

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a rainy street at night. A person's silhouette is visible in the center, walking away from the viewer. To the right, a street lamp is illuminated, casting a warm glow. The rain is visible as diagonal streaks across the entire scene.

TEEN
REALITY

A COLLECTION OF STORIES
ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND MORE

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

“Teen Reality” is a collection of stories written from teenagers for teenagers. The authors are seven girls currently in the 7th grade of elementary school from a small town. The stories were written as part of an extracurricular creative writing course. The goal of the collection is to normalize mental health problems among teenagers and to encourage conversation about difficult topics such as addiction and domestic violence.

The main audience for the stories is intended to be young people aged 12+. The authors wanted their peers, through reading, to feel that they are not alone with their problems. The audience can also be parents and teachers, who, thanks to the stories, have a chance to see the world from the perspective of modern teenagers.

Through this project, the young authors discovered their strengths, developed critical thinking skills, learned to articulate their thoughts, and refined their creative writing abilities.

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Szkoła Podstawowa im. Ziemi Pałuckiej w Królikowie
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FROM AUTHORS

Hey!

Before you dive into this book, we want to tell you what you will find in it and how the idea for it was born.

“Teen Reality” consists of several short stories, and each of them is the story of a different teenager. The fate of our characters is fictional, invented by us, but the problems raised are as real and important as possible.

Mental Health. We didn’t choose such a topic for no reason. Panic attacks, eating disorders, peer violence, hatred, addictions – there are plenty of people struggling with similar problems. Each of us knows someone who has experienced it to a greater or lesser degree.

Our goal was to tame the subject, to speak out about it, to spread awareness of teenage reality, both among young readers and adults.

However, the group we wanted to reach first were our colleagues, peers from all over Poland. We are committed to helping teenagers with their problems. We believe that

by reading these stories, you will feel less alone in whatever you are facing.

We wrote this very book to help you find yourself in it. Why do we think this book is important?

Here are the authors' brief responses:

“In our stories we have shown many situations that can happen to anyone. Others often have the same problems as we do.” – Zuzia

“This book is important because it shows how to deal with certain issues.” – Lena

“Our stories show that we are not alone in the world with our difficulties, and that is probably the most important thing.” – Nicola

“This book is written by teenagers to teenagers, thanks to the common language we understand each other better.” – Emilia

“Maybe we can show our peers that we're not the only ones with this problem and that it's worth asking for help.” – Maja

“This book is important because it shows that problems need to be talked about.” – Nikola

“Through the writing process we were able to understand each other better.” – Klaudia

FROM THE PROJECT COORDINATOR

Kalina Beczak – passionate about education, elementary school teacher, Certified Positive Discipline Educator, author of social and educational projects, promoter of changes in education towards building relationships and developing future skills.

This collection of stories is giving voice to young people. Treating them as equal partners in the discussion. Because even though they are smaller (up to a certain age) and less experienced, they are often more creative than adults and, if we let them, can teach us as much as we teach them.

I am specifically giving voice to seven teenage girls with whom I had the pleasure of working: Zuzia, Maja, Klaudia, Nicola, Lena, Emilia, and Nikola. The stories were written during the second semester of sixth grade, while their editing and revision took place in seventh grade.

From the beginning, the goal was clear – write a book. The theme, format, target audience, plotlines, characters, titles, illustrations, and cover were all the girls’ ideas. As their Polish teacher, I ensured a safe space, provided creative writing exercises, guided them in filtering information, and structured the process using the Design Thinking methodology. That is why our stories are not just ordinary stories – they address a real issue: the taboo surrounding mental health problems among young people, especially in small rural schools.

And so, the Teen Reality project was born – a collection in which real-life issues are wrapped in fictional yet realistic characters and events. By teenagers, for teenagers.

Who else is this collection of short stories aimed at?

For parents, teachers, specialists, and educators – to better understand young people in 2025 and to see the world from their perspective.

How to use this collection?

I leave creative freedom to teachers and educators, trusting that they will use this collection as a starting point for meaningful discussions on mental health and addiction. The stories can be read as a collection or as individual pieces. The suggested age for working with these stories is 12+.

I encourage parents to read carefully and pause before making judgments. Let this book serve as an entry point for open and thoughtful conversations with your child.

The following stories touch on the following topics:

1. “In search of the sea” – peer violence, betrayal, school phobia.
2. “Bar codes” – self-harm, domestic violence, alcohol addiction.
3. “What’s wrong with me?” – panic attacks, anxiety.
4. “Little black” – eating disorders.
5. “Scar” – school bullying.
6. “On the roof” – suicidal thoughts.
7. “Hope” – addictions.

Good reading!

PSYCHOLOGIST'S COMMENT

Marta Michalska – psychologist, psychosocial skills trainer. Tutor and edulider development support specialist at Teach for Poland, coordinator of the Youth Council. She supports children, adolescents, teachers and parents. Specializes in empathic communication, stress management, modern prevention methods.

Does anyone understand me?

Reading the stories created by the students, I see a very moving and honest picture of the emotional world of teenagers. They show the complex web of emotions, problems and relationships that young people struggle with on a daily basis. I think that young people who read this collection can find themselves in them, their thoughts, similar experiences. Thanks to the authenticity of the narratives, young readers can gain a sense that they are not alone in their experiences. The stories not only normalize

difficult emotions, but also show that there is a way out of the crisis, that it is worth reaching out for help. This is a valuable source of support that can help young people see their problems from a different perspective and gain the courage to act.

Let me feel

To many adults, the experiences of teenagers may seem trivial – after all, teenagers don’t have to worry about bills or work. The stories are a reminder of how important young people’s problems are and the tremendous impact they have on their lives. In the whirlwind of daily responsibilities, we can, even with good intentions and wanting to make a young person feel better, downplay the issues they come to us with. Every inattentive adult message – “it’s not so important”, “you’ll see that in a few years you’ll forget”, “don’t cry, everything will be fine” – builds a gap between the young and adult worlds. I see the potential of these stories not only in the value they can bring to the authors’ peers who read them, but also as a bridge that young people have begun to build from the other side of this divide. It’s up to adults to step onto that bridge and dare to complete it. The stories offer plenty of guidance on how to do so. The power of the support their characters receive lies in its empathetic nature. It’s a relationship based on understanding, acceptance and non-judgment. The adults and peers who support the heroes

and heroines do not flood them with advice, do not belittle their feelings, but are present, open and ready to listen. From my experience working with young people, I know that this approach is key to building trust and a sense of security. Supporting young people doesn't mean holding them by hands and moving them through their predicament to a place we deem appropriate. It's about being beside them as a tender guide, ready to show the way, but always respecting their needs and decisions.

In my opinion, this book fills an important gap in the vitally important debate about the mental health of children and adolescents. Although, fortunately, this topic is becoming more and more present in the public space, the voices of young people themselves are still too rare. They are, the greatest experts on their world, who show in these stories authentic emotions, situations and ways of dealing with problems.

We build bridges

What caught my attention was that despite the difficult topics, most of the stories lead the reader not just to the culmination of problems, but to their resolution. These stories don't just leave us with despair, but show positive bridges to the future – ways to deal with the crisis. Importantly, the characters reach out for help and support, which is an especially important message for young and older readers.

Normalizing asking for help as an act of courage and strength can have a therapeutic effect on people in similar situations. The endings of the stories, however, are not “over-sweetened”, we do not find an artificial “and everyone lived happily ever after”. We can see that the struggles of the heroines and characters continue, we see real pain and crises, but also embedded in the real world strength and hope for change.

“Teen Reality” is a reminder of the importance of paying attention to the mental health of young people. Today’s students are the foundation of our future, and their needs, emotions and voices are ignored. As the slogan aptly puts it, “Your future sits in the bench” – tomorrow’s world depends on how we support the young generation today. For me, this publication is not only a collection of stories, but also a call to action – to talk, listen and build a space where young people will feel safe and understood.

To adults:

I appeal to adults – parents, guardians, teachers and all those who accompany young people. Such readings can provoke strong emotions and serious reflections, especially if the young person struggles with various difficulties. Be present, talk, listen, support, do not leave young people alone with difficult content and the need to work through them. Even if it seems to you that teenagers prefer to experience their

emotions alone, your willingness to listen and understand can be invaluable to them. This book can be the beginning of important conversations and reflections. Let it be the impetus for building greater understanding, openness and support – both for yourself and for others.

To young readers:

The stories you will find in this book deal with extremely important, but also difficult topics – depression, self-harm, mental crisis, loneliness or substance abuse.

I would like to gently warn you to the fact that the content in this book can be emotionally demanding, especially if you are in a mental crisis, experiencing difficulties or feel that you may not be ready to confront such stories. I encourage you to reach for this reading with caution. Your emotions are important, and your well-being is a priority – if you feel that certain content is too difficult for you, you have the right to put the book down or abandon it altogether.

Young Readers – if you feel anxious, sad, fearful or overwhelmed while reading, don't stay with it alone. Talk to someone you trust – a parent, teacher, school counselor or someone close to you. Everyone needs support sometimes, and there's nothing wrong with that.

If you are experiencing difficulties, remember that help is available. You can turn to your parents, at school to

a psychologist, pedagogue or other trusted teacher, or call a helpline, such as the Give Children Strength Foundation (116 111) – there you will always find someone who will listen and help.

Remember: you are not alone. With care and support

Marta Michalska

CHAPTER 1:

In search of the sea

Lena Antosik



27.08.2023

The end of summer vacation. For any average student, it's a time of regret for the summer ending too soon. A time of returning to the school routine, but also a slight excitement to see a bunch of friends.

But not for Isabella. She kept thinking about what would happen again at school. A new school year, but probably the same "old" nicknames in her direction: "Look! There goes that pathetic loser!".

The school year hadn't even started yet, and she was already feeling sick because of the thought of it. That was too much for her. She wanted to disappear from this world forever. The only thing that comforted her was the fact that it was eighth grade. She will tire herself out in this school for the last year, and then it's time for a change.

1.09.2023

I got out of bed. School was supposed to start at 9:00 a.m. I was terribly afraid. In recent years, my peers began to make fun of me for being fat and ugly, by the way, I thought so too. At the beginning of elementary school it wasn't so bad yet. But in the fifth grade I started to put on a lot of weight, my body was changing, and my skin was covered with pimples. I was never one of the beauties, but all

this puberty left a terrible mark on me. I felt a tightening in my stomach. I was snapped out of this reverie by my mother's voice:

– Isa! Breakfast on the table!

I went downstairs even though I didn't want to eat. I hated myself. The only thing I loved in life was my friend, Em (Emma). She was the one who brightened my every day. She accepted me 100% and never let me feel that I was inferior. We became close especially in the last two years, before that we didn't have a great relationship. One day at English class, the lady assigned us to one project and we stayed that way. We found a common language.

I ate a little, for my mother's holy peace of mind that I wasn't going to school with an empty stomach, and gave the rest of the portion to my dog, Texas.

I left the house, heading to the bus stop.

After a few minutes, I got on the bus, and the only thing on my mind was to run away. However, I was too fearfull to skip school on the first day.

“The torment is time to begin” – I thought, knowing that on that day I would again be the object of derision and mockery.

1.09.2023 8.27 am

A black, slightly rusty gate, three steps and an old wooden door the color of dark cherry. Even at the entrance I heard laughter, giggles and comments. I tried to ignore it as I waited for Em. In all this, she was the only one who had always been a support for me. Actually, she was the only girl in the class with whom I talked. With the others I somehow never got along.

– Ey, Isabella! Our beloved loser! What do you want to get for your birthday ? Maybe some cosmetics to improve your beauty? Ha ha! – I heard Camila’s voice.

Camila is one of those perfect girls who stood in the right line to God when they gave out beauty. An impeccable figure, beautiful, long hair that shines like taffy, curled up-touched-out eyelashes, raspberry lips. And to top it off, fashionable clothes. There was always a chain of other girls around her, for whom she was a guru and who wanted to emulate her. Bad luck that Camila had chosen me as an object of ridicule. Ever since I can remember she made fun of me all the time.

With tears in my eyes, I ran to the bathroom. Em also ran after me, shouting to me in the crowd in the hallway to wait. I promised myself that I would be like the goose that everything runs down on its skin because it has some special kind of feathers or something. I promised myself

that I wouldn't let myself get upset on the first day. After all, it was vacation and I had at least two months to rest from the unpleasant comments. I had... But something inside me broke. I felt that the two months had changed nothing, and even intensified everything I felt before. I was hopeless, because I saw no light in the tunnel, no shadow of hope for improvement.

– Isa! Where are you? – shouted Emma in the bathroom, her voice echoing off the ceramic tiles.

– Here. – I wanted to answer “normally,” and as usual, the sobs came out. I heard Em, guided by my voice, stand at the door of the cabin I was in.

– Ey... Isa..., don't cry. Everything will be fine. Come out, we'll talk.

At the same time, someone entered the bathroom. I heard familiar, confident footsteps.

– Ooo..., and who do we have here? Is it Isabella and Emma? Tell me, Emma, why are you friends with her? After all, she's just an extra baggage who wanders after you when she wants something – chuckled Camila.

– Go away Camila. We'll talk later – Em replied.

– Good. But first I'm gonna... – Camila started a sentence, then I felt something fall on me. It was an over-eaten sandwich. One slice stopped on my jeans, staining the leg

with butter, the other fell on the bathroom floor. I heard loud laughter and a slamming door.

I began to howl even more. I finally came out of the restroom, Emma admittedly comforted me, and I felt that something was off. There was something strange in the conversation between Em and Camila...

– What do you want to talk to her about? – I asked choking back tears.

– A... never mind, – she smiled slightly. – Don't bother it. Come to the classroom, the bell rang.

* * *

Mathematics. Well, no... I hated this lesson.

– Isa, come on now – I heard Emma's voice bringing me down to earth.

I got lost in thought for a moment. I often get like this since I've been going to this school. I kept poking my eyes at something, and after a while I realized that I had completely wandered off somewhere with my thoughts. I followed Emma. We sat down at the benches, I looked around the room, everything was the same. Seeing my thoughtfulness, Mrs. Smith spoke up:

– Isabella, why are you looking around? Eyes on the board.

– All right... – I said quietly.

Everyone in the class started laughing. Well, yes, I could have expected that.

– You're not focused again? That's your excuse? – Mrs. Smith said sternly.

– I'mmmmm sorry... – I involuntarily began to stutter.

– Well, I hope that this will change. Hardly the beginning of the year, and you're already head in the clouds again. Did you fall in love during the vacations?

– And who would want her... haha... – Maciek's comment from the bench next to the window made the whole class laugh, of course.

Thunderous laughter began to rumble in my head. It was unbearable. Why do I always have to be their laughing stock? I don't know. But I do know one thing. I have my friend who I can always count on. I turned to Em to look for her gentle gaze, and she stared ahead.

The lesson passed fairly quickly. Only again Mrs. Smith gave us two pages of exercises as a homework. What is wrong with her? There were supposedly no homework assignments... Just after the bell rang, I went to the bathroom once more, hoping not to meet anyone there. I wiped my tears and waited for Em, but she didn't come. It was strange, because the bathroom is our conventional meeting place. Especially after such moments. I left to find her. I looked

in the library, Mrs. Williams became interested in who I was looking for and said that Em had just left there with Camila. “With Camila?” – I thought to myself. “Why were they together? After all, they hate each other. Maybe Em wanted to pressure her into letting me go.” I left the library and kept looking.

* * *

– Em! Here I’ve got! – I stalked her from behind as she stood at the door of the Polish Studies room, where we were about to have our next lesson.

– Oh that’s right... Isa... It’s time to talk. I have to tell you something – said Em. Her tone sounded confident, but ominous at the same time.

– What is it about? Talk.

Em looked deeply into my eyes. For a moment I felt a kind of... pity? And then she straightened up, squinted her eyes and began:

– Camila is actually a friend of mine. In sixth grade she challenged me in such a way that I should be friends with you until the beginning of eighth grade.

– What...?? – I felt like I was in some kind of matrix. I could hear Em talking to me, but I couldn’t understand.

– I was supposed to gain 500 zloty, it's a shame not to take advantage of such an offer, isn't it? After all, you know that she is a rich person. For her 500 zloty it's like 10 zloty...

I was speechless.

– Is this supposed to be some kind of stupid prank? What are you talking to me about? We were best friends...

– Well, I don't know, Isa. It just happened somehow. From now on I'll be sitting back with Camila, and in a week her folks are taking us to Energyland – this amusement park.

I stood as if I had been stunned and still didn't get what I heard.

– Bye-bye, Isa! – said Camila in a childish voice, then she giggled, and Camila, who, as it turned out, was standing two meters away, began to accompany her. She walked over, took Em's hand and together they walked away.

It took me a few minutes to believe what had just happened. I kept telling myself it was a cruel nightmare. My best friend an imposter? I felt sadness, anger, surprise, fatigue, and most of all I wanted to howl. Not to cry, but to howl. I struggled to hold back the stream of tears I could already feel under my eyelids.

I bit my lips and looked up to control myself. I felt like I was sinking into the ground. With the remnants of my

strength, I turned around, picked up my backpack from the ground and left the school. For the next few months, I did not return to it.

15.12.2023

It has been more than three months since the situation with Ema. At first, I cried for days and nights. I couldn't pull myself together. My parents could not help me. I was very clear that I would not return to school. It seemed to me that my life was over. It had been difficult for me up to that point, but Em was the only star in the darkness, thanks to which I persisted and endured the school's bullying. Now I felt as if I had been robbed of everything. Was I living in some kind of illusion?? How could I not see this?

My parents tried to tell me that I should worry about school, the eighth-grade exam, my future; there were phone calls from school, my parents were also sending to me my aunt, whom I have always liked – nothing helped. Finally, my parents forcibly dragged me to a psychologist and psychiatrist. The diagnosis: school phobia. My parents only found out about the problems I'd been having with bullying for two years. They were mad that I had never told them about anything, and I... all in all, I had no answer for it. Because how do you talk about being a loser...?

I was assigned individual teaching and advised to see a psychologist on a regular basis.

26.04.2024

Several months of visits to a psychologist and one-on-one teaching healed my wounds. I realized that not everyone has such a perfect life as it looks from the outside. The psychologist told me about many different problems and ailments similar to mine. Now I know that there are times when things happen that are simply beyond us and we can't cope with them on our own. The trick is to ask for help.

In life we get different lessons. One is that if you fall down, you have to get up and keep trying. There are times when we experience a great disappointment, someone will cheat us, hurt us or humiliate us. My mother told me that the disappointment I experienced with Em should never have happened to me. But it did happen. Just as it will probably happen more times.

The question: what will you do with it? Will you let it crush you, or will something good come out of it?

I, thanks to the whole situation, became closer with my mother. Before that, it didn't even occur to me that we could talk about such topics.

In less than a month's time, exams are due. I've already chosen the school I'd like to get into, so for now I'm concentrating on that. And Em?

She probably has some plans, too. But my plans do not include her. I read somewhere that "true friendship is like the sea: you can see the beginning, but you can't see the end." My friendship with Em has ended, so maybe it was never real? It doesn't matter anymore.

Now I will look for a new sea.

CHAPTER 2:

Barcodes

Nikola Bielasik, Kalina Beczak



“Dear parents, friends and acquaintances! I am writing to you to...”

NO! This was probably the fifth sheet I had to throw away, because again the words somehow didn’t come together. I reached for the razor blade. Razor blade. That’s the word that’s been anchoring itself in my head lately. Razor blade... Razor blade...! A razor blade? Actually, it wasn’t even a razor blade, but rather a small short blade removed from a disassembled sharpener.

The wounds on my body have surprisingly multiplied in recent months. New “bar codes” were appearing on the barely healed lines. Blood no longer impressed me. The wounds I inflicted on myself were small. Barely a few drops of blood flowed from them. It was more about controlling the pain.

I don’t have the strength to do anything. I thought I found myself in the same place again and I’m writing the damn letter again.

I was snapped out of this reflection by a new notification on my phone. I swiped it, the phone recognized my face and unlocked. “29 new messages from Lidka<3”.

“Hey, are you okay?” “Axel?”

“Hello.”

“Write back! Don’t do anything stupid!”

“Do you want to talk?”

“I’ll call you right away.”

“So much more ahead of you... Trust me.”

Maybe she is right, too? I am 14 years old, supposedly my whole life ahead of me...

I was reminded that tomorrow is Friday. Since the teachers found out that I have problems, my teacher – nicknamed “Axe” (because his surname is Axeman) made me go to the school psychologist. So I go three times a week, just for the sake of being inconspicuous. I don’t want to. I won’t go to school tomorrow.

I’m tired of the same questions and “externalizing”. “What are you feeling today?” “Tell me about the incident.” Bullshit. How am I supposed to open up to a complete stranger who has no idea what my reality is like? My only psychologist may be Lidka. She is somehow so normal. She doesn’t brainwash me. She’s just next to me and listens to me. We first met a year ago at a theater class at my school. I went to 7b and she went to 7d. Since then, she is the only person I can open up to at least a little bit. She’s the one who tries to help me the most, but I still somehow find it hard to talk about all this crap in my life.

I finally gathered myself to call her. I heard a familiar, warm voice in the speaker of my smartphone:

- Hello, Axel? Well, finally...
- Lidka? Sorry for not giving a sign. It's not very interesting again... Maybe we can meet? Do you have time? Tomorrow?
- Something happened? Another party at home? – her warm voice instantly made me blush.
- Sort of. I will tell you tomorrow.
- Ok, sure. Drop by after 4:30 p.m. I'll be back from the guitar class then.
- Thanks, bye!

Relief. But for a while. Again, I couldn't sleep all night. To improve my mood, I read old text messages from Lidka. She had some kind of gift that in a few words she could lift my spirits. She didn't ask about details, didn't preach morals, and yet with her I was somehow better.

* * *

In the morning, when I got up, I packed my books quickly and said to my parents that I was going to school. The old folks probably didn't even notice that I was hanging around the kitchen looking for a sandwich. Zero interest. Besides, what else could I expect? That someone would suddenly fix them? Replace them?

I wandered around the mall until 4 pm. Then I walked through Wałęsa Park. It was already getting chilly outside.

It was late autumn. The colorful leaves had faded and were slowly turning into a grayish, wet mess on the sidewalks. There was a smell of dampness in the air. I felt the cold air in my nostrils, shivered harder than usual and felt like every part of my body was aching. A nice estate of detached houses appeared around the corner. A well-kept farmyard, a few peonies in the garden in front of the entrance. I rang the doorbell.

The door was opened by Mrs. Patrycja, Lidka's mother, a woman of medium build, smiling, brown-haired, with sparkles in her eyes.

– Great to see you, Axel! – she greeted me warmly – it's been a long time since you stopped by.

– Eee, well a little. I've been busy.

She just nodded and let me inside. A wooden staircase led to Lidka's room. I liked this house. There was always the smell of yeast cake and tea in it. Here and there the shadows of two cats moved. Lidka's room was her artistic oasis. Books and music note sheets were everywhere.

– Hey! – she got up to give me a hug, and I was a little frozen as usual. I'm not used to being shown affection. I stood like a log and waited those two seconds in confusion. – What happened? Tell me.

I took a deep breath. Three, two, one...

– I don't know where to start... – I groaned.

– Maybe from the beginning – Lidka smiled gently.

– I had some kind of crisis yesterday... My parents had the argument of the year again, I think it was the tenth this month... This time they threw plates and cutlery. My dad knocked over the cabinet out of anger, and the mother slammed the door and returned in 10 minutes with booze. She poured my father a drink and so they reconciled... Both of them drunk, forgot about the whole world. You know, I feel most sorry for Marcelinka... She is only six years old. And I don't know, nor can I talk to her about it. I can handle this but she?

– You started by saying that you had a crisis. What did you mean? – Lidka always knows how to hit a sensitive spot.

– Well, you know, I wrote the letter again...

– Farewell letter? – sadly reassured Lidka.

– Yes.

There was silence.

– But I had another thought that I want to talk to you about.

– Go on.

– I'm thinking of reporting my parents somewhere. For Marcelina. And a bit for me, too. What do you think?

– I was thinking about it the other day, but I didn't want to suggest it to you myself... I understand you. If you want, I will talk to my parents and I think we could definitely give you support. We will get through this together.

– Don't you think it's going to be so... cruel? You know... To report your own family... It's like turning against them.

– You know, I think that if your old folks can't rise to the occasion and provide you and Marcelina with a normal home, then you shouldn't feel bad about fighting for your common good. At least that's what I think.

– Thanks! That means a lot to me!

She hugged me. Again. I tensed up, but felt my heart quicken its rhythm. I hated this feeling. However, I felt stupid totally not reciprocating Lidka's kind gestures. I made a gentle motion with my hand across her back, something like a pat.

– It will be fine. You can do it! Or rather, we can do it together! – she emphasized this last word, repeating even louder. – Together! We can do it together!

I said thanks again and somehow relaxed. Lidka went to make arrangements with her mother that when her father comes back from work, they would talk to me. In a meanwhile I talked to Lidka about some silly things I needed this to spend some time with her just like that, at ease.

After some time Lidka's dad, Mr. Tomek, returned. We all sat down at the table and Lidka presented the situation. At first I felt a little embarrassed, but seeing the positive attitude of Lidka's parents, after a while I was already talking openly about how the situation was. Tomek and Patrycja suggested that before we take any further steps, first of all me and Marcelina should be in a safe house. They asked if I had a family member who could take us, meaning me and Marcelina, in. I immediately thought of my grandmother Basia. She's a grandmother from my mother's side, but a few years ago they quarreled over something and didn't have very good contact, but when I saw her from time to time, she was always dear to me. Grandma lived on the other side of town, fortunately I had her number in my phone. Patrycja went to the other room to call her, then after ten minutes she came, said that everything was arranged and that she would drive me there, and first we would drive home to get Marcelina and the most necessary things.

* * *

Before leaving we had dinner and listened to music in Lidka's room. When it got late Lidka went to ask her mother if it's already time. While waiting for her, I unlocked my phone and browsed the video on Tik Tok. After a while, Lidka rushed into the room.

– Get dressed. My mother has already gone to get the car. I’m going too.

– Let’s hit the road, captain! Haha!

I noticed her unforced smile. It was perfect. She grabbed my hand and we ran down the stairs through the hallway and went outside.

– Sit down first, then me – I said.

During the drive, thoughts started to torment me: “What if we get there and the parents start arguing again?”, “I hope Marcelina is okay”, “I don’t want to go back there”.

After a while, Lidka lay on my shoulder, and anxiety continued to grow in my head.

– Hey Lidka...

– Yes Axel?

– I’m afraid to go back there... Especially with you guys. It’s not a pretty picture... I am ashamed.

The silence before Lidka spoke seemed awfully long to me. Only the car engine could be heard. Finally, she answered:

– It is not you who should be ashamed.

Phew, we arrived at the place. Lidka asked her mother:

– Mom, can we go with Axel? Please...

– Yes dear, I’ll talk to Axel’s parents first and tell them what’s going on.

We got out of the car. I pressed on the handle, but the door was closed. After a while, Marcelinka opened it.

– Hi sis, where are mom and dad?

– They went somewhere. They left a mess.

We entered, and I looked around the house. Empty bottles, uneaten junk food, garbage, general disorder. As usual.

Patrycja and Lidka sat on the couch and took a moment to look after my young sister, while I went to pack the most necessary things.

– I think that’s it. We can leave. – I said, disbelieving myself that we were really doing it. I sent my parents a text message: “Hi, in case you wonder, I’m with Marcelinka at grandma Basia’s. I know you guys don’t give a shit anyway, but ok. Do whatever you want. Until you guys stop drinking, we’re not going home.”

The city at this time was already quiet. The ride was smooth and fast. After several minutes we were already at my grandmother’s block of flats. She was very happy to see us. She chatted with Patrycja in the kitchen for a few minutes, then grandma came to us. She had a rather frightened look on her face, but after a while she brightened up and started asking us about things like school, kindergarten, etc.

Lidka's mom started getting ready to leave, and Lidka said she would come to the car soon. I escorted her to the staircase, and she approached me. I already knew what she wanted to do. She hugged me. My heart was pounding like crazy again. I think I even started to like the feeling. It made me feel that, at least for seconds, the world stopped and I was in another reality.

– Thank you for everything Lidka... Really, if it wasn't for you, I don't know... the words got stuck in my throat. Lidka snuggled once more, and I felt that my feelings for her were probably no longer just friendship and gratitude, but something more. She surprised me at every step with her gentleness, kindness and understanding.

– Bye Axel, good night Mrs. Barbara! – she slipped her head lightly into the doorway, saying goodbye.

– Good night.

After Lidka left, I turned the key in the lock. I leaned against the door and took three deep breaths. Only now I felt the stress. My legs began to tremble. I went to the kitchen and sat down at the table, before returning to the grandma and Marcelinka. It was a day full of emotions.

* * *

My parents did not write anything back to my message, which was not particularly surprising. The next morning

my grandmother received a phone call. They called from the hospital on Yonska Street that my parents had been in an accident. Fortunately, nothing serious had happened to them.

I experienced a whole kaleidoscope of feelings. Fear, relief, and on top of that, remorse. Maybe they really didn't care about us but they were still our parents. Did I have the right to write them like this and make the decision to move to my grandmother? Doubts began to overwhelm me.

one week later

It turned out that the car accident my parents had was caused under the influence of alcohol. Luckily for them, they didn't hurt themselves or anyone else. They simply failed to make a turn and they drove into some fence, got a little battered.

They were taken care of by social services, and as a result, so were we, me and Marcelinka. Grandma Basia took over the role of our legal guardian for a while. I still had no contact with my parents.

Lidka has been a tremendous support for me, for sure. Her parents were actively involved in things happening with me and my parents. One Thursday afternoon, Lidka invited me to her house for pizza.

I arrived. When I entered, it smelled beautifully of tea again. Lidka was not her usual self. From her posture and tone of voice, I immediately sensed some tension.

– Axel, sorry I didn’t tell you this before, but I was afraid you wouldn’t come. Your parents have spoken to mine. They want to talk to you. They will be here in half an hour.

I was not angry with her. In fact, I was even happy to finally see them. For the past weeks, I had been living on hold. I didn’t know how the situation would develop. And now at least I’ll know where I stand. The bell rang.

– Are you ready? – asked Lidka tenderly and squeezed my hand.

– Yes.

* * *

“Dear parents, friends and acquaintances! I am writing to you to...”

CHAPTER 3:

What's wrong with me?

Nicola Kozuch, Emilia Gorny



Anxiety. I always knew that I was different from the other kids my age. Not only because of my way of looking at things, but also because of the way that I acted in everyday situations, which were perfectly normal for everyone else. Now, I wait until night falls and my parents go to bed, then I open my laptop and research what is wrong with me. I carefully type out my symptoms, receiving the same answer every time I press Enter. Anxiety. Always the same. Anxiety, anxiety, anxiety. I never thought one word could haunt my mind. It was etched into my head like a tattoo. Waiting, until I was sure my parents were asleep, then searching until my eyes grew tired. It became an obsession, in a way. With each word I read, my heart beat faster.

* * *

I sat at my desk with my head down and copied the mathematical sequence from the board, only slightly lifting my head up to read the numbers. I sighed quietly when peach brown appeared before my eyes again. I brushed away my bangs – which were starting to annoy me because they kept falling onto my face. I looked forward to copy the next example when I met Mrs. Jackson's eyes. She had rectangular glasses pushed down onto the tip of her nose, that she peered through at each student like an eagle.

– Maybe Miss Kyla would like to come up and solve this question? – she announced.

I thought that I was going to die. Every pair of eyes turned to look at me, as well as the concerned eyes of my girlfriend, Ana, who was sitting next to me. My heart started to race. I felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the space I was in. My vision unconsciously began to blur and my hands began to get increasingly clammy with sweat.

–Kyla, to the board, please. Unless you have something better to do? – she snapped, sternness thickly laced in her voice. At that moment, I felt like sinking into the ground. I tried to avoid eye contact with any pair of eyes as I slowly stood up from my seat and looked at Ana. She smiled encouragingly, but her smile didn't last very long. I hesitantly staggered to the board with my head down, whilst everything around me seemed to be in slow motion.

I picked up the piece of crumbling chalk, its dry texture soaking into the sweat that was gathering on my palm. I looked at my teacher through a few strands of hair that had fallen onto my face. She was looking at me with that piercing glare of hers. Behind me, I could hear taunting giggles, though they sounded as if they were under water. The room grew hotter with every passing second. I felt my face heat up and my breathing become ragged. I pressed the chalk to the board, hoping to start writing, but my hands were shaking uncontrollably, creating little white dots instead of the numbers I had imagined writing. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, like a million needles trying to pierce

my skin to free themselves. My surroundings became hazy as I felt my body go numb and dark spots danced before my eyes. I dragged the piece of chalk across the blackboard, but as it grazed, an ear-piercing screech echoed throughout the previously quiet classroom. I immediately flinched, the white object falling from my hand.

– What’s wrong, Kyla? – asked Mrs. Jackson, confused.

– May I return to my seat? – I asked stilly.

– Are you feeling alright, sweetie? Do you need to go to the nurse? – She’s never sounded so... nice? I shook my head and sluggishly returned to my assigned seat at the back of the class, though I didn’t remember getting there, until Ana tapped my thigh, taking me out of my trance. For the remainder of the lesson, I sat in complete silence.

I winced as the school bell rang loudly and the crowd of sixth-grade students rushed out of the classroom. I sighed softly and turned to Ana, who was already looking at me with worried eyes. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly, a faint blush spreading across my face, as well as a wistful smile; soft and gentle. I reached for her hand and together we walked into the hallway. We sat down on the floor next to the eighth grade lockers like we usually do. After a moment of silence, Ana moved closer and leaned against me, dropping her head onto my shoulder, sighing. She placed her warm hand on mine and asked:

-
- Is everything okay? – I breathed out deeply and looked at my hands, one of which she was holding.
 - No – I laughed quietly, even though there was nothing humorous about it.
 - Do you want to talk about it?
 - It happened again. I don't even know how to explain what it is. – I groaned, feeling frustrated.
 - Try, I'll listen – she assured me.
 - Think of a time when you were startled by a very loud and sudden noise. At that moment, your mind and body froze in panic and you began to fear for your life. Now imagine having the same feeling several times a day, for no reason, and for a long time. It's like looking a lion in the face as it bears its teeth and is about to pounce on me. I try to move, but I'm frozen, sweating, terrified, my heart is pounding, I can't catch my breath, and I fear for my life. But my mind sees that lion almost everywhere I turn... People who have panic attacks – or anxiety attacks – also have that. When your brain exaggerates a situation and your body reacts as if you were in a life-threatening situation.” When I finished, Ana immediately hugged me, and her straight, ebony hair tickled my nose.
 - Maybe you should talk to Mrs. Hunter? – she asked.

Mrs. Hunter is the school's psychologist. Usually, when we need a substitute, she steps in. I liked her, she seemed normal and kind, maybe even trustworthy. I nodded and beamed at the thought of Ana's concern towards me. I swiftly turned to her and gently kissed her rosy cheek. My lips were warm against her delicate skin. When I leaned back, her icy blue eyes were prominent because of the bright blush on her face.

* * *

It took me two days before I built up enough courage to talk to Mrs. Hunter. I sat next to the door, on an unusually comfortable chair and I flicked through a leaflet that was sprawled out on a glass table. I raised my eyebrows when I got to a page about different mental disorders. "Anxiety" – announced in a larger text – "More commonly found in teenagers". A sunny voice took me out of my thoughts. I peeked my face out from behind the leaflet, and my eyes caught sight of Mrs. Hunter standing in the doorway. A friendly smile was displayed on her face.

– Hello, Kyla. Come in, come in.

I returned the smile and slowly ambled inside, with her right behind me. The room had light blue walls, there were plants placed in random corners – and not only – of the room. There was a white sofa in the center with a matching armchair opposite. The walls were shrouded with minimalistic paintings, which gave the room an undeniable charm. In

general, the room was cozy, yet I still felt uneasy talking to someone about all the things that were wrong with me.

– What brings you here, Kyla? – she asked amiably.

– I think I have anxiety – were the words that left my mouth, before I could even think of what to say.

– Okay, why do you think so?

So, I told her everything that I could think of. From my research to my self-diagnosis. She asked me to name all my symptoms of “weird behavior” – as I called it my entire life – and examples of situations where I felt them, like at the board from two days ago.

After a few sessions, it turned out that I was right. I had anxiety. Mrs. Hunter arranged a meeting with my parents, in which we discussed the causes and ways to help. That day, we decided that I should have weekly sessions with Mrs. Hunter every Thursday. During the sessions we talked about how I’m doing or if I needed extra support. Thankfully, I didn’t think I did. I felt that it was getting better.

I had parents who tried to be there for me as well as they could. But most importantly, I had Ana, who was always by my side when I needed help and guidance. I was extremely grateful that she never made me feel that I was different, abnormal, sick, even though she often saw me during episodes. She treated me normally, which was apparently too difficult for some people from my class.

A Month Later

I placed my hand on my chest when my breathing quickened. I ran out of the classroom, hearing my geography teacher yell behind me. I heard the door open again and when I turned to see who it was, I saw Ana running towards me. She wrapped her hand around my waist and guided me towards the bathroom.

My geography presentation, that I was working on all week, wanting it to be perfect, didn't turn out like it was supposed to. I forgot a few words, consumed by pressure and stress, and then I started hearing cruel laughter from my classmates. I started freaking out and that's when I sprinted out of the room.

I walked up to the sink to splash cold water onto my face and hopefully calm down a bit. Trying to slow down my breathing, I took deep breaths, when Ana's comforting hand found my arm.

– Shhh now, Kyla, it's okay – she consoled me.

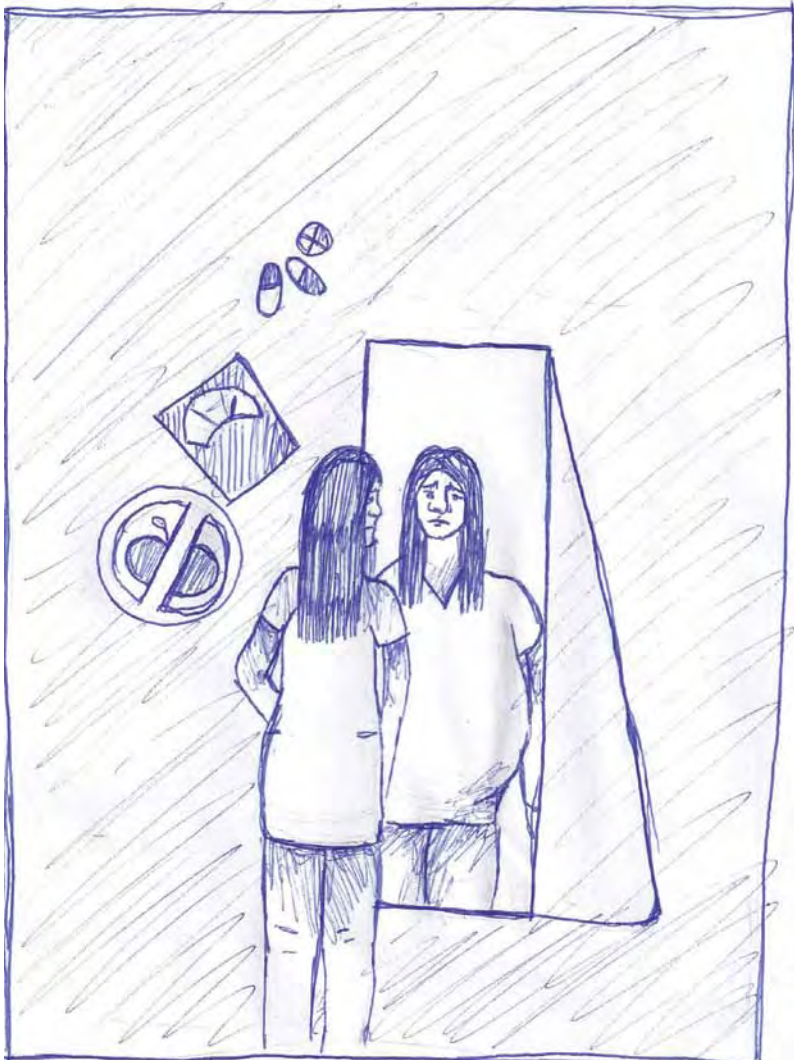
– No! No it's not okay, what the hell is wrong with me?! – I yelled, a singular tear rolling out of my eye. Ana brushed away a few strands of hair that had fallen onto my face again and then hugged me tightly.

– Everything about you is exactly how it's supposed to be. That's why, to me, you're special.

CHAPTER 4:

Little Black

Zuzanna Budziak, Klaudia Izdebska



I never expected this day to be the beginning of the end. But let's start from day zero.

Right after school I went grocery shopping with my stepmother. It was Friday, and we were going to have a family party in the evening. My stepmother and my father were having their wedding anniversary. I asked shyly if we could look at some dresses for me. All the old ones I had were pretty worn out and out of fashion. The stepmother agreed with undisguised grace. Whatever happens, she almost never refuses a visit to clothing stores. We entered Sinsay. Immediately the "little black" caught my eye. Classics: short sleeve, mid-thigh length, v-neck. I like such a timeless cut.

After trying it on, I looked at myself carefully from all sides in the mirror. I liked myself. I left with a smile on my face from the fitting room and presented my styling to my stepmother. This one asked me to turn 90 degrees. She looked at me disgusted.

– Sofia, look how your belly stands out! I hope you're not planning to buy it, are you? – her high, squeaky voice was not one of the most pleasant. I didn't answer her anything, just walked into the fitting room, quickly threw off my dress, jumped into my clothes and left the store.

Late afternoon

I was standing in front of my clothes closet. I already had my hair straightened and light makeup done, but I couldn't find anything suitable for the evening. My stepmother's words hit me hard. I never looked at my body thinking I was "fatter." I felt good about myself and a little bit of more body here and there somehow never bothered me. I was not fat, rather I had a feminine shape. Now, trying on probably already the fifth tight dress, I suddenly began to notice that. Here actually stands out a little, there the underwear is imprinted. I looked at my watch, which indicated that in fifteen minutes the whole family should start to arrive. I sat down tired on the bed and depressed that I would probably go in sweatpants. I looked thoughtfully at the window. At the same moment, Mrs. Maria, the housekeeper, entered the room and put a pile of laundry on the floor behind the closet. She was doing the last tidying up before the arrival of the guests and removing all "obstructive" items from sight. She looked at me, smiled warmly and left.

I looked at the washed clothes and saw my jacket there, along with elegant black trousers. At that moment I thought that maybe I could look reasonably neat at the meeting after all.

There was a tense atmosphere at the table because, in addition to a few familiar guests, it was the first time we

had been visited by a family I had not known until then, from Margaret's, my stepmother's, side. The housekeeper prepared a lot of delicious food for dinner. I was very hungry, but as I took my first bite of dumpling, I felt someone's gaze on myself. Actually, someone was staring at the food held in my hand. I felt uncomfortable. I looked in front of me and noticed my cousin, who was putting some salad in her mouth, looking at me with superiority. At one point, my stepmother left the table and asked me to come aside for a moment. She pulled me by the hand to the toilet, stood by the sink and began to lecture me in a whisper:

– Look at Nina! What a flat belly she has! How beautiful she looks in that dress! And you probably weigh 60 kg and bring us nothing but shame.

After which she left without even waiting for my answer. I felt like an elephant in a herd of ants, that is, simply fatter than others. I wish I looked like Nina, I don't deny that I don't. Maybe then I wouldn't be so invisible and finally get someone's attention? I looked at my protruding belly, straightened up, pulled it in as much as I could and decided to go back to the rest of the guests. I sat down at the table in such a way as to disguise it a bit. I focused on my dish, incidentally still untouched by me. I got up and walked over to my dad. I asked him if it was okay for me to go back to my room because I was feeling bad. He thankfully agreed, so I quickly said goodbye to my family and ran upstairs.

The next morning

– Sofia, from tomorrow you will run in the morning before class. You could use some exercise – Margaret said without any emotion. Then, already leaving, she added. – Oh, and remember your diet. Tomorrow we will go to a nutritionist. Maybe that will help you lose some weight.

I didn't answer. I had already started questioning my appearance and my food choices since yesterday. I decided that maybe it was actually time to lose a few pounds. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast yesterday, and I was very happy about it.

3 days later

After my morning run, I had to go to school. In PE class during the warm-up I felt worse, I had a terrible headache. Never I hadn't felt like this before. Suddenly I lost my balance and I think I fell. I guess, because I don't quite remember what happened then. I only woke up in the hospital. Next to me I saw my dad. I was a little surprised, because he never had time for me and didn't pay attention to me. He always worked a lot and was rarely at home, but I also know that thanks to his hard work, we do not lack anything. Sometimes, however, I think he forgets that he has a daughter. I asked what happened, and he told me the whole story. I reportedly fainted in PE, they couldn't bring

me around, so I was taken to the emergency room. They found dehydration, blood sugar fluctuations and some more mineral deficiencies. I was sure I had fainted due to my diet and morning running.

Over the past few days I've been eating little and exercising a lot, just as Margaret told me to do. In fact, I'm not just doing it for her, but also for myself, because I know it will make me look better and be slimmer. Dad went home after two hours of watching over me, and I was left alone. The nurse brought me dinner and medicine. She also said I had to take it easy and could not do any physical activity for a while.

I didn't eat anything, and I threw the medicines in the trash, because, after all, they were extra calories. After a few days in the hospital, I didn't feel better at all. When I was discharged home, I wanted to get back to exercising as soon as possible, because I couldn't do it in the hospital. I felt useless there. In the evening I went to ballet lessons.

The next day at school I felt pretty good. I didn't have any nausea. Well, maybe I was a little dizzy, but that was probably due to my diet. Since the family dinner it has been very limited. I practically eat nothing. Only sometimes I drink a fruit or vegetable smoothie. After school, I went to meet some friends. First we went for a walk in the park, and then for ice cream and pizza. Of course, I didn't eat. I told the others that I had dinner at home and I didn't have room to eat anything else.

3 weeks later

After a while, my friends began to notice that I was getting thinner and weaker, but I always found some excuse. Once I had a terrible crisis. When I watched them eat pistachio ice cream with pleasure. I could give up everything but pistachio ice cream was my weakness. For the first time since the beginning of the diet, I felt like breaking. I knew I couldn't do it, because I would ruin my previous goals that I had achieved. At such moments I remembered Nina's flat belly and my stepmother's words, "You bring us shame." It helped.

When I came home, I always weighed myself. At first Margaret forced me to do it. She said she had to control my weight. After a while it became my ritual. Today's weighing showed that I had lost a kilogram in less than a week. I was pleased with myself but Margaret was not. She thought it wasn't enough and I should lose weight faster. I began to be remorseful. I found that now I had to be even more diligent to please her.

4 weeks later

Over these last few weeks, I ate even less and felt weaker and weaker. As a result, I was losing weight faster and faster. I jumped into clothes two sizes smaller, compared to the beginning of the diet. I started with a size 40 and now

I'm a 36. I can see that I look cool and at the same time I've never felt so bad mentally. I even have the impression that having a larger size and not being so concerned about my weight, I was happier, full of energy and more satisfied than I am now.

Weight has become my obsession. I see some flaw in my beauty everywhere. When I look at my friends' social media accounts, the first thing I look at is who has what kind of body type, or if they have something off.

In fact, I have never felt as fat and ugly as I do now, even though I weigh 7 kg less than I did two months ago. I have mood swings and find it hard to concentrate.

I had been thinking about all this a lot for a few days. I was sick of the rigor at home. Margaret has turned into a corporal who guards the weight, assigns me portions. Moreover, she is perpetually dissatisfied with me. And dad? He probably doesn't have a clue about anything. He hasn't even noticed that I lost some weight. Anyway, no surprise, he's more of a guest at home.

If I told him everything, he probably wouldn't believe me anyway. He only has eyes for Margaret.

I decided I had to return to my mother. Mom lived separately. In another city, about 30 km from us. My parents argued terribly a lot before the divorce. That's why they divorced. I ended up with my father after that. Mom supposedly went

through some kind of nervous breakdown, went abroad for a while. Our relationship was quite good before, after the divorce somehow everything went sour. Recently, I overheard a conversation between the housekeeper and Margaret that Mom had supposedly returned. Fortunately, I knew her address.

2 days later

I visited my mother. She looked and felt good, I guess the trip did her good. She was very happy that I came. I told her about all my problems, Margaret and the diet. Mom was the only person I could trust 100%. She was very concerned about it and said that I had fallen into an eating disorder. She promised that now she was back on her feet, she would try to regain her parental rights. I felt unimaginable relief.

After the conversation, I returned home. Over the next few days I definitely felt better and even started eating a little more. After two months, my parents had a court hearing. I was very stressed about it and because of this I went back to my earlier diet. When the hearing was over, I wanted to find out as soon as possible whether I would be able to live with my mother. It turned out to be successful. I feel like there's weight off my shoulders.

The first day after moving in with my mother, we talked a lot about health, appearance, food, diet. Mom opened up

to me a lot and I opened up to her. We sat at the kitchen table in the evening, sipping mint tea.

– Remember, darling – she said. – If someone loves you, you never bring them shame, no matter how you look or how much you weigh. This is foolishness. You could do yourself a lot of harm with such diets. I’m sorry this happened to you. It’s your health that counts, not the pounds. And for me you will always be the most beautiful anyway. And now.... get dressed. Are we going shopping? – She added with a smile.

– Like... now? – I asked surprised. – And what for?

– What do you mean why? To get a “little black” for you. I think you already had one chosen, right?

CHAPTER 5:

The Scar

Zuzanna Budziak, Klaudia Izdebska



11.03.2016

I felt someone's touch on my back. I turned around rapidly and saw my friend Aurelia. Before I even had time to react, she pushed me. I felt a jolt, tremendous pain and then I lost consciousness.

I woke up in the hospital, next to me on the chair sat my hunched mother. She was asleep. A wave of piercing pain flooded me. It felt like literally every part of my body was in pain. I touched my forehead with my hand and felt a bandage on it. Opposite the bed was a door. I thought it must be the toilet. Every movement, even the slightest, was agony. I barely got up, sat on the edge of the bed and tiptoed to the bathroom to see what was hidden under the bandage. I began to gently unwind the bandage. I looked in the mirror and saw a large wound on my forehead. Deep laceration, congealed pus and torn skin around it.

01.09.2020

The first day at the new school. I was a little afraid but I thought it couldn't be that bad after all. In elementary school, my appearance after the accident was accepted, and no one commented on the scar that remained on my forehead.

I walked along the sidewalk and all around me groups of teenagers appeared heading in the same direction as me.

I didn't know anyone and was a little worried about how I would blend in. Out of nowhere I heard:

– Oh look, what a scar she has! An alien!

I recognized the voice immediately. It was Aurelia. Just what I needed in my new school... I ignored her and went on. But that was only the beginning of my worries.

The next day was definitely worse. People openly made fun of me and shouted all sorts of stupid texts after me, such as: “but you have fungus on your forehead!” or “wash that forehead”. Apparently, I was too naive, thinking that my scar doesn't define me. When I went to grab my shoes from the locker after that difficult and exhausting day, I noticed “Karmen is an alien” written on the door. I tried to wash it off but the letters wouldn't come off. Well, yes, someone must have used a permanent marker.

I slammed my locker shut and dashed out of the school as fast as I could.

Entering the house I realized that my mother had not yet returned from work. I left my shoes in the hallway and ran to my room. I looked in the mirror and thought that maybe there really was something wrong with me. My elementary school classmates didn't pay attention to my scar at all anymore; after all, I had had it since fifth grade.

Here it was different. Because of the comments, I felt that the scar had become even more visible. For the first time in a very long time, I felt the need to cover it up. I took the foundation from my mother's cosmetics and started to apply it, patting the beige mass into my forehead. Unfortunately, it didn't help. I didn't know what to do. Out of helplessness, I began to cry, and in addition, I realized that my mother would be home in ten minutes. I wiped my tears and started preparing dinner. The rest of the day I pretended to my mother that everything was fine just not to worry her.

The next day

The sound of the door closing. Mom probably left for work, thinking I was asleep the whole time. I got out of bed quickly. I desperately wanted to cover the scar. I ran to Mom's closet and quickly started looking for something that could solve my problem. I found a blue scarf and tied it around my head. A quick glance at myself in the mirror, that's it. I finally look normal! And even quite stylish. I saw recently on instagram how girls purposely tie such turbans to look cool. I walked into school and saw that awful writing on my locker again. Damn... I forgot to take solvent to wash it off. That put me in a bad mood. Suddenly a girl talked to me.

– Hi, are you new here? Because I’ve never seen you before. I’m Mia – at first glance the girl looked like a nerd but such a harmless one. Average body type, wavy chestnut hair, thin-framed glasses and a sharp look.

– Hey, yes. I’m new here – I replied suprised. – My name is Karmen.

– Would like to hang around and maybe have lunch at cafeteria? – asked the girl.

All in all, I had nothing to lose. In the class, everyone knew someone, so everyone went in groups. And I was all by myself.

– Sure – I replied after a moment of thought.

While eating lunch with Mia, we talked a lot. It turned out that she goes to 1c and doesn’t know anyone either, she heard comments about me and saw me standing in front of the locker, so she chatted. We found some common ground. We began to meet every day at breaks. It turned out that our classes had combined PE. I liked her a lot. When I spent time with her, I forgot about all those nicknames, I felt comfortable around her. Besides, the situation with calling names was already better, because I was walking around in different scarves and turbans and everyone thought I just had such a style.

One day Mia and I went to the locker room together, because the next lesson was PE. We were supposed to play soccer, but before we started dividing into teams, the PE teacher in front of everyone told me to take off my scarf.

I was stressed because I knew that when I do this, they would laugh at me again.

– Do I have to? I don't like to go without it – I asked in a pleading tone.

– You have to, you can't practice in it, it's against the rules – the trainer replied sternly.

Everyone looked at me and tears began to come to my eyes. To top it all off, the teacher rushed me. I pulled down my scarf and suddenly everyone started laughing, everyone except Mia. Tears were streaming down my cheeks and the teacher could not bring the class to order. I don't think he knew what to do with me. He looked at me with an apologetic gaze and I ran weeping into the locker room. At that moment I wished the ground would swallow me up. I felt like going home as soon as possible. I felt helpless, because I really wanted to look like the other girls. The teacher followed me out to the locker room but I was so shaken that I was unable to return to the lesson. I think he must have come to his senses because he called my parents and they dismissed me. I was able to go home.

When 4 p.m. struck, my mother returned. I didn't feel like talking to her now, so I locked myself in my room. She tried to make contact with me, but I didn't answer her. I felt that she was worried about me. I know this because my mother was always concerned about me when something happened to me and tried to help me. I had a good relationship with her and always knew I could count on her, but this time the situation overwhelmed me. The next morning I couldn't get out of bed, I felt weak. When I managed to crawl out, I slowly got dressed and went to school.

Others continued to laugh at me, but I paid no attention. I was somehow so indifferent. I told myself that I would block all outside noise. I didn't want to talk to anyone, not even Mia. It was a very difficult day, I was tired all the time. I couldn't concentrate on my studies. The artificial wall I put up between me and the rest of the world actually worked a little. It made me get rid of all feelings. I felt like a ghost, ghosts, after all, don't have a body, so they can't have feelings either.

After returning from school, I quickly went to bed. Over the weekend I just cried and slept, and that's pretty much the only thing I did. I had no appetite, so I ate very little. On Monday, I really didn't want to go to school, but my mother said I had to do it, because if I started skipping like that, I would fall behind. I quickly took a scarf, tied it around my head and went. At the entrance Mia was waiting for me.

– Hi Karmen! How are you, you didn't want to talk to me on Friday, did I do something wrong? – she asked with concern in her voice.

– No, I just had a bad day that day. Would you like to maybe go to the library to study for math?

Mia nodded, so we took off. I think she saw that I was not at my best. In the library, Aurelia, accompanied by some buddy, appeared out of nowhere. Without any hesitation she approached us and, turning to Mia, said:

– Why are you friends with this alien? You are both pathetic – she said. – Aurelia made a theatrical hand gesture, giggled, and the buddy she came with, echoed her and added:

– How did you like my writing on your cabinet “beauty queen”?

He couldn't have said it any more ironically. What could I expect from Aurelia and anyone else who sticks with her? I tried not to let it be known that I felt horrible, so I did not respond to the comment. During a long break, Mia asked if I would go with her to the restroom, because she needed to tell me something. I followed her. I was a little puzzled, because why the restroom. I was afraid it would be bad information.

– Listen Karmen, I can see that you’re having a hard time because of all the bullying and I wanted to show you something – she announced.

I felt fear, I didn’t know what she meant. Mia rolled up the sleeve of her blue sweatshirt. On the inside of her forearm I saw a birthmark, that is, a brown spot on the skin covered with hair. It was irregular shapes, but quite big. It reached from the wrist almost up to the elbow. I was stunned. I didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, Mia was the first to speak up.

– I know you are shocked. I’ve had it since I was born. In the first grades of elementary school, they made fun of me too. You know yourself how cruel kids might be... They insulted me and bullied me. At first it affected me a lot, I didn’t want to go to school, I cried all the time, and I always wore sweatshirts to avoid showing my hand. Over time, I began to get used to it. People forgot about this birthmark when I didn’t care about their words, and I stopped giving them satisfaction. Eventually, they also found themselves another topic for gossip. I no longer paid attention to it and I just functioned normally. I think it may be the same in your case. I think you shouldn’t worry about them, although I know myself that it’s just so easy to say...

– Mia looked straight into my eyes, and I saw compassion, sympathy and understanding. I thought to myself that I was not alone. That others also have similar problems, and this

gave me encouragement. Not knowing what to say, I moved closer to her and hugged her tightly.

After this situation, I was a little confused for the rest of the day. Thoughts were racing through my head. September was still quite warm, most people were walking around in T-shirts, and Mia was wearing long-sleeved shirts or thin sweatshirts. Well, yes, it made sense now. For the next week I thought a lot about what Mia had told me. I even had doubts about whether to believe her. I thought maybe she was faking it and had drawn a fake stain on herself just so I wouldn't feel bad. After some time, I realized that it was true, but I continued to hide the scar because I was afraid of the reactions of others. However I had the cheerful Mia with me all the time. It annoyed me a little that she was able to live a normal life, while I have to hide my scar every day.

I decided that I had to check if Mia was telling the truth. From day to day I stopped wearing the clearly. The first day was the worst. People stared, clearly. But I promised myself that I would persevere in this experiment for at least a few days. At some point I began to notice something. It was happening exactly as Mia said. Others were indeed no longer paying attention to my scar and they started to hate me less. I didn't believe it was really happening. I was gaining confidence. For the first time in a long time, I saw a light in the tunnel.

A few weeks later

A few weeks passed. The situation changed dramatically. I felt normal and my scar was no longer such a sensation.

One day at school I noticed something strange. The dude from Aurelia's gang who signed my locker looked different somehow. Part of his neck became all red and wrinkled. It was obvious that he had been pasting some kind of cream into the area every break. People at school, of course, started talking. From Mia I learned that the guy had burned himself with boiling water. Supposedly, his younger sister had accidentally done it. I felt a little sorry for him, because I know it must have hurt him terribly. I once had a tiny burn on my finger and thought I was going to go out of my mind from the pain.

During breaks, I heard several offensive comments directed at Martin, because that was his name. Boys from the older classes made jokes that someone had sprinkled him with corrosive urine or that some girl wanted to give him a hickey but her saliva was poisoned... For the next week Martin was the talk of the town. I remembered the moments when I was the one in his shoes. On the one hand I felt sorry for him, because I know what it feels like, and on the other hand I felt a little bit of satisfaction that the person who laughed at me was now going through something similar. I knew perfectly well what emotions

and feelings he was going through now, so I decided not to add to it anymore, even though I was tempted, I did not make unnecessary comments.

Two days later, when I was pulling books out of the cabinet (fortunately, the inscription was able to be removed) Marcin approached me and embarrassed, said:

– Hey, Karmen, I want to tell you something – he began uncertainly, staring at the floor. – I’m very sorry for everything I did, for making fun of you. Well, and for that inscription... I hope you will forgive me... It was not cool. I admire you that you behaved with style in this whole situation. I myself don’t know how you endured it...

To say that I was surprised is a weak term. I was also confused. I didn’t particularly want to help him, but it is said that evil can only be overcome with good. After a moment’s thought, I replied:

– Apology accepted. I can guess what you are feeling right now, so I can give you one piece of advice. Do you want to go to the library for a while?

The boy nodded and followed me. I told him everything I had heard from Mia earlier and described briefly how it worked in my situation. He confided in me that his younger sister had accidentally knocked a glass of hot tea off the kitchen bar counter while he sat back and watched the TV. We exchanged phone numbers and he thanked me for

talking to him. Afterwards, I was tormented by some more thoughts about whether I had done the right thing. Everyone tells me that I have a heart of gold, so I never pass indifferently by someone's misfortune, that's probably why I helped him. Whatever the case, it didn't cost me anything, and perhaps I helped him a little and felt better about it myself.

* * *

I learned many things from this whole story but one in particular. In your life, you are sometimes faced with evil in various forms. There is probably some element of good and evil in each of us, the question is, which one will you feed? People who do bad things to you usually do them because they want to boost their self-esteem at the expense of others.

I have a scar on my body. It shows that something terrible happened to me in my life. Maybe someday I will take advantage of some treatment to remove it. Or maybe not.

I recently got a second scar but this one is in my heart. A bad word stays in our souls sometimes for longer than others think. However, I will not let it drag me down.

CHAPTER 6:

On the Roof

Nicola Kozuch, Emilia Gorny



I looked ahead. In the distance, the sun was setting behind the trees. Shades of orange, coloured my surroundings, glowing onto my face and unabling me from looking onwards.

I looked down. The parking lot was finally empty, I only had to wait for the clock to strike 7:00. Every now and then I peered at my phone, held by my shaking hand. The time was coming. I waited for this moment all summer and now it was right at the tip of my fingers. The trice that I had to wait seemed to drag on forever; a few minutes seemed to last for hours.

My emotions were ambivalent, it was difficult to understand them. I couldn't make out what was happening inside of my heart, however I knew exactly what was happening to my body. My eyes were red and puffy from crying for the last hour. My breathing was uneven and my heart was beating like crazy. I know that I want to do this. I will be free. I will finally be free from all these feelings that have been weighing on my heart for so long. From the moment my parents' hearts stopped beating in that car, I had no life left. In one minute, happiness turned to despair, and there was nothing I could do about it. It was as if a lever had flipped in my brain; a switch for all emotions. My life had flashed before my eyes during the crash, but now its meaning was not figurative, but literal. Now I couldn't help but feel happy; unlike then. Unlike since all of this happened. I can't remember a moment when I felt truly happy since the loss

of my parents. It was never real happiness, it was just a part of me wanting to feel like before; normal.

The sun was just a faint memory in my mind, this will be the last time I see it. The sun brought me a sense of peace. It was a part of life; nature. It shone so brightly, it brought us human's life, it brought us light. But when darkness comes, it absorbs the light, and the sun slowly fades into it. Just like me. The darkness is my loss, and the light is me before the tragedy.

I looked at my phone and my pupils dilated when I realized there were only two minutes left until the end of my journey that they call life. My hands that hung helplessly at my sides, trembled, and my chest tightened. The lump in my throat receded, as a pathetic sob threatened to slip past my trembling lips. I hadn't even realised I was crying until a tear sorrowfully rolled down my cheek.

A vibration in my hand brought me out of my thoughts. It was 7:00. It was time. I stood at the edge of the school roof. I lifted my left leg, I couldn't feel the ground. The wind didn't stop around me, and my body escaped from the reality of the world. I was free. The cold pressure of the abyss rocked me, pulling me further into its depths. It was quiet. The peaceful silence I always wanted. I am finally free.

My name is Morris Lange and I was fifteen years old.

December 5th 2022

– Morris, you have to go, do you understand?! – the words spoken in a venomous tone came from my foster mum. “

– I’m not going to that fucking psychologist! – I shouted back.

– Don’t yell at me, child! – she screamed, causing a sharp shrill to ring in my ears. Suddenly, the car came to a stop and I froze at the sight of the building, that caused such profound disgust in my stomach. Just the thought of going inside made me nauseous. I looked at the woman beside me, hoping for mercy, only to receive a look that could only be described as being told to get out of the damn car. So I did. With no intention to step foot inside the clinic. I stood in front of it and waited until the car left the parking lot. I waved sarcastically and smiled as fakely as I could when the car turned away. When I was sure there was no one around, I legged it. Far away from anyone and anything.

May 14th 2023

I winced, hearing the loud noise that my locker door made, when I closed it. I jammed my eyes shut, before taking a deep breath and turning around. I saw exactly what I didn’t want to see. Everyone’s attention was guided to me and I felt all of the pairs of eyes staring my way. My

eyes glazed over as I scanned their faces, seeing only pure repulsion. I heard all of them whisper, however one in particular stuck to my mind:

– Oh god, it's that orphan, right?

I ran as far away as I could before tears started to fall from my eyes. When I got to the bathroom, I locked the door, sliding down it as the tears fell uncontrollably. I pulled my legs up to my chest and curled in on myself, hoping that I'll drown out the world and the laughs as I raced down that hallway.

* * *

Abruptly, I was in a cemetery. Thick fog covered the grey tombstones, and dark clouds shrouded the sun. I turned around when I heard a quiet sob in the distance. It was the melancholy cry of a girl. Somehow, I recognised the voice, however I didn't know where from. With hesitance, I took a step towards the bleak sound, looking for the direction it was coming from. Finding the source didn't take very long. Moments later, I noticed the outline of a figure in the distance. It was a slim girl with light brown hair and emerald eyes. She wore a dark coat and a hood partially covered her face, though you could still see her tear-stained cheeks and bloodshot eyes. It was the girl that sat behind me in class. She always wore a characteristic red hoodie and blue and black striped fingerless gloves. She was a quiet

person that never really raised her hand during lessons. I always thought that she gave off the impression of being nice, which was quite the opposite of all the other people at my school. I wondered what she was doing here, and why I was here. I don't think she noticed I was there; and I didn't remember how I even got here.

I slowly came closer to her.

– Hazel? What are you doing here? – I asked.

Minutes passed and Hazel still hadn't shown any indication that she had even heard me. I didn't receive an answer and I began to worry that I was dreaming. She was acting like I wasn't even there, like everyone else did – literally everyone. I reached to grab her by the arm and guide her attention towards me, but I couldn't. When I tried to touch her, my arm went right through her? I tried, and tried, and tried, and tried, and tried. Until I realised that I really wasn't there. I jumped off the roof. Then, where was I if I wasn't alive? I turned to the direction that she was looking in, at the stone grave. My eyes widened when I read the words: ***Morris Lange. 04.06.2008 – 15.09.2023.***

I was dead... I was actually dead. I repeated the declaration in my head, until it didn't make sense anymore. If I was dead, then what was I doing here? How? This couldn't be heaven, but it didn't look quite like hell either. I sat on the ground, next to Hazel.

– Why did you do it? I would’ve helped if I knew... – she whispered sadly, another tear falling from her shamrock eyes. I smiled at her softly. I didn’t feel anything; and honestly I preferred it that way. I liked how I didn’t have to feel. Everything seemed easier; life seemed easier. Even if I wasn’t alive.

It was good to leave this world, knowing that at least one person cared about my death. Though, weirdly, it hurt me, that I hurt her. In quiet mumbling, I heard something that would make the heart of old me – alive me – beat faster and make my cheeks blush crimson.

– I love you, Morris...

I left the only person, who cared about me, since my parents’ death, in the cruel world that I wasn’t a part of anymore. Now, I have no way of protecting her from all the world’s flaws and darkness. She asked me why I did it, but now my answer will always stay the same: “Because I couldn’t do it anymore”. What would’ve happened if I hadn’t done it? Maybe it would’ve all been better, if I had told her. Maybe, I made a mistake, leaving her in the world that I tried so badly to get out of. Maybe with her it would’ve all been better. Maybe... I could’ve counted on her.

Maybe, in everyone’s life, there is a person that we can count on, we just haven’t put in the effort to find them...

CHAPTER 7:

Hope

Maja Komorowska



I am a Zet Generation. I was born on April 15th 2004. When I was a child, there was no indication that I stood out from my peers in any way. But when I started growing up, I noticed that something was wrong.

Others were enjoying their lives, while I was still sad and felt the damned anxiety in my head. I tended to worry about everything, stress accompanied me daily. Things that other people didn't care about at all seemed like the end of the world to me. I wondered, was it that famous hormonal storm everyone talks about? Or am I just like that?

My parents, seeing how much I really struggle with myself sometimes, wanted to help me. They showed me some youtube tutorials on how to calm down by doing breathing exercises. I, however, had this strange affliction that, when I focused too much on my breathing, I would faint.

It happened to me in various strange situations. I hated my life and wanted to disappear.

When I turned thirteen, I found out that my mother was seriously ill. Dad didn't want to say anything to me, and neither did my brother; he was worried that we would read something on the Internet and panic. I didn't ask what was wrong with Mom, because they both avoided the topic so I let it go. Dad only occasionally mentioned that we had to firmly believe she would recover.

Every day a nurse came to see mom for two hours. Dad, in order to support us, worked two shifts. It fell on me to take care of Mom after school. I would give her medicine, spend time with her and tell her how I was doing. Once, when I was dosing Mom with pills, including strong painkillers, I thought to myself, what if I took them, since Mom feels a little better after them. From then on, I snuck her pills every day.

My days looked the same. I would steal my pills in the morning, which made me feel a little numb to everything I was facing, then go to school, then come back and sit with my mother. Thanks to the pills, I was acting a bit like I was on autopilot. The standard drama at school didn't bother me so much anymore. I stopped asking about my mother's illness and she was getting worse.

After two weeks my mother died. That terrible void left by her was replaced by pills, of which we had a whole cupboard to spare. However, now 2-3 tablets were no longer enough for me as before. I increased the dosage. In six months I changed beyond recognition. I became addicted.

And it was only after this time that my dad began to suspect something. When I came back in the evening from the meeting with my friend, he was waiting for me in the living room, he was staring at me very carefully and was observing my behavior. Suddenly, after a short conversation, he pulled out a drug test and said that I must

take it, even if he had to use force to do so. I was very scared, because I didn't want to worry my dad. I had seen how after my mother's death he had closed himself off and lost his former shine. I agreed to do the test, already having a plan in mind.

In the restroom, I immediately texted my neighbor who lives across the street. Fortunately, she agreed to help me, so I quickly went out the window and ran to Zoe. Zoe, peeing into a cup, was a little confused, but didn't ask anything. More than once we helped each other in different situations. Home tests usually have a urine temperature measurement, so I had to hurry. I quickly went back through the window and, as if nothing had ever happened, handed my dad the cup with the still-warm urine. The test came out negative, and my dad apologized to me for thinking that way in the first place.

My happiness did not last long. Three days after the incident, my dad found empty blister packs of my mom's pills in my room. I was still at school at the time, but when I returned from school, the argument began. Dad yelled at me and cried.

– Honey... I know it hasn't been easy for you lately. But I'm really trying to make sure you have everything you want...

And I felt that I had nothing but pills, which I thought at the time were helping me survive. I was grounded and my dad

told me that he is sending me to rehab. That same day he called a private addiction treatment clinic. He was informed that I could start treatment there in four days, but I already knew that I was not going to be clean.

During those last days of freedom, I decided to party. In addition to the pills I've always taken, I took some others I found, mixed everything together and so the day before rehab I overdosed. I drifted off, lost consciousness. I was saved by my aunt, who had just brought my brother home from school and wanted to pick up some of my mother's things. I remember the moment when I woke up in the hospital and it occurred to me what had happened. I felt terrible. I saw my father asleep in a chair, his few gray hairs falling over his ear.

He tried to support me, to be understanding, but I still felt terrible about it, because I realized that I had taken away something he desperately needed – the peace of mind of experiencing grief for his wife.

I ended up in rehab for a month. I met a lot of people who had much bigger problems. First and foremost, these were young people addicted to drugs. I, after all, was “only” addicted to pain pills. I didn't like the place, the people and the talk that everything is in our hands and that life is beautiful. No, it isn't.

The only light in the whole place was a fair-haired 21-year-

old girl with the nickname Casandra. She was not a patient, but it turned out that her aunt was the director of the center, and she got along well with the young people and worked there casually in a support role. She was smart and funny, and we immediately found common ground. She was interested in me, and for the first time in a very long time I felt I had someone to talk to. She didn't judge me, and when needed she hugged me. The pain pills had already completely flushed out of my system and... suddenly I felt something. It was longing. Oh, I missed the warmth of someone's body during a hug so much, I missed hugging my mother so much. A stream of tears poured down my jeans... This feeling was so painful and strong, and at the same time...it felt good to feel something again...! The pills were taking that away from me. I didn't want to be a robot that runs on autopilot anymore. Feelings sometimes hurt, but it felt good to feel anything after months of numbness...

A month passed, I finally got out. I couldn't wait to feel good. I was picked up from rehab by my dad, he wasn't angry with me. Casandra became my closest friend, who understands perfectly what I went through. I owe everything to her and my dad. If it weren't for them, I might not be here anymore. And the feelings. Sometimes they are difficult, sometimes I still cry into my pillow in longing for my mother, but I also feel other things: joy, satisfaction, pride. And hope.