



Orange Days

By Iva Procházková

© S. Fischer Verlag Frankfurt, 2013
First published by Bibliographisches
Institut / Sauerländer Verlag 2012

Hardcover
240 pages
Format: 221 x 150 x 30 mm



Sample translation by Eva Martus

Orange Days

So many people, so many worlds. Darek had learned this lesson a long time ago. Some worlds were in contact, some were miles apart, but every world had its rules. The worlds were not always in harmony with each other. Often they contradicted each other and they were constantly changing. Mother's world was well-arranged and had clearly defined rules.

“There are things you have to keep in mind,” was the first and most important rule. Following at its heels was the second most important one: *“Certain things you should forget as quickly as possible.”*

“How do I know when to follow the first and when to follow the second rule?” Darek wanted to know.

“Just ask.”

“You?”

“Yourself, of course.”

“And when I get the wrong answer?”

“Then you must not lay the blame on others,” Mother said and in this way laid down the third rule, possibly the most useful of all.

It seemed simple on the surface. But on close inspection Darek still discovered that there was a catch.

“And when I forget what I should keep in mind and keep in mind what I should forget?”

The mother gave him a piece of string. “Just tie yourself a knot.”

In her world, there was no room for wandering around and doubts. Anyone who followed Mother's rules and knew their knots could not lose sight of their way.

Chapter 1

Darek took a deep breath and spat with all his might. The spit hit Hugo's chin and slowly trickled down his neck. Hugo wiped it away with his arm.

"You are dead!" he roared.

"You go first," Darek replied and leaped aside because Hugo ran at him with a club in his hand. Although Darek managed to dodge the blow, Hugo's weight pushed him against the cemetery's wall. When he hit it, he ripped his jumper on a sharp, protruding stone that dug deep into his back, between his shoulder blades. The pain made Darek catch his breath with a hissing sound and he raised his fist to strike a blow against Hugo's jaw. Unfortunately, he only brushed his ear as the other had turned his head away in the last moment.

"Hahaha!" Hugo pretended to have a laughing fit. "That tickles, you idiot!"

"I'll tickle you even more. Do you want me to?"

Instead of answering, Hugo struck at him again with his club. Darek hid his head behind his arms. Immediately, he felt a heavy blow on his left forearm. The pain flared up into his fingertips. Intuitively, he jerked up his right knee into Hugo's crotch. Hugo's legs buckled and he doubled over at the waist. Darek leaped back but stayed alert in a fighting position. It could have just been one of Hugo's tricks so that he could strike out all the harder. But when the club fell out of Hugo's hand and his face took on a grimace of pain, Darek's tension slowly eased. He understood that for today the fight was over. Quickly, he gathered the school and exercise books lying everywhere, stuffed them into his satchel and started to walk backwards along the top of the wall with his eyes firmly set on Hugo the whole time.

"You deserved that, you bastard!" he shouted. His voice sounded uncertain, almost guilty, and he was annoyed at that. As if it hadn't been Hugo who had provoked the fight!

"Bite me," Hugo weakly mumbled through clenched teeth.

"I told you to leave my sister alone! If you touch her one more time I'll kick your balls, but then really hard! Next time, I'll make such a mess of you that you'll end up over there."

He pointed to the graveyard where scenery of headstones and graves presented itself. As it was springtime, it was adorned with fresh flowers. One bunch of these flowers Darek and Ema had put there two days ago. Ema had wrapped a glittery ribbon around the yellow tulips

and had tied the ends into a large bow. Darek did not like such a flashy decoration and he figured Mother did not like it either, but in the end that did not matter.

“Piss off, butthead!” boomed Hugo’s no longer weakened voice. Darek quickened his steps. He knew all too well that Hugo could be fiercely determined and his batteries could recharge in a very short time. Once, when they were beating each other up behind the railway tracks, Hugo, in the finale, shortly before Darek’s victory, had jumped him with such a force that both rolled onto the gravel of the embankment. Hugo, as a result, had broken his little finger and Darek’s phone had been flattened.

No, he definitely did not feel like having a second round fighting. Besides, it was about time to pick up Ema. In a few minutes, she would be standing in front of the school building, craning her neck and looking alternately to the left and to the right – like a chicken on the lookout for grains.

She was an inexhaustible source of amusement for Hugo and other children. “Cluck... cluck... cluck!” They shouted at her and mockingly imitated her jerky movements. “Look! A worm, peck at it, quickly!”

Every time Darek heard their taunting laughter two emotions fought inside him. *Bash them! Beat them up! Smack them right in their faces!* the first fierce stirring recommended. The other feeling took its time. It was composed of weariness and discomfort, and being angry with Ema was also a part of it.

As if she could not just stand there motionless and wait for him! Or find her way back home on her own! When Darek had been eight years old, he had gone everywhere on his own and nobody had wondered about that. But Ema was not like him, she was not like any person he knew. She was different and he had to put up with that. He had to love her the way she was – that was what Mother had said. Darek had never argued with her about that but often he wondered if you could order someone *to love*.

“Go and run to your dumb sister so she doesn’t get hit by a tricycle!” Hugo bawled out after him. Then a stone flew towards Darek but it missed its target. Hugo was a really big guy but he could not take aim properly, that was why they always made him goalkeeper at football. Darek no longer looked back and ran towards the Grafenschule, or, as you could call it, the Count’s school. Its flaking chimney peeped above the hill. The roof gutter was slightly rusted, the plaster was crumbling, and otherwise it had nothing aristocratic about it either, but it was located on the ground of the former Count’s court. Although hardly anyone in Piosek could tell you which Count it had been and where he had met his end, no one bothered to find a more modern name for the school. It was a primary school; the older pupils went to a different

building at the edge of the village. Darek was alright with that separation. In that way, he could get rid of Ema at least in the mornings, did not have to come across her in the corridors and to spend breaks with her in the same schoolyard. Sometimes he managed to forget all about her. In such moments he felt light and carefree. He played football or climbed about on the monkey bars and competed with the others for who could make the rope bridge rock harder. But when, in the middle of any game, he remembered his sister, the laughter got stuck in his throat and he immediately checked his watch, afraid that he was late and Ema could get hurt because of him. This fear followed Darek everywhere, like a tiresome dog you could not chase away.

As he had expected, she was already waiting for him. As soon as he turned the next corner, Ema appeared in front of him. She stood there leaning against the railing and spoke to her class teacher, Ms Paterova. Darek felt relieved. The presence of an adult intimidated the mocking children most of the time. They liked to play their jokes undisturbed. Like Hugo. He had certainly prepared his performance that morning already at home. With a pair of scissors in his jacket pocket and during the morning commotion he had stealthily approached Ema at the primary school's gate. "It's about time to clip your horns," he announced. Before Darek understood what was happening, Hugo raised his hand holding the pair of scissors and cut off a thick strand of Ema's hair. He smiled while doing so and Ema smiled back at him because she was not quick enough to make sense of what was happening. She had no clue that on her head an ugly mass of tangles had appeared which would make her the target for even more stupid jokes. She smiled because smiling was her most spontaneous expression.

Even now it was on her face. She held tight to the straps of her satchel with both hands, looked beamingly up to the teacher and nodded again and again. In this way her crookedly cut hair hopped up and down like a red brush.

"Hello!" She called when she caught sight of Darek. She ran towards him and embraced him. "What have you brought me?"

Every time she asked him what he had brought her. She certainly thought that Darek had nothing better to do than looking for presents for her.

"Good day," Darek first greeted the teacher. ("Don't forget to greet in a decent way," had been one of Mother's most frequent instructions represented by one of the oldest knots Darek had ever tied and later untied again; untied, because both greeting and shopping for Mr Havlik had become a firm habit in the meantime.) He reached into his trouser pocket. Earlier there had been a piece of filled chocolate from Mischa there. Now Darek could only feel a piece of

pine bark. The piece of filled chocolate was gone. Probably he had lost it during the fight at the graveyard. Instead of chocolate he passed Ema the piece of bark. “Here, take it!”

“What’s that?”

“A boat.”

She suspiciously turned the bark between her fingers. “Where?”

“Inside.”

“Then get it out.”

“Only at home.”

“Why?”

Just as Darek wanted to reply that he needed a knife in order to get the boat out of the piece of bark, Ms Paterova put her hand on his shoulder. “We wept bitterly this morning,” she whispered in his ear, full of compassion. When she spoke of Ema, she always had this soft, slightly saddened voice and used the first person plural. Both made Darek feel uncomfortable. “Why?” He asked testily. The teacher touched the parting on Ema’s head fleetingly, but immediately drew back her hand again to avoid reminding Ema of the hair that had been cut off – because that had been the cause of the weeping in the morning. “It will grow back soon,” Darek assured her, in a deliberately airy tone. Paterova’s compassion annoyed him. She was nice; at least that was what Mother had claimed. Despite Ema’s ‘problem’, she had admitted her to her class and Darek knew that she devoted much more time to his sister than to other children. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the teacher bothered him. She underestimated Ema. She asked her to do things a chimpanzee could manage to do. She thought what everyone in Piosek thought: that Ema was a retard. The teacher would never let such a word slip her mouth because she thought it insulting but her exaggerated patience was insulting just the same. “Today we read a fairy tale in class,” she told Darek but at the same time looked at Ema. “About a witch, right? Can you remember what she did?”

“She bewitched the princess,” Ema replied after short consideration.

“And what happened next?”

“Nothingsoever.”

“Because we haven’t finished reading it yet. Do you remember what I gave you for homework?”

The teacher looked at Ema encouragingly and Ema pressed her fist against her forehead. That was what she always did when she made an effort to dig something out from her memory.

“We are supposed to think of an ending ourselves!” She smiled, happy that she had remembered.

The teacher nodded. “Yes, you are supposed to write an appropriate ending. Only a few sentences are enough,” she added. “And if it is too difficult for you, just draw a nice picture of the story.” She picked up the basket with notebooks waiting to be corrected, opened the door of her car and waved to say goodbye. “Bye, and have a nice afternoon!”

“Goodbye,” Darek replied and grabbed Ema who wanted to run after the teacher. Every time the same drama: Ema refused to separate from people she liked. She took them by the hand, the arm, around the waist, grabbed hold of jacket tails or sleeves, whined and tried everything to hold them back. Even now she wriggled in Darek’s clutch until the teacher’s car had disappeared behind the next turn. Only then she calmed down and began to examine the piece of pine bark in her hand for the hidden boat inside it again.

“Where is it?”

“In there.” Darek did not feel like chatting with Ema; he wanted to go on thinking about his own things. But in the presence of his sister he seldom managed to. You could not get rid of her. “Where exactly?” She urged him. “Show me!”

“Here is the bow,” he said and pointed to the pointy edge of the bark.

“What is a bow?”

“The part at the front.”

“And where is the back part?”

“Here!” He said and slapped her bottom. She raised her arm for a counterattack but he ran ahead. She ran after him in her clumsy way. The satchel bounced on her back and she flapped her arms back and forth. *She can’t even walk properly! She hops like a crow! The only thing missing is for her to croak!* He sullenly thought and paused to wait for her. They were in short distance from the shop, the liveliest place of the village, and Darek did not want to attract unnecessary attention.

He knew that the neighbours standing around the shop’s entrance kept a watchful eye on the main street and on everyone that would come along. They would notice Ema’s new, ragged haircut and Darek’s torn up jumper and make comments on that anyway. The best thing was to pass them quickly, he decided. Aside from that, he discovered Hanka at the end of the Ringelweg. Leaning over the handlebars, she came cycling over from the train station and approached the crossing. She had not seen Darek yet. That was his opportunity to wipe his hair away from his eyes and to put on the bored face he had practiced at home in front of the mirror. He knew that made him appear older. In front of Hanka he wanted to seem as adult as possible.

Ema stopped at the Magnum advertisement.

“Will you buy me ice cream?” she asked.

The ice cream on the picture of the ad had been enlarged to the size of a paddle and the shiny chocolate coating, on which drops of water sparkled, was temptingly appetizing. But it was out of the question that you could easily get something so precious. Even more so midweek. At the very most as a treat for a well written final essay or as an extra reward from the trainer for a worthy placing at the youth cup finals.

“Do you know how much that costs?” Darek replied with a counter-question.

“How much?”

“A lot of money. Come on, let’s go!”

He took his sister by the hand but she pulled away, leaned with both hands on the advertising board and opened her mouth. It looked like she wanted to lick the ice cream off the picture.

“M-a-g-u-m,” she slowly spelled out. “Will you buy me a Magum?”

“You left out the N. It’s not Magum, it’s Magnum,” he corrected her and added with an educational tone: “We haven’t eaten anything for lunch yet. Forget the ice cream.”

“I don’t want lunch, I want ice cream,” Ema replied. “That one!”

“There are many things ‘I’ want!” he snarled at her. And to finally get on going, he pushed her slightly. She clung to the ad board. Darek felt the blood rush to his head. He was on the brink of shouting at his sister, of shaking her and dragging her off by force. But that was exactly what he should not do under any circumstance. That would be the worst thing ever. He had to find another way. It would be best to trick her. To distract her so that she forgot the ice cream.

“Look!” he suddenly shouted. “Did you see that?”

“What?”

“Over there!”

Ema turned around and fixed her eyes on the spot he pointed to. But there was nothing to see.

“Do you see?” he asked and took her by the hand. This time she did not pull away.

“What?” she breathed with a strained expression on her face.

“We have to get closer,” he said and felt miserable, like every time he deceived his sister. It was so easy to trick her... That was exactly what made him feel guilty. But it was the safest method to put a stop to her crying and screaming. “Do you see them?”

“Whom? Where? What?” Ema repeated and let herself be led away from the gigantic ice cream step by step. “Who is there?”

“Just now she hid behind the tree.” Darek went on, without the faintest idea what he was actually talking about.

“A cat?”

He nodded with relief. A cat was fine.

“What colour is she?”

“Why don’t you run and see for yourself!”

Now he did not have to drag Ema after him anymore, she ran to the tall tree at the upper end of the main street all by herself. Further up, there was only the pub. It was located at the crossing at which one way led down to the train station and one narrow lane up, along the fields, to their farm. The farm was still called *the collective*, although only the inscription LPG FORTSCHRITT, which meant *Agricultural Production Comradeship Progress*, above the fallen gate of the cowshed reminded of the idea of collectivized farming. Every day Darek looked down at it from the window of his attic room. The letters were faded due to sun and rain and were almost indecipherable. Instead of the actual letters one could also read MORDSCHNITT, FURZSCHLIFF, BORDCHRIST or even HORTZUDRITT. It sounded confusing and mysterious like the language of a civilization long gone.

“Hi, Darek!” Hanka’s voice sounded right next to him and sent a slight, pleasant shiver through him. He turned around.

„Hello, Hanka.” The indifferent face he had prepared crumbled quickly due to the effect of her eyes. The darkest eyes far and wide, genetic inheritance of the family Bulis. Her brother Mischa’s eyes were very dark as well, but quite small, so the colour was not really as striking. Hanka’s pupils were large and boundless. You could not perceive them as a whole because sooner or later you had to avert your eyes from her gaze, otherwise something would happen. Darek was not sure what would happen; he had never tried it out.

“Will you be home this afternoon?” she asked and lowered her foot from the bicycle pedal.

“No idea.” He tried to restore his bored facial expression. “Why?” “I have to set up an electric circuit. For physics class.” “Congratulation!” “I can’t make it by myself.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Please, Darek, please!” she begged and to reinforce her plea she touched the bicycle bell with her thumb. Darek hesitated. He liked the feeling of being asked. Hanka was a year older, she went to secondary school and the bigger part of her life took place in the city. Not being a physics ace did not undermine her confidence at all. Last autumn, Darek had seen her at the market square in Bruntal with a group of schoolmates. All of them had looked very cool and with every move they had made clear that the world belonged to them. Darek had stopped in front of a shop window because he had felt like an idiot with his plain corduroy trousers and his freshly ironed shirt. He had been glad that Hanka had not noticed him or at least had

pretended not to.

“At what time should I come over?” Hanka’s finger touched the bell again. She demanded an answer. “If you don’t have time in the afternoon, I can stop by in the evening, no problem. Or, you come by our house.” She talked about time as if it were something you could freely dispose of. Something you could organize. But Darek’s time could not be organized because too many people and circumstances took it up. Family events had the bad habit to not announce themselves. You could not predict them and you could not defend yourself against them. You could flee from them at the most. But they caught up to you anyway.

“Come at four,” he said. In the mid-afternoon there was more room for hope that father would not come home. And if he came, he would be sober or crawl to the bedroom right away. By day, he was embarrassed about his drinking problem.

“I’ll be at your door, in time at four,” Hanka rhymed and got back on her bicycle. “Bye, see you!” She stepped on the pedals and quickly rode away. Darek could not resist – he turned his head to look after her. She rode her bicycle slightly leaning forward. Her hair was fluttering in the wind, on her left ear swung a black spiral with a crystal drop. It looked as though her ear was crying. Darek wondered if she had ever kissed someone. With fourteen and such eyes you could assume that but Darek would have liked to have certainty. When he had asked Mischa the other day, the other had not been able to give him a satisfying answer.

“Dude, she doesn’t tell me anything! I mean, no secrets. But some monkey with slicked back hair from Bruntal is always glued to her,” he had revealed to him. “Such a gross show-off. He even came up to us once.” That had been an interesting piece of information. So, Hanka did not have anything against *gross show-offs*. Darek wondered if it might be to his advantage to get rid of the bored face and stay at Hanka’s side at all times...

“Darek! Look what I’ve got!”

It made him jump. For a few minutes he had entirely forgotten about Ema.

“We’ll take her home with us, won’t we? Look at how beautiful she is!”

Ema appeared in the bushes at the roadside and walked slowly towards Darek with a white cat on her arm. She was all smiles and held the animal so tight that her hands were barely visible underneath the shaggy fur. The cat raised a protesting cry but Ema ignored it.

“Her name is Snow White,” she informed Darek. Ever since she had been small, she had had a weakness for white animals: cats, rabbits, lambs, dogs. “Snow White Totally White.”

“She doesn’t belong to us.”

“Who does she belong to?”

“I don’t know,” Darek said and at the same time the idea popped into his head that this cat might actually belong to him! He had made her up and because of his idea she had taken a physical form.

“I’ll take her with me,” Ema announced. Darek wanted to object but then he just shrugged his shoulders. It was clear that sooner or later the cat would find her own way to escape. Rather sooner. Even now she was struggling so violently that Ema had her hands full to keep a hold on her. Darek paid no attention to the cat and his sister anymore and walked on. When they passed the pub, he took a quick look inside. At the table near the door a group of sawmill workers had lunch. Next to them sat an elderly cyclist couple – they had left their bicycles in front of the entrance. And Mr Mihule stood at the bar and drew a beer. He nodded as a greeting when he saw Darek. Darek returned the greeting and let his eyes wander across the corner reserved for regular guests. It was empty. He felt relieved but only a bit. It was overall a good thing that the father was not in the pub but, then again, it did not really mean that much. He could just as well be sitting in the snack bar at the train station. He could have got his schnapps from Mrs Gajdoschikova who in her kitchen made alcohol out of plums and apples and anything that had traces of sugar in it. Or he could have driven off to find work.

The last possibility seemed to Darek to be the most likely one. Temporary jobs for low pay, mainly at construction sites, were to get hold of mostly at Ostrawa, in Opawa and sometimes even in Bruntal or on the Polish side of the border. Wherever you looked for it, work was hard to find in Silesia. As if it would vaporize quickly. There was, however, always enough schnapps. Right after Easter, Father and a handful of men had gone off to the job fair at Ratibor in a minibus before dawn. In the evening, Father had returned back home – without job, without good mood, only in a shirt. He had stunk of alcohol and the leather jacket with warm lining with which he had left had been gone. When Darek asked him about it the next morning, the father advised him to mind his own business. Darek did not go into it any further. He knew that he would not learn anything about it anyway. What Father did not want to say, you would not get out of him. Sometimes he would not say a word for days and wandered around the house like a ghost. A square-shouldered, red-haired ghost with a stubbly beard and freckles.

Around the corner, Darek suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. In front of their farm stood an unfamiliar car. A silver BMW with a Polish license plate. It was brightly polished, looked new and expensive; the stylish rims bore no traces of mud. Darek went up closer and looked through the windscreen into the car: lavishly equipped dashboard, seats covered with black leather, on the rear-view mirror a smiling Virgin Mary. She was still swinging slightly back

and forth. Darek touched the bonnet – it was warm. The unknown stranger – he or she – had to have just arrived. Why? To whom? The whole thing was so extraordinary that Darek felt a pleasant tingling. After long weeks of numbness, in which his surroundings had rolled up like a hedgehog, and, with the exception of Father’s extreme drinking, nothing had happened, this car now gave reason to hope.

“Come on,” he excitedly urged Ema. “Someone is here with us.” But instead of hurrying up, Ema stood still and stared at the car. The cat in her arms thrashed about, mewed indignantly and tried to crawl down.

“Why don’t you let her go!” Darek reproached his sister. “Do you really want to get covered in scratches?” Ema did not reply. Probably she had not even heard him at all. When an idea occupied her mind, she concentrated all her attention on it and could not be reached by anything or anyone. In those moments, she reminded Darek of a switched off receiver. Now, her interest was focused on the silver car. The rest of the world did not exist for her.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” Darek placed his hand on the shiny bonnet again. “Look, the GPS device. And the nice steering wheel. Come on, let’s go and ask who this amazing car belongs to!”

Ema did not move a bit. Darek left her alone and headed for the house. He did not have to look after his sister there. Only Mr Havlik lived further up from the farm and beside tractors and wood harvesting machines someone drove by only rarely. Probably someone got lost, Darek wondered while approaching the house. The driver must have gone in to ask for the way and will disappear again right away.

About the author



Iva Procházková was born in what is now the Czech Republic in 1953. In 1986 she went to Germany for a ten-year period. She has written books for children and adolescents for many years, winning the German Youth Literature Award, as well as a nomination for the Hans-Christian-Andersen Medal in 1997. Her title *We Will Meet When They Are All Gone* was awarded the Friedrich-Gerstäcker-Award in 2007 and the Protestant Book Prize in 2008.