

The Film of Our Life

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The Game of Life

Olívia considers herself a girl like any other. No better or worse than her friends, no more fortunate or dissatisfied. She knows that life deals cards at random, that it falls to everyone to play with theirs and you can't cheat because that is vile.

Olívia has been dealt an actress mother, a missing father, a scaredy-cat of a brother, mysterious grandparents, some fussy neighbours, choosy friends, a co-operative school, a damaged TV and a small, pretty, south-facing flat in the Eixample neighbourhood of Barcelona.

Probably, if Olívia had waded in on this list, she'd have wanted to add many other things she thought were important. For example, the collection of volcanic rocks she started when she climbed the Teide, or the blue bike on which she learned to ride and gave to Tim, or the library of adventure books inherited from her maternal grandfather that have kept her company her whole childhood... and so, so many things she thought she'd have forever. But that was before this story begins.

From now on, Olívia won't give as much importance to these trifles. Now she knows that memories often fit in a pocket, that objects, like words, are carried away by the wind and that everything that normal people believe is immutable perhaps won't stay that way.

Life is a well of surprises and from one day to the next it can happen that things that endured and were solid, like the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building or the Hotel Arts, may fall all of a sudden and break into pieces.

Olívia has learned that earthquakes don't just shake cities, mountains and valleys, and turn up on the midday news. There are also personal seismic movements that affect many families, but remain hidden inside homes, undiscovered by anyone.

Olívia knows there could be a day that seems normal, like any other, but isn't. There is no warning in the sky saying ATTENTION, STAY ALERT OR YOU WILL GET HURT. The firefighters won't arrive with the siren going full blast to rescue the injured. Nor will there be queues of people willing to give blood to the victims.

But on that particular day, which remains camouflaged among so many others, things change places, names, values, until all of a sudden the ground collapses beneath your feet and the world known until then disappears in a few seconds.

Can you imagine it?

Olívia, who has lived it, couldn't have imagined it either.

The Light

This evening the lights went out at home.

I was browsing Wikipedia and visiting websites because I had to gather information on Australia for a report I had to do the next day in civics class. I'd almost finished my work when suddenly, blip! the screen went black.

And I hadn't saved it.

And of course I'd lost everything.

EVERYTHING meant at least two hours of work. I was happy because I'd found out and written lots on the Indigenous Australians, who as it turns out are people who have lived on that continent for more than 40,000 years. I'd also discovered that the first Europeans who arrived there were English and they used it as a prison to send criminals far away. I'd even discovered that the name Australia came from *austral*, or southern.

I was really, really annoyed.

"Mum! The lights!" I shouted.

I thought that perhaps Mum was ironing and had forgotten that the washing machine was on. Sometimes if we have more than two or three appliances running at the same time the fuses blow. Mum says it's because of an excess of kilowatts and we mustn't consume so much electricity at once, and so she goes crazy at Tim and I if we leave the computer or telly on and makes us turn off all the lights when we leave the house. Lately she's been in a really bad mood.

"Mum! I'm scared!" Tim shouted from the dining room.

Tim is a scaredy-cat and he came tottering into my room. I let him lie down on my bed, but I didn't want it to get dirty and it was on the condition that he took off his shoes. There wasn't a peep out of him. The poor thing had been half-watching cartoons on the TV, which was always broken, and he got frustrated.

"Ewwwwwww! Your feet smell so bad!" I exclaimed, not able to help myself.

How can the feet of a seven-year-old kid smell like two Camembert?

Tim didn't defend himself, or call me a donkey or even push his feet in my face to annoy me like he has before. He was as quiet as a mouse. I was too.

Everything was dark and silent, strangely empty. It made you anxious. Time had stopped for a few seconds, as if life was happening in slow motion. Without light the world has a different dimension. It's like a black hole that sucks you towards the unknown.

"Muuuuuuuum!" we both shouted at the same time, a little scared, seeing that the light didn't come back on as if by magic, like it has before.

But our shouts didn't have the expected effect. Not one lightbulb lit up, nor did we hear a beep, nor did everything go back to how it was before. Mum hadn't even answered us.

After a while we heard the tip-tap of her footsteps approaching in the hall. Mum was walking with two lit candles, one in each hand, very slowly, for fear that the flame might burn her hair, and taking care that the dripping wax didn't fall on the floor. Her shadow was long and curving like a snake, and it moved up and down. She looked like a ghost. Tim clutched my hand very tightly and squawked like a frightened little animal.

"Mum?" he asked, untrusting.

As if he didn't believe it was her, as if to be sure.

And perhaps he was right because Mum in the dark looked thinner and whiter than ever.

"Who did you think it was?" answered Mum's voice as she left a candle on my table.

"You look like a ghost," Tim dared to say.

Tim is only seven and says things like that when they cross his mind.

"What happened?" I said, intrigued.

"A power cut. They don't know when they can fix it."

"In the whole building?"

"No, it looks like it's a problem here, at home."

My world fell down around me.

"And my homework? How will I do my homework? I have to do the presentation tomorrow! Núria and Bet will be angry with me!"

I imagined the looks on my classmates' faces when I told them the power had gone off just before printing out the report, and without even having saved it on a stupid memory stick.

Mum didn't answer me. She didn't know what to say to me. Obviously she didn't have to go to school and have a face-off with the teacher. She had it easy.

"If tomorrow we still don't have power, you can go and work in the library," she suggested weakly, after a pause that seemed an eternity to me.

I freaked out, obviously.

"What? Tomorrow? You mean that tomorrow the power cut still won't be fixed?"

"I don't know, Olívia, I don't know," she answered in a worried voice.

And she turned around, lighting her way with the other candle.

"But, but..." I turned, nervous, and shouted at her so she would hear. "I need to charge my mobile and watch the robot series and have my green T-shirt ironed for tomorrow and..."

"I also need lots of things but I don't have them!" said Mum in a tone of voice that permitted no more complaints.

Mothers have this way of putting down rebellions. If you say you want one thing they say they want two.

And it's not true.

She doesn't sit beside Neus, who always wrinkles her nose if your sweater smells. She doesn't have wispy hair like mine, that looks like a neutron bomb has fallen on my head if I don't straighten it. She doesn't have ten WhatsApp groups commenting on the night's series and Instagram photos. She's not me and so her problems are not like mine. Hers are much more simple.

"What will Mum do about turning on the microwave?" Tim asked very sensibly.

Even though he's small, sometimes he thinks and this time he was absolutely right. Mum doesn't cook, Mum takes things out of the freezer and puts them straight into the microwave.

What will we eat for dinner, then? And how will we wash the clothes without a washing machine? And how will I dry my hair without a hairdryer? And how will we do the ironing? And how will I charge my mobile? And my laptop?

"Poor Mum, she's all alone in the kitchen in the dark," Tim whimpered.

He might seem like a compassionate kid, but he was dead from fright and incapable of going to keep her company.

“I’m not even a little bit sorry for her,” I said, very angry.

And I wasn’t just saying that. Grown-ups are grown-ups because they’ve lived a long time and know what they’re doing. My mother can make decisions, take action, choose, deal with things and do what she likes with her life. If things go badly you can’t blame anyone else.

On the other hand, I am a student in sixth in primary school. I’m only twelve years old and I can’t vote, or buy a dog, or travel in a plane on my own. I don’t even have house keys.

It’s her fault and that’s that!

School

At school they don't believe me. They don't believe that we've not had electricity at home for a week and Mum hasn't managed to get the company to fix the power cut.

"And how do you make dinner?" Meritxell asked rudely.

"Bread with tomato and tuna, and orange juice with pineapple," I answered.

"Nothing else?"

"My mother is an actress, you know that."

Having an actress mother means having an answer for everything. It works very well for shutting thoughtless friends up. An actress mother does eccentric things unlike other mothers, like sleeping in the morning and working at night, riding a motorbike, dressing in clothes from the flea market, dyeing her hair bright colours, styling her daughter's – that's me – hair like Pippi Longstocking's, making croquette sandwiches or grabbing a van and going to Brittany to collect shells, eat crêpes and visit dolmens.

They always buy it.

Say what you want about Mum, she always gets a pass because she is an actress and was on TV. She was the hairdresser Eva Tuixent on the midday soap opera and in her moment she was very famous. She confronted the mafiosos in her neighbourhood that were trafficking cocaine, a group of Schwarzeneggers armed to the teeth, but even though she suffered, heaven knows, she never got hurt. Of course, she was the main character and the main characters always land on their feet, I thought. Until she received a burst of machine-gun fire in a shooting and died.

It was so sudden that I cried for a whole afternoon, like a ninny, and Tim slept in her bed for a week because he had nightmares. Poor kid, seeing his mother like a Gruyère cheese on the television screen was very upsetting.

No one could have imagined that the character of Eva Tuixent would end like that, in such an abrupt way. Even Mum didn't believe it because the producers hadn't warned her and she found out that they were peppering her with shots the same day she read the script. At first she thought she was just injured, but on seeing her funeral televised she had to digest that Eva Tuixent

had passed into history. The day before she was a television hero, and the following day she was dead and buried. Very upsetting.

She was left without a job, of course. And I think she also died a little because since Eva Tuixent she hasn't done anything good: detergent adverts, secondary roles in a couple of little plays, lots of badly paid work as an extra, that's all.

But the kids in class believe she's still famous; they call her Tuixent, they ask where she keeps her pistol and request selfies. So when I want them to shut up I distract them with tales of the actress mother. For two years now.

"Olivia! Can you go to the office for a minute? The headmaster wants to speak to you."

It was Empar who had spoken, the Head of Studies and a teacher of mathematics as bitter as all teachers of mathematics.

The whole class had turned at once to look at me – I don't know why everyone looks at those who are called – and I turned as red as a pepper. I can't do anything about it. It always happens to me when my name is called. It's not that I'm shy – I have a lot to say and questions to ask – but before opening my mouth, if they look at me, I feel a warmth in my cheeks and I know soon the warmth will become an intense burning, a crescendo, until I look like a traffic light.

I remember that the first time it happened to me was when I entered my new school and Mireia Boixeras, who sat beside me, asked me my father's name. I was six and I didn't know. In fact I didn't even know where he lived because he was never mentioned at home. And to be honest, I didn't even remember his face. Then Mireia pointed her little finger at me and shouted loudly to all the boys and girls that the new girl didn't even know her father's name and was stupid. Everyone laughed and I went as red as a tomato.

That same day, Mum explained that my daddy was called Filippo Tancredi, he was an Italian journalist, they had met while travelling and he lived far away, in Asia, writing reports and chronicles from country to country. Mum showed me a couple of photographs of Daddy, from years ago, and told me he was very handsome and very nice, and she lived a very short, but very happy time by his side. She sighed and said very softly, as if it were a secret, that perhaps one day he would come to see us because he hadn't met Tim.

My father didn't come back and I recognise that I get embarrassed when they ask about him. Aina, who is the daughter of psychiatrists, told me that what I had was a childhood trauma. I got angry and never wanted to play with her again. But sometimes I think she wasn't completely wrong and I haven't fully accepted having a missing father. Maybe because of that, whenever my friends talk about their fathers I'm overcome with a rainy afternoon sadness and a strong desire to cry. Then I pick myself up, pretending that everything is fine, and I leave.

I don't know if I miss him, but it seems strange that all the boys and girls have a father and I don't. And maybe I want to cry because I don't have memories of him and can't say anything about him. I can't moan because he is annoying like Arnau's father, nor a know-it-all like Núria's father, nor a devil-may-care like the López twins' father. Maybe Aina is right – maybe I am traumatised and that's why I always go red.

Mum doesn't understand it. Of course, she's an actress and is used to acting in public. For her it's very easy to get up in the middle of a parents' meeting and complain that we only have half an hour in the schoolyard or let out a joke and make everyone laugh. I'm the other side of the coin. Quiet and discreet, I try to make sure I'm not looked at. Often I'm thought unfriendly and proud, or shy. Oh well.

Shaking, I rose and ran towards the headmaster's office, making sure my classmates didn't see my blushes. I went to the bathroom and splashed my face with cold water until my appearance had returned to normal. Afterwards, I took a deep breath and knocked at the door of the headmaster's office.

I wasn't calm at all, but anxious. The teachers must have told him I was a liar and had invented the electricity excuse so as not to do the work they asked of me. In sixth class they put pressure on us, saying that in the coming year we will be going to secondary school.

"Come in, come in, Olívia, and sit down."

The headmaster is very old, or seems to be, because his hair is completely white and his skin is wrinkled like a raisin. He is a dry, serious man: no one knows his first name and when something happens he is there to scold the kids and frighten them. He's the headmaster.

I sat down with my eyes downcast so as not to go red and waited for him to tell me off. But he didn't attack like a bulldog. Instead of scolding me he coughed a couple of times, as if he didn't

know how to begin, and, trying to keep his voice very friendly, he asked me, "Is your mother alright?"

It was so surprising I immediately raised my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Is she in good health, she's not sick?"

"No, she's not sick. Why?"

The man became uneasy. He was tapping the table repeatedly with one finger. "It's just that we've sent her a couple of letters and not had an answer. Are you at the same address?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't understand."

"Maybe... maybe the postman put it in the wrong mailbox," I said, just to say something.

"We've called her a few times and she doesn't answer."

"You can't hear the telephone from the kitchen," I defended her.

"We have a problem and we need to speak to her."

I was taken completely by surprise. "What problem?"

He became even more nervous. "Nothing much, adult things. I just wanted to know that everything is alright and give you a note so you can get it to her in person."

I didn't like taking an envelope for my mother at all. It made me feel bad, like a traitor. What if they wanted to complain about me? Or Tim? Or about the clothes we wore? Or the language book I lost?

"You'll give it to her, won't you?"

I got up with the envelope clutched in my hand and my legs trembling. The man noticed that I was a little frightened and to relieve the atmosphere he asked the question everyone asked: "And what is your mother working on these days?"

And I gave the answer I've been giving for the last year. "Nothing definite. She's only finding little jobs."

It's an uncomfortable answer. People think actresses spend their lives making films and doing plays and that they are surrounded by paparazzi and fans, but that only happens in Hollywood. Mum and many of her friends look for work, they spend the day sending résumés to agencies and going to casting calls for a whole lot of series and adverts, but they don't hire them.

They say they are unfashionable and too old. And they offer them very badly paid jobs. Mum told me that last month she worked for four euro an hour.

“Well, give her my regards.”

I left with a cold smile, but instead of going back to class I shut myself in the toilet again and with great care, I opened the envelope without tearing it. I'll fix it with glue as soon as I get home. I read it in one go, without breathing.

Dear Mrs Tancredi,

The invoices for the fees and school meals for your children have been returned unpaid by the bank for the last four months. We ask that you come to the office as soon as possible to bring your payments up to date.

If you do not respond to our request we will be obliged to take other measures.

Regards,

The School Board

Despite being alone in the bathroom, I turned as red as a traffic light.

Bills

I'm obsessed with looks from other people. I have the impression that they look at me pityingly, as though they feel sorry for me, as though meeting me irritates them, or as though I were an uncomfortable nuisance. It happens with teachers, neighbours, the ballet teacher and the cashier in the supermarket... And I suppose it's true, because we haven't paid the school bills in a while, or the neighbours' association ones, or those from the ballet academy or the supermarket.

Our neighbour from downstairs pretends she doesn't know me, and before she used to be friendly because Mum was on TV. In school, the teachers, who are nice people – except the maths teacher – look at me with pity. My tutor Núria told me I could trust her and to tell her if I had problems, but I couldn't because I didn't know where to start or what to say. I only know that going past the secretary's office makes me feel sick in case they ask about Mum and the bills we haven't paid. To save myself the embarrassment at ballet, I decided never to go back.

"It's a bad patch, that's all," Mum answered when I asked her face to face if we had no money. "Right now I'm waiting to be paid for last month's work, and I had to pay some freelance bills and arrears on the mortgage. We're broke."

"What now?"

"You know that I did a test for a role in a new series last week. The casting director is a good friend, he assured me it was mine. And if that doesn't come off there are a couple of very interesting projects..."

She always says the same thing. Mum is optimistic by nature and believes that everything will turn out fine, but her explanation didn't comfort me at all.

"So you'll pay the school then?" I asked, impatiently. "It's just that I don't know what to say when they ask me now... and I'm embarrassed."

Mum sat me on her lap, hugged me and showered me with kisses.

"My chatty little broom, don't think so much – thinking too much makes your head hurt. Just study. Everything else is my concern."

Mum always ends everything with over-the-top squeezes and a handful of sweet kisses. She calls me “chatty little broom” because my hair is tousled like a scrubbing brush and when I was little I never stopped talking. But now I don’t believe her.

Tim is a fool and he believes Mum, even when she tells him lies. On Monday, after coming back from the library, I found them both sitting on the floor wearing their coats, scarves, hats and gloves and laughing like madmen. They were surrounded by candles, and had a tin of sardines in front of them and they were singing a song.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re playing Eskimos. Now we live in an igloo,” Tim answered.

It was certainly bitterly cold. By nature I’m sensitive to cold and I started to shiver. I feared the worst.

“Why don’t you turn on the heating?” I asked Mum, who avoided meeting my eyes.

“Because we are Eskimos,” she answered tranquilly.

And they continued singing.

I’m not an idiot. The gas had been shut off.

Now we don’t have gas or electricity because there’s no money in Mum’s account. The bank won’t give us any more credit. They cancelled the card and when bills arrive from the electric company, the school or ballet, the bank returns them unpaid. In the supermarket they don’t trust us either. The other day when I went to get olive oil, tomatoes and cereal, and asked, as usual, to add them to Mum’s account, the cashier Sònia told me it wasn’t possible and if I wanted anything to bring cash – she’s such a stickler for rules, Sònia – because we already owe them lots of money.

Everything is very strange at home. The fridge no longer refrigerates, but it doesn’t matter because it’s empty. I have to warm the milk with a camping stove, sleep with four blankets on top of me, go around the house with my coat on, dress by candlelight, plug in my mobile at the library, shower in cold water, dry my hair with a towel, wash clothes by hand and use friends’ computers.

Mum pretends nothing has happened, that everything is the same as ever and that we will come through one way or another.

"We can eat, beautiful, you have a hot lunch at school and at night there is always a bit of bread, a piece of fruit and a drop of milk. While we can eat, have a roof over our heads and are alive we can get by," says Mum.

Her words are soothing and make me forget to think, stop suffering by trying to fix what I have no way of fixing. But Mum is deceiving me. I knew it that very night when Tim got into my bed because he was afraid.

"There's a ghost in the house."

"A ghost?"

"I heard it moaning."

"Silly. You dreamed it."

Chubby as a piglet, Tim fell asleep holding on to me in the record time of four and a half seconds. Then I heard the ghost's moans. They were real. Tim hadn't made them up.

I got up on tiptoes, making sure not to make a sound, and walked in the dark down the passage, towards the light coming from the dining room. I peered in the half-open door and discovered Mum crying.

She was sitting at the table, surrounded by bills and files, and she had a paper in her hand which she was reading and re-reading while continuing to cry. She was thinner than ever, paler than ever, she had her hair down and a scarf wound around her neck. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and her body moved rhythmically back and forth, like a doll on a spring. She was feeling sorry for herself, consoling herself while she continued the rhythm of her weeping and her moans.

At first I thought it was all a sham and she was rehearsing for a new television series. Any minute I expected her to recite a film phrase, like "My God, my God, I can't believe you have left me! You are ungrateful, but I will love you forever." I stayed still, impatient to hear a line of script of a new role that would save us from the bad patch.

But no.

It was real.

Mum wasn't making believe, she wasn't pretending, she wasn't acting. She was simply crying.

I'd only ever seen her cry on stage or on screen and it felt very strange to know that she wasn't in character at all. The scene I was seeing was real because in that moment Mum was Ingrid Porta, a forty-four-year-old woman, ruined.

I didn't know what to do. I was so scared I stayed still, very still, not moving even a millimetre. After a while I turned around and went back to bed.

I'm a coward. I couldn't hug her or whisper cheery instructions to her like she does to me. I can't take in my mother being so desperate because that means there is no one to watch over me. I thought Mum was grown-up, strong and would protect me. That whatever might happen she would have kisses, sweet words, hopes for me and I could be a cry-baby on her shoulder. That if life was hard on me she'd find the solution to the problem, putting a cold hand on my forehead and making bad thoughts and fever go away. And never, ever would anything or anyone frighten me if SHE was by my side.

Now I know it's not true.

Seeing a mother cry really hurts. It should be forbidden. It's like becoming a grown-up all of a sudden. It's similar to the disappointment of finding out the Three Kings are your parents. And much worse than the unpleasant surprise of discovering that parents conspire with the TV, shops, teachers and radio, and all together they have deceived us for years and years in a grand collective lie, making us believe that the world is a welcoming pink place where dreams become reality one magical night.

It's very sad.

Seeing your mother broken like an old toy, crying like a child before bills she can't pay is very hard.

So... if the only person I can rely on is lost... what will I do? I thought, terrified. And suddenly I felt alone and destitute, worthy of pity.

It was a horrible discovery.

And hugging Tim, I cried all night too.

The Neighbour

I am the neighbour from downstairs.

Eva Tuixent, poor girl, is going through a bad patch. She is the latest victim of the economic crisis that I know. Excuse the fact that I call her Eva Tuixent: I know her name is Ingrid Porta, but when she bought this flat and moved in with her children she was already Eva Tuixent, and you see it's not easy to change people's names once you know them.

It was said that Eva Tuixent bought the flat above ours during the years of excess. Then she had work on TV and she and everyone believed that we'd always be rolling in money.

But it was a mirage. And of course when the hour of truth came she realised she couldn't afford so many expenses: the neighbours' association, the mortgage on the flat, the children's school and who knows what else.

The neighbours' association turned a blind eye for a while, but the debt kept mounting and we're not rich either. It's been a month now since the chairman asked her very pleasantly to pay the outstanding bills and instead of agreeing to a deal, she said it was impossible. My God! What an unpleasant situation. Eva Tuixent owes us a fortune.

How could she have thought to get caught up in buying a flat? With two small children and no family? She says her mother has Alzheimer's and is in a home, her father died and she has no siblings. She used to have a boyfriend, a very friendly and good-looking boy who was a teacher in a school. But they let it go. I'm not meddling but if she had a partner perhaps things wouldn't have gone so badly.

The day the power was switched off she asked me if I could please keep her things in the fridge and charge her mobile because she had many calls to make. I said no, politely. I don't want trouble of any kind. My husband, who always grumbles that I interfere where I'm not wanted, said I did the right thing.

I feel bad for the little ones – it's not their fault, but I can't help. With these people, you give them an inch and they take a mile. Best to keep your distance and each to their own. And the worst is still to come, my husband told me, and he always gets it right.

Not long ago they turned off the gas and now they have seized the motorbike and van. It was to be expected but she took it very badly. She lost her cool and couldn't keep up appearances. It was so embarrassing for all of us neighbours when she argued with the people from the bank, shouting that she had her rights.

You can see the end is coming, but Eva Tuixent, not a penny to her name, goes around with her head high and pretends to be offended. She doesn't greet me any longer when taking the lift. Not that I want her to.

Things as they are, it's very painful and the sooner it ends the better. For us, for her and for the poor kids.

The Furniture

I'd often thought that furniture was a nuisance we could do without. Above all when Mum would say, "Careful with the table, it's new" or "Don't dirty the sofa". I thought it was a nuisance because it got in the way when playing ball and it was a danger at night when I got up to go the bathroom because I don't know how, but I would always trip over a chair that had decided to move and place itself in the middle of the room.

Why do we have to have so much furniture? I would wonder. After all, furniture gets covered in dust and has to be cleaned, beds have to be made, wardrobes have to be tidied. How many times had I thought we would be better off living in a tent with no furniture?

But when there is no furniture, when the flat is empty and the clothes are piled on the floor, the mattress is on the parquet, you don't know where to leave the key or hang your coat and you no longer have chairs to trip over... what do you want me to say, you realise that the pieces of furniture are like close friends who, even though they don't call you, are always nearby keeping you company. And you miss them.

Coming in from school, Tim stood with his mouth open and couldn't close it for ages. Luckily it's winter and no flies went in.

Even though I guessed something serious was happening, I was stunned. I hadn't imagined that anyone could take away the beds, the TV, the chairs, the tables, the electrical appliances and the sofa. They hadn't left even the toaster.

I thought they'd have enough with the van and the motorbike, that a van and motorbike would be worth a lot of money, and with the money they got for our vehicles the bank would be satisfied and stop pestering us. But clearly not. It looks like they desperately need our furniture. What nasty people!

"What's happened?" Tim asked once he'd reacted and could speak.

I hoped Mum would invent some story but she wasn't capable of it. She was on the floor, sitting with her legs crossed, and she hadn't even lifted her head on hearing us come in.

"Mum, Tim asked what has happened?" I insisted in a shaky voice.

She lifted her head for a moment, looked at me and whispered, "You tell him, I'm very tired."

Mum is never tired. It's the first time I've ever heard her say she is tired. My legs faltered and I was really scared. Not of losing the furniture, but of losing Mum.

"Mum, what's wrong?" I asked, kneeling at her side, and this time I did hug her.

"Are you going to tell me or not?" asked Tim suddenly, like a little lost bird.

Mum kept quiet and I realised she had no intention of soothing Tim.

And I didn't know what to do.

"What's going on?" insisted Tim, his face scared and swallowing the urge to cry. "Where are my TV and my bed?" he whimpered, all the time a little sadder, a little quieter.

"Mum, please," I insisted, to make her react.

But Mum was breathing quickly, as though she was trying not to cry, and looking far away, not daring to raise her head, ashamed of being there, incapable of giving an explanation to her children about what was happening to us.

"I can't," she said weakly, her voice cracked.

And suddenly the world fell on top of me. I realised that Mum couldn't even protect Tim. And Tim, who realised it too, burst out crying.

I had no option but to take charge of the situation. I smiled with an actor's smile, like Mum when she tricks Tim.

"But what are you doing crying, don't be silly, it was a surprise!"

Tim went quiet all of a sudden, sniffled, wiped away his tears and stared at me. "A surprise?"

And I saw that whatever I said he would believe it. He wanted so much to believe the lies that all I had to do was invent some, so he could sleep at night.

I offered him my hand and put my finger to my lips. "Ssssssssssh! It's a secret – come, come with me."

He followed me with his eyes wide open and shining, tasting with anticipation the feeling of sharing a secret and taking part in a surprise. Nothing had occurred to me other than taking him out of there and giving Mum time to recover herself, and me time to have an idea.

"Okay, let's go to the park and that way no one will hear us."

"Is it a very secret secret?" Tim wanted to be sure.

"Top secret."

It's unbelievable how changeable they are, kids. A few minutes ago he was a wreck and now, on the other hand, he'd gone towards the park like a rocket, happy as a clam. I could hardly keep up with him.

"Wait! Don't run so fast!"

He entered the park like an arrow and headed toward the swings. And as I ran in pursuit of my little brother, I didn't notice the cable on the ground.

"Watch out! Watch out!" voices shouted at me.

Too late. I tripped and fell headfirst amidst a crowd of people. On looking up I saw lights above me and a gentleman dressed in nineteenth-century clothing who helped me up. Immediately a lady with a crinoline skirt and patterned umbrella came over, crying, "Olívia! Olívia, are you hurt?"

It was Judith, one of Mum's best friends. An actress.

She kissed me on both cheeks and above the uproar a voice accustomed to giving orders could be heard: "We'll have to do another take."

I understood it all. "You're shooting a film!"

And all of a sudden, and by pure chance, the idea came to me.

FIRST LETTER FROM THE HOLLYWOOD PRODUCERS

TO TIM TANCREDI

Dear Tim,

We are very important American producers who have produced many films.

Your sister Olívia – how lucky you are to have a sister like her – sent us your CV and photograph. WONDERFUL! Being so young, the list of things you have done is very impressive. Congratulations on your drawing of the whale – very artistic – and your poem about the squashed butterfly – very touching.

Your marks in school aren't much to write home about, but we know you try your best and your English is coming along. This makes us happy. You know that the more languages actors can speak the better. Being an actor is to live ready to pack a suitcase from one day to the next, catch a plane and go to shoot in Australia, Japan or Madagascar. One is born an actor, but one also becomes an actor. It's a way of life.

But what do we have to say to you? To Tim Tancredi, who played the baby Jesus, a shepherd and a devil in the Sant Josep Oriol Nativity play? To Tim Tancredi, who acted in the nappy advert at two months old and dirtied his nose with Yum chocolate aged three and a half? Nice. You even became a little bit famous.

We appreciate the fact that you already know what a set is, a spotlight, a floor manager, a microphone and a camera. You can't imagine the headaches new actors give us when they mix up the sound cable and their shoelaces.

You must be wondering why we have written to you. Alright then... Ta-da!!

The moment has come to give you the good news. Right now we are looking for an actor more or less like you. Seven years old, chestnut hair, hazel eyes and a very black fingernail.

What a coincidence, right?

Of course what ended up convincing us is finding out that you are Ingrid Porta's son. Your mother is a fantastic actress. My colleague and I were fans of her character, Eva Tuixent the hairdresser, and we were very sorry when she died. So we want you, your mother and your sister to be the leading actors in our own film.

For the moment we can't say more or tell you our names. We can't come to see you and sign the contract either because we live in Hollywood and it's very far away, but we will write to your sister Olívia and she will tell you what you have to do.

Just one condition. Don't talk about it to anyone, not even your mother. The cameras will be secret and you will never see them, nor will you meet the director, or the members of the crew. It will be a film of hidden cameras. Understood?

So, brush your teeth every day, part your hair on the left (it suits you better), change your socks when they smell and act as well as you can.

Break a leg!

THE SECRET PRODUCERS

The Film

It was a good idea. After tricking him into coming to the park and tearing my hair out from promising him a grand surprise, that night Tim breathlessly read the letter I'd written myself and he swallowed it all. From the first word to the last. He raised his eyes from the page, smiled a toothpaste-advert smile and cried happily:

"Now I understand! We're making a film! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because the producers didn't let us. It was a secret."

"And now it's not?"

"I told them that you were asking a lot of questions and it was best that you know you were being an actor. You see that they liked your CV a lot. So I asked them to write to you."

"I am a very good actor," said Tim, swelling with pride and without the least humility. "I know how to cry and everything."

"Perfect. It will be a very sad film."

"What will happen?"

"Can't say. Only the scriptwriters know. We'll keep getting the scripts, but don't worry, you don't have to read them. I'll explain the scenes we are shooting every day."

"And what's the film called?"

Why do kids ask so many questions?

"The Game of Life." It suddenly occurred to me.

"Will we be playing?"

"No. We won't. Life will play with us and there will be many surprises, many adventures."

"Great!"

"Don't be so sure. We'll have to shoot some difficult scenes. It will seem as if you're almost living in the film. It will seem real."

Tim was pensive for a moment, until he smiled and confessed, as if he'd been caught doing something naughty. "You know what? I thought that all that with the lights and the furniture was real."

“Silly,” I said affectionately.

“You really really fooled me.”

“Of course, Mum is a very good actress. But now you know, you have to stay quiet. Not a word to anyone.”

Tim crossed his fingers like a good accomplice and swore an oath. “I swear.”

I tickled him, he tickled me back, we couldn’t hold in the laughter and we both ended up rolling to the floor.

He’s a real jester, Tim. His fringe falls in front of his eyes and sometimes, to see better, he blows it out of the way. When he blows his fringe I could eat him up with kisses because the air escapes through the gap in his teeth and makes a farting sound. Without his teeth he is cuter, funnier and has the face of a cartoon character.

I don’t want Tim to suffer, I don’t want him to have a bad time. I don’t want him to feel like I did the other night when I saw Mum crying. I know it’s bad to tell lies, but grown-ups tell them too and they invent the Three Kings, the Christmas Log and the Tooth Fairy.

I want to save him the pain of knowing that the world is not a lovely welcoming place, of discovering that mothers collapse and realising that people are not supportive, friendly or compassionate like they want us to believe. He is still too little and it could traumatise him, like me with the story of Dad.

Tim is lucky. He doesn’t find it strange not to have a father because when he was small Mum had a boyfriend, Sergi, and when Tim began to talk he called him Dad. Tim really liked Sergi and he was like a father to him. He took him to fly kites on Tibidabo, to build sandcastles on the beach and to look for ants in the Collserola mountains. They got on very well together.

One summer, two years ago now, we took a trip together. We went to see the summer solstice, the shortest day of the year, at the North Pole. We travelled many, many kilometres, millions of kilometres, and along the way we photographed reindeer, fjords and seals. We slept in the van on mattresses, we cooked with a camping stove and we ate dinner sitting on a blanket looking at the stars. Sergi would tell us stories and Mum would make us wet ourselves laughing by telling jokes. It was great fun. It was the best trip of my life.

When Tim asks for Dad he is really asking for Sergi. He was his real father. I'd also have liked Sergi to have been my real father, or if not, then my adoptive father. He'd have a name, a face, I'd see him and we'd have a hot dinner every night. Because Sergi cooked so well it would make you lick your toes.

Last year I was happy because I'd overheard Sergi and Mum talking about getting married and living together. I didn't say anything to Tim and kept it quiet, as a big sister secret. It was all for the best, because from that day onwards they began to argue. It was strange and I thought it was because Mum had lost her job and she was very anxious. But no, the problem was that Mum didn't want to get married or for them to live together. Maybe because she is very independent or maybe she didn't want people feeling sorry for her.

Mum never explained to me why they separated. Even though they loved each other so much. When she doesn't feel like it, Mum doesn't give explanations. Sergi and Mum made a good couple, and at dinnertime, all four of us seated around a table before a plate of stew, we seemed like any other family.

Sometimes I want to see Sergi and ask him to tell me a story. Sergi's voice was as soft as a leather coat. It was a voice that embraced me and drove away fears at night, while he told me fantastic tales. Sergi read a lot of books and he taught literature classes in a school, and I'm sure if he knew what was happening to us he would help.

But Mum doesn't want anyone to help us. She is very proud. Because of that no one knows about our situation. When I explained it to Judith, she was dumbstruck.

"Don't worry, Olívia, I have lots of friends and I'm sure we can find a solution. Everything will work out, you'll see."

Hopefully. Several days have passed and I've not heard anything. I just know that Mum doesn't laugh any more, I'm cold at night, the flat is dark, I'm ashamed to go to school and in the mornings I'm very hungry because I don't have a sandwich in my rucksack. There are nights when we have a piece of bread for dinner and nothing else. We cut it in three pieces and give the biggest to Tim. He is the smallest and has to grow.

I know we are poor, but that word feels strange to me and I don't know how to say it out loud.

Unjust Laws

Today I found out that laws can be unfair.

I thought that by definition laws were just, but no, it seems that the laws in every country are different and not all of them are fair.

In our country there are many injustices, but one of the worst is that the laws help the banks with money that we have all paid but on the other hand, they don't help the citizens with no money or anything at all.

Mum, Tim and I are poor now, but the government of our country doesn't care. No one will protect us and if we don't have money to pay for the flat we will be on the streets and on top of that we will owe money to the bank for a flat that is no longer ours.

I don't understand it. The truth is it seems like absolute nonsense to me.

A solicitor, Toni, and Judith, Mum's friend, explained this very patiently when they paid us a visit this afternoon. They came with a good dose of optimism and lots of papers to try to convince Mum not to keep sitting on the floor with her arms crossed, crying. Toni and Judith told her she had to face the bank and defend her rights.

But Mum is very demoralised and she says she feels "impotent", which more or less means she can't do anything because it's all too much. Then she showed us the foreclosure notice that arrived days ago and she hadn't shown to anyone, which says we have to leave the flat and if we don't leave they will come to evict us by force. It also says that more than sixty thousand euro has to be paid to the bank.

The problem is not just that we will be left without a house, the problem is that the bank is demanding money from her that we don't have and never will. Toni has said that what we have to achieve is for the bank to take our flat and then leave us alone forever. After all, when Mum bought the flat it was on the condition that if she couldn't pay, it would belong to them.

But the bank has no heart and wants it all. The flat, the money and Mum's health.

It's horrible!

If Mum had a job, the bank would take her pay, just as they have seized the motorbike, the van and the furniture.

Poor Mum – I'd feel impotent too.

"You have to fight," said Judith.

"We'll help you," said Toni.

"You're not alone," insisted Judith.

"Please, Mum, let's do something," I pleaded.

And after a long silence, Mum nodded.

"Great, I'll represent you free of charge. Sign here, here and here and give me your identity card," Toni said rapidly.

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. Toni knew what he was doing. It looks like he has worked on a lot of cases like ours and has won quite a few. Nowadays the banks are under pressure because people are sick of being played for fools by them; there are politicians against the banks and finally judges are beginning to understand the problem.

Mum signed like an automaton and, I don't know whether from nerves or emotion, she had a dizzy spell. Then Judith made her sit in the only chair left and bathed her forehead with cold water.

"You're so pale and thin!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you eating?"

And the scales suddenly fell from my eyes. "Mum, when Tim and I are at school, what do you... eat?"

Mum went as quiet as a mouse and lowered her eyes.

Mum hadn't eaten for a month. That was why she was so weak.

"This can't go on, there's no way this can go on," said Judith, very determined.

She asked me to come with her, and we went to the supermarket together. We filled a basket with things we hadn't had for a long time. Rice, pasta, cheese, tomatoes, meat, fruit, milk and cereals.

Judith is a very good person. She kept repeating that everything would be fine and this was just a bad patch.

“Above all, don’t let your mother collapse and if you see her not answering her phone, you answer it, and look after your brother, he’s still very small,” she insisted as she paid with her credit card. “And if anything happens, tell me.”

“What will we do the day of the eviction? It’s this Friday,” I asked, scared.

“They won’t kick you out, we’ll come to help you.”

“You and Toni?”

“And many more people. You’ll see.”

My heart swelled and I thanked her thirty million times.

On the way, I thought of Tim, who had gone to play at his friend Bernat’s house, and his face when I’d show him the surprise. He wouldn’t believe it when I said, “Tonight we’ll have a hot dinner and dessert!”

In fact, Tim opened his eyes as wide as dinner plates and asked, “So the film is over? Now we go back to having electricity and heating and I can watch TV and sleep in my bed?”

Oh. I didn’t expect that.

“Not yet, it’s not finished yet. We’re just at the beginning, it will be a very long film.”

“How long?” Tim wanted to know. “A football match long or a summer long?”

“Well... a little bit longer.”

“As long as it’s been since we last saw Sergi?”

It had been a year. It’s unbelievable how kids measure time.

“More or less...”

“And will Sergi be in the film?”

“I don’t know yet,” I pretended.

“Well, if you speak to the scriptwriters tell them I’d like them to include Sergi. He’s a very good actor too.”

“I’ll tell them. But you have to cheer up.”

“Why?”

“Because, because tonight we’re having a party.”

“And why are we having a party? What are we celebrating?”

Damned kid, he wants to know everything.

“Well, we’re celebrating... celebrating that we have friends and they’re helping us.”

“And the script says I have to be happy?”

“Of course, the script says when Tim finds out there’s a party and he will have a hot dinner he becomes very happy.”

Then Tim clapped his hands and jumped for joy.

“Yay! We’re having dinner! Yay!”

Seeing him happy, whether pretend or real, passed on a little bit of happiness to me. I cheered and jumped like him. I felt like it.

And Tim and I, like two little animals, started dancing in the middle of the street while people stared at us and thought we were mad.

I’d never have thought that having the dinner we should have would be such a source of happiness.

The Earthquake

“Everything will be fine, you’ll see,” we were told by the people who came early one morning to support us and help us to not be evicted from the flat. There were around thirty of them. Early risers, chatterboxes and sympathetic people. On arriving one by one they embraced Mum, Tim and me, and gave us courage. They convinced us to have sandwiches and orange juice for breakfast and a lady filled Tim’s pockets with strawberry and mandarin flavoured sweets.

The majority were young boys and girls dressed in jeans and cool T-shirts, but there were also ladies like Mum and retired people with fluorescent waistcoats armed with whistles and placards. Among the volunteers there were people from other countries. I know because they had accents and strange appearances. There was even a woman who must have been Muslim because she wore a headscarf. It seemed they’d had help to avoid being evicted and now, whenever they could, they helped others. They had experienced it and knew what they were doing.

“We’ll sit on the ground and make a human barrier.”

“We won’t let them through.”

“It’ll be a peaceful resistance.”

“Tonight you’ll sleep in your home, don’t worry.”

I was very nervous and Mum wasn’t speaking. On the other hand, when Tim saw a television camera and a photographer, he blew at his fringe, smiled for the camera and said quietly to me, “I can see the camera from the film. Look, there.”

And he pointed discreetly to a reporter from a local TV station.

“Me too. Obviously today they can’t hide.”

“What does the script say? What do I have to do?”

“You have to put on a sad face because you don’t want the police to throw us out on the street.”

“The police?” he said, frightened. “Will the police come?”

“Definitely.”

“Then we’ll win because the police will help us and save us from the bank,” he exclaimed happily.

“No, Tim, the police will help the bank.”

He didn’t understand and corrected me like kids do. “But the police are good and will save us from the baddies.”

“Well, in this film the police are with the baddies.”

It took him a while, heaven knows, but in the end he accepted it. “Will they shoot us?”

“No.”

“And do I have to cry?”

“If you want.”

“It’ll look better if I cry a bit, won’t it?”

“Then cry.”

Tim began to make a face, as if he had something in his eye. Suddenly he turned and showed me his cheek. There was a little almond-shaped tear.

“Look, look, I’m crying. I’m a really good actor.”

“Not now, silly. When all the trouble begins.”

“Ah!” he said, clapping his hand over his mouth for having done it at the wrong moment.

If it wasn’t for Tim and the film, I’d have cried too. Now the moment of the eviction was approaching, I was like jelly and I didn’t want to be a hero. I didn’t want to be brave. I didn’t want to be a fighter like Judith and Toni asked me to be. I’d have preferred to be at school, with the other boys and girls in my class, sitting in front of the blackboard of a boring maths lesson. I’d have liked to be a cowardly girl, like my friends, who lived peacefully with their families that made them dinner every night, who tucked them into their warm beds and turned out their lights. We didn’t have dinner, or beds or light. And soon we wouldn’t have a house. I didn’t want to be different.

Yesterday a social worker called Mar came and Mum, who hadn’t spoken for two days, opened her mouth to say we didn’t need her, but she played deaf and didn’t leave. She sat on the floor, with her legs crossed like a yoga teacher, took out a notebook and began asking Mum questions. She asked her how much money she had in the bank and how much money went in

each month. Mum answered in a dry voice that she had nothing at all, that she was broke and not even a cent had gone in for more than twenty days.

“Well, in that case I will process a minimum pension for you and your children as a matter of urgency. You can’t go on without money.”

I was dumbstruck. So was Mum. The minimum pension, or unemployment benefit, was four hundred euro. Maybe it’s not so much, but to me it seemed like a fortune.

“And if you are evicted, do you have a temporary place to stay? Relatives? Someone close?”

Mum didn’t answer and I answered in her place. “We’ll go to Judith’s house because Mum doesn’t have any family.”

Mar made a note of it in her notebook.

“Do you go to school every day?”

“Yes,” I answered quickly, “but we haven’t paid for meals or the fees for a long time and they’re angry with us.”

She wanted to know the name of the school and the months we hadn’t paid. She said she would sort it all out and request a grant for school meals, but we should have asked for it long ago.

Mar was charming. She was interested in everything and very affectionate towards Mum. She told her that these situations make you dizzy unless you’ve lived through them before. It was like being at the edge of a precipice and feeling as if the void was sucking you to the bottom. I listened, not saying a word, because it was exactly how I was feeling.

“And what do we have to do to not fall?” I asked, very interested.

“Well, stretch out your arm in the opposite direction and ask for help, which is what you would do if you were on the verge on falling into a real precipice. There are always hands to help you out, or branches to hold on to.”

I made a mental note. *Ask for help.* “What else?”

“Information. You can get food, clothes, grants and extracurricular activities if you know where to look. You also need a list of soup kitchens, food banks, one-night shelters... and many other things.”

Mar’s last words were a breath of hope.

“Now I have your file and we’ll help you. Don’t worry.”

It’s good to know that someone working in the administration has a file where it is written down that a family of a mother and two children don’t have money to eat, to keep warm, to pay the school or the flat.

It’s a small consolation when you see the police arrive with their helmets on and their truncheons in their hands, armed as if they were going to war.

I shivered and gripped the arm Judith offered me very tightly. There were four rows of people and we were the last of all. Judith told me very quietly that if things got ugly Tim and I should hide behind her and Toni.

Tim and I shouldn’t have been present, but Judith asked Mum to have us there. She said it was necessary to show the reality and the reality is that a family of two children and a mother were being evicted. If the security forces don’t see it, they act as machines and not as people. At first Mum didn’t want to, but Toni and Judith insisted so much she accepted.

It didn’t look good. A lot of police from special units had arrived, ready to act. There were almost as many as there were activists but with the difference that they were armed and we were not.

“Relax, you’ll see they won’t be able to handle us,” said Judith.

I wanted to believe her, but when I saw that they were dragging people by their feet and by their hair, that people weren’t letting go and turning around, and the police were getting nervous and striking blows with feet and truncheons, and in an instant everything became a muddle of shouts and whistles... I got scared.

Tim did too. He started to cry and I had to summon strength from I don’t know where to congratulate him.

“Very good, Tim, you’re crying brilliantly.”

“It’s just that... it seems real.”

“It’s not, silly.”

“What if they beat us up?”

“Maybe there’ll be a few blows from a truncheon, but they won’t hurt you.”

“Does it say in the script that they beat us up?”

No script was necessary. Things hadn't gone as we'd hoped and the police had orders to remove us voluntarily or by force. And they did. Judith and Toni protected Mum, Tim and I. When they had kicked out the last of the demonstrators, they stood before us. Toni identified himself as our solicitor and said, "This is the family. They will go willingly – there are two minors."

And shaking, we came out, dragging our suitcases and the bits and pieces we'd had ready just in case, amidst a police cordon. Behind us the door of our home was closed and sealed.

I felt it then. When they put on the seal, *squeak, squeak*, the sound of the rubber ripped away a piece of my heart. Mum and I hugged each other and cried. I cried because all of the memories of the time I'd lived in that flat had stayed behind that door. A door that had been closed to us by force. Tim clutched our legs and soaked us with tears and snot. I mussed his hair and whispered in his ear, "Well done, Tim, you're a first-class actor. You see, they didn't beat us, did they?"

And Tim, very proud, blew his nose, picked up his backpack, full of toys and underwear and bigger than him, clutched Toni's hand and whispered, "Now what? Where will we go?"

"To Judith's house, until you find somewhere else."

Tim blew at his fringe, annoyed, and sighed. "I really want the film to end so we can go home!"

Toni, of course, didn't understand this at all.

Glossary

Three Kings: In Spain, Christmas gifts traditionally come from the Three Kings – Melchor, Gaspar and Baltasar – on 5 January, rather than Santa Claus on 24 December.

Christmas Log: In Barcelona there is a Christmas tradition of a log or trunk in the home that children need to look after, keeping it warm and giving it food to eat from 8 December until Christmas Eve, when they hit the log with sticks to make it deliver presents.