

**НАЦИОНАЛЕН ЛИТЕРАТУРЕН КОНКУРС
ЗА АВТОРСКИ ТЕКСТОВЕ НА АНГЛИЙСКИ И НЕМСКИ ЕЗИК
"ТОЗИ БЕЗКРАЕН СВЯТ"
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АНГЛИЙСКИ ЕЗИК

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ПЪРВА НАГРАДА

83 "Of Credibility and Writing"

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Of Credibility and Writing

It's not about the destination - they said - it's about the journey.

My personal opinion would, under normal circumstances, beg to differ, but as the protagonist of this story I need to be predictable and boring but inspiring in a good way, possessing high moral values and average intellect that enables my friends to occasionally lend me a helping hand in their roles of secondary characters with no real development.

Because everything here is about me, because I like thinking my destiny is my own to make and the path I take is a path I pave myself.

As it seems, I've become aware of my significant role in this entertaining ploy meaning to reap success, which, in my personal opinion, will only end in failure. Fruitless is the outcome and barren are the lands I walk upon. Every hour spent on my unsaid story is meaningless and vain, an idle act of self-indulgence meant to satisfy an inward need for praise and glory.

My name is inconsequential – isn't that ironic?

You won't hear me mention it because I might be important but, much like this humble excerpt of a way longer monologue, I am only an image conjured by a

tired mind and I have one goal – to successfully imitate and effectively convey inherent human qualities in order to seem plausible, evoke sympathy and bring reality to a digital page of what can otherwise be called illiterate garbage.

It's hard to be a protagonist. There are things you absolutely have to do – be flawed but always improve, don't lie unless written otherwise, always have that one supporting character you never leave, either find the love of your life or have the epiphany you don't need it to love yourself and be happy - and others you are forbid to even fancy thinking of. Such examples are: drug usage, criminal actions and immoral behaviour of all kinds.

For the sake of simple censure, most writers tend to avoid all aforementioned (and other additional) taboo topics unless they wish to appear controversial, innovative and brave (or plain careless) or relate certain social commentary on said topic by either playing out a bad scenario and portraying the worst possible outcome as to show the reality of the possible consequences or straight-up inserting their personal opinion in their writing in such an intrusive way the reader has no other choice but to think it through.

I once knew a controversial character – it was back in my first drafts. Can you believe I was once not the one written role all spotlights landed on? I cannot.

Back to the controversy – a writer's desperate attempt to break the mould and turn something bad into money using only their words. If you ask me lawyers do it way better. The character my author created was... weird to say the least. And that's putting it kindly just because I'm not allowed to think badly of anybody besides my enemy.

The taboo character was a sceredy cat with a drug problem and a strange thing he liked to call “depression”. Don't get me wrong, I know that's a real thing. The problem here, however, stood elsewhere. I don't remember the guy's name anymore, I only know he was the first character who was so out of place in a world he supposedly belonged in he decided to cut – not his wrists but himself.

Word by word, he cut himself out of the story. Leading a dialogue with him was hard, he looked but he couldn't see. He was always bleeding, always cold, always wishing he could be elsewhere. I can read between the lines (because I'm supposed to be tactful and empathetic) but I knew very little of what he felt. It's like his essence was suddenly absent.

Appearances in thick paragraphs turned to small lines amidst a boring scene until they vanished altogether.

He was too big a step for the author too take, a type of fame which would bring no satisfaction whatsoever. Maybe he was a sad reflection of something better left unsaid.

Maybe he was realer than he thought - realer than me, than anybody in this story. Maybe he could lead this monologue better. I don't know anymore.

Either way, I must go on. Because I am the main character everybody relies on. Not everybody – *everything*. I am created to surpass the limitations of much more than a complex plot and an engaging storyline meant to hook a bunch of bookworms to a number of pages.

I am what creates income for my creator and I am real – for a single second, a simple moment, an infinitesimal instant – I take the form of nothing I want and I can't bend my own image to my will but I am vouchsafed the gift of speech, of existence, of evanescent glory.

Because somewhere out there a single person is reading my words that are not my words and he is thinking of me as somebody who speaks to him. There is the notion that stories don't influence the human mind – I think I just managed to prove it wrong. For at least one person, I proved it wrong.

I changed the story – not mine, *theirs*. All it took was a few words, a number of cunning phrases, a dozen of pompous adjectives and adverbs, some mistakenly placed commas a stickler would never approve of and the brief idea which gave all of them life.

This is why I am here, why I am important, why the spotlights are on me. This is why I don't curse or I do so in moderation, this is why I fear censure and lack of critical acclaim. This is why I rarely lie, this is why I always improve, this is why I love and cry, and laugh, and everything else a human being is known to do and experience. This is why I am written, living, breathing and flawed.

This is why it's not about the journey – it's about the destination.

It's about the kid who is bewildered by the weird long words and the incomprehensible sentences, only to reread them a few years later and find itself inside.

It's about the elderly who curse at the non-conservative writing and outrageous ideas of the story only to find themselves falling asleep to their tune in the evening.

It's about the single mothers and the working fathers who don't have the energy to read this due to too much work, then get a weekend off work only to throw my story to the side because it needs too much thinking. Still, they know they'll pick it up again later.

It's about the students who hate reading and think themselves cool if they rebel against everything, only to trace a random line with their eyes and feel a curious itch in their gut. I know them and they'll get to know me too. I promise I'm good.

It's about the outcast who enjoys books so much he has forgotten what it's like to get stuck at a long chapter and actually put a bit of thought into what you're reading. I see you gliding a finger over the word "depression". Do not worry for my words won't let you bleed.

It's about the author who hates me so much he stops writing me, only to later let his fingers hover above the keyboard ever so hesitantly. I know it's hard to come back to me – even though I'm the greatest character you've ever written – but you keep doing it. Why? Maybe there's still something for me to say. Maybe you think so too. I'm sorry if your eyes hurt from writing too much but this is my moment and you're supposed to keep going until I'm done.

I am a protagonist but I tend to be selfish. I lie only when I say I'm real. But I am for you, isn't that right?

In the end, that's all that matters. My reality is different from yours – hard but with a better ending, a definite one – it's somewhere you can escape for a while, and whilst I go on all kinds of adventures, you pack your bag and follow - blindly, impulsively - just to eschew tedium and negate your problems.

I have a proclivity to not judge too harshly, so I won't voice any prejudice even if I have a piece of it. After all, I've been supportive hitherto – why stop now? A main character doesn't turn on his fans unless strictly written so.

Let me take you on a journey? You'll find the destination unpleasant, so I ask of you to enjoy it while it lasts.

We can walk down a cobblestone street in a small village in the outskirts of a town neither of us knows the name of. We can watch the gabled houses through a punctured wall of gnarled branches, we can potter about steep hills and nimbly avoid the strident call of life bursting about our forms. I can chafe my lips together, you can cogently tell me stories of yourself and we can breathe the balmy air during a light-hearted discourse neither of us wishes to end.

We can seldom check the time by looking at the setting sun and adroitly jump over any vicissitude standing in our way. We can bask in the last golden rays and tacitly genuflect before the picturesque view we'll soon be robbed of. We can doff our hats and rest in the shadow of a tall tree, contemplating our insipid days and our rueful choices. We can share our debilities and slowly give into our lassitude.

We can watch the fleecy clouds give way to a shiny conglomeration of stars through half-closed eyes and we can just barely utter a word under the somniferous influence of the murk gently engulfing our bodies.

I am afraid we do not welcome the warm sun together the following morning. Your alarm has already rung and I am stuck between the pages you've last held in your hands. That's the good part about being fictional – I'm always there.

Naturally, I didn't lie when I said the destination is worse than the journey. Why? Because your destination is the dreadful reality you've tried to avoid and mine is the end of this story until it starts over again, gripped and devoured by somebody's desperation to bring me down the same road I've walked a million times already.

It doesn't matter. Because my journey is the same but your destination always changes. It's fascinating how a number of pages can change so many things for so many different people. And since this is just a random escapade I'm meant to embark on, I am pleasantly surprised to announce I – for once – do not know how it ends.

One thing, however, I do know. There is somebody out there reading this now – reading and thinking, and considering, then reconsidering. This might've been a futile attempt at success where I play the main role but we've at once reached our destination. So how is it? Describe it to me – not the road, but the end of it.

ВТОРА НАГРАДА

41 “The Yellow Garden”

София Руменова Енчева
МГ „Баба Тонка“, гр. Русе

The Yellow Garden

Inspired by true events

“It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.”

Sir Edmund Hillary

Climbing was a gruelling and tiresome process. As the hours went by, each and every step upwards caused the Poet immense pain. Only the thought of reaching the peak was keeping him moving, as if once he stepped on the top, everything would change. Surrounded by nothing but the blinding shade of white reflected by endless mountains of snow and ice, he was helpless under the crumbling weight of his equipment. The years of patient preparation leading up to this day played in his mind over and over again: the physical training that felt like he was continuously at war with his own strength and will, the tiny room he came home to at night with his limbs aching and his fingers bleeding from holding onto the trekking poles for dear life. These memories of his miserable existence made him resent the reality he was escaping from even more. Flashbacks of faces danced around in the snow, disappearing somewhere behind him as he was struggling to move forward. The landlord who threatened to leave him on the streets after he had invested all his savings in the expedition. The doctor who tried to convince him to abandon his dream because he wasn't strong enough to endure the climb. The people from the federation who refused to fund the group, delaying the one event he looked forward to by over two years. 730 additional days of torture, of uncertainty, of having to exist in a world where everyone is satisfied with being equally ordinary, at the sea level of life, counting the hours until the end of their shift, the days until their next holiday. People who had relatives, who were loved, but who would one day be gone, forgotten, nameless to the history of tomorrow.

The Poet picked up his pace, hoping to see a fellow climber, a change in scenery, anything that could distract him from his own chain of thought which was choking, bringing out bitter resentment amplified by raw suffering somewhere in the depths of his subconscious, waiting for his legs to give out and his mind to soar into a delirious haze to torment him. There was only snow-white nothingness standing strong against the deadly gusts of wind that hissed around

his ears painfully. He could feel the severe frost slowly numbing his face and hands as he was moving closer and closer to the death zone, a few hundred metres away from the summit. He was finally about to experience what he had only been able to imagine during the lonely hours in his room, what he had been carefully planning and calculating in the comfort of safety, what he had weighed the risks of with the confidence of an experienced climber and the sheer horror of a mere mortal fighting the laws of nature. As he was starting to breathe heavily, he struggled to recall any snippet of information that could motivate him, help him keep moving. Roughly 848 metres left to the top. One second per metre at a normal speed would mean that 848 seconds were enough for him to achieve his ultimate dream. Yet, it could take as many as 12 hours, even for the most robust of climbers. But what importance does time make when you are that close to feeling complete, accomplished, and – for one blissfully beautiful moment – content with reality for giving you mountains to ascend and a beating heart to resound through your chest as you acknowledge your triumph over all that is wrong with the world, and more importantly – over yourself?

Back at the base camp, where the rest of the group were still preparing to attack the summit, everyone was silent following yet another unsuccessful attempt to radio the Poet. Time was running out for his safe return before nighttime. The great difficulty tracking him down rendered sending someone to his rescue impossible. He could be planting the poem he had been working on in the snow at the top, he could be minutes away from returning safely, or he... It had been his choice to leave before them, hardly an understandable one but the hikers, albeit reluctant to let him risk his life, secretly admired him for his dedication to the sport, a dedication that he had given up his future as a literature student for, as well as his relationship with his parents, who strongly disapproved of his passion for climbing. Only Isaiah, being the one closest to him, knew about his financial struggles. He had been with the Poet when he fell and broke one of his trekking poles during a test hike, only to return the next day with a hastily bandaged wrist and a single pole. Isaiah smiled at the image of his friend's face when he offered him his spare pole, a yellow one, contrasting the bright green of the original pair sharply. Now, when the Poet was at the mercy of the ruthless night somewhere too high up the mountain to even consider his chances of survival, Isaiah was desperately trying to think of a way to save him. The silence was pierced by a sudden ring of the satellite phone, catching the group by surprise and causing a flicker of a hopeful smile to pass over their features. Moments later it was silent yet again – the terrifying stillness that inevitably follows after realising a battle was about to be lost and no good deed would ever be able to redeem it.

A blizzard was coming.

There was no time to panic: the climbers had to quickly shore up the camp and anticipate the worst possible outcome. Searching for the Poet was delayed until

the following morning. Isaiah left in a hurry to check on the nearby camps and ask for spare provisions.

It was freezing, but the Poet felt inexplicably warm in the dark night. He was so high up that the stars on the horizon were close enough to reach; their soft glow over his face felt like the gentle caress of a loved one he had never thought he needed until this moment that seemed to last for ages. Now all he could imagine was his mother's tight embrace, his childhood home, the smell of old books and the flower garden where he spent his most peaceful days. He was complete at last.

Hours later, just as the morning sunlight was wiping away the last traces of night on the skyline, another call on the satellite phone brought the group to tears. Isaiah was missing. Two trekking poles – one yellow and one neon green – were found just below the summit. No one was able to determine whether the climber was on the way back from the top or metres away from conquering it. Only one thing was certain – he would likely remain on the mountain forever, becoming one with the single path from which he couldn't find his way to return.

The poem was never found, and was soon forgotten.

ТРЕТА НАГРАДА

43 “Is It Worth It if You Give Up In the End”

Боряна Иванова Цветкова

1.ЕГ, гр. Варна

Is it worth it if you give up in the end?

He’s been walking for hours. The path is cobblestone and crooked steps, and he trips more than he walks. It’s pitch black, and his eyes still haven’t adjusted. He knows they never will. Not to this kind of darkness.

The air is clammy, freezing and scorching at the same time – the air in a tunnel leading to the Underworld. The walls are moving, constricting around him, like they want to suffocate him. They probably do. They whisper in his ears – desperate cries, rueful confessions, angry hisses. They beg and they blame and they mourn. It’s too much.

But there’s a presence he feels behind him, a warm breath tickling his neck, and his shoulders lose some of the tension etched in the muscles. Then she’s gone and he starts to panic, but a second later he catches her scent, of spring flowers and pine trees and life and happiness. She keeps disappearing and coming back and he can’t turn around to make sure she’s still there. It’s a never-ending cycle of anxiety.

His legs are burning, straining against the effort to keep going. His chest is heavy, lungs on fire, sweat rolls down his back in cold droplets and his skin is sticky with grime. He wants to stop. He aches down to his bones. He can’t go on anymore. But he has to.

He has to, because there is no other way. The path is only one, and there is no going back, and if he stops, even for a moment, he’s risking it all. All, which he has been promised to be walking behind him, which he has bargained with Death for, which he imagines his future with. She is all, and without her he is nothing, and he cannot stop, or turn, or touch, or hear. So he speaks in the language of bards, all before him and all after him. He speaks in music, with his lyre and his voice.

His words soothe the whispers and his notes steady the drafts. Walking becomes easier. Somewhere far, far ahead a sliver of light pierces the darkness. His heart leaps up in his chest. Relief. Relief is near. His entire body protests as he pushes it to its limits one last time. Just a bit longer, and he will have joy and happiness and a life bards only dream of when they let themselves be convinced to stay, stay a bit longer, and then lose the path they'd been walking so far.

He knows his path. It's slippery and uneven, it's torturous, uncertain, but it's the only one for him. He squares his shoulders, bites back the pain in his bleeding fingers. His voice fills with new resolve, louder and stronger than before. The walls draw back. They've grown silent, listening in hypnotising bliss.

Patience, he was told. Patience would prove his dedication. But not sooner than the goal was reached. He is close, so close.

The sliver of light turns into an opening. Grass spatters the stones, brushes his bare, raw feet. The wind carries the scent of everything familiar, of woods and sun, of rivers and soil, chasing away the stench of misery and defeat.

The opening becomes a portal – a gate, separating life from death, everything from nothing, pleasure from despair. His voice reaches a crescendo, but his feet are dragging and his breaths come up short. He needs rest and there's a nagging in his chest, a buzzing in his head, feeding him lies and fears and doubts, and could it all be for nothing?

He can't wait anymore. He's there, at an arm's length of his promised future, one step separating him from eternal happiness. He is close enough, he is there.

(He is too far away.)

Orpheus turns.
Eurydice dissolves into air before his eyes.

ТРЕТА НАГРАДА

98 “After the End - the Way Upward”

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After The End - The Way Upward

(Essay)

How many times have you been unable to see the way forward? For how long have you scrutinized the unknown, waiting for a godsend revelation? Most of us are tremulously timid in the wind of change, in the face of those impending endings. Little does it matter whether a relationship, an ideal or a version of us wanes - an inner revolt is inevitably triggered. We are prone to clinging to the familiar road until Fortune herself graciously cuts it off with her treacherous scissors. Even after, not a small number of us find ourselves kneeling down, treasuring the ragged pieces and trying to sew them back together. But what if, contrary to popular belief, there is no way forward? What if the way goes upward?

Life is commonly perceived as a linear journey - a thread entwined with myriad beads of experience. Human beings savor the brevity of occasional flights in the skies, frequently followed by a sobering landing on the axis of reality. Endings are viewed as periods of closure and descent. For this reason, we are so intimidated when they set foot nowhere else but on our own threshold. I recently bade farewell to my first flame. He would often paint pictures of a shared future - he said he pictured me in white. All of us have these apparitions scattered on the canvas of our mind. They give meaning to our existence, invigorate us and illuminate our itinerary. Naturally, if the itinerary gets irreparably torn, we feel disoriented. Some of us will do everything in their power to avoid the discomfort of the unknown. In my personal experience, the most effective way to do so is to immediately sketch a new itinerary. Thus, we intend to prove, mostly to ourselves, how unshakeable we are. After all, we have found the way forward.

While hastily moving on is an indispensable short-term painkiller, it impedes healing and growth. During the formative years of our development a vast majority of us are taught that vulnerability is a flaw in need of reinforcements. As a result, most human beings learn that the best coping strategy for negative emotions is bottling them up. Applying it, however, turns them into withering buds; they never muster the courage to open up their petals and embrace the purifying morning dew. Each closure in our lives requires a period of

introspection. It might seem counterproductive - lagging behind under the influence of your emotions. On the contrary, pulling off the road and exploring your emotional jungle is an investment worth making. There are bound to be some lions lurking in the bushes - deeply ingrained childhood fears, encapsulated bitterness and failures; lions which would otherwise keep navigating your course. As ridiculous as it may seem, they can all be tamed with a gentle caress through the mane. These inhabitants of our emotional world are starved for love, warmth and compassion. Tending to their needs with patience and understanding holds potential for an elevating liberation.

The way upward begins when we make peace with the past. It is a long process of taking responsibility, making amends and letting go. We might have to go many years back to offer our apologies and ask for forgiveness from people we have not seen for ages. We might choose to forgive those who did us wrong but never apologized; we might have to forgive our own parents. It may be high time some of us discarded keepsakes from past lovers, along with promises no longer valid. Last but not least, we could part with any belonging which reminds us of a negative experience and keeps us emotionally anchored to the past. Is it uncomfortable? Definitely! Human beings have a hard time accepting their shadows and liberating themselves from shadows externally projected on them. At the same time, such bold steps are the letters of an explicit statement - the statement of who we truly are beyond our shadows and earthly limitations. When the scales of the past and present get even our hearts are purified from fear and bitterness. As a natural consequence, we experience realignment with our essence. In its immaculate form, our soul fervently aspires for the wisdom of experience. Therefore, in the absence of accumulated pain, the spirit is no longer afraid of the unknown - it is no longer afraid of growth.

All in all, I am inclined to believe that Fortune utilizes her scissors in order to provide us with shortcuts to personal authenticity. Unless we decide to hectically run forward in fear of the unknown, we might discover the healing power of endings. Observing ourselves kindly is a beautiful experience because, regardless of our mistakes, we are mostly good-natured, ever-evolving beings. Recognizing this fact makes apologies sincere and forgiveness easier. Once we begin to consciously and responsibly detach from the painful roots of our past, our soul can finally come into play - to eke out the wisdom of experience and elevate us to the next level of understanding. If you choose to assist her, she will do so every time.

ПОЩРЕНИЕ

1) 64 “The Theory of Shoes, Mazes, and Passages in the Sky”

Ния Станимирова Вълнова
1.ЕГ, гр. Варна

The theory of shoes, mazes and passages in the sky

I've worn my mom's shoes since I was five.

Sparkly and feminine was what immediately grabbed the little girl's attention, the thought of transforming into a runaway model the moment she puts the high heels on, exciting her to no end.

Since my feet were so tiny at that age, there was plenty of space for dreams and possibilities to find their way in the fancy shoes, tickle my ankles with a feathery touch, greet my heels and swirl around my toes.

The awfully small corridor(no more than two meters) cramped up with more shoes, boxes and whatnot, expands in front of the little girl, taking the form of a big enough stage for her made-up fashion show.

She's sure modelling is her true calling.

I'm fifteen and my mom's Mary Janes are filled uncomfortably with cotton.

The teenage girl, an actress in the making, is yet to be introduced to the living creature that is the theatre.

She's on stage, flowers of uncertainty, fear and nervousness protruding from the floor beneath her feet, ready to make her stumble at any given moment. Closing her eyes, the young girl hopes that the cotton will be enough to stabilize her feet in the size too big shoes.

The red curtains separating me from the crowd, start to lift slowly, the light that shines from the projectors, scorching the weeds around my legs, opening up a free path that lays in front of me.

At that moment, she's certain that she's taken the right road.

That it's all written in the stars.

I'm twenty-five and my mom's white sneakers, now bursting at the seams with rocks, expectations and unachieved dreams, have been taking me to the wrong side of the subway station for the last five years.

It's 7:30 pm on a Friday and I find myself glued to the same spot at the crowded station, waiting for a train that is almost always late.

The underground tube, an endless maze of paths that intertwined as fast as they untangled to continue into their own lane, was buzzing with chatter, mixed up with the screeching of the trains and the sound of drumming coming from someone busking in one of the many corridors of the labyrinth.

Night shifts at the hospital on 506 Lenox Avenue in Manhattan, had become one of the main reasons for my life feeling like it had come to a halt at the age of 25. The vicious circle that had gradually built itself around me was a suffocating force of repetitiveness that tightened around my body every time I tried to do something apart from work. The memories of days and weeks were dancing around my head freely, merging into one, making the last years of my life into a never ending shift at the hospital.

The orchestra of sounds that surrounded me is interrupted by the clear male voice announcing the arrival of a train that I don't want to take.

I take a few steps, stopping at the bright yellow line that separates the citizens at the station from certain demise, joining the swarm of people, waiting for the already late train to arrive.

I see the ride emerging from the dark tunnel, the familiar blue lines all over the metallic shell looking as bright as ever, accompanied by the loud noise of the train coming to a stop that briefly reminded me of a high-pitched mock laugh. In the corner of my eye, I can make the silhouette of another train, this one with red lines running along the metal roof.

Turning around, I spot a group of girls carrying colorful garment cases over their shoulders, some holding instrument cases and enormous makeup bags, white stapled sheets hanging from one of the actresses' hands, who is laughing at what her colleague had just said.

They are getting on the red train.

A beat passes.

'Should I?'

A sudden urge to follow them, to break from the never-ending circle of my days, erupts in my chest like a wildfire. I try to do something, to take a step towards what I once thought was my yellow brick road. But with the years passing, the rocks that have been piling up more and more in my shoes seem to have gained magnetic properties.

I find myself getting on the train with the big blue number 7 placed on the back of it.

'I heard that you are trying to get yourself fired from the hospital.'

The message pops up on my phone right before I have to get off the train.

I'm gripping the metal pole right next to the door, squished between it and an old lady with a big purse at her side. My phone screen, in a matter of seconds since the first message, is already littered with long texts that are full with words of disappointment and expectations.

Muting the messages from my mom, I put the phone back in my bag.

A female voice rings through the whole place, the name of the next stop, alerting some of the sitting passengers that it's their cue to get up and near the doors, ready to get off as fast as they can. The train is starting to slow down, the only thing running through my mind being the messages from my mom, her voice clear in my head, substituting the music that is blaring from one of the earphones. The train has already come to a stop, the 'ding dong' sound that notified of the opening doors, stirring up rapid movement in the compartment.

I can't seem to move.

Someone bumps into me as a stream of curses and glares are delivered my way. I become aware that I have turned into an obstacle for the people who are trying to get off. And I'm shocked, because I should be one of these people.

The rocks in my shoes are starting to heat up quickly to the point of burning, the more I stand like a statue in front of the doors that are wide open for what feels like too long, almost as if waiting for me to do what I do every single day.

'Please, stand clear of the closing doors'

Before I can realize what had happened, I'm already on the way to the next stop.

I get off on a new territory, an unknown part of the big underground labyrinth materializing in front of me. As soon as I set foot on the dirty colored tiles of this newfound place, I feel like thousands of eyes are cast upon my figure, all judging.

Do people know that I shouldn't be here?

With every step towards the exit, the white sneakers that I have on start to weight more, the feeling of guilt slipping in the shoes, coating the rocks with its existence.

I'm running, taking two steps at a time, trying to dodge the people in my way, whose eyes join the pile of stares that are crawling up my legs and back. Resurfacing from the maze, I wonder off in a random direction, searching for a place to hide from all the overwhelming emotions which had turned into the colorless creature with many eyes that is now chasing me.

Looking up to try to catch my breath, I notice the fusion of colors and it dawns on me that I haven't seen the sky in another color apart from black, or a dark blue for the past 3 months. Stopping in the middle of the street, sure that the monster had lost me somewhere down streets or got stuck in rush hour, I marvel at the palette of colors above me. The constant night shifts had turned me into a nocturnal creature, the days being the time for sleep and the time between 8 pm to 7 am for action. Summer had come without me noticing.

Still starrng at the sky that was starting to turn purple, I catch a glimpse of a pair of hanging shoes on the power lines above my head. Tracing with my eyes the path of the knotted wires towards one of the smaller streets, I notice more and more hanging shoes-old sneakers, leather boots, ballet shoes and dozens of others. Following the path of footwear in the sky, I stop under a pair of shoes that look exactly like my white sneakers.

It's not the first time that I see packed with shoes wires, the sight reminding me of the last days before graduation at my hometown. It was a tradition done by the seniors, ready to discard themselves of the old and open a place for the new path that awaited them after high school.

I never got the chance to fling my shoes up in the air and see them hang next to my friends'. The shoes weren't mine after all.

They were my mom's.

And now, after so many years, I finally had the opportunity to start anew.

Taking off the sneakers, the warm pavement tickling my feet, adrenaline coursing through my body, I tie them together tightly, ready to launch them up next to all the other ones.

But I forget about all the rocks and expectations that are hiding inside of them.

I'm frozen, frustration taking the place of the confidence that was inside me seconds ago, and I feel helpless.

I can't do it.

I sit down under all the forgotten paths, and the stars on the sky that I once believed would write the story that the fifteen-year-old 'actress' deserved.

I know that I should undo the ties of the white sneakers, put them on, go back to the station and take the train to the hospital.

But for now I'll just sit, barefoot under the summer sky, waiting for the day that I'll be able to leave the shoes to the mercy of time, hanging on one of the many wires in town, and march barefoot down my path.

Free.

ПОЩРЕНИЕ

2) 29 “The Way”

Александър Антонов Кабрански
ПМГ „Атанас Радев“, гр. Ямбол

The way

I was born like a little path in the snow. On this February day I was sleeping under a blanket of snow dreaming about the spring and its first sunbeams, verdant grass and wild flowers. The snowflakes were falling silently and lovely piling up a snow cover over the glade. Each of them was dancing their own dance spinning enchantingly in the air. These are my first memories of the moments when I woke up to life with each new step tearing the perfect whiteness which surrounded me.

They were the footsteps of a man and a woman carrying their sick child. He was walking in front leaving tracks and she was struggling to follow them in order not to sink into the deep snow. In a hurry and frightened though tense, they did not stop walking. Thus began my existence like any other in pain, but also with the will to live.

It was she who was moving those tortured and frozen feet. The tormented parents knew that they did not have time and had to get to the doctor as soon as possible, so they did not take the road, but instinctively took the most direct route-through the forest. Their faces were haggard and tortured, their hands – numb from the weight of the sick kid they were taking turns to carry. Their knees bent as if they were crackling like dry sticks, the tears in their eyes were freezing, but they did not stop, they continued walking, eager to reach the healer. I will never forget those people whose grief and fear failed to shatter them. After them others came and I grew from a pale trail to a path, then into a small forest road.

That spring the entire forest had become alive. The animals were changing their fur and were seeking food joyful that the winter was over. The forest flowers were saturating the air with their wonderful scent and were opening wide cups more and more with every sunny morning. I was also enjoying the beautiful, full of grace day. Suddenly I heard footsteps. I recognized the same mother and father with the sick child who were rushing to the doctor in that cold winter afternoon. This time, however, they were not carrying the child, but it was trotting around them. Fortunately, their offspring had healed and now they had come to rest on the flower lawn. Hope and humility could be seen written all over their faces. They crossed me again on their way to the glade. I could feel the love and

happiness in their hearts, pounding. Perhaps these people had not forgotten me either because they would often pass through me and I was pulsating with the rhythm of their hearts and the footsteps of all others who left their mark on me. And I was growing. I was already a narrow road, spreading all the way to the wheat fields and I was getting bigger and bigger.

Spring and summer had been shining on the ground making it colorful and beautiful. Then there came the autumn even more magnificent; motley as always. Some of the trees had still kept their green robes. Others were already in a variety of colors. Red, yellow, orange and brown leaves adorned the wood. Years had passed, but here again I heard those familiar steps. The kid I knew as a small child had already grown up. He had become a young courageous man. Together with a gorgeous girl, tender and charming like a butterfly, he was walking on the road on me. The drizzle was complementing the background. Falling on the leaves, raindrops were creating lyrical music. I could feel the hearts and souls of the youth. They were filled with the most beautiful feeling – love. Two hearts, made for each other were thumping wildly.

...

That's how it is in life, or as they say on the road –grief and hope, troubles and salvation, trials and revelations alternate. Sometimes in the stalemate, in despair and in grief, a new direction is born, with effort and perseverance turning into a path, and if it finds followers, it grows and becomes a path. For such a path to exist, however, there is a need for love , which lies at its very core and continuity.

I was born out of the love of two parents to their child. Over the years I have met many fates, brought together many hearts, helped many souls, and they led me further and further. People don't even suspect, but I can hear them. And yet, without knowing, I give them hope – that the direction they have chosen is the right one.

Because we are all connected in this perfect Universe.

ПОЩРЕНИЕ

3) 50 “The Old Road to the Airport”

Стела Димитрова Рускова

СУ „Емилиян Станев“, гр.Велико Търново

The Old Road To The Airport

Hi, youngin! You seem lost, not many people come this way any more. Hey, you don't have to be afraid, sit down please, rest a little and while you're here I can tell you a story or two.

You might know me as "The old road to the airport" and I don't like the part with "old" but there's nothing I can do about it because it's true. A few years ago they built a new road to the airport, shorter and faster. And here I am, abandoned and redundant, with nothing to give me a purpose, no future to look forward to, nothing to bring me comfort or at least something to keep me sane.

I've never thought I'd see the light of the day when I'd be left alone to melt and crumble under the sun and reminisce about the old times when I took my existence for granted. As I said, because of my ignorance, I couldn't fully appreciate the one thing that I now know helped me feel like a worthy part of this world – the stories. I felt alive. Everyone had a different reason to travel – work, vacations, relationships, you name it! I used to help people reach the entire world, and they brought the whole world back to me in return. Every day, every hour or even every minute there was someone, somewhere telling his friends, family, co-workers or even sometimes a complete stranger, their story while travelling upon me. It might not seem like much to you, however, I couldn't help but immerse myself into their life. It was really exciting and interesting for me to see and feel how people think, how they react to certain things, what they found important and enjoyable and what brings them happiness, sadness, sorrow or anger. I listened and analysed. It made me enjoy my existence. This might seem boring to you, but there's only so much you can do when you're just a road, right? It entertained me for the years I existed.

My favourite story is about the first time I felt love. Hey, don't look so surprised, you can trust me about this one, kiddo, I promise, just hear me. On the very first week of my existence, there was this young couple that went abroad for their honeymoon. They were glowing with happiness and love. He was kind and caring and he was talking to her so gently and tenderly it made her eyes shine with love. They were laughing, kissing and hugging all the time. I could see their

emotions, hopes and dreams. I could hear it in their voices how true love feels. And once they returned they were a newlywed couple, full of excitement and eager to see what life would bring them, and a little scared but really optimistic of how they would get through hard times now that they were together. Their love was amazing! I could really feel it, all of it! It was real! For the first time I was alive, truly and completely alive! It's unbelievable how a good story can make you feel. Love is the greatest feeling, kiddo, remember that!

Did you like this story? I'm going to tell you a sad one now. C`mon you know it isn't all fun and games. Life is not supposed to be one giant positive experience, otherwise no one would learn anything or strive to become better. A really bad story may teach you the important stuff, you know, so hear this one and I hope you can learn from this person's mistakes... So sit tight kiddo, this one won't be so nice.

Once this man went to the airport. He was about 20 years old, quite young, I remember when I was this young... He was talking on the phone and driving recklessly. He was frowning and shouting, obviously, he was angry at someone. He said how he would never forgive and forget, and that the thing they did was unforgivable, let alone unforgettable. The young man shouted that he would leave for good, so they should leave him alone, then ended the conversation and turned off his phone. I could feel his fury and I was curious about what had happened but didn't find out until years later. I was very surprised when the young man came across my way a decade later. He was different now, filled with sadness, tears were streaming down his face. The only words he managed to get out before he took his phone out again were: "If only I hadn't been so stubborn...". Poor man, he seemed so ruined - devastated even. He dialled someone on the phone and slowed the car down until it completely stopped. He sat on the grass that grew alongside me. At that moment, he was already talking to someone I soon discovered was his mother. It turned out his father was the one he was angry with 10 years ago when he first came my way. They had a terrible fight and said horrible things to each other. He got mad and left, and they never spoke again. His dad died and it was too late to fix things between them. The man who once was furious was coming back home for his father's funeral... He said to his mother that he wanted to turn back time and never leave. Even though his father was to blame for the argument, the young man now learned one of the biggest lessons in life: Holding grudges with people is only going to harm you! Forgive for your own sake, kiddo. Do everything you can and fix things before it's too late! As of the young man, he now lives close to his mother and has children that he loves with all his heart. I hope they won't make the same mistake, though, I'm sure that he has taught them well, kiddo, so you don't have to worry for them too...

I'm a little tired now, but let me tell you just one last story for today. Sometimes, life gets rough but as long as you have faith and people who you can

count on, at the end of the day things turn out just fine, so you should always keep your head up and never give up. Now, listen to me carefully, youngin:

Once, I got to see and almost feel what true anxiety and worry felt like. There was a family of four. Mother, father and two sons who were almost the same age. The younger boy fell very sick. He was only 5 and a half, as I heard. The whole family needed me to go to the airport so they could fly abroad to see a group of specialists to help them save their little child. Of course, they were worried you could see the fear even in his tough-looking dad. I couldn't make out what exactly the little one was suffering from but all I know is that he had trouble breathing. You should have seen them and their troubled expressions filled with worry. They were trying to stay strong for their kid. They didn't want to scare him more than he already was. Kiddo, now that I think about it, you're better off not seeing that. Anyway, let's cut the long story short. I was ecstatic once I saw them again. They spent such a long time abroad I almost didn't recognise them! But youngin, I never forget my travellers. Now I took my time and observed them once again. The little boy was still recovering from the operations he probably had had but he looked so much better and filled with hope and excitement. Once he healed and was able to start breathing properly he could take on the world. The family was happy and was making jokes along the way. Both boys were making plans to become ninjas once they grew up and their parents were fully supporting them. Talk about a fun future! I'm sure they're doing alright!

Despite it being a cliché, it's true what people say: "Experience is the best teacher". I've seen and heard prime examples of this rule. The people with the worst experiences found happiness here – at home, or got themselves together, packed their luggage and tried to start over, heads on. These people also tended to have the best stories once they returned. Thus, I'm sure that this applies to other problems in your human lives as well. I'm certain that every one of you has that turning point of making a mistake that ended up turning you into a better person. Thinking about it now, my biggest life lesson was never to take anything for granted, you never know what you've got until it's gone. It's an obvious statement, but I think everyone needs to acknowledge it and be aware of that fact.

You, youngin, for example, you have a family, you have a home, you have better things to do than to exist and observe other people who don't think twice and go past you. Go and live your life, enjoy it, love your closest and dearest people with all your heart and make sure they know it. Be vocal, speak your mind and most importantly don't let your dreams be dreams, go for them.

I'm just a road, and although I had the privilege of connecting people with the entire world, somehow I still managed to miss this one thing I now strongly believe at. And now, there's no turning back for me. I'm left to be buried in the grass and fade away under the hot sun, now that there's a newer and better road to the airport. It may be too late for me, but you, youngin, you have every means to live your life to the fullest.

Don't spend your time walking along old roads. Go on! Travel, make new relationships, study, move, try to excel at life. Make it so that once you're old like me you don't feel sorry for not appreciating what you had and have regrets for what you didn't or couldn't do. Do stuff that you know you will feel proud of. Experience new cultures, live your life in a way that you will be the one telling the stories, not just quietly listening.

One more thing, before you go. If you can, please, come back and visit me, and tell me about your great accomplishments. So, I'll have something better to do than just rot and fade away.

Thank you for listening to me, kiddo. You may think of me as just a road, but what I really am is a Storyteller. I think I've always been. I just needed you to sit here and listen to me to become one indeed. I believe I made my point clear – The most important things in life are **love, forgiveness, faith and hope!** Make sure you have them all!

Until next time, youngin! I hope our roads cross again!

ПОЩРЕНИЕ

4) 18 “The Man Feeding the Cats”

Христо Свиленов Парушев
ПГПЗЕ „Захарий Стоянов“, гр. Сливен

The man feeding the cats

It was an ordinary day - the same old way to school, the same old elderly couple sitting on the bench next to the road and the same old cats, which always made me annoyed with their constant meowing.

“Isn’t my experience on my way to school just wonderful?”- I thought to myself and continued with the tedious activity, which consumed most of my daily routine. As I was walking I suddenly felt something on my shoulder and I quickly brushed it off. ”Sigh! Here he goes again. Guess the old habits die hard”- I mumbled and looked up. There he was standing all high and mighty on the balcony of the second floor with a bag of chicken bones in his hand, throwing the leftovers from the food to the cats.

He was your average senior citizen- grumpy, with a gloomy state of mind which had engulfed him to such an extent that he was only seeing the things around him and nothing beyond that. I’ve rarely seen him going out of his comfy flat, let alone have I seen him smiling. Greetings were also a rare event for him. It seemed that feeding the cats was the only thing which pumped the blood in his vessels and I had no problem with that even though it was disturbing my already ‘joyful’ trip to school. Hopefully, there is also a positive side of this unordinary attitude. My mindset always makes me contemplate on the things happening around me through many questions so that I can gain a better understanding of life and this time the case was the same. ”Is he happy living such type of lifestyle? What is the story behind these curtains of unhappiness?”, and most importantly, “Why is feeding the cats the only thing he finds joy in?”. It is comforting to know that these questions are only circumstantial and will soon disappear into the abyss of countless other ones provoked by my simple ability to think thoroughly. Well, there is a thing we have in common with the elderly man - both of us are so absorbed into our own ‘little world’ that everything else loses any meaning. I hope it is for good.

What lightened my mood was the scenery which was lovely contrary to my expectations of a day in the beginning of the winter season. The warm wind was blowing gently through my hair and the sun was still showing its face over the horizon, illuminating everything in its path.

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Moment by moment time passed through the warm hug of summer and the soft touch of autumn when finally, lady winter showed her harsh nature.

“Did I make the most of my time right during summer vacation?”. As this suddenly went through my mind I felt a chill down my spine.

“No, that’s the forbidden question”- I told myself and shook my head. Everyone has this one question, which can’t be answered because just thinking of it results in a lump in the throat. It’s the same with everyone, or so do I think that in order to quickly erase the thought from my head.

Here am I, on my way to school like any other time but with different surroundings. Snowflakes, each one with their own unique identity, were falling slowly, covering the road in front of me and the trees, which looked creepy without their crown of leaves. The cats have taken shelter in the below the window caps, which briefly protected them from the tender snowflake touch and only made them shiver silently.

“How come I have not seen him lately... Well, never mind that.”

The moment I passed the block of flats I heard the familiar old screeching sound coming from the opening of the entrance door. Leaving the building was the same grumpy old man with an outfit, untypical for the harsh winter weather outside: he wore flip-flops along with shorts and a t-shirt, which completed his odd look. His bald head wasn’t covered by a hat and I could see the uneven locks of white hair his balding head wasn’t covered by a hat, giving me a glimpse of the small strands of his white hair. It looked like he was taking out the trash - he was holding a big bag in one hand and a small blue one in the other. After throwing out the garbage, he opened the small bag and spilled/poured its contents on the ground. He was so concentrated that he completely lost sight of me. Meowing, followed by 3 cats approaching the old man, filled the empty winter air. Leaning in to gently stroke the cats, he didn’t seem to be bothered by the icy- cold wind, blowing through his scarce clothes. This resulted in red spots on his wrinkled face.

“Now that’s what I call dedication.”- I thought to myself. The whole scene looked kind of/somewhat ridiculous to me. Was this because of his outfit? Was it because

I could spot a slight smile on his face, which was a rare sight or should I say an unimaginable sight?

“It’s not like it concerns me of anything”.

I continued my way through the slushy path, engraved by the countless footprints, left by other people. The wind was singing its monotone song which at some point silenced/engulfed/ the sound coming from the hungry cats, left all alone at the mercy of fate.

...

Yet another month slowly passed by and lady winter made its retreat from the throne of the seasons by passing it to spring. Everything, which up until this moment has been asleep under the powerful winter spell, suddenly woke up and liveliness reigned yet again. Previously deserted gardens filled up with numerous blooming flowers, whose sweet scent lured the wandering bees. The cats were no longer trembling because of the cold and they were now happily chasing after each other under the shining sun. The dry and cracked tree branches also showed signs of life as buds appeared on them, foreshadowing the arrival of the spring.

I was cleaning the basement during the weekend. Unlike my surroundings, which were brimming with hope for the future, the obsolete items from the basement were totally out of the picture. Scattered all around the room (small enough for only one person to fit in it), they were giving off a different feeling – as if the room was frozen in a long- forgotten time. If you looked carefully around the room, through the faint light of the flickering lamp, you could spot boards, working tools and cardboard boxes, filled up to the top with toys and board games. All these objects made me go back to the past when I was a kid and adult problems didn’t bother me at all. This was a time when I was focused on what was happening now and not on what will happen in the future. A peaceful time indeed.

“Discarding all these items will take some time”- I sighed and continued with my boring and daunting task.

Just as I was throwing a cardboard box with toys in the bin, a hunched figure slowly approached me. It was holding a cane and walked in a strange wobbly way. The old man who was feeding the cats surprisingly stopped beside me and I heard a hoarse voice, damaged by the countless days of smoking:

“Good afternoon!”

“Good afternoon”- I replied.

“It’s quite a nice weather outside, isn’t it? What are you doing boy?”

“Well, I am trying to free up some space in the basement by throwing out things I don’t need any more. Want to help?”- I said jokingly.

He ignored my invite and his face got serious:

“But why are you throwing out the toys? Aren’t they dear to you? When I was your age I used to play with a small metal car- series 249. Sadly, they don’t produce them anymore but I would do anything to get a hold of one. After all, people associate different memories with certain objects.”-he said with a completely serious look on his face, without a hint of him making a joke.

“Umm, yes they surely do.”- I said, while trying to follow his train of thoughts.

He was right but I didn’t want to think as he did. Items from the past, in my view, belonged to the past belonged there and not in the present. People are meant to only move forward and clinching to the past is slowing down this process, preventing any further development. I actually came up with my own metaphor, describing the future- “the room with the fan”. I can’t explain the meaning behind it, because it’s unclear to me too. All I can say is that the simplicity and independence combined in this expression give me a warm sense of coziness every time it comes across my mind.

“So what are you doing? Taking a walk outside?”- I asked rather impolitely, changing the topic.

“You don’t like bringing up the past, huh? My bad then. I was throwing away this old guy here”- he said and pointed at his cane, which was a little bit crooked and had scratches all over it. “It won’t be of great use to me anymore. The daily walks around the neighborhood strengthened my legs to such an extent, that I think I will be able to run in the future”- he said and started laughing raspily.

While coughing into his hand, he threw the cane into the garbage bin without second thoughts.

“Looks like he has softened up a little. At least now he is more approachable”- I thought to myself.

“You resemble the young me a bit in in terms of face and build. Youth is comprised of the best moments in one’s life, so be sure to treasure them dearly. Hope we get to talk tomorrow”- he said and this time I was sure he smiled, because I could see it on his face.

Unsteady on his feet he started walking away...

“He doesn’t seem like a good company for an engaging conversation. I didn’t ask what his name was though. It’s not that important, I guess tomorrow also a day.”

Little by little , the distance between us grew larger and larger until I could only see a faint image of his back. I returned to my task without any thoughts troubling me.

...

The sunrise, especially when knowing it was during the weekend, filled me with energy and enthusiasm. This is the most peaceful day of the week, when people are not occupied by their jobs and can finally spare a breath to look at themselves from a different angle. I looked up at the sky from the balcony. Unlike the previous day, the blue infinity was filled up with dark clouds presaging an upcoming/ storm. A slight patchy drizzle appeared fell and the tiny drops ran across my glasses, hindering my vision. Taking a walk right before a storm is one of the greatest experiences for a man. The smell of the approaching rain hits the nostrils, while the soft, warm air wraps around you.

I exited my apartment building and headed to the nearest shop for a drink. I passed the garbage bins, filled up to the brim completely and most of its contents were scattered on the ground. As I reached the building, where the old man was living, I gradually slowed down. The cats were there like always but this time there was no meowing. On the entrance door I could briefly see some kind of notice. In the middle there was a blurry black and white picture of him. This came as a shock to me.

There was no one who could feed the cats anymore.

I quickly rushed to the garbage bins before they were emptied.

ПУБЛИКАЦИЯ

1) 100 “Summer Cycles and Cigarette Reflections”

Стефани Веселинова Ангелова

1.ЕГ, гр. Варна

Summer Cycles and Cigarette Reflections

Under the dim light of the night club two swallows were flying in chaotic circles, intensely flapping their wings while chasing yet another deluded moth. The moth, drawing his own chaotic circles around the lamp's orbit, sensing the danger of sharp beaks behind him, but unable to avert his eyes nor his movements from the tempting light nonetheless, was making sharp turns and skilled maneuvers, worthy for the praise of every racing driver, each of them somehow ending at the very center of the neon bulb.

So easily could this whole race be put to an end with the moth disappearing in the dark, settling for the light of another street lamp, and the swallows – giving up, retreating to their nest. But the lamp was one, and it was here, and the poor moth was not evolved enough to consider the possibility of an alternative lamp, especially when this one was already shining in his faceted eyes. No, he had to have *this* lamp, possess it, devour its brightness and vanish in its warmth, melting his frozen soul with its heat and filling the emptiness in his little body with neon and hope. In his eyes, the lamp was brighter than a supernova and he wouldn't leave its enticing orbit for anything in the world – even if that meant avoiding the intrusive beaks of death forever. And it seemed like precisely that was about to happen – neither the lamp would stop burning, nor the swallows were intending to leave their pray anytime soon, so the chaotic race was cursed to continue the whole night, until the sun finally rises above this pitiful world and restores its order by turning off all the artificial light sources trying to imitate its glory.

The girl standing in front of the night club to sober up in the fresh night air from the strong music and the stronger alcohol absent-mindedly took another drag on her cigarette while watching this whole cycle, amused how it was constantly repeating itself and yet – nothing changed. Wasn't that the definition of “lunacy” – doing the same thing again and again, while expecting a different result? But to them it didn't look pointless, this whole thing. It was in the name of some purpose, something... greater, more sacred in itself, a purpose which they just refused to... refuse. The lamp *had to* keep on burning – that was what it was made to do, to

illuminate the night as much as it could, to fight the darkness and whatever was lingering in it, offering safety from the unknown under its little orbit – that was its duty, pride, purpose. The moth *had to* become one with the lamp, even if it meant being burnt by its light – if he could just for a moment feel the soft warmth of the rays filling his body and making his being whole, hopeful, happy, it would have been worth it. The swallows *had to* capture the moth – first, because that was a matter of survival – their natural duty was to chase the insect down and use it to feed themselves and their children, probably waiting for them in the nest, hungry and vulnerable. Second and more important – this was a matter of dignity. The swallows were experienced hunters and in order to prove their skill, they couldn't afford to let this pray go – they *had to* be the winners of the race.

There was something in the faith of this doomed cycle, something monotonous but somehow necessary, that felt painfully familiar to the girl. Inside her not-entirely-sober head started flooding memories, images and events that, for some reason that she couldn't quite grasp, appeared very similar to this chasing between predator, light and prey, hope, will and stubbornness – pointless and chaotic, but at the same time so organic, so normal in the Universe's order. She put out her cigarette and started walking towards the pulsing void of the night club. Suddenly, she stopped and chuckled – she was about to go back under the artificial light of the disco ball, to circle around the sweet orbit of the bar, hoping to vanish in a moment of alcoholic warmth, and most probably, drunk with false happiness again, she would be chased by dangerous predators, even more drunk than her, who would continue their efforts of capturing her even when she rejects them not because they are interested in her, but because for them, too, it is a matter of pride. And this would go on and on, until the sun rises...

Her gaze fell on the neon lamp. Maybe the alcohol tonight was a bit much, it was making her think ridiculous things, confusing things... real things? Scary things. No no no, she needed another smoke! In any case, she wasn't ready to return to the night club and be a moth again just yet...

ПУБЛИКАЦИЯ

2) 23 “The End of the Road”

Кристина Петрова Янакиева
ППГПЧЕ „Екзарх Йосиф“, гр. Разград

The End of the Road

If your car breaks down, take the bus. If there are no buses nearby, ride a bike. If you can't ride a bike - run! But never stop in the middle of the road. What about when everything around you starts to spin? When you run out of air. When the pain in your lungs makes you cry. When every single muscle in your body seems to tear. It is boiling hot. Sweat runs down your forehead and goes straight into your eyes. You can't see anything. You hear horns. Cars pass by you one after another, leaving only black smoke and dust behind. Your instincts scream. You need to stop. But if you stop, you are dead. Will you keep going? Plamen was told that life is a road where you can't stop moving. One second of rest is a sign of weakness. A moment of weakness and you are dead.

Adults often underestimate the difficulties their kids face at school. Overwhelmed by work, bills and taxes, they forget about the time when they were young. When their problems were walking down the high school hallways, too. Classmates, teachers or maybe even the principal. Is it that easy to forget the reluctance to get out of bed, the disappointment of another low grade or the fear of the bully who beats you every day after school? Maybe not all parents have been through this. Maybe they were someone's problems. Nevertheless, that cannot be an excuse for the lack of interest that some of them show their children every day. When Plamen lost five kilos, the only person in the house who noticed was Anton - his grandpa. The lost kilos became ten - no one but Anton. Again. His father noticed when the weight lost became eighteen kilos, and only because Plamen asked for money for new clothes. During all those weeks, his mother didn't show up to see him ever once, although she had the right to see him every weekend. However, the presence of a parent figure cannot be completely denied. Anton was like a father, a brother and a friend to the boy, and that was a responsibility he couldn't handle. Something really bad was about to happen and it was mainly his fault. He always supported Plamen. He supported him so much that it deprived him of the opportunity to give up. It didn't matter what it was

about - homework, video games or something much more serious. Something like his diet.

“If you start driving, you have to keep driving until the end of the road.” he said “If you stop, you are dead.”

Plamen had been plump since he was a child, but that didn't stop him having a joyful life. He had many friends and felt good in his own body. At that time, he took singing lessons. He loved to test the abilities of his voice, and he was doing great. He was often invited to sing at various school events, and of course, he accepted because he loved attention and applause. He dreamed of becoming famous and having millions of fans all around the world.

“You are already on the road.”, Anton said once. “There is no going back. Everyone will know your name. You just have to keep driving, you know.”

Plamen believed in his grandpa's words. He also believed in himself. He could close his eyes and see millions of people chanting his name, dying to hear him sing. Anything was possible. His imagination had painted a beautiful picture of his future. However, that picture caught fire when Plamen started high school. He was in a new and unfamiliar place and his old friends weren't there with him. At first, he wasn't scared, on the contrary - he was excited. He was ready for all those things he had seen in the movies. But life is not a movie. High school doesn't always mean new friends, wild parties, big love or popularity. Disney doesn't make movies about all the stress, loneliness, bullying and fear that you face right after stepping at school. Nor about the high expectations, disappointments, tears, depression. Who would watch a movie about the feeling of helplessness? When Plamen faced all those things, the shock was hard to handle. He had never been bullied before and he couldn't understand why it was happening now, when everyone was supposed to be more mature. Insults about his weight were commonplace. The boy became an easy target for those, who desperately needed to feel strong.

What was happening to Plamen was one of the secrets that everyone in the school carefully kept because it was easier that way. The teachers saw what was going on but did nothing. Bullying was a sight they perceived as part of their profession. Most of the students kept quiet but waited with slight excitement to hear the next painful joke. A few of his classmates wanted to tell someone but they were afraid of becoming the next victim. Even Plamen didn't say anything. He was ashamed; he thought it was his fault. His old friends had adapted well to their new schools, only he had become rejected. Because of all the taunts the boy started hating the attention that used to be his favorite thing. It was too much to

handle. He needed a break. Maybe a new school would fix everything. He could ask his parents to move him. Maybe there he could find nicer classmates or teachers that are more helpful. And maybe then everything would be alright and those amazing things from the movies could finally happen. But every time his heart was filled with hope, Plamen remembered Anton's words. Life was a road. Every choice was a road. He couldn't give up, he had to get to the end. And as foolish as it was, his grandpa was the only person who had always supported and loved him, and his words could be nothing but truth.

In his first year at high school, Plamen was verbally bullied every single day. Each insult became part of him like a scar that the boy could easily see in the mirror. But the following year the scars became real. Everyone has problems and, in most cases, they increase over time. So it was with those who harassed Plamen. Therefore, their desire to have control over someone else had also increased. The words were no longer enough. Anger aroused in some of them a desire for pain. Not everyone needed to hurt. Not everyone was like Stefan. But they wanted to be. He looked cool, strong, chill - something all those insecure children dreamed of being. Although Stefan was far from one of those things. Even when he hit someone, he was more frightened. Fear had control over him all the time. Fear made him feel insecure and that came out as anger. This made him push Plamen against the wall. And hit him in the stomach. And then in the face. And so again and again and again, until a few tears flowed down the boy's cheeks. Only then Stefan stopped. A group of kids had gathered around them to watch as if it were some kind of show. Plamen stood there frozen, waiting for the next punch. But there was none. Stefan left the classroom and the crowd dispersed. However, this was only the beginning. The incident was accepted as an invitation. As a permission. The poor boy would no longer be only an object of painful jokes. Anyone who felt the need, would show strength. Unfortunately, many people seemed to need it.

Only Anton took things seriously. Every day his grandson came home with new bruises, and only he thought that was not normal. Plamen's parents saw this as common youth fights and didn't even bother to ask their son if he was okay. They were too busy arguing about every insignificant thing you can think of. Nevertheless, in the end, his grandfather's reaction wasn't better or at least its results.

“What happened?” the old man asked after Plamen returned with a bruised eye.

“The usual.” the boy replied, “Everyone hates me, that's it.”

“That shouldn't stop you. You don't have time to rest. The road does not wait for those lagging behind. Keep driving! Don't let anyone stop you!”

It was the middle of ninth grade when Plamen decided to change things. He was convinced that if he lost weight, no one would bother him anymore. After all, that was the reason they started, right? The boy didn't understand that these kids needed to hurt someone. They could think of a thousand insults that had nothing to do with his weight. They didn't need a reason to punch, they already had enough waiting for them in home every day. But how could Plamen know that? How could he know that Stefan's father was an aggressive drug addict? How could he know that one of those bullies had lost both of his parents? How could he know that one of the girls who was calling him “pig” was being beaten up by her mother? He had no way of knowing all those things. So one day he decided to start a diet. His grandfather made him set a clear goal.

“Ten kilograms.” said the boy.

“If you take this road, you have to drive to the end.” Anton replied, “Think carefully about ten being too many.”

“I got this.”

And so the promise was made. The boy had decided that he would eat only fruits and vegetables until he reached his goal. Every time he thought of something different, even a slice of bread, he remembered his grandfather's words. He was already driving on the road and there was no going back. Plus, he was ready to do anything to stop the bullying.

In three weeks the boy succeeded. He was already ten kilos lighter, but things at school hadn't improved. Stefan had started something that was hard to stop. Almost impossible. It didn't matter that Plamen looked like everyone else, the invisible target on his back was still there. But he didn't see it that way. Plamen decided that ten kilos weren't enough and he was ready to lose more. “You are already on the road. If your car refuses, catch the bus. You can't stop. If you stop, you are dead. I can't let them stop me.” This was spinning in the boy's head the whole time. That, and the compulsive thought that those kids are right. He looked in the mirror and in his own eyes looked worse than ever - fat and disgusting.

Plamen started counting the calories he was taking in and tried to reduce them a little every day. He watched the numbers on the scales go down, but the boy in the mirror looked far from slim. He felt exhausted all the time, sometimes he even fell asleep in class. Everyone could see how much weight he had lost, it was obvious that he was not well, but that didn't stop the harassment. Maybe people wanted blood.

These kids had made Plamen ill. Physically and mentally. But there was no one to see. How could they? Society has accepted anorexia as a female disease. Quite unfair, don't you think? Who would have thought that Plamen could suffer from it? Everyone thought he had just decided to get in shape. And so the boy continued to lose weight. Moreover, he couldn't stop thinking about the damn road his grandfather kept talking about.

At the beginning of tenth grade, the boy weighed forty-two kilos, which was twenty-one kilos below the norm, considering his age and height. PE classes had become a nightmare because it was impossible for Plamen to run, jump and even to play basketball. He was on the verge of his strength. So when one day Stefan waited for him after school, the boy realized he couldn't take it anymore. He needed a break. But he was taught that if he stopped, he would die. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, ready to take any punch Stefan would offer. He was incapable of anything else. When he opened his eyes, it was dark outside. He was lying on the grass in a garden near his house. He had passed out on the way home. He was still on that road. And he ran with all his might, metaphorically, of course.

Plamen was ready to solve his problems once for all. He stayed up late, he had to make sure everyone was asleep. He couldn't risk being caught. He entered his grandpa's room as quietly as possible. The man was sleeping deeply, so he was unlikely to wake up. His gun was in the nightstand because he thought it was the last place anyone would think of looking. Plamen picked up the weapon and hurried back to his room before anyone saw him. He stayed up all night, convincing himself it was the right thing to do. He couldn't stop before the end of the road. He had already started driving so he had to get to the end. Stefan was just making it harder.

The next day, Plamen didn't show up for school. Not the day after. Or any other day. Because the gun fired one bullet and it was intended for Plamen. He couldn't stop before the end of his road, but he could decide where the road ended.