

NARRATIVES

‘**A**nd you call this an ‘e’?’

Aster looked at the crooked vowel. The letter was neither neat nor upright, but appeared to be in a lying position, looking much more like a crippled ‘a’. The dash crossed the main arc in the middle, but instead of stopping there, it veered in a strange curve to the right. This was the boy’s fifth attempt to write ‘exergy’ and again, it had ended in failure.

Grandmother had given him an appallingly dull textbook on thermodynamics to rewrite. The text was incomprehensible and after a month on the Introduction to Rewriting Course, the boy had only managed to complete the first section. Aster got up five fifty in the morning, hastily washed his face, and hurriedly ate his breakfast. At the six o’clock, his grandmother met him in the study – the room which would eventually become his office in the future. She was a strict woman who had seven identical wool dresses deemed suitable for all occasions. She worked with her grandson until eight in the evening, allowing him a break of only half an hour for lunch. Aster was then given one hour to eat his supper and prepare for bed. At nine o’clock, he was checked on by a nanny who was also the part-time cook, cleaner, gardener, and in charge of keeping the house in good order.

‘Start again, Rewriter Jr. Jr. And would you be so kind as to remind me how to write the letter ‘e’?’

‘One needs to start slowly and carefully. First, one has to draw a straight line, raise it into a smooth curve, and finish in a semicircle.’

‘Now, please put your knowledge into practice.’

The boy lowered his quill into a vial of ink and flicked off a surplus droplet. Before getting down to the task, he did a breathing exercise: On the count of four, breathe in; on five, hold the air; on eight, exhale. His heart calmed and the trembling in his hands subsided. Aster raised his quill over the paper, and the challenge began.

...As soon as he enters the game, our hero immediately faces an obstacle; the pesky ‘e’! What is he going to do? Look at him nailing the curve, semi-circling it at the end! Brilliant! One hopes that this momentum is enough for the coming letter, the ‘x’. One diagonal line, then another – done! And now, that special moment had arrived. The letters met face to face. Never before, had Aster flanked a letter with two ‘e’s. Hold your breath... He... does it! This is a true miracle, fellas! Everyone who bet on him to fail; have your money ready. And those who have, until recently, fully believed in our hero, get ready to celebrate! Because today...

Aster screwed up ‘r’. The first dash swung too far to the right.

‘I can’t do this anymore! You have driven me to the edge, Rewriter Jr. Jr. I need to take my drops! And then... and then... I’ll rewrite a chapter from ‘Botany for the Chosen Ones’ about the eurybathic properties of mushrooms. We must respect the poor ‘e’!’

The door slammed shut, like a clapperboard on a film set. The atmosphere in the room immediately relaxed and Aster let out a joyful ‘yoo-hoo!’

For the first time in a month, from the day he turned ten years old, Aster found himself alone in the study. Grandmother, with stalwart stubbornness, constantly tried to correct her student’s poor performance. For one whole month, the boy had only seen her and the nanny. His father and the grandfather were always locked away in their respective studies. They got up at five in the morning and went to bed at two o’clock in the wee hours of the next morning. Their mealtimes had never overlapped with Aster’s schedule. The boy had never seen his father or grandfather eating, and even suspected that they could be feeding themselves through photosynthesis, by letting bright sunlight into their stuffy studies through wide-open windows. Aster’s lack of communication with the male half of the family had never bothered him since they were never close to begin with.

However, the boy hadn’t seen Mum for one whole month either, and he missed her.

His mother was phenomenal. She could always find ways to amuse her son; whether accompanying him on walks, telling him magical short stories or inspiring him to compose his own. In his eyes, her smile was brighter than the shining stars, and her soul was warmer than the sun.

Grandmother was always trying to lessen the time they spent together but could never succeed in exerting much power over anybody under the age of ten living in her house. Since Mum was obviously above that age, Grandmother would send her on errands and give her tasks related to their business; new feather pens had to be ordered from the store, or when ink smeared across a page, the whole thing had to be redone. Aster's mum never once disobeyed Grandmother. With enviable speed and ability, she dutifully followed each and every instruction, no matter how futile or ridiculous. Eventually, Grandmother ran out of excuses and with her imagination completely exhausted, she gave up. At last, Mum had plenty of time to spend with her son.

Aster and Mum built a miniature toy castle, initially occupied by characters which they drew, then cut out from paper. Mum then found two wooden pegs and after carving out arms legs and faces, proclaimed them king and queen. The then five-year-old Aster painted them and so, their little kingdom was ruled by green-nosed and blue-handed sovereigns. The most exciting event in the make-believe life of this colourful kingdom was the 'return' of its long-lost princess; a gorgeous doll with long curly hair the colour of autumn leaves, which Mum had bought at the city fair. However, to the young Aster, it seemed quite unfair that she suddenly appeared in the kingdom all grown up. To explain this anomaly, Mum came up with the idea that the princess had been imprisoned for many years in a tower by a wicked witch, but one day, a charming prince rescued her and she was able to return home. They now needed a prince fit for a princess, so rather than carve another peg figure, Mum promised to go back to the fair and return with a handsome husband. The boy and his mum also created another version of events in which the heroic princess fought off the villainous witch and thus saved herself. And Aster was just as pleased with this story as the version featuring Prince Charming as her saviour.

The boy could leave the confines of the house only in the Mum's company. Amongst rewriters, such forays were not approved of. They were familiar with sunlight only by hearsay. They transcribed pieces about photosynthesis from textbooks on botany, but that is where their knowledge of sunlight ended. Mum wasn't like that; she hadn't been born 'Rewriteress', although that was her official name.

The two of them wandered past mirrored lakes, explored steep cliffs, watched birds, and caught butterflies with nets. However, such trips to faraway places didn't happen often. As a rule, they usually took walks near the lowlands on the Southeast Border, surrounded by wild juniper bushes. Mum, who was generally happy to explain any of the world's mysteries to Aster, never told him anything about this place. Only once, did she mention that it was too soon for the boy to venture there, but she didn't explain why. Aster, who considered himself grown up, felt dispirited that he wasn't to be entrusted with its secret but in the end, grudgingly reconciled himself to the situation and decided to go with the flow.

Mum would descend into the lowlands for about an hour at a time, armed with a notebook and a pencil with an eraser. Meanwhile, Aster would play with a ball, compose nursery rhymes, chase ladybugs, or simply lie on a grass, eating sandwiches and pies from a picnic basket. And then, when the boy had all lost track of time, Mum would make an entrance. She always came back from the lowlands with her eyes fixed in a meaningful and wistful gaze, and a vague smile would wander across her face. With each trip, her notes became a little thicker. A month earlier, when Aster had last gone for a walk with Mum, her pile of notes was so thick, it looked like a book.

Aster, of course, did not always lie patiently in wait for Mum. There were a couple of times when unable to suppress his curiosity about what lay behind those juniper bushes, he had sneaked a peek into the lowlands. Each of his visits was brief but still allowed the boy quick glimpses of a small, hidden garden filled with a myriad of flowers of all the shapes and sizes!

There were so many varieties that all the flower directories rewritten by Aster's family could not enumerate all that grew there. He watched his mother sit next to one particular flower while—slowly and deliberately—inhaling its scent. For a couple of seconds, she seemed lost in thought but then opened her notebook and began making notes at a feverish speed. One day, Aster looked into the garden at the most inopportune moment. Mum just finished writing and raising her eyes, caught sight of her son. She cast him a reproachful look and wagged her finger yet said nothing.

In the study, the boy awoke from his daydream to discover that that first burst of joy from his unexpected freedom had quickly dissipated. Aster needed something to occupy himself. On the table and shelves, there was nothing, but a pile of incredibly mundane volumes, quills of different lengths, inks of all shades of black and blue, and a paper blade for correcting mistakes. Of all these things, it was the blade that Aster used most often.

Aster was afraid to leave the room: what if suddenly, in the corridor, he stumbled across the surly nanny? Or, even worse, what if Grandmother decided that he wasn't done for today? It was much safer to stay in the study.

The air was always stuffy and stale in here. Above the desk, was a huge window of opaque glass, through which only a tiny shaft of dim sunlight could slip. Grandmother forbade him to open the window, citing something she had rewritten in a pseudo-scientific book about the devastating effects of sunlight on paper and ink. But now Aster was alone. The boy couldn't reach the window from the chair, so he climbed onto the table and reached for the handle. In the process, he stepped on some copied prescriptions, crumpling and soiling them with his feet, and then, with a bit of effort, swung open this only source of fresh air.

A lively gust of wind rushed into the room, tickling the child who immediately wrapped his arms around his body to ward off its chill. The wind blew the papers hither and thither, upturned the inkpot, and scattered the quills that were laid out in order of size, from the longest to the shortest. At the same time, sunlight flooded the study, making all the colours more vivid and pleasing to eye. For the second time that day, the boy released a loud 'yoo-hoo'!

Evening was fast approaching. Aster looked at the clock; it was three minutes past seven, which meant that it was almost bedtime, and then, the next day would dawn and his grandmother would begin teaching him with renewed vigour. Aster sighed heavily. *Well, while I still have time, he decided, I can admire the view from the window, for I won't see anything as exciting for a long, long time.*

The Southeast Border, inhabited by rewriters, was so magnificent that no words could describe it. At exactly the place where the East bordered the South, there was an invisible line, separating the heathery moors from the wheat fields. *Take it all in and enjoy it while you can!* As Aster happily obeyed his instinct, he noticed that there, on the very border, was the place where Mum's secret garden was located. And the reason he noticed it was because he could see Mum leaving it!

Aster shouted his third 'yoo-hoo!' and jumped off the table. Then forgetting about potential danger of bumping into his grandmother and nanny, he rushed downstairs. Mum! He would finally see Mum! So, what, if were punished for breaking the rules and disrupting the order of the rewriters' house; he would soon be reunited with the person he loved most in the world! The boy swooped into the hallway. Mum wasn't there but he only had to wait for a minute before the front door opened.

'Ma!!!' he yelled and rushed to hug her.

Her eyes widened in surprise, but soon filled with love. The boy clasped her waist tightly and rested his face on her abdomen. Caressing his head with her hand, Mum asked:

'My little star, I thought you were having a lesson with Grandmother?'

'Yeah, yeah, we were, until I...'

'Until Rewriter Jr. Jr. almost led the esteemed Rewriting course teacher to a heart attack!'

The boy didn't need to look round. The voice that had scolded him constantly for a month was the one he could recognise anywhere.

‘He doesn’t have any makings of rewriter, and it is all your fault, Rewriteress.’

‘Little Star, go to your bed—’

‘First of all, his name is Rewriter Jr. Jr.’, Grandmother interrupted. ‘And secondly, he will stay here and participate in adult conversation. He is already ten years old and his childishness can no longer be excused!’

Mum and Aster gasped in unison. The boy turned around.

‘Throughout time, the care of rewriters in this house—until they reach the age of ten—has been entrusted exclusively to the nannies. Only after that, do talented teachers begin to train the youngsters’, said Grandmother, humbly. ‘I made an exception to this rule, Rewriteress, when I allowed your involvement in the boy’s upbringing. And what do I see? This boy, our only hope, displays no natural instinct for rewriting and is completely lacking in even the most basic skills, including elementary spelling. He has absolutely no ability to... *rewrite*!’ Her voice cracked with emotion.

Mum remained silent then calmly responded:

‘I am so sorry it has turned out this way, Rewriteress.’

‘And I am sorry that I placed my confidence in you, Rewriteress.’

Aster looked at Mum. Only now, he noticed that she was holding her garden notes in her hands. No less than a hundred pages had been added to the ‘book’. Mum pensively glanced at her notes, then back at her son, and back at the notes again. Suddenly a cheerful smile lit up her face, as if she had just heard her favourite song.

‘Madam Rewriteress, you say I have completely destroyed a rewriting prodigy in my son, so I beg you for an opportunity to put things right.’

‘And how exactly do you propose to do that, when even I failed to succeed?’ Grandmother asked arrogantly.

‘Give me a week. All this week I will be Aste... Rewriter Jr. Jr.’s tutor. If there are no signs of improvement ... you will once again take charge of deciding his fate.’

Grandmother shook her head irritably.

‘You didn’t answer my question. I didn’t ask how much time you’d need, but *how* you planned to achieve some positive result?’

‘He is going to rewrite only the books that I choose for him.’

‘There is an approved list of books for the Introduction to Rewriting course that was created especially for rewriters. These are: ‘Mathematical Shenanigans within the Limits of the Reasonable’, ‘Art as a Way to Neglect Science’, ‘The Theory of Practice’, and ‘The Practice of Theory’. These books have been used to train Rewriter Jr., Rewriter, Rewriter Sr., Rewriter Sr. Sr., Re—’

‘I have the deepest respect for all of the rewriters’ traditions.’ Grandmother snickered, dissatisfied that she had been interrupted. ‘But don’t you think that since Rewriter Jr. Jr. has trouble mastering the set material, he might benefit from an alternative teaching style?’

Grandmother became thoughtful. Mum affectionately held Aster by the shoulders and with budding excitement, gently squeezed them.

‘What do you say, Rewriter Jr. Jr.?’

Aster flinched when Grandmother looked him straight in the eye but buoyed by Mum’s presence, replied

‘Well, I’m totally up for that.’

‘Well then. Rewriteress, I grant you one week. I will be checking on your studies at the end of each day to assess progress. I sincerely hope it will prove successful. Goodnight.’

The moment Grandmother was out of sight, Aster and Mum hugged each other and yelled ‘yoo-hoo’ as they twirled in triumph around the hall. Alerted by such unusual sounds of happiness and joy, Nanny came running and barely restraining her indignation, said it was time for Rewriter Jr. Jr. to have supper and get ready for a bed. Mum winked at Aster and Aster awkwardly blinked both eyes in response.

The lamb that evening, for the first time ever, seemed tender, and the corn tasted so juicy! With a smile on his face, he laid his head on his pillow. The boy was now looking forward to tomorrow, and the sweet taste of the corn lingered on his tongue as he fell asleep.

Mum was thirty minutes late. Aster was accustomed to starting his Introduction to Rewriting lessons at exactly eight o'clock. This time, not only had the teacher changed, but also, the very structure of the class.

Mum dashed into the study looking disheveled and half-asleep. She dumped a pile of notebooks, sheets of paper and unusual-looking quills on the table and plopped herself down on the chair. Aster fidgeted excitedly on his seat. It was a new sensation for him to feel excited in this room.

'So, what are we going to do? Go on a treasure-hunt? Take a trip to the North? Learn dogs' language?'

'We are going to rewrite, Little Star.'

The boy leaned back in his chair and looked questionably at Mum.

'What?'

'What did you think we were going to do? Grandmother will be checking up on us. I am fairly certain she has also instructed Nanny to do likewise. Whilst I was brushing my teeth, she entered the bathroom three times to change the towels; she even watched me having breakfast. And as I was walking here, I heard quiet footsteps behind me.'

'But... but... I thought I was going to do something exciting. Ma, I haven't had a break for a month!'

Mum reached out her hand to Aster and gently smoothed a strand of hair behind his ear.

'My little star, it's not about what are we doing, but who we are doing it with.'

Mum smiled. Aster couldn't help but smile back.

She spread a selection of blank notebooks in front of him and asked him to choose one to rewrite in. For Aster, it was like being in a sweet shop. He was immediately drawn to the one with kittens then spotted a cover decorated with awesome aeroplanes. Another had a highly realistic seascape and the fourth, an image of sparkling sand... Oh, and this plain black notebook; it looked so adult. The boy then noticed yet another notebook, modestly hiding beneath the others. Its cover depicted a night garden, gently illuminated by the moon, and as soon as he saw it, the boy felt warm and at peace. This notebook was much thicker than the others. Aster had seen it before.

'Oops, that's mine.' Mum quickly covered the garden notes with her hands. 'I too, liked this one the best, so I bought another just like it, especially for you!'

Mum pulled a second 'night in the garden' notebook from the very bottom of the pile and placed it in front of Aster. He immediately opened it and flipped through its pages, mesmerized by its pure white pages; as yet untouched and sullied by his hand! With a deep sigh, he put it aside.

'What's wrong, Little Star?'

'I will ruin it. You know how difficult I find writing. I can read, memorize, draw, but... but... I simply can't write, let alone rewrite.'

'Little Star', Mum began, 'Everyone experiences difficulties at some stage in their life. We can either resign ourselves to them or learn how to overcome them.'

Mum put a quill in Aster's hand. It was transparent and already filled with ink. He had never seen anything quite so peculiar.

'How awesome is that? No more dipping quills into vials means no more ink stains! But if some letter turns out bad, you can erase it with this.' She handed the boy a red eraser. 'It's a special ink eraser. Just remember not to press too hard on it.'

Aster held the eraser and the pen the way a warrior holds a sword and a shield. At that moment, he felt like a valiant knight about to storm an enemy fortress, and Mum was a sage wizard, guiding Aster the hero, on the road to victory. The role suited her perfectly.

‘So, you’ll let me ruin such a beautiful notebook?’

‘Permission granted. I have already ruined mine!’ Mum waved her garden notes.

‘Okay, but what are we going to rewrite? Yesterday it sounded like you had a plan.’

‘I still do. You are not going to rewrite, Aster. You will be listening to me and writing down everything I say. Like a dictation.’

‘Is it some kind of garden data book?’ Aster wrinkled his nose in displeasure.

‘Is that all you expect of me, young man?’ Mum pretended to be upset and in a dramatic gesture, raised the back side of her hand to her forehead. ‘I’m kidding! You are going to rewrite the narratales.’

‘Narratales?’

‘Narratales.’

‘Narratives?’

‘Narratales.’

‘What *are* they?’

Mum smiled mysteriously as if she had anticipated this question.

‘Oh, we’ll get to that eventually. But for now, you need to concentrate. Listen, then write everything down as carefully as you can.’

Mum gently opened her notebook. The pages rustled like autumn leaves. Mum flicked through them, going from the end to the beginning, then from the middle to the second quarter. After a while, she gave a meaningful chuckle and told Aster to get ready. The boy raised the strange looking quill over the first line of the first page of the first notebook, took a deep breath and exhaled.

‘I should warn you right away: narratales don’t follow any chronological order.’

‘Why not?’ Aster wondered.

‘If I were a wise philosopher, I’d answer that it’s only in chaos we might find order. But actually, I just think it would be much more interesting,’ smiled Mum and began with the second narratale.

WHAT WIND BROUGHT

Once upon a time there lived a girl without a heart.

She wasn't a princess in a faraway kingdom; she wasn't a poor orphan; nor did she possess any special talents. But would her story deserve to be told if this girl were just ordinary?

It all began with the girl's grandparents who were impoverished nobles. They dreamt of living beyond any reasonable means, just like in the old times. Their best option was an arranged marriage between their only daughter and some rich fellow. However, the realisation of this goal was trickier than first anticipated. No matter how clever, self-confident and beautiful she was, their daughter was still a girl without a fortune in rich man's world. One day, they got wind of Miller. A would-be nobleman, he had grown up in a poor household, but he was ambitious, with high aspirations to better himself. He bought an old, failing mill which miraculously, he turned around to such a degree that even the Royal household ordered flour from its gleaming premises. He was a hard worker and an over-achiever. At first glance, Miller looked like a tough general. He was tall and broad shouldered, with a permanent scowl on his face and a harshness in his eyes. It felt like he would command you at a moment's notice, to do a hundred press-ups. Miller had been set up with many ladies but he always managed to detect a flaw in even the most dazzling beauty or cleverest damsel. The first was deemed a gambler, the second was incapable of loving anyone more than herself, and third ate an unreasonable amount of peas! Such was the lot of a rich and picky bachelor who was introduced to potential fiancées on a daily basis.

As it wasn't common for nobles to mix with millers, he wasn't considered a good match for the girl. But this didn't worry her parents one bit. So long as the groom was rich, the rest was a piece of cake. On the day of their meeting, Miller went to greet the girl with an especially bored look on his face but as soon as she entered the room, Miller realised he was in love, and none of her flaws would prevent them from getting engaged. They were soon married, much to the delight of her parents. The wedding was a fun-filled, extravagant affair and because they got on well with their son-in-law, the girl's parents were able to resume the kind of lifestyle they had been forced to abandon. Once married, everyone addressed the girl as 'Milleress'.

And so, began their new life together. It took a while for Milleress to get used to living with a man she considered an ignorant bumpkin and who furthermore, always looked so grave and sullen. But despite his dour appearance, he was kind and endearingly naïve and Milleress' attitude began to change when Miller revealed his true face. He dreamt of simple things: family, home and inner peace. But the world in which Miller operated, did not entertain such notions. That is why he had no choice but to adopt the impression of being a man of steel. Prior to the arrival of his wife at the mill, he had worn this guise like a suit of armour but things soon changed for the better. She was as ingenious as only a woman can be and her presence was as gratifying as listening to a fine song.

As she got to know him better, she fell in love with this man who outwardly severe, was essentially very kind. And there was no happier couple than Miller and Milleress.

Over the years, they lived in harmony. In times of stress, they made each other laugh and peace was quickly restored after any argument. Most importantly, Miller and Milleress were always together. Everything was good apart from the fact that the child for whom they longed, couldn't make its way into the world. They were consumed by grief and neither a doctor nor a healer could help.

Whilst searching for a solution, Miller heard out about the eldest of the Quadripartite witches— the powerful Seeress of the Northern Barren— who was able to grant any wish. It was rumoured that tired of practicing mainstream magic, she had become mad. The witch was apparently always looking for new ways of wonder-making. Miller had been thinking about approaching her for a long time; toying with whether he, a rational if not the most educated of men, could place his faith in magic. In any other circumstances, Miller would never have contemplated such nonsense.

Yet with every passing day, Milleress' hope was fading and unable to bear his loved one's grief, he went to see the witch. The journey was long and difficult, but he eventually reached the witch's house.

At first, Miller thought he had got lost and ended up in wrong place, for standing before him was manor, albeit small and single-storied, of the type belonging to the nobility. The 'pocket palace' as Miller called it in his mind, was painted in such a brilliant white that without its teal roof, it would have been invisible in the snow. The porch was almost as big as the house itself; a perfect place for genteel gatherings and tea parties when the weather was fine. The main entrance was framed with grand, classical pillars, so imposing that they looked like something from Atlantis. The 'pocket palace' certainly didn't look like a mad witch's citadel.

Miller was slightly apprehensive about knocking at the door, but the very moment he peeked through the wide window, the main door opened. A remarkably tall lady appeared before Miller's eyes. She took a weary look at the intruder and introduced herself as Seeress of the Northern Barren.

The witch cast aside courtesies and demanded an immediate explanation of what business brought a Western Foothills' villager to her home. Having listened to his story, she mumbled something like 'How boring!' and at first, refused to help. Miller began to beg her – he was ready to sacrifice all his wealth, all his memories, all the sunny days he have ever had on condition that his one and only wish would be granted. 'I'm a scientist, Mr. Miller, what use are your riches, memories and all your sunny days to me?' The witch sounded offended. 'Unfortunately for you, I tend to avoid such simple cases.'

But Miller was as insistent as Milleress' parents had been a long time ago. The witch grumbled, lamented, then surrendered. 'Okay! Okay, I will help! You'll get a child; worry not about that. But I am not interested in your sentimentalities or, huh, money. Your wish will be granted on one condition – I will do it my way and you must not interfere with this *experiment*. Deal?' Miller immediately agreed to her terms. He did not pay attention to the word 'experiment', the witch's mysterious strain, and the mischievous fire in her eyes. Seeress sent him home and ordered him to wait; something with which he was already well accustomed.

One morning, the Millers found a basket on their porch. Inside lay a baby girl with Milleress' button-like nose and Miller's somber eyes. Milleress decided that some supreme force had deigned to give them a daughter. Miller kept his secret and she never found out about the Northern witch. Who, how, why or where, were not as important as the fact that they had finally found happiness.

All went well. The girl grew up to be a sweet child, her mind was clear, and she had enough wit to resist the world's meanness. Although her parents weren't as rich as before, they tried to give their daughter everything she dreamt of and the girl wanted for nothing. And how Miller and Milleress loved her! To them, their daughter was the sun, the sky, the moon and the stars. They protected her from danger and cared for her deeply. But the girl never appreciated all that she had. The warmth and security that filled her life, she took as a given right. The girl calmly accepted her relatives' love but gave nothing in return. She was equally indifferent to those closest to her and to people she didn't know. When playing with neighbours' children, if anyone dared to laugh at her, accidentally push her over or generally mess about, she would fix them with a cold stare and walk off. The girl wasn't interested in anything around her: she was only interested in her own affairs. Such was the character of this girl; insensitive and cold to the brink of appearing inhuman.

Both Miller and Milleress worried greatly. Miller thought: *What has this witch done? Why? Why did she do this to our only child?* He was tormented by the fact that his wife knew nothing about the scientific experiment from which their daughter had evolved and which they couldn't change. And in turn, blamed himself for inadvertently causing his wife's sorrowful state. But Milleress viewed at the problem from the different angle. She tended to blame herself for everything that was happening with the girl. *I didn't love Miller when I married him. That's why we didn't have a baby for such a long time. But when she came into our lives... when she*

came...’ She would burst into tears, unable to reconcile herself with all she had put her husband through.

Their lives were in disarray. They both felt guilty. And they both remained silent; each afraid of voicing their secret woes.

This discord could not last forever more—otherwise, this story would have been short and boring—so it had to come to an end.

One day, Miller and Milleress returned from market to find that the interior of their home had been completely transformed. The perfumed lilacs, beloved by Milleress, had disappeared from every room, as had Miller’s favourite model ships. They soon noticed that all of their family photos, favourite books, and personal mementos had also been removed. Highly alarmed, Milleress immediately cried out ‘Thieves!’ and the Miller rushed for his stick, ready to punish the villains. Apparently, they didn’t know that *Thief* no longer posed any threat in the kingdom. Roused by the commotion, the girl came downstairs and when she realised why they were panicking, calmly said:

‘Mama and Papa, why are you so worried? It is just an ordinary spring-clean. There is no reason to keep all these flowers and portraits. There mustn’t be any eyesores at the mill. We are working millers and have no need for any distractions from any fripperies, especially in the home. Isn’t that so?’

Miller and Milleress were taken aback but responded calmly to their daughter’s strange behaviour. They hoped that she was simply going through a phase and as soon as she grew older, these oddities would be gone as if they had never existed.

While the Millers lived in constant hope of improvement in her behaviour, the girl grew up. Neither family nor memories, neither emotions nor feelings, nor hearty Sunday casseroles, were of any significance to the girl. In short, the girl scared Miller and Milleress.

The moment arrived when they finally admitted that they could no longer cope with things as they were. Miller decided to pay another visit to Seeress. It was her duty to explain what she had done to their daughter! However, over the years, Miller’s health had deteriorated and he was now too unfit to travel to the Northern Barren.

The Millers didn’t know how to cure the girl, so they turned to the leading lights in science.

First, they sought advice from an astrologist. It should be mentioned that Milleress was a woman who liked to keep abreast of latest trends. She never missed a single performance by a prominent psychic. She believed in the benefits of gems on people’s health and minds and was in the habit of buying the most expensive crystals. One day, her girlfriends told her about the eminent astrologist Kurburdy Felononis. What stories! For example, Long Nose, a friend of Milleress, could not accept the fact that her daughter was still not married. What nonsense, being single aged twenty-three! Her daughter would soon be considered an old maid, and if all alone, how would she manage to support herself in the world? Long Nose decided to seek out Kurburdy. His astrological highness examined the situation and said that if Long Nose went alone—he particularly mentioned ‘without her daughter’—to the Southern Steppes, say for a little vacation, everything would turn out fine. In less than a month, her daughter found the true love. It happened the very moment Long Nose left and stopped interfering with her daughter’s relationships. Another of Milleress’ friends suffered from lower backache. Kurburdy Felononis checked his chart of the locations of the planets and stated that the backaches causing her pain were due to Pluto’s influence. His advice was to fully forget about this planet’s existence and moreover, remove its name from anywhere she could see it. The woman followed his advice: first she deleted every mention of the planet in her home, her village, and neighbouring villages—she even got her hands on the Capital’s manuscripts! It worked. Everybody completely forgot that there was such planet—‘Bruto’ was it?—and they stopped writing or talking about it. The pain mysteriously disappeared during the woman’s wanderings around the kingdom. Unbelievable! A true miracle! Nobody doubted the genius of Felononis.

Miller and Milleress asked this unsurpassed astrologist for help. Kurburdy Felononis examined the girl attentively, asked her some questions, checked his cards and charts, and came to the conclusion:

‘With absolute certainty, I can state that the fault lies in her stars! I assure you, if Venus hadn’t been in Libra at the moment of the child’s birth, she would not be plagued by this condition! At three o’clock on Tuesdays and Fridays, your daughter must lie in the sun and think about the majestic beauty of our world. She must also avoid talking to Geminis and Scorpios. Oh, are you a Scorpio, Madam Milleress? I must ask you to cease communication with your daughter from now on. Thus, she will recover in no time!’

The girl and her parents followed his instructions. Milleress was deeply upset by the prospect of never conversing or spending time with her only child. But her worries did not last long. Kurburdy’s advice didn’t work, and indeed, things only got worse. One day, Miller and Milleress discovered that their lovingly selected wallpaper was gone; it turned out that the girl had decided to whitewash all of their walls.

‘Mama and Papa, we have of no need of bright flowers and patterns on the walls,’ the girl explained. ‘They distract us from our duties and ruin our mood for work.’ The house now looked bland and unhomely. The Millers were frightened for not only their daughter’s, but also the family’s future.

Once again, her parents sought professional help, this time from a Doctor of Political Sciences. Miller insisted on that. This was down to the fact that he was emotionally affected by the political situation in the kingdom. He followed the news, read articles on the economy and politics, and shared his thoughts with his wife in the evenings: ‘My dearest Milleress, all the kingdoms—and I mean absolutely all of them—are staging an informational war against us! They see how strong and brave we are, and they are trying to crush us. But our King is a man of steel. He will fix everything! The only problem is that the royal court is shamelessly robbing the kingdom’s treasury!’ Miller thought that everything in the world was connected with politics. The author of his favourite column, ‘He Who Is Not Our Rival Will Soon Become One’, was a professor of political sciences called Jacques the Unbearable. ‘He is a professional, not like all those charlatans!’ claimed Miller. He started bombarding the professor with letters, and the professor in turn and contrary to his name, eventually gave in to Miller and agreed to examine the girl.

Professor Unbearable delved into the girl’s case as attentively as Felononis; he asked her some questions, and gave his verdict:

‘Well, this case is as clear as the fact that our Kingdom’s healthcare is better than any other kingdoms’! The girl suffers from a disease that is all too common these days: Political ab-sen-te-ism! You had better take note, Mr. Miller, lest you forget! Kids these days, assume that they can shape up well whilst completely ignoring the political dimension. That is the most foolish mistake! The girl needs to read newspaper articles on the kingdom’s foreign affairs and discuss them with peers, parents, grandparents, or even geese, as far as I’m concerned! We need to think more about politics! We need to talk constantly about politics!’

The girl read newspapers and articles and discussed the kingdom’s foreign affairs with whoever she met. Miller was delighted that finally, there was someone who truly appeared to share his passion for politics. But that very same week, the girl threw out Miller’s favourite currant jam and Milleress’ spicy chicken wings. The family’s meals were suddenly rationed to just water and tasteless cereal without milk or any other condiment. There were afraid of what might happen next.

This time, her parents were at a loss as to what to do. They had invited advice from renowned professionals but nothing had improved and in fact, the situation had actually worsened. Their final option was to approach their local doctor. It is worth mentioning that the Millers weren’t as quite as skeptical about medics but they still had their reservations. ‘It seems so straightforward! It seems so obvious! But there are no good doctors these day, only phonies, lazybones, and talentless quacks who have nowhere else to go!’

That was the preface to the doctor's visit to the Millers. He turned out to be a humble and quiet young man, whose name no one remembered. He tripped over the doorstep, broke a vase, and apologised approximately two hundred times that day. The Millers wrinkled their noses and exchanged meaningful looks for they had little faith in this young doctor. However, they had no alternative but to give him a chance. The doctor headed straight for the patient and when he greeted her with a big smile, the girl merely mumbled, 'G'day.' He listened to her chest with a stethoscope, then after a little contemplation, firmly announced:

'Your girl has no heart.'

His diagnosis naturally came as a mighty shock to her parents! The cause of the Millers' suffering hadn't been Venus's pernicious location nor political ab-sen-te-ism; it hadn't been bad heredity, for which Milleress had blamed Miller. No heart?! What did that even mean?

'This disease cannot be cured,' added the doctor. 'You either have a heart or you don't. No medicines, or potions, or physiology would help.'

'How could it be so?' The Millers were enraged. They refused to believe their daughter was hopelessly incurable. The doctor repeatedly tried to persuade them that any treatment would be pointless, but his words only inflamed the parents. Milleress wept, blaming herself for not falling in love with her husband on the day the two of them met. Miller beat himself up for entrusting their child's destiny to the mad witch. But neither wanted to reveal their secret fears. Either they did not want to hurt each other even more, or they were scared of the consequences.

Meanwhile, the girl lay on the bed, looking at the fatigued doctor, her weeping parents, and the fig tree on the windowsill. Uppermost in her mind, was the thought: 'As soon as they've all calmed down, I will remove that tree from the house as well.'