





OR
THE CURIOUS STORY
ABOUT THE TIME THIEVES
AND THE CHILD WHO RETURNED
THE PEOPLE'S STOLEN TIME

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M^oSWEENEY'S M^oMULLENS

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PART ONE



A big city and a little girl

Long, long ago, when people spoke different languages from the ones we speak today, many magnificent cities flourished in the warmer parts of the world. There were large palaces for kings and emperors; there were broad streets, narrow alleyways, and winding lanes; there were marvelous temples, decorated with gold and marble statues of gods; there were bustling markets where people sold wares from far and wide; and there were big, beautiful squares where people gathered to discuss the news and give speeches or listen to them. But above all, there were large theaters.

These theaters looked the way circuses look today, except that they were built entirely out of stone. The seats for spectators were arranged in the shape of an enormous crater lined with rows that circled upward like a winding staircase. Seen from above, some of the theaters looked round, while others were more oval, and still others formed wide semicircles. These last ones—the semicircles—were called amphitheaters.

There were large amphitheaters, as big as football stadiums, and smaller ones that could hold only a few hundred people. Some were lavishly decorated with columns and statues, and others were plain and unadorned. These amphitheaters didn't have roofs, so everything took place under the sky. This was why, in the more luxurious ones, there were awnings made of gold-laced brocade that spanned the rows of seats, protecting the public from the harsh heat of the sun or from a sudden downpour. In the simple theaters, mats made out of cattail and straw served the same purpose. The theaters matched what people could afford, and everyone wanted one because they were all passionate speakers and listeners. When they saw exciting or amusing events being acted out on the stage, it was as if, in some mysterious way, the make-believe lives that they saw before them were more real than their own everyday lives. And they loved to watch and listen in on this other reality.

Thousands of years have gone by since then. Most of the great cities from those times have eroded; the temples and palaces have crumbled. Wind and rain, cold and heat, have ground down and hollowed out the stones, and even in the case of the big theaters, only ruins remain. In the broken walls, cicadas sing their monotonous songs, and it sounds like the earth is breathing in its sleep.

But some of these ancient cities have survived up to this very day. Life in them has changed, of course. People drive around in cars or buses, and they have telephones and electric lights. But here and there, scattered among the newer buildings, a few structures from the old days can still be seen—an arch, a piece of wall, or even an amphitheater.

Momo's story took place in one of these cities.

At the southern edge of this big city, where the first fields began and the huts became shabbier and more run-down, the ruins of an amphitheater lay hidden in a small pine forest. Even in old times it wasn't one of the magnificent ones; even then, it was a place for poor people to entertain themselves, and at the time when Momo's story began, the ruin was almost entirely forgotten. Only a few professors of antiquity knew about it, but they didn't bother with it anymore because there was nothing left to discover. It wasn't the kind of attraction that could rival others in the big city either, s

the few lost tourists who stumbled upon it every now and then merely clambered across the overgrown rows of seats, made noise, snapped photographs, and left again. Then silence would return to the stone semicircle and the cicadas would sing the next verse of their endless song, which was never any different from the preceding one.

Only the people from the nearby surroundings really knew of the strange, circular construction. They let their goats graze there, their children played ball on the round stage, and sometimes two lovebirds would meet there in the evening.

One day, though, rumors began to spread that something was living in the old amphitheater. It was a child, a small girl supposedly, but no one knew for sure because it was quite strangely dressed. It was called Momo, or something similar.

Momo looked more than a little bizarre, and her appearance could easily shock the kind of people who hold cleanliness and neatness in high regard. She was so small and skinny that people couldn't tell, even when they tried their hardest, whether she was eight or already twelve. She had a wild, jet-black mop of curly hair that looked like it had never been touched by brush or scissors. She had large, beautiful, obsidian eyes, and because she was always barefoot, she had black feet the same color as her hair. She sometimes wore shoes in the winter, but it was a mismatched pair that was much too big for her. This was because Momo didn't own anything apart from what she found lying around or had been given as a gift. Her skirt was made of many different colorful swatches of fabric sewn together, and it reached all the way down to her ankles. She wore an old men's jacket on top of that, which was much too wide for her, and she rolled the sleeves up at her wrists. As a precaution, Momo hadn't cut the sleeves because she wisely recognized that she would probably still grow, and who knew if she would ever again find such a beautiful and practical jacket with so many pockets.

There were a few collapsed chambers under the overgrown stage of the ruined amphitheater that could be reached through a hole in the outer wall, and it was in one of these that Momo decided to make her home.

One afternoon, a few people from the neighborhood came by and tried to talk to her. Because she was worried that they would chase her away, Momo stood across from them, glaring apprehensively, but she soon realized that these were friendly people who were poor like her, and who knew the hardships of life.

"So," said one of the men, "you like it here?"

"Yes," answered Momo.

"And you want to stay here?"

"Yes, please."

"But aren't you supposed to be somewhere?"

"No."

"I mean, don't you have to go back home?"

"This is my home," Momo quickly assured them.

"But where are you from?"

Momo made an ambiguous movement with her hand, which seemed to suggest somewhere in the distance.

"Who are your parents, then?" the man persisted.

Momo looked helplessly from him to the others and shrugged her shoulders a little. The people looked at one another and sighed.

"You don't have to be afraid," the man continued. "We don't want to chase you away. We only want to help you."

Momo nodded silently but wasn't quite convinced yet.

"Your name is Momo, right?"

"Yes."

"That's a pretty name, but I've never heard it before. Who named you that?"

"I did."

"You named yourself that?"

"Yes."

"When were you born?"

Momo thought about this. "As far as I can remember," she finally said, "I've always been here."

"Don't you have an aunt or an uncle, or a grandmother, or any family at all who you could stay with?"

Momo only looked at the man in silence for a while. Then she murmured, "This is my home."

"Well that's all good and fine," the man reckoned, "but you're still a child. How old are you?"

Momo balked. "A hundred," she said hesitantly.

The people laughed because they thought she was joking.

"Seriously, how old are you?"

"A hundred and two," answered Momo, still more uncertain.

It took a while for the people to realize that she only knew a few numbers—ones she had picked up in conversation—but she didn't know exactly what any of them meant because no one had taught her how to count.

"Listen," said the man after consulting the others. "Would you mind if we told the police that you're here? Then you'd go to a children's home where you'll get food and a bed, and where you'll learn to do math and read and write, and much more. What would you think about that, eh?"

Momo looked up at him in horror.

"No," she whispered. "I don't want to go there. I've already been to one of those places. Other kids were also there. There were bars over the windows, and every day we were scolded for no reason. One night I slipped over the wall and ran away. I don't ever want to go back there."

"I can understand that," said an old man, nodding, and the other people nodded as well.

"Okay, fine," said a woman. "But you're still so little. Somebody has to take care of you."

"I'll take care of myself," answered Momo.

"Can you?" asked the woman.

Momo didn't answer at once. Then she said softly, "I don't need much."

The people exchanged glances again, sighed, and nodded.

"You know what, Momo?" the man who had spoken first began again. "We were thinking you might want to stay with one of us. We don't have much room ourselves, and most of us already have a bunch of kids to feed, but at this point one more won't really make a difference. What do you say?"

"Thanks," Momo said, smiling for the first time. "Thanks a lot. But couldn't you just let me live here?"

The people argued back and forth for a while, deliberating, but finally they agreed. Here, they reasoned, the child could live just as well as with any of them, and here they could all take care of her together. In any case, it would be easier for all of them than for one person alone.

They immediately began to help by cleaning up Momo's dilapidated stone dungeon and making it as habitable as possible. One of them, a bricklayer, even built Momo a small stone stove, somehow producing a rusty stovepipe to go along with it. An old carpenter nailed a few crate boards together to make a small table and two chairs. Finally, some women brought a rusted iron bed frame, ornamented

with curlicues, a mattress that was only a little ripped, and two blankets. Last of all, the bricklayer, who was also a bit of an artist, painted a pretty flower-painting on the wall. He even painted a pretend frame around it and pretend nails. Suddenly the stone hole under the stage of the ruin had become a cozy little room.

Then the people's children came and brought all the leftover food that they could scrounge together. One brought a morsel of cheese, another a hunk of bread, the third some fruit, and so on. And because there were so many children, a large enough crowd showed up that night that they were able to throw a real party for Momo in the amphitheater. It was the kind of warm and lovely celebration that only poor people know how to have, and it marked the beginning of a wonderful friendship between Momo and the people of the neighborhood.

An extraordinary gift and an ordinary argument

From then on Momo was happy, or at least happy in her own understanding of the word. She always had something to eat, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on what the people could spare. She had a roof over her head, she had a bed, and when she was cold she could make a fire. But most important of all, she had many good friends.

You might think that it was only Momo who had been lucky to find such friendly people—Momo was thoroughly convinced of this herself—but it soon became clear that the people were just as fortunate to have Momo around. They came to need Momo so much that they began to wonder how they had ever managed without her. The longer the little girl was with them, the more indispensable she became—so indispensable that their main concern was that she would one day leave. And so it happened that Momo began to have more and more visitors. There was almost always someone sitting and speaking intently with her, and those who needed her but weren't able to go visit sent for her to come. Anyone who hadn't yet noticed that he needed her was always told the same thing: "Just go to Momo!"

This slowly became a common saying among the people in the neighborhood. In the same way that they might say, "All the best!" or "Bon appétit!" or "For god's sake!" now, whenever the opportunity arose—which was often—they said, "Just go to Momo!"

But why? Was Momo so incredibly smart that she could give every person good advice? Did she always choose the right words when somebody needed to be consoled? Did she always pass wise and fair judgments?

No. Momo was just as bad at all of these things as every other child.

Then did she have some skill that put people in a good mood? Could she sing beautifully or play an instrument especially well? Could she dance or perform acrobatic tricks, seeing as she lived in a kind of circus?

No, it wasn't any of these things either.

Could she do magic? Did she know a secret spell that could drive away worries and needs? Was she a palm reader, or could she foretell the future in some other way?

No, none of these.

The thing that Momo could do better than anyone else was *listen*. Now, many readers might say that being able to listen is nothing special—anyone can do it—but they would be altogether mistaken. Very few people can really listen, and the way Momo practiced the art of listening was unique.

Momo listened in a way that made slow people suddenly have the cleverest ideas. She didn't ask or say anything in particular that would bring them to these thoughts. She merely sat and listened with the utmost attention and sympathy, fixing her large, dark eyes on them. And when they finally stumbled upon an idea that they had never even dreamt of before, they felt like it had come from deep within them.

She listened in such a way that anxious and indecisive people suddenly knew what they wanted. Shy people suddenly felt brave and free. Unhappy and depressed people suddenly became joyful. And

when someone thought that his life was a meaningless failure, and that he was just one among millions of people who could all be replaced as easily and as quickly as a broken pot, then he would go and explain everything to Momo. Even as he spoke, it would become clear to him, in some mysterious way, that he was fundamentally mistaken, that among all the people in the world there was only one of him, and that he was therefore important in his own particular way.

This was how Momo listened.

One day, two men came to Momo's amphitheater. They had gotten into such a vile dispute that they were no longer on speaking terms, even though they were next-door neighbors. Their friends had told them to visit Momo because it wasn't right for neighbors to live as enemies. At first, the two had refused, but in the end they had begrudgingly given in.

So now they were sitting in the amphitheater, silent and furious, each opposite the other on one of the stone rows of seats. Both were glowering to themselves.

One of them was the bricklayer who had given Momo the oven and the stovepipe, which were now both in her "living room." His name was Nicola, and he was a burly man with a black mustache that curled up at the ends. The other one was Nino. He was skinny and always looked a bit tired. Nino was in charge of a small pub at the edge of the city that usually had no more than a few old men in it, who spent the entire evening over one glass of wine reminiscing about bygone times. Nino and his plump wife were also Momo's friends, and on more than one occasion they had brought her some very tasty snacks.

Momo quickly realized how angry these two men were at each other, and she didn't know which one she should go to first. In order not to insult either, she sat down between the two of them. Then she turned her head from one to the other, looking at them both in turn, and waited to see what would happen. Some things simply take time, and time was the only thing that Momo had in abundance.

After the men had been sitting like that for a while, Nicola finally got up and said, "I'm going. I showed my goodwill just by coming here, but as you can see, Momo, he won't budge. Why should I stay any longer?" And he turned to leave.

"Yeah, get out of here!" Nino yelled after him. "You didn't need to come in the first place. It's not like I'm going to apologize to a lowly thug!"

Nicola spun around. His face was bright red with fury. "Who's the thug here?" he asked threateningly, walking back. "Say that again!"

"As often as you want!" Nino screamed. "You think that because you're big and tough, no one'll dare tell you the truth. But me, I'll tell it to you and anyone else who wants to hear it." He paused. "You heard me! Why don't you just come over here and murder me. You already tried to the other day!"

"I wish I had!" roared Nicola, clenching his fists. "You see that Momo, see how he's smearing me with his lies. I only grabbed him by the collar and threw him in a puddle of dirty water behind his pub. I couldn't even drown a rat in there." And then he yelled at Nino again, "Unfortunately you're still alive and kicking! All the worse for me!"

For a while a storm of insults flew back and forth, and Momo couldn't even put together what had happened or why the two were so furious at one another. Little by little, it came out that Nicola had only committed his outrageous act because Nino had slapped him in the face. But Nino claimed that Nicola had first tried to smash all his dishes.

"That's not even true!" Nicola bitterly responded in his defense. "I threw a single jug against the wall, and it already had a crack in it anyway."

“But it was *my* jug, get it?” retorted Nino. “You had no right to do that.”

But Nicola was convinced that he had had every right to do what he had done because Nino had insulted his honor as a bricklayer. “You know what he said about me?” he yelled at Momo. “He said that I couldn’t build a straight wall because I’m drunk day and night, and he also said that my great-grandfather was one of the drunkards who helped build the Leaning Tower of Pisa!”

“But Nicola,” said Nino, “that was only a joke!”

“Ha!” growled Nicola. “I can’t laugh about things like that.”

It turned out that Nino had insulted Nicola as payback back for a different joke. One morning Nino had woken up to find ONLY A LOW CREEP EVER BECOMES A BARKEEP written on his door in red paint, and Nino, for his part, hadn’t found it funny at all.

For a while they argued in earnest about which of the two jokes had been better, working themselves back into a rage, but suddenly they stopped.

Momo was staring at them wide-eyed and neither of the two could quite understand her gaze. Was she laughing at them both on the inside? Or was she sad? Her face betrayed nothing, but the two men suddenly felt as if they were seeing themselves in a mirror, and they became ashamed.

“Okay,” said Nicola. “Maybe I shouldn’t have painted that on your door, Nino, but I wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t refused to serve me a glass of wine the night before. That was a low blow, and you know it! I always pay! You had no right to treat me like that.”

“Oh really?” Nino spat back. “Don’t you remember the business with that picture of Saint Anthony? Yeah, now you’re getting pale! You pulled a fast one on me, and I don’t put up with stuff like that.”

“I cheated *you*?” yelled Nicola, putting his hand to his head. “It’s the other way around, my friend. You wanted to take me for a ride, but it didn’t work out!”

This was the story: There used to be a picture of Saint Anthony hanging on the wall in Nino’s pub. It was a color print that Nino had cut out of a newspaper and framed. One day Nicola said he wanted to buy the picture from Nino—supposedly because he thought it was beautiful—and after a lot of slick bargaining, Nino finally convinced Nicola to trade him his radio for it. Nino laughed himself silly because Nicola was clearly on the losing end of the deal.

But it turned out that there was money tucked between the picture and the back of the frame that Nino hadn’t known about. Suddenly, he angrily realized that he was the one who’d been outsmarted. In a short, he demanded that Nicola give him back the money because it didn’t belong to the bargain. Nicola refused, so Nino decided he wouldn’t serve him anything else to drink. That was how the fight had originally begun.

Once the two men had traced the episode back to its beginning, they fell silent for a while.

Then Nino asked, “Now tell me honestly Nicola, did you know about the money before the trade?”

“Of course, otherwise I would have never given you my radio.”

“Then you did swindle me!”

“What? Didn’t you know about the money?”

“No, I swear I didn’t!”

“Well, there you are! It’s pretty clear that you were trying to cheat me. How else could you be willing to accept my radio for a worthless scrap of paper, huh?”

“How did you even know about the money?”

“I saw a customer stick it back there as an offering to Saint Anthony two nights before.”

Nino bit his lip. “Was it a lot?”

“No more and no less than the value of my radio,” answered Nicola.

“Then our entire argument,” said Nino thoughtfully, “is actually about a newspaper clipping of Saint Anthony.”

Nicola scratched his head. “I guess so,” he grumbled. “You can have him back if you want, Nino.”

“No way!” answered Nino in a dignified voice. “A deal’s a deal! After all, we did shake hands on it.”

Suddenly they both burst out laughing. They climbed down the stone steps, met in the middle of the round piazza, threw their arms around one another, and slapped each other on the back. Then they both took Momo down and said, “Thank you very much!”

When they left a little while later, Momo stood waving after them for a long time. She was glad that they were friends again.

Another time, a small boy brought her a canary that wouldn’t sing. This was a much more difficult assignment for Momo. She had to listen to it for an entire week before it finally began to trill and whistle again.

Momo listened to everyone and everything: dogs, cats, crickets, toads, even the rain and the wind in the trees. And everything spoke to her in its own way.

On some nights, when all her friends had gone home, she would sit alone for a long time in the old theater’s large, stone rotunda listening to the deepening silence while the starry sky arched high above her.

Whenever she did this, she imagined that she was sitting in the middle of a giant ear that was listening in on the entire cosmos, and she often thought she could hear soft but powerful music that went straight to her heart. On those nights she always had especially beautiful dreams.

Anyone who still thinks that listening is nothing special should simply try to do it half as well.

A make-believe storm and a real squall

It should already be evident that Momo treated adults and children exactly the same way when she listened to them, but there was another reason why children liked visiting the old amphitheater as much as they did. Ever since Momo had arrived, they were able to play better than ever before. There just weren't any boring moments anymore. It wasn't that Momo made especially good suggestions for games—no, she simply played along—but for some unknown reason, whenever she joined in a game the children always came up with the best ideas all by themselves. Every day they came up with new games, each more imaginative than the last.

One hot and humid afternoon, ten or eleven children were sitting around the stone steps waiting for Momo, who had gone wandering around the neighborhood as she sometimes did. Thick, black clouds hung low in the sky, and it looked like there was going to be a thunderstorm.

"I think I'm gonna go home," said one girl, who had her little sister with her. "I'm afraid of lightning and thunder."

"And at home?" asked a boy with glasses. "You aren't afraid when you're at home?"

"No, I am," answered the girl.

"Then you could just as well stay here," reckoned the boy.

The girl shrugged her shoulders and nodded. After a while she said, "But maybe Momo isn't coming today."

"So what?" said another boy, who looked a little mangy and neglected. "We can still play something—even without Momo."

"Fine, but what?"

"I don't know, just something."

"Just something is nothing. Who has an idea?"

"I know what," said a fat boy with a shrill, high-pitched voice. "We could pretend that the entire ruin is a big ship and that we're sailing in unknown seas looking for adventures. I'll be the captain, you can be the first mate, and you'll be the scientist because this adventure is a scientific expedition, got it? And the rest of you can be sailors."

"What about us girls, what'll we be?"

"Girl sailors. It's a modern ship."

The fat boy's plan sounded like a good one, and they tried to play but they couldn't quite agree with one another, so the game never really got going. After a short time they were all sitting on the stone steps again, waiting. Then Momo came.

A wave whooshed by the *Argo's* bow. The exploratory vessel was quietly bobbing up and down in the swell while it swiftly pushed ahead at full speed toward the Coral Sea. Since the dawn of man, no boat had dared enter these perilous waters, which were teeming with shallow coral reefs and unknown sea monsters, and, worst of all, the so-called Traveling Typhoon: a hurricane that never came to rest. It wandered eternally across the ocean looking for loot like a living, cunning beast. The hurricane's path was completely unpredictable, and once it had trapped something in its mighty embrace, it wouldn't

let it go until that thing had been reduced to a pile of matchstick wood.

Naturally, the *Argo* was specially equipped for an encounter with this Traveling Typhoon. Its hull was made entirely out of lower bainite, an extremely flexible stainless blue steel that was as strong as a sword blade. And through a special process, the hull had also been cast all in one piece, without any welded edges or rivets.

But even with a well-equipped vessel like the *Argo*, scarcely any other captain and crew would have been courageous enough to put themselves in such danger. Captain Gordon was extraordinary though. From the steering deck, he proudly gazed down at his crewmembers, all of whom were tried and proven experts in their respective fields. Don Melu, the first mate, stood next to the captain. He was an old sea dog, who had already lived to see one hundred and twenty-seven hurricanes.

Professor Eisenstein, the scientific leader of the expedition, was further aft, on the sun deck, with his two assistants Maurin and Sara who, with their incredible memories, were like an entire movable library. All three of the scientists were standing over their various instruments quietly discussing something in complex technical jargon.

Momosan, the pretty native, was sitting cross-legged a little farther off to the side. Every now and then, the scientist would ask her specific questions about certain unique characteristics of the Coral Sea, and she would answer him in her melodious Hula dialect, which only the professor understood.

The aim of the expedition was to discover the cause of the Traveling Typhoon, and if possible, to eliminate it so that the sea would be safe for future boats to travel. But so far everything had remained calm, and there was no sign of the storm.

Suddenly the man in the crow's nest yelled down, wrenching the captain out of his thoughts.

"Cap'n!" he yelled, cupping his hand around his mouth. "Unless I'm crazy, I swear I can see a glass island up ahead."

The captain and Don Melu immediately looked through their spyglasses. Even Professor Eisenstein and his assistants hurried over. They were all suddenly brimming with excitement. Only the pretty native remained seated and unperturbed. The mysterious customs of her people forbade her to show curiosity.

They quickly reached the glass island. The professor clambered down the rope ladder on the side of the boat and stepped onto the transparent surface, which turned out to be so slippery that he had quite a hard time staying on his feet.

The island was completely circular, with a diameter of approximately sixty feet, and it rose up like a dome in the middle. When the professor reached the very top, he could clearly glimpse a pulsating orb of light in the heart of the island, deep below the transparent surface.

He shared his observations with the others, who were anxiously awaiting him at the boat's railing.

"Well," said Maurin, "we must be dealing with an *Oggelmumpf Bistrozinalis*."

"Possible," said Sara, the other assistant. "But it could just as easily be a *Shluckula Tapetozifera*."

Professor Eisenstein straightened back up, pushed his glasses into place and yelled up, "In my opinion, this is an unusual variety of the ordinary *Strumpus Quietshinensus*. But we can only be sure once we've examined it from below."

With that, the three girl sailors, who were also world-famous scuba divers, and who in the meantime had already put on wet suits, plunged into the water and disappeared into the blue depths. For a while, all that appeared on the surface of the water were a few air bubbles, but suddenly one of the divers, a girl named Sandra, popped up, gasping, and yelled, "It's a giant jellyfish! The others are caught in its tentacles and can't free themselves. We need to help them before it's too late!" And she disappeared again.

One hundred frogmen, led by their captain, Franco, nicknamed the Dolphin, threw themselves into the water without a moment's hesitation. A massive battle ensued beneath the surface, which became covered with froth and spray. But even these hundred men weren't able to free the girls from the jellyfish's horrible embrace. The creature was too powerful!

"Something in this water seems to be causing everything to grow extremely large," said the professor, furling his brow. "This is a highly interesting phenomenon!"

Meanwhile, Captain Gordon and his first mate had come to a decision.

"Everyone back!" yelled Don Melu. "All hands on deck. We're going to cut the beast in half, otherwise we won't be able to free the girls."

The Dolphin and his frogmen climbed back onto the boat. The *Argo* reversed a little and then shot toward the giant jellyfish at full throttle. The steel ship's bow was razor sharp, and it silently cut the jellyfish in two without so much as a shudder. The maneuver wasn't exactly safe for the two girls, but Don Melu had measured so precisely that the boat went right between them. The jellyfish's tentacles immediately fell to the side, limp and lifeless, and the girls were able to untangle themselves.

They were received on the ship amid loud cheers. Professor Eisenstein stepped toward them and said, "It was my fault. I should never have sent you down there. Forgive me for putting you in so much danger."

"Don't worry about it, Professor," answered one of the girls, laughing. "At the end of the day, that's why we decided to come."

"Danger is our profession," added the other girl.

But there wasn't enough time for a longer exchange. During the rescue mission the captain and crew had completely forgotten to keep watching the ocean, and only now, with almost no time to spare, did they finally see the Traveling Typhoon on the horizon, racing toward the boat at breakneck speed.

An immense wave picked the *Argo* high up into the air, spun it onto its side, and sent it plummeting down into a trough nearly one hundred and fifty feet deep. After the first impact, many less experienced and less courageous mariners would have fainted or been swept overboard, but Captain Gordon stood wide legged on the steering deck as if nothing had happened, and his crew stood fast just as calmly. Only the pretty native, who wasn't used to such wild sea voyages, had scrambled into a lifeboat.

In just a few seconds the entire sky had gone pitch-black. The hurricane threw itself at the ship. Howling and bellowing, it hurled the *Argo* way up into the sky, only to throw it back down into the depths of a watery abyss. It was as if the storm were growing more furious from minute to minute as it tried in vain to crack the ship's steel hull.

In a calm voice, the captain gave out orders to the first mate who then relayed them to the rest of the crew. Everyone was in position. Even Professor Eisenstein and his assistants hadn't left their instruments. Instead, they were calculating the location of the eye of the storm because the boat would eventually have to be steered toward it. The captain silently admired these scientists, who remained calm and collected even though they weren't familiar with the ocean the way he and his men were.

A lightning bolt shot down and struck the steel ship, which became electrically charged. Sparks shot out wherever anyone touched, but the crew onboard the *Argo* had trained for months in preparation, so this barely affected them. The one problem was that the ship's thinner parts—steel cables and iron rods, for example—began to glow like the filament in an electric bulb. This made work a little more difficult for the crew members, despite the heat-resistant rubber gloves they had prepared. Luckily, the glowing bits were soon extinguished by a downpour heavier than any crew member,

except Don Melu, had ever seen. The rain was so dense that it soon made the air too thick to breathe, and the crew members had to put on diving masks with oxygen tanks attached to them.

Lightning bolt after lightning bolt flashed, followed by ever-louder thunderclaps. The storm howled, and waves as big as houses drowned everything under mountains of white foam. The *Argo* crawled forward, one foot at a time, fighting against the Traveling Typhoon, its engines running full steam ahead. Deep down in the engine room, the mechanics and fire stokers were giving it their all. They had lashed themselves tightly with thick ropes so that they wouldn't be thrown into the open furnace by the boat's violent heaving and pitching.

At last, after a long, toilsome struggle, the *Argo* reached the eye of the storm. What a sight!

The typhoon had knocked flat all the waves at its center, and the water was as still as a mirror. An enormous being of some kind was dancing in the middle of this glistening mirror. It was standing on one leg, and its body grew wider the higher one looked. It resembled a spinning top the size of an inverted mountain, and it was moving so quickly that nobody could quite make out what it was.

"A *Shum-Shum Gummilastikum!*" yelled the titillated professor while holding his glasses in place so that the torrents of rain wouldn't wash them off of his nose.

"Translation please," grumbled Don Melu. "We're simple seamen here."

"Leave the professor to himself while he does his research," interrupted Sara. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This gyro-creature probably dates back to the very beginning of the earth's formation. It must be more than a billion years old. Today there is only one tiny subspecies left, which can sometimes be found in tomato sauce and very rarely in green ink. A specimen this big is presumably the only one of its kind that still exists."

"But we came here," yelled the captain over the howling storm, "to eliminate the source of the Traveling Typhoon. Tell the professor to tell us how we can get this awful thing to stop spinning."

"Your guess is as good as mine," said the professor. "I have no inkling of how to do that yet. Science has never had the chance to study this phenomenon."

"Okay then," reckoned the captain. "We'll just have to shoot at it a few times and see what happens."

"How horrible!" lamented the professor. "Shooting the only existing specimen of a *Shum-Shum Gummilastikum!*"

But the Counterfiction Cannon was already aimed at the giant gyro-creature.

"Fire!" ordered the captain.

Two blue flashes, each at least one hundred feet long, shot out of the twin barrels. Naturally there was no explosion because, as everyone knows, a Counterfiction Cannon fires proteins at its target.

The illuminated streaks flew toward the *Shum-Shum* but were deflected by the enormous vortex, pulled in, and then whirled around and around until they were finally catapulted up into the sky where they disappeared in the dark cloud bank overhead.

"It's no use!" yelled Captain Gordon. "We have to get closer to the thing!"

"We can't get any closer!" Don Melu roared back. "The engines are already running at full throttle, and it's barely enough to keep us in place."

"Do you have any suggestions, Professor?" the captain wanted to know, but the professor merely shrugged his shoulders. His assistants didn't have any better ideas. It was looking like they would have to give up the expedition.

But just then, someone pulled on the professor's sleeve. It was the pretty native.

"*Malumba!*" she said with a graceful gesture. "*Malumba, oisitu sono! Erweini samba insaltu lolobindra. Kramuna heun beni beni sadogau.*"

“*Babalu?*” inquired the surprised professor. “*Didi maha feinosi intu ge doinen malumba?*”

The pretty native nodded eagerly and replied, “*Dodo um aifu schulamat wawada.*”

“*Oi-oi,*” answered the professor, thoughtfully stroking his chin.

“What does she want?” asked the first mate.

“She says that her people have an ancient song that could lull the Traveling Typhoon to sleep if anyone were brave enough to sing it.”

“Is that some kind of bad joke?” growled Don Melu. “A lullaby for a hurricane!”

“What do you think, Professor?” Sara wanted to know. “Is something like that scientifically possible?”

“We should always stay open-minded. There is often a kernel of truth in the traditions of natives. Maybe there are specific sonic vibrations that have an effect on the *Shum-Shum Gummilastikum*. We simply know too little about its living conditions to rule that out.”

“It can’t hurt,” decided the captain. “Let’s give it a shot. Tell her to start singing.”

The professor turned to the pretty native and said, “*Malumba didi oisafal huna-huna, wawadu?*”

Momosan nodded her head and immediately began to sing a highly distinctive song that only consisted of a few different notes repeated over and over again: “*Eni meni allubeni; wana tai susura teni!*” She also clapped her hands and jumped around to the beat while she sang.

The simple melody and words were easy enough to learn, and slowly other people began to join in. Soon all the crew members were clapping their hands and dancing around to the beat. It was quite a nice surprise to see that the old sea dog, Don Melu, and the professor were also singing and clapping like children in a playground.

Lo and behold, the humongous top began to slow its spinning until it finally came to a complete halt and began to sink. The water thundered before engulfing it, and then the storm began to wane before stopping altogether. All of a sudden, the sky became clear and blue, and the ocean became calm. The *Argo* stood still on a glittering mirror of water, as though nothing had ever happened to disturb its voyage.

“Crew members,” said Captain Gordon, looking every single person in the eyes with appreciation. “we did it!” Everyone knew he was a man of very few words, so it meant that much more when he added, “I’m proud of you guys.”

“I think it actually rained,” said the girl with the little sister. “I, for one, am completely soaked.”

She was right. The storm had come and gone. The girl was especially surprised to discover that she had forgotten to be afraid of the thunder and the lightning while she was on the *Argo*.

The children spoke for a while longer about their adventure, explaining certain details to each other and trading personal experiences. Then they split up to go home and dry themselves off.

Only the boy with the glasses was not completely satisfied with the outcome of the game. As he was saying goodbye, he went over to Momo and said, “It’s too bad that we let the *Shum-Shum Gummilastikum* sink away without doing anything. The last specimen of its kind! I really wish I could have done some more experiments on it.”

But everyone agreed about one thing: they never had more fun than they did with Momo.

CHAPTER FOUR

A reserved old man and a silver-tongued boy

Even people with many friends always have one or two with whom they are especially close, and whom they like best of all. This was true in Momo's case as well. She had two very special friends. They came to see her every day, and both shared everything with her. One was young and the other was old, and Momo could not have said which of the two she loved more.

The older one was named Beppo Streetsweeper. In reality, he probably had a different last name, but because he was a street sweeper by profession, and because everyone had always called him that, he had simply taken to using it as a surname.

Beppo Streetsweeper lived near the amphitheater in a small shack that he had cobbled together out of bricks, roofing tiles, and sheets of corrugated metal. Because he was an exceptionally small man, and because he had a slight hunch, Beppo was not much taller than Momo. He had a large head that was always slightly cocked to one side with many small white hairs protruding out of it, and he had a tiny pair of wire-rimmed glasses that he wore on the tip of his nose.



Many of the people in the neighborhood thought that Beppo was a little loony, because whenever anyone asked him a question, he almost always responded with a friendly laugh but no answer. The truth was that he was always considering what had been asked, and when he didn't think an answer was necessary, he remained silent. When he did think an answer was necessary, though, he would weigh his words even more carefully, and sometimes it took many hours, occasionally even entire days, for him to reply. In the meantime, the other person had naturally forgotten what he had asked, so Beppo's responses often seemed strange and out of context. Only Momo was patient enough to understand him. She knew that he took as long as he did because he never wanted to say anything untrue. In his opinion, all the misfortune in the world came from the many lies—the deliberate ones but also the accidental ones that were born of haste or imprecision.

Every morning, well before daybreak, Beppo would ride his old squeaky bicycle to a large depot in the city. He would wait there with his fellow street sweepers until he was given a broom and cart and a specific street to clean. Beppo loved the hour right before daybreak when the city was still asleep, and he did his job happily, throwing himself into it because he knew that it was very important work.

When he swept the streets, he did so slowly but steadily: one step for every breath, and one broom stroke for every step. Step, breath, stroke. Step, breath, stroke. In between, he would sometimes stand still for a while and stare thoughtfully off into the distance. Then he would begin again: step, breath, stroke...

While he slowly moved forward—the dirty street ahead of him, and the clean street behind him—he sometimes had grand ideas. They were wordless ideas, though, ideas that were as difficult to share as a smell that you can just barely remember, or a color from a dream. After work, when he was sitting with Momo, he explained his thoughts to her, and because of her special way of listening, he soon found the right words.

“You see, Momo?” he asked one day. “It's like this: sometimes you have a very long street ahead of you. It's so terribly long, you think to yourself, that you'll never be able to finish sweeping it.”

He stared silently off into the distance for a while before continuing. “So you begin to hurry. You keep getting faster and faster, but every time you look up, you see that the street isn't getting any shorter. There's always just as much left as before. You start straining yourself even more, you panic, and finally you're all out of breath. You can't go on at all, and the street still stretches out far ahead of you. That's not the way to do it.”

He thought for a while more. Then he said, “You can never think about the whole street all at once, can you understand? You can only think about the next step, the next breath, the next broom stroke. Only ever the next one.”

He paused and thought again before continuing. “Then it's pure joy, and that's the most important thing, because then you do your work well. That's how it's supposed to be.”

He paused again for a long time. “Suddenly you notice that, step by step, bit by bit, you've finished the whole street, and you don't even know how because you're not out of breath.” He nodded again and finally said, “That's also important.”

Another time he came and sat down quietly beside Momo, and she saw that he was thinking hard and that he had something particularly special to say. Suddenly he looked her in the eyes and began. “You recognized us,” he said. It was a long time before he continued, and then, in a low voice, he said, “It happens sometimes at midday, when everything is asleep in the heat. That's when the world becomes transparent, like a stream, do you understand? You can look down to the very bottom.”

He nodded and fell silent for a while. Then even more quietly he said, “There are other times, other ages lying down there on the bottom.” He sat and reflected again for a long time, looking for the

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