



*A*  
**ROOM**  
*in the*  
**CLOUDS**

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# 1 A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

A wise Chinese man once said, even the longest journey begins with a single step. Although I am neither wise nor Chinese, I agree. Becoming a pilot has been a very long journey, but I still remember perfectly what the first step was...



My journey began one August day, at breakfast time. To be honest, I can't remember what day of the week it was because, in the holidays, no one cares whether it's Monday or Friday. However, I remember clearly that

I was dunking some sponge cake into a glass of fresh milk with cinnamon when I heard the phrase which would change my life.

*'Balma, today we'll sort out your bedroom.'*

In normal circumstances, the words sort out and bedroom in the same sentence would have given me a heart attack. A big one. But that time it was special. More than special. The time had finally arrived for me to have a room of my own!

I got so excited that I knocked over the glass of milk. Luckily there were only a few drops left. In my defence, I will say that I had plenty of reasons to get that excited and more. The thing is, when you're about to turn twelve, it's a nightmare sharing a room with your eight-year-old brother and sister. A living nightmare. For the record, I love Abril and Leo a lot, but sometimes...sometimes I'd like to listen to music or read or think about my stuff. Three completely impossible activities in the company of the loony twins.

I had been complaining for months by then, but my parents always had more urgent things to do and they always settled the matter by asking me to be patient. Patience. As if I hadn't shown enough already. But that summer, I found the **REASON**, yes, in all-caps

and bold. A surefire reason. Unanswerable. Simply, the **REASON**.

*'At secondary school, I'm going to have to study a lot more.'*

I dropped it in like that, casually, and went off to do my things. But those words, as I hoped, erupted like thunder over my parents' heads. That I couldn't listen to music or read or think about my stuff hadn't seemed like an urgent problem to them, but all that about not being able to study was an intolerable thought. The most awful thought in the world.



As it was in my interests, I played along, even though I didn't fully agree with them. For me, the most awful thought in the world wasn't having to study lots, but, simply, having to start secondary school in September. Having to leave my village every day, swapping the small, familiar school for an unknown monster full of people, meeting a bunch of teachers that who knows what they'd be like...yeesh! The mere thought gave me goosebumps, and more so because I couldn't talk about it with anyone. My parents would have fretted too much, so you can imagine what help that would be. Leo and Abril would have had fun mocking me, in the event they'd actually listened, which was unlikely. And my classmates seemed so happy, so excited to begin this new chapter in their lives, that I didn't have the heart to bother them with my qualms. Basically, I felt all alone!

My parents began pacing up and down the house, looking at every room as if it was the first time they'd seen it and whispering to each other every now and again. They just love being mysterious. I didn't worry even a little bit, because I knew that they would end up reaching the only sensible conclusion. If they didn't want to spend money on building works, and they didn't, there was only one place possible. They'd find it eventually.

It took them a couple of days because they are stubborn as mules, but in the end they admitted defeat.

'Balma...we thought maybe the attic...'

'Oh, really?' I played it cool.

'What do you think, dear?'

'Me? Perfect!'

'You sure? It's a lot of stairs to be going up and down all the time...'

'Even better! I'll get super fit.'

'Well, if you're convinced...'

'Totally!'

'Well, if you've no doubts...'

What doubts would I have? I wanted my own room so bad I'd have settled for it being in the stable, if we had one.

'I love the idea, to be honest.'

'And so do we,' said Abril straight away because she has to stick her nose into everything. 'Don't we, Leo?'

'We do! Because Balma is so annoying. Always like *be quiet and turn off the light and let me sleep...* Such a bore.'

'Shush, you silly billies!' I cut short the avalanche of complaints. 'If you want me to go so much, I don't know why you aren't emptying the attic already.'



'When you're right, you're right!'

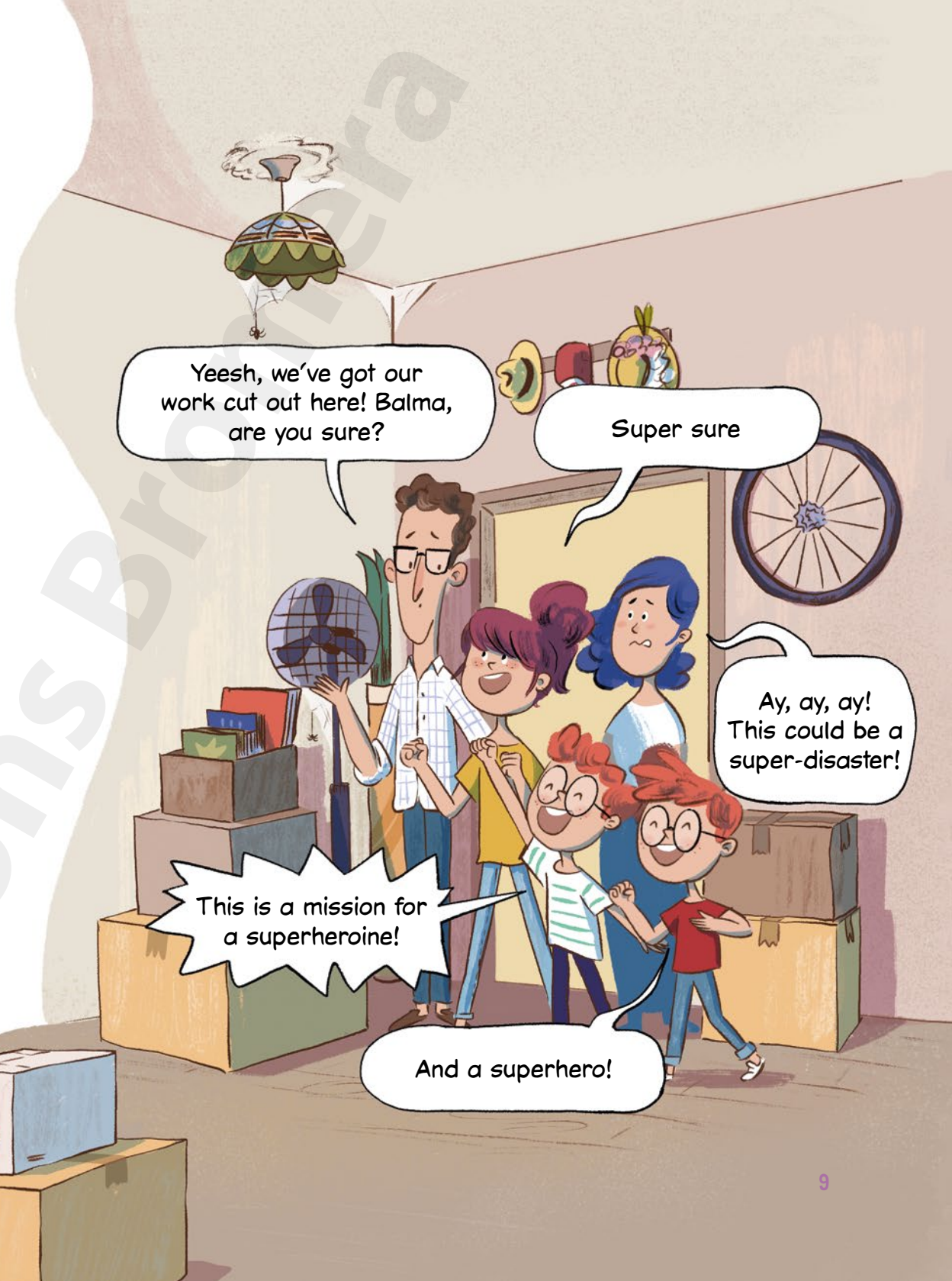
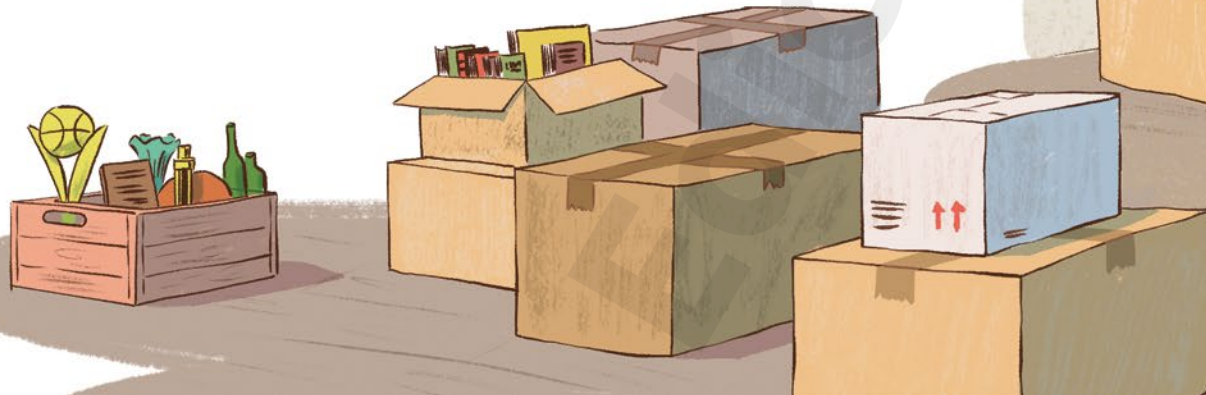
Abril and Leo flew up the stairs, giggling and shoving, and my parents flew after them as if possessed. The twins were small, but capable of having the most awful ideas. They knew too well the danger of leaving them alone.

The attic was full to the brim of boxes full of who knows what, stuff someone had found useful once, and, above all, dust and cobwebs. Yuck!

It took longer than I had imagined, but after a couple of days I found myself the lady and ruler of a well-lit room which I thought was amazing. And I wasn't the only one – the twins tried to steal it right off me...the little rascals!

'We'd be super comfy up here,' began Abril. 'Wouldn't we, Leo?'

'Oh yes, super comfy!' Confirmed Leo. 'And we wouldn't annoy anyone with our games.'



Yeesh, we've got our work cut out here! Balma, are you sure?

Super sure

Ay, ay, ay! This could be a super-disaster!

This is a mission for a superheroine!

And a superhero!

'Exactly,' continued Abril. 'You wouldn't even know we were here.'

'You'll all have peace and quiet,' went on Leo.

'That's just what we want, to let you out of sight!' My mum joked, stopping them in their tracks.

'You cheeky monkeys still have good few years of supervised freedom ahead of you,' added my dad.

Before the twins' laughs turned to tears, as so often happened, I sent them out of my domain authoritatively.

'Right, take your jabbering elsewhere and let me sort my things out.'

It took me hours to tame the chaos, mostly because I found a load of things I thought I'd lost. And I suppose I did lose some others. That's life. Reluctantly, I got rid of everything I didn't need anymore. I had to make room for all the new things to come in my life. It was in the last drawer I organised that the black-and-white photo I'd found before reappeared. I looked at it for a while. Who was that man? What was he wearing? And why did he look so serious? Or was it a sad expression?

I don't know if all parents are the same, but mine are always so run off their feet they barely have time for the essentials. I spent several days with the photo in my pocket, trying to get someone to tell me who that man was.



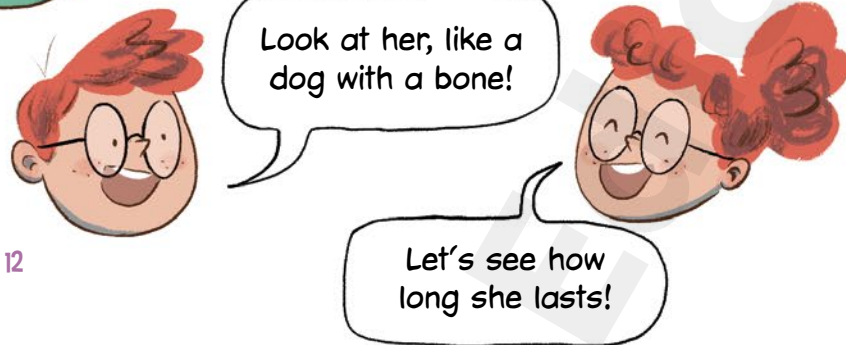
I understand that a house with five people in it is a lot of work, especially when two of those people are twins who are allergic to soap and have a rather odd idea of tidiness, to put it mildly. But it's also true that my parents aren't exactly king and queen of being organised, and they have a certain tendency to rush around aimlessly, shouting lots and solving little. Everyone is the way they are.

However, I am every bit as stubborn as they are hectic. So I armed myself with infinite patience and dedicated myself to following them all over the house,



putting up with them constantly swatting me away like a fly. And, in the process, putting up with the jibes from Abril and Leo, who were splitting their sides.

That night, I really struggled to sleep. I couldn't get that recently-discovered great-great-grandfather out



my head. At first, I was annoyed about looking like a man from when the world was in black and white, to be quite honest, and the twins' jokes didn't amuse me in the slightest. But dad said it was a very nice thing to look like an ancestor, and mum said they were beautiful eyes, so the twins pulled faces and shut up. That was a triumph all round.

Lying on the bed, eyes fixed on the attic window, I began to count the planes flying across the night sky in all directions. Three, five, nine, fifteen...it was dizzying to think that every one of those little lights flashing in the darkness was carrying dozens, hundreds of people inside. Everyone went on planes, except us. I'd have to clear that up with mum and dad the next day...I also wanted to see the world from above, like all those people, although...I'm a bit embarrassed to say this, but the rollercoaster at the fair made me scream like crazy person. What might happen to me on a plane? I might have my great-great-granda's eyes, but it looks like I didn't inherit his bravery.

The sound of rain on the window woke me and I got up in a bad mood. The summer rain meant that there would be no swimming pool, or bike rides, or anything at all. I didn't even have the option of going to someone's house because all my friends

had chosen the same week in August to go away. And not any old week, but my birthday week. That's right, I'm one of the select group of people who have their birthday in the middle of August and I have never been able to celebrate with a proper birthday party with all my school friends. Either I have it so early it doesn't make sense, or so late that no one remembers it was my birthday.

I went downstairs, dragging my feet, bored to death before even starting the day, but there was a surprise waiting for me in the kitchen.

'Look, Balma!

My mum held out a rather dusty cardboard box which looked like it was from Napoleonic times. It didn't look very inviting and I didn't move to take it.

'My birthday's still two days away,' I commented as a greeting.

'And who said it was a birthday present?' My dad laughed.

'Forget it, Toni,' my mum said, 'she's not interested.'

'We are!' cried the twins, who had just come into the kitchen and didn't even know what was going on, not that they cared. It was just about stirring.

'Hold it there!' I shouted like a madwoman. 'It's mine!'



The shout stunned them for a few seconds, but it would have been impossible to explore the box in peace had fortune not unexpectedly taken my side.

'Don't you two remember you're in a hurry?' said dad, teasingly.

'Aaah, yes!' shouted Leo.

'A super-huge massive hurry!' shouted Abril.

They wolfed down their breakfast with lightning speed and in the blink of an eye had disappeared from the kitchen. It took me a few seconds to react, but then I remembered that the little rascals were off to spend a couple of days at the beach, at the house of a classmate. I was a little bit jealous, because I had nowhere to go, but at least it meant I had the house and my parents all to myself. When you're the oldest of three, that's harder than finding a needle in a haystack!

I don't think I've ever washed my hands as much as that day. The box was dusty outside and in, some of the papers inside looked like they'd been bitten by rats and there were lots of little brown balls that I preferred not to identify... a real treasure! In normal circumstances, I wouldn't have touched it with a barge-pole, but it only took one phrase for me not to mind shoving my hands into all that filth.



'There might be things of Great-Great-Granda Daniel's in there.'

Evidently, the box had been in the attic for donkey's years before it became my room and no one really knew who had filled it or with what. It was the closest thing to a mystery that had ever happened to me. I felt a bit like those explorers who find an ancient tomb in the middle of a desert and hurry to discover the deceased's secrets. At least these dead people were my family and not some complete strangers.

The rain didn't stop falling all morning and nor did my parents stop working. Making the most of the twins' absence, they cleaned the house from top

to bottom, put on I don't know how many washes and cooked enough food for a whole village. Good thing we have a giant freezer in the garage. While they worked, I took out the contents of the box, dusted them as well as I could and arranged them in three piles: one of photos, one of papers and another with weird things like baby's socks. And then, as I needed explanations from my parents, I had no choice but to help them out a bit. If I didn't lend them a hand, they might not stop until nighttime.



The contents of the box kept us busy all evening. I mean, there was all sorts in there. Many of the strange things we only touched with our fingertips, because they were a bit disgusting: there were milk teeth belonging to who knows who, a rattle with lots of holes in it, a rusty spoon...all to the rubbish! The pile of papers turned out to be a collection of recipes, written in very nice handwriting, and I suggested we try some. My dad laughed.

'We'll have to do some calculations first, Balma! Have you noticed the quantities aren't in grams, they're in ounces?'

'They sure are old,' said my mum, taking a look. 'And from what I can see, loaded with sugar and fat!'

'For the bin as well?' I asked, although it seemed a shame because of that lovely writing.

'No, no!' exclaimed my dad. 'Even if they don't seem that appealing anymore, they are a part of our history.'

That's how our ancestors ate!

'But they're not doing any good inside that box,' added my mum. 'Why don't we take them to the local library? They have a section of old documents.'

'Good idea!'

We put the recipes in a drawer, awaiting a trip to the library, and made a start on the pile of photos. I didn't know I had so many relatives. I thought my parents knew all those people by heart, but I was quite wrong. They appeared just as lost as I was.

'That's Grandma Matilde, right?' asked my dad, holding up a photo.

'No, no, no!' laughed my mum. 'That's Aunt Carmel!'

'Ah, so it is...and look, here's Granda Vicent!'

'Oh, yes! I thought it was Uncle Colau...'

'You're on fire!' I laughed. 'Are you sure, at least, that they are your relatives?'

It was getting dark when we found, almost at the bottom of the box, a photo which made my jaw drop. There was no doubt it was Great-Great-Granda Daniel, so easy to recognise thanks to the eyes we shared... but what on earth was that thing behind him?

I had imagined my great-great-granda flying a super modern plane. Sometimes I'm completely daft...



more so than the twins, which is saying something. When I said it out loud, my parents laughed heartily. See how they enjoy making fun of me? When they stopped laughing, they hit me with a history lesson on aviation which almost floored me. Well, not them directly, because they don't know much more than I



do, but instead Mrs Internet, who knows everything.  
And I mean, everything.



Humanity has always been curious and interested in flying like birds...



Until the planes we know today came along. Super safe and hi-tech.



Men and women of extraordinary bravery invented and tested new and ever-improving models.

'That's the kind of plane I'll fly!'



That was the first time I said it out loud. The first of many. Many many, according to my parents and the twins. I don't know exactly what made me say it, to be honest, because I had never thought it before in my life. However, once said, it seemed to me the most logical and natural thing in the world. I had inherited my great-great-grandfather's eyes...why shouldn't I have also inherited his passion for flying?

My parents, who knew me like the back of their hands, looked at me with raised eyebrows. My dad raised his right brow. My mum the left. And both of them, as if they had rehearsed it, sighed in unison.

'Another hobby, Balma?'

As much as I'd have liked to, I couldn't blame them for reacting that way. Because it was true that, up until that moment, it was typical of me that I became captivated with hobbies which I got over as quickly as I had gotten into. When I got into music, for example, I exasperated them with endless and tuneless flute concerts. When it was painting, no piece of furniture in the house escaped being splattered in colour. When I took a fancy for ballet, I tried to only move around on tiptoe, falling here, rising there... How were they supposed to believe this time it was for real?

The peace at home lasted as long as the absence of Abril and Leo did, and they returned from the beach more tanned and more restless, as if that was possible.

'We made awesome castles!'

'Better than Cinderella's!'

'And we caught tiny clams!'

'And we chased crabs!'

'And...!'

'And...!'

And there was no need for me to say anything else because who would hear me anyway? Such is life.

My birthday came along without a cloud in the sky and a breeze that was beginning to smell like September. A perfect day! I spent a good while looking at myself in the mirror and saying over and over that I was twelve years old. Yikes, twelve. I was twelve and I had a room of my own and I was about to start a new school and...and, most of all, I had a bundle of nerves in my stomach. Who knew how many new things were about to happen in my life?

When I went into the kitchen, I suffered a violent attack of affection from my family. The twins threw themselves round me, Abril from the front, Leo from the back, for balance, while my parents hugged me from either side. They really are animals! They cover my

face in kisses and slobber and twist my ears for good luck, but they also put a smile on my face and warm my heart. That's my family for you.



The birthday presents came after breakfast. Some rather unexpected presents which made me realise that, apparently, I had been going on about planes quite a lot! But like, a lot a lot.



I was about to pass out or have a heart attack. Were these really my presents? Lately I had been getting excited about flying, that was true, but it wasn't such a big deal. Luckily, before I started feeling bad, my parents had the good sense to give me the real present. The present I had been waiting impatiently for months for, the present I was desperate to receive because all my friends already had it...THE ULTIMATE PRESENT...my first ever phone! A phone with restricted access to the internet and restricted hours of use, but a phone no less. As soon as I connected it, it began to bleep like mad. What was that about? A second later, my eyes were full of tears. I couldn't believe it.



My parents, who had all my friends' contacts, had secretly given them my new number so they could wish me a happy birthday. I mean, when they want to be, they're just adorable.

I couldn't be happier. I showed it with all the kisses and hugs the occasion deserved, and I celebrated by sharing with Abril and Leo all the joke presents they'd given me. I had a great time, to be honest. When they want to be, they're lovely, truth be told. And, come on, turning twelve doesn't mean you stop wanting to play.

Just when I thought my birthday was over, and feeling like all my wishes had come true, my parents gave me one more surprise. A big surprise.

'Are you still curious about your great-great-granda, Balma?' my dad asked me all of a sudden.

Still curious? I couldn't be any more curious.

'Very! Why? Did you find more things?'

'Well, things...' murmured my mum.

'Not things.'

They really were being mysterious. Where was this headed?

'Then, what?' I asked, biting my nails impatiently.

'We've found someone who knew him!'

What? How?

I cried out with enthusiasm, I danced on one foot then the other, and then I froze still. Wait a second... something didn't add up... did they say someone who knew Great-Great-Granda Daniel?



Apparently my parents had read my mind, because right away they explained. Taking the words from my mouth, as usual, but they explained.

'He knew him, but he's not the same age, don't worry.'

'In fact, he's the son of a good friend of Great-Great-Granda's.'

'Even so, he's a ripe old age.'

'See! Great-Great-Granda Daniel would be how old now? One-hundred and thirty?'

'No, no! Let me work it out... In 1936, when the war began, he was thirty-two.'

'So, he was born in 1904. That's quite something!'

'Exactly. Now he'd be one-hundred and nineteen...'

'Wow!'

'And his friend's son...'

'Must be over one-hundred, for sure!'

I had to make a necessary interruption. They were making me dizzy with so many calculations. And what war were they talking about, I'd like to know?

'War? What war?'

My parents glanced at each other out the corner of their eyes with an uncomfortable look on their faces, like they always did when the twins or I asked a question that required a long answer. Or a difficult one. Or both.



They were saved by the bell, in its usual form of wild twins, but I had no intention of letting it go. And so, amidst pushing and shoving and my siblings' mischief, I managed to understand that they were talking about the Spanish Civil War. Of course, silly me. What else could it have been? I didn't really know much about it, though. They had mentioned it at school once or twice, and we'd talked about it at home because of some news item or film, but I didn't pay much attention to topics like that. Everything about wars put and still puts me in a bad mood, it makes me very sad and I just want to cry. That's why I can't stand the news, there's always one on there.

A few days later, my mum arranged a trip with the twins to buy school things, as September was just around the corner. I was horrified at the prospect of spending an afternoon going from shop to shop with that unruly pair, but, then, I was also saved by the bell.

'Balma,' said my dad. 'You and I are going to meet Great-Great-Granda Daniel's friend.'

'For real?' I shouted, without realising my double luck. I was escaping an awful afternoon and, at the same time, getting the chance to discover lots about my pilot great-great-grandfather.

'For really real,' laughed my dad. 'He's expecting us at half-past five.'

'Great!'

As he lived nearby, we walked, and on the way my dad explained to me how they had found him. I only heard about one word in every three because I was nervous about meeting a man so old he had lived at the same time as Great-Great-Granda Daniel. How do you talk to a mummy? Loudly, I supposed... Suddenly, I heard my dad say something.

'Lucky your mum is an excellent surfer!'

What? How could I not react to a comment like that?

'What do you mean? She gets dizzy just roller-skating near the beach!'

'I mean surfing the web, silly,' laughed my dad. 'Which, by the way, we'll have to have a proper chat about, especially now you have a phone...'

'With restricted access,' I complained.

'Restricted, but still with access!' he hit back. 'On the internet you can find everything. And everything means everything. A bunch of interesting, important and fun stuff, but also lots of rubbish.'

'I know that, they're always going on about it at school.'

'I should hope so!' my dad ruffles my hair, like when I was little. 'But the thing is, when you know how to use it as well as your mum does, the internet is useful. Just look, it's helped us find out this man is still alive and, what's more, he lives a stone's throw from home. What are the chances?'

Between one thing and another, we had reached the front door of the house in question. It turned out I already knew it, because that strange tower on the roof had always caught my attention. I had even drawn it during my painter phase.

'The house with the tower!' I exclaimed, surprised. 'Don't tell me he lives here!'



'What tower, sweetie?' my dad was equally surprised. 'That's a dovecote!'

That called for more questions, but I didn't have time to ask them. We hadn't yet touched the door when a very wrinkled, very friendly and very elderly woman was waving us inside a cold, dark house. Very pleasant, given the heat outside.

'Oh, this air con is lovely!' I exclaimed, relieved.

The woman burst out laughing.

'We don't have any of that air con! Just wooden blinds and awnings.'

'And the knowhow to open and close them at the right times to keep the house cool!' exclaimed my dad. 'Clearly we have a lot to learn, Balma!'

'Balma is a lovely name,' the woman smiled at me.

'Let's go into the sitting room, my father is waiting for us.'

I had to bite my tongue to avoid letting out a cry of surprise. If this old woman was the daughter, I dreaded to think what the father might look like... I steeled myself and followed her closely all the way to the sitting room, which was as cool and dark as the hall. I looked left and right, but I couldn't see anything but armchairs and seats.

'Dad,' said the woman, raising her voice, but not as much as I'd expected. 'Your visitors.'


I was beginning to wonder who she was talking to when one of the armchairs came to life and with a wispy voice which seemed about to break, he murmured a greeting.

'Welcome!'

And then, straining my eyes, I found him.

Wow! It's the oldest man in the world!





Over the summer, Balma has moved into the attic after begging her parents for a room of her own, away from her little brother and sister. There she finds a photo of her Great-Great-Granda Daniel, who was a pilot and died young in a plane crash.

Keen to discover more about her ancestor, Balma's parents introduce her to Mr Bellver, an elderly man who tells her many things about Daniel and the world of aviation. However, not everything is so rosy...

With the start of the new school year, Balma begins secondary school, has to meet lots of new people, gets her first period, argues with the boys about whether a woman can be a pilot, and a loved one dies. All that together makes her deeply sad and worried.

Luckily, everything begins to change when her Grandma Elisa gives her Great-Great-Granda Daniel's personal diary and when a female pilot who visits her class becomes her role model.

This is a story which fills us with optimism and the confidence to take on the obstacles life puts in our way.