



JORDI CERVERA

A SEA

OF

DRAWINGS

Translated by
Andrew McDougall

bromera



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A drawing

Have you ever looked at a drawing and thought, *this is magical* or *this feels alive*?

Well, it's true, there are magical drawings, living drawings.

Would you think that a simple drawing, done on completely ordinary paper, a straightforward, uncomplicated drawing, could end up saving lives? Would you believe that being able to draw with passion and enthusiasm can be a safety net and can stop the whole world from collapsing? Are pencils and paper tools that can prevent disasters and right awful wrongdoings?

Now you'll be thinking, *so many questions!* But... what about the answers?

To be sure of them, you'll have to listen carefully to a very special story, the story of Pep Grau. And now you'll be wondering *who is Pep Grau?*

Pep Grau is a very famous sketch artist who saw his life turned upside down from one day to the next. But his story doesn't exist alone and you'll have to pay attention to two narratives, because the thing that makes Pep's story very, very different from all the other stories in the world is precisely the presence of someone very different to Pep: Samir Mobarek, a Syrian boy who, as it so happens, also likes drawing, but doesn't do it quite the same way as Pep.

Samir and Pep are two people so far apart in everything that, in fact, we might think they couldn't possibly have anything to do with one another. Fate, however, likes to play games and, in this particular case, by a special coincidence, it has made them the protagonists of an incredible, impossible, almost magical adventure.

That's what this story is all about: drawings, pictures, imagination, dangers, mysteries, magic, surprises and everything that can be hidden by a drawing that comes from the heart.

A bit of red, a stroke of yellow, a touch of magenta, a line of green, a trace of black, this thick bit here outlining the edges and the shapes to finish it off and complete the work. He likes working this way and, when he finishes, he takes the drawing, holds it up and looks at it from a bit further away and then turns to show it to the audience.

Pep is a very famous sketch artist. He has won many national and international prizes, and every day he posts a different drawing on Instagram.

When he was very young, he discovered he liked reading and drawing more than speaking or writing. Instead of wasting time explaining something, he drew it. That way he finished quicker and the result

was always much better. While his classmates worked hard on reports and making up stories, he was much more comfortable drawing.

He can recall the first time his drawing ability caught the eye of someone outside his family circle. It was at school, a Tuesday in the first term, when the teacher asked them, as the task of the day, to come up with a summary of the story she had just read out loud. Everyone began writing. He, on the other hand, took his colours and began to draw. Technically, the teacher hadn't said anything about wanting a written text, had she?

He produced five drawings, with plenty of colour and detail, which perfectly summarised the travails of the story's protagonist. Pep can remember it as if it were yesterday. It was a reindeer, Anori, a large stag with velvety antlers and a powerful voice that, when he roared, spread like the wind over the snowy white earth of the icy Great North.

He did it confidently and without hesitating for a second, but he had his doubts. As he drew, he wondered if it'd earn him a big fat zero and a tug on the ear. The teacher had asked for a summary and there he was drawing pictures!

The teacher took in the class's work, going desk by desk. When she reached his, she looked at the drawings in surprise. Pep prepared for the worst, but he instead recieved sincere praise.

‘Wonderful! Very original!’ said the teacher as she spread all five out on the table, one beside the other, following the order of the story.

The best of all was that the teacher also discovered a new way to do things which opened up lots of possibilities. From that moment on, in class, whenever an image was required to illustrate something, everyone asked Pep to do it and he was always more than happy to oblige without protest. Sometimes it was a cat, sometimes a donkey, or a cell, or an apple, or a combination of three elements.

This motivated him in an extraordinary fashion and turned him from a somewhat lazy, average student, capable of being distracted at any moment by the buzz of a fly, into a dedicated worker who tried hard and achieved good marks. He could spend hours and hours sketching and painting, giving form to all the requests and assignments that his classmates and teachers gave him. Everyone wanted one of his drawings.

‘Can you draw me dressed as a Roman?’

‘Pep, can you draw me a red motorbike?’

‘Do you think you could draw my dog?’

‘And my three cats?’

‘And my budgie?’

‘I have a multicoloured fish, could you draw that, too?’

‘Would you like to draw a house?’

‘What about a car race for me?’

‘Can you do a drawing of this photo?’

‘I’d like a portrait of my three hamsters?’

‘I want a wolf running across a snowy mountain!’

‘Do you reckon you could draw the school building to go on the front cover of the termly magazine?’

‘Could you paint my grandma? She’s going to be 95 this week and we want to give her a present.’

‘Can you draw us a knight, a dragon and a princess? We want to hang it in the staff room for St George’s Day.’

Pep, always smiling with that timid expression of his, would adjust his glasses, pretending to think about it, but he never said no to any of the requests that came his way. And he worked hard to produce the best drawings he could.

Coloured ink, crayons, watercolours, graphite, felt-tips, granulated paper, coloured pens, pencils... And always, always, whenever he thought he’d finished, he held up the drawing with two fingertips on one side, looked at it, and, eventually, decided if it was good enough to hand in or if had to simply rip it up and start over.

That gesture, by virtue of repeating it drawing after drawing, became a singular ritual that he continued to perform for the rest of his life.

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The crisis

Time goes by slowly, almost imperceptibly. Pep has grown up and, unlike what happens with most people, he has done so without ever losing his childish spirit, his timid smile, his innocent and slightly mischievous expression that has led him to always view the world with his eyes wide open and a pureness of spirit; a formula that has always helped him when it comes to work and when it comes to life.

‘What is drawing?’

Drawing is simply transforming everything around you into a smile or a question, he replies whenever they ask him that question in an interview. And maybe that’s why his life and his relationship with himself and others are full of questions and smiles.

Since he began working professionally, Pep has received all kinds of commissions: illustrations, books, posters, catalogues, postcards, invitations, pens, stickers collections, notebooks, cups, t-shirts, hats, all sorts of objects, and he has even had offers to buy the image rights to some of his best-known characters to turn them into the stars of films or cartoon series, which were then shown around the world.

However, the more work he got and the better known he became, the less happy he was. He has been losing his enthusiasm for drawing. He feels a heavy weight upon him, he feels exhausted and his joy is giving away to a kind of strange sadness that washes over him for no apparent reason.

Put simply, he doesn't enjoy drawing like he used to. He would like to regain that total freedom and, above all, that unique spirit from when he was young, when he did whatever he liked and had the whole wide world before him to discover step by step. Now he has the feeling he can't do anything new, that all that's left is to keep changing themes, but he's doomed to repeat himself over and over. Everyone says he has created a unique style, but this, instead of flattering him, saddens him deeply.

One day, he receives a commission from a big publisher, one of the most important in the world. They want to publish *The book of fear* and they want

him to illustrate it. They are convinced that no one could do it better.

‘Fear? I’ve never drawn fear,’ he responds to the editor.

‘You’ll do a great job, Pep. We’re sure of it.’

Pep isn’t so sure, but as he doesn’t like to say no to any challenge, instead of turning it down, he decides to park his own fears to one side and accept.

How do you draw fear? he wonders to himself when he arrives home and is by himself.

His challenge, therefore, is to begin working on this rather different project. Who knows, it might help him to see things from another point of view, to find new ways of doing things, and leave behind the bad mood that has been plaguing him.

But there is a problem. A big problem.

His drawings are full of colour and aren’t scary in the slightest. He can still recall one time he tried to sketch a fearsome, ugly, hairy monster, but it ended up becoming one of his funniest, most popular and beloved characters.

How do you draw fear?

After throwing away a thousand sketches that aren’t up to scratch, he begins to lose hope and wonder if it wouldn’t be better to speak to the publisher and tell them he’s quitting, that it’d be better if someone more knowledgeable on the subject did it.

How do you draw fear? he wonders again quietly. And, once more, he doesn't find an answer.

Making an effort, before giving up and abandoning it, he resolves to give it one more go: he tries not to think too much and just let himself be moved by what he feels, by that kind of sadness that follows him around. He clears his mind, casts out all thoughts and begins to draw whatever comes from within him, trying not to put any restraints or limitations on it. Maybe by doing so he'll be able to represent his mood and this sort of darkness he carries around.

The first thing that comes out is a small black spider, running inside his chest. He picks up the page with two fingers and looks at it, as he always does. A black spider isn't fear, but it could be a good way of starting to think about the things that cause it.

As he produces more drawings, he sees how the little spider grows and becomes a huge, hairy monster with a terrifying, repulsive face. It transforms into an animal that gnaws constantly at the artist's body. If he were to be honest, however, more than frighten, what it does is disgust.

He has spent a good few days shut away in his study and has produced numerous drafts, working almost obsessively. He has hundreds of sketches, which he has been arranging in piles until he finally decides to gather all of them and unite them.

Seeing them all together inspires a feeling of anguish, but that isn't exactly Fear with a capital F, the kind that he has to draw.

How do you draw fear?

All together, they look like a terrible nightmare, a horror story. Looking at them, he is sure these drawings could become a scary comic, but he's also certain that they could never illustrate a book about fear, about the great fear as an abstract concept. And this thought upsets and depresses him.

He doesn't know how to proceed. And the question resurfaces:

How do you draw fear?

His drawings show the colour of his heart; those dark shades are nought but a mirror that reflects the exact state of his mood...but they're not fear! How do you draw fear?

Pep is disorientated. For the first time in his life, it seems like he has lost the ability to draw. He needs to do something that will allow him to regain his joy and motivation, but he doesn't know how.

Is he tired of it? Does he dislike what he does? Is he going through a rough spell? Does he want to change professions? Does he feel unable to carry on?

All these questions have the same answer: no! But if the answers are all *no*...what is the matter with him?

Despite this slump he's in, something he has always enjoyed and has never stopped doing is giving drawing workshops for children in schools, libraries and cultural centres. They are always a success, and they say the secret to a triumph is that there's no secret.

In these workshops, Pep takes in the children's energy and it fills him with life. He can always be himself and he feels more like a child than ever, isolating himself from everything and rediscovering that innocence and spontaneity. But now there's a question that pursues him and worries him.

Who knows, perhaps the truth is that this question doesn't have an answer.

How do you draw fear?

Today is Saturday and he is going to a library to deliver a workshop he enjoys a lot: colours. The building is made up of two large transparent glass cubes, which turns it into a kind of two-way display case. From inside, you can see everything that happens on the street, and those walking outside can also see everything going on inside. He thinks this sensation of an open world is fantastic! He likes this hall, even though many people say it actually looks like a giant fish bowl.

During the workshop, the children try to produce a drawing that is good enough or imaginative enough to receive the illustrator's approval at the end. Suddenly, amidst all the racket, Pep looks up

from the drawings for a moment and sees a boy standing still in the street, far from the hustle and bustle inside the hall.

Alone, with an expression of sadness, or at least of the utmost concentration, the boy is watching everything from the outside, with his nose pressed against the glass and his hands either side of his eyes to stop the glare of the light from annoying him. From a distance, Pep thinks he looks like might be from Asia, he would even venture to say the Middle East. He is wearing wide brownish trousers, a long buttonless orange-coloured shirt and sandals, and he is carrying a leather rucksack on his shoulders.

Pep gives him a smile and waves at him to enter, but the boy doesn't budge. Thinking he hasn't seen him, he waves his arms again, this time exaggeratedly to make sure his gesture can be understood from outside the library. And the boy does see him, but he remains motionless where he was.

Without giving it another thought, Pep grabs a sheet of paper and a box of colours and goes outside the library. He stands in front of the boy and shows him the materials, offers him his hand and invites him inside.

The boy hesitates but eventually accepts the offer and they go in. First, however, he looks cautiously all around, as if wanting to be sure no one can see him going into the library. For a moment, Pep feels like

he's a spy in a film who wants to be certain that no one is following him as he begins his secret mission.

The boy sits down, but does so far away from the other children. Pep sits in front of him and starts to draw. True to his style, in no time at all, he has produced an almost perfect portrait of the boy. The resemblance is almost photographic. He picks up his notebook with two fingers, looks at it and turns it around. The boy is speechless for a few seconds. His expression is one of surprise, as if he's never seen a portrait like that before, but he still doesn't say anything.

Perhaps it's the first time someone has drawn him, thinks Pep before leaving him to check on the other participants in the workshop. If he doesn't overwhelm him too much, he thinks he might start to feel more comfortable, relax, get over his shyness and end up joining the group, one way or another.

While responding to all the other children's questions and doubts, he keeps a discrete eye on the boy. It seems as if, gradually, he is settling. After a while, he sees him pick up a pencil and begin to draw.

Pep smiles. He keeps watching him.

The boy marks the paper with heavy strokes. From a distance, Pep would even venture to say he is drawing with rage, a lot of rage. That fury grabs his attention, he has never seen it in any child in all the years he has been doing workshops. It looks

almost like he is fighting with the paper, as if, instead of sketching, he wants to leave an indelible mark. Why does he draw like that? What is behind all that?

‘Pep, do you think I should paint this t-shirt red or blue?’ a girl says.

‘What does your heart say will look better?’

‘I like red better.’

‘Then red. You always have to be true to what you like.’

Pep is distracted for a while, observing how the girl in front of him paints her character’s t-shirt red, trying not to stray outside the lines. And when he looks up, the boy is no longer there.

He casts his gaze around the inside of the library and waits for a few seconds, keeping an eye on where he was sat, in case he got up for some reason he is unaware of. Eventually, he sees him outside, walking firmly down the street without looking back once.

He goes over to the table where he was. He has left a drawing, just one. It is dark, black, very black, colourless, unnerving, and it seems full of pain and anxiety.

It is a drawing that, in a way, reminds him a bit of those he does when he is alone, when he doesn’t feel good. But this one is even sadder, more dramatic, much more real, much more striking, violent and powerful. A drawing that transmits fear and sadness.

He looks at it again and thinks it is so unlike the drawings the other children his age produce. On the other hand, it is the very picture of fear.

Yes, fear! Genuine fear!

Pep can't take his eyes off that dark drawing so full of sadness. He feels a lump in his throat as he fights to stop the tears rolling down his cheeks. He feels a chill, and a feeling comes over him that he can't quite define but that is very real. It is a mixture of cold, as if he'd left the freezer door open, and fear, great fear. He doesn't know what of, but he's scared.

It can't be! The drawing he has in his hands is fear, the fear he's been looking for, real fear, Fear with a capital F!

At one in the afternoon when the workshop is over, and as he receives thankyou's from the parents of all the kids, he asks the library staff if they know the boy who disappeared just as he appeared, as if from nowhere.

'No, we've seen him sometimes walking down the street or looking through the window, but nothing more than that. Today is the first time he's come inside.'

Pep sets off home with the drawing safely tucked away and all week he can't get the image out of his head of the boy drawing in silence, not talking to anyone. Above all, he can't stop looking at the drawing. It is dark, full of sadness and unusual for someone in his age.

Every time he looks at it, he feels fear take hold of him.

He doesn't regret taking it with him. He has it hanging up in his study and whenever he looks at it, he is scared. He can't help it. It is as if the drawing had magic powers.

He looks at it again. Yes, he's sure! He has seen many drawings over the course of his life, his own and those of many other artists, and none were as powerful as this one. The drawing hides a secret; there's no other explanation. An important secret, one of those secrets that are worth finding out, a secret that, most likely, only the boy who drew it knows.

Pep reaches the conclusion that he has to find him if he is to get to the bottom of the mystery hidden in the drawing. He curses not having followed him when he left. He would have liked to have stopped him and spoken to him for a moment. He needs to talk to him. He has to find him one way or another!

Were he to be honest, he would admit that with the clues he has so far, he doesn't have much hope. Even so, every day and whenever he can, he goes to the library and sits in one of the seats in front of the glass front, giving him an unbeatable view of the surroundings. For now, that's all he can do: sit and wait.

Monday. Tuesday. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday.
Nothing!

The days drag on and he begins to feel like he is wasting his time, but he doesn't want to give up. He needs to find the boy and ask him questions, to find out how he can draw so intensely, so viscerally, with such emotion, drama and life.

On Saturday he gets out of bed feeling very tired and, even though he is getting behind on work, he decides to have a shower, get dressed, have breakfast, brush his teeth and dash to the bus stop. He wants to return to the library as soon as possible.

Pep has rushed so much that he reaches the library front door twenty minutes before opening time. Twenty minutes that feel never-ending.

Finally, the time comes. One of the workers opens the door and Pep enters nervously and sits down at one of the tables that gives him a view of the entire reading room and a good panorama of the outside as well. From there he can see how goes in, who goes out, who moves around and where everyone goes.

He takes out the notebook he always carries with him and a mechanical pencil and begins to sketch without looking at the paper, drawing but not talking his eyes off the library and its glassy exterior, so as not to miss a single detail of everything going on.

However, as time goes on, he begins to grow increasingly nervous. He notices his nervousness in his legs, which he can't stop moving. If it wasn't for the fact that in the library you can't make any noise, he'd have been tapping his feet on the floor and wrapping his fingers on the table. He is nervous. Very, very nervous.

Unable to stop checking his watch, every time he does it seems like the hands haven't budged. There are times when he keeps looking at it for several seconds to check it's working. The morning is dragging on and there's no sign of the boy anywhere.

He came on an irrational whim and, now that he thinks about it, he isn't even sure what he'd say to the boy if he is lucky enough to find him. He's been sat in the library for three hours, his bottom aches and, just when he's starting to feel very tired and tempted to call it a day, suddenly, on the other side of the glass front wall, he sees him. He's walking by unhurriedly with his hands in his pockets and a rucksack on his back.

From outside, the boy looks through the glass and it seems to Pep like he recognises him, that he remembers him. Following an instinct, he gets up and waves at him, encouraging him to enter. The boy looks back at him, turns away and walks faster, down the street, away from the library.

Pep is left confused and feeling foolish for a few seconds, unsure quite how to react. He isn't a man

of action and he finds it difficult to make decisions outside of his drawings. So, when he finally opts to follow him, it is already a little late.

He breaks into a run, but there is a slight problem: Pep is a great artist, but a terrible athlete. He's also a bit on the chubby side and after twenty metres he starts to puff like a steam engine. He realises he won't be able to keep up with a fit young boy who, besides, had a considerable headstart. Right now he could maybe use one of those electric scooters that everyone has these days.

He spots him at the end of the road, just as he turns the corner. If he doesn't run, he'll lose him and, even though he has barely got his breath back, he breaks into a run again. When he reaches the junction, he catches a glimpse of him in the distance, about to turn another corner.

The pursuit goes on for more than half an hour, with Pep growing tired and the urban landscape changing with every step. They've left the city centre and entered the most run-down neighbourhoods. The streets have become narrower and darker, with more poverty and expressions of fear and threat.

The boy turns another corner and is now out of sight. Pep doesn't know if he's entered one of the doorways or if he had time to disappear in this labyrinth of tiny streets that are unknown to him, that he has never set foot in and that seem to belong to

another world, one very far and different from his own. Used to always roaming the same streets, he didn't know there were places like this in his city.

He stops, disconcerted and exhausted. He stretches his legs a bit, puts his hands on his knees and, still clutching his sketchpad, he bends over and tries to take in some air in and catch his breath.

After a couple of minutes, having recovered a bit, he stands up. In front of him, three dark-skinned men with Arab features surround him and in a blunt, intimidating tone, with thick foreign accents, ask him what he's looking for, what he wants, what he's doing there.

He shakes his head unconsciously.

'You look for Hassan?' asks a fourth man, much taller than the others and who seems to have appeared out of nowhere.

'Hassan not here,' replies one of the other men.

'Hassan? Who is Hassan?' says Pep.

'If not look for Hassan, here there is nothing and no one for you,' says one of the men.

'No, no, I'm not looking for anyone. I don't want anything,' says Pep.

For a moment, he thinks about taking out his notebook, opening it and showing the men the page with his drawing of the boy, but before saying anything he stops, reflects and decides it isn't a good idea; better to say on the defensive. He looks at them

suspiciously, but keeping an inoffensive expression. As if they'd read his mind, they also look him up and down and one of them points to the sketchpad threateningly.

'I think I'm lost,' Pep says in a soft, apologetic voice.

'What you bring here?' exclaims the man nearest to him.

'Nothing, it's nothing.'

'Nothing?' replies the one who seems to be in charge, waving his hands, demanding he hand it over.

Pep hesitates. He doesn't like this at all and he doesn't trust these men. They might be able to help him find the boy, but he's not sure and decides to be cautious. He flicks through the pages, trying not to stop on the portrait of the boy.

'Drawings, they're just drawings.'

The tallest man snatches the pad from him in the blink of an eye. He looks at a couple of pages uninterestedly, closes it and throws it hard at Pep's face. He reacts just in time to stop it smacking his nose. He starts to feel a bit scared.

'If you want nothing, go away!' says the fourth man, putting his hand on his chest.

Pep, who has always been quite sure he isn't a hero or man of action in the slightest, starts to tremble a bit.

‘Yes...okay...no problem. I’m going. Excuse me.’

The one who seems to call the shots nods tiredly and the other three step towards the artist threateningly.

‘You no have business here, okay?’ says one.

‘We don’t like visits we don’t know, no people without invite coming here looking for nothing,’ says another with a thick accent.

Pep, increasingly scared, turns on his tail and leaves the same way he came, with the four men staring at him to make sure he is really going.

Frightened, he walks slowly, trying to catch his breath and clutching the sketchpad to his chest as if it were a shield. He looks back for a second and can’t see the men anymore. As he breathes a sigh of relief, he hears a strange sound.

‘Pssst.’

He stops for a moment to listen.

‘Pssst, pssst.’

Is someone calling him?

‘Pssst!’

A girl pokes her head out of the hole in one of the walls and waves him over to her. Pep doesn’t know what to do. He hesitates.

He looks down the street to make sure none of the four men who half threatened him before are following him. There’s no one around. He feels a bit scared and wonders if it might be best to ignore the

girl and flee, to keep going back the way he came. But he's rather disconcerted and, as he can't think clearly, he follows his first instinct and goes over to her.

He proceeds slowly, cautiously and anxiously, dodging some weeds and building site waste, and looking carefully at the other side of the wall. He is prepared for anything.

The girl looks at him, signals assuredly for him to follow her and starts to walk towards the inside of the dishevelled plot of land.

He sees her cross a kind of abandoned courtyard. A few metres further on, he sees her enter one of the wings of the building, which looks like an old factory, passing under some red-brick arches. Then, he loses sight of her.

Pep doesn't know whether to quicken his step or leave, but the subconscious and irrational desire to find the boy, the power hidden in that drawing and the mystery that seems to surround this enigmatic girl, push him to keep going.

A flight of stairs rises before him and, although they appear solid, they also look very neglected and fragile. The steps are old, worn, steep, rusty and very dark. Everything smells like a mix of dirt, humidity, time and, most of all, mystery and abandonment. But also danger. As much as he tries, he can't drive away the sense of danger, not even for a moment.

With some difficulty, he reaches the first flight of stairs, which leads inside the building. There ends what little light had been entering the lower part and he is left almost completely in the dark.

He's scared, but he keeps climbing, slowly, groping the walls with his free hand and taking care where he puts his feet. With every step he goes up, he regrets having entered, but it's too late now to go back. First floor. What if this is a trap?

He keeps climbing. Second floor. What if he can't get out again? No one knows he came in. If anything happens to him, they'll never find him.

No longer able to see his feet, he can, however, still hear the girl's footsteps climbing ahead of him, lighter and quicker than his own. Some strange sounds he is unable to identify also reach his ears and make him feel very uneasy. Suddenly, a beam of light illuminates the final landing. A door has opened.

Panting, he reaches the top and backlit in the doorway he sees the silhouette of the girl. At this distance, she seems very young. She might be twelve or thirteen years old.

'I'm Nour. What do you want? What have you come here for?'

'Nothing,' Pep replies, confused.

He hesitates for a few seconds. On the one hand, the girl appears more trustworthy than the men from before, but he finds himself in an unknown,

threatening place and he doesn't know if he should let his guard down. It might be a terrible mistake, but he decides to tell the truth.

'I'm looking for a boy.'

'What boy?'

'This one,' he replies, showing her the portrait in his sketchbook.

For a few seconds the girl remains motionless, as if surprised by the quality and likeness of the drawing.

'What do you want with him?'

It's a good question. A question that, now he thinks about it, he is unsure how to respond to. What does he want from him? He has no idea. He has let himself get carried away by an instinctive, almost automatic reaction. Finding the boy. With what aim? Discovering who he is? Solving the mystery of his strange drawing? He is unable to explain it. He was captivated by the tragic power of that drawing, the fear and anguish it portrayed and the secret that seemed to be hidden beneath it all. Almost as if that drawing had spoken to him and, somehow, forced him to follow its creator.

'What do you want with him?' repeats the girl.

'I don't know,' he replies honestly. 'I saw a drawing of his and I needed to find him, to speak to him, to see him draw again.'

The girl looks thoughtful for a few seconds. It seems his answer has satisfied her. She smiles.

‘Come in,’ she says, letting him pass and handing back his notebook.

Pep looks around him and sees the rather well-conserved ruins of a factory, one of those that never underwent urban redevelopment and became luxury flats. It is full of shadows and hiding places. It occurs to him that this could be a trap and the four men might appear and beat him up. He looks around with eyes wide open and fear written on his face.

‘What will you do to him if you find him?’

What will he do if he finds him? What kind of question is that? He doesn’t plan on doing anything to him. Just watching him draw, asking him where he learnt and how he does it like that.

‘You don’t want to hurt him?’ insists Nour.

‘Of course I don’t want to hurt him!’ he replies indignantly. ‘Why would I want to do that?’

‘Did he rob you?’

This girl asks some very strange questions, thinks Pep.

‘No, of course he didn’t rob me. Why would he do that?’

The girl lowers her head and remains in silence for a while.

‘Soon it will be his job and he has to practice.’

Despite the shadows, Pep sees Nour's eyes grow sad and her face darken, losing its bright glow.

'His job? What do you mean by *his job*?'

'Very soon he'll have to become a thief.' She lowers her head, ashamed, before adding in an even quieter voice: 'And so will I. They force us to if we want to eat and we don't want them to beat us.'

'Who forces you to?'

'They do,' replies the girl with a barely-audible whisp of a voice.

'Who are they?'

The girl nods towards the street, meaning the men he saw before.

'And who are you?'

‘I told you. I’m Nour, and I’m his big sister.’

‘Why did you call me and make me follow you? It’s my turn to ask you: what do you want from me?’

‘Samir wrote me a note mentioning you and your drawings.’ She stops for a moment; a couple of tears roll down her cheek. ‘You have to help us. You’re the only one who can help us. We don’t know anyone else here. Please, please,’ she adds in an unmistakably pleading tone.

‘He wrote to you about me?’ replies Pep, surprised and slightly confused. ‘And how do you want me to help you?’

‘He told me you’re the drawing man and that you look like a good person. If we can’t escape here, things will go very badly for us. In fact, soon I’ll have to go out every day to steal, but that will just be temporary. Afterwards they say I’ll have to do worse things.’

‘Where are you from? How did you get here? Where are your parents?’

Pep doesn’t understand any of what is going on and the questions pile up in his head.

‘From very far away, from the East. We lived in a very nice city next to a river. We were very happy and we didn’t have any problems until the war broke out.’

Pep looks at her with surprised eyes. He remains silent for a moment and thinks. Like most people, he has kept up to date with the war in the news, but

without giving it much importance. It's obviously a humanitarian crisis, but he's always seen it as something distant, like a matter on another continent, a problem that affects other people. He recognises, as well, that it is with pity and indignation, but also a certain distant indifference, that he has followed the stories of the refugees who have had to leave everything behind and flee their homes with nowhere to go, risking everything to reach a Europe that doesn't want them and does nothing to help them.

And now he has a genuine real-life one standing right in front of him and talking to him. He watches her move, he hears her breathe, he listens to the beginning of her sad story. She's not just an image on the television or a photo in the paper. She is a real living girl. A pang of guilt makes him listen to Nour's story much more attentively.

'Our dad was a doctor, a very good and well-known doctor. Mum looked after us all, we lived happily and didn't want for anything, but one day people started going out into the streets and calling for the president to resign and leave his job. Two opposing armed groups were formed and started attacking each other. Gradually, almost unnoticeably, everything became harder, with people arguing and weapons everywhere. After the pistols and rifles came the rocket launchers, tanks, mortar bombs,

as well as attacks, soldiers, lots of soldiers, clashes, deaths, injuries and bombs, the bombing became more constant, day and night. And our lives, until then normal and simple, became hard, difficult and very dangerous.

‘Dad was forced to leave his surgery and had to focus on just helping our neighbours who were wounded or had problems. Gradually, there began to be a shortage of food and other essential products, even though we couldn’t complain, as lots of dad’s patients paid with gifts and so, luckily, we always had something to eat.

‘But our reserves ran out as the fighting increased and the war came closer to our door. The planes flew over our heads and dropped bombs closer and closer. Buildings fell. The destruction increased. People died, and those who survived fled. One day, realising that living in our house was getting riskier, and before it was too late, dad went to the bank and took out all his savings. *I’d rather we have them*, he told us.’

Nour stops for a few moments, takes a deep breath and carries on.

‘And we carried on, dodging dangers and sharing the fear and anguish with our neighbours, until one night bombs started falling all around like never before and our neighbourhood became a living hell. Our parents shouted, got us out of bed, told us to get dressed and grab our things and we all went outside.

‘The last one to leave the house was Samir, who stayed back to get his big waterproof rucksack, the one he carries everywhere, with his most prized possessions.’

She pauses and breathes deeply again.

‘It looked like an action videogame or one of those disaster films. Buildings were falling all around us and we ran and ran, but without knowing where to go, what direction to head in. And we shouted as well, we shouted very loudly, and we heard loud shouting all around us. Everything was shouting, bombs and explosions, explosions, bombs and shouting. Until we stopped shouting and focused all our efforts on running, on escaping, on getting out of there. Wherever we looked, everything was falling as we ran! The worst thing was we didn’t really know where we were going! We were just trying to get out of there and dodge the walls and houses falling on either side of us.

‘Suddenly, just like they started, they bombs stopped and, as if in sync, we stopped in our tracks as well. We stopped running and stayed still, looking at the destruction all around. For a moment, a great silence fell over everything. It wasn’t a calm silence, it wasn’t like when mum used to rock us to sleep. No, this was a horrible, terrifying silence, but it didn’t last long. Maybe it was just an illusion caused by the fact the thunderous noise of

the bombs had stopped so suddenly, as a moment later shouts rang out, along with cries, falling walls, sirens and suffering groans.

‘Dad, waving his hand energetically, made us turn back. Mum, Samir and I looked at him terrified. Did Dad want us to go back to where we’d just come from? Whatever the reason, he began walking decidedly, retracing his steps and Mum, Samir and I, after hesitating for a few seconds, followed him. He walked quickly and didn’t stop once while we went after him, eyes full of tears but saying nothing.

‘When we got to our street, we were met with a devastating image. Not a single house was left intact, and ours, which was one of the few still standing, was missing the front wall. It looked as if a tyrannosaurus or some other huge monster had taken a bite and ripped off the façade, leaving the insides open. From the street we could see all the rooms, like in a doll’s house. Our whole lives, all our things, our furniture...everything! Dad, risking his life, ran up and started picking out anything that wasn’t damaged and he thought we could carry, and started throwing them down to us. Samir and I cried silently while we gathered everything Dad gave us. A dry crack made another part of the wall fall down. Mum shouted at Dad to come down. He was still busy picking out things, until another collapse, bigger this time, forced him to come down.

‘Piled up in the middle of the road we could see what was left of our lives. Almost nothing, a few basic things, a far cry from everything we had and even further from what we needed. Mum organised everything, giving us orders as we packed and, when everything was ready, we left, laden down and crying silently the whole time.

‘Dad walked on ahead, not turning round. We could only see his back, but we could hear him crying, too.

‘A loud crash accompanied by a big, thick cloud covered everything in dust. It had fallen. We didn’t have a home anymore, we didn’t have a past, we didn’t have anything. We had just lost everything except what we were carrying, and now every step took us further from our lives, from everything we were and everything we’d known until then. I didn’t dare say it out loud, but as we walked I wondered: and where do we go now?’

A noise from outside the factory startles Pep, who had been completely absorbed in Nour’s story. The girl stops her story and with a finger over her lips asks for silence.

‘It might be them.’

‘Them...’ repeats Pep in a quiet and rather upset voice, as if he’d known them his whole life.

‘Yes, you have to go. They can’t find you here.’

Nour starts walking and Pep, frightened, follows her between the ruins. They walk in silence, dodging

piles of useless objects and crossing half-demolished rooms, until they reach a large door. The girl opens a smaller one hidden beside it.

‘You can go out here. You’ll end up on the other side of the neighbourhood and there’s no danger of them seeing you.’

‘But,’ protests the artist, ‘how does your story end?’

‘Another day.’

‘Come to the library tomorrow morning. I’ll be waiting for you.’

‘Okay, but don’t waste time now and go.’

And suddenly, Pep finds himself in the middle of a wasteland. Still frightened, he looks all around. He doesn’t see anyone, he breathes easier and begins to walk quickly towards the city centre.