

# IF YOU'RE THERE, CLAP YOUR HANDS

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## **OUT-OF-TUNE VILLAGE'S BELLS**

In summer and winter, day and night, Out-of-Tune Village's bells ring every hour. This happens every day of the week, every month of the year. Chime after chime, they never miss an appointment. Punctual and out of tune. The inhabitants have become accustomed to it. They don't notice that the band is out of tune, the choir singing in church is out of tune, or even the doorbells of the houses are out of tune.

At Macumba, on the other hand, it was completely different when it was still open. My grandfather always tells me about it. That's where he met my grandmother, on the notes of the accordion played by Fred Milonga, the owner. People came from neighbouring villages, and the car park was always full. Then one day, a dance hall opened a few hills away, and the music changed.

Little by little, people stopped going to Macumba. Fred Milonga closed his club and returned to Argentina, where he opened a tango school. The Macumba sign went out for good, and its grey dome looks like a spaceship that accidentally landed on Earth and never took off again.

When I go on holiday to Out-of-Tune Village, my grandfather and I walk past it in the evening when we take Bassoon, his dachshund, for a walk.

The car park is now overgrown with weeds. Trees and shrubs have grown everywhere. In the moonlight, they cast strange shadows and look like claws chasing us. If the bells start ringing at that moment, I get the creeps and quicken my pace. There's something mournful about that sound. Luckily, Grandpa starts whistling a cheerful tune and Bassoon joins in with a howl, so my fear passes. He is really in tune. Bassoon, not so much.

My grandfather loves music, he has a huge collection of old records and every now and then he lets me listen to them. When I close my eyes, I feel like I'm travelling. Just like when I read.

I love books. That's why everyone calls me Bookmark, even though my real name is Luca. I'm as thin as a sheet of paper, always immersed in the pages. So absorbed that if someone speaks to me, I reply at least ten seconds later. Nothing can distract me when I'm reading, except for the smell of my grandmother's gnocchi and chess games. And the weather forecast. I never miss it on television: I always watch it before leaving the house to see if there are any storms coming.

I take my books everywhere with me. On trips, to the park, to the bathroom. At school, during break time, if the weather is nice, I sit on the bench under the big willow tree and don't move until someone comes to call me. When I return to class, the bell has long since rung and the teacher always looks at me a little askance. How can I explain to her that I was lost in Neverland or that I was helping Alice with one of my croquets moves?

When I'm in Out-of-Tune Village, I often go to the library. That's where a thrilling adventure began this summer. Want to know why? Make yourselves comfortable. I'll tell you all about it.

## **THE FORBIDDEN BOOK**

Out-of-Tune Village's library is a strange and mysterious place, full of shelves and books that reach up to the ceiling. The wooden floor is very old and creaks with every step. From the windows you can see the roofs of the village and the bell tower that rises above the houses like a sharp pencil.

Above the entrance door hangs a stuffed boar's head with enormous tusks. Among the dusty corridors, you can find stuffed crows, foxes, deer heads, stoats with pure white fur and even a wolf. They all stand motionless, watching me with their fake eyes as I walk among the books. I always feel a little observed.

There are volumes of all kinds, some very old. They are looked after by Palmira, the librarian, a gruff-looking lady with a crow-like voice.

If you forget to return your books, she rings you at home, croaking and threatening to call the police. If you return them torn or scribbled on, you get a fine.

The "Forbidden Books", as Palmira calls them, are at the top of one shelf. She says that children are not allowed to read them, otherwise they will be shocked. She has even put up a nice sign with a skull on it: "Touch it and you die!"

She hopes to scare me, but I'm not afraid of anything. Well, almost anything... OK, I admit it. Between you and me, I'm a little afraid of spiders. And bugs, when they fly around my head. I never look under my bed or inside wardrobes. I'm afraid of the dark, cemeteries at night, cellars and thunder, so I prefer to know when storms are forecast.

This summer, when I was on holiday at my grandparents' house, I went looking for something to read. I needed a manual on weather forecasting, but all I found was a

vegetarian cookery course. I was reading the recipe for gnocchi with tofu ragù – my grandmother's are much better – when the window in front of me suddenly flew open. The wind blew my cap away and, as I tried to retrieve it, I heard a thud behind me.

I turned around quickly and saw a book on the floor. It wasn't very big or very thick. It looked old: the black cover was damaged and dusty. I looked up and saw an empty space among the Forbidden Books. It must have fallen from up there.

There was no title on the cover, just strange symbols mixed with the alphabet's letters.

I was about to leaf through it when a voice in the next room made me jump.

"Bookmark, I have to close up. It's time to go."

"Here I am, Palmira." I quickly made my way to the library exit.

"Aren't you borrowing any books today?" she croaked as she tidied up her desk.

"No, I didn't find anything interesting."

She looked at me from behind her glasses. "That's good. I'm in a hurry tonight, they're waiting for me at the club for the buraco tournament."

"Then I'll go. Bye, Palmira, have fun! Sooner or later, I'll teach you how to play chess."

I said goodbye with a smile. She made one of her grimaces, which I never know how to interpret.

It didn't matter. I walked home because after dinner I had invited my friends to my grandparents' house. Hidden in my rucksack was the mysterious book that I couldn't wait to read with them.