

Rebecca and the Violin Spider

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Orlando D'eath was an unlucky boy. Very unlucky. And not only for his unhappy surname. You might even say there was something extraordinary about his bad luck, because it was impossible to believe it was only the result of chance. He was unlucky in small things as well as in big ones. If he played bingo he never won so much as a piece of candy, and if he did just for once, the candy would be hard and disgusting, probably rhubarb-flavoured, like the ones toothless grandmothers suck on. If there was a poo somewhere nearby, Orlando was sure to step on it with his best shoes, the white trainers he'd been given for his birthday. And if he was on his bike and there was a nail on the street or a thorny branch, it was mathematically certain his wheel would pass over it.

That was why Orlando had prepared a virtual arsenal in his backpack: patches for bicycle wheels, universal glue, scissors, two different sizes of wrenches, a Swiss knife, a magnifying glass, a yard of rope, pliers, bandages and sticking plasters. All things that served to fix himself and his belongings, because if there was one thing Orlando had learnt in his eleven years of life it was this: from rotten luck there was no escape.

But Orlando's misfortune wasn't limited to small things. It had blown the wind of death, taking away his father one rainy November day, on the eve of his tenth birthday. Sebastian D'eath, a huge man seven feet tall and weighing two hundred pounds, died falling from the roof he'd climbed up on to change some broken tiles, shocking the whole neighbourhood and driving his wife Ann crazy with grief.

And his bad luck struck again, because Orlando's mother grew so sad and wasted that she wound up losing her speech as well as her mind, so when summer came Orlando was moved to a community for minors with the unpromising name of *The Lord's Handmaids*. In that lonely place rooted to the side of a green mountain, in the exact centre of the Alps, Orlando spent the summer waiting for someone to come and visit him, even if he knew perfectly well that no one would come because his paternal grandparents had died of old age and his maternal grandparents lived far very away, far to the north and east.

When he wasn't in his room thinking about his mother Orlando tried to stay as far as he could from the nuns, who were terrible, and from the other children, who were even worse. He

especially did his best to avoid Iago, a boy who emptied dinner trays onto the first person whose eyes crossed his (and if soup was on the menu, you risked getting burned). Then there were the brothers Matt and Mark, who bit him if he refused to play beast with them, a card game where you gambled to empty the adversary's pockets. Finally there was Adam, a sort of overweight octopus who'd developed the vice of hugging him till he suffocated. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that when Orlando learned he'd been put into foster care with a family he was extremely happy. But not for long.

The Villins stood waiting for him lined up in a row from the tallest to the shortest, by pure chance in order of size. The father, Gustav Villin, was a tall thin man with heavy black-framed glasses over large sleepy eyes. His uncombed thick white hair covered a TV-shaped cranium. A huge nose like a koala's stuck out of his face. As soon as his gaze crossed Orlando's his lips opened into a broad, heart-warming smile, and Orlando at once felt sympathy for that elderly man who was still a dad.

Next to him was his wife, Violet Villin, whose physical features were the exact opposite. She was short and pleasingly plump, with thick blond hair that fell in gentle waves over tapered shoulders, a heart-shaped mouth and a dimple under her chin that emphasized the fullness of her face. She was wearing a woolly jumper pulled down over a prosperous breast that reminded Orlando of a snow-white goose.

So far so good, you'll say. And indeed Orlando felt the sweet presentiment of a safe, happy life with two parents who would take care of him. For a long moment he imagined himself slightly spoiled and a bit chubby, settled into a sofa in front of the TV with a tray of crisps and cheese crackers. Then a strong sneeze, like a horse's, brought him back to reality.

The author of that animal-like roar was the couple's oldest daughter. After hesitating for a moment the girl, who must have been more or less his age, got the idea of wiping off her dirty hand. Except that she used the hood of her brother's sweatshirt, which happened to be nearby and which was so large that he wasn't even aware of what she was doing.

She had a frankly disagreeable air, with a thin nose and two thick eyebrows like the bristles of a doormat. Her wolf-like grey eyes stared at Orlando while her long, pointed lizard-like tongue passed again and again over her thin lips. Maybe, hoped Orlando, it was just that she was hungry.

To her left, an inch or two shorter, was a little boy with a honey-coloured complexion and almond eyes. His head was shaven and he wore a basket-ball player's high-ankled shoes and combat fatigues with white letters spelling *think again*. When his gaze met Orlando's he brought his

thumb and middle finger up to his eye, then turned them towards him as if to say, “watch it”.

Orlando gulped.

At the end of the row was a little girl with curls tightly bunched in a pony-tail high on her head and one eye – the other was bandaged – of a lovely hazel colour. Beneath her shorts her legs were covered with scabs and fresh cuts that still hadn’t formed crusts. Shreds of dry skin hung from the elbow that she uncovered when she lifted it to scratch behind her neck. When her eyes met Orlando’s she smiled widely, revealing a wasteland of fallen teeth. Maybe she was the best of the bunch.

The Villins hugged him one by one, coming forward in order of age: Angelica the eldest, Duc the middle child, and finally Noga. Then the parents invited him to load his bags into the boot of the van. On the hatch a sticker with the word “family” showed the profile of four children. Orlando gave a puzzled look, laid his large bag on the ground and asked,

«But have you got four children?»

«Oh, certainly», answered Violet Villin, caressing his hair. «Didn’t they tell you?»

«They spoke about a lot of brothers and sisters».

«You’ll be number five, to be exact».

«And where’s the other one?»

«Oh», sighed the mother in a velvety voice, «Victor is grown up, you know. He didn’t want to come. He’s a dancer, a future star of classical ballet. He practices every day, even on Christmas day. He’s a true artist».

When they’d finished loading the car Angelica opened the door and motioned to him to get in first, a courtesy that actually led to nothing good. And in fact, one after the other Angelica, Duc and Noga climbed into the car, squeezing him like a sardine in a tin. The boot, which could have been extended to provide three more seats, was crammed with Orlando’s summer and winter wardrobe and his school things, so they were all forced to sit together.

«Move over! We can’t even close the door...», said Angelica, giving him a hard shove with her shoulder.

Orlando slipped off the backpack holding his things and put it under his feet, trying to make himself as small as he could. Gustav went into first gear and parted, blowing the horn to chase away the ducks waddling down the path of the large garden of the *Lord’s Handmaids*. Orlando turned round to watch the big white house move off into the distance. It hardly seemed real: no more refectory, no more prayers, no more punishments (the worst was cleaning all of the cook’s steel kitchen with vinegar). He’d only spent a summer in there, but it seemed like an eternity.

«We live on the other side of the mountain. Do you get car sick, Orlando?» asked Gustav, peering into in the rear view mirror.

Orlando answered that no, he'd never suffered from car sickness, but then he had to think again. Gustav Villin was a terrible driver – he accelerated when the road was straight and then suddenly stepped on the brake at every curve. The curves wound sharply up the steep slope of the mountain, and when the car jerked to Orlando's side he found himself literally crushed by the weight of Angelica, who did her best to increase the pressure.

«Hey», she whispered at the second curve, «You should know that I'm the real daughter of Violet and Gustav».

From the front seat came Ms Villin's velvety voice, «What are you saying, Angelica? Everything ok back there? You're crowded, I know, but with all those suitcases ... Of course, it's not really so much, Orlando dear, you must have your whole life in there!»

Angelica, Duc and Noga exchanged a meaningful glance, and Orlando understood that as soon as the occasion presented itself the three of them would stick their noses into all his bags. What actually happened later was worse.

«Nothing, Mum. I didn't say anything».

Violet turned on the car radio and with her index finger searched for a station she liked. Orlando noticed that she had short, clean oval nails. A doctor's hands, he thought. And Violet Villin and her husband were indeed very famous doctors, because they ran the renowned *Smile Clinic* in Venaus, a specialized centre near the hospital where they treated chronic cases of incurable unhappiness with revolutionary drugs. They had won numerous awards for their pioneering work. As though that were not enough, they'd distinguished themselves in recent years for having adopted two children and collecting a large sum of money for the *Lord's Handmaids*.

«Let's get things clear», Angelica continued when Gustav took the third curve as if he was running formula one. «The others are adopted. And you are the latest arrival». She paused for a few seconds, then added, «The latest and the least».

Orlando looked at Duc and Noga for comfort, but with hard, serious faces, they nodded and repeated one after the other in a low voice,

«The latest and the least».

«The latest and the least».

*

When they reached what seemed to be a mountain pass, the Villins' car started to go at terrifying speed down the road that wound between emerald green fields. Orlando thought he was going to be sick, but he only swallowed a lot of saliva. He remembered that his mother had told him

to look at a fixed point out of the window to get over car sickness, and that's what he did. He decided to look at the lake shining below like a silver plate, but then a curve changed his perspective again and a strange fog began to climb up from the valley.

«It's coming», said Gustav. «On this side of the mountain the fog falls twice a day, did you know»?

«No, we never came to these parts».

«You get used to it quickly enough, it's not a big problem. It falls in the morning, from seven to nine, and then lifts. At sunset it does the same ... but don't ask me how it works! It's a complicated phenomenon, a matter of humidity and the temperature of the lake water and the land. Oh, turn up the volume, Violet! Do you remember this one? We always used to dance to it at school parties!

Gustav and Violet began singing together, «*Wa chess mate to everyone who's shakin' wa let's let loose, come on, don't ever stop. Wa-wa-warm me and don't let me go, if the world crashes, wa-wa, I want to stay on to-o-op*».

The song had a snappy beat and Orlando tried to tap his foot to the beat. Finally trust was finding a space in the boy's heart. With two such jolly, welcoming parents he could feel safe, and he wouldn't trouble himself about his siblings, sooner or later he'd manage to win them over. After all, two of them were still little kids and the eldest was a girl. And girls, said Orlando to himself, are never cruel, proving that he didn't know them at all.

Meanwhile the fog had grown so thick that it looked like spun sugar, as if you could put a hand through the trees. The woods outside were remote and mysterious. "How can he drive like that?" wondered Orlando as he looked at Gustav in the rear view mirror. Nothing could be seen beyond the car bonnet, but he kept stepping on the accelerator, filling his lungs and singing as loud as he could.

A few minutes later a deer came into view, its profile faded like a ghost's. Its distance from the bonnet was too short for Gustav to put on the brakes, so he swerved and lost control. The car started to gain speed as it rolled down the slope. After two skids it finished against the guardrail, banging up against it so hard that it bent the iron. From the radio someone was singing *wa-wa jump in, come on, do another lap*. All the rest was an eerie silence.

Gustav was the first to lift his head up from the steering wheel. He took off his glasses, which were half-broken and had cut the bridge of his nose. Then he turned around to check on the children in the back. At once he turned around to check on the children behind, but as soon as he moved a sinister noise, like a pile of metal settling, made him go pale with fright. With a yellow face and a tongue dry with fear, he said simply,

«Get out, slowly».

The car had gone over the edge of the road for half of its length, the back half. Under the feet of Duc, Angelica, Noga and Orlando there was a void -- to be precise a sheer drop of about fifty yards. Nothing abysmal, but enough to guarantee certain death for anyone who fell into it. The guardrail was intact, though bent, and now held the car in a miraculous embrace.

«It won't open»! shouted Noga, starting to scratch his face out of fear. «It won't open»!

The door was blocked. Gustav looked at Violet, who looked at the children. Her skin had taken on a whitish tinge, too.

«You get out, slowly, and I'll get into your place to keep the car balanced. Does that door open»? asked Gustav.

Violet moved very slowly. She opened the door, put one foot out, placed it on the road, then sighed with relief that she'd managed it. But when she lifted her bottom, and it must be said that she had a hefty bottom, fleshy and well-rounded, the car slid half a yard backwards. Angelica, Duc and Noga screamed at the top of their lungs and all around frightened birds flew into the air.

Orlando, instead, kept his eyes tight shut. His was the worst position – he was on the side of the precipice and knew well that if there was someone who risked ending up down there with the car, it was him. As soon as the others made a move to get out of the car its weight would fall back towards the cliff. Orlando seriously thought his end had come, and more than anything else he was afraid of the pain. How many blows to his head would he take as he rolled down the cliff?

Meanwhile Violet ran to the side of the wood, looked for a rock and found one, changed her mind and picked up a bigger one and returned to the car.

«Cover your eyes»! she shouted, and hurled the rock against the window to break it. «Get out one at a time and change places, very slowly»! she ordered.

Noga was the first to get out through the window, and right away Duc jumped into her place. The car moved again, bending another thirty degrees downwards.

«I said slow»! Gustav thundered.

Angelica slid into the place that had been occupied by Duc, and Orlando finally gained the middle place.

«Duc, get out», shouted Violet. «Slowly»!

Duc jumped out of the window like a monkey and wound up in his mother's arms, making her fall back a few steps.

Angelica turned towards Orlando and with a mean smile said,

«You're the last one out, I'd start praying if I were you».

The car grew less and less stable each time someone got out, and only two were left -- Gustav and Orlando.

«Orlando you get out first – go now»!

Orlando looked out of the window and saw that there was a gap of at least half a yard between the edge of the road and the car.

«Should I go»? he asked shakily.

«Go»! said Gustav.

Orlando threw himself out with his heart in his throat and hit the ground hard as he landed, because Violet wasn't there to catch him. The woman he had been entrusted to had thrown her arms out to her husband and not to him. But he was happy because he'd been able to grab his backpack before jumping.

«We're safe, thank God», said Violet, stretching her arms to fit all of them this time. The three children nestled into that scented space, because Violet's jumper had the lovely smell of honey, biscuits and cinnamon.

«Come, Orlando», she added, inviting him.

Orlando shyly joined the embrace, and at once felt a painful pressure on his left shoe. Duc was stepping on his foot as hard as he could.

«I'll call the rescue squad», said Gustav, pulling out a large phone like a remote control that only he, the mayor, and a few other citizens of Venaus who were mad about cutting-edge appliances owned. «They'll come and fetch us».

At that very moment the guardrail broke in half, freeing the car to drop down the cliff in a din of broken metal and smashed glass. When it ended its course at the bottom the alarm went off like a shout of good-bye.

«Well», said Gustav, without losing his calm, «it could have gone worse».

Angelica drew close to Orlando with an expressionless face, like those of old dolls for sale in junk markets.

«It's not that you bring bad luck»? she hissed in a low voice, so as not to be heard by her parents.

Orlando did his best to seem convincing.

«No», he answered firmly, «what do you mean»?!

At that very moment a clap of thunder marked the start of a storm that poured a shower of freezing water over their heads.

The Villin Home

Orlando was glad to get into the jeep of the traffic officer who came to rescue them, but once again he had to sit next to Angelica, who stuck out her elbows to make it uncomfortable for whoever was sitting next to her. On her left Duc wasn't complaining, so Orlando, who was on her right, thought it best to keep his silence.

«You were lucky to have saved your skins», the policeman remarked as he turned on the engine.

«If you ask me, it was bloody rotten luck!» Angelica exclaimed, leaning towards the adults in the front to give herself importance.

«Watch your vocabulary, Angelica, vocabulary ...», Violet admonished her.

«Dad went off the road, the car wound up in a cliff, a storm broke out and we're soaking ... you tell me, Mum, if that isn't a *bloody rotten luck!*»

Violet ignored her daughter's words and asked the policeman:

«When will you be able to get the car back up?»

«Well, it's likely that tomorrow we'll start working on it ...»

«Likely»? said Gustav, startled. He couldn't stand uncertainty.

«We've got things to do today», replied the policeman. «You know the cheese festival is on, there are folks from all over ...».

«Of course», recalled Violet, who didn't appreciate either festivals or cheese.

«Anyway, give the matter top priority», said Gustav. «Tomorrow the festival will be over, and after all Venaus isn't New York».

The policeman, who was a small, bald man with close-set eyes as round as hazel nuts, felt a shiver of anxiety go through him. Was Gustav insinuating that a policeman in Venaus had nothing to do but control traffic in front of schools for children going in and out?

«Don't worry, professor! We'll get busy right away!» he replied, trying to sound convincing.

When they arrived at their destination the officer left quickly, determined not to let himself be bothered by the Villins, who were known all over town for being sticklers and sometimes nosey.

Angelica was the first to run towards the house, but at the garden gate she stopped, pushed it with her toe and let Orlando go in to enjoy the spectacle of his amazement.

And in fact Orlando lifted his chin and was left breathless. He couldn't have imagined a house more beautiful than the one that stood before his eyes: it was an old villa with large windows bordered with mouldings like curls of icing on a cake, an imposing steep roof boasting solid new wooden gables and a lovely garden with a towering chestnut tree and a cedar whose long, twisting branches were perfect for climbing.

On the stairs that led to the front door two dogs wagged their tails in a frenzy. They were incredibly ugly. The first, which had thick fur and the face of an uncombed owl, growled, showing a row of crooked teeth where a crosswise canine stood out. The second had large crossed eyes, a tongue so long that it didn't fit in its mouth, and a deformed hairless body.

«Here are our daarlings», said Violet, stretching out her hand to rub the two animals' heads. The ordeal they'd just gone through seemed not to have minimally scratched the surface of her good mood.

«What breed are they»? asked Orlando with disgust.

«Oh», said she a bit proudly, «Cocotte is a Brussels griffon, and Ganache is a bald Chinese».

Orlando looked at them, unconvinced.

«Th – th – they're», he stammered, «well, they're...».

«Ugly as hell!» Duc broke in, pushing him aside to get his mother's full attention. «But they say you have to love ugly dogs, too!»

«Just so, darling. It's an exercise for becoming a better person!»

Orlando's eyes followed the more gimpy of the two, Ganache, who trotted over to his backpack, lifted its leg and peed on it at length.

«Stop!» he shouted, «what are you doing! Get away!»

Angelica and Noga guffawed, but they were immediately silenced by their father's reproachful stare. «Patience, Orlando. Take it as a canine welcome...», said Gustav. Then he put his hands on his daughters' shoulders and went into the house with them.

«You have to say *sitz*!» added Violet, handing him some tissues to dry the pee off the backpack. «*Sitz*!»

The dog sat down, ready to receive new orders.

«They only understand German», explained Duc with a giggle.

«But my backpack ...».

«Tomorrow you can empty it out and we'll wash it», Violet reassured him.

«And my suitcases»? added Orlando, more and more discouraged.

«I think they'll get them tomorrow morning along with the car, but who knows what shape they'll be in ...»

«There were my clothes, there were my ...»

«Orlando...», Violet reproached him gently, «you can wear Duc's clothes to go to school tomorrow. Remember you're not alone, you have a family now».

«But my mother is ...»

«Oh, yes, your mum...» Violet took his face between her hands. «Your mum will be back, you'll see».

And with these words, she set a resounding kiss on his forehead.

«Duc, go change, you're all wet! Then it's Orlando's turn, put some dry clothes on the bed. Orlando, you come with me to meet Victor».

Orlando followed Violet, who took off her soaked shoes and let her feet slide into pink-furred slippers. He took off his boots, which had kept his feet perfectly dry, but was at once sorry he had because both his socks had a hole in the big toe.

«He'll be below», she went on in her velvety tone. «He used to practice outdoors, summer and winter, then after he caught pneumonia I said *enough* and Gustav decided to remodel the basement. We had the floor covered with wood and a bar put on the wall, and that's all it took – it doesn't take much to make a dancer happy».

Violet opened a heavy armoured door and went down the stairs. Orlando wondered why the door was like that, as if there was a bank vault down there.

«There's never been a burglary around here», said Violet, guessing his thoughts, «but prevention is the best arm against thieves. You need dogs in the house to sound the warning if there are intruders, perimeter alarms, and doors and windows that are proof against burglars! Victor»? she called out timidly, approaching the threshold.

Victor turned off the thundering music of the percussions of a symphonic orchestra.

«Hey! Has the latest purchase arrived»? he asked, crossing the dancing room on long, athletic legs. Orlando took a few steps forward and put his hands in his pockets. Victor stared at him from head to foot, and he did the same. Victor had the eyes of a deer, emotionless as a stuffed animal, dark lips curved upwards in a mischievous grin and a perfect nose, like a Greek statue. He raised his eyebrows towards his hairline, which was parted in the exact middle of his head. His hair was very shiny, as if he'd spread gel on it. Then he said,

«Hi, you should know that you come here only if it's really necessary».

«Victor! He's just arrived, really ...», said his mother.

«I know, Mum, but I'm busy, you know that audition is coming up soon. Now leave me alone, please. Call me when dinner is ready».

Before going back upstairs Violet felt she ought to show Orlando the study where she and her husband did their medical research. It was right over the dancing room and below the kitchen, on a floor she called the *mezzanine*. Orlando didn't know exactly what that meant, but he guessed that it was an in-between floor. It was a long, narrow room with an unsteady column of books piled on the pavement, because there wasn't any more room in the bookcase. On the middle of the widest wall a fireplace invited the ideas that the Villins formulated, sitting on the two leather chairs nearby. When they had to work they used a large desk of shining walnut, so wide that two people could comfortably work there. Behind it there spread a large cork board that had several newspaper articles pinned on it, with highlighted titles: *Gli Zabò al lavoro su una formula rivoluzionaria!* shouted an Italian paper. *Meet the most innovative scientists in the heart of the Alps*, declaimed an English-language periodical. *Les progrès de la pharmacologie d'après la Professeure Zabò*, promised a French scientific publication.

«This is our press review», Violet explained. «The children take care of it. Every month they take turns going through all the newspapers and scientific publications to check if there are articles about us».

«Oh»! exclaimed Orlando, thinking about how boring a job it must be.

«You'll do it, too...», clarified Violet, with a flicker of light in her eyes that made Orlando uncomfortable. But it was only for a second, because his foster mother at once broke into a wide smile. «Let's go, it's getting late».

Carefully closing the cellar door, Violet and Orlando climbed up to the next floor. Then Violet pointed to the large stairway that led to the bedrooms above. It was panelled in wood that gleamed brightly with wax.

«Come, Orlando, don't be shy».

Orlando followed her. His socks made him slip pleasantly on the wood, and his big toes sticking out of the holes sensed a warmth that made the stairs feel heated. Everything in that house, he thought, looked like it was encased in velvet. The colours of the furnishings, studied and chosen by Violet, were like the colours of ice-cream – the curtains were white, the walls pale hazel, the furniture painted and decorated in ivory, pistachio green and a touch of strawberry pink on the borders. The doors of the childrens' bedrooms were yellow cream. In the middle of each one hung a sign with their drawings, saying "Imagination will save us". Violet indicated a door that opened onto a large double bed.

«That's our room, you see»?

Then her eyes met Orlando's, which had settled on a winding stair at the end of the corridor.

«Up there is Victor's room ... you know, he has a passion for reptiles, he has three of them, so we've put him upstairs, you never know when one might escape.... Anyhow», she said, changing the subject with a hint of nervousness, «here is your bathroom and this is your room».

Orlando dropped his backpack on the floor and his jaw fell open. The beds were attached to the ceiling with solid steel ropes like the ones that support cable cars. To get up, there were two rope ladders with wooden pegs, like pirate ships of bygone times. The walls of the room were covered with posters reproducing weapons of every kind -- rifles, assault weapons, sawed-off shotguns. On the shelf near what must have been Duc's desk Orlando counted three grenades that looked very real and very old. A pile of books took up half of the table. Orlando read a few titles: *Manual for Post-atomic Survival*, *Seventy-six Days in the Ocean* and *Do-it-yourself Ammunition: a Practical Guide*.

«Orlando!»! shouted Angelica, shooting into the room with the savagery of an invasive crow.

«Meeting», she said, pulling him towards the door.

«How nice of you! I'll leave you to yourselves», said Violet as she left.

«Meetings are always in the girls' room», explained Angelica in a martial voice.

«Why»? asked Orlando, halting on the threshold.

«Because that's where I sleep».

«So»?

«To get along there have to be clear rules, Dad says so all the time. And there has to be someone in command».

«And who is that?»

«Me, then Duc, then Noga. You're last. We already told you».

«But Noga must be six years old!»

«Exactly. But she bites hard. Now come on».

«Can't I get changed first? I'm all wet!»

«Granted. But make it quick».

[...]

When in the quiet of the boys' room Orlando finally put his head down on the pillow, happy that this difficult day was about to end, Duc fell on top of him, jumping on his stomach.

«Hey! Have you set the alarm clock?»

«Yes», replied Orlando, rubbing his eyes, «sure I set it. A quarter past six».

«Good. Because we won't wait for you, you know. Whoever is there, is there».

«All right...».

«Without us you risk getting lost».

Orlando raised himself on an elbow, exasperated.

«You don't have to be a genius to find the bus-stop of the bus going down towards the valley».

«Oh, sure. As long as you don't take the wrong crossing and wind up in the wrong forest.»

«Why? Is there a right forest, too?»

«Well ... there's one for playing war and walking the dogs and gathering chestnuts. That's *the right forest*».

«And then?»

«And then there's the other one – it's the same except for the fact that the taxidermist's house is there, and you don't want to wind up there. That is *the wrong forest*».

«Who's the taxidermist?»

«A woman who takes dead animals, empties them, fills them with stuff, sews them back up and sells them. Around here they put them over the fireplace. But she also makes sculptures. She won a prize and got into the papers when she took one of those old-fashioned phones and put a crow on the receiver to answer».

«That's horrible».

«I think you'll be in the same class as her daughter. And with Angelica. The daughter is really scary».

«Why?»

«First of all, she lives alone with her mother in the wrong forest. The father has never been seen, everyone thinks that, well you know, the mother could have eliminated him, some people say she can have, she could have ...»

«Could have», Orlando corrected him.

«She could have embalmed him...»

«That's enough, Duc. I'm sleepy and I don't believe a word you're saying!»

«Anyway, you'll see her tomorrow».

«Who?»

«The taxidermist's daughter! Her eyes are so black that you can't even find the pupils, they look like an insect's eyes. And her skin is transparent, you can see all the veins. And then she dresses like someone a hundred years old».

«What's her name?»

«Rebecca McMuffle. When you see her tomorrow, you'll know right away it's her».

Rebecca McMuffle

[Orlando's first day of school starts off badly: his siblings had turned off his alarm clock and didn't wait for him, so he had to run to arrive on time, in the midst of a fog. During the first class Orlando finds himself having to do a very boring exercise in concentration, and while it is going on he has the possibility of observing his new schoolmates...]

Orlando followed the path of Angelica's gaze, and as soon as he saw her he understood – she was staring at Rebecca McMuffle. Of course he wasn't able to see all of her yet, because his desk was two rows behind hers and she was turned towards the window, but Orlando had no doubt about it. Her clothing matched Duc's description. "She dresses like an old woman", he'd said. And in fact she was wearing a white blouse with an embroidered neck tied with a black velvet ribbon, a cardigan that arrived almost to her knees, and a long pleated skirt above ankles covered by white socks. On the feet sticking out under her desk she wore black shoes tied with laces.

As soon as she turned around Orlando could see her eyes: they were two ink-black wells, and it seemed they couldn't see anything, or else on the contrary that they saw everything. The rest of her face was nice. Maybe even beautiful, but Orlando wasn't sure. Her hair was twisted back and held by a multitude of hairpins. Orlando wondered how long it took her to arrange a hairstyle like that every morning.

Then he shot a quick glance at the teacher. Seeing that she was busy writing in the register he studied the others in the hope of finding friendly faces, especially among the boys. But once again bad luck was his lot, because he counted only three boys. One had eyes bleary with sleep and looked like a sloth, one seemed very hostile, with a shaved head and poisonous gaze, and the last one couldn't keep his head still, shaking it at regular intervals as if he had to get rid of a fly in his hair. All the others in the class, nine girls, surely belonged to Angelica's army, except for one.

When those interminable five minutes had passed, Ms Costner decreed that they could begin the hour of mathematics. It was the first time in his life that Orlando was actually happy to dedicate himself to decimal numbers.

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For the entire maths hour Angelica never stopped staring at Rebecca. So she was here this year, too. She'd hoped she had ended up being swallowed in a bottomless pit in the road, or kidnapped by aliens. Instead, nothing like that had happened, unfortunately the witch was still there.

On the one hand it was a reason to be glad, because in the first year of middle school Rebecca had been her favourite victim. She dressed badly, she never spoke except to give an answer, she was pale and thin, she was a disaster at every sport – in particular, she couldn't hold a ball in her hand – and she was very good at school. Angelica never lost a chance to get her goat.

But then there had been the *episode*, and Angelica couldn't forget the humiliation that Rebecca had made her suffer just on the last day of school before the holidays, a few seconds before the bell rang and in front of every single classmate. As she was picking up her sweatshirt from the back of the chair, Rebecca had thrown a spider on her head, and she had skitted around the room, hopping like a frightened frog. After that episode she'd started to doubt whether she suffered from spider phobia. But of one thing she was certain: she'd make sure Rebecca paid dearly for that little joke.

On her side, Angelica had a lot of advantages. First of all, she could count on her teachers' silence because she was the daughter of the most powerful couple in the whole town of Venaus, who had made considerable donations to the school. What is more, she had her classmates' support because they all adored her. She knew an infinite number of jokes, she could pick up the boys to show off her physical strength, she wrote love notes to her girlfriends to assure their loyalty, and she dressed impeccably in glitter skirts and sequin-covered jumpers. How was it possible not to find her fantastic? Sometimes she even came to school with glitter on her cheeks.

Yes, Angelica said to herself, school has to start right, and the most important thing after the holidays was to make it clear that she was the one who called the tune. Besides, there was Orlando in her class now. She had to give a demonstration of her power to him, too, even if indirectly. And so at the end of the third hour, breathing slowly and feeling a little sleepy thanks to Ms Costner's droning voice, she came to a decision.

At the sound of the bell a river of boys and girls poured down the stairs and into the mouth of the entrance hall before scattering in the courtyard. Rebecca went into the toilet and Angelica pretended to be tying her shoe laces while she waited for the right moment. As soon as she saw her disappear behind the door, she went to her desk to look for something to steal or break, and a plastic container with a yellow tap drew her attention. She opened it, and the sight of a banana made her smile. A silver-plated opportunity.

She peeled the banana, threw the peel on the floor and mashed the pulp on the maths notebook opened to the page with notes on today's lesson. Then she stealthily slipped out of the door, bumping into Orlando who – overcome by the embarrassment of not knowing anybody – had decided to spend the break in class.

«Keep quiet if you want to pass a day like every other», Angelica told him, looking down on him from the height of her five inches of advantage. «Otherwise, watch out!»

For a long moment Orlando didn't move, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. Certainly he'd never ever have the courage to tell what had happened to Rebecca, who after all he didn't even know, but while he looked at Angelica he found himself considering the consequences of a bold move. If he told on her, he would be declaring war on a step-sister who was clearly hateful and he'd have made a friend, but one who had a bad reputation and a sinister look. He decided it was better to keep his mouth shut.

When Rebecca came back into the classroom she at once saw the mess on her notebook. The smell it gave off was sweet and exotic, but not at all consoling. From his desk Orlando saw her pick up the notebook, tear out the page that had been soiled with banana, and throw it all in the basket. She went back to her seat, leaned her elbow on the desk and put her face on the palm of her hand, which was open like a shell. A calm face, but rather sad, Orlando noticed.

When Angelica came back into the room, followed as usual by a swarm of perfumed, squawking friends, Rebecca looked away to avoid eye contact. No one could know that in the darkness of her shoes her toes were curled tight. And when Rebecca curled her toes, it meant she was really, really annoyed.

«What is this stink of banana»? said Angelica, sniffing the air with her thin nose.

The toes on Rebecca's left foot formed such a high arch that they stretched the leather on the point of her shoe, which was so old and worn that it was like a second skin.

«A monkey must have got in here».

Rebecca stood up from her desk as the black cardigan she'd placed on the chair slipped silently to the floor. She went up to Angelica, who was standing with one leg on the step near the teacher's desk. She liked staying near the teachers' desk or their locker – in general, she liked staying where it was not allowed. Each time the teachers had to ask her nicely to move, even if their eyes darted flames.

«This is for you»! said Rebecca, opening her mouth.

Comfortably settled on her tongue there was a brown spider, with a nicely-formed round head and the profile of a violin drawn on its abdomen. It was small like a five-cent piece, but that didn't keep it from being horrible. When the eight legs started moving towards the point of Rebecca's tongue, Angelica screamed so loudly that she caught the attention of the teachers talking together in the hallway.

«What's going on»? asked Ms Costner, limping as she burst into the room -- perhaps one of her long legs was shorter than the other.

«Villin, you'd better have a good reason for screaming like that!» she added in a half-broken voice that ended in a gasp. Maybe she had a problem with her vocal cords, too.

«She's got a spider in her mouth! She's got a spider in her mouth!» shrieked Angelica, pointing at Rebecca.

«What on earth are you talking about?» said Ms Costner, trying to smooth things over.

«Look! Open your mouth, you dumb witch!»

«Angelica, no insults!» ordered the teacher. «And you, Rebecca, open your mouth», she added, after a moment's hesitation.

Rebecca smiled and opened her mouth as wide as if she were in a dentist's chair. She raised her tongue, bent it to the right and the left, and swallowed.

«There's no spider in my mouth», she said, with an air of innocence.

«You could have eaten it!» objected Angelica, her face still red with fright.

«I do not eat spiders».

«That's enough!» ordered Ms Costner. «Take your seats. At least on the first day of school let's try not to waste time in useless quarrels! And you, Angelica, are intelligent enough to understand that certain lies are not to be believed. A spider in the mouth, I say, not even a grammar school child would believe that».

To Angelica it seemed she was drowning in quicksand. The humiliation she felt was multiplied by the number of girlfriends who were staring at her at that moment. In some of them she could see a glimmer of satisfaction, she was sure. Ms Costner had scolded her, and in the six years of her school career that had never happened. Rebecca returned to her desk, unaware of the irreversible damage she'd caused.

Meanwhile, Orlando was possessed by a curiosity of the sort that makes the brain fry. His instinct told him that Rebecca did have a spider in her mouth for sure – he'd only known Angelica for a short time, but he couldn't call her a liar. Hateful, cruel, sour-tempered, but a liar no. True, it could have been a toy spider, but that would mean Angelica wasn't able to distinguish a toy from a real spider, and she wasn't that gullible. Orlando put his chin on his hands and for the whole time that remained he didn't take his eyes off Rebecca McMuffle.

When he got on the bus, surrounded by his siblings who had pushed him to the back to sit with them, his heart almost stopped. Rebecca had climbed in right behind him, and with all the composure of an adult she'd taken a seat in the first row.