
THE STAIRCASE TO THE PILLOW
Ten steps, ten stories to fall asleep gently
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Stories of Little Animals

Once upon a time there was a little rabbit named Lino.

Lino had white and gray fur. He had long, soft ears. A tousled little tuft fell over his forehead.

His home was a burrow beneath an apple tree. Inside there was a bed of leaves. On top of the bed there was a wool blanket.

That evening Lino returned to the burrow while the sky was still light.

—Mom, I'm home, —he said.

But Mama Rabbit wasn't there.

She had gone out to gather tender grass for dinner. She had told him she would be back soon.

Lino sat down on the bed of leaves.

He waited.

The burrow smelled of fresh earth and apple. Near the entrance there was a dry leaf. Lino moved it with one paw, then sat down again.

He looked around. There was a smooth little pebble on the floor. Lino nudged it with the tip of his paw. It rolled to the edge of the bed and stopped.

He picked it up and put it beside the entrance, where it wouldn't get in anyone's way.

Near the bed there was a little root poking out of the earth. Lino knew it well: during the day he used it as a step to climb onto the bed. He touched it with one paw and felt how rough it was.

—Good evening to you too, —he said to the root.

Then he sat on the blanket and let his paws dangle.

Outside, the sun sank behind the trees. The meadow turned dark green. The sky turned blue. Then the blue grew deeper and deeper.

Lino pulled the blanket over his knees.

He waited some more.

There wasn't much light in the burrow. Lino looked at the entrance. He couldn't see Mama

Rabbit.

So he clutched the blanket with his little paws.

—She'll be back soon, —he whispered.

Lino ran one paw along the edge of the blanket. The wool was rough on one side and smooth on the other, because Mama had mended it carefully. Lino knew that little thicker patch. He rubbed it between his fingers, gently, as he listened.

From the burrow he could see a little patch of meadow. A blade of grass bent and then straightened again. An apple-tree leaf moved just a little. Lino tried to guess where Mama was, but he couldn't see anyone.

He got up to look more closely. He took two steps toward the entrance and stopped. Outside, the sky was still light in the distance, but above the trees it was growing dark. Lino went back to the bed and sat in his place.

The blanket slipped down a little. He pulled it back over his knees.

—She'll be back soon, —he repeated, more softly.

Lino made himself more comfortable on the bed. The dry leaves rustled softly beneath his weight. He moved one that tickled his side and put it beside his moss pillow. Then he smoothed the blanket over his knees, first on one side and then on the other.

Near the entrance, the pebble he had set aside gleamed faintly in the remaining light. Lino looked at it and thought it looked like a little gray moon. He didn't pick it up: it was already in its place, out of the way.

A scent of apple rose from the earth beneath the roots. Lino breathed it in slowly. The burrow was his home, with its bed, blanket, rough root, and pebble by the door. He remembered that Mama knew the way and had told him she would be back soon.

Lino rested his paws on the blanket and waited, listening to the silence between one rustle and the next.

The first sound came from the apple tree.

Frrr, frrr.

Lino's eyes flew open.

Something was moving outside the burrow.

Frrr, frrr.

Lino curled up under the blanket.

—Who's there? —he asked softly.

The sound came again.

Frrr, frrr.

Lino listened without moving.

The wind was passing through the apple-tree leaves. The leaves touched one another and said hello.

Frrr, frrr.

—It's the wind, —said Lino.

The blanket slipped a little off his ears.

The wind blew softly. The leaves rustled again.

Lino listened. The sound didn't hurt. It was only the apple tree moving in the wind.

—Good evening, apple tree, —he said.

The apple tree didn't answer. It only went frrr, frrr.

Lino stayed sitting on the bed of leaves.

He waited.

Night drew near the burrow. Another sound sprang out of the grass.

Cri, cri.

Lino froze.

The sound came from near the entrance.

Cri, cri.

Lino wrapped himself in the blanket.

—Mama? —he called.

No one answered.

Lino listened again.

Cri, cri.

Then he saw a small shadow standing still between two blades of grass.

It was a cricket.

The cricket rubbed its wings together and sang to the evening.

Cri, cri.

—Is that you, Cricket? —Lino asked.

Cri, cri, the cricket replied.

Lino gave a little smile.

—Your song is very small, —he said. —But I can hear it all the way over here.

The cricket sang again. Lino listened to its thin little voice. It sounded like a little song saying, “It’s evening, it’s evening, rest for a while.”

Lino stretched out on the bed of leaves.

The blanket warmed his paws. The cricket sang outside. The apple tree rustled above the burrow.

Lino closed his eyes.

Then he heard a third sound.

Tup.

Lino opened his eyes again.

Tup, tup.

Something had touched the blanket.

Lino clutched it tightly.

—Who's there now? —he whispered.

Tup.

Lino stayed perfectly still.

Tup, tup.

The sound came from behind him.

Lino looked to the left. He didn't see anything.

He looked to the right. He didn't see anything.

Then he turned his head and saw his tail.

His soft tail was brushing against the blanket.

Tup, tup.

It was his tail moving while he trembled.

Lino touched it with one paw.

—Oh. It's you, Tail.

The tail went still.

Lino stroked it gently.

—There's nothing to be afraid of.

Outside, the wind went frrr, frrr. The cricket went cri, cri. And Lino's tail didn't go tup anymore.

Lino breathed slowly.

Inside the burrow it was dark, but it wasn't an empty darkness. There was the bed of leaves, the warm blanket, and the lovely smell of earth. Outside there were the apple tree and the cricket.

Lino looked at the entrance.

The sky was dark now.

—Mama will come back, —he said.

And he waited a little longer.

The burrow was quiet for a moment. Lino rested one ear on the blanket and felt his heart beating softly.

Thump, thump.

It wasn't a new sound. It was his heart, keeping him company while he waited.

Lino put one paw on his chest.

—I'm here, —he said softly.

He settled on the bed, his nose pointed toward the entrance. From there he could see a little part of the meadow. He couldn't see the whole night, only a little patch of sky and a few blades of grass.

Lino counted the blades of grass moving gently.

One.

Two.

Then he stopped. He didn't have to count anything. He could simply watch.

Then a thread of light came in through the burrow opening.

It was a moonbeam.

It slid across the earthen floor. It reached the bed of leaves. It settled on Lino's blanket, bright and gentle.

Lino looked outside.

In the meadow, a firefly lit up its little light.

Then another lit up.

Then another.

One, two, three.

The fireflies shone among the grass like tiny light bulbs.

Lino stayed and watched them.

The moon was above the apple tree. It didn't say anything. But its beam came into the burrow and kept Lino company.

—Good evening, Moon, —said the little rabbit.

The moon shone softly.

Lino followed the lights in the meadow with his eyes. One firefly landed on a blade of grass. Another flew a little farther away. The third lit up near the apple-tree roots.

They looked like little friends saying hello without waking anyone.

Lino heard the wind among the leaves. He heard the cricket in the meadow. He felt his breath going up and down.

Up and down.

Up and down.

The blanket came up to his nose.

Lino curled up. His ears rested softly on the blanket, one on one side and one on the other. The bed of leaves rustled just a little beneath him.

Outside, one firefly went dark for a moment and then shone again. Lino watched it without lifting his head.

The moonbeam stayed on the floor. The cricket sang once more. The apple tree answered with a rustle.

Lino no longer needed to wonder who was making those sounds. He knew them. The wind was in the apple tree. The song belonged to the cricket. The little tup had been his tail.

When Mama Rabbit came back, she was carrying a bunch of tender grass.

She entered the burrow quietly.

—Lino? —she called softly.

Lino was already asleep.

He was curled up on the bed of leaves, with the blanket up to his nose. A moonbeam lit one of his

ears. Outside, the fireflies were still lighting up in the meadow.

Mama Rabbit put the grass near the entrance. She tucked in his blanket.

Lino gave a little sigh.

The moon stayed at the burrow window.

The apple tree rustled softly.

The cricket sang softly.

And Lino slept safe and sound.

“Darkness, darkness, I’m not afraid anymore: the moon tucks in my blanket for me.”

Nina was a little snail with a honey-colored shell.

The shell had a dark spiral, like a path that wound and wound. Nina always carried it on her back. It was her home, and her roof too.

One evening the meadow friends planned a snack.

—Come along too, Nina, —they said. —We’ll meet near the big yellow flower.

Nina smiled.

—I’ll come, —she replied.

Her friends set off right away.

Nina set off early, just as evening was beginning.

She knew she moved slowly. Very slowly. Step by step.

She settled her shell on her shoulders and put a cabbage leaf in her little bag. Then she came out from beneath her house leaf.

Before setting off, she looked at her green door. The leaf was broad and fresh, and its edge made a little shadow.

—I’ll be back after the snack, —said Nina.

Then she set off.

The meadow was big for a little snail.

In front of her were blades of grass as tall as trees. There were round stones like hills. There were paths winding around the roots.

Nina began to walk.

Before going any farther, she made sure the cabbage leaf was safely in her bag and checked that her shell was secure on her shoulders. The edge of the shell brushed her neck, but it didn't bother her: it was her home, and it went everywhere with her.

The earth was cool beneath her foot. Nina left a shiny trail behind her, thin as a silver thread. She passed a dark clod of earth, then went past a round seed that looked like a tiny pebble. She didn't pick it up; she only looked at it as the sky changed color above the grass.

A blade of grass brushed one of her feelers. Nina stopped, let it sway, and waited for it to return to its place. A little farther on was a broad leaf with a little drop on its edge. The drop trembled, but stayed put. Nina greeted it with a nod and continued on her way.

Every now and then she stopped to see how far she had come. Her green home was now tiny behind her, but the path was still clear. Nina wasn't worried: she knew the way and could follow it back.

—Slowly, slowly, step by step, —she said. —The whole meadow is right here.

The first step was small.

The second was even smaller.

The third brought her beside a closed flower.

Nina stopped.

The flower's petals were pressed tightly together. It looked as if it were asleep.

—Good evening, Flower, —said Nina.

The flower didn't move.

Nina waited.

She knew how to wait. It was something she was good at.

She waited a moment.

She waited another moment.

She looked at the tip of a petal. It was smooth and closed. Then she looked at the stem, thin and still.

The meadow wasn't in a hurry. Neither was Nina.

She waited some more.

Then the flower moved just a little.

One petal opened.

Then another.

Then another.

The flower slowly woke up, right in front of Nina.

Nina watched the petals open in the evening light. They were yellow in the middle and pale around the edges.

—How lovely, —she said.

The flower cast a little shadow over her for a moment.

Nina continued on her way.

Slowly, slowly.

Step by step.

After a while she saw a drop of water hanging from a blade of grass.

The drop was round and shiny. Inside it was a little piece of sky.

Nina came closer.

One step.

Then another.

The drop trembled.

Nina stopped.

The drop slid slowly down the green blade.

Down, down, down.

Nina followed the drop with her eyes.

The drop reached the tip of the grass. It stayed there, hanging like a little bead.

Nina stretched out a feeler to touch it.

Plink.

The drop fell onto a leaf.

Nina laughed.

—Plink, plink, —she said. —What a little splash.

The leaf swayed, but the drop stayed in place.

Nina watched the drop shine on the leaf. The moon, which had just appeared above the meadow, was reflected on its shiny surface.

For a moment Nina stayed there, still, watching that little circle of light.

Then she continued on her way.

Slowly, slowly.

Step by step.

The meadow looked different up close. There were roads between the roots. There were little doorways beneath the leaves. There were tiny footprints in the soft earth.

Nina followed a path that went between two stones.

There she found a snail asleep.

The snail was curled up inside its shell. All you could see was the spiral and a little patch of moss.

Nina walked even more slowly.

—Rest well, —she whispered.

The snail didn't wake up.

Nina stopped beside it and looked at the moss. It was soft and green. There were two grains of earth on the shell.

—I'll keep the path clear for you, —said Nina.

Then she passed by without making a sound.

Slowly, slowly.

Step by step.

Sometimes the path climbed over a root. Sometimes it dipped down into a little crease in the earth. Nina didn't hurry. She stopped whenever she found a shiny pebble or a heart-shaped leaf.

Then she set off again.

Slowly, slowly.

Step by step.

Once, a little leaf fell in front of her. Nina looked at it closely. It had a rounded tip and a thin vein running down the middle.

She picked it up and put it beside her cabbage leaf in her bag.

—That way I'll have a memory of the journey, —she said.

Then she went on, leaving a shiny trail on the earth.

Along the path, Nina passed between two blades of grass that touched overhead. To her they looked like a green doorway. She went through the doorway and stopped for a moment on the other side.

She turned to look at it.

—What a lovely path, —she said.

The shiny trail she had left behind her gleamed faintly. Nina followed the trail with her eyes, then looked ahead.

The evening grew darker. The moon rose above the meadow, and its light fell between the blades of grass.

Nina looked up.

The moon looked down at her with its peaceful face.

—I'm on my way, —said Nina.

And she continued on her way.

Slowly, slowly.

Step by step.

When Nina arrived at the big yellow flower, her friends were gathering up the last crumbs from their snack.

But they hadn't gone away.

—Nina! —they said. —You made it!

—We waited for you, —said a little ant.

—Sit down beside us, —said a ladybug.

They made room for her on a broad leaf. Nina sat down with her shell resting securely.

The leaf was cool and a little curved, like a bowl. Nina set her bag beside her and took out the cabbage leaf she had brought. She put it on her knees, but didn't take a bite right away. The path, the open flower, and the shiny drop were still in her mind's eye.

Her friends offered her a soft crumb. Nina took it gently and put it beside the cabbage leaf. The ladybug made room for her with a light step; the little ant pushed a tiny crumb toward the middle so everyone could reach it.

Nina looked at her friends' little feet gathered around the leaf. The meadow had grown quiet. She could hear the rustle of the tall grass and, far away, a cricket trying out its song. No one was in a hurry to get up.

Nina drank a drop of water left on the edge of the leaf. It was cool and tasted of evening. Then she wiped her mouth with one little foot and got ready to tell them what she had seen.

—What was the journey like? —her friends asked.

Nina looked at the yellow flower.

—I saw a flower opening, —she said. —I saw a drop slide down a blade of grass and go plink onto a leaf. And I saw a snail sleeping beneath the moss.

Her friends leaned closer.

—And then? —asked the little ant.

—Then I kept walking, —said Nina. —Slowly, slowly. Step by step.

Nina told them about the path between the stones. She told them about the round drop, which held a little piece of sky inside it. She told them about the flower that had opened its petals one by one.

The ladybug imagined the drop and made a little plink with her mouth.

The little ant spread and closed her feet, like the flower's petals.

Another friend lay down on the leaf and closed his eyes for a moment, just like the snail.

Her friends listened without interrupting.

None of them had seen those things. They had rushed past, hurrying to get to the snack.

Nina noticed that while she was telling the story, her friends had grown quiet. The little ant held a crumb between her feet without eating it. The ladybug was looking at the flower. A cricket had stopped at the edge of the leaf.

—It really felt as if we were there, —said the ladybug.

Nina smiled. She was glad that her friends had seen her path too, at least in their imaginations.

—Will you take us along tomorrow? —asked the ladybug.

—If you like, —said Nina. —But we'll go slowly.

—Slowly, slowly, —her friends replied.

—Step by step, —said Nina.

The moon rose a little higher.

Her friends said goodbye to Nina. She went back home, beneath the cabbage leaf.

The path was the same, but by now she knew it well.

She passed near the flower, which held its petals open.

She passed near the leaf, where the drop still shone.

She passed near the snail, sleeping peacefully.

—Good night, everyone, —she whispered.

When she reached her house leaf, Nina settled beneath its broad green edge. Her shell made a roof for her.

She curled up.

Outside, the moon lit up the meadow.

Nina closed her eyes.

“Slowly, slowly, step by step, the whole meadow is right here.”

Dora was a sheep with soft, curly fleece.

She wore a little bell around her neck. When she walked, the bell went ding.

That evening Dora was in the pen, near the low fence. Her sheep friends had already settled down on the straw.

One was asleep with her nose resting on her fleece.

Another was asleep beside the feeding trough.

A third had rested her head against her friend’s side.

Dora lay down too.

But sleep didn’t come.

Dora closed her eyes.

She opened them again.

She turned onto one side.

Then onto the other.

The little bell went ding.

—I don't want to wake anyone, —Dora whispered.

So she stayed still.

She listened to the pen.

Her friends were breathing softly.

Outside, the meadow was quiet.

The moon rose above the fence. Its light fell on the straw and made a blade of grass shine.

Dora looked at her sleeping friends.

—I can count sheep, —she thought. —They say that helps you fall asleep.

She began softly.

—One... two... three...

The first sheep was asleep with her nose resting on her fleece.

The second was beside the feeding trough.

The third had her head against her friend's side.

Dora reached three and stopped.

The sheep beside the feeding trough gave a little yawn.

Dora yawned too.

Then she forgot the number.

—I'll start again, —she said softly.

—One... two... three...

With each number Dora looked at a sheep. One, two, three.

But a cloud passed beyond the fence.

The cloud was big and bright. It moved slowly across the sky.

Dora looked up.

The cloud looked like a pillow. Or perhaps a very, very tall sheep.

—Four, —said Dora.

And then she couldn't remember whether she had counted the cloud or one of her friends.

—I'll start again, —she whispered.

The sheep were still asleep.

Dora made herself more comfortable on the straw. She looked for a place where her side felt comfortable. She pulled a piece of straw close to her legs and rested her chin on it.

The straw tickled her nose a little. Dora moved her muzzle an inch, then another inch, until she found a soft spot.

—There, —she murmured. —This is better.

She covered her legs with her fleece and left only her nose sticking out. The night air was cool, but the straw kept her warm.

A piece of straw was resting on her fleece. Dora saw it out of the corner of her eye. She didn't try to pick it up right away: first she stretched her neck slowly, then the straw slid off by itself and fell onto the bedding.

Dora followed it with her eyes until it stopped near her hoof.

—You can rest too, —she told it.

The pen wasn't completely silent. From outside came the rustle of the grass, and from the feeding trough came a little creak of wood. Dora knew those sounds. She heard them during the day as she walked with her friends.

Dora tried to keep her eyes closed. She counted silently, without moving her mouth.

One.

Two.

Three.

With each number she let a little air out through her nose. Her breath made a tiny cloud that vanished right away.

One.

Two.

Three.

The pen was peaceful. A piece of straw moved just a little near her hoof. Dora looked at it, then stopped looking. She didn't need to know where it was going.

—One... two... three...

This time the counting went smoothly.

One sheep.

Two sheep.

Three sheep.

Dora was about to say four when she heard a rustle near the gate.

The pen's dog had curled up there. He had his muzzle on his paws and his eyes nearly closed.

—The dog is here too, —Dora murmured.

She counted him.

—Four.

The dog twitched an ear.

Dora stopped.

—Did I count the dog, or the last sheep? —she wondered.

The dog sighed and went back to sleep.

Dora started over.

—One... two... three...

A little cat peeped out from behind the water bucket. It took three silent steps and curled up beside the dog.

—The cat is here too, —said Dora.

The cat closed its eyes.

—Then you're five, —said Dora.

But the little bell went ding, and Dora got distracted.

She started thinking about the little bell.

It was small and round. It had a thin sound. During the day it went ding when she walked in the meadow.

In the evening, though, it had to stay quiet.

Dora turned over very carefully. The little bell touched her fleece and made just a tiny tick.

—Easy, little bell, —she whispered. —It's time to rest.

Dora held her breath and listened.

No ding.

Only the sheep's breathing.

Only the sleeping dog.

Only the cat, curled up like a ball of dark wool.

Dora imagined that every breath was a little wave. The waves came softly, one after another, and then slipped away without making a sound.

She tried to follow the rhythm.

Up and down.

Up and down.

Her shoulders relaxed a little.

Dora tried again.

—One... two... three...

She counted her friends very carefully.

The first sheep by the fence.

The second beside the feeding trough.

The third on the straw.

The fourth beneath a blanket of hay.

Dora looked at them one by one. She wasn't in a hurry.

Then she counted the dog.

Five.

And the cat.

Six.

Dora smiled.

—This time I didn't lose count.

But sleep still hadn't come.

Dora lay on one side and listened to the sounds of the night. The dog took a long breath. The cat gave a little purr. The sheep breathed softly, each at a different pace.

Dora tried to count them.

One long breath.

A purr.

One slow breath.

Then the purr became so soft that Dora forgot to count.

Dora wondered whether the cat purred in its dreams too. The cat didn't answer. It only purred once more, as light as a breath.

The dog moved one paw, but didn't wake up. One of the sheep made a little sound in her sleep and then went back to breathing softly.

Dora listened to every sound without needing to count it. The pen was full of peaceful breathing.

The moon slipped behind a cloud. The light in the pen grew softer.

Dora looked at her wool blanket. It covered her back and her legs.

She realized there was still someone left to count.

—One sheep is missing, —she said.

She looked around.

Her friends were asleep.

The dog was asleep.

The cat was asleep.

The cloud drifted slowly above the pen.

Dora looked at the little bell around her neck.

Then she looked at her legs.

—I'm here too, —she said.

She settled comfortably on the straw.

—One, two, three, four, five, six... and seven: there's me.

Her little bell gave a single ding.

Dora closed her eyes.

There was no one left to count.

The dog was asleep.

The cat was asleep.

The sheep were asleep.

Dora felt her eyelids growing heavy. The counting was over, but before falling asleep she wanted to get settled properly. The moon stayed above the fence and lit up the straw. Dora moved one hoof just a little, carefully, so as not to disturb her friends.

Before sleep came, Dora adjusted her wool blanket one more time. She pulled it over her side with one hoof and smoothed its edge with her muzzle. A fold was still under her knee: she gently pushed it away without making the little bell move.

Beside her, a sheep had let a piece of straw fall onto her side. Dora picked it up with her lips and put it near the feeding trough, where it wouldn't prick anyone.

Then she rested her chin on her soft spot. She felt the warmth of the straw under her chest and the cool air on the tip of her nose. The fence cast a line of shadow on the ground; beyond the boards, the grass bent just a little.

Dora looked at the little bell. It was still, round, and quiet. She touched it with the tip of her hoof, ever so gently. It didn't go ding. Dora smiled and drew her hoof back.

The cat curled up a little tighter. The dog let out a long sigh. The sheep stayed nestled in the straw, close together without squashing one another.

Dora tried counting the breaths, but this time she didn't try to reach a number. She listened to the dog's breathing, the cat's purr, and her friends' soft breaths. Each sound was different, and they all went well together.

The moon lit the edge of the fence and then Dora's little bell. The light wasn't bright: it seemed like a little, pale caress. Dora let her eyes close.

Her breathing grew slow. Her muzzle rested on the straw. Her legs tucked beneath her fleece.

There was no one left to count.

The dog was asleep.

The cat was asleep.

The sheep were asleep.

Dora fell asleep too.

The moon stayed above the fence. The cloud passed slowly by. No more ding was heard in the pen.

Only a slow breath.

"One, two, three... count me too."

Stories of the Moon and Sky

Once upon a time there was a little cloud, soft and a little gray around the edges. Her name was Pia.

That evening she was floating above a meadow full of tables. On the tables were glasses, little plates, and napkins folded in half. Children ran around. A dog passed between the chairs with its tongue hanging out. Butterflies landed on the flowers and then flew off again.

Pia watched everything from up high.

— What a lovely party — she said softly.

The late-day sun still warmed the grass. The trees' shadows stretched across the meadow. Here and there, the last drops left on the leaves sparkled, because it had rained a little in the afternoon.

Pia wished she could come closer. She wished she could see the colorful ribbons hanging from the tables and hear the laughter. But she was a cloud, and clouds sometimes brought rain.

Pia looked at her gray little tummy.

— If I come closer, I might get everyone wet — she murmured.

So she stayed far away. She moved a little toward the edge of the sky, where the air was clear. From up there she could see the children playing tag. One ran to the old tree and came back. Another jumped over a row of leaves. The dog chased a ball and brought it back in its mouth.

Pia smiled. Then she felt a little tickle inside her.

It was the rain getting ready.

Pia made herself smaller, like when she curled up to rest. She looked at the tables. She looked at the children. She looked at the dog, who had lain down in the shade with the ball between its paws.

— I don't want to spoil the party — she said.

A big cloud, white and wide as a blanket spread across the sky, was passing nearby. Pia hid behind it.

From that hiding place she could see only a little bit of the meadow. She could hear the voices, but she couldn't make out the words. She could hear glasses clinking and the light sound of footsteps

on the grass.

The big cloud moved on. Pia followed close behind.

The wind blew from one side.

The big cloud went that way.

Pia fell a little behind.

Then the wind blew from the other side.

The big cloud changed course. Pia tried to follow it, but her gray little tummy ended up above the meadow.

Below her, the party went on.

Pia held her breath, even though clouds don't breathe like animals. She curled up tight, hoping the rain would stay inside.

But one drop escaped.

Plink.

The drop drifted down, passed by a branch, and landed on a wide leaf.

Pia looked down.

No one had noticed a thing. The children kept playing. The dog still had the ball between its paws. The little plates stayed dry.

— It was only one drop — Pia said.

Another one came.

Plink.

This one fell on the grass, beside a daisy. The daisy bowed its head and then lifted it again.

Pia made herself even smaller.

— Maybe I should go away — she said.

But the wind, gentle as could be, passed beneath her like an open hand. It carried her slowly over the meadow, without tearing at her path or pushing her hard. Pia drifted through the air. She saw

the chairs, the tablecloths, and the children's hair. She saw hands passing glasses back and forth. She saw the dog get up to look up.

A third drop slipped away.

Then a fourth.

The drops fell far apart, with space between them. They pattered on the leaves, the tables, and the grass. One drop landed on the tip of a child's nose. The child wiped it away with a finger and looked at the sky.

— It's raining! — the child said.

Pia closed her eyes.

She expected a shout. She expected everyone to run away. Instead, she heard laughter.

The children lifted their faces. They held out their hands. One little girl spun around. A little boy jumped into a small puddle that had gathered beside a bush.

Splash.

The dog dropped the ball and ran in a circle. The ball rolled under a chair and came to a stop against a table leg.

The rain grew heavier, but it stayed gentle. It didn't make a loud noise. It went tick, tick, tick on the leaves. It went plink, plink on the empty glasses. It rustled over the grass.

Pia took a closer look.

The napkins had been gathered up. The little plates were safe under the table. The children kept dancing, their arms spread wide. The dog shook its ears and then ran off again.

Pia hadn't spoiled the party.

The party had changed.

At the edge of the meadow, where the grass was shorter and the earth was darker, something moved.

First a green tip appeared.

Then another.

Then a little blue flower opened between two leaves.

Pia watched. The flower had delicate petals, blue as the sky after the rain. Another one appeared beside it, and then another.

— Cornflowers — Pia whispered.

The rain had reached the dry earth. It had refreshed the meadow and woken the flowers hiding at the edge.

The children saw them. They came closer without trampling the grass. They bent down to look at the flowers up close, but they didn't pick them. The dog sniffed the air and sat beside them.

Pia felt her little tummy grow lighter. The drops were still falling, but they no longer seemed like a problem. A drop slid down her side and broke away, shining like a pearl.

Evening grew darker. The party quieted down little by little. The children didn't run around so much anymore; they walked slowly between the tables. The grown-ups put away the glasses and folded the tablecloths. The dog lay down again, this time with its muzzle on its paws.

Then the moon appeared, round and bright above the meadow. Her light fell on the drops and the cornflowers. Each flower seemed to have a little silver dot.

Pia looked at the moon.

The moon said nothing. She stayed there, peaceful, while the rain grew lighter.

Pia stretched out across the sky. She no longer tried to hide behind the big cloud. She let the last drop fall slowly, all the way to the grass.

The children began saying goodbye by the tables. The dog got up and went over to them. The quiet tables and the new cornflowers were all that remained in the meadow.

Pia felt soft and light. She gathered her edges in, like a blanket being folded, and stayed beside the moon.

"Drop, drop, come below: one more flower will grow."

Then the meadow rested beneath the sky.

Pia looked at the meadow again. The tiniest drops had settled on the tips of the grass. One shone beside the daisy; another sat on the wide leaf. When the wind passed by, they all trembled

together.

The nearest cornflower bent a little. Then it stood straight again. Pia saw it and smiled. She, too, sometimes bent when the wind pushed her. And then she found her shape again.

The big cloud passed beside Pia.

— Did you see the flowers? — it asked her.

Pia nodded.

— Yes. I thought the rain would bother everyone.

The big cloud puffed itself up slowly, as if taking a breath.

— Look at that flower over there. It still has a drop on its tip.

Pia looked at the cornflowers. She didn't answer right away. She took her time looking at each blue petal, one by one. Then she noticed that the party had left the meadow more beautiful too: the chairs had been put back in place, the tables were empty and clean, and light footprints remained in the grass.

A little girl stopped before going away. She pointed out the flowers to the person holding her hand. She didn't pick them. She only bent down to look at them, then stood up and continued on her way.

Pia sent her a tiny, tiny drop. It fell on the earth, beside the cornflowers' roots.

— Goodnight — Pia whispered.

The moon shone above her. The big cloud continued on its journey across the sky, and Pia followed without hurrying. She no longer needed to hide. If another drop fell, she could watch it come and accompany it all the way to the meadow.

The clouds grew pale around the edges. The wind calmed down. Beneath them, the flowers closed up a little for the night, but they stayed firmly rooted in the cool earth.

Pia settled beside the moon. The moon made room for her with her gentle light. The cloud lowered her edges like a blanket over her shoulders, and stopped moving.

The meadow was quiet.

The tables were resting.

The cornflowers were resting.

Pia was resting in the sky.

Mia was in her bed, under the blanket. She was four years old, with short, curly brown hair and blue striped pajamas. Her cloth blanket was beside her pillow.

The room was almost dark. A gentle little night-light made a yellow circle on the wall. Through the window, Mia could see the balcony, and beyond the balcony, the night sky.

Mia turned her pillow one way. Then the other way. She closed her eyes. She opened them again.

— I can't sleep — she said softly.

That was when she saw a light outside the window.

It wasn't a steady light like a star. It came down from the sky, little by little, and settled right on the balcony. The light formed a step. Then it formed another, higher up. Another one climbed toward the sky.

Mia sat up.

The staircase glowed softly, without dazzling her. Each step seemed to be made of golden dust and moonlight. The staircase began on the balcony and climbed up among the stars.

Mia looked at her blanket. She picked it up and hugged it to her chest.

— I'm only going to take a look — she said.

She opened the glass door and went out onto the balcony. The air was fresh, but not cold. The staircase began beside the railing. The first step was wide and bright.

Mia put one foot on it.

The step didn't move.

She climbed onto the second.

Then the third.

With every step came a light sound: ting, ting, ting. Like a little spoon touching a cup very far away.

Mia climbed slowly. She wasn't in a hurry. Her blanket covered her shoulders and came almost to

her knees. Below her, the balcony grew smaller, but the door to her room was still visible, with the yellow night-light on.

When she reached a branch crossing the staircase, she saw an owl.

The owl was perched there with its feathers puffed up and its round eyes open. It had a serious face, but it wasn't frightening. It blinked very slowly.

– Good evening – said Mia.

– Good evening, little traveler – replied the owl.

Mia stopped on the step.

– Where does this staircase lead?

The owl tilted its head.

– Up, one step at a time.

Mia looked up. The staircase seemed long, but each step was close to the next.

– What if I don't know how many steps I have left?

– You can count – said the owl. – But there's no hurry.

The owl placed one foot on the branch.

– One – it said.

Mia climbed a step.

– Two – said the owl.

Mia climbed the next one.

– Three.

Ting.

– Four.

Ting.

– Five.

Mia said the numbers with it. Each step had a different light: one was golden, one silver, one blue like the bow Mia wore in her hair during the day.

The owl counted to six. Mia climbed again.

– Seven.

– Eight.

– Nine.

– Ten – they said together.

Mia stopped. She had counted ten steps and wasn't tired. The owl nodded to her.

– You see? You don't have to get there all at once. Just take one step, then another.

Mia smiled.

– Thank you, Mr. Owl.

– Have a good journey, Mia.

The owl closed its eyes for a moment. It seemed half asleep already, but it stayed on the branch, watching the staircase.

Mia kept climbing. The stars were all around her, far away and quiet. Some shone brightly. Others looked like tiny dots, barely drawn. The little girl walked carefully, holding her blanket tight with one hand.

Higher up, she heard a sob.

Mia stopped.

The sob came from a step just above her. A little star was sitting there, with its knees drawn up and its arms wrapped around its legs. Its eyes were shiny with tears and its light was faint, like a nearly burnt-out light bulb.

– Why are you crying? – Mia asked.

The star wiped a glowing cheek.

– I'm afraid of the dark – it said.

Mia looked around. The sky was vast and dark. But all the stars were there, near or far. The step beneath Mia's feet was shining too.

– But you're a star – said Mia.

– I know – the little star replied. – But when I look at the dark sky, it seems very big.

Mia sat down beside it. Her cloth blanket slipped over her shoulders. It was the blanket she kept with her in bed, soft and familiar.

– My room gets dark in the evening too – said Mia. – But there's the night-light on the wall. And there's the door, the bed, and my pillow.

The star looked at the blanket.

– Is it warm?

– Yes – said Mia. – Would you like to hold it for a moment?

The little star hesitated. Then Mia put the blanket over its shoulders.

The cloth covered its arms and knees. The star stopped sobbing. Its light trembled once, then again.

Mia pointed to the sky.

– The dark isn't empty. There are lots of little, lovely things. There are the other stars. There's the owl on the branch. There's the moon watching over us.

The little star followed her finger. It saw the owl, who had opened one eye again. It saw the glowing staircase below them. It saw the moon, round and peaceful, hanging a little higher up.

The little star breathed softly.

Its light grew brighter.

First its center shone. Then its tips lit up. Finally, its whole body sparkled like a drop of silver.

Mia clapped softly.

– You're shining again.

The little star looked at the blanket over its shoulders.

— Thank you, Mia. The sky doesn't seem so big now.

Mia smiled at it. She took back the blanket and put it over herself again. The little star stayed sitting there, but it no longer had its knees squeezed against its chest. It looked at the sky with curiosity.

The moon came closer to the staircase. Her light was gentle; it didn't hurt their eyes.

— It's time to go down slowly — she said.

Mia looked at the top of the staircase. It wasn't very far away. She climbed a few more steps and reached the moon. From up there, she could see the balcony, small as a bright rectangle, and the window of her room.

The owl settled on the branch. The little star shone beside the staircase.

— I have to go home — said Mia.

— One step at a time — the moon reminded her.

Mia began to climb down. On the first step, she turned to wave goodbye to the star. On the second, she waved goodbye to the owl. Her blanket brushed her knees with every step.

The stars near the staircase went out one by one, slowly, like the lights in a house when everyone is already in bed. They didn't disappear: they closed their eyes to rest.

Mia counted under her breath.

— One.

She climbed down a step.

— Two.

The light in the sky stayed calm.

— Three.

The balcony grew a little bigger.

The moon accompanied her from above. Mia climbed down without running. The owl stayed on the branch, and the little star waved with one glowing tip.

When Mia reached the balcony, the staircase dissolved into tiny points of light. For a moment,

they hung in the air. Then they settled on the windowsill and went dark.

Mia went back into the room. The yellow night-light was still shining on the wall. The pillow was in its place. The blanket smelled like home.

Mia slipped under the covers. She lay on her side and rested her cheek on the pillow. Through the window, she could still see one star, small and bright.

The moon sent her a slender ray of light.

Mia let her eyelids fall for a moment.

“One step, two, three: the night is full of stars for me.”

And in the sky, the little star shone peacefully.

Mia half opened her eyes again and settled the blanket over her shoulders. The fold near her neck tickled, so she pulled it a little lower. Then she rested one hand on the edge of her cloth blanket.

The room was quiet. The sound of the steps no longer came through the window, but Mia could still imagine them: ting, ting, ting. They weren’t far away. They sounded like a little tune, drifting slowly away into the sky.

Mia looked at the night-light on the wall. The yellow circle was still there. A bright stripe was drawn on the curtain, and a silver dot remained on the windowsill, right where the staircase had melted away.

The little girl thought of the star. It was no longer curled up. It was shining with the others in the vast sky. She thought of the owl, who had perhaps already closed both eyes. She thought of the moon, keeping watch without making a sound.

Mia turned onto her side. The pillow was cool on one side and soft on the other. She put her cheek on the soft side. Her fingers brushed the edge of the blanket, and then they stopped.

The light from the night-light no longer seemed to be alone. Outside were the stars. Inside were the bed, the door, the pillow, and the blanket. Everything was in its place.

Mia took a slow breath.

Then she took another.

The moon stayed outside the window, round and peaceful. The little star kept shining, small but

easy to see. Mia let go of the edge of the blanket and closed her eyes.

The little sun was still hanging in the sky.

It had a round, orange face, two sleepy eyes, and a smile that was getting smaller and smaller. Below it stretched the sea. Not far away, the mountains drew a dark line on the horizon.

The sun watched the boats.

A white boat glided across the water. Another was almost at the harbor. The sails slowly filled in the wind.

— Just a little longer — said the sun. — I want to see where that boat is going.

The white boat moved without hurry. With each wave, it rose a little and then dipped down. Its edge left a shining trail in the water, which spread out and disappeared. The sun followed that trail with its eyes, from one spot to another, until the boat passed in front of a low rocky outcrop.

— Look how it rocks — it said.

The sea answered with a long rustle. The waves came to the shore and went back again, one after another. The sun tried to count them, but each wave seemed just like the one before.

Farther down there was a meadow. Children ran through the grass, chasing a ball. The ball went one way, then the other. One child stopped it with a foot and passed it to a friend.

The sun stretched its light across the meadow.

— Just a little longer — it said. — I want to see one more kick.

The little girl kicked the ball. It rolled to a bush and stopped. The boy reached it, picked it up with his hands, and carried it back to the middle of the meadow. The sun lit the path that crossed the grass, but not too brightly: its light was now as warm as a hand resting on someone's back.

— My turn now! — called a voice.

The children lined up. One kicked gently, another kicked harder. The ball bounced once and ended up between two tufts of grass. Everyone laughed.

But evening kept coming.

The blue of the sky grew darker. The trees' shadows stretched across the meadow. The children ran one more time, then slowed down. One yawned. Another rubbed her eyes.

The ball lay still between two tufts of grass.

The children said goodbye to the meadow and headed home. The boats kept gliding across the water, but they moved slowly. The sailors gathered in the sails and got ready to return.

The sun watched them go.

— I'm not finished yet — it said.

Its light sank lower. It was warm, but no longer strong. The mountains seemed closer, and the sky above them filled with little blue shadows.

The sun tried to stay where it was.

But its place seemed too high and the evening too quiet. Its eyes kept closing on their own. It opened them once. Then again.

— Maybe I could sleep for a little while — it said.

It didn't want to miss the whole sky. It didn't want to stop watching the boats and the meadow. So it stayed hanging there, with its cheeks puffed out and its eyes half closed.

A swallow passed over the sea. It flew toward the mountains and disappeared behind a row of rooftops. Other swallows followed it, one after another, returning to their nests.

The sun followed them with its gaze.

— They're going home too — it murmured.

The swallows flew low. Every so often one would leave the group, circle above a roof, and then catch up with the others. The sun saw them disappear among the tiles and the beams of their nests. For a moment, it thought that it too might find a place to rest.

Below, windows lit up here and there. A yellow light appeared in a kitchen. Another came on in a little bedroom. The meadow grew dark, but it didn't seem empty: the flowers, the grass, and the ball resting between the tufts were still there.

The sun looked at the sea once more. The last boat was now close to the shore. It moved slowly, rocked by the water.

— I can stay awake until it gets there — it said.

The wind blew gently. It didn't push the sun. It only brushed its face, like a cool hand.

Then the moon arrived.

She rose above the mountains, round and peaceful. Her light spread across the sea and drew a silver road on the water.

— Good evening, sun — she said.

— Good evening, moon — it replied. — I'd like to stay a little longer.

The moon looked at the sky. Then she looked at the sun, whose eyes were almost closed.

— You've watched the boats. You've seen the children go home. Now you can rest.

— But the sky is still so big — said the sun.

— The sky will still be here — replied the moon. — I'll watch over it tonight.

The sun lowered its eyes toward the meadow. The children weren't running anymore. The ball lay still in the grass. The swallows were in their nests. The boats were resting near the shore.

— What if I wake up? — it asked.

— I'll be here — said the moon. — I'll keep watch all night.

The sun didn't answer right away. The moon showed it a soft cloud, white around the edges and pink in the middle. It looked like a big, fluffy pillow.

The cloud came closer slowly. The wind carried it without hurrying, and the moon walked beside it. Its edge was as light as cream. In the middle was a pink streak, colored by the sun's last rays.

— I made this for you — she said.

The sun looked at it. The cloud was just the right size: wide enough for its round cheeks and soft enough to let its eyes close without hurrying.

— Is it a pillow? — it asked.

— A cloud pillow — said the moon.

The moon guided the cloud beneath the sun. The sun leaned against it a little. The cloud gave way just slightly, like a bed of feathers.

The sun sighed.

— It's soft.

— I know — said the moon.

The sun looked at the sea one last time. The boat had arrived. It looked at the meadow one last time. Everything was quiet. Then it looked at the mountains, waiting for it with their dark and peaceful peaks.

— Will you come with me? — it asked.

— Of course — said the moon.

The moon stood beside the cloud pillow. She didn't push it. She guided it gently, like someone being led to bed.

The sun began to sink behind the mountains.

It slipped down little by little. First the lowest part of its round shape disappeared. Then its cheeks sank lower. The orange light spread over the mountain peaks and the edge of the sea.

— Goodnight, sun — said the moon.

— Goodnight — it replied, its voice already thick with sleep.

The cloud welcomed it like a blanket. The moon stayed in the sky, bright and quiet.

For a moment, an orange stripe remained above the mountains. It was thin as a ribbon. Little by little it turned pink, then purple, then dark.

The sun had gone to sleep.

The moon kept watch, as she had promised. She watched the sea, the meadow, and the rooftops. She wasn't in a hurry. The night could be peaceful.

The moonlight came down over the rooftops. It touched the chimneys, the windowsills, and the closed curtains. It passed over the meadow without waking the flowers and brushed the ball, still resting between the tufts of grass. On the sea, it left a bright stripe that moved slowly with the waves.

The wind calmed down. The boats stayed near the shore. The swallows rested in their nests, their wings folded in. Inside the houses, the lights grew smaller behind the windows.

The moon looked at the place where the sun had disappeared. The cloud pillow had come to rest

behind the mountains, soft and quiet. The sun slept with its face turned toward the sky.

The night was in its place.

“Sun, sun, off to bed: the moon will watch ahead.”

And the sky grew calm.

Stories of Home and Pillow

The big house at the end of the street had a red door and two windows that looked like eyes. During the day, many voices could be heard inside the house. In the evening, though, the voices grew softer and softer.

That evening, the sky turned dark blue. The moon rose above the rooftops and looked at the house. The shutters moved just a little.

The house gave a big yawn.

— Aaaah — its beams creaked.

Then it began turning out the lights, one by one.

There was still a yellow light on in the kitchen. There were plates, glasses, and a spoon on the table. Water ran in the sink: swish, swish. One plate went ting. Another went tong.

The yellow light fell on the table and made the rims of the glasses shine. The spoon rested beside the plate, its handle pointing toward the tablecloth. A drop stayed on the faucet for a little while, round and shiny. The house watched it tremble. Then the drop fell into the sink.

When the last glass was clean, the water stopped. The faucet went drip, just one drop. The kitchen light went out.

The house listened. There was no more clatter of dishes. The hallway remained, long and quiet, with a light on at the far end.

“One light, two lights, three…” the house whispered. “The house sleeps along with me.”

A footstep passed through the hallway. Then another. The wooden stairs answered with a faint creak.

— Creak — said the first step. — Creak — answered the second.

The house wasn’t scared. It knew those stairs. Every evening they guided footsteps up and down, and every evening, when everyone was in bed, they rested.

The hallway had a light-colored wall and a small shelf. There was an empty bowl on the shelf. The light at the far end reached the rim of the bowl and left a golden spot on the wall. When nobody passed by, the house listened to the silence between one creak and the next.

The big hallway lamp went out. Only the little night-light at the far end, close to the floor, stayed on.

In the bathroom, the water gurgled a little. A brush was put back in its place. A soft towel swayed on its hook. The bathroom light went out.

Now the hallway was darker. The light at the far end looked like a little yellow star.

The house gave another yawn, a smaller one.

— Aaaah — the shutters murmured.

In one bedroom, a book closed. Its pages had told a story about a little fish looking for its mommy. The book was placed on the bedside table. A hand stroked a blanket, and a voice said:

— Good night.

Then came a kiss: smack, light as a butterfly.

The grown-ups' bedroom light went out. The house stayed alert. The darkness didn't arrive all at once. In the rooms that were already quiet, the hallway night-light and the moonlight on the windows remained. A warm light still came from the child's bedroom door.

"One light, two lights, three..." the house repeated. "The house sleeps along with me."

There was still a lamp on in the child's bedroom. Its light made a warm circle on the floor. Inside that circle were a rug, a little shoe, and a wooden toy.

The toy had one red wheel and one blue wheel. The little shoe had been left beside the rug, its lace untied. The house knew everything in the room: the edge of the bed, the low bedside table, the blanket that folded into a little wave over the child's legs.

The child was already in bed. The sheet reached his tummy. The blanket covered his legs. A voice wished him good night. The door stayed ajar.

The house listened to the child's breathing. One. Two. Little by little, his breathing became steady.

The moon appeared in the window glass. She didn't come in and didn't say anything. She only sent a bright stripe onto the windowsill. The house understood that it was time to sleep.

The child's bedroom lamp went out. Only the hallway night-light stayed on.

The house looked at its rooms. The kitchen was dark. The bathroom was dark. The grown-ups'

bedroom was dark. In the child's bedroom was a little breath, safe under the blanket.

Each room had found its silence. The table no longer had any dishes to clink. The faucet no longer went drip. The book slept closed on the bedside table. The stairs no longer had any footsteps to guide.

The house tried to give one last yawn, but all that came out was a sigh.

— Mmm — said the roof.

The shutters settled into place. The windows stayed still. The red door no longer creaked.

"One light, two lights, three..." the house sang, softer and softer. "The house sleeps along with me."

The hallway night-light shone for one more moment. It was small, but that was enough. The moon stayed outside, quiet, and watched the roof.

Then the house closed its eyes, which were its windows. The stairs stopped creaking. Even the wood rested.

The whole house slept, room by room, beneath the moon's gentle light.

Bombo was a brown teddy bear. One ear was sewn on a little crooked, and he had a button instead of an eye. He usually sat on the sofa beside his child.

That evening the sofa gave a little jolt. Bombo slid down.

Plop.

He fell onto the rug, rolled gently, and ended up under the sofa. There was dust and there were crumbs down there. A crumb stopped beside his cloth nose.

Bombo tried to turn around. But there was very little room under the sofa. His paw touched the wall. His crooked ear brushed the floor.

From there he could hardly see anything. He could see a strip of light, the legs of the little table, and a shoe left beside the armchair.

The rug had lots of woven threads. Up close, they looked like little paths, one red, one blue, one cream-colored. Bombo followed one with his eyes as far as it went. Then the thread disappeared into the shadows. There were specks of dust on the floor, quiet as little gray dots. One crumb had an even tinier crumb beside it. Bombo looked at it and thought it looked like a crumb for a teeny-

tiny mouse.

He tried to move one paw. The fabric went rustle. The sofa was so close that the seam of his ear brushed the wood. Bombo stayed still for a moment. He could feel the sofa cushion above him, soft and heavy. From down there, the place he knew so well seemed different.

He heard the house getting ready for bed. In the kitchen, the water stopped running. A plate went ting. Then the light went out.

Bombo listened.

A creak came from the hallway. Creak, creak. Then a door closed softly.

The house was growing quiet. Bombo thought of his child. Maybe he had already gone upstairs to his room. Maybe he hadn't noticed that Bombo was no longer on the sofa.

His shiny button looked at the strip of light. His other eye, the cloth one, stayed calm.

— Child? — Bombo would have liked to say.

But his voice was made of cotton, and it didn't come out.

The living room was full of things Bombo knew. There was the armchair with its wide arms. There was the little stool, which looked like a little house with four legs. There was the rug, spread out in front of the sofa. And yet, from underneath, everything seemed far away and huge.

Bombo tried to see better. He moved his muzzle a tiny bit, but his forehead touched the low edge of the sofa. He couldn't stand up. He couldn't even sit the way he always did. All he could do was wait and listen.

The moon appeared at the window. A pale light reached the rug and then stopped. Under the sofa, Bombo saw that the darkness wasn't all black: there was a silver thread between the furniture legs.

The moonlight drew a narrow shape on the floor. The bright thread reached close to Bombo's paw, then spread out a little. The dust glimmered faintly, as if it had lots of little silver dots. Bombo looked at it without moving. The stripe wasn't a real road, but it kept him company.

Another light went out in the hallway. The house sighed, and Bombo felt the sofa above him grow still.

Then, from the other room, a voice called.

— Bombo? Where are you? It's time for bed.

Bombo recognized that voice right away. It was his child's voice.

He moved. First he pushed one paw forward. The fabric scraped along the floor: rustle, rustle. A crumb moved to one side.

His paw moved only a little. Bombo paused. Then he pushed with the other one too. The fabric bunched up a little beneath his body and smoothed out again. The floor was cold, but the child's voice sounded warm and close.

The voice called him again:

— Bombo, come on. I'm saving you a spot.

The teddy bear found his courage. He turned onto his side and passed under the edge of the sofa. A button brushed the rug. Then he managed to stick his muzzle out.

For a moment he stayed there, with half his body in the shadows and half on the rug. The moonlight touched his nose. The living room didn't seem so big anymore. Bombo saw the little stool in front of him and recognized the rug he had missed.

The little stool was in front of him. Bombo slowly went around it. The moon barely lit the floor, like a little bright path.

The first turn was a tight one. Bombo moved one paw, then the other. The stool's legs were solid and still. He passed one, then the next, taking care not to bump into the wood. His crooked ear brushed against a leg. It didn't get caught. Bombo kept going.

— This way, Bombo — said the child.

The teddy bear followed the voice. He passed under the armchair, between two big, still legs. His crooked ear got caught for a moment in a thread of the rug. Bombo tugged gently. The thread came free.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

The thread of the rug stayed in its place. Bombo straightened his ear with a little nudge of his shoulder. Then he started moving again. The armchair made a sort of arch above him. Bombo passed through the middle, where there was room, without bumping the arms or the legs.

The voice was getting closer and closer.

— Bombo, have I found you?

The teddy bear made one last turn and popped out right in front of two bare feet. The child bent down and picked him up with both hands.

— There you are. I was looking for you.

Bombo couldn't answer, but he let himself be cuddled. His crooked ear rested against the pajamas. The child held him by one arm and carried him toward the bed.

The house was quiet. The moon stayed at the window. The child pulled up the blanket and put Bombo beside the pillow.

— Good night, Bombo.

The teddy bear stayed close to him. The button shone one last time in the moonlight. Then the child closed his eyes and gave him a gentle squeeze.

"Teddy, teddy, where are you? I look, I find you, I hold you close."

The child's breathing grew slow. Bombo was back in his place, warm and cozy, and he got ready to sleep too.

Qua was a yellow rubber duck with an orange beak and a little hole that let water out. She waited on the edge of the bathtub. She looked around the bathroom, all ready for the evening.

The towel was folded on the stool. It was big and soft, with one corner hanging almost down to the bath mat. The pajamas were waiting on the bed in the next room. On the edge of the bathtub was a soft sponge, round like a little cloud.

Qua stayed still. Her beak looked at the water, which wasn't there yet. The bathroom was quiet. There was only a faint sound from the house and the ticking of the clock.

Then the faucet opened.

— Ssshhh — went the water.

It fell into the bathtub and made round ripples. The ripples spread, one after another, until they reached the sides. Warm steam filled the bathroom. The bubbles began to grow: first one little cloud, then two, then a big white heap.

Qua looked at the bubbles. A little bubble landed on her beak.

— Qua? — she went.

The bubble popped: plink.

Qua tilted her rubber head. A drop fell from her beak and went drip on the edge. The duck waited a little longer. The water kept flowing, but not too fast. The bathtub filled to just the right mark.

The child came in. He stepped onto the bath mat and put one foot in the water. Then the other. The water went splash, splash, and a little wave pushed the bubbles toward the edge.

Qua bobbed. A little bump made her slide into the bathtub.

Splash!

The duck floated. She turned onto her side, then righted herself. Her orange beak poked out between the bubbles. A ribbon of water slipped beneath her belly. Qua rose and fell gently, like a little boat.

— Qua, qua, qua!

The child laughed and answered:

— Qua, qua!

Qua made a slow circle around the bathtub. The child followed her with one finger, without squeezing her too hard. The duck left a little trail in the water. The trail spread out and disappeared near the edge.

One bubble rose from the bottom. Then another. Qua watched them one at a time.

— One — said the child.

The bubble came closer to the foam. The child waited for it to reach the top.

— Two.

Another little bubble rose, as small as a lentil. It bobbed in the water and passed by Qua.

— Three!

The bubble stopped on the tip of Qua's beak and popped softly. Plop.

The child clapped his hands in the water. Splash, splash. Qua hopped on the waves. The foam shifted like a row of white clouds. Some of it gathered near the sponge. The rest rested against the

edge of the bathtub.

Qua passed under a little mountain of foam. For a moment, only her orange beak could be seen. Then she appeared again, all in one piece. The child smiled and let her float in the middle.

— Where are you, Qua? — he asked softly.

The duck popped out from behind the foam.

— Qua, qua!

The moon appeared high up in the bathroom window. She looked at the bathtub and sent a bright reflection onto the water. The surface shone for a moment. A line of light moved near the duck and then stopped.

Qua stayed close to the child. He made her go around once more. The duck turned slowly, without splashing out of the water. Then she stopped beside his hand.

The bathroom was warm. The water made little ripples. Steam fogged the window glass just a little. The moon stayed outside, and her light wasn't too bright.

Then the child said to her:

— It's almost time to get out.

The duck didn't answer with words. She went qua qua, just once.

The child stood up. Little drops of water ran down his legs. The towel wrapped him up, soft and warm. Qua was lifted with one hand and set on the edge of the bathtub.

Her yellow body was all wet. A drop came out of her beak. Then another.

Drip.

The child put on his pajamas. The sponge was put back in its place. The faucet stayed closed. In the bathtub, the foam slowly sank as the water grew still.

Qua looked at the door. The child waved goodbye to her.

— Good night, Qua. See you tomorrow.

The duck gave a little bob. Her drops fell one by one onto the edge. A drop slid down her side and fell into the bathtub. Another stayed hanging from her beak, shone in the light, and then fell.

The child left the bathroom in his pajamas, with his hair just dried. The door stayed ajar. The light grew soft, and the sound of footsteps faded away.

“Qua, qua, qua, one bubble, then away.”

The moon stayed at the window. The bathroom was warm and quiet. Qua stayed in her place, waiting for the next evening.

Mia was under the blankets. She wore blue striped pajamas, and her little cloth blanket reached up to her chin. The little light in the bedroom was on.

The moon watched from the window.

Mia rested her cheek on the pillow. It was soft and wide. In her imagination, the pillow became a boat. The blanket became a sail.

— We’ll set off slowly — Mia whispered.

The boat moved without making a sound. The little light became a small harbor. The moon lit up the room and then the door, as if opening a quiet path.

Mia felt the pillow give a little beneath her cheek. In her imagination, that was the calm sea. The boat had no oars and didn’t need any. All it needed was a gentle breath from the moon. The blanket made a soft sail, with the blue stripes of Mia’s pajamas close to the edge. Mia kept one hand resting on the fabric so it wouldn’t slip.

The room stayed all around her. The bed was the boat’s deck. The sheet made a bright shore. The little light near the door looked like a small, round, friendly lighthouse. There were no tall waves. There was no strong wind. The boat only bobbed a little, up and down, like Mia’s slow breathing.

The boat passed in front of the first house. It was Nina’s meadow. The little snail was sleeping under a cabbage leaf. Her little bag was beside her, and inside it was the little leaf she had picked up along the way. Her friends were resting nearby, on a wide leaf.

Mia looked at the meadow from far away. The blades of grass were still. The leaves shaded the little burrows, and the evening drops glimmered faintly without falling. The cabbage leaf was as big as a roof for Nina. The little snail slept under its shelter, with her little house on her back. Beside her, the bag stayed closed. The little leaf she had picked up along the way was safe inside.

Nina’s friends were settled on the wide leaf. They weren’t talking or moving. The crumb they had shared at snack time was gone: they had eaten it. Mia looked at them all, one by one, without

coming too close.

Mia didn't wake her. The boat glided away, very, very slowly.

— Good night, Nina — she said softly.

The boat passed beyond the meadow. The sail moved just a little. Mia adjusted the blanket on her shoulder and let the pillow keep her comfortable. The little light's lighthouse grew small behind her, but the moon kept showing the way.

Then she passed near Dora's pen. The sheep slept beside one another. Dora's little bell was still. It didn't go ding, it didn't go dong. The dog and the cat were resting too, each in their own corner.

The pen had a low fence. The boat passed over it without a sound, as if it were floating over an invisible gate. Mia saw the sheep's soft fleece, pale in the moonlight. One sheep had its muzzle resting on another sheep's wool. Another had its legs tucked beneath its body.

Dora slept peacefully. The little bell around her neck didn't jingle. There wasn't a single ding or dong. The dog was stretched out beside the fence, and the cat had curled up in its corner. The night kept them all quiet.

The boat kept floating through the air. The blanket-sail puffed up a little, as if with a gentle breath.

Mia thought that even silence could have a sound. There were no footsteps or bells in the pen. There was only the sheep's slow, restful breathing. The boat moved gently, without shaking the fence or waking the dog or the cat.

In front of the burrow under the apple tree, Mia saw two fireflies. The burrow was quiet. Lino was sleeping with the wool blanket pulled right up over his nose. The moon sent a thin ray between the leaves. The fireflies slowly lit up and went dark again.

The apple tree stretched its branches over the burrow. The leaves were dark, but the moonbeam passed between them and reached the entrance. One firefly lit up near the grass. The other glowed a little farther away. Then the first one went dark, and the second stayed bright for a moment.

Mia saw Lino's shape beneath the blanket. The little rabbit's ears were tucked in, and his muzzle was warm. There was a moss pillow on the bed. The smooth pebble was near the entrance, away from the path. Lino slept without clutching the blanket tightly. The burrow was full of soft shadows, not scary sounds.

Mia kept her voice low.

— Good night, Lino.

The boat moved away from the meadow and rose into the sky. There, a pale cloud floated above the rooftops. Below it, Pia's cornflowers were closed for the night. Pia's cloud was resting, light and airy, and the rain was over.

The boat rose slowly. Mia didn't lean over the edge. She stayed sitting comfortably, with the blanket between her fingers. The meadow grew small beneath her. The houses looked like quiet boxes, with dark windows and barely lit roofs.

Pia's cloud was soft and pale. Its edges were no longer heavy with rain. Below it, the cornflowers had closed their petals. No children were dancing in the meadow anymore. The party was over, and everything was resting.

Mia looked at the cloud for a moment. She didn't call to it or disturb it. The sky was big enough to let it sleep. The boat passed nearby, but didn't touch it.

Higher up, the boat saw the stars. One of them glowed softly, without dazzling anyone. Mia smiled and pulled up one corner of the blanket.

— Good night, little star.

The star's light was small and steady. Mia remembered the staircase of glowing steps and the owl who had taught her to count to ten. She also remembered the little star who had once been afraid of the dark. Now that star shone peacefully in the sky. Mia didn't look for her little blanket: the star was already safe in her light.

The moon accompanied the boat across the sky. She didn't push it. She showed it the way with a gentle light.

Mia looked up. The moon wasn't in a hurry. Her light fell across the sail and the edge of the pillow. The boat followed that glowing path without going too far away. Each time it bobbed, Mia felt her head grow heavier on the pillow.

The boat passed in front of Bombo's living room and then the nearby bedroom. The sofa was empty, but the teddy bear was already resting in bed beside his child. One ear was folded on the pillow. The child had an arm around him.

The living room was dark and tidy. The little stool was still. Nobody was underneath the armchair

anymore. The rug rested flat on the floor. Bombo hadn't stayed in the place with the dust and crumbs: he was beside his child, held close and warm.

Mia saw the ear sewn on a little crooked and the button that was no longer shining. The child slept with his arm around the teddy bear. Bombo was back in his place, right beside the pillow.

Mia didn't stop. The boat knew the way.

— Good night, Bombo — she murmured.

The boat made a wide circle beyond the bedroom window, without going in. Then it moved away, leaving the child and the teddy bear in silence. The sail stayed puffed up just enough to keep the journey going.

Then it passed in front of Qua's bathroom. The bathtub was empty and the towel was folded. Qua was on the edge, almost dry, with her beak turned toward the window. One last drop slid off her body and went drip.

The bathroom was quiet. The foam had disappeared and the water wasn't running anymore. The towel waited, folded on the stool. The round sponge was in its place. Qua wasn't in the bathtub: she was resting on the edge, with her beak turned toward the window.

The drop slid slowly down the duck's yellow side. First it hung there, small and shiny. Then it fell into the bathtub.

Drip.

Qua didn't move. The boat didn't go into the room and didn't wake her. Mia sent her a silent greeting, giving a little wave under the blanket.

The boat gave a little bob.

— Good night, Qua.

Under the blanket, Mia felt warm. The boat had passed by all the places along the staircase. Nobody was awake, and nobody needed help. Everyone was safe.

Mia thought again about Nina's meadow, Dora's pen, Lino's burrow, Pia's cornflowers, Bombo's living room, and Qua's bathroom. Every place had found its silence. Every friend was resting in their own corner, with a gentle light or a blanket nearby.

The boat slowed down. There was no need to look for a new path anymore. The journey had

visited the homes without waking anyone. Mia felt the warmth of the blanket on her arms and the warmth of the pillow beneath her cheek.

The moon came close to the pillow harbor. The room had become a room again. The bed was the bed, the blanket was the blanket, and the little light shone beside the door.

The harbor was soft. The pillow held the boat still. The cloth sail no longer puffed up. Mia rested both hands on the blanket and felt the stripes of her pajamas beneath her fingers.

The moon stopped at the window. Her light reached the edge of the bed, then settled on the floor. The little light near the door no longer looked like a distant lighthouse: it was the little bedroom light, in the very same place.

The boat stopped. The sail lowered, little by little, and the blanket covered Mia again.

The blanket fell over her shoulders. Mia snuggled beneath it without opening her eyes. The pillow was no longer a boat: it was her pillow, soft and wide. The room hadn't changed. It had only grown quieter.

The moon turned off the last light in Mia's imagination. The little bedroom light stayed on a little longer, small and quiet.

"Sail down, my little boat, good night, and off we go."

Mia closed her eyes. Her breathing grew slow. The moon stayed at the window, keeping watch over the night.

The staircase was over. The last step was the pillow.

And on the pillow, Mia slept.