

THE SECRET

Snap, creak... psst... I must be quiet so Monika won't find me. The attic is perfect for hide-and-seek. I thought she'd never find me in this corner. I sat down, made myself comfortable and started looking around my hiding place. She'll never find me here, I snickered into my knees (I covered my mouth so my sister wouldn't hear a thing)... Ten minutes later she still hadn't found me. A good hiding place. Bored, I started looking at the walls, made of old boxes, little crannies under a wooden beam. I bent right down to the floor so I could see into the back (what if there was treasure hidden there...?). But... there WAS something there (but not treasure: it was too small for that). I stretched out my arm as far as I could and grabbed it... A book? I pulled it out and looked at it. It really was a book, wrapped up in old wrapping paper, and on it was written "Jana Lužická's diary". That was my mum's surname before she was married (now it's Brabcová, like me and my sister)... Well I never, it was mum's old diary...

Three years. Is that a long time? Is it long enough to forget, to overcome the pain, or is it too short?

Those three years have passed so quickly, a lot has happened and so much has changed, but there's something I still can't get over... I can't get over the loss of someone who was so close to me... Three years ago, on my name day, my grandad died. It's been so long and I still can't talk about it. He was something like a role model for me. I looked up to him with such respect, and I loved him.

Something more than blood: emotion. Something more than a bond: feeling.

I think about him every day. I remember the times we spent together. The time when we were children and he took out a typewriter and taught us how to write on it (later, when he was retired, he wrote a lot about his birthplace, Nekoř, and our family history – I think he loved writing), or when we had to read, and we hated it. Now I'd give anything for that. We'd sit at the big kitchen table, he'd lean back comfortably in his chair, close his eyes and listen. He had a small bookcase at home, he loved reading books just as much as writing them. Sometimes he would just tell us stories, things that had happened somewhere, and we loved listening to them...

Whenever I go to my grandmother's in Nekoř now I always stop in front of his room (he used to sleep in the living room, as he had rheumatism and everything was to hand there) and I take a deep breath, and I can still smell his cologne – later, even though he couldn't go out, he was always well dressed and clean-shaven. He used to be the mayor of Nekoř, and his parents had brought him up strictly. You could tell. He always walked with his head held high, steadfast and proud of who he was. And he didn't lose that later: when he couldn't walk without a stick he still stood upright as far as possible.

Whenever I'm at my grandmother's I go to his bookcase and open it, or just look at the books through the glass. My eyes run over the individual titles. Sometimes I'll borrow a book and sit down at his desk, at the desk where he wrote all his papers, books and chronicles, and I start turning the pages...

Grandad's cupboard is also there. When we were little we were forbidden to open it, and to this day I won't permit myself to do that. I probably don't have the courage I had earlier, when there was the danger of a smack if I was caught... but what's the danger now? Am I afraid? Of what? Of memories, the fear that if I open it I'll see his things, that familiar scent will flow out and I'll see those familiar, dear things again? I remember what it looked

like inside... How his trousers and shirts were neatly folded, his jackets on hangers, and on the door there was a mirror with a small shelf where his shaving things were. The drawers where he kept the stationery for his writing, the drawer where he kept his medicines... It all comes back to me, I know it all down to the smallest detail... I remember and I start crying again. I miss him so much.

Most of all I think about the day he died. I was there, in Nekoř; we'd just gone to see him. I was so looking forward to seeing granny and grandad again...

I don't remember the journey to Nekoř, but I remember every word, every emotion from the moment granny opened the door...

I gave her a big kiss, as I always did. I stroked Rek (my granny's dog: they'd found him a few years before at Pastviny Dam) and ran in to say hello to grandad... He was always so pleased to see us... He always wanted to hear all our news, every last detail, and then he would talk – about the news in Nekoř, who'd had a baby, who'd got married, who'd died...

I ran into his room as usual (for him I was always a wild little typhoon) and greeted him. Only then did I see him... how he was lying in bed, and didn't even look at me. He was just lying there, and his expression was... absent, as though part of him was already somewhere else... and I understood. I ran into the kitchen crying and hid so that no one would see me. Big girls don't cry...

The other members of my family slowly entered the living room to say hello to grandad... I remember hearing granny talking to him, but I don't know if he answered, or what happened. I ran away... as I'd done so many times before when a problem arose and I was too afraid to deal with it. As I'd done so many times when I didn't want to accept the truth. As I'd done so many times when I didn't want to believe something... I ran away... and I'm still running away...

That afternoon I didn't go into his room... I didn't want to accept that my grandad, someone I loved, was dying in the next room, and I could do nothing about it. I hate that feeling of powerlessness. I hate everything I can't change. I hate everything that makes me cry...

The afternoon was like a trance... I remember everything I felt and the faces around me that afternoon. But I can't remember what I did, how much time passed. All at once it was dark and snowing outside... An ambulance stopped under a street lamp... three people got out and came through the garden gate and up the narrow path to the house. I watched from the window. I know I was behind the curtain, and from downstairs I heard voices... those three people had come here. That ambulance had come here? I didn't understand... I was terribly afraid. My eyes filled with tears... Ten minutes went by... twenty.. thirty... I was still waiting at the window, looking out stupidly...

Maybe an hour went by, maybe it was a part of my life... The doctors got back into the ambulance and drove off. There was only the street lamp again, nothing more...

We took our seats at the kitchen table and tried to eat dinner... my dad and my uncle tried to be jocular, probably to ease the tension a little, or was it so we wouldn't be so frightened? Perhaps they themselves were afraid... of tears, and of what would come next. I sat with my back to the door where my grandad was sleeping (I think he was sleeping). My dad was just saying something when I heard a deep breath from the next room... a breath like I'd never heard before... like the breath of someone saying good bye... the LAST breath, the one that fills the lungs for the last time... And then only the exhalation, which sounded quiet, sad, like the end of an echo... The final sound and then NOTHING...

And I was so afraid... I didn't get up and go in to see him, although I should have. I should have gone in and I should have done a thousand things differently that day... Why can't I change that? I keep going over it again and again and I ask myself WHY? And I'm frightened of the answer... Did he know we were in the room next door, that we were with

him, or did he die alone? Did he know???

Sometimes I can't sleep... I think about that. I've never told anyone. I can't talk about grandad and not cry. He's still part of my life. I think about him every day, and I remember.

But sometimes when I go to Nekoř the first thing I do is I "run" into the living room and I smell the scent of cologne again... but he isn't there... and then that day is sadder than other days. When I realise that I can't change it, that he's gone and nothing will bring him back. When I have that feeling of powerlessness again... the tears pour down my cheeks and I start running, running away again, far, far away... To somewhere where people can do something. Where the world stops for the sake of a girl's aching heart. Where there's a chance of changing things... When will I stop? Does anyone know? What will happen if I don't run away? What will come next...?

I read the last line on the page. I can't believe it... I can't believe my mum wrote that. My mum, who always knows what to do, who never shows any sign of fear, who deals with everything firmly and directly (with me and my sister too... so many smacks for our tricks) – and now this. I've seen into (even though you could say it was unintentional) her private world, her heart of hearts. I've read what she only confided to her diary, and no one was supposed to find out... it's a strange feeling. How would I feel if someone discovered my secrets? Even if it's more than twenty years old. It's not right. There are some things, PRIVATE things, that no one should ever find out. Our greatest secrets, our feelings, our thoughts... I closed the diary and didn't read any further. I wouldn't want anyone to see my diary, see into MY heart. I took the diary and hid it back under the beam again, right at the back, where it belonged. Maybe my mum would remember it and look for it... I'll let her secret sleep... she's the only one who has the right to awaken it. Her private, inner world is hers alone, and no one has the right to see inside...

"Found you! Now I'll hide and you'll look for me..." I crawled out of my hiding place with a smile and now it was my turn to look for my sister. Where could she be hiding? What kind of hiding place does she have...?