

L-Aqwa Żmien

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Excerpt in Maltese

Raġel żgħir

Jiena żewġ affarijiet: prinċep u raġel żgħir. Fadd ma jemmini meta ngħid li jien prinċep. Ninduna li ma emmnunx għax jew narahom jidhqu, jew inkella jaqbd u jgħiduli li m'iniex. Kien hemm wieħed staqsieni fejn hu l-palazz fejn noqgħod.

- Ma rridx ngħidlek. U mbagħad qalli:
- Mela fejn toqgħod int?

Imma jien m'għedtlux. M'għedtlux għax ommi qaltli biex ma ngħidx. Hekk qaltli:

- Issa ismagħni sewwa: ara ma jfettillekx tgħid fejn noqogħdu. Hekk eżatt qaltli:
- ... ara ma jfettillekx ...

Allura meta dak il-wieħed qalli:

- Mela fejn toqgħod int? M'għedtlux. Għedtlu:
- Mhux affarik int. U qalli:
- Mela mhux veru prinċep int. U jien għedtlu:
- Iva veru.
- Mhux veru.
- Iva veru.
- Le.
- Iva.

- Le.
- Iva.
- Le u le.
- Iva għedtlek!

U issa jien x'jimpurtani x'jgħid dak il-wieħed. Dak il-wieħed jismu Keanu.

Jien prinċep. U jien raġel żgħir. Għax hekk tgħidli ommi. Kuljum tgħidli:

- Int il-prinċep tiegħi.

Kuljum qabel norqod. Imma l-aktar li bdiet tgħidli minn dakinhar.

Kuljum tgħidli:

- Int il-prinċep tiegħi. Kuljum qabel norqod.

Kważi kuljum ikun hemm ġlieda fil-bitħa tal-iskola. Pereżempju kien hemm waħda bejn Keanu u tifel ieħor minn klassi mhux tagħna. Jien lanqas nibża' minn Keanu. Meta kien jiġi jarana z-ziju kien jgħidli biex jekk xi ħadd jagħmilli xi haġa nagħtih daqqa ta' ponn fuq wiċċu. Veru hekk kien jgħidli. Imma mbagħad, kont għedt lill-mummy x'qalli z-ziju u qaltli:

- Ara ma jfettillekx!

Allura ġieli nagħmel kif jgħidli z-ziju u ġieli kif tgħidli l-mummy, skont min ikun it-tifel li jagħmilli xi haġa. Xi kultant naħseb li z-ziju mhux veru z-ziju. L-ewwel nett qatt ma rajt liz-zija, u t-tieni għax il-mummy dejjem tgħidli ma ngħid lil ħadd li jiġi għandna wieħed ziju. Issa ma nafx, imma hekk naħseb. U issa ilu ħafna ma jiġi dak iz-ziju u l-mummy qaltli ma noqgħodx insaqsi għalih.

- Daqshekk.

Hekk qaltli:

- Daqshekk dak iz-ziju.

Kont inħobbu 'l dak iz-ziju għax dejjem kien iġibli xi haġa. Imma li kont niddejjaq kien li l-mummy kienet tgħidli mmur norqod u mbagħad meta nqum ma kienx ikun hemm.

Issa ilu ħafna ma jiġi. Minn dakinhar tal-ġlieda nbidel kollox imma xorta waħda, kuljum tgħidli

– Int il-prinċep żgħir tiegħi.

Dakinhar tal-ġlieda bdejt nibki u hi bdiet tgħajjat ma' dak ir-raġel u tgħidlu:

– Ara, qed tbikkili t-tifel, ja aħdar!

Kattiv dak ir-raġel. Mhux għal dak iz-ziju qed ngħid. Raġel ieħor dan. Kattiv. Kien ipejjep. Min ipejjep kattiv għax jagħmlilna l-ħsara. Kattiv. Beda jgħajjat u ommi bdiet tgħajjat aktar minnu. Bdiet tgħidlu:

– Ara, qed tbikkili t-tifel, ja aħdar!

U hu beda jgħid kliem pastaż li l-mummy tgħidli li m'għandix ngħidu. Qal Ħaqq u Alla u beda jgħidilha

– Mela itlaq. Ħu kollox u itlaq. Hawn tiegħi. Issa jekk mhux se taċċetta oħroġ 'il barra.

U reġa' qal Ħaqq u reġa' qal Alla.

Ommi għandha għajnejha kannella. Bħal tiegħi. Dakinhar tal-ġlieda rajtha tibki. Bdiet tgħidli ħafna li jien raġel żgħir.

– Int ir-raġel żgħir tiegħi.

Ħadna ħafna basktijiet tal-plastik tas-supermarket u poġġejna l-ħwejjeġ fihom. Anki l-uniformi tal-iskola. U poġġejniehom fil-but tal-karozza u fis-sit ta' wara. Kienet is-sħana.

– Allura fejn se mmorru issa ma?

– Issa naraw.

– Imma se ndumu ma mmorru d-dar?

– Mhux se mmorru d-dar. Id-dar ħaduhelna.

– Dak ir-raġel, ma?

– Iva dak ir-raġel.

– Dak li beda jgħid Ħaqq u Alla, ma?

- Ma rridekx tgħid hekk, fhimt? In-nies il-kattivi jgħidu hekk.
- Imma allura fejn se tkun id-dar tagħna, ma? Se nixtru oħra?
- Issa naraw.
- Kemm se ndumu hawn, ma?
- Issa naraw.
- Għaliex ħadhielna d-dar dak ir-raġel, ma?
- Għax kattiv.
- Veru kattiv, beda jgħid Ħaqq u ...
- Għedtlek ma rridekx tgħid hekk!
- Għandi ġuħ, ma!
- Issa mbagħad nieklu.
- Imma fejn se ssajjar, ma?
- Issa naraw.
- Immorru għand McDonald's, ma?
- Issa naraw.
- Int m'għandekx ġuħ, ma? Lanqas kilna f 'nofsinhar ta.
- Iva oqgħod naqra ibni, ħa naħseb ftit.
- Orrajt ma, imma ddumx għax veru għandi ħafna ġuħ. Imbagħad f 'daqqa waħda, kif konna fil-karozza, il-mummy bdiet tagħti ħafna daqqiet fuq l-istering u bdiet tibki u tagħti aktar fuq l-istering u jien bdejt nibki ħafna wkoll. Xħin ratni nibki qaltli ma nibkix, qaltli li jien raġel żgħir u waqfet tibki. Jien domt ftit nibki imma mbagħad waqaft.

Dakinhar tal-ġlieda ma' dak ir-raġel kattiv xtrajna pizza mingħand tal-kantuniera u oqgħadna nikluha fil- karozza. Lanqas kienet tajba u ma kilthiex kollha u ommi qaltli li l-biċċa li ħallejt kelli nikolha l-għada. Allura kiltha.

Imbagħad bdiet niezla ftit tax-xita u l-ħġieġ ma bqajtx nara minnu.

Imbagħad dalam.

– Fejn se norqdu ma?

Ma nafx x'għedt ħażin imma reġgħet qabdet tibki għax staqsejtha. Qaltli:

– Ħa nnizzillek is-sit u orqod. Neħħi ż-żarbun.

Lanqas kont naf li s-sit tal-karozza jsir sodda. Qaltli nagħlaq għajnejja u bisitni.

– Int il-prinċep żgħir tiegħi. Issa orqod sa għada filgħodu.

– Imma għada se jagħtihielna d-dar dak ir-raġel?

Jien inħobbu lil Keanu imma ġieli jdejjaqni għax joqgħod jgħid li jien mhux veru prinċep u jkompli jgħidli li jekk jien prinċep allura noqgħod ġo palazz u qalli li fejn noqogħdu aħna m'hemmx palazzi. Jien naf fejn joqgħod Keanu għax darba rajtu jilgħab quddiem id-dar. Joqgħod ġo dar kbira ħafna u quddiemha hemm bandla. Ftit ilu qalli biex immur nilgħab miegħu fid-dar. Forsi fuq il-bandla. U qalli li jekk irrid norqod għandhom ukoll. Immur il-Ġimgħa wara l-iskola u mbagħad ommi tiġi għalija l-Ħadd. Noqogħdu nilagħbu. Kieku sew! Għax Keanu għandu ħafna logħob li tilgħabhom fuq it- televixin. Jien kelli waħda u kont tajjeb fiha imma mbagħad, wara dik il-ġlieda, ma bqajtx nilgħabha għax m'għandix fejn. Ommi tgħidli li jien raġel żgħir issa, m'għadnix tifel. Iss, mhux tajjeb tkun raġel żgħir. Keanu daqsi għandu żmien u xorta jilgħab. Dejjem jilgħab. U fis-sajf qalli li jgħum id-dar stess.

– Kif jista' jkun tgħum id-dar?

– Mela.

– Mela d-dar għandkom il-baħar?

– U x'baħar! Għandna pool fil-ġnien, ħi. Int kif m'għandekx wieħed la tgħid li int prinċep?

Lanqas inkun naf x'se naqbad ngħid għax il-mummy qaltli ma nitkellimx fuq hekk. Qaltli noqgħod kwiet u qaltli wkoll li mhi biċċa ta' ħadd. Meta għedtilha li se mmur norqod għand Keanu qaltli le.

– Għaliex?

- Għax le.
- Iss.
- Jekk tmur għandu jkun irid jiġi għandna mbagħad. Fhimt?

Jien nifhem għax jien raġel żgħir. Hekk tgħidli ommi.

Miss Katja. Kemm inħobbha lil Miss Katja. Sirt naf fejn toqgħod ukoll għax ftit wara l-
għlieda, meta konna fil- karozza, rajtha ħierġa mid-dar. Miss Katja għandha dar sabiħa
fin-niżla. Għandha karozza blu bl-abjad u ġieli tipparkjaha ħdejn l-iskola u ġieli tiġi
ma' wieħed raġel u qabel toħroġ mill-karozza tagħtih kiss. Rajtha. Il-mummy qaltli ma
noqgħodx inħares għax mhijiex affari tiegħi, imma jien inħobbha lil Miss Katja.
Tagħmlilna ħafna logħob fil- klassi.

Anki hi tħobbni. Imma ... għax dakinhar għeditilha:

- Miss Katja, taf li jien prinċep?

Indunajt li Miss Katja lanqas kienet taf.

- Prinċep? Isa hej, għandi prinċep fil-klassi tiegħi dis-sena!

Għeditilha li jien raġel żgħir ukoll imma l-aktar prinċep.

- Mela allura, ħa nara, la inti prinċep, il-mamà tiegħek x'inhì?
- Il-mamà.
- Iva, imma la inti prinċep lill-mamà x'ngħidulha? X'ngħidulha l-mamà tal-
prinċep? Isa, ħa nara.
- Il-mamà. Jew il-mummy.
- Il-mamà tal-prinċep ngħidulha: ir-reġina. Ma kontx tafha din? Mela la inti l-
prinċep, il-mamà tiegħek hija r-reġina, mhux hekk?
- Issa ngħidilha.

Imbagħad Miss Katja ħabblitli xagħri u mbagħad qaltli

- Mela allura int toqgħod ġo palazz la inti prinċep, hux veru? Palazz kbir kbir!

Anki Miss Katja qaltli li noqgħod ġo palazz, kif qalli Keanu.

- Inti toqgħod ġo dar sabiħa ħafna hux Miss? Toqgħod fin-niżla.
- Iiii, kif taf? Żgur qallek xi suldat milli għandek fil- palazz tiegħek, hux veru? Hekk naħseb jien.
- Le għax ftit ilu rajtek.
- Sabiħa d-dar tiegħi?
- Iva.
- Imma l-palazz tiegħek isbaħ minn tiegħi, hux veru?

Hawn riħa ta' petrol. U hawn id-dlam. Il-mummy tatni torċ biex inkun nista' nagħmel il-homework għax inkella lanqas nara. Dakinhar meta ġiet l-iskola għalija qaltli li xi ħadd tani rigal: sodda ta' veru. Kont ili ħafna norqod fuq saqqu mal-art. Mindu ġejna noqogħdu fil-garaxx. Hawn id-dlam imma issa għandi sodda. Il-mummy għadha torqod fuq is-saqqu fl-art imma qaltli li xi darba naqilgħu sodda għaliha mingħand xi ħaddieħor.

Għalxejn tathuli t-torċ. Illum mhux se nagħmlu l-homework. Ma nistax nagħmlu.

Miss Katja. Illum kont se nibki. Qaltli:

- Tini l-pitazz tal-Malti.
- U jien ma ridtx nagħtihulha l-pitazz tal-Malti. Tajtha tal-maths minflok.
- Kollha tajbin ġibthom, bravu. Issa tini tal-Malti ħa naralek is-sentenzi.
- Ma rridx nagħtihulha l-pitazz tal-Malti għax m'għamilthomx is-sentenzi.
- Isa, sabiħ, ġib il-pitazz ħa naraw kemm ktibt sentenzi sbieħ.
 - Se ttini sticker tal-maths?
 - Veru, ħaqkek sticker għax ġibthom kollha tajbin. Issa ħa nara s-sentenzi tal-Malti ħalli forsi nagħtik sticker oħra. Isa.

Allura jkolli nagħtiha l-pitazz tal-Malti.

– Iiii, fejn huma s-sentenzi li kellek tagħmel?

Jien lanqas naf x'naqbad ngħid għax ommi qaltli ma niftaħ ħalqi ma' ħadd. Ma' ħadd tfisser lanqas ma' Miss Katja.

– M'għamilthomx is-sentenzi?

– Le.

U nibda nibki.

– Insejthom, jaqaw? Nibki.

– Isa, toqgħodx tibki. Kulħadd jinsa xi darba jew oħra. Ilbieraħ taf xi ġrali? Insejt iċ-ċwieviet tad-dar tiegħi u ma stajtix nidhol.

– Tad-dar li għandek fin-niżla?

– Iva dik. Issa ara, irridek tieqaf tibki. Ħa nagħtik il-pitazz tal-Malti lura u meta tmur id-dar tagħmel is-sentenzi. Issa għada qis li ma tinsihomx inkella jkolli ngħid lill-mamà. Fhimt?

Qed nipprova. Qed nipprova ħafna imma ma nistax. Ma nafx kif se niktibhom is-sentenzi. Lill-mummy m'għedtilhiex li m'għamiltx il-homework tal-Malti, inkella nibża' li tgħajjat miegħi. Is-sentenzi m'għamilthomx. Ma nistax nagħmilhom.

– Imma kif ergajt ma ġibthomx is-sentenzi? Mela se ssir imqareb issa? Int m'għedtlix li int prinċep? Hux hekk għedtli d-darba l-oħra? Il-prinċep dejjem ikun bravu. Dejjem dejjem. Issa x'se nagħmlu?

Qed nerġa' nipprova imma ma nistax. Se nerġa' ma nagħmilhomx is-sentenzi. Mhux għax ma rridx – għax ma nistax. Issa għada żgur tgħajjat miegħi Miss Katja. Forsi jmissni nibda nibki. Għax jekk nibda nibki jibdew jaħarquni għajnejja u ngħidilha li bdew jaħarquni għajnejja.

– Għalfejn qed tibki?

Ma ridtx lill-mummy tinduna. Imma issa ratni.

– Miss Katja se tgħajjat miegħi.

– Għaliex se tgħajjat miegħek? X'għamilt?

– Għax ma nistax nagħmel il-homework tas-sentenzi.

– Tkomplix tibki għax m'iniex nifhemek. Għala se tgħajjat miegħek il-Miss? X'għamilt? Kont pastaż?

– Le! Imma ma nistax nagħmel il-homework tas- sentenzi.

– Tkomplix tibki għedtlek! Għala ma tistax tagħmel il-homework? Tajtek toró apposta biex tkun tista' tara sew. Għala ma tistax tagħmilhom is-sentenzi?

Allura lill-mummy nagħtiha l-pitazz fejn suppost ktibt is-sentenzi u mbagħad, meta tarah, tagħfasni magħha u tibda tibki hija wkoll. U jien ma rridx nara lill-mummy terġa' tibki miskina.

– Issa ngħidlek x'nagħmlu. Issa mur ġibli l-kuluri mill- basket u mur orqod.

– Imma ma nistax niktibhom is-sentenzi u Miss Katja tgħajjat miegħi.

– Mur ġib il-kuluri u mur orqod. Tibżax, għada tagħmel is-sentenzi.

– Imma għalfejn tridhom il-kuluri?

– Int agħmel kif għedtlek u mbagħad tara. Isa, prinċep. U ma rridekx tibki aktar. Ara, lanqas jien m'jien nibki issa. Isa.

Illum ma ġietx Miss Katja. Is-soltu niddejjaq meta ma tiġix għax minflok nispiċċa għand Miss Alison u dik ma nħobbhiex. Imma illum imnalla ma ġietx għax kienet tgħajjat miegħi żgur żgur żgur minħabba dawk is-sentenzi. Lanqas Keanu ma ġie. Naħseb ma jiflaħx. Issa ngħaddi minn quddiem id-dar tiegħu llum. Il-mummy mhux se tkun hemm u tatni ċ-ċavetta. Sakemm nasal ħdejn Keanu noqgħod ngħodd kemm hemm djar mill-iskola sa ħdejhomm. Hemm xi elf naħseb. Jew mija. Ta' Keanu l-isbaħ. Ara hemm il-bandla. U kemm hu kbir il- bieb! U anki l-gallarija sabiħa. Naħseb hemm fejn jorqod Keanu dik il-gallarija. Nixtieq inħabbatlu biex nara kif inhu u forsi noqgħod

ftit fuq il-bandla, imma l-mummy qaltli ma mmurx għandu inkella jkun irid jiġi għandna. Kemm hi sabiħa d-dar ta' Keanu. Anki l-bandla sabiħa.

Ir-riħa ta' petrol. Id-dlam. Għandna bozza imma filgħaxija ma tantx nara għax baxxa. Suppost għandi l-fishfingers u ċ-chips. Ma tantx inħobbhom għax kiħin imma allura. Imbagħad inħares lejn is-sodda u kważi nieħu qatgħa u mbagħad nieħu gost. Il-mummy żgur għamlitha dik l-istampa! Għalhekk riedet il-kuluri!

Ikteb ħames sentenzi: X'nara mit-tieqa tal-kamra tiegħi Mit-tieqa tal-kmra tijej nara ġnin sabiħ u gbir hafna hanfa.

Mit-tieqa tal-kamra tieje nara ħafna siġar u fjuri.

Mit tieqa tal-kamra tijej nara swimming puwl kbir u hafna hut go fieh.

Mi-tieqa tal-kmra tijej nara asafar itiruw ma kulumkinn. Mit-tieqa tal-kmara tijej nara tifel u tifla.

Mit-tieqa tal-kamra tiegħi nara hafna xemx gbira u safra.

Illum ġiet Miss Katja. Kif dħalna fil-klassi mort ħdejha bil-pitazz tal-Malti.

– E bravu! Illum ma nsejthomx hux is-sentenzi. Mela, ħa naraw x'tara mill-kamra tiegħek.

Keanu reġa' ma ġiex. Kieku ġie kont nurih is-sentenzi.

Hu jara tiegħi u jien nara tiegħu.

– Il-marelli ħej, kemm tara affarijiet sbieħ mill-kamra tiegħek! Mela veru toqgħod fil-palazz int.

Jien nieħu gost meta Miss Katja tgħidli hekk. Għax jekk Keanu ma jemminnix mhux importanti. Imma Miss Katja temmen.

– Taf xiex? Issa xi darba niġi għandkom ħalli nittawwal mit-tieqa jien ukoll. Trid? Nista' niġi għandkom xi darba, ħa nara jien ukoll?

Waħda Mara

Mhux żgur kienet ilha riegda kwarta, iċemplilha l-mobile.

- Haw' xi trid?
- Għandi biċċa xogħol għalik.
- E mela ... ma nistax.
- Ma tistax għala?
- Għax ma nistax, ara l-ieħor!
- Mela x'għandek?
- Għandi x'nagħmel e.
- X'għandek x'tagħmel?
- Għandi tnejn diġà.
- Meta?
- Wieħed il-Ġimgħa u l-ieħor is-Sibt.
- Dan għat-Tnejn filgħaxija ta. Ara taqdinix għax wegħedthom.
- I, ara l-ieħor! Mela int taqbad u twiegħed qabel tgħidli?
- Se taqdin jew le?
- Issa nċempillek għada. Ćaw.

Dejjem hekk jagħmlilha: jaqbad u jirranġa u mbagħad ikollha tara x'se tagħmel biex takkomodah. Dan l-aħħar bdiet taħsibha taqtax minn miegħu imma għandha xewqa u dix-xewqa tqum il-flus. U flus m'għandhiex. Meta tara li m'għandhiex flus tistaqsi lilha nfisha kif ħaddieħor imur jikollok barra kważi kull nhar ta' Sibt jew Ħadd f 'nofsinhar, u kif ħaddieħor imur xi weekend f 'xi lukanda darba kull xahrejn, u kif ħaddieħor isiefer imqar darba fis-sajf jew għall- ewwel tas-sena. Dan l-aħħar qed imorru ħafna imma hi le. U sadattant ma tafx għaliex. Dak li taqla' ma tafx x'tagħmel bih. Tiekol dejjem waħidha, tixrob ilma u luminata, u tara lill-oħrajn jagħmlu affarijiet li hi tista' biss timmaġinahom. Anzi lanqas għadha timmaġinahom. Għandha xewqa waħda, imma tiswa ħafna flus. Allura meta jċempel xi ħadd b'xi biċċa xogħol u tkun

fil-ponta ta' lsienha li tgħid le, dlonk tiftakar fix-xewqa li għandha u taċċetta. Issa għada ċċempillu u tgħidlu owkej basta jiġi xi ħadd għaliha u xi ħadd iwassalha lura, anki jekk sal-pjazza, hekk jew hekk dak il-ħin ma jkun hemm ħadd. Iddur fuq is-sodda u tħoss il-molol joqomsu u tismagħhom iżaqżqu. Issa għadha kemm ftakret li nsiet tieġu l-pinnoli ta' filgħaxija imma m'għandhiex aptit tqum. Trid torqod. Kieku tista' torqod il-ġurnata kollha. Hekk qaltlu lill- psikjatra meta kien imissha tarah l-isptar it-Tnejn li għadda. Ħala ta' ħin, did-darba f' 'xahar, toqgħod titla' l-isptar, tqatta' xi sagħtejn u iktar tistenna, biex imbagħad jaraha xi ħadd ħames minuti kollox. Ħala ta' ħin għax qatt ma jinbidel xejn. Lanqas il-pinnoli li tibra' – dejjem l-istess u dejjem l-istess doża. U f' 'dawk is-sigħat tistenna toqgħod tilgħab fuq il- mobile u tara r-ritratti tan-nies fuq il-facebook, tgħaddas rasha u toqgħod tagħfas il-buttuni u ġġerri subgħajha basta ma jkellimha u ma tkellem lil ħadd. Skoss imġienen ikun hemm għand il-psikjatra, wieħed ottu aktar mill-ieħor. Sieħeb nhar it-Tnejn, wieħed li dejjem tinzertah, għandu xi erbgħin u dejjem jiġi m'ommu, toqgħod iżżommlu idu u mbagħad, meta jfettillu, jaqbad jibki u jeqred. It-Tnejn ma felħitux:

- Aqtagħha ħi, mela dejjem hekk int? U aktar beda jibki. U mbagħad ommu:
- Għax miskin għandu ħafna dwejjaq bħalissa.
- Allura? Mhux kulħadd għandu d-dwejjaq? Mela kieku qegħdin hawn? Oħorġu barra ħi, għax il-biki t'ibnek jonqosni. Jien qiegħda sew u 'l dan jibki ma' rasi rrid ħa niġi aħjar.

Imbagħad qabżet oħra li wkoll dejjem tinzertaha mat-tifla:

- Mhux sew tgħid hekk, ħi. Ma tafx dak li jkun minn xiex ikun għaddej. Int qatt ma jkollok aptit tibki?
- Nibki? Jien inkisser kulm'hawn għandi aptit mela nibki! U għad taqbiżli u kollox frak nagħmel.

Imbagħad in-nurse għajtet isimha u daħlet tiġri u ħames minuti wara kienet fi triqtha lura bir-riċetta tal-pinnoli diġà mgħaffġa.

Lill-psikjatra ġieli qaltlu dwar ix-xewqa li għandha. Lill-psikjatra biss qalet. Kull darba li tgħidlu jagħti tnejn b'rasu biex juriha li fehem, imma qatt ma jgħid xejn. Xi ħadd qalilha li l-psikjatra għandu villa villun. X'tistenna? Xi ħadd beda jgħid darba waqt li

kienet qiegħda tistenna, li l-psikjatra jithallas sittin ewro għal kull pazjent li jara meta jaħdem privat. Sittin ewro! Ma setgħetx ma taħsibx xi jkollha tagħmel hi għal sittin ewro.

Reġgħet daret fuq in-naħa l-oħra u lakemm ma ħassitx is-sodda tinqasam taħtha. Issa ftakret li mhux il-pinnoli biss insiet imma anki tinħasel. Issa għal għada. M'għandhiex aptit tqum. Taqbad il-mobile.

- Haw', owkej għal nhar it-Tnejn. Imma int se tiġi għalija?
- Issa niftiehm. L-aqwa li owkej. Issa jew niġi jien jew nibgħatlek lil xi ħadd. Int għax ma titlax b'tal-linja? Fejn is-soltu.
- Nitla' żigg f 'sieqek b'tal-linja! Intom kollkom karozzi u nejk u tridni nitla' b'tal-linja? Lanqas Alla ma jrid. U s-soltu għal fejn qed tgħid?
- Fir-razzett.
- E fir-razzett? Mela bil-kbir. Ara mija u ħamsin jew xejn. U rridhom qabel. Kif nidhol fil-karozza dendilli. U ara li jkun hemm ilma sħun mhux bħad-darba l-oħra għoddha waqfitli qalbi bl-ilma kiesaħ. Kemm se jkunu?
- U mhux bħas-soltu?
- Bħas-soltu kemm?
- Xi għoxrin ruħ kollox.
- Il-qaħba għoxrin! Mela veru bil-kbir ġejja. Mija u sebgħin.
- X'mija u sebgħin! Mela int hekk, taqbad u tgħolli? Trid iġġibni fit-trouble?
- Haw', mid-darba ta' wara prezz differenti. Mhux se nibqa' sejra hekk jien. U min ma jogħġbux imur banda oħra.

Jalla ħadd ma jmur banda oħra. Bħall-Ġimgħa u s-Sibt isibu 'l ħaddieħor, imma bħal tat-Tnejn jien biss hawn. U għalhekk imissni ngħolli.

Il-Ġimgħa u s-Sibt ma kinux ħżiena. Tal-Ġimgħa għaddiet malajr aktar minn tas-Sibt. Xħin bdiet il-Ġimgħa kienu diġà mejtin fis-sakra kollha kemm kienu. U ma kinux wisq, xi għaxra kollox. Il-Ħadd baqgħet rieqda sa xi s-sagħtejn ta' waranofsinar u meta gamet indunat li ma kellha xejn fil-frigġ. Telgħet tiġri l-pjazza u xtrat nofs tużżana

piżelli u bdiet tikolhom fit-triq. It-Tnejn filgħodu marret tisma' quddiesa minflok il-
Ħadd, għax il-Ħadd filgħaxija riedet taħsel il-ħwejjeġ u l-kostum għall-għada. Wara l-
quddiesa xegħlet xemgħa lil San Nikola:

– San Nikola ibgħathieli tajba llejla, nitolbok. U tinsiex għala qed nagħmel dan
kollu. Forsi ma tafx kif, jaħasra, tiġini tajba xi darba. Idħol naqra għalija, mhux dejjem
nixgħellek ix-xemgħat u ħallejtni kif kont.

Fit-tmienja neqsin kwart ġie dak li ċemplilha u telqu.

- Inti ġibt tibdila miegħek hux?
- Le, inkella kif niġi lura? Int se twassalni hux?
- Ara nħasel sew għax ma ntellgħekx.
- Dendilli ejja.

Waslu r-razzett fi dlam taqtgħu b'sikkina qalb għelieqi suwed. Mill-karozza setgħu
jinstemgħu xi klieb jinbħu u ħafna għajjat ta' rġiel u daqq jgħajjat. Daħlu minn fetħa
żgħira u marru dritt ġo gorboġ li jagħti għall-kamra l-kbira fejn kien għaddej l-għors.
Dak li ġie għaliha ħareġ mill-ewwel u telaq lejn il-kamra biex javża li waslu. Hi
poġġiet il-basket tal-plastik fejn kellha l-kostum u xugaman u flixxun sapun fuq il-
mejda u bdiet tbiddel. Lanqas tiftakar eżatt kemm ilha b'dax-xogħol. Meta kellha
ħmistax żgur li kienet diġà bdiet; kienet għadha l-iskola, kienet għadha tifla imma
kienet diġà gabet ruħha. Ħadd ma kien jagħtiha anqas minn tmintax dak iż-żmien.
Kien jeħodha zijuha, ħu ommha. Il-kelma xterdet u x-xogħol beda ġej ġmielu.

Imbagħad zijuha mar għand Alla b'tir f'nofs rasu hu u jdaħħal il-vann fil-garaxx,
x'aktarx ħawwad xi ħaġa fin-negozju tal-kokaina, imma malajr sabet min imexxiha,
għal wieħed tnejn u anki tlieta. Kulħadd iċempel: daqqa party għax se jiżżewweġ xi
ħadd, daqqa ieħor għax ġie minn barra jew se jitlaq jaħdem barra, daqqa għax il-
Milied, daqqa hekk u daqqa mod ieħor. Ma tafx kemm-il raġel raha tinża' u tiżżegleg
għarwiena taħt bozoz kulur aħmar jew blu; kemm-il par idejn ħasset tilgħin u niżlin
magħha; kemm- il ilsien ippassiġġa fuq laħamha. Xi darba se tieqaf. L-ewwel iġġibha
żewġ bix-xewqa li għandha u mbagħad tieqaf. Forsi tmur tnaddaf ma' xi sinjuri jew
tiknes il-knisja mqar. Anki jekk tieqaf tibqa' thobbu 'l San Nikola għax anki jekk s'issa
ħallieha bħal qabel, aktarx li mingħajru kienet tkun agħar. Forsi kuljum jidħol għaliha,
għaliha u għal nisa bħalha, u ma tindunax. Jaħdem fil-kwiet u bil-moħbi San Nikola.

Fil-kamra foga tqila bid-dħaħen tas-sigaretti u riħa taqsam ta' birra. Hemm xi għoxrin ruħ, irġiel żgħażagħ u anki xi tnejn fuq is-sittin. Kollha jinfexxu jċapċpu u jsaffru. Tibda tiżfen u tiżżegleg. L-uċuħ ma tarahomx imma tħosshom iħarsu lejha u tismagħhom jidħqu u jgħajtu dejjem aktar. Minn ġo speaker fir-rokna toħroġ mużika b'temp qabbieži u tgħajjat tant li hemm aktar żarżir milli noti. Qed jgħidulha tgħaġġel għax mhux tinża' jriduha l-aktar. Is-sħana f 'din il-kamra. Għarqana xraba diġà, taqbeż u tiżżegleg u ddur mal-irġiel u min jaħtaf minn hawn u min jaħtaf minn hemm. Imbagħad tinxteħet fuq ħoġor wieħed minnhom liebes l-abjad u kulħadd idur qaqoċċa magħhom, kulħadd iċapċap u jgħajjat, kulħadd jagħfas magħhom u jagħfas lilha ma' dak tal-abjad. Lanqas taf kif, issib ruħha fuq l-idejn, iġorruha 'l barra mill-kamra għall- għalqa tan-nofs fejn hemm ir-rifletturi mixgħulin diġà fuq il- ħajt. Mhux l-ewwel darba li ratu dak il-ħajt. Ratu kemm-il darba. U dejjem jiġri l-istess. F'daqqa waħda l-istorbju jieqaf. Iddur wiċċha mal-ħajt u tistenna. Hekk, bħal meta kont tifla u missieri kienu jitilgħulu. Kien jibgħatni wiċċi mal-ħajt. Imma jien minn dejjem kont fuq ruħi u kif jibgħatni wiċċi mal-ħajt kont naqbad nidħaq u nkompli nitbellah. Nistenna l-ewwel waħda. Dik l-agħar: l-ewwel waħda, għax ma tkunx taf meta ġejja u taħsdek. U f 'dal-kwiet li hawn, u f 'dan id-dlam, l-ewwel waħda li tolqtok tweġġgħek. Bħalma kienet tweġġa' d-daqqa li kien jagħtini x-xiħ wara li kont nibqa' nitbellahlu b'wiċċi mal-ħajt. Dejjem fuq sormi kien ifaqqagħhieli. B'kemm Alla tah saħħa. Kemm kien isawwatni. Naħseb kien jogħġbu sormi għalhekk kien itini fuqu. Imbagħad ma kontx nitbellah aktar. L-ewwel waħda mira ħażina, tispiċċa tinfaqa' mal-ħajt ħdejn rasi. Naraha tinfaqa', bl-isfar iġelben u l-qoxra tibqa' mwaħħla għal ftit mal-ħajt u mbagħad taqa' ħdejn sieqi. It-tieni waħda wkoll tispiċċa mal-ħajt. Nistenna l-ewwel waħda taħbat miegħi. Nistenna bħalma kont nistenna s-swat ta' missieri. It- tort kien ikun tiegħi, għax hu kien jibgħatni mal-ħajt u jien kont inkompli nitbellah. Nistenna u nħoss is-sirda tal-lejla u n-nida li niezla fuqi. Imbagħad, eżatt f 'nofs dahri, inħoss id-daqqa tal-ewwel bajda tinfaqa' fuqi. Ninħasad u jindunaw li nħsadt u jidħqu. Minn hemm 'il quddiem donnu ħadd ma jiżbalja aktar: fuq dahri, fuq rasi, fuq sormi, waħda f 'waħda jfaqqgħu fuqi. Is-skiet jieqaf u nismagħhom jgħajtu u jgħiduli ndur ħa jfaqqgħu fuq wiċċi. Indur u nagħlaq għajnejja: ma rridx narahom, ma rridx nara min huma aktar. Hemm mal- għoxrin ruħ, kulħadd bil-bajd f 'idu u jgara bl-addoċċ. Il-klieb jinbħu wara l-ħajt u d-daħq u l-għajjat, l-aktar meta tasal l-ewwel waħda fuq wiċċi, eżatt fuq għajni tax-xellug, taħbat miegħi bħad-daqqiet ta' ħarta li ġieli tani x-xiħ meta kont nitlaq mid-dar u nidħol l-għada filgħodu. Imbagħad oħra u oħra, jaħbtu, jinqasmu, jitfarrku u l-

isfar jinten daqs ma nafx xiex u l-abjad jiddellek ma' wiċċi. U issa ninduna, qegħdin jimmiraw għal fuq sidri u jċapċpu kull darba li xi ħadd jolqot xi wieħed minnhom.

Daqshekk! Daqshekk! Imma jidħqu u jkomplu. Inħossni se nagħmel taħti, nagħmel sforz li ma tmurx taħrabli.

Tinduna li għadda kollox meta ċ-ċapċip u l-għajjat jitle' u mbagħad jinżel bil-mod il-mod. Ħadd minnhom ma jiġi jbagħbasni issa. Jidħlu lura fil-kamra ħa jkomplu jixorbu. Niftaħ għajnejja bil-mod, kemm nista', u nara l-mandra li hemm mal-ħajt u mal-art. Imbagħad nimxi lejn il-kamra u kif jarawni jerġgħu jibdew jgħajtu. Niġbor ħwejġi mill-art fejn ħallejthom jaqgħu, nidħol fil-kamra ta' wara fejn hemm pajp imwaħħal ma' tank, bl-ilma friża, u nibda ningħorok.

Anzi dak li ġie jiġborha wassalha sal-bieb. Hi qaltlu li seta' jwaqqafha l-pjazza imma ħenn għaliha, anki għax sa dak il-ħin nofsillejl kien qabeż sew. Ħarġet iċ-ċavetta minn qiegħ il-basket tal-plastik u fetħet il-bieb. Minkejja kemm għadda żmien, torqod u tqum fl-istess post, ir-riħa t'umdità għadha tissorprendiha kull darba li tidħol. Ħarġet il-kostum u xeħtet kollox f'rokna. Imbagħad ħarġet żewġ pastizzi li ddubbat mir-razzett, wieħed minnhom imgiddem, u belgħathom f'nifs wieħed. Ħarġet ukoll il-mija u ħamsin li kienu jiġru fil-basket u poġġiethom ġo kexxun li jingħalaq biss nofsu.

Għaddiet ukoll, San Nikola. Issa toqgħodx tgħid għax qgħadt niġri għarwiena quddiem l-irġiel. U naħlef li nofshom miżżewġin. Xi ż-żobb trid tagħmel? Taf x'inhi l-biċċa. Jien dejjem lilek nitlob għax int tidħol għalija u għal nisa bħali. Forsi ma tafx kif xi darba għad noħroġ minn dal-qaħba garaxx u mmur noqgħod ġo biċċa mezzanin jew flat imqar. Għax m'għandix ngħix bħal ħaddieħor e? Dan biss nixtieq, San Nikola. Insomma, nixtieq insiefer u ndur 'l hemm u 'l hawn imma issa m'hemmx x'tagħmel.

Imbagħad imteddet bil-ħwejjeg b'kollox, ġibdet kutra rqiqa u kiesħa għal fuqha, u raqdet.

English translation by Ruth Ward and Immanuel Mifsud

Little Man

I am two things: a prince and a little man. No one believes me when I say that I'm a prince. I notice that because they start grinning, or flat out tell me I'm not. One boy asked me where my palace was.

– Won't tell.

And he said:

– So where do you live then?

But I didn't say a word. I didn't, because mom told me not to. Here's what she told me:

– Now listen carefully, you. Don't you dare tell anyone where we live.

That's exactly what she said:

– ... don't you dare ...

So when that boy asked me:

– So where do you live then?

I didn't breathe a word. I told him:

– None of your business.

And he said:

– So it's not true you're a prince.

And I said:

– Is true.

– Not true.

– True.

– Not.

– Yes.

– No.

– Yes.

– No, no.

– I said yes!

What do I care what that boy said anyway. His name is Keanu.

I am a prince. And a little man. Because mom says so. Every day she tells me:

– You're my prince.

Every day before I sleep. But she's been saying it even more lately, I guess since that day.

Every day she tells me:

– You're my prince.

Every day before I sleep.

Almost every day there's some fight out in the schoolyard. For example there was a fight between Keanu and this other boy from a another class. Now, I'm not scared of Keanu. When that uncle used to visit us he used to tell me if anybody ever did something to me I should just punch'em in the face. That's what he used to tell me. But then one time I told mom what uncle said to do and she said:

– Don't you dare!

So sometimes I do what uncle told me, and sometimes I do what mom said, depending on who the boy who wronged me happens to be. Sometimes I think uncle isn't really my uncle. First, I've never seen the aunt, and second because mom keeps telling me not to tell anybody that an uncle comes to visit us. Now I don't know, but that's what I think. And it's been quite a while since he came last, and mom told me not to ask about him.

– Enough.

That's what she told me:

– Enough of that uncle.

I liked him because he always got me something. But what I didn't like was that mom used to send me to bed and then when I woke up he'd be gone. It's been a long time since he came last. Since the day of the fight everything's changed. But still, every day, mom tells me:

– You are my little prince.

On the day of that fight I was crying, and she was shouting at that man and telling him:

– Look! Look, you filthy creature! You're scaring my child!

Cruel man that one. Now I'm not talking about that uncle. Another man. Cruel. This one smoked. And smokers are already cruel because smoking hurts people. Cruel, cruel. He was yelling, and mom was yelling even louder. She told him:

– Look! My child is crying because of you, you vicious creature!

And he was saying naughty words that mom tells me I shouldn't say. He said God and damn and kept on yelling:

– So leave! Take everything you've got and get out. This is my place. It's my terms or no terms.

And again he said god and damn.

My mother has brown eyes. Like mine.

On that day of the fight I watched her crying. She kept telling me I was her little man.

– You are my little man.

We took a bunch of plastic bags from the supermarket and packed our clothes in them. Even the school uniform. Then we put everything in the trunk of the car and the back seat. It was hot.

- So where are we going now, mom?
- We'll see.
- But when are we going home?
- We won't be going back home. They took it away from us.
- Is it that man, mom?
- Yes, that man.
- That one who was saying god and ...?
- I don't want you to say those words. Do you understand? Only vicious men talk like that.
- So where will home be now, mom? Are we buying a new one?
- We'll see.
- Well, how long are we staying here?
- We'll see.
- But why did that man take our home, mom?
- Because he's cruel.
- That's for sure. He is cruel, he was saying god and ...
- I told you not to say those words!
- I'm hungry.
- Later.
- Can we go to McDonald's, mom?
- We'll see.
- Aren't you hungry, mom? We haven't had lunch yet, you know?
- Please! Let me think.
- Okay, mom, but not for long because I'm really hungry.

And then, all of a sudden, mom started banging on the steering wheel and she started crying and banging harder and harder and I started crying too. Then mom told me not to. She said I'm a little man and then she stopped crying. I kept on for a while, then I stopped.

On that day of the fight with the cruel one we bought pizza from the corner shop and ate it in the car. I didn't like it and put it away. Mom said I'd be having that same piece I left the next day. So I went ahead and ate the rest. It started raining and I couldn't make out anything through the windows anymore.

Then it got dark.

– Where are we going to sleep?

Who knows what I'd said wrong, but she started crying again.

She said:

– I'll put your seat down so you can sleep. Take off your shoes.

I had no idea that car seats could change into beds. She told me to close my eyes and she kissed me.

– You are my little prince. Now sleep until morning.

– But tomorrow will that man give us our house back?

I like Keanu but sometimes he gets on my nerves because he keeps on saying I'm not truly a prince, and that if I were a prince I would live in a palace and there aren't any palaces in our town. I know where Keanu lives because once I saw him playing by his house. He lives in a really big house with a swing on the front lawn. A while ago he invited me to come and play. Maybe on that swing. And he even told me I should come for a sleepover. I'd come on a Friday after school and mom could pick me up on Sunday. We'd be playing the whole time. That would be fun! Because Keanu's got a lot of games you play on the television. I had one game like that and I'd gotten good at it too but then, after that fight, I don't get to play it anymore. Mom tells me I'm a little man now, I'm not some child anymore. And that's just not fair. It's

not good being a little man. Keanu is my age and he still plays. He always plays. And in the summertime he even swims at home.

– You swim at home?

– Of course I do.

– What! How? You have a sea at your house?

– Sea? What sea! We have a pool in our backyard. And how come you don't have one too if you're such a prince?

I feel lost because mom warns me off talking about all this. She tells me to just keep my mouth closed and it's nobody's business where we live. When I told her about the sleepover at Keanu's she said no.

– Why?

– Because I said no.

– Not fair!

– Look, if you go over to your friend's, we'll have to return the invitation and have him here. Got it?

Miss Katja. I so love Miss Katja. I got to know where she lives too, because after that fight we were in the car and I saw her coming out of her house. Miss Katja has a beautiful home right down from the school. She has a blue and white car and sometimes she parks almost at the school and there's a man sitting next to her and she gives him a kiss before she gets out of the car. I saw her. Mom told me not to stare because it's not my business, but I love Miss Katja. She plays games with us in class. She loves me too. But ... Because once I told her:

– Miss Katja, do you know that I'm a prince?

I noticed Miss Katja didn't know about that.

– A prince? Wow, I have a prince in my class this year!

I told her I'm a little man too but mostly I am a prince.

– So let's see: if you are a prince, what would your mother be?

– A mother.

– Yes, but if you are a prince, what do we call your mother then? What is a prince's mother called? Come on, tell me.

– Mother. Or mommy.

– A prince's mother is called a queen. Didn't you know that? So, if you are a prince, then your mom is a queen, right?

– I'll tell her.

Then Miss Katja ruffled my hair and kept on talking:

– So, if you're a prince, then you must live in a palace, no? A big, big palace!

Even Miss Katja mentions the palace. Like Keanu.

– You live in a very beautiful house, right Miss? You live down the way.

– Oh my! How did you know that? Must have been one of your guards at the palace who told you that, right? That's what I think.

– No. I saw you a few days ago.

– You like my house?

– Yes.

– But your palace must be nicer than my old house, right?

There's a stinky, stuffy fuelly smell. And it's dark. Mom gave me a flashlight to do my homework, otherwise I wouldn't see a thing. That day when she'd picked me up from school, she told me somebody had given me a present: a bed. I'd been sleeping on a mattress on the floor ever since we started living in this garage. It's dark here, but at least now I have a bed. Mom still sleeps on the floor but she said that one day someone will get us another bed.

It's no use having the flashlight. And there won't be any homework. I can't do it.

Poor Miss Katja. Today I knew I was going to cry. She told me:

– Give me your Language exercise book.

I didn't want to. I gave her my math workbook instead.

– They're all correct. What a good boy. Now show me the Language so I can correct your sentences.

I didn't want to give her that exercise book. There were no Language sentences in it because I never wrote any.

– Come on, my dear, give me your homework so we can see what nice sentences you've written.

– Will you give me a sticker for my math problems?

– You're right, you do deserve one because you got them all correct. Now let's see those Language sentences. Maybe I'll give you another sticker. Come on.

So I handed over the Language exercise book.

– Oh! Where are the sentences you were supposed to write?

Now what should I say? Mom told me not to ever say anything to anyone. Not even to Miss Katja.

– You didn't do your Language homework.

– No.

And that's when I start crying.

– Have you forgotten them?

I cry.

– Come now, don't cry. Sometimes people just forget things. You know what happened to me yesterday? I forgot my house keys and I couldn't get in!

– You mean the home you have down the road.

– Yes, that one. Now look, I want you to stop crying. I'm giving you back the exercise book and when you get home you write those sentences. And make sure you don't forget them again because then I'd have to tell mom. Alright?

Well, I'm trying. I'm trying really hard but I just can't. I have no idea how to write these sentences. And I haven't told mom about not doing them either. I'm afraid she'd shout at me. No sentences again. I just couldn't.

– Tell me. Why haven't you written your Language sentences this time? Are you becoming one of those mischievous boys? Didn't you tell me that you are a prince? That's what you told me the other day, did you not? Princes are always good. Always, always. Now what shall we do?

Again I try, again I cannot. Again I will not write the sentences. It's not that I don't want to write them, but I can't. Tomorrow Miss Katja will surely shout at me. Maybe I should cry again. If start now, my eyes will hurt and then I'll tell Miss Katja that my eyes hurt.

– Why are you crying?

I didn't want mom to see me, but it's too late now.

– Miss Katja will shout at me.

– Why will she shout at you? What have you done?

– Because I can't do the sentences homework.

– Stop crying, I can't understand you. Why will Miss shout at you? What have you done? Have you been naughty?

– No! But I can't write the sentences.

– I told you to stop crying! Why can't you do your homework? I gave you a flashlight, so you can see well enough. Why can't you write the sentences?

I hand mom the Language exercise book where I'm supposed to write the sentences and when she looks at it she hugs me and starts crying herself.

– Don't worry. Go and get me the colored markers from your school bag and go to sleep.

– But I can't write the sentences and Miss Katja will shout at me.

– Go and get the markers and go to sleep. Don't worry, tomorrow evening you'll write the sentences.

– But what do you need the colors for?

– Do as I told you and then you'll see. Come now, prince. And I don't want you to cry anymore. See, I'm not crying now either. So come on.

Today Miss Katja didn't come to school. Usually when this happens I get sad because I end up going to Miss Alison and I don't like her. But I was lucky she didn't come today because she'd have shouted at me for sure because of the sentences. Keanu didn't come either. I think he's sick. I'll walk by his home today. Mom won't be there, so she gave me the key. I'll count how many houses there are from school to Keanu's home. There must be a thousand. Or a hundred. Keanu's is the nicest. Look, there's the swing. And look at the size of that front door! And the balcony so nice. I'd like to knock and check on him. Maybe he'd let me stay and swing for a while. But mom told me not to go to Keanu's otherwise he'd want to visit us. What a beautiful home Keanu has. Even the swing is nice.

The fuely smell. Dark. We have a bulb but in the evening it hardly lights. I'm supposed to have fishsticks and fries. I don't like them much when they're cold. But it's okay. Then I look toward the bed and almost get a fright. Then I feel happy. Mom must have drawn that picture! That's why she wanted the colors!

Write five sentences about: What I see through the window of my room.

from the windw of my room i see a nice and lрге gardin

from the windw of my room i see many treess and flower

from the windw of my room i see a big swimming pool whit many fishes in it

from the windw of my room i see a lot of son and big and yellow

Today Miss Katja did come. Just as soon as we got to the classroom I turned in my Language exercise book.

– Ah! My good boy! You haven't forgotten the sentences today. So let's see what you can see from your room.

Keanu is still absent. If he was here I'd show him my sentences. He sees mine and I see his.

– My goodness, how many beautiful things you see from your room! You must be living in a palace.

I feel so happy when Miss Katja tells me that. I don't care if Keanu doesn't believe me as long as Miss Katja does.

– You know what? One day I'll come to your place so that I too can look through your window. Let's do that, eh? Can I come to your place one day so I can see these beautiful things from your window?

A Woman

She's been asleep for no more than a quarter of an hour, when her mobile phone rings:

- What do you want?
- Have a job for you.
- Yeah, right ... can't.
- Why can't you?
- Why? Because I can't.
- Why not?
- I'm busy.
- Busy doing what?
- Got two jobs already.
- When?
- Friday and Saturday.
- This is for Monday night. Take it, 'cause I promised them.
- You promised them? You can't just promise them before you tell me.
- Are you on for it or not?
- I'll call you tomorrow. Bye.

That's what he always does: he does all the fixing and arranging, leaving her to do all the accommodating. Lately she's been thinking about saying to hell with all of it. But then there's this wish of hers, an expensive wish, and she has no money. When she stares into her empty purse, she asks herself how other people do it. How are they dining out every Saturday, out for brunch on Sundays; taking their weekend

breaks in some hotel every couple of months; going abroad at least once every summer, or for New Year's. These days it seems everyone's going someplace except her. And she can't figure out why. Where does her money get off to? She always eats alone, drinks water and soft drinks instead of wine, all while watching the others gorge on things she can only dream of ... or not even that. So whenever someone phones to offer some job, and she's just on the verge of refusing, up pops her wish ... and she accepts. Tomorrow she'll call and tell him yes as long as someone picks her up and gives her a lift back at least to the village square because, anyway, there'll be no one around at that hour.

She rolls over in bed, feels the springs jabbing her, hears them groaning. She suddenly remembers she hasn't taken the evening pills, but she doesn't feel like getting up. She wants to sleep. Just sleep. If she could, she'd sleep the whole day long. That's what she'd told her shrink during last Monday's session. That waste of time. Once a month, she has to go to the clinic, spend two hours or more waiting, only so that someone can see her for five minutes—five— and that's it. Nothing but a waste of time because nothing ever changes. Even the pills she gulps—always the same ones, always the same dose. She fritters away the waiting room time futzing with the mobile, perusing photos on Facebook; chin tucked while clicking and swiping so that no one talks to her and she doesn't have to talk to them. A bunch of nutties at the shrink's, one worse than the other. Take last Monday, for example. There's this guy she's always coming across—at least forty-something, at least—and he shows up with his mother. Now the woman is already holding his hand when, out of the blue, this guy starts bawling and whining. Well, last Monday she simply couldn't take it anymore:

– Hey, stop it! Always the same story with you!

The guy's cries even more. And then his mother has the nerve to say:

– Because, you know, poor thing he's not feeling well at the moment ...

– Really? So what? Do you think any of us is feeling great around here? Would we be here if we felt well? Take him out! Just go. Take him anywhere, because that

crying is all I need right now! I'm fucked up as it is, and your son's wailing is sending me over the edge.

Then, this other woman who always comes with her daughter, says:

– That's not nice of you, dear. You can't tell what others are going through. Don't you ever feel like crying?

– Crying? Me? I feel like smashing the whole place to bits, not crying! And I tell you, one day I just might snap and fuck up everything in sight.

Just then the nurse calls her name, she strolls in, and voilà—five minutes later she's on her way out with her prescription, all crumpled up. She's told the shrink her wish, and she's told it to no one but him. Each time she tells him about it he nods. He nods, to let her know he hears what she's saying, but he says nothing. She's been told that her shrink owns a huge villa. What would you expect? Once, in the waiting room, someone was saying the shrink charges sixty euro per patient when he works in his private clinic. Sixty euros! She couldn't imagine what she'd have to do to earn sixty euros.

She rolls to the other side, with a sensation that the bed is breaking beneath her. It occurs to her that not only did she miss her evening meds, but she also didn't shower either. Till tomorrow then. She doesn't feel like getting up. She grabs her mobile.

– Hey, I'm ok for Monday. But will you pick me up?

– We'll figure out something. The main thing is that you're on. I'll pick you up or send someone for you. ... Why can't you catch the bus? It's at the usual place.

– Fuck you! I will not catch the bus. You've got cars coming out of your arse and shit, and then you expect me to catch the bus? No way. And where is this usual place?

– The farm.

– Oh, the farm? So it'll be a nice take then. Now, you listen to me. It's a hundred and fifty or nothing. And I want it all upfront. I mean as soon as I get in the car, you give me the cash. And make sure there's hot water at that farm, because last time I almost had a heart attack in that cold shower. How many are coming?

– Usual.

– What's usual like?

– Around twenty.

– Fuck! Twenty? So it's really going to be a big take. Hundred seventy then.

– Hundred seventy? What the fuck? You can't just raise the price like that! You want me to get into trouble or what?

– Tell you what: from here on out prices are changing. We've reached the end of this road. And whoever doesn't like it can go knocking on somebody else's door. Plenty will do a Friday and Saturday kind of job, but never a Monday. I'm the only one who provides that service. ... So there. I'm raising my fee.

Friday and Saturday weren't bad. On Friday it was all over sooner than on Saturday. On Friday by the time she started they were already dead drunk, the whole lot of them. And there weren't many of them, just ten. On Sunday she slept until two in the afternoon and on getting up she realized there was nothing in the fridge. So she went to the square and bought half a dozen pastizzi which she munched on while walking back home. On Monday she went to mass, to make up for Sunday, because on Sunday evening she had to do the laundry and prepare her costume for the next day. At the conclusion of mass, she lit a candle before St. Nicholas:

– Saint Nicholas, please help me this evening, I pray you. And do keep in mind why I'm doing this. You never know, maybe one day I'll turn out okay. Please, please help me. I keep lighting candles for you, and you just leave me like I always was.

At quarter to eight the 'arranger' picked her up.

- Hope you got something to change in.
- Of course, I do. How would I come back otherwise? You're bringing me back, right?
- Make sure you scrub yourself well or I won't be taking you in my car.
- Cash. Now.

They arrived at the farm in pitch darkness amidst dark fields. From the car they could hear dogs barking, the hooting of men, loud music. They went in using an obscure back entrance and went straight to a little room opening onto a hall where the reveling had already begun. The man who picked her up went straight to the hall to announce they had arrived. She put her plastic bag which held her costume, a towel, and shower gel on a table and started changing. She can't recall how long she's been doing this job. Definitely since she was fifteen. She was still in school, still a child, yet she was already quite shapely. No one at that time would have guessed she was under eighteen. Her uncle, her mother's brother, used to take her on jobs. Word spread around and she started getting lots of offers. Then her uncle kicked the bucket after a single shot to the head while parking his van in the garage. Probably some cocaine deal. Anyway, she soon found someone else to manage her, not just one but two and even three people willing to find her jobs. Everyone was asking for her: sometimes for a bachelor party, or a party for someone just back from abroad or leaving, or for some Christmas bash ... always one thing or another. She wouldn't hazard a guess at this point as to how many men have seen her strip and rock naked under red or blue lights; how many hands have fondled her; how many tongues have trailed her flesh.

One day she'll quit. First, she'll make her one wish come true and then she'll quit. After that she might start working as a cleaner for some rich family or clean up at the church. She'll still love St. Nicholas if she quits because even though, so far, he's left her the way she was, most likely she'd be even worse off without him. Maybe he actually is helping her already, her and all the women like her, and she hasn't noticed it yet. St. Nicholas works silently and discreetly.

The air is thick in the smoky hall, reeking of beer. There are twenty people there—mostly young men; a couple over sixty. They see her, start clapping and jeering. She begins dancing, rocking. She can't see the faces but can feel the gaze, hear the laughter growing louder and louder. From a speaker in a corner blares a song so strident there's more buzzing from the speaker than music—jolting. They're telling her to hurry now, because it's not the striptease they're after. The heat in the hall has her drenched in sweat already, even before all the cavorting and shaking her behind, as she makes the rounds of the men who are feeling her up. Then she straddles the lap of one who's wearing white and the others circle them: more clapping and jeering; grinding their bodies against the two; pressing her, forcing her, against the man she's sits astride. Then they carry her out of the hall, out into a field where a couple of torches have been lit against a wall. This is not the first time she's seeing that wall. She's seen it many times, and always the same thing happens. Suddenly all goes quiet. She turns facing the wall and waits. Just like when I was little and pa used to get pissed off. He'd send me to face the wall. But I was always a little devil, so when I faced the wall I would start laughing and fooling around. I wait for the first one. That's the worst: the first one, because you can't quite tell when it's coming and then it startles you. In the silence and darkness, the first one to hit you hurts. Just like the smack my old man used to give me after I'd clowned around while facing the wall. He always used to smack me on my arse. With all his might. He used to hit me so much! I think he liked my arse. That's why he always hit me on it. After a while though, I stopped clowning around.

Shot one goes wide. I watch it smash against the wall, the yolk sliding and the shell sticking for a moment or two before it falls near my feet. The second shot also smashes against the wall. I wait for the first strike. I wait like I used to wait for my dad's blows. It used to be my fault because he'd send me to face the wall and I used to go right on clowning. I wait, feel the night's chill and its dew misting my skin. Suddenly, I feel the first egg exploding against me, exactly in the middle of my back. I get a fright; they notice, and laugh. From then on it seems everyone's aiming well: at my back, my head, my arse— one egg after another crashing into my body. It's not

silent anymore. They shout at me to turn around so they can target my face now. I turn and close my eyes: I don't want to see them, don't want to see who they are anymore. There are some twenty of them, everyone holding eggs they're anxious to launch at me. The dogs, barking behind the wall, echo the raucous laughter—especially when the first egg hits my face, exactly on my left eye. It hits me like the slaps my old man used to give me when I used to leave home and not return till the next morning. Another one, and another, they smash, crack, break, and the yolk stinks like I don't know what and smears all over my face. Now I notice they're aiming at my breasts, and they applaud each time someone manages to hit them. Enough! Enough! But they mock me and carry on. I'm afraid I'm going to piss and try hard not to let go.

She notices it's all over when the clapping and shouting escalate and then subside. No one comes to touch me now. They walk back into the hall to carry on with their drinking. Slowly I open my eyes and see all that filth on the wall and the ground. Then I make my way to the hall. When they see me come in, they start jeering again. I pick up my costume from the floor where it fell while I was stripping for them, go back to the cramped back room where there's a hose connected to a tank with freezing cold water. I have a shower.

At least the guy who picked her up drove her straight to her door. She told him he could stop at the square, but he had some mercy; by then it was well past midnight. She takes the key from her plastic bag, opens the door. Despite the long years she's been sleeping and waking in the same place, the rank humidity still takes her by surprise each and every time she turns the key. She takes out her costume and puts her toiletries in a corner. Then she takes out a couple of pastizzi she'd managed to nab, one of them dirty, and wolfs them down. She scoops the hundred and fifty euros from the bottom of the bag and puts them in a drawer.

Done and dusted, St. Nicholas. Now don't judge me for running around naked with men. I'm sure half of them are married. What the fuck can I do? ... You know what? I

always pray to you because you help me, and women like me. I hope that one day I'll leave this fucking garage and move into a proper house, or a flat at least. Why shouldn't I live like other people? This is all I wish, St. Nicholas. Except, well, I'd like to take a trip too, travel about, but there's nothing to do about that.

She lay down, still clothed, pulled the thin, cold blanket over her, and slept.