

## Chapter One

It's a cool, early Saturday morning. The town is still asleep, the horses are resting, the trees are not yet up, but the first rays of the sun are starting to appear over their tops, waking everyone up for a new day. I'm still curled up in the warmth of my wooden cot. Remembering that my father must have already missed his breakfast, I jump out of bed and hurry to get ready. Carrying a tray, I quickly rush to my father's office and open the door to find my father not there.

- Where has he gone? - I wonder.

Back in the kitchen, I meet Mum and tentatively ask her:

- Good morning, Mum, where's Dad? Why isn't he in the study as usual?

Mum turns away, nervously fiddles with the corner of her apron, and there is a depressing silence in the room.

- Mum, why don't you answer my question? Has something happened to him? - I ask her insistently.

- Ada, children should not interfere in the affairs of adults. Get to work! Dry the laundry! - Mom retorts angrily.

As I'm about to walk out the door with a huge pile of laundry, Mum shouts again:

- We're going to see Mrs Melissa today. She has been inviting us to visit her for a long time and have tea.

- Oh, no... - I mutter under my nose and kick the door before Mum notices the unhappy look on my face.

Mrs Melissa was our aunt. She was, to be honest, not very nice: always angry and frowning when she greeted us. My brother John and I didn't like her, although sometimes she was just funny. My mother explained to us that Aunt Melissa had some terrible illness. It is difficult for us children to understand all adult illnesses, and we just kept wondering how Auntie could forget everything: what she did today, what she ate a few minutes ago, even her name. The funny thing was that she did not distinguish between me and my brother. She used to call me Jonas and my brother Ada. Sometimes we would get so involved in this game that we would start imitating each other. I would try to talk like my brother and Jonas would repeat my movements. We would end up laughing loudly until we were in tears, and my aunt would get angrier and angrier because she didn't understand why we were laughing. In fact, my little brother Alex did not get involved in our game. He felt sorry for Aunt Melissa, who was ill. He would patiently answer the same questions, and his aunt would always treat him to a bagel. John and I, of course, were drooling, but we continued to play pranks.

In the courtyard, while I was doing the clean laundry, still smelling of soap, I kept thinking about my father's mysterious disappearance: 'What is my mother hiding? Why didn't Father say goodbye to us before he left? After all, I'm his favourite little daughter? How could he leave without telling me?'

Suddenly I heard my brothers' voices. They waved at me from afar, with flushed cheeks and a cheerful attitude. They must not have noticed that my father was not there yet. In the

mornings, my father liked to sit in his room for a long time, reading, writing and smoking his pipe.

- Where have you been? - I asked, holding back tears.
- We were playing ball with the boys, Alex answered me.

Before I could ask them another question, I saw my mother standing in the doorway, staring at John and Alex.

- Well, where have you been, you shameless bastards?- she asked sternly.
- We were playing with the yard boys," they replied in a shaky voice, and they knew they were going to get it.
- And you didn't tell me anything about it! Did you sneak out of the house and think I wouldn't punish you?" asked the mother, who was barely able to control her rage, clenching her fists.
- 'We're so sorry,' they both said in trembling voices.
- Come on, let's go and change your clothes, because we're going to Mrs Melissa's,' said the mother. - And you, too, get ready!

Without saying anything, I ran into the house.

I put on some comfortable clothes. Maybe because I grew up with my brothers, I never liked dresses. In fact, looks were the least of my concerns. I liked reading the most. My mother, when she saw me with a book in my hands, was always angry and grumbled that girls didn't need to read books, they had to know how to sew, cook, and clean the house, but my father stood up for me. He taught me how to read and kept telling me that girls could be just as smart as boys. He used to laugh and tell me that when I grew up I would become a traveller. I would sail on a ship with him and discover new continents.

When my mother saw me dressed like that, she sighed angrily and said:

- "Ada, I've asked you so many times to put on that new brown dress Dad gave me. It's not proper for girls to dress like that.

I was tempted to say something more, but I knew from the look in my mother's eyes that she would not stand for any arguments or objections, so I put my head down, turned around and went to my room to change.

An hour later, when she saw me wearing the dress, she smiled and praised me with the corner of her lips:

- Well, you look like a real girl, not with those torn scarves like always.

For the first time this morning, the kind words from my mother's lips brightened my gloomy mood.

## Chapter Two

Before lunch we went to see Mrs Melissa. She greeted us in a different way than always - she had a smile on her face and had already baked Alex a delicious croissant. This time John and I had to, because I was in no mood to annoy her, so I behaved like a good, well-mannered girl.

When I walked into her small house, I immediately felt warm. I sat down on a wooden chair

and began to look around, bored. I saw a massive clay vase, a large wooden bed and a wardrobe, bright curtains and long tablecloths, a shelf on which pictures of the Saints were lined up, a few books, because Mrs Melissa was not very fond of reading, and a large album containing all my family and other relatives. Once, when I was a little girl, Mrs Melissa and I used to look through that big album, so now I know what is in that album. Suddenly, I was invited into the kitchen to have tea together. I did not go slowly into the kitchen, but sat down on a wooden chair and, with my head down, sipped my tea in silence.

- Hi, sweetheart, how are you feeling today? - Aunt Melissa asked. Today was one of those days when my aunt had not lost her memory, did not mix up our names and was very clear in her thoughts.

- Okay... I just miss Daddy a little bit," I confessed to her, because I couldn't reveal my feelings to Mum.

- I understand. He had been preparing to leave on the boat for that dangerous expedition for a long time, but he kept delaying. It was hard for him to leave you," said my aunt with a sigh.

- What expedition? I didn't know anything about it, my mother didn't tell me anything about it, my father didn't say anything about it either, but I could see him always looking at maps, writing something, drawing something... But he kept telling me that the world had not yet been discovered, that people didn't know much, and that when I grew up, he would take me on a journey with him," I said, barely holding back tears.

- You shouldn't be angry with him. Your father's heart was breaking at the thought of having to leave you, wondering if he would come back. He was torn all his life between his duty to his family and his desire for travel and adventure. Only you, his little Aduté, slowed him down a little, but seeing how fast you were growing up and how clever you were becoming, he wanted to spread his wings again, to go on a perilous journey, to discover new continents, and to come back and tell you all about them.

I wanted to ask her many more questions about my father, but my mother came in and interrupted our conversation.

•Mrs Melissa, I promised to help you bake bread. So let's get to work without waiting.

Aunt Melissa winked at me, letting me know that perhaps we could continue our conversation later, and quickly jumped up from her chair and skipped off:

•Let's get to work! I can't wait to smell the fresh bread!

I was not very enthusiastic about cooking. I always helped my mother in the kitchen, but I did it reluctantly, gritting my teeth. I would rather read a book or play ball with my brothers in the backyard than hang around the pots. But this time, at Aunt Melissa's house, I happily agreed to help bake bread.

Three women were busily milling around the kitchen. I had to do my mother's or auntie's bidding all the time, so I didn't have time to think about Daddy. Soon the smell of baking bread filled the kitchen. An hour later, my aunt pulled a toasted loaf of bread out of the oven. I even drooled. Mum cut it open and gave everyone a slice. The first bite was fabulously tasty...

After we had eaten, we looked around and saw that it was starting to get dark, so it was

time to go home. As the horses pulled our carriage and the wheels of the carriage rattled monotonously, thoughts of my father and whether I would ever get to see him again went through my mind.

### Chapter Three

Morning dawned again in the town. When I woke up, I immediately remembered yesterday's visit to Mrs Melissa. It had not been the same as usual. John and I hadn't played pranks or made fun of Mrs Melissa. Now I was very grateful to her: if it hadn't been for her chattiness, I wouldn't have known where our father had disappeared to so suddenly. And again my heart was filled with longing.

I jumped out of bed, dressed in my everyday clothes and ran downstairs. I found nothing in the kitchen. With my father away, the usual routines were gone: sitting at the table together, planning and dividing up the work, talking and arguing together. I took a bite of the slice of bread left over from the day before and rushed outside to play with my brothers. My mother stopped me in the doorway:

- Where are you going? You're wearing that scarf again, like you have no other clothes. Wait a minute, you'll have to do this laundry. I've just finished doing the laundry.

- Okay," I said quietly, lowering my head so that my mother wouldn't see my disappointment. It was such a nice day today, I had hoped to have a frolic with my brothers, but I was overwhelmed with housework from the very morning.

I was gloomily drying the laundry when Alex suddenly kicked me in the leg with the ball.

- Can you give us the ball? - he shouted from afar.

Thinking the laundry could wait, I decided to play with my brothers:

- Can I play with you too?

- No way," said John, "the girls don't know how to kick a ball.

Furious, I kicked the ball hard against a tree and it got stuck in the branches. I immediately regretted it - I knew they would run to their mother as soon as possible, and I should be taking off my clothes, not kicking the ball! Before I could even breathe a sigh of relief, the brothers were already pounding on their mother, whining and yelling at her to get the ball out as soon as possible. I was scared, because I knew I was going to be very lucky. Mum had been in a bad mood lately. This morning I saw her even more upset. It's better not to get confused underfoot anymore... I wanted to hide as soon as possible, but I didn't know where. I ran as fast as I could and suddenly I came to the river Nemunas... Where my dad used to go fishing with me in the summer... I felt sad... A few tears rolled down my cheeks - the whole environment reminded me of him. I wanted Dad to come back as soon as possible and give me a big hug and comfort me.

I sat down on the river bank, put my arms around my knees and closed my eyes. I had forgotten all about my brothers and that ill-fated ball stuck in the tree, and all I cared about was my dad, and it would be all right if my dad was there... He would laugh and pull the ball out of the tree and kick it at me. I would catch it and pass it back to him. My brothers would join in, and we would have fun catching the ball for about an hour. Mum would

obviously be unhappy that we were wasting our time playing instead of getting on with our work, but Dad would run up to her, gasp, lift her up in his arms and, after twirling her around in the air a couple of times, give her a peck on the cheek. Mum would go back to her work, humming happily... After a while, I felt a cold, wet object touch my toes. I opened my eyes and saw a glass bottle. Apparently, the waves had come from somewhere. Taking it in my hands, I began to investigate. I tentatively unscrewed the cork and found a note inside. Excitedly, with trembling hands, I took the note out of the bottle. On the slip of paper was written just one word - "WILL". "Maybe it means something?" - "Maybe it means that I have to be strong, patient and never lose hope that my father will come back. It was getting darker and darker. Time to go home. Everyone will have missed me anyway. As I approached the house, I saw my mother bringing a broom and trying to scrape a ball stuck in the branches. Mum was a tiny little thing, she couldn't reach the ball. Then John decided to climb the tree, but his mother strictly forbade him. I stood hiding behind a bush and watched them. I didn't want them to see me, especially my mother. I heard my mother sniffing angrily under her nose about the ball. Finally, it was getting dark, and Mum gave in. When she and her brothers came into the house, I quickly crawled out of the bush and sneaked in through the window. Quietly, on my toes, I padded to my room, closed the door and quickly curled up in bed.

I could hear my brothers and my mother in the kitchen having dinner, chatting at the table. I remembered that I hadn't eaten anything since the morning. My stomach was in knots, but I didn't dare go down to the kitchen. I knew that I would not be able to withstand my brothers' reproaches and my mother's gloomy look. I felt very lonely and unnecessary. "Oh, that I could turn into a bird. I would fly high up in the sky and go looking for my daddy," I thought in my mind and fell into a dream.

In my sleep I heard my mother come into my room with a tray in her hands. She sat down on my bed and started stroking my head.

•Good night," she said softly and slipped out of the room.

'She's not mad at me,' I thought in my sleep and fell back to sleep.

## Chapter Four

The next morning, I got up and immediately ran to say hello to my mother.

- Good morning," I said to my mother with excitement in my throat. I was afraid she would be angry with me because it was late in the morning and I was still in my pyjamas.

- Hello, sweetheart," my mother greeted me pleasantly.

I stared at her for an hour, frozen. I couldn't believe how much my mother and I had changed, how close we had become. We had grown closer after Dad left us. I missed him. I believe that Mum misses him too, it is hard for her to be alone without him. Until then, my dad was much closer to me and I spent most of my time with him. He used to let me be myself: wear trousers, play ball in the yard, ride a horse, stay awake at night and watch the stars with him. I could go on and on about how many things he taught me, how many secrets of the world he revealed, how he was the first to show me the world of books, how he ignited an irresistible passion for reading. My mother was always the opposite of my father: reserved, strict, not smiling very much, and always demanding good behaviour from us, especially from me. I used to shun her, afraid of a fierce look or a stern word. But now

that my father was gone - my safe haven - I had to spend more time with my mother. Now I saw her through different eyes. Despite all the hardships that had fallen on her shoulders, she never sulked or complained, paid even more attention to us, her children, and sometimes even smiled at our silly pranks. As I was thinking of her, she suddenly came up to me, touched my long, tangled hair and, taking a comb, began to comb it. She combed it as gently as ever, humming something softly to herself, lost in her thoughts. After weaving a neat and tidy tresses, she hugged me and said:

- How big you are! I didn't even notice when you grew up.

I was already ten years old. I didn't notice how quickly I had grown up - I was no longer Daddy's little girl. "Dad! Where are you now? How are you doing in another country?" - I was so speechless that tears started to fall from my eyes. Suddenly, anger overcame me. I was angry with my father for leaving us, for not telling me his intentions, for not saying goodbye to us, for not promising to come back.

I don't know how long I cried and poured out my anguish when I felt my mother's embrace. She held me close to her, wiped my tears and said:

- You are a big, strong girl. You will overcome everything! And now let's go to breakfast. It's almost lunchtime and we haven't had breakfast yet.

We ate in silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Strangely enough, I was no longer frightened by the uncomfortable silence, no longer missed my brothers, who, as soon as they jumped out of bed, ran outside and came home when their stomachs were playing marches. Now I was just enjoying my mother's company.

- What do I have to do today? - I asked Mum.
- I have always been very demanding and strict with you, forcing you to do things, but today I want you to rest and do whatever you want," my mother suddenly replied.

After breakfast, I tidied up the kitchen and went to my room. I tried to read, but I couldn't concentrate. My mind was buzzing with intrusive thoughts. Suddenly a thought popped into my head - I'm going to write a letter to my dad! I know I won't be able to send it, I have no idea where in the world he is, but maybe it will help me to get my thoughts together, to ease my sadness and longing.

## Chapter Five

- Peter, come, we need to talk," came Anthony's breathless voice.
- I can't now, I am writing to my daughter.
- That's what we need to talk about.
- What's wrong?
- You shouldn't be writing to her and you know exactly why.

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- Ada, stop burning the kerosene lamp, go to bed, it's late.
- I'm coming, Mom. I have some things to finish.

My mother, seeing me with a goose feather in my hand, understood everything and said with a sigh:

•Ada, dear, don't write letters to your father, he won't get them anyway. You are old enough to understand that. I have made my peace, and I would like you to do the same. We have to be strong and learn to live without him," said my mother, as she left my room, quietly closing the door.

Left alone again, I picked up the pen. I wrote without stopping. The thoughts poured out one after another. I told my father about my brothers, all the pranks they had played while he was away, the change in my mother's behaviour towards me, the books they were reading, and many other things he would surely know about if only he were home with us now. I wanted to reproach him, to write how angry I was and how hurt I felt, but I couldn't... my hand wrote the words of love and longing. He has always been and will always be my most beloved father.

As I finished writing the last words, salty tears rolled down my cheeks again. Tired and emotional, I did not even realise that I had dozed off with my head on the table.

I dreamt that I put the letter in a glass wine bottle and threw it into the Nemunas. It floats away, carried by the current, ends up in the Baltic Sea, and finally floats out into the wide waters. It wanders for days, baked by the hot sun and washed by salty waves. Suddenly, he bumps into the edge of a small island. He would like to swim further, but a strong wave brings the bottle back to the island. He clings to a rock and lies there for several days. Suddenly, one morning, a man who had gone to the sea for a swim sees it. He takes out a letter from the bottle, sits down on the same stone and starts reading...

Suddenly I wake up. It's pitch black all around. I am still sitting at the table with the feather in my hand. I realise that I have dozed off and dreamt. When I wrote the letter to my father, I didn't know what I was going to do with it, I just wanted to express my thoughts, to vent my feelings. Now I had another idea in my head - to put the letter in a bottle of wine and, as in a dream, run it down the Nemunas. I went to bed knowing exactly what I was going to do in the early hours of the morning.

The first rays of sunlight wake me up. Without waiting for anything, I jump out of bed, hurriedly get dressed and go to the cellar in search of an old bottle of wine. When I find it, I slip in a letter and run to the river without falling over. My brothers, seeing me running somewhere in a daze, still tried to stop me, but I was already rushing down the road, with the Nemunas River rushing before my eyes. When I got to it, I took a sip and let go of the bottle. It was caught by the current and carried away. I watched, frozen, until it disappeared from my sight.

Returning from the river, I realised that something had happened - hope had been kindled in my heart. At home, I found my mother and my brothers already having breakfast. Without saying anything, I sat down at the table. I was hit by my mother's reproachful gaze like hot water. She saw right through me and understood everything.

- 'Don't write letters to your father, you know he won't get them, it's just a waste of time,' my mother said suddenly, and got up from the table and went out into the yard.

We didn't talk about it again for the rest of the day, but I felt like a stranger.

"It's not a waste of time. Hope will always burn in my heart. I am not going to put my hands down and just wait quietly," I said to myself.

## Chapter Six

Spring is earlier than ever this year. All the trees are in blossom, the flowers are blooming in the gardens and meadows. The birds were chirping happily and the yards were full of children's screams and pure laughter. More work has been done in the fields, so my mother, brothers and I have been working around the house. We had to plough the land, plant potatoes, sow vegetables and look after a few elms.

Next Sunday is Easter, the biggest celebration of spring. Every year we paint eggs, go to church and visit relatives. This year will be different - no dad around. Suddenly, I feel sad again, no longer happy about the warmth of the sun and the flowers blooming in the nursery. "What are the holidays without Daddy? Will he be celebrating Easter somewhere else on another corner of the earth too? Or is there no such holiday there?" - these and similar thoughts are going through my mind. Suddenly, my mother's voice interrupts them:

- Ada, go to your neighbour Elena and ask for ten eggs. It's Easter and we don't have eggs. We ate our chickens over the winter, so we don't have anyone to lay eggs.
- Okay, Mum, I'll get ready and run.

An hour later, I was in my neighbour Elena's yard. I couldn't find her anywhere, but I saw a boy I had never seen before. He was about my age, but he was a little out of shape for the year, with light, messy curls on his head and a slightly freckled face, but what struck me the most were the deep brown eyes that pierced through me.

- What are you doing here? - He asked me.
- And what are you doing here? Where is my neighbour Elena? I came to see her, I told him boldly.
- She's away at the market. I am her nephew. My mother is very ill, so Aunt Elena took me in.
- And where is your father? - suddenly, she burst out at me.
- He died when I was very young. The horse dropped him and turned his neck.
- Oh, how terrible! I'm sorry, I said a little more gently.
- Thank you. I don't remember him very well because I was very young and I miss my mother very much. I hope she will get well soon," she said in a rapid-fire voice. In fact, I was surprised by his openness, he spoke to me like an old friend, even though it was the first time we had met.
- My mother sent me eggs. Next Sunday is Easter, and we have no chickens, so no eggs. We could go to the market and buy some, but with Dad away, money is tight. But our neighbour Elena is very kind, and always helps us and Mummy," I said, encouraged by his openness.
- Well, I'm not the owner of this house, so I can't give it to you without your aunt's knowledge. If you have time, you can wait," he suggested.
- Is it true what your name is? - Suddenly it occurred to me that we hadn't introduced ourselves yet.
- Casimir, like my father.
- I'm Ada," I said, extending my hand, "nice to meet you.
- It's nice to meet you, too," said Casimir, shaking it firmly.



I had to wait quite a long time for my neighbour Elena. During that time, Kazimieras showed me around the farm, we petted all the cats and dogs in the yard, and fed the animals together. We talked and talked about our lives while we worked. It turns out that Casimir also likes to read and has several books. But they were left at home, and they are not here at my aunt's house, because my aunt Elena can't read, so the books are not needed. I promised to bring him a few of my books the next time I visit.

I came home in the evening. I could tell from the look in my mother's eyes that she was worried and unhappy, but when she found out that my neighbour Elena was not at home and that I had to wait for a long time, she calmed down and prepared a delicious dinner. I went to bed that night thinking that I was not the only one who was so lonely and unhappy. I miss my father very much, but he is alive, I know that, but he is far away, and he will come back, I am sure of it. Casimir's dad has been in heaven for a long time...

## Chapter Seven

Easter morning dawned. Mum was up at the crack of dawn, getting ready, decorating, setting the table, and after breakfast we had to go to church. I also jumped out of bed. My brothers were still sleeping sweetly - morning sleep is so sweet. My mother and I were hanging around in the kitchen, waiting for my brothers to show up. John was the first to come. He barely batted an eyelid and already grabbed the Easter egg he had taken. Mum slapped his hand in annoyance. John laughed uproariously and ran outside to wash himself with cold water from the well. Alex soon joined him. Dressed in the nicest clothes available, we sat down at the table. Mum said a prayer instead of Dad. My heart squeezed and tears welled up in my eyes. Mum's voice trembled as she said the prayer, but I hope my brothers did not notice.

After breakfast, we got into the carriage and went to the church in the town. There were already crowds of people there. Everyone was dressed up, in good spirits, kissing and greeting each other. Suddenly, I saw Casimir and his neighbour Elena in the crowd. When our eyes met, he smiled and waved his hand at me. I did the same.

During the service, the priest gave a very beautiful sermon, wishing everyone peace. I prayed to God all the time that nothing would happen to my father, that he would come back alive and well. I did not forget to pray and ask for the health of Casimir's mother. My heart broke at the thought that if he lost his mother, he would be a complete orphan. I started to mourn, but I looked at John, who, as usual, was bored during the service and was following a crawling fly with great interest. A smile reappeared on my face. I don't know whether it was the uplifting festive mood or the priest's convincing sermon that filled my heart with faith and hope that all would be well. My father will be back, I will definitely see him again and I will give him a big hug.

After the service, everyone was still in a hurry to leave: some of the men, who had left their women and children in the town square, were already hurrying to the inn to discuss "men's" business. The women, distracted from their chores, also chatted incessantly, sharing their joys and sorrows with others. The children, as soon as the last "Amen" was said, rushed out of the church and into the town squares and parks, running around as if they had broken the chain. Some of the little ones, indulged with a sweet bought by their parents, licked the treat in a quiet corner and felt like the happiest children on earth. For an hour, my mother and I were part of this sea of fun. But when many people started

asking about Daddy, how he was doing, if we had heard from him, Mummy's face started to frown and she hurried us home.

We got home in the afternoon, feeling tired after the hustle and bustle of the day. Mum quickly prepared dinner and took us to bed. Sitting in my room, I couldn't fall asleep.

Suddenly I felt the urge to write a letter to Dad again, to tell him about the first Easter without him, to ask him how he celebrated without us.

I sat down at the table again and started to write.

## Chapter Eight

- Peter, stop writing. You are only hurting yourself. You know your daughter will never get these letters! We are on an uninhabited island, there is no mail - nothing. Our ship is wrecked, and it is not clear whether it can be rebuilt.

- Antanas, I have not lost my sanity. I see and understand everything, but hope dies last. I did not intend to send them. I will give them all to Ada myself as soon as I get back to her house.

- You are as naive as a little child," Antanas grumbled discontentedly, "I have given up all hope. We're not getting out of here.

- There is always hope," Peter repeated like a prayer, "God will help us.

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Time was running out. Spring gave way to summer. It has been almost half a year since my father has been home. So far we have not heard from him. Mother's face grew greyer and greyer, the lights in her eyes were no longer shining, and the smile on her lips was less and less frequent. My brothers, too, seemed to have grown fatter, no longer childlike, and were less likely to play pranks and more likely to stay at home to help my mother and me. Nobody talked about my father. There was this bubble of fear and anxiety in the air, but everyone was afraid to say a word, lest it burst.

Casimir's mother, although feeling a little better, was so weak that she could not take care of herself. Our neighbour Elena, who was kind-hearted, looked after her sister and her son. Kazimieras grew even more mature and was not afraid of hard work: he would go to the fields with his men, go to the market - he was Aunt Elena's right-hand man.

During this summer, Kazimieras and I became very close friends. When we had a spare minute, we would visit each other, play, read and discuss books, just talk. I told him about my dad. I remembered all the best moments with him: jumping through puddles, making snowmen and snow angels, swimming in the river in the summer, reading books, listening to his stories about faraway lands in the evenings... I don't even feel the tears rolling down my cheeks as I tell this. Casimir wipes them away, hugs me and says:

- Don't lose hope, Ada. Your father is a strong man. He will overcome all obstacles and one day come back to you. Believe in him. Believe in yourself!

- Thank you for these words. I believe, I have never stopped believing. God will help us. Your mother will get better too. One day you will get out of bed and you will be able to return to your home. We do not deserve God's punishment, he cannot take our parents away from us," I said without stopping.

- God sends us all trials to make us stronger," Kazimieras repeated the priest's words from the sermon.

- I have always been strong, I don't need any tests," I tried to contradict him.
- We cannot know what we need," said Casimir philosophically, "Maybe after all the suffering and trials, there is joy waiting for us.

I feel warm and peaceful when I hear such words. I vow to myself never to lose hope and never to stop writing letters to my father.

As I do every night, after everyone is asleep, I sit down to write. Thoughts flow freely. I tell about my life, the troubles I have had, the joys I have experienced, the conversations I have had with my mother, the quarrels I have had with my brothers. I write and imagine that he is sitting next to me, nodding his head in agreement or frowning his brow if I am wrong. He smiles through his moustache at John's pranks, nodding approvingly that little Alex is big and can do a lot of things. I don't send letters anymore, I don't expect my father to find them, and I don't have that many bottles of wine, so I put them neatly in a wooden box to give them all to my father when he returns. He would read my letters during the night and know what happened during the time he was away. I smile at the thought.

I have already written about a dozen letters: "Dear Dad," I write, "I miss you very much. Today is a rainy day. I am thinking of all the times we used to play outside together. I wish you were here so we could talk, be, frolic together again..." Or another: "Dear Dad, today has been a wonderful day. Of course, it would be even more wonderful if you were here..." I pick up the other one and read: "Dear Daddy, Mummy was very angry today. I understand how hard it is for her. It's very hard for all of us, but she scolded me and John for not fetching water from the well, for not building the stove, for not helping her, for being lazy. That's not fair, Daddy. We do try to help her, but sometimes we just want to play with our friends or read a book. You would certainly understand me and never scold me. There would always be laughter and songs in the house, and we would be running around instead of tiptoeing, just so we don't make Mummy angry. Each letter is a tiny story of love, longing, desire and, above all, hope. It will never go out.

As I was putting the letters in the box, the door burst open and John burst into my room.

- What are you doing here? - I asked him in surprise.
- I can't sleep, my brother replied sadly.
- What's in this box? - He asked curiously and was already reaching for it. Fortunately, I grabbed it in time.
- Don't touch it, it's mine, you don't need to know," I shouted angrily.
- Do you have secrets? - John continued to chase me.
- Who doesn't?! - I retorted.

We were silent for an hour. Suddenly John asked:

- Don't you miss your dad? Where could he be now?

I was confused and silent. Until now, I thought it was only me who was missing him madly, who missed him the most. John and Alex were always frolicking, playing pranks and never mentioning Dad. Turns out he was hiding his feelings too. He missed his father as much as I did. He missed him. The house seemed uncomfortable and empty without him. Neither the innocent quarrels of the brothers nor the talk and laughter of the relatives who came to visit us could fill that void.

- You know you are missing. After all, I was always his favourite little daughter. I miss him every minute, I wake up every morning thinking about him and I fall asleep wondering where he is now, how he is doing,' I replied to John, without hiding my anguish.
- I have a secret. I'd like to tell you," John said shyly.
- You can always trust me, because I am your eldest sister.
- I found my dad's tools in the barn and started to carve. I'm carving boats," John admitted.
- That's great! - I exclaimed. You, like our father, have golden hands.
- When I carve, I think about him, I talk about him and I promised him that I would give him all my boats when he gets home," John continued.
- That will be the best present for him," I said and hugged my brother.

Holding him in my arms, I felt my nightgown getting wet. John cried even as he giggled. Until now he had only been pretending to be a strong and almost grown man, he didn't want to upset his mother, but his heart was suffering as much as the rest of us.

- 'I also have a secret,' I confessed to him, 'I keep letters written to my father in a box. I promise to give them to him when he comes back.

- Do you really believe he will come back? - John asked.

- I am sure of it, I replied firmly.

- Then I am even more sure," said John firmly.

My heart was filled with joy. We both have not lost faith. We will never lose it. We will support each other in our weakest moments.

- I love you, my little brother.
- I am not so little anymore. I am only a year younger than you," John replied unhappily.
- I know, but you have to listen to me. Now go to bed before Mum catches us and gets the whole house on its feet.
- I'm listening, sis. Good night,' said John and quietly slipped out of my room.

"I'll have to write about that in my next letter," I thought dreamily, and drifted off into the realm of sleep.

## Chapter Nine

- How do you think we will get on, Peter? - Antanas asked excitedly.
- We managed to rebuild part of the ship, Peter replied calmly.
- We don't have sails," said Antony, upset.

Peter, calmly scratching at the boat, said:

- I know it will take a while to get back, but we will at least try to get off this island, and then it will be as God wills.

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I woke up to early sunshine. I got out of bed, dressed quickly and ran to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. My mother was already up. She hadn't slept much lately and complained of terrible dreams. I had always tried to comfort her, to cheer her up, but I was

struggling. Every day she was becoming more and more withdrawn into her own world and took little interest in what was happening around her. We ate in silence. Reluctantly, after swallowing a few bites, I tidied up the kitchen and went out into the courtyard. I sat down on the bench and for an hour I watched the chickens digging in the loose earth for earthworms, my beloved dog Margie chewing sweetly on a bone, and, a little further away, I saw the sheep munching on the grass ... Suddenly a thought crossed my mind: "Father has been away for some time, but nothing has changed - everything is as it was, only there is an emptiness in my heart."

My thoughts were interrupted by John appearing in the yard. He rushed into the barn without noticing me. I knew immediately what he needed there. I timidly followed him. Through the crack of the open door, I watched as he took out his tools, picked up a wood saw and started carving. I watched him for an hour: his face so intent, his hands so deft. I admired my brother, how skilful he was - just like our father.

- May I come in? - I ask timidly.

John, caught unawares, flinches, but on reflection says:

- Come in if you like.
- It's been a long time since I've been here, I say quietly. - The last time I visited was when my father was carving the wooden box in which I now keep the letters I write him.
- And I spend a lot of time here," says John.
- So that's where you disappeared! I thought you were wandering around with your friends, looking for adventure, but you were here," I laughed.
- Well, yes. I don't really care about fun now. But here I feel good, I can still smell my father's smell, I can still feel his presence near me," John said sadly.
- Could you show me your boats that you talked about last night? - I asked eagerly.

John opened a chest in the corner and started pulling out one by one ships of all sizes and models. I looked at them carefully and gasped with admiration:

- How talented you are, John! How proud you are! He would be so proud of you.
- I have a dream," he said shyly, "I dream of building a big, real ship and going out to find my dad.

I lost my mind for an hour. The thought of looking for him never crossed my mind. After thinking about it, I ask:

- Will you take me with you?
- I've been thinking about it for a long time," John replies, "It would be fun to go on a trip with you, but you have to stay at home and look after Mum and little Alex. We can't leave them alone.
- Then I don't want you to go," I replied through tears, "my heart would break with pain if I lost you too.
- Calm down, I'm not going anywhere yet, and I wouldn't build a huge ship on my own," John reassured me.

I felt a little better - in the meantime, maybe Dad will be back and John won't have to go anywhere.

- Promise me that you will never leave without telling me and saying goodbye.  
Promise me that you won't do what our dad did, I begged him.
- I promise," John replied firmly.

I was a little relieved, but my chest was still heavy with fear and the pain of loss. All day long I was like a stranger. In the evening I sat down to write again, told my father about John's idea and asked him to come back as soon as possible.

## Chapter Ten

The third summer was coming to an end. As I was sweeping the yard, I thought that it had been three years since we had lived without my father. Everything had changed: I had grown up from a freckled girl with permanently white knees and tangled hair into a beautiful lady, my brothers had gone from being cheerful boys who couldn't stand still to sturdy, serious young men, and my mother had become even shorter, more flabby, with a paler face and a duller gaze. She looked small and fragile as she stood beside us. Now we didn't let her work so much, we took all the housework into our own hands.

- I'm going to the market, I'll sell some of our cow's milk, it's a little money in my pocket," John said seriously, kicking the horse.
- In the meantime, I'll mow the meadows," said Alex, walking with his scythe on his shoulder.

My mother and I were alone in the house. As I was getting ready around the house, I was always talking, saying things, but I don't know if my mother was listening, or if she could hear us at all. She would sit in her chair all day long, looking out of the window into the distance and thinking about something. What she was thinking about, she never said, but my brothers and I sensed that the longing and the pain of loss were finally breaking our dear mother. Maybe I would have given up over the years, but three years ago I found a bottle with the note 'Hope' on it, and the letters I wrote to my father every night, and I could not give up, I could not let go. John had already amassed a collection of ships, large and small. "Maybe he too is starting to lose hope?", I thought fearfully.

- Mum, I've prepared lunch for you. Be good, eat. I'm going to run to my neighbour Elena's to visit Casimir. I shouldn't be long," I said, giving her a peck on the cheek, and left the house.

In the meantime, Casimir's mother had recovered, got stronger, and was able to enjoy life again. They both decided not to return to their home, to stay with Sister Elena and help her on the farm. Elena, of course, was very happy about their decision: she would no longer have to work alone on the farm, and she would not be so sad during the long winter evenings. Casimir became like a son to her. She and Elena used to squat like chickens, so that he would not be in need of anything, so that he would always have a tasty snack and a drink of cold water when he was in the fields. Kazimieras would return the favour by kissing the women he loved when they returned, and he would not forget to bring them treats or a silk scarf from the market. Harmony and peace prevailed in their home. I was thinking about this as I hurried to Kazimieras: "If God helped Casimir's mother to get

well and get out of her sick bed, maybe He won't abandon us and help my father to come home before my mother dies of grief".

- Hi, my beautiful girl, how are you? - he asked jokingly and in good spirits.
- As always. You know. I will never feel happy until I know where my father is, what happened to him," I answered quietly.
- Today I was in the market and overheard a conversation. Men were talking about your father, mentioning the shipwreck.
- Oh, no!", I exclaimed, not allowing him to continue.
- Wait, listen. They said that somehow they managed to rebuild the ship and now they are sailing back. That's why it took so long.
- It can't be! Thank you! I knew, I always knew he was alive! - I threw myself into his arms and burst into tears, this time tears of joy.

After my emotions had subsided, I visited them again, had tea and cake and ran home. The reaction of the household to my news was subdued: the brothers just shrugged, shook their heads and went on with their work, the mother's eyes sparkled for a second, but then she looked away again, and then looked out of the window into the distance. I was the only one who turned around the house with a dance step, humming softly. "Hope never dies," I repeated to myself in my mind.

Winter had come. It was as bleak and cold as ever. We rarely went out because we were often snowed in. The cold penetrated not only into my bones but also into my heart.

Another Christmas without Daddy. But I was stubborn. Every evening, in my cold room, I would sit at my desk to write. I wrote and waited, waited and wrote...

Icicles dripped from the rooftops, cats squatted in the yard, longing for the warmth of the sun, and the first signs of spring appeared. And with spring, hope was reborn. From the very morning, I was happily tidying up the house, chatting with my brothers, petting the dogs who were yapping around my feet, hoping for a tastier morsel. Suddenly, in the distance, I heard a neighbour's boy screaming:

- He's back! They're back!

My chest tightened with excitement. Without waiting for anything, and despite the fact that it was still chilly outside, I ran out into the yard in one dress. I started to run to the river, as if in a daze. In the distance I saw people coming back from the river. I knew my father immediately. He was very old, grey-haired, his clothes were shabby, but he had the same deep, serious look, the same smile on his lips. I stood there as if shocked and could not believe it. I had dreamt so much, dreamt about this moment, and now it was coming true. Here he is, walking towards me... Suddenly, my father stopped, his gaze piercing me. Finally, recognising his daughter, he opened his arms and came to me, clasping me in his embrace. The wind caressed my wet cheeks, wet with tears, penetrated deep into my thin dress, but I felt neither the icy cold nor the bitter wind, a fire burned in my heart.

I remember through a haze how we came home, how my mother and brothers welcomed us, what I was preparing for dinner. It was like a fog. But I am calm, because I know that we will have plenty of time to be together, to talk things out, to hand over the letters we have written, to show John's collection of ships. Suddenly I remember the song: 'Never go out, little light of hope!' and a broad smile lights up my face.

