

Paweł Beręsowicz, *Scary-scary*

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“I want a Daddy and Sonny story!” I went silent.

“Very scary or just a bit?”

I chose very scary. I know Daddy well, so I was getting ready for scary-scary. I clutched the duvet with both hands, ready to pull it over my head any minute, just in case. I moved towards the edge of the bed—close enough to feel Daddy with my hip, but not enough to push him off the bed and onto the floor.

And that is how the story went:

Once upon a time there lived Sonny boy and his Daddy. They lived in a big town, in a medium-size house. On warm, sunny days they used to put their shoes on and go out into the garden. It was by no means an ordinary garden. It was a special garden which could function also as a football stadium. Between the games, it was overgrown with bushes, flowers and carrots. But as soon as Daddy and his Sonny appeared in front of the house, the bushes, flowers and carrots would immediately hide underground. The lawn—small and shapeless—stretched in all directions and turned into a huge rectangular football pitch. The small trees moved closer to one another and turned into goals, and the fence... the fence turned into stands. When the weather was nice, there were thousands of people in the stands. A million at times!

“Sonny! Sonny! Sonny!” they chanted so loudly that window panes in the neighbouring tenement building were vibrating. A sea of colourful scarves fluttered in the air.

The boy would choose a target, take a run-up and kick the ball, which then dashed through the air while Daddy threw himself trying to catch it. Only it so happened that whenever Daddy threw himself to the right, the ball headed left. When he threw himself to the left, the ball veered to the right. That is how Sonny used to outfox his Daddy.

And then, one warm, sunny day, Daddy said to his son: “You know what? Go and play in the garden yourself.” “What about you?” “I’m not in the mood. I’m really tired.”

Indeed, Daddy didn’t look well. Pale, with dark circles under his eyes, he seemed strangely nervous.

And so, the boy went out to the garden by himself. He stood in the middle with the ball in his hands. He looked around with anticipation, stamping his feet impatiently, and muttered: “Huh!”

The bushes, the flowers and the carrots were nowhere near hiding underground. The lawn has not even begun to stretch. The trees were just standing there, rustling as if nothing happened.

“Something is off,” the boy mumbled.

At first, he thought the stadium software stopped working. It should be enough to call in an IT specialist. Then, he started thinking that it was a more serious malfunction. In the evening, while walking with Daddy to a store, he noticed that everyone they met on the way seemed sullen and preoccupied. As if their software was malfunctioning, too. That was the day when Sonny heard the word “ring” for the first time. It drifted out of a conversation of two ladies who passed them by, fell into Sonny’s ear and made no special impression on him. But when he heard it for the second time—uttered behind the neighbours’ fence—and the third time on the radio through an open window, and then the fourth, fifth and sixth time, he thought to himself: “Oh, oh! Six times ‘ring’ in one day? That’s very suspicious.”

During supper, Sonny asked what the word meant, but Daddy just sighed and made a face. He clearly wanted to postpone explaining what the ‘ring’ was to his Sonny boy.

“Ring? he muttered reluctantly. “Like a wedding ring, only a big one.”

“How big?” Sonny asked. “To fit the whole hand?”

“Bigger, perhaps.”

“To fit a leg?”

“Bigger still.”

“To fit the house?” Sonny started giggling quietly, as he always did whenever he got carried away imagining things.

Alas, Daddy was in no mood for giggles. He interrupted the boy and said without skipping a beat:

“They found a ring around the town.”

Sonny's eyes became round as saucers and sparkled like bicycle wheel reflectors.

"A golden one?" he gasped.

"No, not golden."

"Silver?"

"No."

"So what is it like?" Sonny was getting impatient.

Daddy was trying to explain but it came out rather vague. He said that it's not like anything else, cause it's transparent, therefore invisible, really. The question seemed rather obvious: "So how do we know it's there?"

Dad scratched his head and decided it's easier to show rather than talk about it. He bent over the table and put his hands in such a way that all the cups, plates and cutlery were inside the circle formed by his arms. His hands, initially barely touching, began to interlock and then move further, towards the opposite elbows. The ring was shrinking, tightening, and the dishes cluttered on the table top as they were drawing closer and closer to the middle. Herded in, they fought for space, pushed one another, crumpled, clashed; in the end, a jar of jam, stuck between a sugar bowl and a saucer, fell with a clank onto a plate which broke into two uneven pieces.

"That's how we know," Daddy said when this happened. "It's closing in."

The place where they lived looked normal for the time being—two hundred steps from the house to the school, as always; sixty steps from the post office to the newsagent's. What ring, closing in how?—the boy tried to cheer himself up sometimes. But the rumours floating in the air were nothing but cheerful. They said the airport got closer to the hospital. Allegedly, the courthouse pushed the theatre out to the middle of the street. Allegedly, at some places houses were already touching one another.

At night, in bed, the boy could hear faraway screeching and grunting noises getting more and more distinct. More and more often the fire engine sirens would not let him sleep. One morning, it turned out that a striped powerhouse chimney disappeared from view outside the window, even though it had been there the previous evening, for sure. At other times, glass objects in the kitchen would clink from a distant tremor. Later, they said that the university pushed its way into the town hall and knocked over the clock tower. And, of course, it was hard not to notice the people. At every corner, on every street, more and more of them each day, tired and scared, they were searching for places that had not yet been squashed.

And then, at last—Daddy and his Sonny boy were in the middle of dinner—a cracking of wooden boards breaking resounded close by. They both jumped up and ran to the window. In the middle of the garden, right where the penalty area used to be—before the stadium software malfunctioned, that is—stood the neighbouring tenement house.

“Daddy,” the boy asked anxiously. “Will the ring ever stop?”

They spent the next two days bringing supplies to the house, which was very clever—on the third day, the tenement building drew so close that it was impossible to open the door and step outside. That night, the boy slept in his own bed for the last time. The next day, the ring tightened around the town so much that the walls of the house tumbled down and his bedroom ceased to exist. He had to move to the other side of the house, to Daddy’s bedroom.

“Your bedroom is squash-proof, isn’t it?” the boy enquired, standing in the doorway, clutching his pillow which he somehow managed to rescue.

Daddy seemed to be pondering over his question for a while. In the end, he sighed heavily and knelt down. He grabbed the edge of the carpet and started rolling it up. As the roll grew

thicker with each new layer, the outline of a rectangular hatch appeared on the bare floor. The boy scrutinized its four sides closely and asked with suspicion:

“A hatch? What for?”

“It’s an entrance to a tunnel.”

“A long one?”

“Yes.”

“Does it lead beyond the ring?”

“Yep.”

The boy jumped up with joy and shouted:

“Hurrah! Let’s go then! What are we waiting for?”

Daddy did not jump with joy. He kept rubbing his chin and shaking his head.

“You see,” he finally spoke. “We don’t know what awaits us on the other side. It can go both ways. It can be good or bad.”

There was a crunching noise behind the wall. A zigzagging crack appeared all the way from the floor to the ceiling. Sonny and Daddy exchanged glances and rushed to the hatch. They lifted it together and supported it with a stick attached to the underside. They bent over the black opening and called out into the depths of the hole:

“Hello, anyone there?”

There was a hissing noise and a cracking noise behind the wall. Dust from the ceiling sprinkled the heads of Daddy and his Sonny boy. They pulled their backpacks from the wardrobe and began to pack whatever they could fit inside them. Clothes, food, a torch. Water, a cup, medicines. A blanket, a knife, money.

“Where’s my pillow?” the boy looked around anxiously.

There was a banging sound behind the wall. The entire house shook. A wall was pushed into the bedroom, and bricks began to fall onto the floor. They didn't have time to lose. They grabbed their backpacks, jumped and closed the hatch. Swathed in total darkness, they listened to the rumbling noise coming from above.

"Daddy, are you there?" the boy whispered when it eventually got quiet.

"I'm right here."

"Do you think good things await us on the other side?"

"I'm sure they do."

Daddy didn't sound sure at all, but the boy's hand managed to locate a familiar shape in the darkness, and it was all that counted. They lit the torch to check it was really them, and they found their backpacks laying on the ground.

"Shall we go?" the boy suggested in a brisk manner.

Off they went. The tunnel stretched into the unknown—flat at times, at other times it led upwards or down again. If it turned, it turned gently, in a wide arc, but whether it led north or south, east or west, it was impossible to tell from the stone vault. When they got hungry, they ate; when they got tired, they slept wrapped in blankets, with their heads on their backpacks.

And then, they'd wake up again and continue to walk. Sometimes they talked, sometimes they sang, sometimes they were silent, deep in thoughts.

"You know what, daddy?" the boy would repeat now and again. "I have a feeling good things await us."

It also happened—who knows, perhaps just as often, especially when the legs hurt and the stomach was empty—that the boy's instinct told him exactly the opposite.

“You know what, Daddy?” he’d mumble then. “I’m slightly worried that no good awaits us after all.”

One day, Daddy said they had to eat less as they were running out of supplies. Instead of a slice of bread, they would eat half a slice, to make it last longer. When there was only one slice left, Daddy put half of it aside and they shared half a slice between the two of them. Half a slice of bread does not give one a lot of energy, and a quarter of a slice even less, and one-eighth of a slice less still, so... it was getting increasingly difficult to keep walking, and the boy felt like crying more and more often. And then, the torch went dead. The last battery was finished.

“Do you think good things await us?” the boy sobbed, even though it was getting less and less likely they’d ever reach the other side.

From now on, they had to proceed in total darkness. Daddy went first, his arms stretched out in front of him. The boy followed right behind, holding onto a strap from Daddy’s backpack. When they rested, they sat together but they hardly ever spoke. Sometimes the boy would reach for his Daddy’s cheek to check how much beard has grown since the last time he checked.

They proceeded very slowly. It’s very hard to walk faster without as much as a piece of bread in one’s stomach, not even breadcrumbs. Since it was pitch black all around, they could walk with their eyes closed, trying to imagine they were somewhere else. The boy was particularly good at this. One time, he almost succeeded—he was sure he was in his garden, the stadium software working without a fault. He placed the ball on the ground and was running up to it...

“Ouch!” he woke up, having hit his nose against something.

It was Daddy’s backpack. Instead of moving forward, it stood still, blocking the way. The darkness in front of him mumbled tentatively:



“That’s bizarre. It’s the end of the tunnel, or so it seems.”

It looked as if the tunnel ended right there. Daddy could feel cold, wet stone with his fingers, and no crack or fissure, no passage to proceed further. Suddenly, his hand felt something, something other than a wall. It protruded from the wall and left a metallic smell on Daddy’s fingers. Above it, there was another one, and yet another one above this one.

“A ladder,” Daddy whispered.

They look up, their hearts pounding. For the first time in a very long time, they saw something other than total darkness. A rectangle. A black one, too, but somewhat lighter than the rest.

“A hatch?” the boy asked in a trembling voice. “I wonder if good things await us beyond the hatch.”

Daddy placed his foot on the first rung and began to climb slowly. Once he reached the top, he stretched his arm towards the hatch and pushed it lightly. It moved.

“Daddy, Daddy! Are we going to be ok?” he heard Sonny’s anxious voice coming from below.

“I’m not sure yet,” he whispered.

Daddy pushed harder and the hatch gave way. The story ended abruptly. The silence over my bed was so deep that I could almost hear the noise made by the shadows on the wall.

“Are you listening to me at all?” Dad glanced at me with suspicion.

Perhaps he could feel I was drawing closer and closer, pushing him off the edge of the mattress. It’s true, I haven’t been listening carefully for the past few minutes. I was looking intensely at a point right behind Dad’s knee, in the very middle of the room. I could swear

that the carpet moved. To make sure, I closed my eyes for a moment, and then opened them and looked again. There was no doubt now. Something was going on there, for sure. The carpet was moving, as if something or someone was pushing it from below. A big bubble appeared on the floor.

“Daddy, Daddy! Are we going to be ok?” I heard a voice, as if coming from under the ground. “Wait a minute!” said someone much closer to me.

The person down below was clearly losing his patience. “Daddy!” he insisted. “Is it ok? Tell me!”

Silence fell, the carpet billowed. I couldn’t bear the tension any longer. “You’re going to be ok, you’ve reached us!” I shouted.