

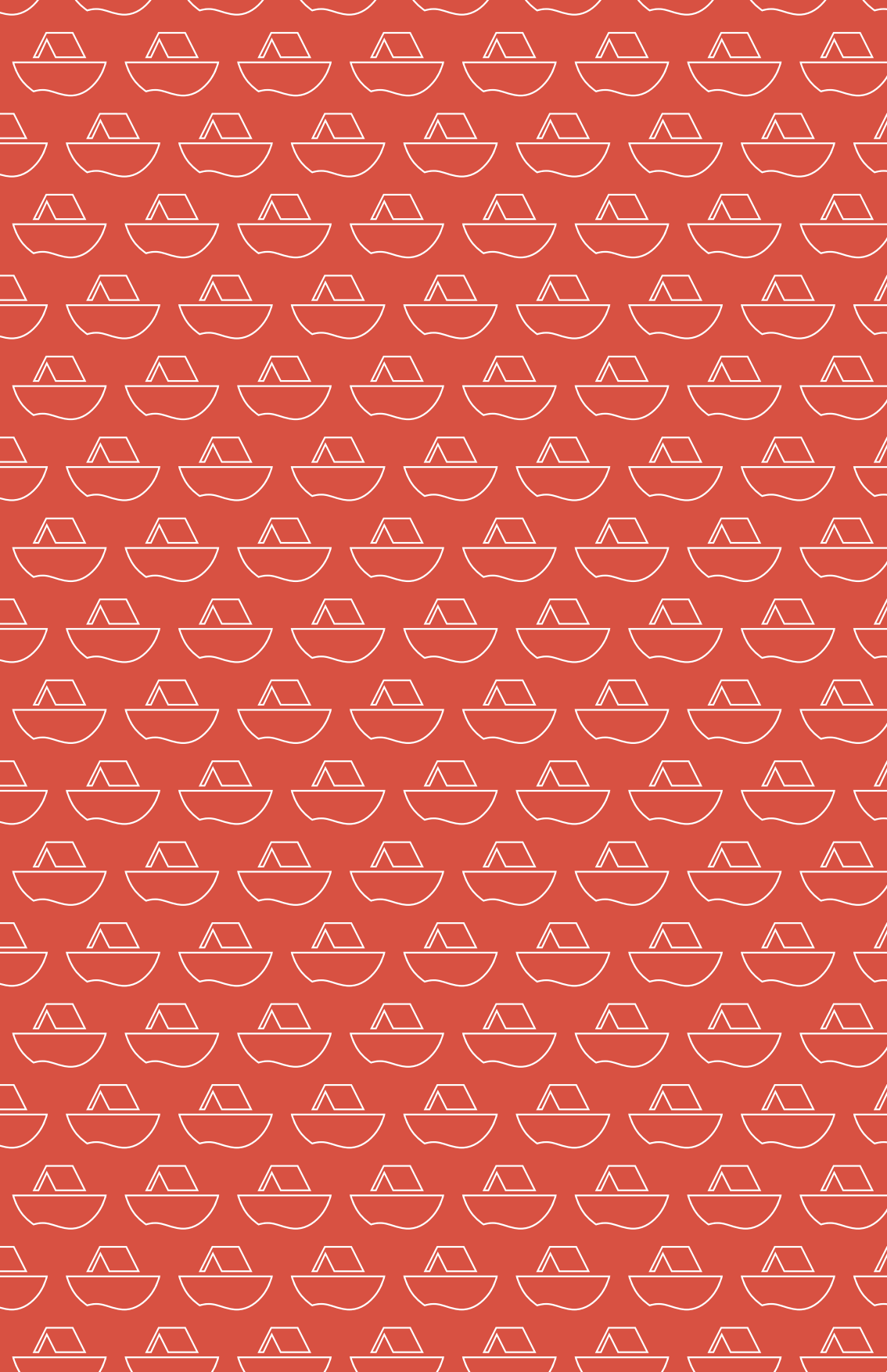
The Magical Family

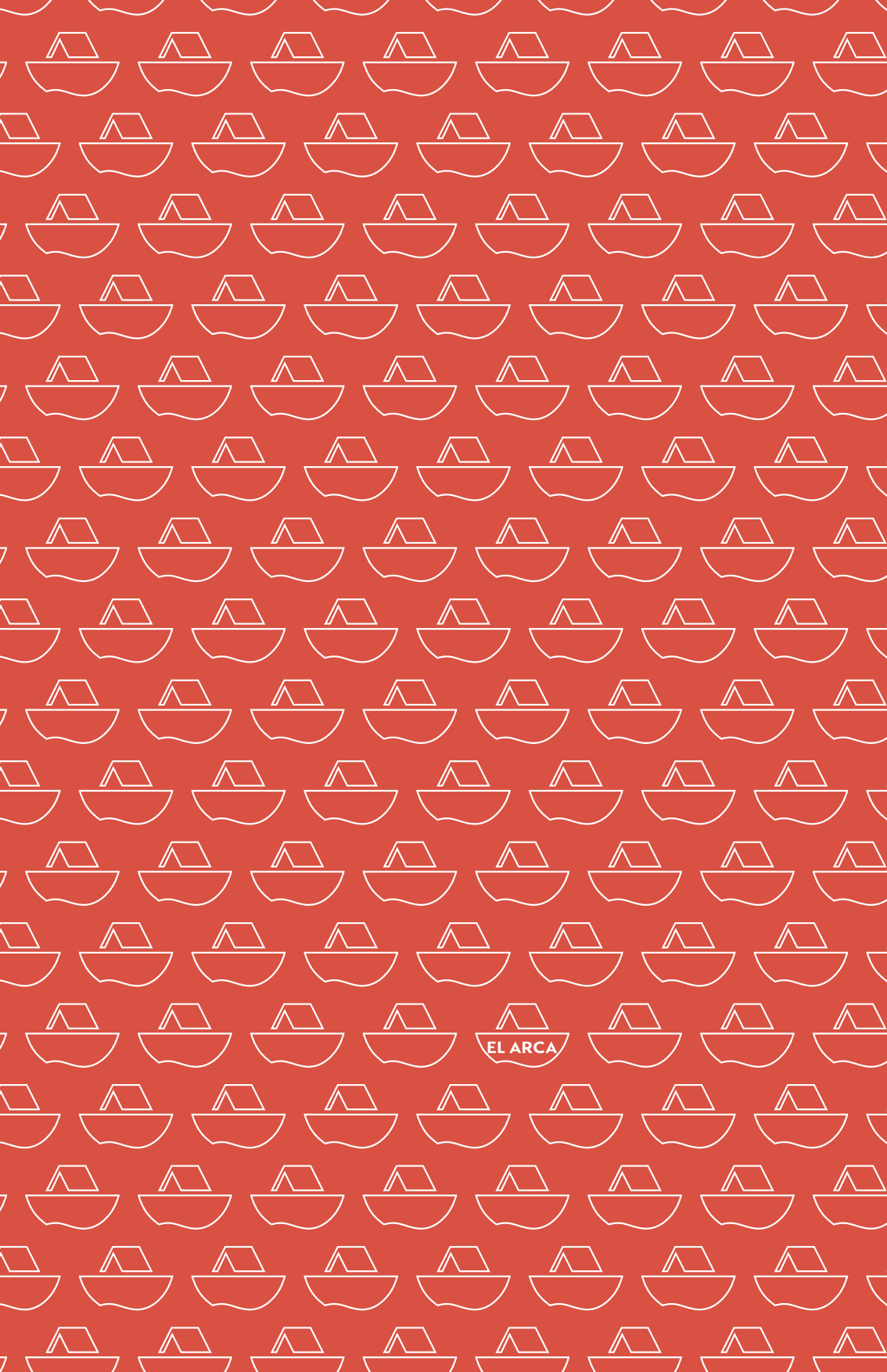
Mar Benegas

Illustrated by
Jorge del Corral

Translated by
Andrew McDougall







The Magical Family

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The Magical Family

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Hello, my name's Ana and I'm a journalist

My grandma told me that it is very important to present the facts in order to orientate the readers. You will have seen from that wonderful turn of phrase how well I express myself. That's because I'm a journalist, like my grandma. But not just any kind of journalist: I'm a serious journalist, and a columnist at that. She, my grandma, is teaching me.

My name is Ana and I'm nine, almost ten, years old. I have a younger sister, Sol (that's her name), who is four, but when everything that I'm about to tell you began, she was two and I was seven. That might not seem like much, but we girls know that two years is a long time. For example, my sister was still using nappies and could barely talk; now there's no shutting

her up. She chatters away nonstop. She's like a machine for asking questions: two-thousand questions per minute. If you spend a while with her, you'll end up with a headache – seriously. However, I haven't changed quite as much; just in a few unimportant ways. At seven, I still wasn't allowed to go by myself to buy bread, nor could I ride without stabilisers. Apart from that, in everything else, I'm still the same. Except my teeth, which have fallen out and been replaced by larger ones. Now I look like a squirrel, according to my dad. My mum said that if I carried on like that, the Tooth Fairy would go bankrupt. But I don't think so. She must have a good business set up with the teeth. Every time I lose one, she leaves me a five-euro note. What does she want so many teeth for? Maybe she sells them on for a profit...

Anyway, as I was saying: a girl's life is very unstable and changeable. That's why what I'm going to tell you made my anxiety levels shoot through the roof, even if my dad says children don't have anxiety and that I like telling tales. To be honest, I was quite anxious when my sister was born. I stopped being able to do many things and I began to wake up in the middle of

the night. I got really mad when she used to cry nonstop and no one knew why. I became furious when she covered my toys biscuit paste. Yes, that paste that babies make when they put a biscuit in their mouths. She spent all day getting everything sticky. She herself was coated in biscuit paste: her hands, face, mouth, clothes and, of course, everything she touched. She was like a mini version of the Cookie Monster. Also, Sol did what all babies do: break things, paint them, cover them in slobber... And the most incredible of all: she could vomit without even moving her head an inch. It didn't bother her in the slightest if we were all around the table eating. Upon her throne, she opened her mouth and, casually, let it out. It was disgusting. That little brat did all manner of things that, if I had even thought of doing them,, my parents would still be telling me off. Naturally, I became anxious and broke things and hated her with all my being.

However, that is all in the past: now I know my sister is great. I like the little squirt. I'll even protect her if anyone picks on her. My mum said that's an animal instinct because a couple of weeks ago I tripped up a kid from her class who stole her sandwich. The problem was that their

teacher saw me and called my parents: *It's an animal instinct; she's started to look out for her. She's getting over the jealousy. She'll learn to control herself, won't you, Ana?* I thought, *what jealousy?* but I replied, *Yes, mum, of course.*

On my seventh birthday I was given a voice recorder. It was from my grandma, who I told you about before. She told me that, as I asked so many questions, I would know how to make good use of the present, and that I carried in my veins her passion for interviews. I thought that if there was a champion of asking questions it was Sol, but I held my tongue. My grandma knew what she was doing and she was absolutely right: I made very good use of the voice recorder. Thanks to the device, I can tell you everything that happened, because shortly after my birthday, strange things started occurring, very strange things.

I'm going to tell you what happened in chronological order. That word, *chronological*, is very important to journalists. My grandma told me so. And I'll tell you everything with highly reliable information (*reliable* is also important; it means we have to tell the truth, without leaving anything out). My grandma says that these

days journalists aren't reliable and they all write fallacies. Fallacies must be like lies but bigger and uglier than normal ones. My grandma helps me to classify the recordings by chronological order, like real journalists do, to keep them safe for posterity, in other words, the future. You see, my grandma teaches me a lot of words. She insists that I must have a rich vocabulary if I want to be a proper journalist, like her. She says journalists today don't know how to write or talk or do anything at all. My grandma has travelled the world as a war correspondent. Now, she doesn't work anymore, but she still travels. My grandma is awesome.

COLUMN I

The day my mum went flying

Right, let's start at the beginning. That day was my parents' anniversary. They had been in love since forever and all that stuff. They gave each other presents and were even more sickeningly sweet than normal. It was a Sunday in March and it was very windy; I know because I used my voice recorder to record the date and the noise of the wind in the garden. They kissed a lot and were very happy. They looked at each other weirdly (note: my grandma says *fondly*, they looked at each other *fondly*), even though their plan hadn't quite worked out. Their idea was for me and my sister to stay with my grandma, but when they called her, she was in Morocco. She had gone on a surprise trip, without warning, and the babysitter that sometimes looked after us had a fever. So my parents just had to deal

with it and take us to a fancy restaurant, the kind that grownups like. And go without their romantic meal, of course. *The consequences of being responsible parents*, said my mum, with a wry smile, the one she makes when something goes awry, which makes sense, I suppose.

“It’s 13:15. We’re leaving the house. We’re very smartly dressed, all four of us. My mum is wearing a new dress, which is blue. My dad gave it to her as a present. She looks beautiful. No wonder he fell in love with her.” That’s what I recorded when we went out the door. My mum smiled and gave me such a loud kiss it also came through on the recording, together with my response: “Get off, mum, I’m working!”

My mum’s dress looked a bit like a parachute (*it’s called a flared skirt*, said grandma). The skirt came down almost to her ankles. Something about my parachute comment came true, though. We were crossing the garden towards the car when it happened.

“Look what a lovely dress he gave me,” said my mum as she span around, being a bit silly. “How do I...?”

But she didn’t finish her sentence. The skirt of the dress inflated like a parachute and she took

off into the air. She began to shout as she span around, going higher and higher. It would have been amazing to have had a camera at that moment because what was happening was hard to believe. But that's really what happened. She carried on getting higher and higher and shouting *heeelllp!* It was just like the kite we'd seen the day before in the park, only that instead of a kite, it was my mum who was rising up into the sky. She had already reached the gate, but at the height of the pole with the electricity cables. My dad shouted at her to not grab onto them as she might electrocute herself, but she couldn't hear him. Then, Sol began to cry and call for her mummy, who is also mine, and I began to get quite worried, so much so that I forgot to record what was happening. My dad was very anxious, he shouted *get down, get down from there right now!* but it was clear she couldn't do anything. My mum just looked at us with a pained expression. And still she rose, higher and higher, crossing the street.

It was quite the sight: Sol crying, my dad shouting like crazy and me, frozen to the spot. I thought that if she carried on like that, my mum could end up in orbit (like a NASA satellite) or living on the moon and we'd never see her again.

She had already passed over our car, which was parked on the street, and was getting dangerously close to the neighbours' house opposite. That's when I got really scared, because in their garden lived Roco, a giant bad-tempered dog. A black dog with a head bigger than a truck and teeth as sharp as daggers. The same dog that destroys all the balls we, accidentally, hit into his territory. I was seriously scared for my mum's life. If she fell into Roco's garden, he would eat her without a second thought.

But no, she continued to rise higher. Thankfully, she finally reacted. She managed to grab onto the weather vane on the roof with one hand and, with the other, as best she could, pushed the material of her skirt inwards and held it tightly between her legs. That allowed her to slow her ascent. We saw her hovering above the roof. She had lost her shoes. Her legs were wide apart as if she were riding a horse, but, instead of a horse, she was riding a two-story house, with balconies, attic and all. She clung to the weather vane for dear life. If we hadn't been so scared, I think we might have been rolling around in laughter.

My dad called the fire brigade, who put her flight down to the volume of the skirt. Logically,

she has never worn it since. It is curious how the mind tries to logically explain things that have no explanation. The fireman who got her down from the roof told us that these new porous, aerodynamic fabrics were dangerous. That for all we knew they were the offcuts of a special fabric used to make kites or space suits. That was, most certainly, why she had flown off.

After that whole palaver, my mum went to put on different clothes, something with a tight skirt, just in case. She was very pale. That motorless flight incident was hardly spoken about afterwards. When my dad stopped squeezing her and checking if she'd broken something, all he said was: *your dad doesn't have anything to do with this, does he?* My mum lowered her eyes to the floor. But that didn't spoil our meal at the restaurant. She said (I know because after all the commotion, I began recording again): *I'm not going to let an unfortunate take-off get in the way of celebrating our anniversary.* And so off we went, the four of us.



COLUMN II

How to put a lion to sleep

What happened that day, several weeks after my mum turned into a kite, was a riot. I remember I got home around midday. I had been at school, which is on our street but further down. My mum works at home and is an illustrator; so is my dad. But that day, he had gone out, so my mum was alone with Sol.

She was incredibly pale, as white as a recently painted wall. I went in through the kitchen, which looks out onto the garden, as we all usually do. Sol was very happy and when she saw me come in, she babbled *biig, biig meow*. Understanding babies is something us kids are very good at, especially when we live with one. It's like learning French. I thought they'd given her a soft toy, because my parents were unrelenting on the subject of pets: *but you can't even look after your own*

things, how are you going to care for a dog? Or a cat, or a chameleon, or an armadillo, or a tarantula, depending on what I had asked them for.

Anyway, I'm going off on a tangent, where was I? Right, I went in and gave them the customary kiss, the "I'm home" one. In my house we're very touchy-feely and we give each other all kinds of kisses: ones to say hello, goodbye, I love you, this will make it better, and just because. But my mum didn't even look at me; she just said: darling, don't go into the living room until your dad gets home.

"But...I need the toilet. I'll go quickly and come back," I said, walking to the kitchen door. I sensed my mum didn't have the strength to reply. Not even for one of her paralysing shouts of *STOPPPP!* that make me freeze like a statue, unable to move a muscle for several seconds.

When I peered through the kitchen door, I realised why: sleeping peacefully in the middle of the living room was an enormous lion. Its huge body was blocking the entrance to the bathroom and bedrooms. Trust me, this was the biggest creature you can imagine. I was left open-mouthed from the shock and my bag and jacket fell from my hands to the floor.

“I told you,” was all that my mum said.
A mere whisper, in a faint voice.

‘Daaad!’ shouted Sol. Her voice brought me back to reality. My dad was coming into the kitchen. It seemed he knew something was up because he arrived with a sigh and was asking for explanations straight away.

“What happened?” He didn’t even remember the customary kiss, the just-arrived one.

“Meow-meow, daddy, meow-meow!” Sol replied.

“Yes, darling, there’s a kitty cat in the living room, that’s what’s happened,” said my mum, still whispering.

“Wow, dad,” I said. “It’s a lion! When I tell this at school, no one will believe me.”

“Oh, dearie me,” murmured my dad, holding onto the frame of the kitchen door with both hands and peering through.

We could hear the deep, thunderous snores of the giant beast.

“Well, at least he’s asleep. Right...let’s think. We’ll call the zoo. But...how did he get in here?”

“I don’t know...I don’t know. It was so, so, so...awful. It...it...was...”



And then my mum broke down, her pretence of normality falling like a house of cards. She began to sob. Too much tension in too short a time. When she had finally let it all out, we could understand what she was saying. She told us everything that had happened, missing nothing out.

“Sol was still asleep. I was in the study, working. Everything as normal, right? Suddenly I heard Sol laughing. I thought she was laughing to herself, but she kept saying *meow-meow, meow-meow* all the time.

“I got up to go and get her and then I saw it. Sol had woken up and come out of her room. She had gone into the living room and was climbing on the back of a huge lion! Darling, just its head is three times the size of her! I almost fainted. But then it moved, it turned its ginormous head, opened its jaws and...SWALLOWED HER, IT SWALLOWED HER WHOLE!” *Note: at that moment I understood why Sol’s hair was so slick and sticky, as if someone had emptied a pot of gel on it.*

“I shouted,” *Note: I’m sure it was one of her paralysing shouts, I can imagine it perfectly.* “And the lion just looked at me like it was nothing.

IT HAD DEVoured OUR DAUGHTER. A lion, who was IN OUR LIVING ROOM, HAD EAT-EN HER. And then I fainted.”

My mum closed her eyes for a few moments and took a deep breath. Then she carried on with her story.

(Note: the capital letters mean my mum was shouting or raising her voice while telling it, as if she was about to have a fit of nerves or something worse).

“When I opened my eyes again, the two of them were playing. Sol and the lion! Sol was covered in slobber, but alive and apparently happy. I felt so relieved. It seems he just wanted to carry her in his mouth or something. The lion stood up and he was so tall he reached the lampshade. I took my chance to grab Sol, I hugged her and cried from the fright. But the lion just wanted to keep playing, and so did Sol. So he came towards us, darling, and knocked down the sideboard and the table. Sol, with the crash and the surprise from the furniture falling, escaped from my arms and crawled towards him, laughing happily. She looked like the tiny toy of an enormous cat. He could have squashed me with one swipe of his paw. But then...the lion opened

his mouth and...SOL DISAPPEARED INTO HIS JAWS AGAIN!

“I heard Sol laughing inside his mouth. This time I didn’t faint, oh no. I wanted to see what happened. I mean, if she’d come out once, she’d surely come out again. What was the alternative?

“The lion span round, smashing loudly into the sofa and knocking down the bookcase. He sat back down again on the floor and opened his giant mouth. Sol came out from inside, giggling and covered in slobber. She walked in front of him and staggered all around him, having a great time. It was clear she was loving it. She grabbed on tightly to the lion’s fur, right by his tail and began to climb onto his hindquarters. She clambered all the way up to his neck. She tugged at his mane, putting her feet anywhere she could: inside his mouth, in his eye or up his nostrils. Anyway, I realised that the lion was as tame as a cat. Sol was laughing, she was happy. They were having a whale of a time together, so I took a deep breath and went to make breakfast for her and a chamomile tea for me. I needed to think. From the kitchen I could hear Sol laughing her head off.

“But it didn’t stop there. Your daughter shared her breakfast with the *meow-meow*, who took very delicate bites of her biscuits. Every time she held a biscuit out to him, I tensed up, thinking he’d accidentally bite her whole arm off or maybe gobble her all up. But no, this lion is as gentle as a lamb.

“And we’ve spent the whooole morning like this. Them playing and me watching closely. Eventually, Sol was tired of climbing all over the *meow-meow*. It was time for her morning nap; she came over to me and said, *sing mummy, sleep, me, meow sleep*. She took my hand and led me to the lion. She pointed to the floor. I leaned on the soft hairy side of the giant animal, with Sol in my arms, and began to sing them my whole repertoire of lullabies. And the three of us fell asleep like that. I was certainly exhausted from the tension.”

Anyway, that day was so much fun. The lion woke up with the smell of food. He liked me, as much as he did Sol, and we spent the whole afternoon playing together. My parents argued over what to do, whether to call the zoo or if it would be better to call my grandad. Ah, my grandad, that wonderful man, who my sister and

I love, but who puts my parents on edge. I'll tell you more about him later. While they decided, we spent the afternoon climbing on the lion and sliding down again. We fed him and he emptied the fridge. My dad had to go to the supermarket. It was clear, crystal clear, that we couldn't keep him as a pet. Every time he moved, he broke something. Also, at the rate he put food away, we'd have needed 20 jobs to feed him.

In the afternoon, the neighbour from across the way came round, the owner of Roco, the toy-eating dog. Someone had told her about my mum landing on her roof and about the firemen. Since then she had started coming round with any old excuse to see what we were up to. My neighbour is very friendly, terribly friendly, too friendly. That's why I've never liked her. With all that friendliness she's always sticking her nose in where it doesn't belong. We had to come up with all sorts to make sure she didn't suspect anything about the lion.

"Sorry, Amapola," That's her name. "We're rearranging the furniture, putting things in boxes. It's best you don't come in."

"Ah now, don't worry; I'm here to help."



“No, really, it’s better you don’t, but thank you anyway.”

“Come on, I don’t mind, and I have the vision of an interior designer. Have you seen my living room? A magazine wanted to take photos of it,” Amapola went on, advancing dangerously towards the door that led to the living room.

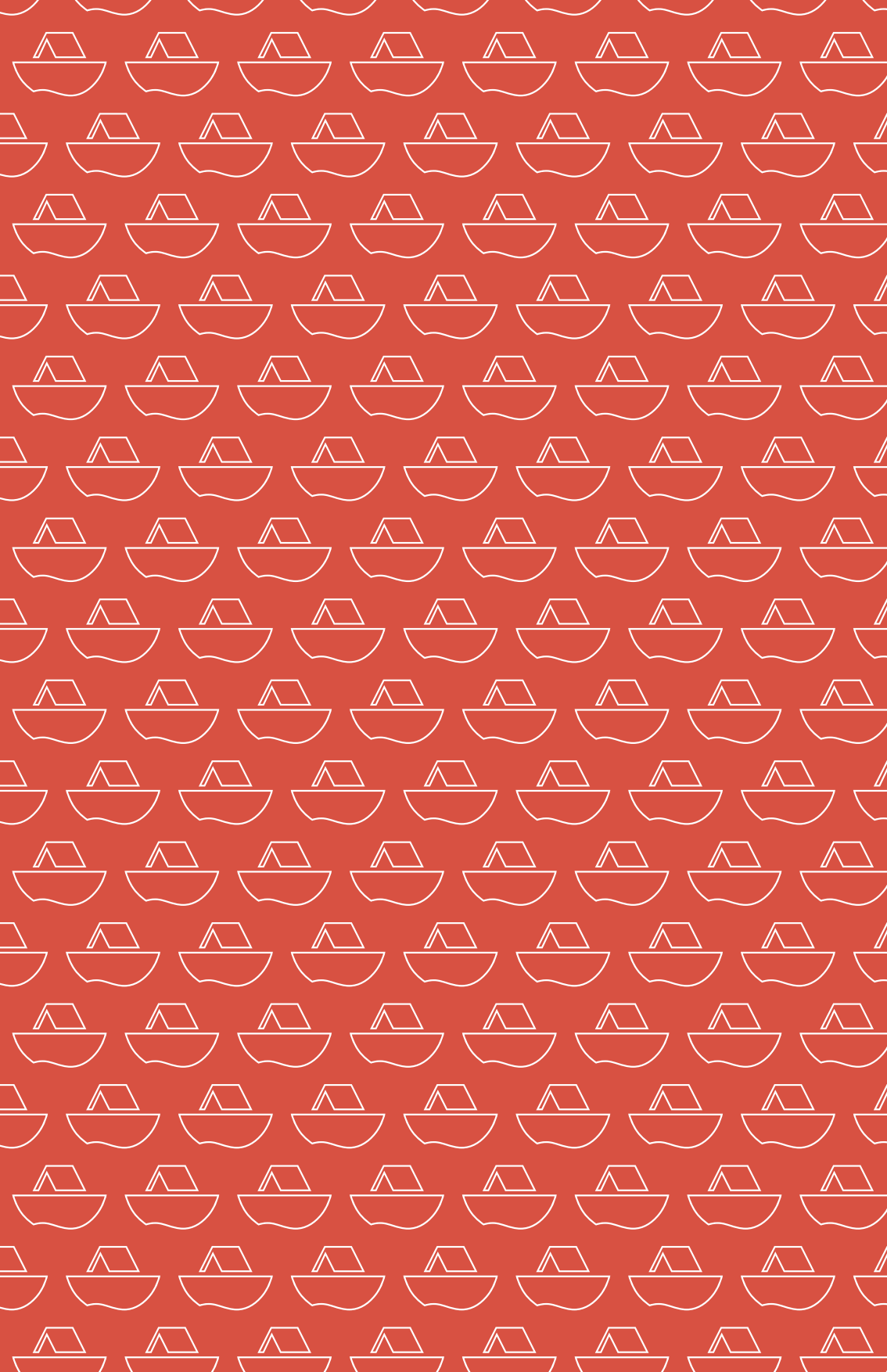
“NO! You can’t go through! You’re not going in and that’s it.” My dad raised his voice and it sounded like a deadly threat. It was the same tone he uses to tell me there’s no way I’m doing whatever it is I’ve asked him, like when I wanted to spend a night alone in the forest, or that time I was determined to climb down a cliff to go to the beach because at the bottom I’d seen something shiny and I was sure it was treasure. There was no questioning that tone.

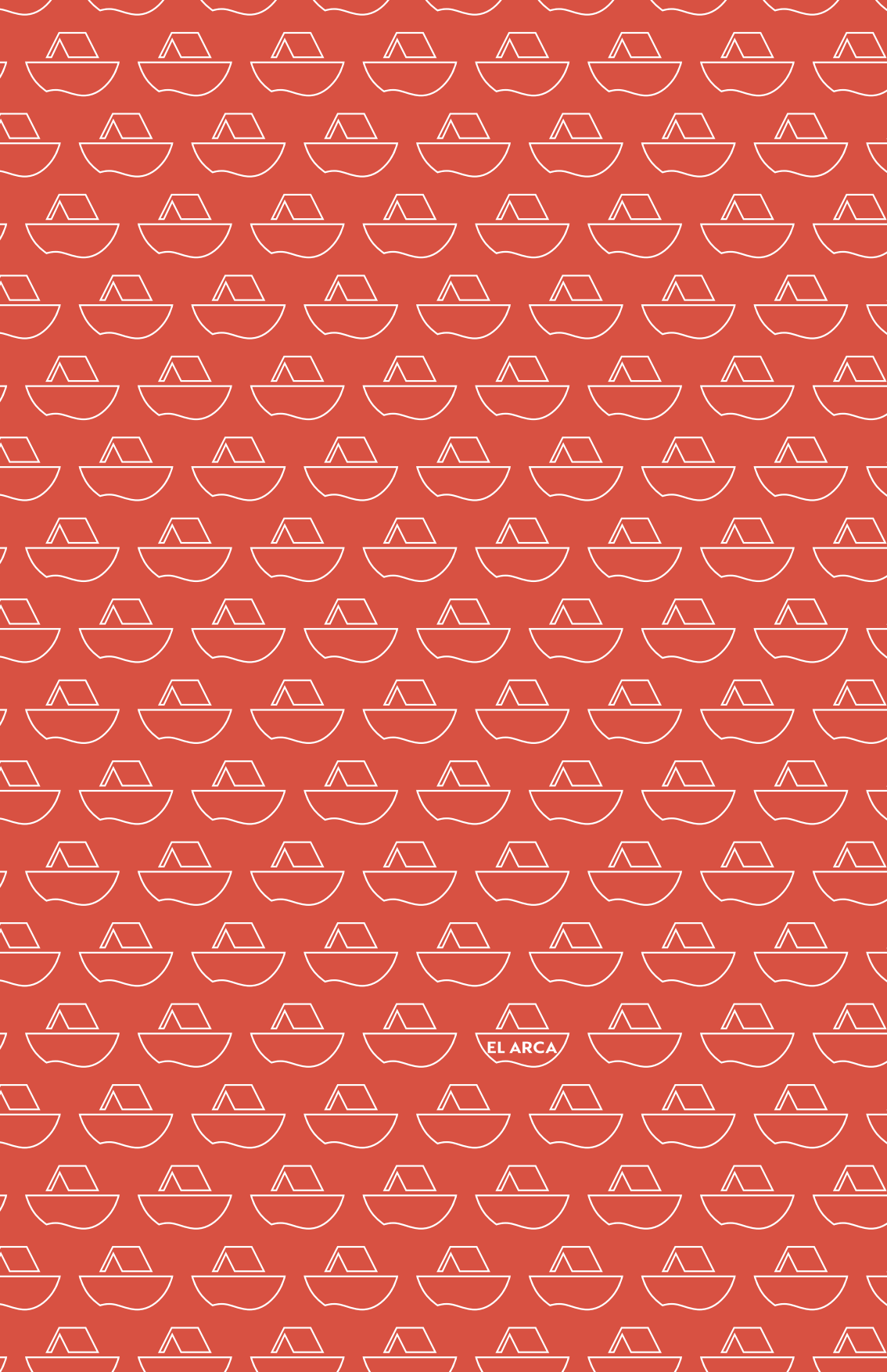
Amapola left our house with an unpleasant look on her face. It was clear she could tell something was going on. That was how I discovered our neighbour, as well as being annoyingly friendly, also had a special sense for sniffing out strange goings-on. She would have made a terrific journalist, like me, because I always find out what’s happening in the neighbourhood.

That night we were all exhausted, especially

Sol and I after so much climbing up and down the lion's back. My mum had to sing her whole repertoire of lullabies all over again. It was the only effective way to get her to sleep. Then, we all went to bed. *The best place to think things over*, said my dad. The next day, the lion wasn't in the living room anymore. All that was left was the mess of furniture knocked over, broken pictures and bitten books. Sol threw a terrible tantrum, since the kitty cat and her had become great friends. I felt bad, too, but, to be honest, having seen the state of the living room, I thought it was for the best. Not even an earthquake would have done so much damage.

We never spoke about that incident again, but here I am, to leave a record of the facts.





Ana carries her voice recorder everywhere: she wants to be a journalist, like her grandmother. Thanks to the device, she can record everything that happens around her...even the impossible.

One day, her mother's dress makes her fly. On another, a huge lion appears in the living room and plays with her little sister. Other reports include the whole house travelling to Kansas, the neighbour turning into a chicken and her grandfather coming to life from a photograph.

With laughter, chaos and a lot of magic, Ana will discover a secret that will change her life forever.

Mar Benegas (Valencia, 1975) is a poet and writer of books for children and adults. She is a director of JALEO (Events for Encouraging Reading, Writing and Observation), which collaborates with various institutions. Her books have been published (and translated) in China, USA, Brazil, Russia, Korea, Italy and France.

Jorge del Corral (Jaca, 1979) studied Fine Arts in Barcelona. After several years in the world of artistic education, he decided to take the leap into illustration. Since then, he has published picture books, children's literature, YA and textbooks in various countries.

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