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Tickets through the Union

She's wearing the Chinese t-shirt with fishes on it, which her mummy gives her every year when they go to the seaside. The fishes are all different colours, the like of which Adelutza has never seen on any other children's t-shirts. "The Chinese make good stuff," says mummy. Adelutza's face and blonde hair are streaked with the sunbeams that lave the back seat of the Dacia. Adelutza is dozing off.

Last night, she stayed up late because mummy was packing the suitcases for the seaside, and she opened all the cupboard doors, the ones on the bottom and the ones on the top. Only mummy is allowed to open the cupboards, because it's very tidy in there, and Adelutza quickly went to tell daddy that mummy had opened the cupboards and wondered why he didn't come to see what was inside, too. Out of the cupboard appeared mummy's dresses — large green, red and blue corollas, with flowers, leaves and sprigs — which won't answer you however much you tug them by the sleeve, because they're like mummies without faces.

Her mummy, the real one, went to rinse her hands. Adelutza took a step toward the open suitcase. "Mind you don't touch anything in there," she heard mummy's voice say, from the bathroom. Adelutza gave a start and quickly took a step back. Mummy came back, and her hands swooped down and started folding the dresses, very slowly. Against the wall, in the light from the street lamp outside, mummy's hands looked like animals that had come to eat or to bury dead birds. The suitcase swallowed the last bird shadows and mummy closed the lid.

"Why don't you go to sleep?" asks mummy. "Come on, there's still ages

until the seaside.”

Adelutza doesn't think there's still ages because if she looks hard enough she can see how the sea sparkles at the end of the highway, somewhere between mummy's long black hair and the short similarly black hair on daddy's nape, like a long blue scarf binding them together. Daddy is speeding along in the car towards the sea, but then he reaches the end of the road or turns a corner, and the scarf vanishes for a moment, and mummy and daddy's heads draw apart, but then Adelutza screws up her eyes tightly and asks daddy:

“Daddy, can't you see the sea there in front, behind those trees?”

Daddy looks, too. He screws up his eyes and says:

“Yes, duckling, of course I can.”

Mummy jerks her head and says:

“Cut out the nonsense. How can she see the sea? Adelutza, darling, go to sleep. Take no notice of what your daddy says.”

Then from the seat in front, mummy stretches out her hand. Adelutza takes it and, gazing intently at the gold bracelet of the watch jiggling on mummy's wrist, her eyelids droop. Her ears now barely hear the words exchanged by mummy and daddy: “Let the child have her fun,” “Why disappoint her,” “Best let her sleep otherwise she'll end up being sick again.”

Adelutza knows that it is already afternoon and that they've reached the seaside, but she doesn't open her eyes, because nothing fun is happening yet. She'll wait for hours in the hotel, in the dusky lobby — while other children pass by with blue inflatable rings around their tummies, ready for the beach — until the man from reception tells mummy that the cleaning lady comes every day to do the vacuuming and that

there aren't any rats or bedbugs in the room. That was what happened last time. Then mummy will take the keys and daddy the luggage and Adelutza, and they'll all go up to the room.

"WHAT?"

Adelutza gives a start and opens her eyes. She had fallen asleep on a suitcase, in the lobby of the Mioritza Hotel, that's what daddy said it was called this winter when they got the tickets through the "union" — "we're going to the Mioritza this summer," that's what he said. Tickets through the union — to Adelutza the "union" is something like the music at the puppet theatre, like a musical band that also sells tickets for the seaside. Mummy is standing at the reception desk. She is tall, wearing cherry-red velour slacks, her cheeks almost the same colour as the trousers:

"We didn't book tickets for the ground floor! What do you mean we're on the ground floor!"

Mummy abruptly turns round to daddy:

"Why don't you tell him? It's out of the question! We booked them specially in winter, so that we wouldn't have any surprises!"

The man from reception, in a white shirt and black trousers, with a skinny black tie around his neck, shrugs. Then he says in a whisper, so that Adelutza can barely hear:

"Madam, there's nothing we can do, now the Germans have arrived. Orders from the Party."

Mummy is whispering rapidly with the man from reception and Adelutza can't understand what they're saying.

Anyway, she's overjoyed when she sees daddy turn round and come towards her. He takes her by the hand, he takes the suitcases, and they set off down the dusky corridor. They come to a stop in front of a door, which

daddy opens. Adelutza steps inside: in the room it is cool and slightly dark, and through the grate on the window burst the large green leaves of a tree. There are also some sparrows, chirping raucously. Adelutza sits down on the bed and listens for a little. Then she bursts out laughing.

“What is it, kitty, why are you laughing?” asks daddy.

“The sparrows are making union music.”

“What? Where do you come up with that one?”

Daddy chortles.

“So, you can laugh about it, can you?”

It's mummy's voice. She comes into the room and looks around. She opens the wardrobes, lifts the bedcovers, looks behind the curtains, and then peers up at the corners of the ceiling.

“There's mould on the walls. Don't you see it? I'm not staying in here. The child will fall ill!”

The birds fall silent. Daddy falls silent. Adelutza falls silent. Adelutza sees daddy make a face and turn green. He goes over to mummy and gazes at her, his head thrown slightly back. Daddy is a little shorter in height than mummy.

“What do you want me to do? Pit myself against the Party? Do you want me to end up in gaol?” says daddy in a loud whisper.

Adelutza has taken refuge on the windowsill. The sparrows have flown away, nearly frightening her. She rocks her legs to and fro, imagining that they aren't hers. When mummy and daddy are quarrelling, a part of Adelutza's body vanishes, and when they make their peace, she gets the part back again and she rejoices. But now she'd like her legs back straight away, so that she can walk on them to the beach.

“That's a laugh. You to pit yourself against something! You should have given that sleazeball in reception something to make him sort it out. It's not

like the whole of Germany is staying at the Mioritza. I didn't see a single German in the lobby. It wouldn't have killed you if you'd slipped him some packets of Kent or something."

"You slip him something, if you're so clever."

Daddy has taken off his jeans and put on his shorts.

"Come on, bunny, we're off to the beach," daddy calls.

Adelutza gets down from the windowsill. Mummy and daddy have not made their peace, but she's got her legs back. It's a special occasion.

The Mioritza is very close to the beach. Adelutza and daddy spread the white sheet over the sand. The wind keeps blowing the corners in the air and Adelutza would have caught them if mummy, arriving shortly after them, had not taken her by the hand. Adelutza leaves the sheet and runs as fast as she can towards the water that is waiting so near, so ultramarine, with so many layers, each higher than the next.

"Adela, come back!" thunders daddy's voice in the sunlight.

"But I'm not going in, I'm just looking!"

"Come back this instant and put your bathing cap on! I told you you're not going in except with daddy or mummy, because the waves are high."

Adelutza sighs but goes back. She hates the bathing cap, made of beige rubber, with bobbles in relief. When daddy puts it on her head, it sticks to her skin and her ears and she can't hear, and it's like a huge wall of glass separating her from the water and the shells, through which she can't touch anything. Daddy pokes the last strands of her hair under the cap.

"It's so you won't get your hair wet and catch a chill."

Adelutza races toward the water, finding it hard to keep her balance in the silence of the bathing cap. She has reached the seashore, where the foam of the waves laps around her legs and recedes, leaving its lacework like the

patterns on mummy's stockings. But the lacy patterns quickly vanish and Adelutza has to wait for the next wave to restore them. Sometimes she runs to meet the waves, but only a little way, because she is frightened they might drag her to the bottom. Up to now, she has made herself five pairs of white lace stockings. The most she ever managed was last summer, when she made herself thirty in just one day! Daddy had fallen asleep in the sun and forgotten to call her back to sit on the sheet. If she were to take her bathing cap off just for a little... she would be able to hear the waves coming from afar and to guess what kind of stockings she was going to receive. The louder waves make thicker and longer stockings, which come all the way up her legs. She takes off her bathing cap: the sea is sougling, the seagulls are cawing, everything is glinting around Adelutza, and daddy's voice pierces the rustling swathes of air:

"Adelutza, come here, please!"

Adelutza turns around, and the wave strikes only one of her legs, making a sagging stocking with torn elastic, which slips down to her ankle. Daddy takes the wet bathing cap from her.

"Why did you take it off? Look at it — it's all wet. How are you going to put it back on your head now?"

Adelutza is about to say something, but she sees that mummy is sitting on the sheet closer to daddy than she was before.

"Let her be. You've got an obsession about her not getting her hair wet," she says, without raising her voice.

"What can you do, we each have our own little obsession," says daddy, smiling at her, as he briskly wipes the bathing hat with a towel.

"We'd better pack up, so that we can catch the evening meal."

Mummy and daddy pack up the sheet, towels, magazines, sun creams,

each helping the other, and they set off together, with their hands very close together. Adelutza follows them, hopping now on one leg, now on the other. Mummy goes into the hotel restaurant first. She has unpacked from the suitcase a red cotton dress with a wide hem and a small black handbag. In the neon light, the red turns a dark cherry colour, like the scabs when Adelutza grazes her knees. Daddy is looking at some cards and he shows mummy their table, near the door on the other side of the dining room, which has blue walls with gold-coloured patterns.

“Is this where we are, with the Germans?” says mummy going up to the table. Daddy shrugs.

“It’s a table for six. I think this is where the Germans end. Or begin.”

All three sit down. Adelutza busies herself with the folded blue napkin in a glass. She likes waiting with mummy and daddy. All of a sudden, there appear as if from nowhere a man with a black moustache and a yellow t-shirt, a lady with a denim skirt and blue t-shirt, and a chestnut-haired boy, older than Adelutza, taller, but chubby and bespectacled. He has a pair of flippers, which are of a green that Adelutza has only seen on foreign t-shirts, fluorescent, daddy calls it. The three take their seats at their table.

“Good evening.”

“Good evening,” reply mummy and daddy. Mummy is examining them gravely. Adelutza does likewise.

“It looks like we’ll be sharing a table for the rest of our stay,” says the man with the yellow t-shirt, looking at them each in turn to see whether they are suntanned. “I see you haven’t been here long...”

A hollow-cheeked waitress appears at their table, wearing a cherry-red waistcoat and a white bonnet. She lays some pieces of paper in front of the gentleman with the moustache. The lady and gentleman look at them.

In the meantime, a tall waiter, also wearing a cherry-red waistcoat, comes with a tray and places a plate of belly pork and beans in front of mummy, daddy and Adelutza. Adelutza hates beans and the pork is very fatty.

“Have you decided?” the waiter asks the fellow diners at their table.

“So these are your Germans, are they?” mummy asks daddy in a whisper.

“Rainer, mammy’s darling, what do you want for din-din: potatoes with a loin chop or beefsteak with mushrooms?”

“Maybe they’re Transylvanian Germans, can’t you hear the lad has a German name?” whispers daddy.

“Transylvanians my foot. He looks like a southerner any day of the week. He pulled strings to eat with the Germans,” says mummy emphatically.

Daddy looks down at his plate and starts cutting his pork. Rainer puts his flippers on the table, next to Adelutza’s plate.

“They’re from my Uncle Gelu in America,” Rainer whispers to Adelutza.

“Know how far I can swim with them? As far as the buoy!”

Adelutza runs her finger along the wonderful green edge of one of the flippers, but Rainer thrusts her hand away.

“Don’t touch, ’cause you’ll spoil them. How far can you swim?”

“I play on the seashore in the waves. If you like, I’ll show you.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” mocks Rainer, while his mother quickly pops a piece of chicken leg in his mouth. “What kind of game is that? Haven’t you got any flippers like these?”

“No, but I’ve got a bathing cap.”

“Adelutza, look here, daddy’s cut up some nice bits of pork for you.”

Adelutza shakes her head. She’s not hungry. She has turned round to face Rainer.

“So what? What do you need it for?”

“Poor child. She’s hardly going to eat this muck,” says mummy, pushing her plate aside.

Daddy chokes back his irritation:

“Never mind. Tomorrow we’ll go to another restaurant and have a grill.”

“So you won’t get your hair wet,” says Adelutza.

“What year are you in at school?” asks Rainer, a few seconds later, eating with his mouth open and splattering Adelutza with spittle and bits of chicken and potato.

“So what are we paying for here, then?” whispers mummy to daddy, gritting her teeth.

“I don’t start school until autumn,” Adelutza tells Rainer.

“How was I supposed to know what the conditions were like?”

“Ha, ha, what a baby! I’ll be starting the fourth grade,” Rainer spits at Adelutza.

“You could have asked around, or let me handle it.”

“Everyone told me it was good.”

“Who told you? That waster Vasile? The only people you talk to are your subordinates.”

“Mummy, look!”

The waitress with the bonnet comes to their table with three bowls of brightly coloured fruit salad and whipped cream. Adelutza can even see a slice of orange on the top! The waitress places them in front of Rainer and his parents. Rainer quickly thrusts his spoon into the bowl and scoops up the slice of orange, thick with whipped cream. Adelutza watches the whole spoonful vanish into Rainer’s mouth.

“Want some?” Rainer asks her.

Adelutza nods. Rainer heaps the spoon with a piece of apple and a

cherry.

“Close your eyes and open wide!”

Adelutza obeys. But nothing happens. The spoon has vanished into Rainer’s mouth and he is laughing fit to burst.

“Ha, ha, ha, I fooled you!”

Daddy hugs Adelutza to his side and at the same time calls to the waitress:

“We’d like to order some fruit salad, please.”

“I’m sorry,” shrugs the waitress, “it’s reserved for the German guests.”

“Rainer, darling, that wasn’t very nice,” says Rainer’s mother, putting a few spoonfuls of fruit salad on a saucer and handing it to Adelutza.

Mummy is about to refuse, but Adelutza looks at the saucer and sighs.

Rainer’s daddy tugs on his moustache and whispers to mummy, winking:

“Missus, you really don’t have to put up with Romanian conditions. One carton of Kent for the bloke in reception, and you’d have got a German ticket, and a first-rate room with a sea view. What’s your room number?”

Mummy stands up and without looking at anyone, not even Adelutza, she goes out of the restaurant. Her dress flutters behind her, like a red wing.

Daddy stands up too, lifting Adelutza in his arms.

“Good evening and all the best.”

The three nod and because her head is over daddy’s shoulder Adelutza can see how they are watching them, chewing their food.

In their room, daddy puts Adelutza down on the bed. Mummy comes out of the bathroom. She has put the cherry-red velour slacks on again.

She has been crying and she has a glass of water in her hand.

“Thank you very much! Is this what it’s come to, for scum like that to laugh through their noses at me and for my daughter to scrounge food from

other people? You're the big boss at a factory but on holiday we have to put up with conditions worse than for labourers."

"Didn't I tell you I tried to speak with the bloke from reception..."

"Only someone like you could believe a cock-and-bull story like that about the Party."

Sitting on the bed, Adelutza can't feel her legs again. But her heart is thumping. Daddy's face is scarlet and it is as if his skin is throbbing when he moves close to mummy's face.

"What do you mean someone like me?"

Mummy looks down at him and says very softly some words that Adelutza does not understand:

"A non-entity of a man."

Daddy's palm swoops almost to mummy's cheek. It stops there, hovering above the skin, seemingly not knowing what to do next. All of a sudden mummy laughs very loudly. She brushes daddy's hand to one side, sits down on the bed, facing Adelutza, and laughs. Adelutza tries to laugh, too. She is laughing with mummy, louder and louder. Daddy looks from one to the other, his eyes boggling. He takes his briefcase from the table, kisses Adelutza on the crown of her head, and goes out. Adelutza hears a car engine starting and hurries to the window grate. It's daddy's red Dacia, now vanishing beyond the trees with the dusky, green leaves.

Adelutza is at the beach with mummy. It's cloudy, but everyone is sitting on beach towels as if it were sunny. Adelutza asks mummy whether she is allowed to go into the water and mummy gives a husky "yes", looking at her wearily. Adelutza takes her bathing cap and sets off to the water's edge. She listens for a little to the screaming seagulls and children. She

hears the lapping of a wave that comes up to her thighs, tracing on her legs a beautiful pattern of white foam. Adelutza brushes off the foam and crams the bathing cap onto her head. The silent waves are like building blocks, one on top of the other.

Adelutza feels something smacking her face.

“Ha, ha, found you, small fry.”

Two fluorescent green flippers are claspng Adelutza’s face, and between them she can see the face of Rainer, with his tongue sticking out. Through the green tunnel, Adelutza’s little fist moves swiftly and punches Rainer in the nose with all its might. His face grimaces frightfully and through the bathing cap Adelutza can hear him roaring somewhere far away, out on the seawall. Rainer throws himself on her and they both tumble over the wet sand by the water’s edge. The shells and pebbles scratch Adelutza’s skin badly. Rainer has torn off her bathing cap and tossed it away as far as he could, and now he is trying to yank her hair. Adelutza gathers all her strength and throws Rainer another punch. Then she scratches him, leaving a bloody furrow from below his eyebrow as far as his lower lip. Rainer bawls at the top of his voice, gets up and runs along the beach, calling for his mother.

Adelutza gets up, too. She is panting. Nearby some children are making a sandcastle, and the parents are chatting a little way off. Adelutza looks for her bathing cap. It has been washed away. She sees it floating on the waves a short way out. Adelutza goes into the water and heads for the bathing cap. It’s not so bad to go into the water alone, even if there are waves. She feels the fine sand under the soles of her feet. She can almost reach the bathing cap with the tips of her fingers. The water is cold, but the deeper you go the more you get used to it. A wave carries

the bathing cap further out. Adelutza takes another step. She's certain she'll catch it this time. But the bathing cap has moved further away. Adelutza steps forward.