

Momo and Me

by Gilles van der Loo

It's dark. Momo keeps looking at the gas meter. Its light colors his face orange. Every now and then there is a village, a few houses with their backs to the road as if they're hiding from us. I look at the stars and the black fields, at the telephone lines swooping up and down.

'Hey, little man', Momo says, 'are you awake?'

'Where are we?'

'What I want you to do', he says, 'is read out every sign we pass.'

'But I don't know how to pronounce those funny l's or the s's with a roof.'

'Doesn't matter. Just read them out loud, like in school.'

I squint and look at the side of the road. Momo would have been less angry with me if I hadn't pointed out the boy. The one who had to watch our car while we went out to eat. All the other boys said: *Watch your car, mister?* and this one just looked as if he didn't really want to. *Him*, I said. *Let him do it*. When we got back the radio was gone and the glove compartment was empty. I look at Momo from the corner of my eye, but he just stares at the road.

'What did that sign say?' he asks.

I didn't see the sign.

'Ladolin', I say.

'It should have been here already. We should have been there ages ago.' Momo releases the gas and looks around.

'What's it called where we're going?'

'I don't know.'

'How can we look for something if we don't know what it's called?'

'The name of the village is in my wallet.'

His wallet was in the glove compartment.

Momo brakes so suddenly that my nose hits the lid of the glove compartment. My eyes tear up, so I don't look at Momo but out into

the dark where there's nothing to see but my own reflection. Momo backs up the car and when we pass the sign he brakes again. Whispering, he reads the name of the exit. He sighs like a tire losing all its air and then we take the exit.

When Mama and me moved into the flat next to Momo's, he was standing in the gallery. He winked at me and greeted Mama and all of a sudden it wasn't so bad that we didn't know anyone. But Mama opened the door to our flat and told me: *In*. She didn't say anything to Momo.

At first Mama was home every day but after a while she worked till late and sometimes she stayed away all night. When she came home she smelt of Vodka and she would bump into the couch and be angry with me because I was still up. In the morning she would get sugared Balgiszt at the store. Sometimes she cried. *I'm sorry baby*, she would say, *I'm so sorry. Do you forgive your little mother?*

I think Mama was unhappy and that is why she had to leave. Like the king in the fairy tale Momo told me, whose queen died. He cried so much that his tears flooded the whole kingdom.

It was as if Momo didn't mind Mama being nasty to him, because he kept saying hi. Not until I was in first grade and he came to get me from school every day did Mama start to treat him nicer. Sometimes I saw her looking at him when he was working on his car.

This road is narrower. If I knew what Momo was looking for I could help him, but I'm not allowed to ask any more questions until we get there. And I'm also not allowed to ask if we're there yet.

'Is it far?' I ask.

Momo puts his hand over my mouth. We drive into a village with low houses and small walls and alleys. There is no light anywhere. When we pass the last house, Momo turns off the road onto an even narrower one. We drive until the car almost gets stuck in the mud. Then he turns off the engine.

'Get your stuff', Momo says, 'we're walking.'

'We can't just leave the car in the middle of the road, can we?'

Momo gets out and leans back in: 'Come on. There's nothing left in here anyway.'

I get out and close my door with the knob down, so it's locked.

Momo starts to walk. He takes very large steps and his shoes sink way down in the mud. Where I'm walking, along the sides, the mud isn't so deep. Maybe I should tell him it's better to walk on this side, but he doesn't look like he is in the mood for my advice. When he's like this he'll say: *I'm in no mood for advice from you...*

'Come here', Momo says.

His hands are warm. He presses me to him, with my back against his legs. 'I can't take you any further', he says. 'You see that little light over there?'

When he asks it like that it means he wants me to go there. I turn around, put my face against his stomach. But Momo takes me by the shoulders and turns me back, pushes me forward.

'Momo...', I say.

'I'm here', he says, 'I'll wait for you.'

'But I don't want to go there. Who's there? What do I say?'

'Just walk to the light. They're waiting for you.'

He pushes me and I start walking. I'm looking at the light, so I can't see the road. With every step my shoes sink deeper and deeper, as if the mud doesn't want me to go either. Then I think of all the times that Momo pushed me forward when I didn't dare and suddenly the mud is not so heavy anymore.

One day, when I came out of school, Momo wasn't waiting by the fence. I waited for a long time and then I walked home by myself. He was standing in our hallway with Mama, but they were standing real close, as if they had some secret.

Little man, he said when he saw me. *How awful. I was talking to your mom and completely lost track of time.* And just like that I started to cry, even though I wasn't really sad. Momo wiped my tears away and said: *I promise I'll never leave you standing like that again.* Mama went into her room and slammed the door.

After that, he was there every day. Sometimes he would take me on his shoulders and sometimes he would take me on his back. He was there the day Mama had to go away. I saw his smile wasn't the same. He looked very serious and told me that I was

coming to live with him and his mom for a while. That Mama had to go on a long long trip. He seemed sadder than I was.

I bump into the gate so hard I can't breathe for a while. With my hands on my stomach I look back: Momo is gone.

No. He can't be gone, Momo would never do that.

I open the gate and walk on. Pebbles grind beneath my shoes. The walls of the house are white and the roof is all flat stones, just like the roof at school. There are shutters and the windows have crosses in them. When I'm at the door an old man with a white beard opens the top half.

It's the king from Momo's fairy tale, I can tell by his sad eyes.

The king says something I don't understand and then he says it again. Now he opens the bottom half of the door too and steps back. On his T-shirt it says: *Real Time Measuring Champion. Barclay Number One Winner.*

'Are you the king?' I ask.

Slowly he bends forward. 'A king?' A big wet tear falls from his eye. 'What gives you that idea?'

I knew it. Whatever he says, if he's crying then he must be the king.

The king's house is filled with stuff. There's bikes, a lawnmower and a moped. On a plastic topped table there's an open TV with some kind of pen in a holder next to it. It smells like hot iron, like a car's exhaust.

'I fix stuff', the king says. 'Things that people give me because they're broken.' His breath stinks. 'Because they're broken and people...'

'Is that what a king does? Fix stuff? In our flat there's a guy who fixes stuff because he's a mechanic. And Momo fixes stuff, but he's not married. Are you married?'

'No', the king says, so he's lying. Or doesn't it count when your wife is dead? He says: 'Why don't you take off your sweater? You must be hot.'

I push away his hand. 'Why can't Momo come in?'

'Momo?'

'Momo. He's standing outside.'

'Ah. He thought it better to wait out there.'

'But won't he be cold in the car?'

The king shrugs. He shows me some things he's fixed and I look out the window, at the spot where I think Momo is standing. It's like in our room at night, when I can't see him, but I know he is there. Sometimes, when he gets out of bed because he can't sleep, I wake up too. But Momo always says: *Don't worry, little man, I'll be close by in the living room.* And then I fall asleep again.

The king goes to the stove and takes a boiling pot from it. He lifts the lid and smells.

'You must be hungry', he says.

I'm hungry, but if Momo can't come in then I won't eat. The king takes a mug and spoons something from the pot. He hands me the mug and I put it on the desk, but I put it down too hard and the pen falls out of its holder and rolls over the edge. The point of the pen, which is red hot, hits my arm. It really hurts, but I don't cry. The king picks up the pen and puts his foot on the spot where the carpet is smoking.

'You've got Nikes!' I say.

The king puts the pen back in the holder and gives me the mug.

'Here. Drink up.'

I take the mug because I'm afraid he could get angry and take a sip. It tastes good. Like Mama's soup. Mama's beet soup was better than Momo's mom's, with less green things in it, so I never gagged when I tried to swallow. When Mama began working evenings she never made soup anymore.

What I remember of Mama is how she smells, and that her lips are always red. The time we bought a pair of trousers for me and how she put her hand in the seat of my pants to see if they fitted okay. One of her nails scratched in between my buttocks and I screamed, but Mama just laughed and said: *Don't be a baby.*

'Is it good?' the king asks. 'That was your mother's favorite.'

The mug falls to the ground and the rest of the soup splashes the king's trousers.

'You know my Mama?'

'Why do you think you're here? Didn't that boy explain anything?'

'I wasn't allowed to ask any more questions because I got our stuff stolen and I sent us in the wrong direction.'

The king, who knows Mama, sighs. He picks up the mug and puts it on the stove.

'Listen', he says, 'this is a mistake. If anyone knows I'm no good with children, she does. I'm sorry, but tell the boy-', he points toward Momo, '- that I can't keep you here.'

'But I don't *want* to stay here!', I say, 'I want to be with Momo.'

The king shakes his head. His beard rustles against his T-shirt. He walks to the door and stops, his hand on the handle.

'I want to go!', I shout.

The king steps aside and opens the door very slowly. As I run past him I feel his hand on my neck, as if he wants to try and stop me.

'Boy...', says the king, and then something else, but I'm already gone. I run over the gravel, push through the gate and keep running until it is too dark to run any further. With my hands out in front of me I follow the road to where the car was, to where Momo was.

Momo is not there. Where the car was parked, where I'm sure it was parked, there is no car. Behind me, exactly where it was before, is the little light.

Momo would never do this. He promised.

Before I can help it, I start to cry. I wipe my tears because I'm afraid that Momo will see when he comes back. I go and sit on a pile of wood beside the road and stare in the direction of the village. The woodpile is cold and wet and my pants are getting wet too, but I'll stay and sit here until Momo comes back. If I close my eyes like I'm not worried at all, then surely he will come. I close my eyes. Something moves behind me.

'I hear you', I say. 'I can hear you.'

Momo doesn't answer.

'Come out', I say. 'I know you're there.'

I look back. I can make out the trees and bushes along the road now, and a field with a cow in it. But no Momo.

Things always go wrong for Momo, and it's always because of me. Yesterday, his mother got very angry. She said that he had to find me another home. She said: *Why should I have to take care of that whore's child? When I get back I want him gone!* Then she put on her coat, grabbed her bag and pulled slammed the door behind her. From the window we watched her come out of the building. She crossed the lawn and disappeared into Wiczo street.

Momo told me not to mind her, but I did. At night, after he'd tucked me in, I could hear him on the phone in the living room, talking for a long time. Early this morning he woke me up and gave me my backpack.

'Put some clothes in here', he said. 'We're going on a trip.'

I wake up because of the light. My sweater is wet, stuck to my back, but I'm not cold. There's a blanket over my stomach. It's Momo's blanket, from the back seat of the car.

'I thought you'd never wake up', says Momo. He's standing a little ways away, looking at the cow in the field. I have to stop myself from running and jumping right on top of him, because I'm too old for that now.

'Can I have a cigarette?', I ask.

'No', says Momo, 'but you can have a drag.'

I pull the blanket off me and walk over to him. He hands me the cigarette and I suck my mouth full of smoke, but it's not as good as it smells.

'Listen', says Momo, and he sticks his finger in the air. There is a *ka-du-ka-du-ka-du* somewhere behind the village.

'A train', he says.

Now, it's my turn. I listen closely and think long and hard.

'Cow', I say, 'or a sheep or something.'

'Goat', says Momo. He puts a hand behind his ear and squints into the rising sun.

'Momo?' I say.

His head is down as if he is deep in thought. 'A motorbike', he says. 'Two cylinders.'

'Momo, who is that man in that house?'

He sighs, looks the other way. Then there's his hand on my back, rubbing, like an iron taking all the creases out of my sweater.

'Didn't he say?'

'He said he fixes things.'

A bird sings nearby, like I've never heard before. Momo doesn't seem to hear. He throws the cigarette on the ground, walks over to the woodpile, folds the blanket and tucks it under his arm.

'Come on', he says. 'We're going.'

He holds out his hand and I take it. Together we walk down the path to the car, which is just around the corner. If I'd walked a little further, I would have found it.

'I thought you'd left', I say.

Momo stops. He turns to me and drops to his knees so that his head is just as high as mine. Then he takes me by the sweater and pulls the zipper up to just under my chin.

'You didn't think that, did you?'

I can only nod and then I start to cry again.

'Stop crying', says Momo. He wipes my cheeks with his thumbs and dries his thumbs on his pants. 'That guy is not important, you hear me?'

'But he knows where Mama is, maybe.'

Momo spits on the ground. 'Maybe. It's always maybe.'

'Are we going home now?', I ask. When I say *home* it comes out all funny.

'Yes', says Momo. He takes my hand and together we walk to the car.

'But do we have enough gas?'

He shrugs. 'If the gas runs out we'll rob a gas station.'

I imagine us robbing a gas station, and I put my hand in my pocket like a gun. Driving down the mud path, onto the regular road, I get my gun from my pocket and lean out of the window to shoot at all the traffic signs. Momo honks the horn and drives extra fast, but I know nothing can happen because he has me by the seat of my pants, so I can not fall.

