

EXCERPT

I met her at a party. New Year's Eve was approaching, and we were invited to spend it at our neighbours' place. Mum was not feeling well; also, there was a raging blizzard going on, and we could not have gone to the city centre to watch the fireworks anyway. And so the invitation was accepted. Had I known that there would not be another boy at the party, I would have never agreed to go!

'Theo darling, please don't spoil the night for us,' Mum pleaded. 'So nice of our neighbour to invite us at the last minute. I'm sure you will find something to do there – it is New Year's Eve, after all. Who knows, a miracle might even happen at midnight.'

Yeah right – as if. Things like that only happen in movies.

The neighbour's house was the biggest in Snooper Street. The number of guests was impressive – but there was no-one from our gang, of course. Only a girl.

Everybody called her Midge, Beanie or Tiny but most of all – Button. She was sneaking around from one group of people to another, butting into the grownups' conversations, loudly telling jokes, knocking back glass after glass of children's champagne and basking in the public's attention. Had there been some of the Snooper Street's boys at the party, we would have ferreted our way through all the secret rooms in the house. As for Button, all she did was get in the way of the grownups and act like I did not exist. 'Some lovely weather we're having tonight,' she kept saying things like that. We could not possibly have a thing in common even if I DID love the snowstorm wailing outside.

This looked set to become the most boring New Year's Eve in my life. I decided to sit out the rest of the night by the fireplace – a giant wide-open lion's mouth with licking flames instead of a tongue. The whole house was actually very funny: the banisters of the spiral staircase looked like twining tree roots guarded by two sleeping lions with wings; the door frames were enveloped by tangles of grapevines – made out of wood – and the furniture was old-fashioned and uncomfortable.

'So how did you find the President's New Year's speech? Inspiring, right?' I heard the familiar voice behind my back.

I honestly would not know what to with her!

She was prattling on, blabbing and rattling like a big and shiny wrapper with a small and quirky gift inside. Finally someone got tired of Button's waffle and they sent the girl to the kitchen to fetch some snacks or something equally insignificant.

'By all means! I won't be a moment!' Button promised, showing no intention of getting even close to the kitchen. She disappeared among the guests; a moment later, I caught sight of her at the other end of the room. She cast an absent-minded glance over the room and then, quick as a lightning, suddenly bolted through a door.

I perked up immediately. I had already noticed the door: round-topped and glass-panelled, it was covered in gold vines and grape bunches so that you could not see through the glass at all; a fat big peacock, its tail spread out in a fan, was sitting in the middle of it all. The door handle was shaped like the peacock's claw – protectively held close to its chest so that no-one would even think of touching it. The door led to the only room in the house that had not been shown to the guests before the dinner. I followed her. Having made sure that everyone was too carried away by

the conversations to keep an eye on me, I pressed down the peacock's claw and, like Button, slipped into the room as quietly as I could.

And that is where the whole thing began.

'...does SHE take good care of you? ...you poor little thing... You haven't grown the tiniest bit... Me? Oh please, I'm growing by the hour, that's what Dad says... how kind of you...' Pressing her nose against the side wall, Button was having a conversation with someone in a mysterious whisper and covered her mouth now and then, trying to suppress laughter.

I realised immediately that we were in a study. This must be the host's most important room where all the big deals were made; and yet I did not find it so special that it should be hidden from the guests' eyes. Compared with other rooms in the house, it seemed even simple. There was a brightly polished massive wood desk in the middle, leather sofas and shelves with gilded volumes; on the side walls, several paintings were displayed. Button was standing and whispering at one of them.

'What are you doing?'

Button started.

'Shhh,' she hissed, and we waited for the dangerously loud voices and shadows behind the glass door move further away.

'What are *you* doing here? Go back to your warm seat by the fireplace!' she said with the intention of making me realise that she had been very much aware of my existence throughout the night: she had simply chosen to ignore me.

'Hey, is that you?' I pointed at the painting in front of which she was standing. It was a portrait of a girl with red hair, freckled and aristocratically pale skin, wearing

a posh dress and expensive pearl jewellery. She had a gold tiara on her head. A princess.

‘No!’

‘You two look very much alike,’ I replied coolly. I knew that was the most horrible thing you could say to a girl. They do not want to look like anyone else.

Button hissed angrily.

‘Not at all! Could you kindly leave me alone?’ she whispered.

‘And let you talk to the wall from boredom? Please – enjoy yourself!’

‘Idiot!’ Button turned to the painting but immediately froze in horror. ‘IT HAS DISAPPEARED!’

The voices behind the glass door grew louder again; the guests called out to each other, laughed. Then came a familiar-sounding pop as a bottle of champagne was opened.

TEN! NINE!...

It was getting close to midnight.

‘What is it you have lost here? Let’s go!’

‘The monkey is lost!’ Button was pointing at the painting, her hand shaking.

‘The princess has a monkey but now it’s disappeared!’

‘Oh fiddlesticks!’ I looked at the red-haired princess: she did not appear to be missing anything to me.

‘In that case, read this!’ Button pointed defiantly at a small plaque next to the painting.

‘JANIS ROZENTĀLS. (This must be the author of the painting?)
“PRINCESS WITH A MONKEY”. 1913. (What an old princess!) OIL,’ I read in the
description.

‘Princess WITH A MONKEY! You think the artist painted just the princess,
leaving the monkey to imagination?’

I leant in really close to the painting. Had there really been some sort of
monkey there, who now had been stolen or painted over, there should have been a
hole cut in the canvas or at least fresh paint. There was no sign of either.

FIVE! FOUR!...

‘The monkey was there – I spoke with him only A MOMENT AGO!’

OOOONE!!!

Everything went very quiet suddenly, as if no-one was there behind the door
anymore. They must have rushed out to watch the fireworks!

‘You were SPEAKING with a picture of a monkey,’ I repeated. She definitely
had gone crackers. ‘Listen, good luck to you but I am going to watch the fireworks
with other PEOPLE.’

I turned to leave, and it was only then that we noticed that something had gone
wrong. The study looked quite different. Actually, it did not look like a study at all. It
was more like a passage winding up a spiral staircase. Like a weird white snake with
patterned skin, the staircase was coiling around its axis. The steps were covered with
an opulent red carpet but the ceiling and walls were adorned with fine ornaments from
top to bottom. There were no longer any paintings on the wall. There was no monkey
or his princess, or any other paintings. Suddenly we had found ourselves in a
completely different room.

‘What are you doing?’ I cried and heard the hollow noise of my voice echoing in the round belly of the staircase. ‘Whatever it is that you’re doing, stop it at once! Stop... this...’ I did not even know how to call whatever had happened just now. I had never experienced anything like that and had no idea what the proper name was. It was... some sort of spellcasting!

‘I haven’t done anything,’ Button said defensively. ‘Perhaps we have teleported to the other end of the house? It could happen... On the other hand, I have explored every corner of this building, even places that the owner himself knows nothing about – but I HAVE NEVER SEEN this staircase,’ she was holding forth loudly, tilting back her head and looking inside the coils of the winding staircase.

‘Teleporting is not for real. It only happens in movies! But whom am I telling this? You have conversations with picture animals!’ I was really angry. I often get angry when I do not understand or know something. It feels like trying to see behind the horizon – where nothing at all can be seen. Perhaps the world is round, perhaps it is flat and ends at the horizon. Perhaps it is simply the edge of the world and there is nothing beyond it. But I have never managed to find out if that is the case: there is always a tree or a house standing in the way. Anyway, the anger dissipates if I calm down a bit and think about it properly. No-one has discovered the edge of the world, therefore it must be round. ‘Let’s go. There must be a way back somewhere nearby.’

We were going up the stairs. The white walls were glistening like porcelain but the wall paintings were aglow with (I could have sworn!) real gold. On every landing there was a chocolate wooden door – all covered in ornaments. All of them locked. There was a strong whiff of ladies’ face powder, mixed with the sharp smell of cigarette smoke, which neither of us had felt before, and so we followed the much

safer trail of the roast meat aroma coming from the top floor.

‘I don’t care if you don’t believe me, but he really did speak,’ Button said as we were making our way up the stairs. ‘Well, not “speak” speak, like people. But he waved at me with his paw, flicked his tail, scratched his head and understood everything I asked him.’

I was really sick and tired of her banging on about the monkey all the time. I decided to keep well away from her once we would get back to the others. I hoped that I would be back in time for the final – biggest – firework of the display.

‘I found it hard to believe it myself in the beginning! When it first happened, I thought I had gone completely ga-ga – that I was seeing things out of sheer fear, because I had sneaked into the study without permission. So I went back to check on our next visit – not at all! The monkey was glad to see me again – leaping around (around the painting, that is, not the study), dancing and clearly MOVING! He even pressed his little face against the glass in front of the painting once – that was really funny.’ Button did an impression of a flattened face and gave one of her loud shrieks of laughter.

‘So what was the princess doing then? Standing around fiddling her thumbs?’

‘She? Nothing! She was just standing there, the same as always; didn’t even look at me once.’

‘It must have been a TV set,’ I concluded.

‘I checked,’ Button insisted stubbornly. ‘There was no cord. It was an ordinary canvas.’

I did not answer. With an imagination like this, she should be writing books.

‘As I said – I don’t care if you don’t believe me,’ she shrugged indifferently.
‘It doesn’t make it any less interesting for me.’

She kept chattering while I, stubbornly silent, put my hand in my pockets – and then it hit me: I had a mobile phone! I could call Mum and Dad, pretending that I had wanted to say Happy New Year ‘the modern way’ just for fun, and then ask casually if they knew anything about a secret staircase in this house. They would definitely come and get us. But the phone suddenly refused to work: the screen was black and the buttons did not respond. The only thing that I managed to switch on was the flashlight; in any other way the phone was completely useless.

However, soon there was no longer any need for it: we had finally reached the top floor – a tempting aroma of roast meat was wafting through the open door – and went straight in. The walls of the little passage were covered in magnificently embroidered carpets and we saw the familiar drawing room right in front of us. It seemed much cosier and nicer after this mysterious little incident. The furniture suddenly seemed more comfortable; there was a comforting sort of mess everywhere. The table was set with an enticingly golden-brown roast and potatoes, half-empty serving dishes and open bottles; candles were lit and dripping fast. There obviously had been guests only a moment ago; they must have rushed out for the New Year countdown. I breathed a sigh of relief. We could have a quick bite and then – outside!

‘We are in a completely different drawing-room,’ Button said.

‘Very funny,’ I replied.

‘If you could bring yourself to stop fiddling with the roast leg and take a look at the fireplace, you just might understand what I’m talking about.’

Reluctantly, I looked back over my shoulder. There was still a fire in the fireplace – but it was a completely DIFFERENT fireplace! Instead of the grand open mouth of the lion it was now adorned with fragile metal flowers. I was starting to get a bad feeling in my gut. I shivered.

And at that moment the door opened and people – dozens of people – descended on the hall: rosy-cheeked, loud, happy and smiley, coatless, wearing coats, wearing fedoras, top hats, evening suits, long dresses, old-fashioned ladies' hats, MOLESKIN hats and other pieces of clothing reminiscent of carnival costumes, followed by a cloud of sweet face-powder and tobacco scent and a cheerful hubbub. We leapt out of their way, seeking our parents with our eyes, but the room was still filling up with more and more of the unfamiliar crowd. Everyone was so funnily dressed up that we probably would not recognise our folks anyway. Button was dropping curtseys left, right and centre: 'Good evening, sir! Happy New Year! Good evening, ma'am! Happy New Year!', squealing with delight about the dresses: 'You look simply DIVINE!', admiring the men's moustaches: 'Ooh, that is big!' and did not seem in the slightest surprised by what was happening around us.

Prettily-dressed maids appeared out of nowhere, serving everyone hot drinks from shiny trays. But there had been no maidservants at our party... Nor had there been all these too-poshly dressed people...

'Listen,' I kept prodding at Button. 'Who are all these people?'

There was no sight of my parents or any other familiar faces among the crowd. Right now Button was the only person I knew here. She just shrugged and giggled excitedly: 'We are at a completely DIFFERENT party!'

However, I had been wrong: I recognised another familiar face only a moment later. My heart almost stopped; my legs turned to jelly: you could have knocked me down with a feather – I could not believe my own eyes. ‘Button!’ I nudged her again. ‘BUTTON! Look!’

Standing nearby, we saw a red-haired girl with freckled, aristocratically pale skin; she was wearing a posh dress and expensive pearl jewellery but on her head she had a gold tiara... It was the princess! The one in the painting! The old princess from 1913! (She did not look at all as if she were a hundred years old...) Fiddling with her magnificent curls, she was listening with a bored look on her face to a gallant gentleman and paying no attention whatsoever to us.

‘How can it even be possible?’ I was flustered. Hundred-year-old people do not step out of paintings and walk among the living. Button looked as agitated as I was, only much happier about the whole thing.

‘Let’s go and introduce ourselves!’

‘We can’t simply walk up and...’ I started but did not finish the sentence: Button was already approaching the Princess.

‘Good evening, honourable Princess!’ she piped up, bobbing a curtsy.

The Princess stared down at Button; her companion also turned to glance at the little girl and then looked at the Princess again.

‘Indeed!’ the gentleman exclaimed. ‘You do look like a real princess tonight, my dear!’

The charming beauty flicked back her hair, graced the gentleman with a brief smile and gave a sophisticated sigh in the way only princesses do.

‘How kind of you, Master,’ she said in broken Latvian. ‘But why is it so BORING here? I want to DANCE intolerably! I want to dance!’ she added in English.

After this comment, the gentleman bowed courteously and asked the Princess for a dance. They glided to the centre of the hall and the gentleman called out loudly:

‘Let’s have some music! Put on the jazz records! It is time for dancing to commence!’ To which everybody responded with an enthusiastic cheer. She really was a great dancer. Her elegant, dreamlike movements seemed to hypnotise the guests: all eyes were only on her. The ladies were surprised – apparently, they had not seen anyone dance like that: what freedom! What flow of movement! How MODERN!

‘Marvellous!’ the elegant gentleman admired her when the dance was over. ‘This is exactly the thing I have been looking for! Thank you, young lady... I’m afraid I don’t know your name.’

‘Button!’

‘Button, pleased to meet you! Thank you for helping me find my future princess!’ and he shook Button’s hand.

We exchanged glances.

‘Are you two going to get married?’ Button demanded and the gentleman chuckled.

‘Oh no, certainly not! Elli is my wife.’ He pointed at a woman who was at the centre of a group of people having a lively conversation. The lady was dressed in a long white dress and wore a string of glossy honey-coloured amber beads. But it was the warmth of her eyes that made her stand out among other people. She spoke very

friendly to everyone, and it was somehow immediately clear that she was the hostess of the party.

‘But I shall definitely paint our princess,’ the gentleman said with satisfaction.

By now I was really starting to feel as if I had finally taken leave of my senses: too many details were starting to build an increasingly UNBELIEVABLE picture of the night’s true events... but then yet another incredible thing happened. The gentleman took some slightly droopy red roses out of a vase and handed them to the Princess – but she merely gave a coquettish little laugh:

‘What a coincidence! Master ROSEnthal with ROSES!’

‘Rosenthal – Rozentāls!’ Button squealed. As for me... I had to hold on to my chair while I processed the scene we had just witnessed, whereas Button went on gushingly: ‘The painter Janis Rozentāls! Oh, but you ABSOLUTELY have to paint ‘Princess with a Monkey’. It is such a WONDERFUL painting!’

‘With a monkey?’ Master Rozentāls shook his head in puzzlement. ‘Monkeys, monkeys... Oh, perhaps you mean meerkats? The “sea cats”? They have indeed become very widely liked lately, even more so than lapdogs. However, I am not sure that it would be a good idea to paint a meerkat – or, as you say, monkey – next to such an ethereal creature... No, I shall leave it to fairytale drawers. Perhaps you are interested in mastering the art of draughtsmanship? I can teach you to draw fairytale monkeys.’

‘Oh, that would be...’

I lost no time to pull Button aside.

‘What is it?’ she hissed. ‘Don’t you see that I am having a conversation? How rude...’

‘Do you even realise what is happening here?’ I interrupted her. Button gestured impatiently for me to speak quicker.

‘Mr Rozentāls... Could you tell me what year is it, please?’ I asked.

‘We just saw nineteen thirteen in, young man,’ Janis Rozentāls answered calmly. As if there was nothing special about the fact that we had found ourselves in a hundred-year-old past!

‘Don’t you really find it weird?’ I whispered. I found it hard to believe what I was about to say to Button myself. ‘We haven’t been teleported or simply gate-crashed the wrong party. Take a look around! The princess – check! The painter – check! 1913 – check! The only thing missing is...’

‘The monkey,’ Button drawled and continued excitedly: ‘Could it be that... do you think that we... have ended up ON THE OTHER SIDE of the painting?!’

I looked around. People did look DIFFERENT. In a way, they were sort of the same as Button and I: they walked on two legs instead of four, as they would in the really ancient times, and yet they were dressed a bit funny; they seemed to speak the same Latvian as Button and I, and yet they sounded old-fashioned and comical. Even the food looked more delicious here and the potted plant on the window sill appeared greener. And then the Princess: she looked exactly as if she had stepped out of the painting! Except it was as impossible as the thought of us GETTING INSIDE the picture. And yet everything seemed to point to this... I nodded.

Button’s eyes twinkled excitedly.