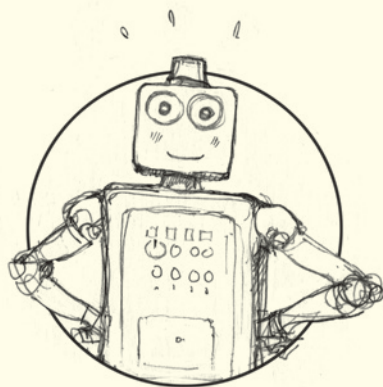


Mr Jeroni's Winter

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animallibres

*To Joan Vives, for believing in this story
when Jeroni was only four pages
that didn't know where to go*

One

The afternoons were long. Whether he had Vladimir or not.

When he first got him, he would go shut himself in the bathroom to think in peace. He had the feeling he could read his thoughts. If he took a long time to come out the bathroom, he would knock on the door and ask if he was okay or if he should call the emergency services.

‘One touch of a button and you’ll have the police and an ambulance at the door,’ his son had explained to him.

‘I don’t need this thing,’ he had protested.

‘Dad, I’m away a lot, and Dora lives far

away,' his son explained patiently. 'This way, we'll all be more relaxed.'

Of course, that was what they wanted, to be more relaxed, themselves. Since he's had Vladimir, they'd called a couple of times, but hadn't been back round.

Neither Roger nor Dora. Well, perhaps his grandson, Boi, now and again, but no one else.

'What do you think about all this, Francesca?' he said, looking at her in the photo.

Francesca often came out of the photos and moved things around. Sometimes, she rearranged them or hid them. Like a mischievous child. He found his toothbrush the day he opened the freezer looking for peas. Frozen, like a strawberry ice lolly. He didn't get mad. Likely she did it because she didn't want him to forget her. But how could he?

He couldn't explain all this stuff about Francesca to his children. They would think he was losing his mind or even stick him in one of those care homes where grandparents snooze like plants.

Everything was different when they were together. Together and very often like cat and dog, but he felt alive and everything was happening. Now, things pass him by and feels as if he

were on a platform where no train ever stops... and if one does, by the time he's thought about catching it, he's already missed it.

The only voice that sounds within these four walls is the clunky voice of Vladimir.

'Do you need anything? I am here to help you. What can I do for you?' he repeats like a duck going quack-quack.

And Jeroni asks:

'What is the meaning of life?'

'Vladimir processing, not found. One-two-three. Time to brush your hair,' he says with that fairground smile.

'I've only got four hairs left on my head, so good luck with that,' Jeroni replies.

'Drink water and take your four-o'clock pill.'

'I just want to go be with Francesca, do you understand?'

'Vladimir, processing, one-two-three.'

When he doesn't understand something, he always says he's processing, just to end up saying something like:

'I am uncertain about the meaning of life, but now we can go take a walk around the garden.'

'I have no intention of walking around the garden with an airhead, or with anyone else,

okay, I would only do those things if Francesca came back.’

He grabs the book *Baba Dunja’s Last Love* by Alina Bronsky and reads from it at random: “Here she doesn’t even have a cow, though she does have a goat that lives with her in the house and watches TV with her... At least that way she has the company of a living, breathing entity.”

He looks up and out the window. It’s a cold, sunny, end-of-February day. The woman who lives opposite is walking underneath the blossoming almond tree. She is carrying a watering can and appears to be singing.

He couldn’t say how old she is, he’d guess very, but she treads as a lightly as a bird.

She has a dog and a granddaughter who visits often. She talks to the dog and the dog wags its tail. He seems happy. He lies down face up and she scratches his belly. Both laugh. Who says dogs don’t laugh? Nonsense. They laugh and they cry, but in their own way, Francesca would say.

The neighbour talks to her dog and he talks to Francesca.

‘See, we all talk to whoever will listen without judgement, that’s all we need.’

My name is Boi

My name is Boi and I have a grandfather called Jeroni.

The first memory I have of him is in black and white. Maybe because he's very old and he's been losing colour over the years. I was three. Or maybe four. Now I'll be eleven soon and I'll have a girlfriend, Noe. Well, I haven't told her yet, I just need to work up the courage to ask her and for her to say yes. Guim, my best friend, says I shouldn't bother. Because if they say no or they leave you, it hurts. Oh, I'm going off topic! I'll cross all this out because right now I'm not supposed to be talking about me, but about my grandfather. But Rosa

told me that if I wasn't sure how to start the task about grandad, it was a good idea to write down everything that came to mind, without thinking, then I could edit it later.

Back to grandad. My first memory.

That day I went to do a wee and walked past the watch room. The door was half open. I didn't mean to spy on him, but my eyes were stuck. He had his head bent over a tiny watch and he seemed miles away, as if he were reading a fascinating story, like what happens to me with Harry Potter. Without meaning to, I touched the door and the sound gave me away. He wasn't cross. He brought me into his room full of spheres and small parts. Then he explained to me that a watchmaker is like a doctor for watches, who heals them when they are sick.

'Close your eyes and listen,' he told me.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...

'That's a whole load of lives beating with us,' he whispered.

Grandad showing me his watches made me feel important. As if we were both pirates and he had revealed his treasure chest to me.



Two

It's raining outside. It's Saturday. He knows because he hasn't heard the children on their way to school. He stays in bed a little longer and listens to the drizzle on the windows. The rain puts music to his thoughts. The day he and Francesca met it was also raining. Now that she can't hear him, he can tell it his way. She would say it was a bright, sunny day and that he couldn't take his eyes off her, and that she didn't know what to think of that shabby boy who flicked through philosophy books in the library. You did it for show, she would say, you wanted to look interesting, but you weren't looking at the books,

you were looking at my legs. Well, yes, and no. First, he noticed her shoes. She was wearing a pair of red sandals and her toes moved restlessly. She would deny it, say she didn't move her toes at all and that the sandals were green.

'Good morning, Mr Jeroni, it is breakfast time!' Vladimir interrupted him, entering the bedroom without knocking.

He's a nuisance. For a few days now he's been thinking about disconnecting him. Surely he must have some button or a cable he can pull out. He doesn't want anyone coming in and telling him when to do things. He'll eat when he's hungry and if he wants to stay in bed all day, then there he will stay.

'First, breakfast, then, your exercises, Mr Jeroni.'

'Exercises, exercises,' he puffs.

'It is not healthy to sleep for more than eight hours and the body needs to reactivate itself with exercise,' he insists.

'Okay, wait for me in the kitchen, I'll be there in a minute, I want to be alone to get dressed.'

'Very well, in the kitchen in ten minutes, or Vladimir will come back to get you.'

Sometimes he has to say these things so he

leaves him alone. He gets up. His leg crunches as if his bones were patched together from tiny pieces. However, despite all the operations, it still works well enough.

Francesca was always there. Every visit to the doctor, every operation, keeping him company for hours and hours. Sometimes she fell asleep and he looked at her. Her lips relaxed and her hair shone, as if she were dreaming nice things.

He looks out the window. He wants to watch how the rain falls on the garden. It surprises him to see the neighbour head out into the rain then back into the house. She doesn't have an umbrella and appears to be in a hurry. What can she be doing in her back garden, in this rain? And why doesn't she take an umbrella? Maybe she doesn't have one, maybe she lent it to her granddaughter and she hasn't given it back. That's the thing about umbrellas. You only think about them when it rains. He could go lend her one. If she gets wet, she could catch a mighty cold.

Since when do you care about the neighbour across the road? He hears Francesca ask him from the photo.

Not jealous now, are you? he replies with a sly smile.

You know I never will be, she laughs. Because you are alive, it's good that you are more interested in the living than the dead. There's always something you can do for the living. We, the dead, are just that, dead.

You don't need to tell me that, I don't want to hear it, he says angrily.

He looks back at the house opposite. The rain is falling harder now. The woman has left the door open but he can't see her anywhere. Once more he thinks about going to check if she's okay, but he chases the thought from his head.

He goes to the bathroom to wash his face. Not his teeth. There's no point. His arm gets tired from brushing up and down, down and up, now circles to the right, circles to the left. For at least three minutes, three times a day. The dentist always reminds him of this, as if he were a small child. Looking after himself isn't one of his strengths. Francesca always said so. You get on better with machines than people. And she was right. Vladimir is an exception, of course, because he is a machine who wants to seem like a person and Jeroni finds that pretentious. Generally speaking, however, mac-

hines don't trick you. They are transparent. They have a logical way of working and if they go wrong, you just have to find out where the fault is and fix it. Like with his beloved watches. He has never been able to understand people. And when he does understand them, he doesn't know how to help them. Like when Francesca was four months pregnant and lost the child. It was their first pregnancy, they already had the name, the room, the clothes and a thousand other things imagined together for when the baby came. She cried and he didn't know what to say to her. He was lost for words. Dumbstruck. There was no piece to easily fix or replace, nor any word sufficient to soothe the pain.

Later on, the other children came, Roger and Dora, and the pain grew gradually smaller. In the end, it becomes just a knot in the heart. It doesn't go away altogether, but it passes.

With his children this has happened, too. Watching them suffer and not knowing how to help made him feel small, useless when it came to the important things in life. Francesca was always different with all that. She always knew what everyone needed and had the right, appro-

priate words. That's why, when they had a problem, they told her about it and he had grown distant, without realising it.

He didn't like that distance, but he didn't know how to break it and perhaps it wasn't worth it now, it was too late.

Sat at the kitchen table, he took a bite of toast with marmalade and a sip of coffee. Then, someone knocked on the door.

It was strange. He wasn't expecting anyone. His children usually let him know when they were coming. Boi, his grandson, did the same. Likely, it would be one of those door-to-door salespeople that are impossible to get rid of, he thought. You can't look them in the eyes because then you feel sorry for them and you end up standing through their whole long-winded speech as a punishment.

Jeroni told Vladimir to open the door, tell them we don't need anything and then shut the door straight away.

If he had to put up with him, he may as well do something actually useful.

When Vladimir opened the door, Jeroni heard a soft voice, like a girl's, and stood up to see what was going on.

Vladimir had recited his speech word-for-word and was closing the door in her face.

‘Wait!’ he cried out.

He pulled back the door and saw that girl. The neighbour’s granddaughter. She was soaked from head to foot and looked scared.

‘It’s Violeta, I can’t find her...’

‘...Violeta?’ he asked.

The girl pointed to the house opposite.

Jeroni ordered Vladimir to fetch a towel and invited the girl in.

The girl was shivering. She explained that her mum had dropped her off in the car, that the door was open, but her grandmother was nowhere to be found and nor was Snowy, her dog.

‘Don’t worry, she must have gone to take the dog for a walk,’ he said. No sooner had he said it than he realised it would be madness to take the dog out in the middle of a storm.

She shook her head, she wouldn’t have gone out knowing she was about to arrive.

The girl had short hair and big, round eyes. Jeroni asked her if she had her mother’s phone number and she said no, but Violeta had it, but she didn’t know where.

‘What about your dad’s?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

Jeroni didn’t want to bewilder her with more questions.

Vladimir brought her a towel and she wrapped it around herself but she didn’t stop shivering.

‘You know what we’ll do?’ he said. ‘You go to the bathroom, dry yourself properly, get changed, and in the meantime I’ll go see if I can find your grandma.’

The girl nodded her head.

He sent Vladimir to fetch some of his grandson’s clothes from the small bedroom and bring them to the girl.

It was still raining ferociously, and it showed no sign of stopping.

He grabbed his coat and an umbrella and crossed his garden towards the house opposite.

Three

He went straight to the back of the house. That was where he had seen her headed from the window. His shoes and the bottom of his trousers were soaked, as if he'd jumped in a river.

Behind the house, the rain had made some lemons fall. Then, between the bushes of the hedge, he saw a body stretched out on the ground. He remembered the day he'd found Francesca on the kitchen floor, motionless... He'd shouted at her as if he could wake her from a harmless sleep, but she couldn't hear him anymore. He'd arrived too late. If he hadn't stopped to talk to Frederic, or maybe if he had stayed



at home with her that morning...maybe...he'll never know.

He approached the body which the rain continued to drench without the slightest consideration. Putting an ear to her heart, he thought he could hear a soft pum-pum. Like a sigh. Then he ran. Like he hadn't ran in years. Not thinking about his knee, or the rain, or anything at all. He threw down the umbrella in the doorway and called out for Vladimir.

'Vladimir, call an ambulance, quickly, an ambulance!'

Vladimir called for an ambulance. The girl looked at him with frightened eyes and he tried to reassure her.

'Your grandma has had a fall, but she'll be fine,' he said.

'Where is she?'

'They'll take her to the hospital soon and the doctors will look after her.'

'What about Snowy?'

'I've not seen him, but first you need to help me find your mum's telephone number.'

She nodded. The girl had a lump in her throat, but she didn't want to let the tears fall.

The rain had eased. The pair of them went

out and then into the other house. The girl said she thought the phone numbers were in a notebook in a drawer by the door.

‘What name am I looking for?’

‘My mum is called Carolina.’

‘Here she is!’ he said, pointing to Carolina’s name.

‘But mum will be mad if we call her...she’s working and when she’s working she can’t talk on the phone.’

‘In this situation, it’s different,’ he said as he dialled the number.

It was a mobile number and she didn’t pick up.

‘When she’s working, she turns her phone off because she says they’d kick her out if she looked at her phone messages.’

‘And where does she work?’

‘In a café in the shopping centre.’

‘What’s it called? Maybe your grandma has the café’s number written down.’

He looked back at the notebook and read out loud.

‘Cafeteria Punt de Trobada.’

‘Yes, that one!’ the girl cried out.

While he called the café, the ambulance arrived. With a faltering voice, Carolina told him

to put the girl in the ambulance and she would go straight to the hospital.

The ambulance took Violeta away. She was unconscious, but breathing. He had covered her with his coat to protect her from the rain. The coat went into the ambulance too. So did the girl, biting her lip.

‘Don’t worry, she’ll get better,’ he’d told her, ‘and your mum will meet you at the hospital.’

He had said it with his heart in a knot. Who was he to mislead a little girl? What would happen if her grandma didn’t wake up or didn’t fully recover? No one fully recovers from these scares. They leave your heart full of holes, like a sieve. He thought life was like a minefield where, at any moment, one wrong step and fate, or roguish imps, did their work.

Then, he thought about the dog. Snowy, they’d said his name was, like Tintin’s dog. Where had he gotten to?

It had stopped raining, but the humidity had seeped into his bones, and his arms and legs trembled. He noticed his lips were dry, his stomach empty, like an echo.

When he went inside his house, Vladimir was waiting as if nothing had happened.

‘Thank you, Vladimir, for calling the ambulance,’ he heard himself say.

‘Happy to help,’ replied Vladimir with his square smile.

He wondered if that dull robot could ever have feelings. There was probably no point thanking it or being polite. Vladimir didn’t care. He followed his operating system. Rigidly. He wouldn’t shed a tear when Jeroni died. And yet, he’d be the one with whom he’d spent most of his final days.

Four

The hours that followed were filled with an empty silence. The rain had stopped, but a thick fog floated over the rooftops. The fog muffled the noise of the cars and gave the impression that the pedestrians and cats were moving in slow motion, trying not to make a sound.

Jeroni couldn't rid his head of the image of the neighbour's motionless body, lying on the ground, rain-soaked.

He thought about calling the hospital and asking after her. What was her name? He seemed to recall that the girl had said the name, but he could only remember her mother's, Carolina.

And if he called, what could he say? They'd ask him for the patient's name and he wouldn't know what to reply.

Francesca, from the photo, shook her head. Stop worrying about it. You did what you had to, don't think about it any more.

Easy to say. Don't think about this, don't think about that...don't think about the hugs you didn't give or the words you didn't say...don't think that you're getting older and losing things every day...don't think.

Sometimes he wishes his mind was like Vladimir's, who stuck to what he was told. His thoughts, on the other hand, were free and roamed wherever they pleased.

Then, the bell rang. Vladimir made as if to go to open it, but he stopped him.

'I'll get it,' he said quickly.

When he opened the door, he was met by the smile of his grandson, Boi.

'Hi, Grandad!'

He let him in and he filled the house with light.

Boi told him he now had a budgie called Peach. He'd given it that name because it was the same colour as a ripe peach. While he spoke, he ran to fetch the chessboard.

In no time, Boi had greeted Vladimir and set up the pieces on the board.

‘Grandad, you’ve got the blacks and I’m the whites, I go first!’

Z‘And what question is that?’ asked Jeroni, intrigued.

Boi grabbed his rucksack, took out a notebook and pen and told him.

‘We have to gather important things that our grandparents can teach us. Do you know why?’

‘I don’t.’

‘Because you have been alive for the most years and you know the most things. Miss Rosa, my teacher, says that you are wise and we have to listen carefully... For the project, I have to write a record of everything I’ve learnt from you and end it with an important phrase that you want to give me.’

‘What kind of phrase?’ asked Jeroni, who had never thought that his words might be considered important.

‘You have to imagine you’re about to die and you only have time to tell me one thing, just one phrase, do you get it?’

Jeroni listened closely and thought it over.

‘And can I think about it for a few days or do you need it right now?’

‘I can give you five days, until next Thursday.’

‘Okay, that’s fair,’ nodded Jeroni, overwhelmed by the request.

Boi got up and stood in front of Vladimir.

‘What does this robot do? Do you think he could do my maths homework?’

‘I don’t know, ask him, he’s called Vladimir.’

Boi looked at his eyes, they were like a pair of snooker balls which rotated and sparkled when he talked.

‘Vladimir, can you do my homework?’

‘Homework, if it’s yours, you have to do it yourself, Master Boi,’ replied Vladimir.

‘He called me Master!’ Boi burst out laughing.

Then he carried on asking questions.

‘Vladimir, what about playing Monopoly? What games can you play? Can you play football?’

‘One-two-three, Vladimir processing, play Monopoly, not found.’

When Boi left, the house fell silent again. And the silence brought the memory of the

neighbour. Jeroni stuck his head out the window. The house opposite was still the same. The fog was still hovering and showed no sign of evaporating.

He picked up the phone and called the hospital.

‘Hospital reception, how can I help?’

‘Good morning, I’d like to enquire about a patient...an elderly woman who was taken in about ten this morning...’

‘You’d have to tell me the patient’s name and who’s calling, are you family?’

‘Well, she’s my neighbour and I’m calling...’

‘If you don’t know the patient’s name and you’re not family, we can’t give out any information.’

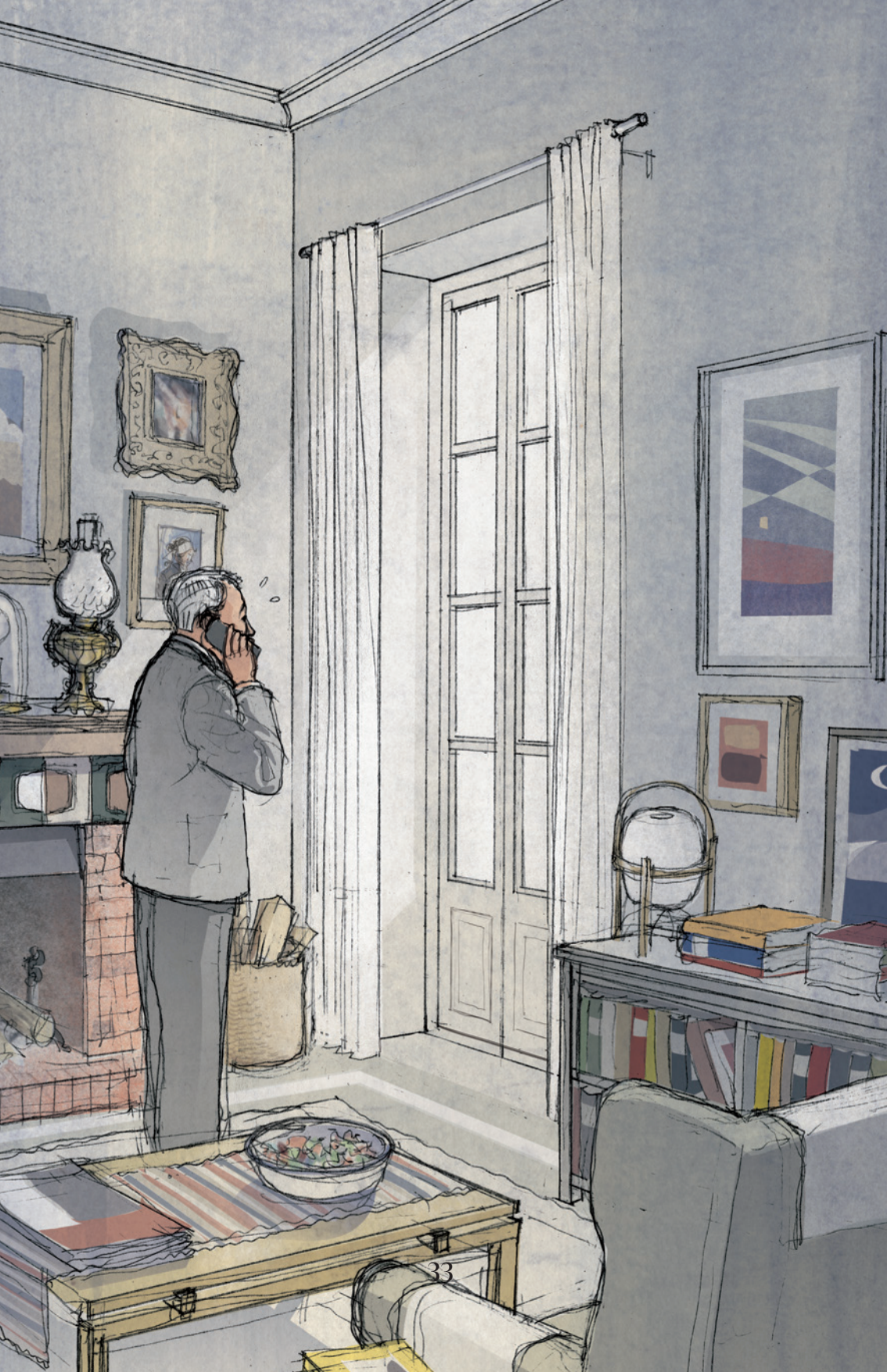
And with that, they hung up on him.

Jeroni sighed. If people were kinder or a bit more...

He thought about the phrase Boi had asked him for.

Maybe that’s what he would tell him: Simply, be kind to everyone.

It seemed very straightforward, but it wasn’t. He himself was aware that sometimes he had behaved in quite an unkind way, even with



his children when they annoyed him, or with Francesca. Now he realised.

What are you grumbling about all the time?
he heard her say.

Oh, now you appear. By the way, do you know what the neighbour's name is?

It's Violeta, the girl told you, don't you remember?

And how do you know, if you weren't there?

I'm here and not here at the same time, do you understand?

Violeta, that's nice.

Not any nicer than Francesca, hmm.

I could call and say I'm her son and I need to know how she is.

But you only know her first name, they'll ask you for her surname too.

You're right.

Stop fretting about it and go take a stroll on the beach, eh.

By myself?

By yourself or with Vladimir, what do you want, me to go?

I wish.

Don't be silly, you know I can't.

Jeroni sighed again.

Maybe I'll turn up at the hospital, even though it's jolly far from here on foot.

You can't do anything there. Violeta is in good hands. What you should do is look for her dog, Snowy.

The dog, how could he have forgotten?!

Good thing Francesca was on the ball with everything, as always. He got up and went to get his coat, but it wasn't there. Then he remembered they'd taken it in the ambulance. He'd have to look for another jacket in the cupboard.

Grandad lives with a robot

I cycle under the trees and the wind brushes my hair. The leaves are the colours of pomegranates, squirrels and the sunset. I feel free as a bird and I imagine Noe cycling alongside me. One day I'll ask her to go on a bike ride, just the two of us. Guim says one time he went cycling with his cousin and a coconut fell on his head and it gave him a lump like a golf ball. Guim lives with his grandparents. His mum is always ill and he doesn't know anything about his dad.

My grandad lives with Vladimir. Vladimir is a really fun robot who looks like he knows everything, but he doesn't. When you ask him a difficult question, all his lights turn on and he

makes excuses, like saying can't find it or something like that.

Grandad is happy when he sees me. He smiles and the wrinkles on his brow disappear.

He really likes playing cards, chess, Monopoly...

Football, too, but he plays very slowly, as if in slow motion.

Five

The fog had lifted and the sun gave off a timid warmth through a handful of frayed clouds. He approached the neighbour's house and peered into the back garden. He whistled. He was looking for a dog called Snowy, but he didn't know what breed, or even what colour. He didn't get them, dogs, they had never interested him. I'm sure it'll be a mongrel and the colour of a dog running away, he said to himself with a smirk.

He walked up and down the street. There was a lot going on in the square. Young people sitting outside bars, children playing with scooters and bikes. All that noise and movement made him feel insecure, as if at any moment

they might knock him down. He saw a girl with cherry-coloured nails and a little dog in a pink polka-dot dress.

His legs were shaking. He was tired. He sat down on a bench and sighed.

Then he went into the bakery and asked if they'd seen a dog.

'What kind of dog?' someone asked.

'Big or small?' asked the baker, carrying loaves of bread.

'What's its name?' inquired a woman in cycling gear who was in the queue.

'Go to the park, there's loads there...some are rabid...maybe they've hurt him,' chimed in a woman holding three baskets full of fruit and vegetables.

'He probably found a girlfriend,' laughed a large man who was sitting down while waiting his turn.

'Dogs get lost and don't come back, it's a mystery,' murmured a small woman wearing a headscarf.

'If you want to bring us a photo of the dog, we'll put it up in the window,' the baker offered.

Jeroni left the bakery, overwhelmed by so many questions and opinions.

He went by the park, but all the dogs he saw were accompanied by their owners.

He went back home.

Looking for dogs was not his forte.

Then he thought he could call his grandson and ask him to help him look for the dog.

He fell asleep on the sofa with the book on his lap. The characters in it were very strange. Old, too, like him. He'd have liked to invite them round for a chat. He dreamt about it. Someone rapped on the window, wanting to come in. It was Baba Dunja. Invite me in for a coffee, Jeroni, she said. Come in, come in. I don't have cups but it doesn't matter. The moon was full and the wolves howled. It was a long, sad howl like a solitary wail.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes and it took him a few seconds to realise the howls were coming from the street. He went to look out the window and saw him. It was Snowy, in front of the neighbour's house. He felt a twinge in his heart. He went out to fetch him. He called the

dog's name, but it paid no attention to him. It was curled up by the door, tail between its legs. Jeroni thought that if he brought it some food, he might convince it to come with him. It was a cold night and he might freeze out there. But what did dogs eat?

He opened the fridge and took out some ham and a box of cereal. He put it in a bowl. In another bowl, he poured water and he took it all to the dog.

Snowy didn't make eye contact. Now his howls were more of a whimper, as if he were switching off. Jeroni left the food and felt the cold on his nose and in his fingertips. He went back inside to fetch a blanket and covered him. Snowy let him do that, but he didn't move from the door.

Jeroni returned home and got into bed, but he couldn't close his eyes. Every now and again, he got up to check if the dog was still there.

Francesca told him a good few times to stay where he was, that he'd done all he could, that maybe tomorrow he'd persuade the dog to come inside.

Sure, easy to say that from the photo...in here, always smiling like an angel, but I've got to put my feet on firm ground, and what if Snowy

runs away and doesn't come back or one of the neighbours hits him to make him shut up, you know there are people with no respect round here...

It's the first time I've seen you worried about an animal.

An animal? His name's Snowy, he's not just any animal.

Come on now, get to sleep. Tomorrow's another day.

The howls had stopped completely now. Snowy was probably asleep, too.

Goodnight, Francesca, Jeroni murmured and he gave in to sleep.