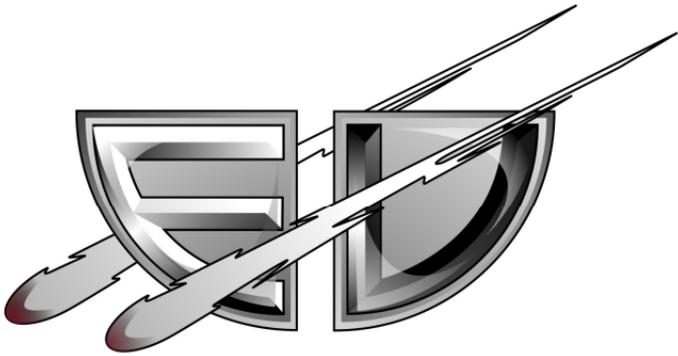


An  
Extra-Ordinary  
Beginning

*The Adventures of Eric and Ursula*



A.D. Winch

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## PROLOGUE

### OVER TEN YEARS AGO

The explosion ripped through the European Space Station with the speed of a bullet. In less than a second, one hundred metres of metal, plastic, complicated circuitry and solar panels were silently reduced to a billion new satellites orbiting the earth. Hidden amongst the debris were two platinum pods. They had been shot away from the space station, moments before the explosion, into the Earth's atmosphere and onto their programmed locations.

Moments earlier Professor Larsen had blinked back a tear and watched, through sky blue eyes, as her lifetime's work left her forever and escaped the coming disaster. She had expected this to happen, had accepted the fact and was only thankful that it had taken them this long to find her. She hoped she had done enough.

Down on the planet in the Main Control Room at the European Space Operations Centre in Germany everybody was in shock. The sudden disappearance of the biggest European space project in history was met with disbelieving gasps and then frantic action as the control room came to life. Technicians, scientists and computer experts searched hurriedly for the cause of the problem. No one believed that a space station could suddenly vanish. Computers were rebooted, millions of lines of software code were scanned for bugs, the position of radars were checked and the tracking stations of the ESTRACK network were contacted. The two stations in Australia were unable to locate the space station and the

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same was true of those in Kenya, French Guinea, Sweden and Spain.

In desperation NASA was contacted. They did not answer the call.

It soon became clear that there was no glitch in the system and a powerful digital telescope in Belgium was trained on the coordinates, where the space station should have been. As these images appeared on the seven large plasma screens dominating the room, the busy movements and conversations began to peter out. The hive of worker bees were turned into wax work dummies with mouths open.

A hush fell over the room, broken only by the voice of a skinny scientist who wouldn't give up on the woman who had always been there for him. Speaking calmly, patiently and expectantly he repeated the same words over and over again. "Professor Larsen, this is ESOC, please come in. Professor Larsen, this is ESOC, please come in. Professor Larsen..."

Tears streamed down his cheeks.

## ON THE ROOFTOPS OF PARIS

Ursula stood on the flat roof of the Palais Omnisports indoor stadium. Four floors below her was the busy Boulevard de Bercy but up on the roof all was calm. Her black pony tail reached the warm tiles on which she sat and she could feel the heat through the holes in her jeans. A thin layer of moisture stuck her white vest to her back and, as she wiped her dirty hands across its front, railway tracks of grey appeared where her ribs protruded. From her stomach came a deep rumbling. She tried to ignore it as she had more important things to think about. Gingerly she placed her dark hand into the front pocket of her grubby jeans, to check that its contents were still there. As her bony fingers felt the edge of the small cardboard box she let out a sigh of relief and lay back to look at the sky.

It was a beautiful day in Paris. The sky was bright blue and fluffy clouds drifted aimlessly, creating shapes for anyone who had a mind to see them. Ursula loved watching the clouds. She fixed her chocolate brown eyes upon them and before long could make out a vicious fire-breathing dragon, a long-eared rabbit and the outline of Italy. These gradually became a horse on a cold day, a round teddy bear and a lady's pointed boot, before merging together and blowing into the distance.

Her grandmother and neighbours had been moaning about the heat since it had risen to tropical temperatures three weeks previously. It was the subject of conversation every time they met on the graffiti covered passageways

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outside their flats. Anyone nearby would happily join in with their opinions on the, 'stifling temperatures.' At first Ursula had been honest and told the adults how much she loved the heat and felt energized by the sun. However, after the tuts, disapproving looks and comments such as, 'you're only eleven, you wait until you're our age,' she decided it was probably best to just agree and enjoy the sun in private.

For Ursula nowhere was more private than the rooftops of Paris. High above the busy streets, tooting cars, grumpy commuters, lost tourists and stressed shoppers she was alone. Hidden behind billboards, advertising products people did not need, she was free from disapproving glances, nasty comments and away from prying eyes. She relaxed, took the little Sudoku book and pencil from her back pocket, flicked to the only one she had not yet completed and rolled onto her front to do it. As the sun beat down on her back her brain came to life and she set about solving the puzzle in front of her. It was rated 'very difficult'. Within two minutes it was almost complete. She wrote the last number, nine, in a small square on the page and allowed a thin smile of satisfaction to creep across her slim face. Just a bit longer then I'll go home, she thought to herself, appreciating her solitude. However Ursula was not completely alone, she was being watched. On a tall floodlight overlooking the indoor stadium and advertising boards was a CCTV camera and it was trained firmly on the Palais roof.

"Geez, this kid is something else," exclaimed Agent Hoover in the near darkness, relaxing his bloated body into the swivel chair that was his home every day. "I mean she's a worthless thieving little punk, who deserves a brief stretch in the joint, but you've got to admire her style."

He sat forward again, placed his podgy elbows on the glass desk in front of him and rested his head in his swollen hands.

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Ursula returned the pencil and book to her back pocket and sat up, unaware of the attention she was receiving. She was on a small screen marked 'Boulevard de Bercy, Paris, France.' Surrounding it, on a wall the size of a tennis court, were thousands upon thousands of similar tiny screens all marked with the names of streets, towns and countries in Europe. The flickering pictures provided the only light in the air-conditioned room and reflected off Agent Hoover's blotchy red face. Behind him, lurking in the shadows, a short sinewy figure remained silent.

Agent Hoover continued talking to himself, "I tell you something for nothing, next time I see her I'm going to bring her down, she may be a skinny little runt but that's about twelve drug stores she's held up now."

Suddenly, he felt as if someone had just stabbed his brain with a pin and then he heard his own voice in his head. "We are not looking for French juvenile petty criminals."

He pulled his eyes away from the screen showing Ursula, slumped back in his chair and took in all the screens in front of him. He did not know how he could watch and process so many at once but he thanked the stars and stripes that he had been born into this TV nation.

Ursula stood up and walked across the tiles on the gym roof. Without making a sound she knelt down beside a large skylight and peered into the indoor stadium below. The Palais Omnisports was holding a gymnastics event. Parallel bars, high bars, hoops, beams, a large blue floor mat, and a host of other gymnastic equipment filled the arena. Around the edges, underneath flags and billboards, the stands were full of people showing their appreciation. In the centre two boys, in their countrys' tracksuits, stood on a podium with a bronze and silver medal around their necks. They belonged to a world that Ursula dreamed of

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but knew she would never be part of. She hated being part of *les exclus*: the people whom no one wanted.

Upset by her thoughts Ursula crept back from the skylight, jumped up purposefully, twisted before she landed and ran towards the blue metal supports that criss-crossed around the edge of the arena's roof. The moment she reached the edge she sprang up like a cat and launched herself into the air. From the Palais below she heard a man's nasal voice announce that the gold medal winner in the under thirteen category was Eric Meyer.

Eric walked confidently towards the other two medal winners with his head held high. He brushed his blond hair away from his high forehead and used the movement as an excuse to briefly look at the audience. He could not see his parents but it was a big crowd and he decided to look again once he was on the podium. Eric jumped up on to the step reserved for the gold medalist. He raised his toned arm in the air and, acknowledging the clapping and cheering, slowly turned on the spot. His dark brown eyes searched the audience as he turned but his parents were nowhere to be seen. On the outside his body remained tall and powerful but inside Eric slumped and his strong shoulders drooped forward.

A grey haired man in an ill-fitting grey suit, who was introduced to the audience as 'today's main sponsor', approached Eric. The tender skin on Eric's palms stung as the man limply shook his hand. Together they posed for the cameras which flashed around them. Eric then bowed towards the sponsor and his prize was placed delicately over his head. The ribbon slid over his ears and the gold medal hung, swinging from his neck. As he stood up to his full height he saw his nanny, who doubled as his maid and driver, standing beside the exit. Her skin was so pale that she stood out in a crowd, especially in the summer time when everyone else was sporting a tan. She wasn't his parents but at least someone Eric knew had been there

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to see him win. In fact Miss Duna, or Andrea as she liked to be called, was always there. Whether it was picking Eric up from school or gymnastic competitions or sports matches or guitar performances it didn't matter, she was there.

The national anthem began and flags, half the size of the mobile phone adverts that ringed the area, began their slow journey towards the ceiling. Eric lowered his head respectfully and stared at his feet, which he felt were too small for his body. It was always better to look down than try to sing along. He knew the words but also knew that he couldn't sing and hated the idea of making a fool of himself in front of a large crowd, or anyone for that matter. To the spectators he looked like a model gymnast, tall and slim with muscles starting to develop on his young body. He also looked deep in thought. Most people watching felt he was enjoying this winning moment but he wasn't.

Eric's thoughts were hijacked by the list of broken promises that his parents had made. They had promised with hands on hearts that they would be here today, and the time before and the time before that. His mind wandered. Despite all his achievements maybe they just weren't proud of him. He had always tried to be the best but maybe he had to try even harder to be even better. Maybe only then would they notice him and reward him with some recognition.

The anthem finished and Eric hopped down from the podium, stumbling with tiredness as he hit the floor. He hoped that no one had seen and was relieved to see the spectators streaming towards the exits oblivious to his near fall. Warily he picked up his heavy gym bag, slung it over his shoulders and walked towards his leather clad nanny. It never ceased to amaze him that whatever the weather Andrea would be wearing the same leather trousers and same leather jacket. The only item that seemed to change was the long-sleeved T-shirt she wore underneath it.

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Today she was wearing a Nirvana one from her never-ending supply.

“I would like to leave now, please Andrea,” requested Eric, saying every word clearly and properly.

“Okay,” answered Andrea in an accent that had been formed behind the Communist Iron Curtain and added, almost as an afterthought, “you did well today Eric.”

“I’m glad someone thinks so,” replied Eric, a little more sharply than he would have liked.

“They all thought so,” said Andrea waving one of her slight arms at the leaving crowd.

“You know who I mean;” and Eric handed Andrea his heavy gym bag. She barely noticed the weight and turned to lead Eric out of the stadium. For a moment Eric forgot the crowds around him and gazed solely at Andrea. She was a petite woman, barely one metre fifty, with an elfin frame. Eric often thought that she had once been a tall woman who had shrunk in the rain. In spite of her size she was not puny and, from head to toe, she was as solid as a rock. One of Eric’s earliest memories was of the difference between being held by his soft and warm mother and being held by Andrea.

“It is time to go,” she said over her shoulder and, without barging or pushing, his nanny walked calmly into the throng of people who parted before her like Moses and the Red Sea. Eric loped behind her, appreciating the path she created through the crowd.

Once outside in the sun Eric’s tiredness seemed to drift away and his plan to become even better began to take shape. The more he thought about it the more it made sense. His father was, according to newspapers, the best poker player on the planet and his mother was a former Miss World. They were therefore used to being THE BEST and for them only THE BEST would do.

Eric continued to follow Andrea along the busy Boulevard de Bercy but his thoughts were elsewhere. His idea needed some direction and, as he reviewed his

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achievements, he set himself new goals. In gymnastics, as of today, he was the European champion so his next step had to be World Champion. That would put him on par with his parents. In school he was quite certain that he was top of the class, even though his teacher never told him, but he would now get top marks in every test to prove it. When competing in tennis and swimming for the school he would beat all opponents and in football he would be the star player of the team. He would stand out from all the other children in school and be admired because of it. During the guitar and kick boxing lessons that his parents arranged for him in his free-time, he would excel. Admittedly he was already at Grade 7 for guitar and a black belt in kick boxing but this did not mean he could not improve further.

Eric was too caught up in his thoughts to notice the world around him. One step behind him was a man in red baseball cap worn low over his eyes. In front of Eric was Andrea, whose brisk pace came to an abrupt end when she suddenly stopped. Eric clattered into the back of her. A rock being hit by a toy action man would have moved more.

“Sorry, Andrea.”

“No problem, Eric.”

The man behind side stepped the pair, tutted, and walked off into the distance.

Andrea had stopped in front of the Meyer’s new top of the line Range Rover. It was silver with dark tinted windows and grey door handles. She opened the rear door and seemed to strain not to wrench it from its hinges. The new car smell, mixed with the leather aroma of the seats, wafted out of the vehicle as Eric climbed in.

Once his nanny had sat down on the cream driver’s seat she turned like a clockwork toy to face Eric. “I will repeat what I said earlier, you did well today. You are only eleven years old and you are now the under thirteen European champion. That is quite an achievement.”

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A hint of a smile briefly appeared on her face and she raised her non-existent eye brows. There was not one hair on her pale face and Eric was certain that her short blonde bob was a wig. In spite of how she looked Eric felt safe and secure around her. If Andrea said she would do something she did it, if Andrea was asked to do something she did it and on the very rare occasions that she could not do something she would say so beforehand. If only his parents could be the same.

“Thank you,” said Eric quietly, “I’m glad you were there.”

“Always a pleasure, Eric,” and Andrea started the car. The V8 Supercharged engine roared into life and she pulled cautiously away into the afternoon traffic.

In front of Eric on the back of Andrea’s headrest and fixed into a Mahogany casing was a LCD screen. It was showing a map of their journey home and as she took lefts and rights Eric followed the Galileo satellite navigation system. They were just coming onto Place Felix Eboué when ‘Incoming Call’ flashed three times on the screen before disappearing. The screen flickered with colour and then a woman’s beautiful face smiled at Eric.

His mother’s jet black hair cascaded down her well-tanned face and she flicked it over her shoulder before she spoke.

“Erika, bambino,” she purred.

“Mother,” replied Eric through clenched teeth. He hated being called Erika and bambino more than he hated losing.

“Did you win?” she asked with the Latin accent that Eric knew turned grown men to gibbering wrecks.

“Yes.”

“I knew you would, that’s why I knew you it would not be a problem if I was not there.”

“You said you would!” Eric replied angrily.

“I know what I said bambino but I managed to get a last minute appointment with Pierre La Vache before he

flew off for the Milano show. He is such an exciting young fashion designer with so many wonderful ideas on how to use fabrics for women that I just had to meet him. If I hadn't met him today it could have been up to two weeks before I got another appointment."

"Oh, lucky you," Eric didn't know what else to say.

"I knew you would be happy for me Erika. I have to go as I'm half way through being measured. Ciao bambino, see you at home."

No sooner had the screen turned blank than it filled with colour again. This time a man appeared. He had a long angular face and blond hair in a side parting, similar to Eric's.

"Hi son," Eric's father never called him by his name, "Andrea's been telling me you vere great today."

"I won," was all Eric could think of to reply.

"You von," Eric's father could not say 'w'. "Of course you did. I expect nothing but the best from my boy."

"It would have been nice if you had been there father." Eric almost swallowed the words as he said them.

On the screen Eric's father appeared to squirm. "Sorry son, you know I vood have loved to but these rich Parisians have, how do you say in English, so much money and so little hours."

"Time. So little time," corrected Eric. "What happened?"

"I von," Eric's dad leaned forward and looked around him to make sure no one was listening and whispered, "six point seven million."

"Well done," said Eric but there was no conviction in his praise.

"Thanks, son. It vill make sure your mother has clothes for a few more day, no?" Eric's father laughed falsely and then raised his voice. "Can you hear me, Andrea?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good job on the competition in the newspaper, vell

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done,” congratulated Mr Meyer. “I saw it was in Le Monde, El Pais, Das Bild and The Times in the hotel *tabac* where I was playing poker.”

“Thank you Sir, it was in every national newspaper in Europe.”

“Including, San Marino?”

“Of course.”

“What competition was this father?” asked Eric, suddenly concerned that there was something he did not know about.

Once again Eric’s father began to squirm and Eric knew he wasn’t going to like it when his father replied, “At home I will tell you.”

After his father signed off Eric asked Andrea semi-seriously if it was possible to divorce his parents.

## PARENTS PET PROJECT

A black crow circled over Ursula's head before landing on a broken CCTV camera only a few metres from where she stood. It stared at her through its beady dark eyes and gave a loud squawk. Even the birds have attitude in *les banlieues*, thought Ursula and tried to scare it off. The crow refused to move and continued to stare, challenging her right to be there on the roof, eight floors above the ground.

"I'll only be a minute," Ursula told the crow who, apparently satisfied with this statement, flew away over her head. Ursula followed him with her eyes, as he flew across her neighbourhood and towards the Stade de France.

Despite being only half a kilometre from Ursula's home it was another world away. The stadium was covered in advertising boards and was made of the latest materials all welded and concreted stylishly together. It was an arena which people flocked to and marveled at. When people saw Ursula's neighbourhood, *les banlieues* at Saint-Denis, they were just relieved that they did not live there and beat a quick retreat.

Ursula lived in an eighth floor apartment on a square of four high-rise blocks. It was a concrete cuboid embedded with small windows, balconies that rarely saw any sunlight and passageways where lights, if they were working, were permanently on. None of the CCTV cameras which watched these areas worked and like the blocks themselves they had been painted grey. The occasional flashes of colour, on these crumbling urban tombstones, were

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impressive pieces of graffiti that belonged to unknown nocturnal artists or flags of the residents' home countries. From numerous windows proudly hung the flags of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Djibouti, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Morocco, Togo, Tunisia, Zaire and more. To residents they were colourful symbols, which scattered across the four high-rises brought welcome relief from the oppressive and over bearing grey. To middle class Parisians who walked past, on their way to the stadium, they were viewed as warning signs telling them to stay away. Ursula liked the flags, could name them all, and was proud of the fact that so many different nationalities were present in her neighbourhood of only four apartment blocks.

Enclosed by these high rises was an outside communal area made up of a basketball net woven from metal chains, three trees which continued to live in spite of the amount of engravings on their trunks, several broken benches and, below them all, more concrete. Ursula knew that there were better places to live but she liked the area anyway and it even had its own soundtrack. As she stood on the roof she could hear Arabic Rai, Euro Pop and French Rap echoing between the blocks.

On the corner of her building she had painted a little white cross, next to the edge and overlooking the communal area. She approached like a panther and, bending down, placed her hands firmly between the cross and the edge, kicking her legs in the air as she did so. The world turned upside down and she gazed momentarily at the building above the sky before swinging her legs down and gripping the edge tightly. Her body turned through one hundred and eighty degrees, she let go and landed almost silently on a balcony below that was completely covered in lush green plants.

The plants emerged from numerous yoghurt pots on the balcony's ledge, from old plastic buckets on the floor and from burst footballs hanging from the ceiling.

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Amongst them all, in a large flowery nylon dress and with a watering can in her hand, was Ursula's Grandmother Benjamin or Mémé, as she liked to be called. She was a short woman shaped like a pear with the largest bottom in the block. Her black hair was wrapped around dusty pink and baby blue curlers and she looked decidedly unimpressed.

"*Salut*, Mémé," greeted Ursula and smiled meekly.

"I've told you not to jump down onto the balcony. You will get yourself killed," she scolded in her thick French African accent, "where have you been anyway? You have been a long time!"

"*Pardon* Mémé, I was enjoying the weather."

"At least someone is. I'm hotter than a burning coconut. It wasn't even this hot when I lived near the equator."

"I know, you keep telling me."

"You have been enjoying it for a whole afternoon, the pharmacy is only over the road," and she pointed into the distance.

"It was closed," lied Ursula, and hated herself for saying this the instant the words left her lips. "I had to go to another one." This bit at least was true.

Mémé clasped her rough hands around the battered watering can and looked at Ursula with eyes that had seen it all. She knew Ursula was not being completely truthful, but the girl had been brought up to know the difference between right and wrong and did what she was told without complaint.

"Well, at least tell me you've got Granddad Benjamin's medicine."

"Yes, it's here," and Ursula pointed to her pocket.

Mémé's face softened and, still clasping the metal can, she waved Ursula towards the balcony door with her fleshy arms. Ursula squeezed between the plants and her grandmother. As she passed she gave Mémé a quick sneaky hug before being shooed away by the smiling old

lady.

The balcony door led directly into the living room and Ursula stepped inside onto the orange paisley carpet. Instantly Mémé appeared in the door way.

“Take off your trainers, *ma chérie*. I’ve just cleaned.”

Ursula did as she was told and placed them on the mat besides the feeble looking door. The room was sparsely furnished, containing only a brown and beige sofa which Ursula found too itchy to sit on, a huge old television with a small screen placed dangerously on a rickety metal stand, a fold up white formica table with matching chairs and, in pride of place near the window, a glass cabinet full of random trinkets. These included five blown glass animals, a wind up clock standing on a CD which they never played, Kinder egg toys and china ornaments. These ornaments, and the furniture, were all much older than Ursula but the room was spotlessly clean and everything had been carefully looked after.

Ursula walked through, past the kitchen and to the short hallway that led to the other three rooms in the flat: the bathroom, her room and her destination, her grandparents’ bedroom.

It was dim in the room but she could still see her Granddad, laying fast-asleep on top of the yellow nylon sheets. He was wearing a string vest and baggy faded black trousers held up by green braces. A thin beam of sun light, from a crack in the purple curtains, bounced off his bald ebony head and lit up the glass on the circular bedside table. Inside it, covered in water, were his dentures. One day, when she had money, Ursula wanted to replace these with a pair of wind-up teeth. The thought of them in his mouth chattering away uncontrollably often made her giggle and she knew he would chuckle at it too. Granddad Benjamin had the best and loudest laugh in the world, a roaring infectious laugh which everyone who heard it would join in with. Unfortunately, he also had the worst and loudest snore in the world, a trumpet blasting snore

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which could have been put to better use warning ships in fog. Ursula decided to save her ears, sat softly on the end of the bed, away from the noise, and took hold of Granddad Benjamin's naked left foot. Gently, she shook it until the old man woke up.

"Hello Granddad," she said, "I've bought your medicine."

Ever since Ursula was a baby Granddad Benjamin had only spoken English to her, while Mémé spoke French, and he expected only English to be spoken back. He had told on her numerous occasions that he had had to learn English, French plus his own language and if he could learn three then he was sure she could learn two.

He raised his head to look at Ursula, smiled a gummy grin and replied, "Fang oo, dear."

"Put your teeth in Granddad."

"Solly," he sat up and in one movement took his teeth out of the water, threw them in the air and caught them skillfully in this mouth. Once again he smiled but this time his teeth were at right angles to where they should have been. Ursula laughed and he waved his hand in front of his mouth until he revealed a beaming white crescent moon of a smile. Granddad Benjamin was full of little tricks and, even though Ursula had seen them many times, she still couldn't see how he did them.

"Hand it over then little miss," he said with a smile as he put out a calloused palm.

Ursula retrieved the box from her pocket and asked, "Will I get your illness, Granddad?"

"Oh no, I suffer from a problem only men and normally only old men get. With better medicine I would be much better, but these are the best for now," and he shook the box. "But you are trying to distract me. Where is my change?" he asked gently.

Ursula sighed, removed the twenty Euro cents from her pocket and handed it over.

"Is that all?"

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“I bought some *bonbons*,” she lied.

“After running around for your Granddad I’m sure you deserve them. But don’t tell your Grandmother.”

Ursula smiled with relief and promised she wouldn’t. She hated lying but she felt she really had no choice. Granddad Benjamin needed the medicine and it was her job to get it for him.

Since Granddad Benjamin had developed his mysterious illness, and Mémé refused to leave the flat without him, Ursula had inherited all the outside chores. This meant, primarily, shopping and going to the pharmacy for medicine. At first it was difficult for their weekly allowance to stretch to both but Ursula learnt to shop around, soon found the cheapest shops for different items and used her keen mental mathematics ability to make it work. However, when prices rose during the financial crisis this quickly became impossible. Ursula’s grandparents, who were not economically minded, could not understand it and, even if they did, they did not have enough money to change it. As a result Ursula was forced into an impossible situation: get Granddad his medicine and have no food, or buy food and deny Granddad his medicine. Neither was a good option so Ursula, even though she knew it was wrong, chose a third one. She was thinking about this when Granddad Benjamin playfully hit her with a newspaper.

“Hey daydreamer, take a look at that,” and he thrust a tightly folded paper into her hand.

Ursula took it, opened it out in front of her and scanned the front page. It was the previous day’s *Le Monde*, which a neighbour always kept for her Granddad. The headline announced, ‘Hailstones Destroy Vineyards’ and Ursula was not interested enough to read on.

“What’s the big deal?” asked Ursula scratching her head.

“Not that,” said her Granddad, shuffling up the bed to sit beside her, “but this.”

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He opened the paper to page 3 and tapped a full page advert repeatedly with his finger until Ursula started to read it.

*WIN 10,000 EURO!*

*10,000 Euro prize money will be given tax-free to anyone in Europe who can solve this puzzle!*

She glanced briefly over the puzzle and then read below:

*All entries should include name, age and address and are to be received within seven days of publication at the following address:  
WIN 10,000 EURO PUZZLE, BP 1357911, FRANCE  
In case of a draw please include a similar puzzle you have written with its solution.*

“So what do you think?” Granddad Benjamin asked, barely able to contain the excitement in his voice.

“What do I think about what?” Ursula was confused.

“For a smart girl you are slow sometimes.” he mocked.

“The puzzle! Do you think you could do it?”

Ursula stared intently at the puzzle. It took up most of the page and was made up of an irregular hexagon with letters, numbers and symbols she had never seen before, dotted around its outside edges. Some of them appeared inside smaller hexagons within the larger one but they were scattered around in what appeared to be a totally random pattern. There were no instructions, no rules and no guidelines given.

Granddad Benjamin took her arm with a sweaty hand and looked at her expectantly. “Well, can you?”

“Granddad this puzzle is in Le Monde, a newspaper for adults. How am I supposed to do it? I’m only eleven.”

In spite of what she had said Granddad Benjamin still looked excited. His hand left her arm, patted her on the back and he said, “I know but if anyone can do it you

can.”

“Okay Granddad, for you I’ll try,” Ursula declared, gripped the paper tightly and strode purposefully out of the room.

Granddad Benjamin lay back on his bed and thought about what he would do with the money. It was a simple dream, but one that would not go away and one that he had had since Ursula first started talking many years earlier. He would place it all in a savings account and, when Ursula was old enough, he would send her away to get a good education, to university, and out of the *les banlieues* forever.

Ursula’s room was only big enough for a small bed, wardrobe and desk. The neatly made bed rested against one wall and on top of the pink blanket slept Ursula’s teddy bear, Fred. On the opposite wall, separated by a thin strip of carpet underlay, was a wardrobe and the desk. The wardrobe was so old that the wood had warped and the doors no longer shut. Mémé would not permit anything to be stuck on the walls of the room, as she thought it looked unsightly, but allowed the wardrobe to be used instead. Because of this Ursula had completely covered the wardrobe in cut outs from Granddad Benjamin’s newspapers. Zinedine Zidane fought for space with cyclists in the Tour de France who overlapped with French astronauts who partially covered Lady Diana who nudged against Nelson Mandela and so on. Next to the wardrobe Ursula sat at her worn little desk. It had been used so much that the letters, words and sentences were etched into the wood. Until Granddad Benjamin placed a piece of glass on the surface it had been difficult to use but now it was perfect and, if Ursula became bored while working, she could read what was written underneath it. At the moment she was not bored. School work bored her as it was all too easy, crosswords and puzzles from Mémé’s magazines bored her but this puzzle was something else and it definitely was not boring.

## AN EXTRA-ORDINARY BEGINNING

There was a quiet knock at the door and Granddad Benjamin entered sheepishly. Ursula was so deep in concentration that she didn't notice. On the desk in front of her the puzzle lay untouched, next to an old chess set, but she frantically turned a short stubby pencil in her left hand as she pondered it. Granddad Benjamin watched and leaned against the wardrobe door which creaked and broke Ursula's concentration.

"Granddad, what are you doing out of bed?" she asked caringly, for he rarely left his bed other than to visit the toilet, which he did often.

He gave her a big warm smile and placed one of his wife's homemade sunflower seed biscuits delicately on the desk so as not to disturb the puzzle. Placing a finger to his bald head he silently mouthed, "brain food," and shuffled out in small, careful steps.

The moment he closed the door behind him the smell of the biscuit reached Ursula's nose and it smelt delicious. It was still warm as she picked it up and it felt comforting in her skinny fingers. She ate in small bites, savouring every mouthful, and catching any crumbs that fell in her palm. Mémé's biscuits were the best in the world, better than any Ursula had eaten from a shop, and the sunflower ones were her favourite. She finished off the remaining crumbs from her hand and, feeling suitably energized, she continued to work on the puzzle.

Within sixty minutes she had completed it and within another thirty she had written her own similar puzzle, with solution, and was sitting on her grandparents' bed explaining how she had done it. Outside, the sun had set but Ursula was basking in the warmth of her Granddad's delighted smile.

"I knew you could do it," he said, more excited than he had been for years.

"And I knew I would find you with your Granddad," interrupted Mémé, appearing in the bedroom doorway. "It's bedtime for you young lady," she ordered.

## THE ADVENTURES OF ERIC AND URSULA

Her hands were placed forcefully on her hips and Ursula knew that this pose meant Granddad Benjamin was in trouble.

“But Marie-Thérèse,” he pleaded, in French, as his wife spoke limited English. “Ursula has just solved the prize puzzle in *Le Monde*,”

“I don’t care if she’s just solved the planet’s energy crisis. It’s bedtime! And that applies to you too, Jerome. I’m not happy with you at all, NOT AT ALL, I say.”

Granddad is in for it now, thought Ursula and looked for a place to hide, in case Mémé started throwing things at him. Even though Mémé had not done this for years Ursula did not want to get caught in the cross-fire in case it happened again.

“The whole of Europe will be entering that competition, millions and millions of people who are probably a lot cleverer than Ursula.” She looked at Ursula, apologized for the last comment, and continued, “Which means absolutely no chance of winning. Getting Ursula excited for no reason is one thing but getting yourself so excited at your age, and with your health, and with a lack of proper medication is just, just,” she hunted for the right word, “Dangerous.” She pointed at Ursula, “Come on you, au lit!”

Ursula was glad to leave before Mémé gave her Granddad a proper roasting. She had only done the puzzle to make him happy, she hadn’t meant to get him excited or get him into trouble. Leaving the newspaper and her puzzle on the bed she stood up miserably and walked towards the door.

“*Bonne nuit*, Mémé,” she said and gave her Grandmother a kiss on the cheek.

“*Bonne nuit*, ma chérie,” replied Mémé, moving away from the door.

Behind his wife’s back Granddad Benjamin pulled a rude face which made Ursula giggle as she tiptoed past her Grandmother.

## AN EXTRA-ORDINARY BEGINNING

The moment she had left the room Mémé picked up Le Monde and Ursula's puzzle and waved them in her husband's direction. "I mean it Jerome, Ursula will be devastated if she lost you and so would I."

Granddad Benjamin dropped his head solemnly and mumbled an apology but his wife hadn't quite finished yet. She kept shaking the newspaper and puzzle, which were now screwed up together, and continued.

"And none of this puzzle nonsense!" she warned before storming out of the bedroom, turning out the light as she went.

In the darkness Granddad Benjamin whispered, "She's a softy, really. She'll send it." A victorious smile appeared across his face and he promptly fell fast asleep.

The next morning at dawn, before anyone was up, Mémé took the screwed up newspaper and unfolded it as if it was made of gold. She cut out the puzzle, as neatly as she could, and put it with the puzzle Ursula had written. Taking extra care she ironed each one and then placed them in an envelope she had addressed the previous evening. As quiet as a mouse she slipped out of the flat, took the lift down to the post box on the ground floor of the block and secretly sent off Ursula's entry.

Eric gripped Le Monde tightly in his right hand and a fountain pen in his left. He was worried but he did not let it show as he stood in the centre of his parent's luxurious Parisian living room. They had four other properties around the world but this was undoubtedly his least favourite and, at nearly two hundred and fifty years old, the oldest. In his opinion it belonged in the years before the French Revolution with its grandiose furnishings, marble flooring and fireplace the size of a shed. The decadent crystal chandelier alone had just been valued at over one hundred thousand Euros and his parents adored it. He could understand why the French peasants had wanted to chop off aristocratic heads when they entered

these buildings. Simple bad taste in furnishings alone was reason enough in Eric's mind. However, the worst thing about the room, which he loathed more than everything else put together, was the smug family portrait. It hung above the crafted mantelpiece in a gold gilded frame and dominated the room. There were two reasons he hated it so much. Firstly, he had not posed for it. Secondly, it had been painted in a romantic style with pinkish rose hues that made him want to retch. To keep his food down he looked from the painting to his parents. They were sat in front of him on a rich burgundy sofa with finely carved teak legs.

Mr and Mrs Meyer were sat very close together with knees touching and hands resting in each other's. Eric had watched his father play poker and had seen that where money and gambling were concerned, he was supremely focused. Eric had watched his mother on the catwalk and had seen that she oozed confidence from every beautiful pore. However, where Eric was concerned they were neither focused nor confident. Most of the time they just avoided Eric and when they did spend time with him, they didn't really know what to do, unless it involved giving presents.

"So, let me get this absolutely clear," said Eric throwing the pen above his head. It spun around in the air so close to the expensive chandelier that his mother winced. "The only thing you wanted to tell me this evening is that you are running a rather childish competition in the international press of Europe and the person who solves this silly little puzzle will win ten thousand Euros?"

"It's not that silly, bambino," said his mother looking hurt and pouting.

"It took me slightly longer than an hour to complete it and I'm ONLY eleven! Of course it's silly."

"But it was designed by a man I hired with an IQ plus 200, son," his father said.

"Next time why don't you save yourself some money

## AN EXTRA-ORDINARY BEGINNING

and ask me to do it.” Eric was on edge, he knew that his parents were avoiding telling him something else. Their stalling was unnerving his Saxon reason and awakening his Latin temper. “I’ll ask again, the only thing you wanted to tell me this evening was about this competition?”

Mr Meyer’s eyes moved away from Eric and made contact with his wife’s. Without speaking but with an unobtrusive nodding of his head he prompted his wife to tell Eric the news. She looked guiltily flustered, began to pout again and shot glances at her son. Even though he looked calm and stood almost like a statue, inside Eric was turning to jelly. All he wanted was a normal family life, but his parents seemed opposed to such boring matters as bringing up a child. What else could he expect from a beauty queen and poker king who met in Vegas, dated in Monaco and were married by a pastor dressed as Elvis on the Great Barrier Reef?

The pouting stopped and Mrs Meyer began, “Erika, bambino.”

Eric’s back tensed. His mother would never let him forget that he was not the daughter she had so desperately desired.

“We are worried that you are lonely. That you are talented and... gifted and... special.”

Eric did nothing but waited for the punch line. He was being complimented which, he had learnt from experience, meant the news he was about to receive was really bad. His mother continued.

“Therefore, we wanted to find someone who was a match or an equal to you.”

“In other words, son,” his father interrupted, “we have decided to use the ‘Meyer Foundation for the Deprived, Needy and Challenged’ to find you a friend.”

“I don’t need your foundation for the poor, dirty and stupid to find me a friend. I don’t need friends,” Eric stated forcefully and then blurted out, “I just need you.”

If his parents had been tortoises they would have

chosen that moment to retreat sharply into their shells and not re-emerge until Spring.

“If a suitable person enters a winning puzzle into the competition, son, we will use the foundation to award them a scholarship to your school in Prague.”

Just as Eric was about to say, “Great! I’m going to bed,” Mr. Meyer nudged his wife. This new development was frightening, it meant they had not finished yet. Eric’s mouth froze before he could utter the words.

“As well as the scholarship, bambino, we will also support the winner financially in Prague.”

There was more to come, Eric could feel it, and his blood started to boil.

“And Erika,” she paused, fearful to go on, “they can live in our house too.”

That was it, the big news that they were scared to tell him was out in the open, the bombshell had been detonated. Phew, it’s over, thought Eric. Despite being mightily annoyed at the future intrusion on his privacy he let his shoulders drop and he relaxed. He congratulated his parents on such noble charity work; applauded his ‘Parents’ Pet Project’ as he instantly named it. He hoped that the PPP would be happy in the cellar with the rats, bid his parents a good night and spun round to leave. Behind him his father let out an extremely false cough that he normally reserved for waiters in fancy restaurants. Eric stopped in a heartbeat and without hurrying, for fear of showing his concern, turned around on the spot.

“You have not fully understood, son,” said Mr Meyer stumbling over his words as he said them. “They von’t be staying with the rats, they’ll be staying with us, sort of, in a manner of talking, if you see what I mean.”

Eric’s mind went into overdrive. Shared dinners, wet towels in his bathroom, fights over the television channel, locks on his room, no chocolate biscuits... but all he could think of saying was, “Fine, I don’t have to communicate with your PPP, I’ll just ignore it and speak to you instead.”

## AN EXTRA-ORDINARY BEGINNING

Mrs Meyer removed a frilly handkerchief from a satin sleeve and dabbed her forehead delicately. “Erika, bambino, you may have to if we are not there.”

“I’ll wait until you get home,” he answered assuredly and crossed his arms securely to show that he meant what he said.

“That might be hard, son, because your mother and me, ve have been speaking and next month is our anniversary of fourteen years.”

“Congratulations,” said Eric flatly but his father ignored him.

“So ve decided to go on a second honeymoon.”

“Good for you,” said Eric without any trace of enthusiasm. “Take a week or two weeks, I’m sure I can handle the PPP for that long.”

Suddenly Mrs Meyer blurted out, “We’ll be gone from September until April.”

Eric’s jaw hit the floor. “What? Eight months!”

“Yes, we’ve decided to make good use of the yacht and sail around the world,” declared his mother as if she was just going down the shops. “But don’t worry, Andrea will be here to look after you both.”

In a fraction of a second Eric’s blood reached boiling point and his brain spun out of control. He had no idea who was now talking to him. It could not be his parents. Parents would never leave their child for eight months! On the sofa, with reassuring smiles plastered all over their faces, sat his mother and father. They looked as if they did not have a care in the world. With a jolt that made him wince Eric’s mind went blank. The thoughts that had been exploding in his mind like fireworks stopped and a new one emerged. It flashed in his head like breaking news on the television, ‘PARENTS AWAY FOR EIGHT MONTHS TO BE REPLACED BY INSIGNIFICANT PPP FLAT-MATE. ERIC MEYER WHEN ASKED TO COMMENT STATED...’ In truth Eric did not know what to say; his dream of a normal family life had been put

on hold for yet another eight months and he felt, he felt, he felt...

His thoughts were broken by a rather uninformed and ill-timed comment from his mother. "Cuddle, bambino?"

It was the straw that broke the camel's back and Eric felt his rage about to spin out of control. His parents took this point to stand up, walk quickly behind the sofa and out of the living room into the hallway. They didn't even say good night. Eric saw in quick succession yellow, orange and then RED. Without thinking he charged, like an Olympic long jumper, towards where they had been sitting and sprang into the air. Eric hit the well sprung sofa with the speed of a train, his feet sunk into the cushions and he sprang backwards up towards the high ceiling. He twisted effortlessly in the air, dropped *Le Monde*, put out his hands and caught hold of the chandelier. The force of his movement swung the chandelier upwards and just before it made contact with the ceiling Eric let go. He somersaulted towards the door, landed calmly on his feet and walked quietly out of the room as if nothing had happened. Behind him there was a thunderous crash as the chandelier hit the ceiling and smashed into countless crystal hailstones which rained down upon the room.

When at last the glass and dust settled Eric's parents appeared from the hallway door.

"I thought that vent vell," said Mr Meyer gleefully.

"I agree," purred his wife. "Let's go out for dinner."