more important than ever. "This is not happening," he said as he listened to what I had to say. I thought he fainted on the armchair, but his body was moving, his eyes were slowly filled with tears. We were all in shock.

December 20

The art exhibition is today and my stomach is feeling funny. This time it is not in a bad way, but it is more like having butterflies swirling around. I am so nervous I can barely write. Davies and I are already at the fair to put up his paintings. Hall B is much bigger than I had imagined. It is rectangular in size with a stage furthest from the entrance. There is even a chandelier hanging in the ceiling. I had seen the sign to the hall after swimming practise, but never walked inside. The Hall is full of art and people talking to each other. They are all dressed in fancy shoes and proper dresses. They look at us. I look at them, but Davies looks down on the floor. He says he has had enough of people staring. He says he wants to leave. I tell him to stay and to think about his Mother. He stays. I look at the clock and see that it is not so long time left until the first visitors are coming. I look at Davies, who is sitting in the corner. He is barely visible, almost like a ghost in the big hall. The doors are slowly opening and the first people enter. They do not even see us. Instead they walk to the other displayers whose faces look up, and whose

paintings hang proudly on the wall. Then I see a familiar face in the crowd; Mother shortly followed by Father. They seem to like it here, as they stop in front of Davies' paintings. My Father seems honestly impressed. I go up to talk to him. I tell him the man in the corner has made them. Father does not believe me. He does not even recognise the man and like everyone else he moves on to the other paintings. The hours are long, and I sit by Davies' side. Time goes slower when you think too much of it. Roger Davies still looks down on the floor even though it is not so long till the exhibition ends. A jury of five is suddenly standing on the stage with the microphones in their hands. They are about to announce the winner of the \$10,000. I think of how much money that is, and how it would be enough to afford a trip to the US. "And the moment we've all been waiting for is finally here." I can see how Davies looks up from the floor. There is still hope in his eyes. "The winner of this year's annual Art Exhibition is..." Hundreds of people got quiet. Like many I had a hard time to breathe. It was nearly impossible in the big hall, you could feel the tension. "...Anna and James Patterson in booth number 84. Please come and receive your prize!" Somewhere in the hall you heard a group of people screaming and cheering. Others were clapping their hands, but did not look too cheerful. You could tell they were upset, having wanted the prize themselves or given to some friend of theirs. Some agreed with the jury: "What an excellent exhibition! They were truly worth the prize of \$10,000." These people envied the winners and they sounded fake. People like Davies stayed

silent, knowing their dreams were crushed. I tell him to look up, but he tells me he was right all along. No one is interested in the artwork made by a homeless man. That is not something people want to see or buy. He leaves, walking past his own paintings like everyone else. I look at the paintings in admiration. I truly love them. Can I be so wrong?

I am writing in my diary when a man comes up to me, long after Davies had left. He is well dressed, but does not seem as mean as the other displayers. "Are these your paintings?" he asks. I tell him they are not. "They are made by a friend of mine who's left." The man looks at me. "Why would someone leave such beautiful pieces of art? Do you know where the man lives? I would very much like to see him." This time it was my turn to look down on the floor, for do I really know where he lives? What if he has simply gone out on the streets again, where he could be lost forever? "I think I know where he lives" I replied. "But we must hurry, he might already have left."

We found him sitting by the oak tree all alone. He was looking down on his sketchbook with the brush in his hand, sketching for another painting. He was surprised to see a new face. I presented them to each other – the agent and the man - and for the first time he cried. He cried from joy. You can do that, I have learnt. He cried from joy as he hugged me. He was finally given a new beginning as an artist and could finally see his Mother.

December 25

Merry Christmas everyone! Today is Christmas and the very day Davies leaves for New York. He was so excited he could barely walk. He had never flown before. Mother gave him some useful tips if he would get sick on the plane. She truly has this amazing voice with the ability to calm you down. I guess it is an important part of the job. She even got him cheaper tickets, because he will be flying through her company. Davies will be flying first class too, which is why I am not that worried about him. He will be taken care of. The agent I introduced him to insisted on the trip as well. He was one of the most important agents in the country and worked for the National Gallery. That is where Davies will put up an art exhibition in the spring! I cannot believe it! I am so proud of him I cannot describe it in words. Therefore he is no longer living in the playhouse by the harbour. He got himself a nice flat in the city instead. Luckily it is not too far from home, so he can still come by and visit. My Father drove him to the airport earlier this morning. I could tell he did not want to. But Mother gave him the looks, and he cannot say no to Mother. He still does not know that it was Davies who helped him. I went with them to say farewell and wish him a good trip. So did Podgy and Father could not understand why he was so sad after Davies had left.

Once at the airport, we had to park the car. I could not help but to laugh, but Father was too tired to notice. I

looked at the ticket machine and I began to love numbers. The payment board said it cost five dollars. Father paid without saying a word.



We celebrated the rest of the day as usual, which meant we spent it with Amy's family. They came over for dinner. It is scary how easily we forget things. I had almost forgotten about Nathan, but now he was feeling better than ever. I overheard the grown-ups talk about him. Apparently he was going to switch to another school, where they could help him better. He seemed very happy about it, because he told us he had a lot of friends there. I did not doubt him for one second. At the same time, I could not help but feel glad. Nathan Johnson would never go to our school again. I hope his friends never find out he is afraid of dogs. Later in the evening we finally got our Christmas gifts. I got some more things from Singapore. They were mostly video games so Amy and I went upstairs to play in my room. We were both surprised our Fathers did not begin gambling, or shouting at each other. They usually do, but this year was different, because Podgy was around. This must have been the best Christmas in a long time.

December 27

I got mail from Davies today. This was an actual mail, because he does not know how to use a computer. It was lovely to get something in your mail box for once. It felt so real. He had sent a postcard, which had a picture of the Statue of Liberty on the front.

Hello Sophie

Hope everything is fine with you and Podgy.

The city is wonderful and the weather is very nice.

What is even better is to be around Mother.

How I have missed her!

We have so much to talk about! Tonight I will see her sing.

Sorry that I will miss the competition. But I hope there are others to come.

I will come home soon.

Swim well!

Yours sincerely,

Roger Davies

It was so nice to hear from him I cannot describe it in words. His story finally came to a happy ending.

December 31

Joseph is coming home today, finally! I have so much to tell him. I have to tell him the story of the homeless man and Podgy, who scared Nathan into the bushes, and the art fair in Knightingale. Not to mention the adventures in the National Reservation Park and the snowball fight. I must not forget to tell him about Rex either. Because people like Rex should never be forgotten. I hope Joseph will be proud of me.

I cannot believe it is already the last day of the year. Time truly flies and today is the day of the all-star competition. Everyone seem so nervous, but I do not know what they are nervous for. They are standing in their swim suits, shaking. There is nothing to worry about, I want to tell them. It is only a competition, it is meant to be fun. But for many it is a big deal, for they swim in the highest division. I decide to write in my notebook. I find it very soothing. My coach tells me my group will swim last. They all look petrified. From outside the locker room you can hear the audience cheer and the strokes from the children of the lower divisions. I hope it is going well for Amy. Something tells me she is doing just fine. I cannot wait to get into the water of the gigantic swim hall, and no matter how it goes I will not care. Because I know I will go to the station and see Joseph afterwards. The coach tells me it is my turn now. Wish me luck.

It took four minutes and thirty-three seconds for me to swim the lengths. I ended third, and got my medal. I did not care too much that it was not of gold, because everyone were proud of me. They hugged me and took photos with the camera. I talked to Amy and saw she had won! The gold medal was hanging proudly around her neck. I was so proud of her, because that is what friends are of each other. After I got out from the locker room my coach walked up to me. He said he thought I swam the best; I only lost valuable time when turning in the water. "But that's alright," he said. "It gives us something to work on next term." I could barely wait. I felt so proud of myself that I could not wait until Joseph and Davies would watch me swim. I know they were proud of me too, even though they were not there.

At home we are having a big feast with hot chocolate and cake. We are celebrating with Amy and her family. Nathan smiled at me during the feast. He said he was impressed by my swimming. I guess there is goodness even in people like Nathan. This feast is so much fun.

Joseph just called and said he was close by, which means I have to leave. I shall not forget to bring this journal and a warm jacket. It is cold outside.

New Year's Day

The night was long, but thankfully a man with tattered jeans and a big cowboy hat entered the hospital. He was not sure he could donate blood, because he had been out on the streets. Yet thanks to the kindness of a little girl, he was now rising from the grounds. Thanks to her he could donate blood for the first time in his life.

The morning sun rose over the city and shone brightly on the snow that was slowly melting away. The fireworks had long ended, and people were excited about the New Year, when they could finally forget about the past and start over again. Two parents longed for forgiveness, as they listened to their daughter's caring voice.

On the third floor at St Agatha Memorial Hospital lay a little girl listening to a familiar voice. She loved the sound of her brother's voice. When suddenly the blood of a stranger entered her veins, and slowly brought her back to life. Her voice would come back again – stronger and wiser than ever before.

Voices are eternal.

They last forever.

Because those who listen will always hear them.

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