

Sasha

Sasha! Sasha! Are you coming out today?” two screechy voices screamed out. Sasha appeared on the small balcony and waved to the skinny-looking girls, both dressed in the same style shorts the colour of faded green and bright yellow tops.

“Coming!” She put on her favourite red blouse and black shorts, looked quickly in the mirror and, with happy grin on her face, was on her way to meet the girls.

This was the second day of summer school holidays and the morning was perfect. A lonely fluffy white cloud looked lost in the middle of the cobalt blue sky. The sun was already high and shining bright. It looked like it would be a hot day. A light, salty breeze from the sea was laced with the smell of pine tree resin, jasmine flowers and berries, pleasantly cooling the air as it passed through the forest behind the house.

A small flock of pigeons was fighting over breadcrumbs left by the two girls on the side of the road. Sasha had arrived yesterday at her grandmother’s summer house for the holidays. She loved this old wooden two-storey home full of delightful charm and the sweet aroma of dried herbs and honey cake. Every summer, for as long as she could remember, Sasha would spend the school holidays with her grandparents while her mum and dad were working in the city. She hurried downstairs, jumping two steps at a time. A small black cat stretched lazily, disturbed by the squawking noise from the stairs, yawned and went back to sleep.

Sasha’s grandmother was busy pottering around the kitchen preparing lunch. The aroma from the fried forest mushrooms with onions reminded Sasha of their trip to uncle Misha’s home in the Ural Mountains last autumn, of mushroom picking and her encounter with the elk. Sasha kissed her grandmother goodbye and waved to her grandfather, who was reading a newspaper at the large timber kitchen table in the corner, and ran out of the door.

“I have seen Maxim and Eric playing at the end of the road. Let’s check if the boys are still there,” suggested the taller girl.

“Let’s run!” Sasha was adamant to beat them to the end of the road. And she ran as fast as she could. Anya, the taller girl, and Natasha ran after her. They were sisters and Sasha’s best friends who loved dressing in identical clothes and lived a street away from Sasha’s grandmother’s house in a small block of apartments.

Unlike Sasha’s grandparents, who would move every winter to the city to stay with Sasha’s family to escape harsh northern winters, Anya and Natasha permanently resided in this coastal town. They attended local school and Sasha always dreamed of being transferred to the same school so they could spend more time together. But her parents would never agree to that and

would always say that her elite city school would give her a greater advantage in life. What advantage? Sasha could never understand, as it seemed to her that all schools were the same.

“Hey boys, what are you doing?” she screamed at the top of her lungs waving to the boys, who seemed to be having a heated discussion, constantly pointing to the barn that stood at the end of the street. Both Maxim and Eric turned around and waved to the approaching girls.

“Don’t you know what happened yesterday?” The girls looked puzzled. “Vanya, from the seventh flat, climbed on the barn roof and a ghost pushed him down. He is in hospital now,” said Maxim in a quite voice. He looked suspiciously over his shoulder towards the barn. Eric looked worried. This was unusual, as both boys were in a local school soccer team and were known for their bravery, saving Eric’s sister when a stray dog attacked her few months ago.

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“Nonsense! Ghosts do not exist. This is just a story to keep us away from playing around this barn. I am sure nasty aunt Nadya started it and I will prove it! I will climb on the barn’s roof.”

Sasha’s voice was full of determination but inside she did not feel so confident. Everyone’s eyes were on her. Anya looked scared as she whispered, “Are you sure about this?”

Sasha took a few steps towards the barn and looked around. The barn had been built quite a long time ago to store firewood for the winter when there was no electricity in the houses, but now local families used it for drying clothes and children loved playing around it, much to the annoyance of the adults.

The barn walls showed signs of ageing and neglect, with rusty nails sticking out from the sides and faded wooden boards. It was difficult to tell if it had ever been painted but for some reason Sasha was sure that if it had been, it would be a dark grey colour. She loved this barn for the sense of adventure and connection to older times it gave her and Sasha could not let it become a place of fear for local children with the story of Vanya and the ghost. One side of the barn was angled and a few boards were missing, so Sasha decided to use it for climbing. She took a deep breath and put her foot in the slit where boards were missing, stretching her

arms to find another slit for her fingers. A few drops of sweat appeared on her forehead and nose, her arms ached and her heart was beating fast, but Sasha would not give up, she could not give up. Like a rock climber conquering a wall stone by stone, she conquered the barn, board by board.

Once on the top she looked down. "Hey, Sasha, can you see any ghosts?" Eric looked worried. Sasha slowly looked around while trying to steady her breath from climbing and excitement. The breeze was playing with her long brown hair and, together with the sun, it pleasantly touched her face. She could see the sea. The same breeze brought the sound of laughter from somewhere far away with a delightful smell of the burnt sugar. She stood there for a while looking around. Children were getting impatient.

"Maybe the ghost has gone?" Eric suggested loudly.

"No! No nasty ghost would live in such a blissful place," Sasha whispered to herself, then, like a sudden thunderstorm, the voice of aunt Nadya broke up. "You children, stop causing trouble! I am going to catch you all and take you to your parents for detention!" Aunt Nadya, local courtyard keeper, was not a person to mess with and she kept all local children terrified. "I can see your faces, you rascals. No hiding from me!" The voice sounded very close. Sasha's heart skipped a beat. Her hands and feet felt suddenly cold and she could not move.

"I don't think aunt Nadya knows I am on the top," it occurred to her suddenly. "I must hide." Sasha slowly squatted, but she lost balance; suddenly there was nothing under her feet. She was in the air, falling. Sasha felt the gentle tickling of the wind on her skin and her body felt weightless, like a small snowflake. "I am a snowflake who ran away from the snow kingdom to explore the world of summer ..." Sasha closed her eyes. She was a snowflake floating in the summer air – nothing else mattered.

A sudden thud brought her back to reality. Pain. It felt like a thousand small steel ants that just escaped out of Hell's fire were climbing up her right arm. It felt hot and cold at the same time. Those ants without mercy were attacking the flesh of her arm. She could not understand where they came from and how from the weightless beautiful snowflake she so quickly turned into a victim of those fiery ants. Was that how a snowflake felt when it hit the ground?

All of a sudden Sasha's body was lifted up. Aunt Nadya. Her face was so close to Sasha's eyes, "Can you stand up?" A wave of cold and sticky sweat broke over Sasha's body. The nauseatingly sweet feeling, like the smell of overripe plums that had fallen to the ground on a hot summer day, rose from the bottom of Sasha's body. Fear. From somewhere inside her this fear was taking control of her thoughts, of her body, of everything. Fear. She did not even know that this was fear – all she could think was that her

arm was going to fall out of the sleeve of her red blouse. The same red blouse her mother gave her for her twelfth birthday last year. Her arm. "Do not lift me!" she shrieked using all the strength that she could muster. But no one could hear the scream.

"Do not lift me," she said again, but all that came out of her mouth was a weak flow of air that even the smallest of moths would not have been disturbed by. Then suddenly everything went quiet and still, apart from the strange sound of a bell ringing somewhere far away. The air felt so thick that it was hard to breathe and then it all turned black.

Sasha opened her eyes. There were lots of people around her. She could see Anya crying and Natasha comforting her. Eric was talking to a tall man in the police uniform. Aunt Nadya looked pale and somehow smaller than usual.

"What happened?"

"You have broken your arm, sweetheart. We need to get you to the hospital. Where are your parents?" The voice of a paramedic next to her brought Sasha back to reality. She felt a sting and cold burning in her left arm. "That is a strong painkiller. It will make you feel better. Let me know if you feel sick and I can give you something for the sickness. Everything will be okay, don't you worry," the same voice tried to reassure her. Sasha was gently lifted and put on the ambulance stretcher as her grandmother arrived. She still wore her apron.

"Sasha! Sasha! My dear, what have you done? What am I going to tell your mother when she telephones tonight?" Sasha looked at her grandmother, then up into the sky. It was cobalt blue with a small fluffy cloud. "Don't you worry, everything will be alright. It is just a broken arm," she whispered to her grandmother. It was a perfect summer day and the holiday had just began. Sasha smiled. 

AUTHOR MARIJA KIRJANENKO

Based in Melbourne, Kirjanenko works as an emergency physician at Epworth Hospital in Geelong. Kirjanenko studies philosophy part-time at Oxford University, as she likes to understand where ideas come from. She loves manga and cosplay and hopes one day she will be able to read manga in Japanese. She writes short stories in her spare time.



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