

A stylized illustration of a girl's face and hair. The hair is dark and curly, rendered with dense, scribbled lines. The girl's face is pale pink, with a large, detailed eye featuring a black pupil and radiating lines. Her hand is visible near her chin, and she is wearing a red garment. The background is a solid red color.


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THE GIRL

**WHO KEPT
HER EYES
OPEN**



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'Watch out, you're about to crush it!' shouts Alina.

Tomek stops suddenly and looks up from his phone.

'What? What's the matter?'

'You almost crushed that poor snail! Watch where you're stepping!'

Luckily Alina spotted the poor creature, otherwise it would have been reduced to a pulp.

That's why everyone calls her **'Alina-Big-Eyes'**. Not just because of her big blue eyes, but (above all) because she sees everything around her. She has a knack for noticing things that other people don't.

Alina is 10. She lives in a small town in the European Union.

This morning, she's on her way to school with her older brother Tomek.

As he walks scrolling through his phone, Alina keeps interrupting him.

'Hey, I just found a four-leaf clover.'

'Look, that cloud is shaped like an elephant!'

'Did you see the dog? He really looks like his owner!'

Tomek grumbles *'My dear sister who notices everything, can't you see I'm busy?'*

Alina shrugs. Why are big brothers always so grumpy?

They arrive at school and Alina sees her best friends.

'Hi girls, what's new? Hey Anka, did you cut your fringe?'

'No one can hide anything from Alina-Big-Eyes!'





The teacher comes into the classroom.

'Children, we have a new pupil joining our class. Her name is Sofia. She doesn't speak the local language, so I am counting on you to give her a warm welcome.'

'Sofia, there is a place next to Ewa.'

Sofia is shy. She sits down in silence.

She is pale and looks exhausted.

All day long she doesn't say a word.

And the more time goes by, the more she seems to struggle to stay focused.

When the bell rings at the end of the day it makes her jump, as if she had almost fallen asleep.

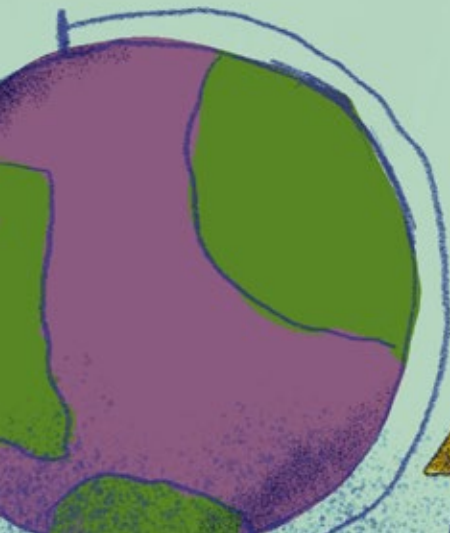
She picks up her things and quickly leaves the classroom.

Alina sees her running towards her mother who is waiting at the gate.

She snuggles into her arms, while her mother strokes her hair as if to soothe her.

'I would be embarrassed to hug my mother like that front of everyone!'
says one of the children.

Alina does not answer. She thinks she would probably do the same after the first day at a new school where she doesn't know anyone.







For the first few days, the other children watch Sofia. But after a week, as she hardly speaks and stays in a corner during break time, they end up losing interest. The only time they pay any attention to her is to laugh when she falls asleep in class.

'Hey Alina-Big-Eyes, Sofia is the opposite of you! You always have your eyes open, and she always has hers closed! She's Sofia-Small-Eyes!'

Alina shrugs.

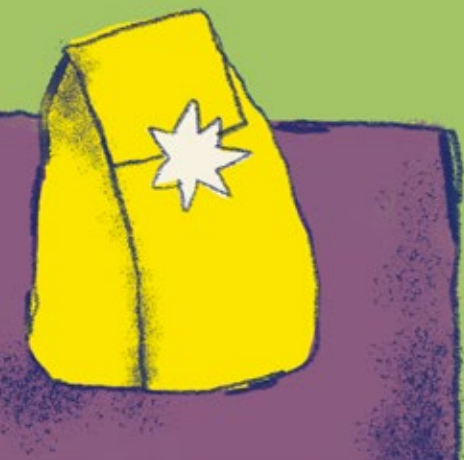
She knows that we should not judge on appearances. She knows that often, if we bother to take an interest in others, we can better understand why they behave the way they do.

She would like to talk a bit more to Sofia, but feels that she needs a little time to get used to her new school.

Alina has heard that Sofia is from Ukraine and there is war there.


She saw pictures on television.

She finds it incredible that a few hundred kilometres away bombs fall on towns that look like hers. She realises that she could have been born there... and that life can be unfair.









Alina is very excited. Today it's the annual town fair and she loves going there.

'Dad, are we going to the fair today? Please, please!!! You promised!'

'Ask your mother. I'm busy! Argh, where are my car keys? This always happens when I'm late!'

Alina replies with a smile *'I saw them somewhere. If I tell you, can we go to the fair tonight?'*

'Alina, I don't have time for games. I'm in a hurry! Where are they?'

'I'll take that as a "yes" for the fair... OK, they're already in your backpack. I saw you put them there last night when you got home from work.'

'Oh yes, that's right! I put them there to make sure I didn't forget them! THANKS! See you later, I'm off.'

'Yes Dad, see you later... to go to the fair together!'

Alina not only notices everything, but she is also very determined.

The whole town is at the fair.

Alina doesn't know where to turn.

She opens her eyes even wider than usual, as if she wants to take in everything around her: the flashing lights of the rides, the bright colours of the sweet shops, the smiles of the little kids on the merry-go-round, the terrified look of people on the roller coaster...

She points at the scary figures on the front of the ghost train.

'Mum, look at the witch! She looks like Aunt Olga!'

'Mmm, that's not a very nice thing to say, but you're not completely wrong' replies her mother. Tomek nearly chokes on his candyfloss.

'Hey, look, there's Sofia over there with her mum!'

Alina thinks it's a good opportunity to get to know her a little better, since this place is much cooler than school.

'Come on! I will introduce her to you. She's new. She's from Ukraine.'

Alina's parents exchange a look.

'Yes, let's go say hi,' says her mother. ***'I'm sure they don't know many people.'***





Sofia is surprised at first when she sees Alina and her family, but then her face lights up with a shy smile.

It is true that of all the pupils, Alina is her favourite, even if they don't talk to each other much. She's the only one who doesn't laugh at her when she dozes off in class, or when she doesn't quite understand a question. Besides, she is the only one who also has a nickname.

Alina's parents introduce themselves to Sofia's mother and start a conversation which Alina can't follow because of noise around them.

'Shall we get some pancakes?' says her dad. 'It's on me!'


The whole group loves this idea.

On the way though, Sofia seems frightened by the crowd. She clings to her mother's hand.

'You'll see, the pancakes here are delicious. And the man who runs the stand is an old friend. He'll give us extra chocolate!'







It's true, the pancakes are excellent. And, as expected, the man is not stingy with the chocolate.

Suddenly, there's a big bang nearby.

Sofia jumps and her pancake falls to the floor.

'The fireworks are beginning' says Tomek.

The rockets start and dramatically light up the sky with a deafening noise.

Alina notices Sofia snuggling up to her mother, shaking.

Her mum says to Alina's parents ***'Thank you for the pancakes. It's been a long time since we've eaten anything so good! I'm really glad to have met you and I hope to see you again soon, but now we need to go home. I'm sorry. It's late and Sofia is tired.'***

And before anyone can answer, they leave very quickly.







The next day at school, Alina sees that Sofia is absent.
Is she ill?

Alina keeps thinking about last night.

About how terrified Sofia was when the fireworks started. Her little body
trembling in her mother's arms. Their hasty departure while everyone
else was enjoying themselves.

And suddenly she understands.





After thinking it through, Alina is certain that Sofia needs her help and decides to visit her. But how can she find out where she lives? Alina takes her courage in both hands and does something she never imagined doing – she goes to see the school secretary. She might be able to help but she is very scary. No one has ever seen her smile. Alina takes a deep breath and knocks on the office door.

'Hello Miss, I need some information. Can you help me, please?'

The woman looks at her suspiciously.

Alina continues ***'Sofia, the new pupil from Ukraine, was absent today and I'd like to bring her the notes that I took during class. But I don't have her address. Could you give it to me, please?'***

Usually, the secretary would be reluctant to give out this kind of information, but Alina seems to mean well, and Sofia is definitely worth looking after. So, she hands her a piece of paper with all the necessary information. All without a smile, of course.

'Thank you so much! And, by the way, I see the red light on your copier is flashing. You probably need to replace the ink cartridge.'

The secretary turns to look at the machine and grunts a thank you.





Alina arrives in front of a large grey building.

There is only one doorbell, which she rings.

A man opens the door.

'What do you want?'

'I've come to visit my friend Sofia. She lives here with her mum.'

'What's her last name?'

Alina hands him a piece of paper on which it is scribbled.

The man checks a list hanging on the wall.

'Fourth floor. Room 412.'

Alina takes the stairs because there is no lift.

She knocks. The door opens.

'Oh, hello Alina. What a surprise!' says Sofia's mother, a little embarrassed.

'Hello, I wanted to see if Sofia was okay.'

'She slept very badly last night. She's in the playground behind the building. You can join her if you want.'

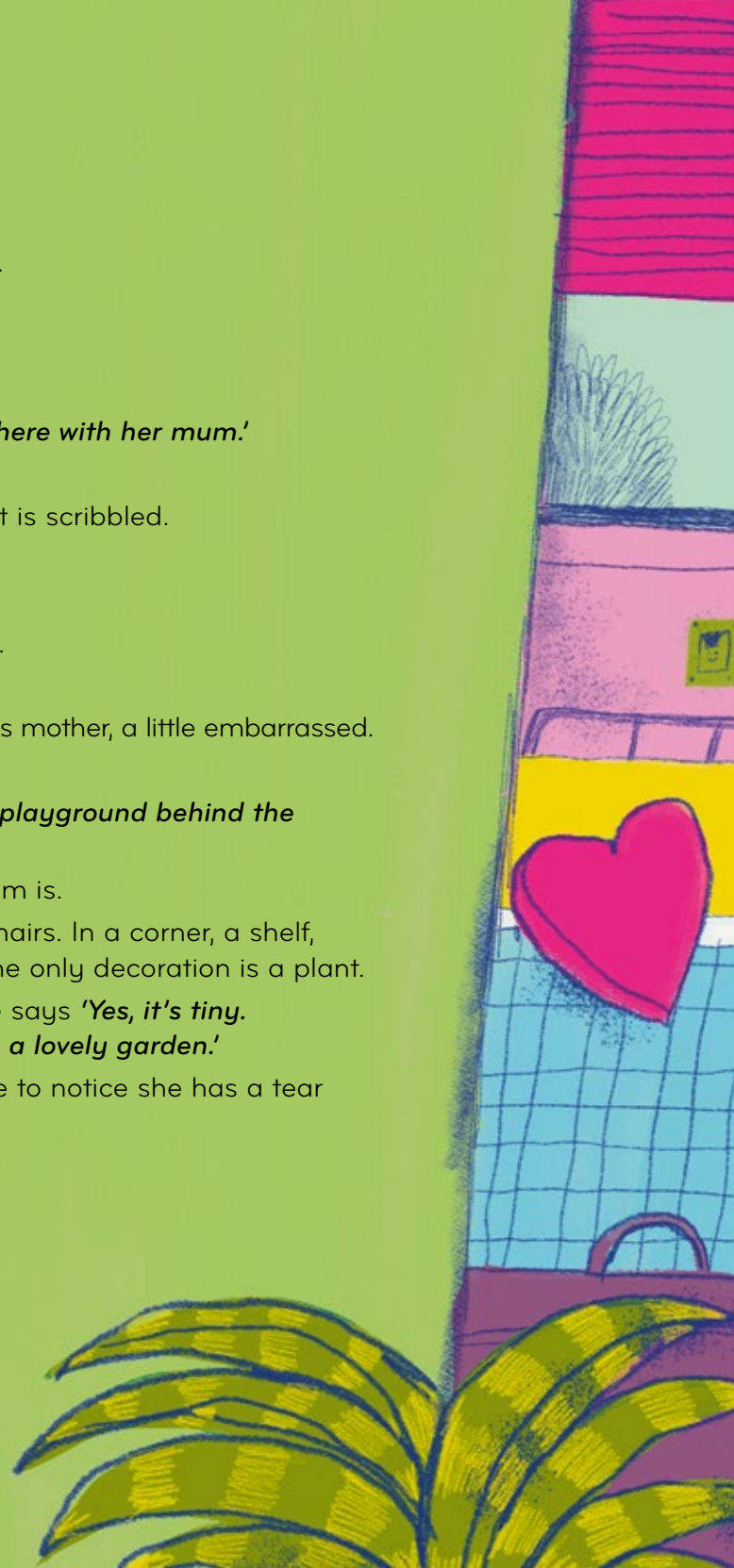
Alina immediately notices how small the room is.

There are two mattresses, a table and two chairs. In a corner, a shelf, a fridge, a microwave and a small cooker. The only decoration is a plant.


The mother reads her thoughts because she says ***'Yes, it's tiny.'***

You know, we used to live in a big house with a lovely garden.'

She turns her head away, but Alina has time to notice she has a tear in the corner of her eye.







'Hey, Sofia. How are you?'

Sofia is alone, sitting on an old swing.

'Alina? What are you doing here?'

'I wanted to see you. You left so quickly last night.'

'Yes, I know. I'm weird sometimes.'

Alina sits down on the other swing.

'No, it's not you who's weird. It's what you're going through that's weird.'

Sofia looks at her.

'I'm so scared.'

'You don't have to be scared anymore. You're safe here.'

'I know. But my dad is still there. We left one morning with just two suitcases. Dad didn't come with us. He told me it was to watch over our house, but I know he had to stay to defend the town, if it is attacked. I overheard a conversation he had with Mum.'

'Have you heard from him?'


'Yes, he calls us every day, but as soon as he hangs up I start to worry again.'

Alina doesn't know what to say.

The only words that manage to come out of her mouth are *'I understand'*.







Sofia tells Alina that very often she can't close her eyes at night.
She's afraid of falling asleep because she has horrible nightmares.
She hears the sound of sirens warning residents of bombs arriving.
She sees flashes of explosions.
She imagines her dad injured.
Or worse.
Alina understands now why Sofia's eyes look so tired during the day.



Back home, Alina can't stop thinking about what Sofia told her. She's too upset to keep it all to herself, so she talks to her mum. Together they turn on the computer and type

'How to help a child who has experienced war?'

This is how Alina realises that the war in Ukraine is just one of many that affect people around the world - many of them children. She also learns that people who go through war often experience what is called post-traumatic stress. This is caused by experiencing events like bombings, shootings or seeing someone injured. This stress gets worse because people are constantly hearing air raid sirens, having to hide in bomb shelters and finding out bad news.

No wonder people, especially children, become anxious, are easily startled and have nightmares. And they try to avoid any reminders of what they went through, as it is too painful for them to think about. She reads that to support a person who has been affected by war you have to make them feel safe. It's very important to be ready to listen, but not to force them to speak. Alina also learns that children have an incredible ability to recover. To do this, they need support and someone to confide in.

She feels like she knows what to do for Sofia, starting with telling her classmates to be more understanding.

It's the least she can do for her Ukrainian friend.

Because now she can say that Sofia is her friend.





Maybe you also know someone who has fled the war.
Keep your eyes open because they need your support.
Don't judge them, rather try to understand them as you don't know
what they've been through.
Listen to them and encourage those around them to do the same.
Say something if you see a classmate bullying or teasing them.
Remember that sometimes it only takes one act of kindness to change
someone's life.



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*Keeping your eyes open can make a big difference...
and lead to a beautiful friendship. We see this
through the captivating story of Alina and Sofia.*



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