

Desenredando el duelo



Unravelling the grief

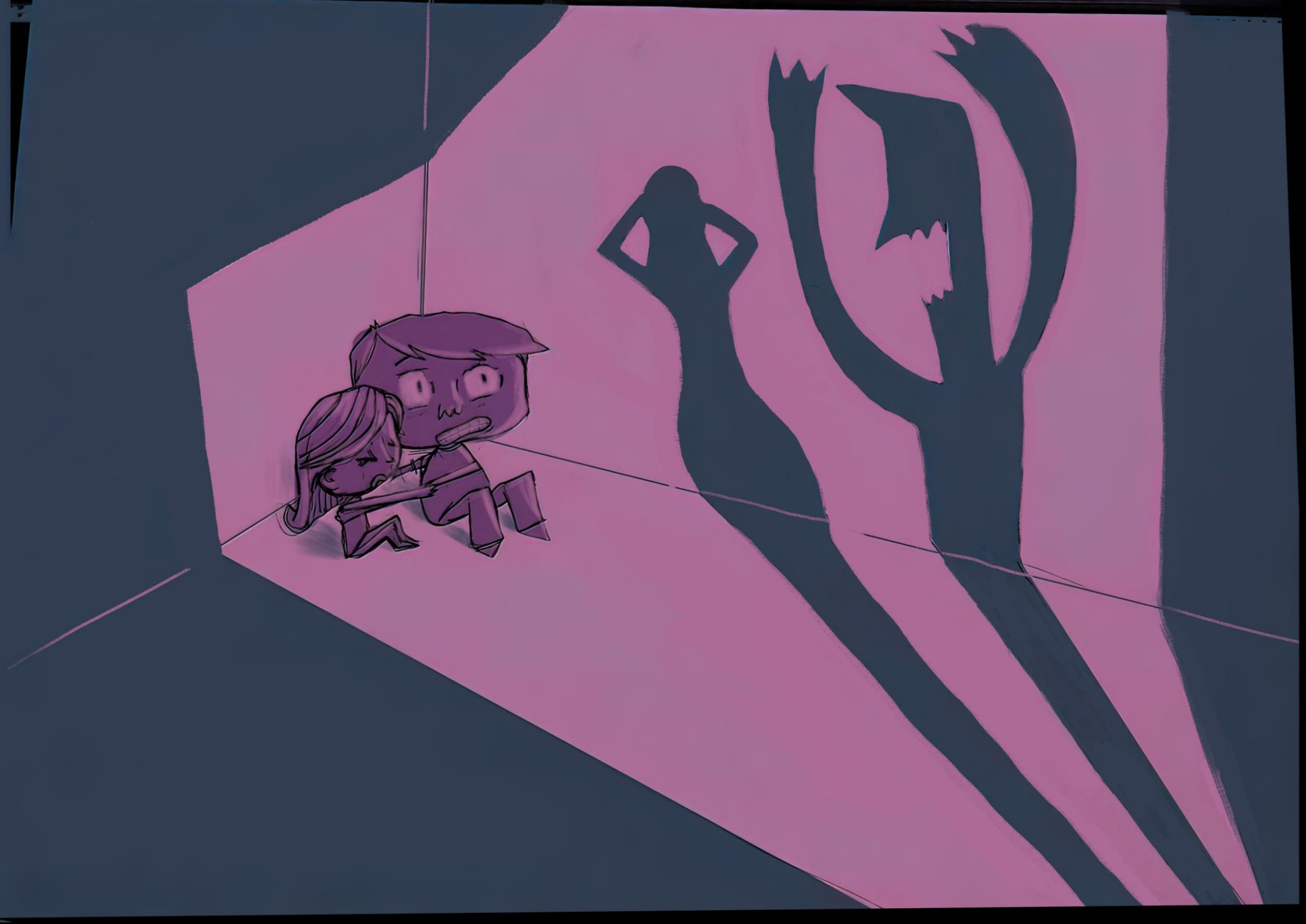
Hi! My name's Matthew and this was my family until my father...



Hola!

Mi nombre es **Mateo**

Y esta era mi familia
hasta que mi padre...



MURDER

Screaming was a fairly regular thing in our house. Dad was angry at so many things that Lara and I didn't think that night would be any different from the rest, but, well... it was.

Mum screamed, crying out for help, but he angrily shoved me away. I huddled up beside Lara crying and begging for it to stop. Then, suddenly, there was silence and a huge bang thundered in our heads. The fear that for years had run through my mind whenever Dad threatened Mum became real. It was over, my world collapsed. I felt like a part of me was dying and would stay there and never come back.



SHOCK

When the police came, I couldn't move, I was paralysed. They wanted to take us away from Mum and I remember Lara hugging her so, so hard that it took several officers to separate them.

Nothing was ever the same again. I felt lost and alone. I wanted to scream, hit out and run... but I was paralysed, as if I was glued to the floor. I couldn't talk, I couldn't think, I couldn't hear, I couldn't feel.

There were lots of people - police, doctors and relatives - moving all around me, round and round, hugging me and talking, but I couldn't feel anything.

Then our grandparents took us back to their house. Lara couldn't stop crying and screaming. I couldn't bear her screams, or my grandparents' hugs and words. I only wanted to be alone.



DENIAL

And so the days passed, and then the months. Every night strange and ugly things came into my head and made me wake up screaming. My grandma would come and hug me tight, and we'd end up crying together, but I still couldn't feel. The headaches and stomach aches were getting worse every day. I stopped doing my homework, watching TV, playing with Lara. Nearly every morning I begged not to go to school. The teachers kept asking me how I was, and my friends would sometimes say that my mother was dead because of my father, but I couldn't stand to hear those words... 'Dead? MUM, MY MUM... she's just sleeping. 'It's just a bad dream,' I told myself. 'Tomorrow Mum will wake me up with a good morning kiss'. Whenever anyone said her name, I'd cover my ears and go off to be alone.



REVICTIMISATION, AMNESIA, TRAUMA

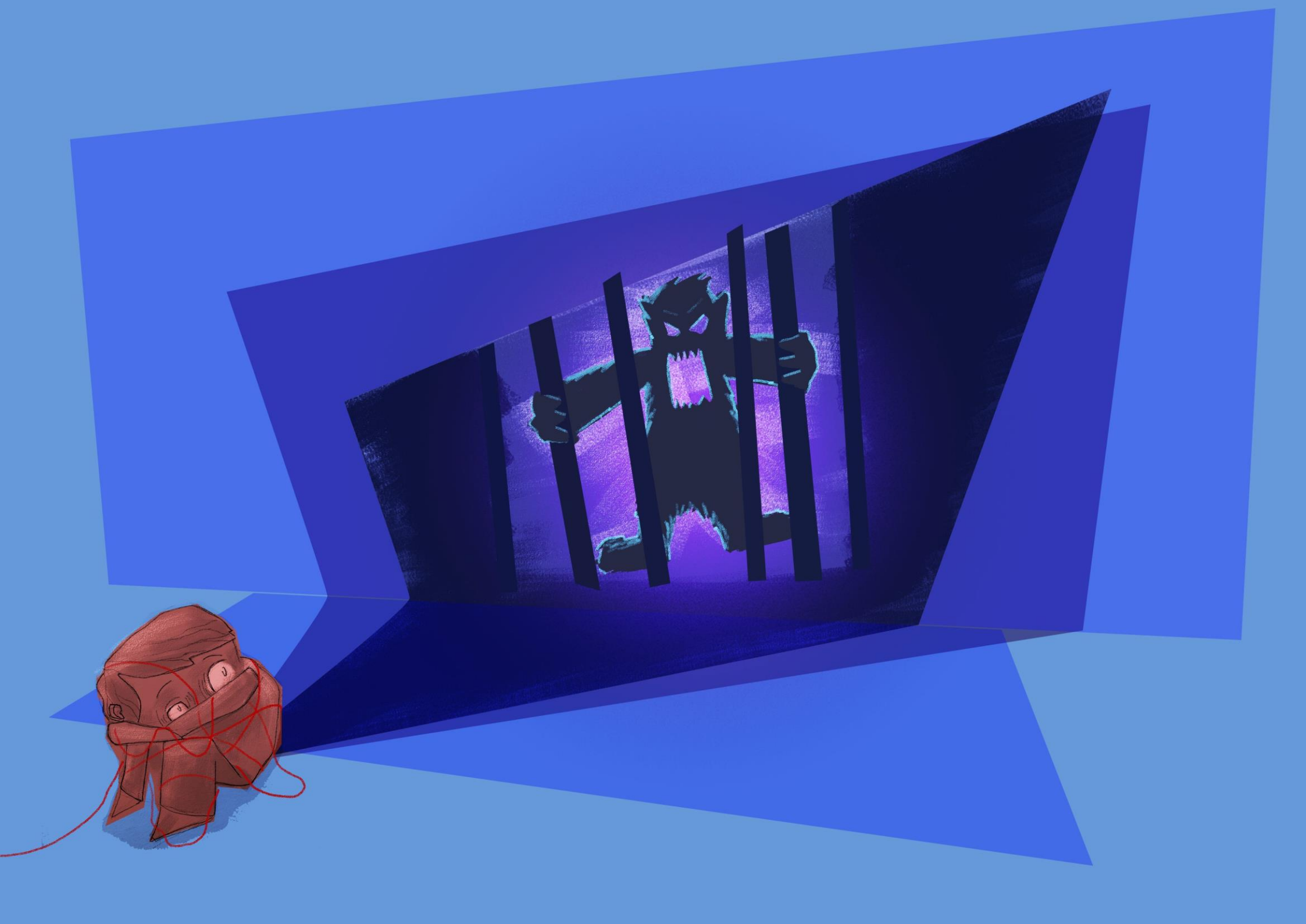
One day, Grandma took Lara and me to the police to tell them about what had happened on that night that I just wanted to forget. And I wanted to forget so much that I could hardly remember anything. While Lara was speaking to them, my mind filled with images of an ugly, hairy monster frothing at the mouth, roaring and destroying everything in its path.

GUILT

After some time had passed, Lara suddenly asked me, 'Matthew, is what happened to Mum our fault?'. I shrugged my shoulders and a shiver ran all down my body. 'Why do you think that?' I asked her, and Lara replied, 'I don't know, sometimes we didn't behave the way Dad wanted us to. He'd get angry with Mum because of us and he did punish us, but it always ended up with him hitting her. Maybe if we'd been better behaved...'. She also said that she was worried about being naughty around our grandparents and that the same thing might happen with them.

I didn't know how to answer, because I'd asked myself so many times why I hadn't done anything to prevent what had happened. 'Maybe if I'd asked for help earlier, or I'd told our grandparents in time, or even the neighbours... maybe Mum would still be here with us'. It hurt so much to think that I hadn't been able to take care of the person who'd loved me the most, the person I'd loved the most in the world.



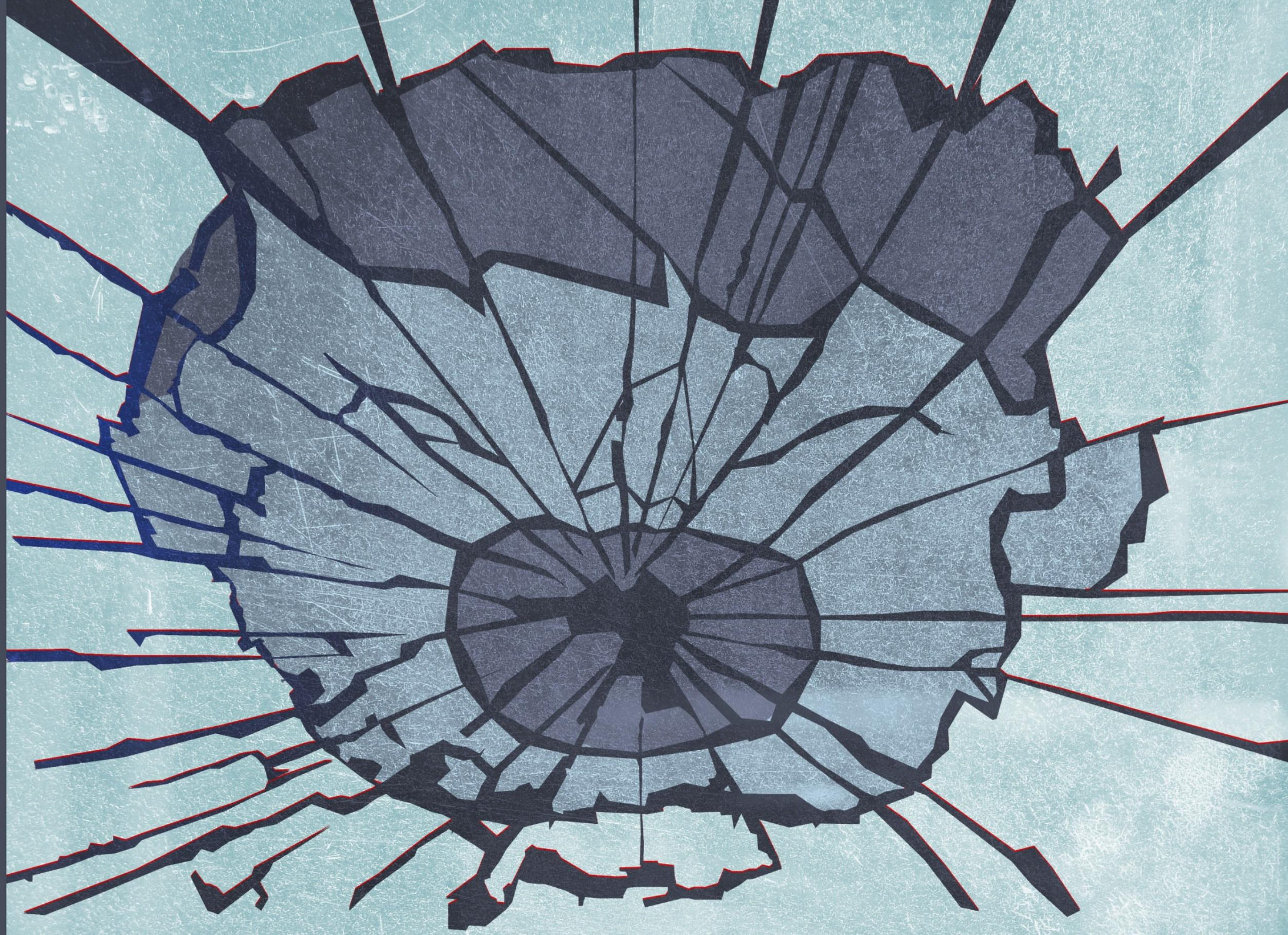


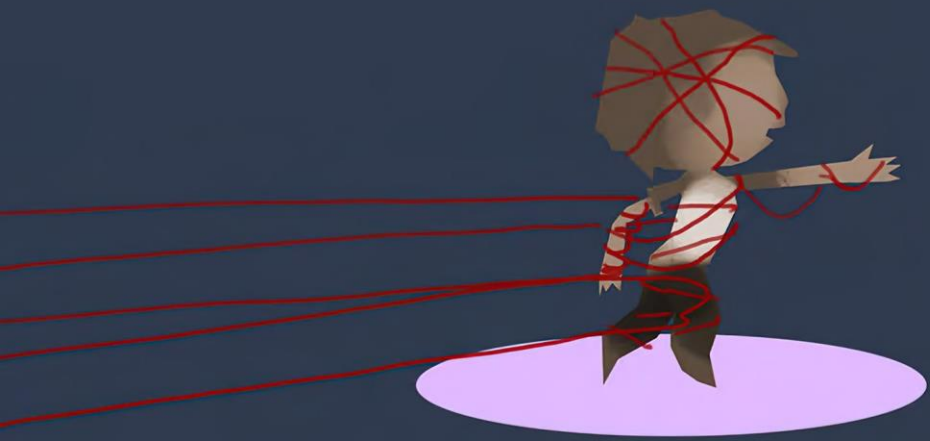
FEAR

Our grandparents told us that Dad was in a place where they send people who do bad things. I knew what that place was and I wished he'd never leave there. I felt so afraid and at the same time so angry every time I thought about him. 'What if he comes back and hurts us or our grandparents?' 'Who'll protect us if he ever comes back?' I wanted so badly just to break everything. 'Why had Dad done something like this to us? It's not fair!' I wanted to go back home with my mum and sister, to play in my room, to laugh, to dance, to be a child like any other child. How would you feel if in just an instant you lost everything?

RAGE

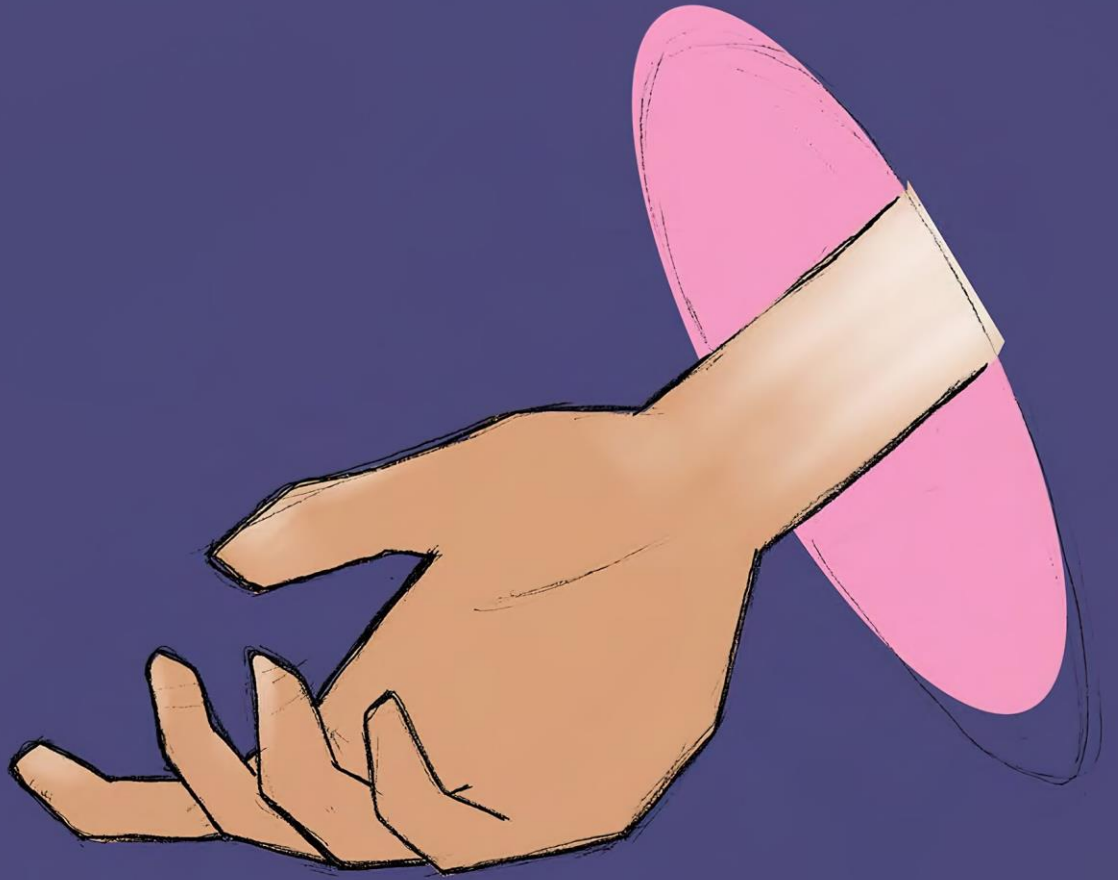
From that night on, I couldn't stop getting angry - about everything and everyone. I started to answer back, to have problems at school and with my classmates, to argue with Lara and our grandparents, with my aunts and uncles when they came to see us, with the whole world. And my head hurt more and more, and I just wanted to scream, 'WHY MUM?' and 'WHY ME?'





SYMPTOMS OF DENIAL

More days and more months passed like this, many more months. The worst were the nights, when I was alone with my nightmares and the images that wouldn't stop flooding my head. Sometimes I heard Lara praying and promising that she'd behave so well if only Mum could come back. She would always fall asleep cuddling me or Grandma. She never wanted to be away from us and cried if we were late home when we went out. I knew that Lara needed me, but I didn't know how to help her.



FINDING HELP

After a while, Grandma told us that we needed to talk about what had happened to someone who could understand and help us. I thought that I'd already talked about it with my sister and I refused. I didn't want to tell anyone about all the bad things that had happened in our house. Lara refused too - she always did what I said now that Mum wasn't there any more. Finally, after a lot of insisting, Grandma convinced us by telling us that it would make her very happy if we at least tried to see if they could help us. And that's how we met Carla, an older girl who had a story to tell us.

'The Lost Children'. When a child loses the most important person in their life, we say that they're lost, like in the title of the story, because they're left without the person they love the most. This is the story of these children.

In a land far, far away, there was an island where the boys and girls who lost their mothers lived. They stayed there for a long time, all the time they needed to accept what had happened. All these children had monstrous fathers and each one described them in their own way, some like an ogre, others like a horrifying creature, some like a venomous snake. And all these fathers had hurt their mothers, hurt them so badly that they'd never wake up again. Some of the monsters were locked up because they were bad, others had gone forever at the same time as their mums, or had disappeared without a trace. The girl who'd been on the island the longest knew exactly how the rest were feeling when they arrived. Almost everyone thought that what was happening wasn't real, that their mum would come back one day, that she wouldn't leave them, that, like in the movies, the bad guy couldn't win.

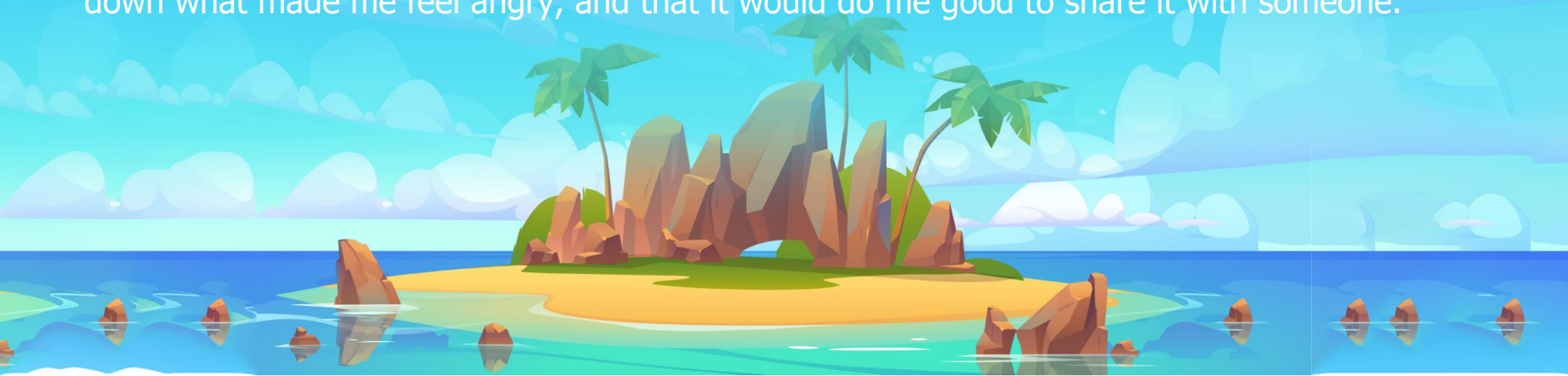
This girl was in charge of looking after them and giving them time to find some calm, guiding them on their way, together with the other boys and girls who'd gone through the same thing. This guide was called Acceptance. But it was Denial who they met when they first arrived on the island, denying everything and wanting to be alone all the time, always saying the word 'NO'. 'No, it didn't happen.' 'No, I don't want to remember.' 'No, I don't want to play.' The new children spent a lot of time with her, sometimes months or even years.

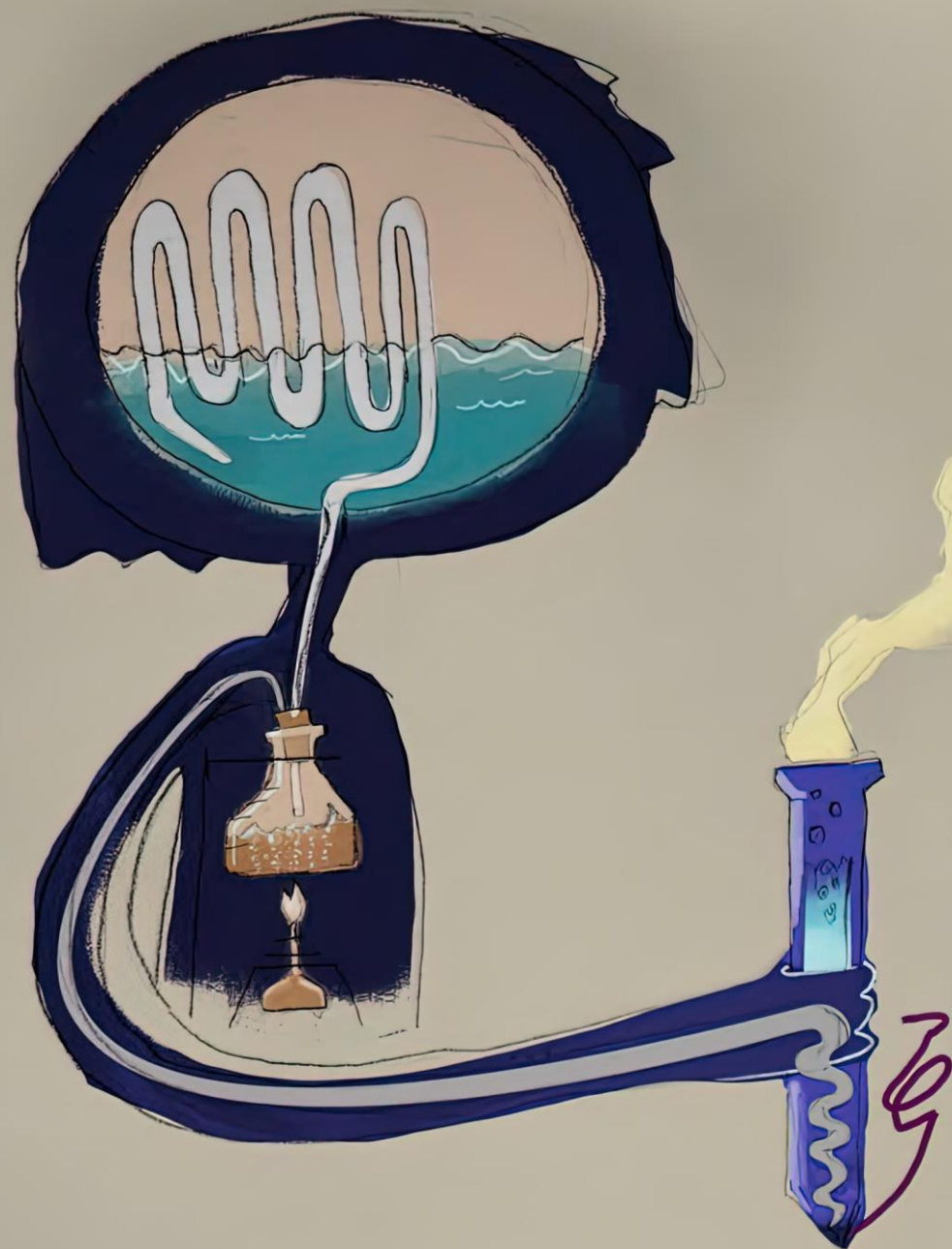
Then they crossed paths with Rage and Injustice, who screamed and kicked and got so angry that it seemed like they were going to explode. 'The monster took my mum and IT'S NOT FAIR!' 'She was my whole world and now she's gone.' They kept tickling the children until they'd say what was making them mad. And what about you, lost child, what's making you angry?

I listened to Carla very carefully and I realised that something was happening inside me - I didn't want to listen to any more stories but at the same time I did.

That night I dreamed that my grandparents weren't there and I was alone, so this time it was me who went to cuddle up with my sister until the morning.

I remembered that Carla had told me that the nightmares came from the bad thoughts that we keep locked up in our heads and don't talk about, and that she'd asked me to write down what made me feel angry, and that it would do me good to share it with someone.

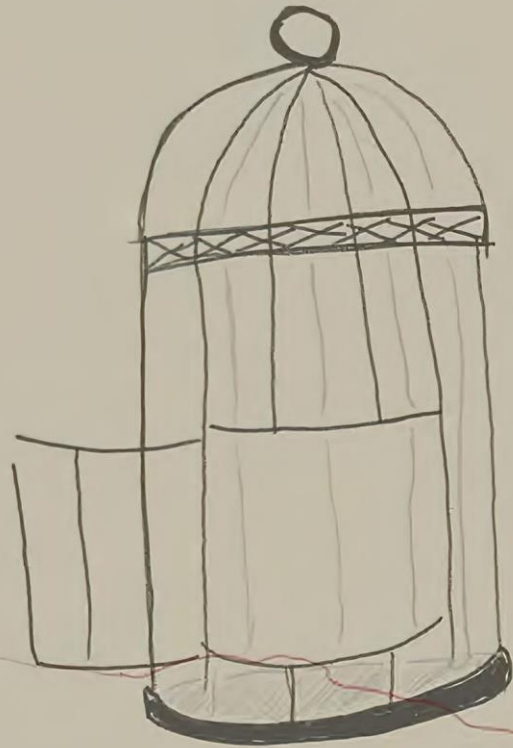




استخرج
سجلا
لانه
من
من

I DON'T TALK ABOUT IT: THE ROLE OF THE PROTECTOR

I hadn't known who to talk to about what I was thinking because Grandma and Granddad cried so much that I thought it was better if they didn't know I had ugly things inside my head. Lara was so small that I just tried to make her smile. My aunts and uncles said it made them so happy the few times they saw me cheerful. So it seemed like a very good idea to try to tell Carla all about what I was feeling and bottling up inside me. She told me to write whatever came into my mind without thinking. 'I HATE YOU SO MUCH. I DON'T EVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN. I WISH IT WAS YOU WHO'D DIED'. I don't really know what happened, but from then on I started to feel a bit better.

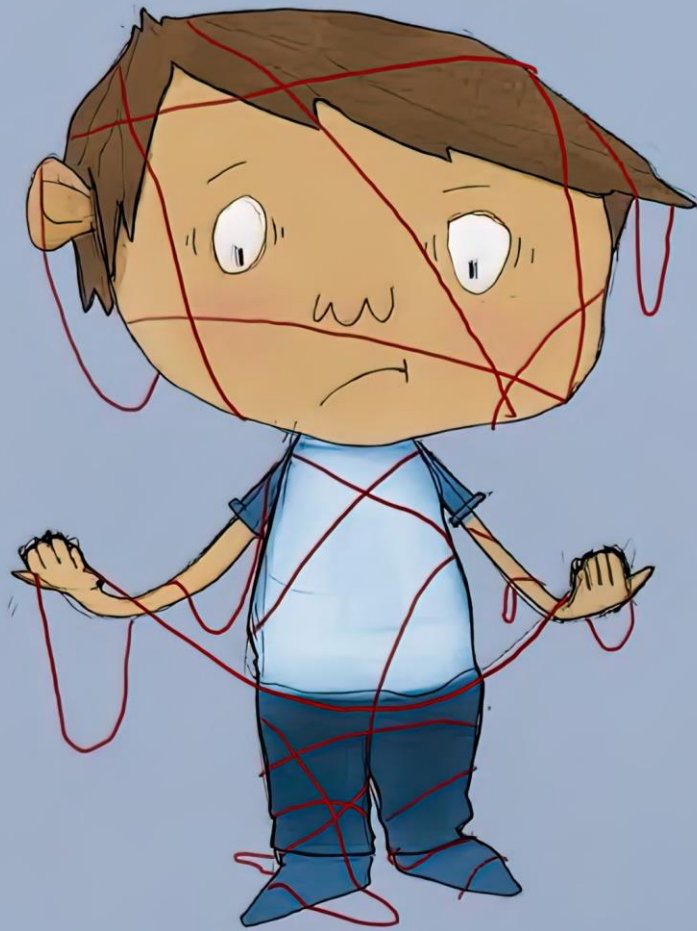


DISTRUST, WITHDRAWAL, ANXIETY

For a long time, Carla visited us every week and told us stories about the Island of Lost Children. We did breathing exercises, we painted, we wrote and each time we told her more secrets. We found out that there are lots of different emotions. Some make you feel better and others make you feel worse, but you need them all. We trusted her more and more.

But it wasn't the same with other people. I stopped trusting friends, teachers and family friends. I thought that anyone could hurt me. 'If someone like your own father, who was supposed to always protect and take care of you, has done you so much harm, what could others do to you?'

For a long time I thought that I'd died that night too. I wasn't who I'd been before and I didn't think I'd ever be again. Nothing got me excited - not birthdays, not parties, not presents. I even thought about how I could be with Mum again because I didn't want a life without her. I liked to imagine that we were still together - me, Mum and Lara - and how happy we could be. But still, 'I felt so empty!' At the same time, I was scared that the monster would come back and take us with it, or that it would hurt my grandparents or my aunts and uncles. I was so lost and alone. I only ever made an effort when I was with Lara because I thought she needed someone to cheer her up.



EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Carla told us that the children on the island found it very difficult to talk about what they felt. They kept everything inside, giving them headaches, stomach aches and leaving a huge hole in their hearts. They spent months without wanting to remember to keep the pain away. They felt abandoned, hurt and furious. That's how we started thinking about things they could do to try and feel better. We made a list of everything we came up with:

If you can't talk about it, draw it or write it down.

If you're angry, scream out loud and let it go.

Keep things that remind you of Mum safe in a box and in your heart.

Talk to someone close to you about your problems.

Write down what you feel about the monster and tear it into a thousand pieces.

Finding ideas for other children wasn't too hard, but when Carla said we could do some ourselves it wasn't so easy.



REVICTIMISATION

After a few months, we had to tell our story yet again, this time in a place called a courthouse. I was fed up of always saying the same thing. 'When was this going to end?' They told me it was important for the people who had to decide what to do with Dad, the monster of my nightmares, so they could make the best decision. I asked Carla to go with me because I was so scared and angry, and she knew how to make it go away.

NEW ATTACHMENT FIGURES, FEAR OF ABANDONMENT, ADAPTATION

Getting used to our new life wasn't easy. We lived with our grandparents and they loved us very much, but they couldn't help us with our homework and they were often busy because they had to go to lots of different places and fill in so many forms so that we could live with them. They didn't do things like Mum did and I missed her so much that whenever I thought about her I got a lump in my throat and I couldn't breathe properly. Lara was always stuck to me or Grandma like glue. She began to be afraid of darkness, loud noises, sleeping on her own, and every night she made us promise that we weren't going to die. I tried to be strong for her, but sometimes I just couldn't stand so much pain and I let myself be carried away by it.

17. DOUBLE THE GRIEF

I began to feel guilty about the part of me that was relieved we didn't have to live with the monster any more - the monster that scared me so much, that terrified me whenever it walked through the door, that punished me for anything it didn't like, that didn't let me take friends home and that made me cry so many times. The same monster that hit and said bad things to Mum while Lara and I shook with fear, always terrified that something awful might happen, as it finally did. I felt guilty because what made me safe took Mum away for ever.

Carla told me that it was normal to feel like this and that I wasn't to blame for anything that happened that night, never mind what I was feeling now, because in that terrible moment, it was the best and the worst thing at the same time. For a long time, I'd dreamed and wished that Dad would leave home and be out of our lives, but when it happened it left us without Mum.



18. SADNESS

The lost children needed to drag up all those bad feelings that they kept inside and let them out so that they could move forward. Carla told us that they nearly all felt guilty. They spent a lot of time trying to get back to how it was before and thinking about what they could have done differently. The mind needs time to take in something so terrible, so they'd stay in the same place for days or months. But with help, they managed to move forward along the path and there they'd find Sadness, who would go with them from there. Sometimes, it's easier to avoid thinking about the things that make us sad so we don't feel bad, but if we don't let these things out, we can't ever leave the island. Without rain, there aren't any rainbows, and with rainbows come the sun.

I didn't want to be sad and worry my family, but I didn't want to think about the memories that brought Mum into my mind, because the images of that night always came back. But Carla suggested some things to do to help both Lara and me:

- Look for pictures of us with Mum and put some in our room and keep the others safe in the memory box.

- Write down the memories that we're afraid to forget and put those in the box too.

- Keep something personal that belonged to her, like a scarf or some jewellery, so we can hold it when we're feeling sad.

- Write a letter to her, telling her what we couldn't say to her and what we'd like her to know, telling her how much we still love her and, finally, saying goodbye to her.



19. SAYING GOODBYE TO MUM

I wasn't ready to say goodbye, I didn't want to do it... but Carla told us that it was a symbolic goodbye so that we could accept in our heads that she was gone. But she'll never be gone from our hearts because she'll be there in all the things we do and with us in all our efforts. She'll always be part of our lives. She'll be alive in our minds as long as we remember her and think about her, it's just that it'll be different, feeling her there instead of being able to see her.

It was more than two years before I was able to write to her, and when I did, I cried so many tears I could have filled an ocean. It was very painful to do, but when a few days had passed I began to feel a bit better. I felt more like doing things and playing. Little by little I began to smile again, and I thought I might be getting ready to leave the Island of Lost Children.

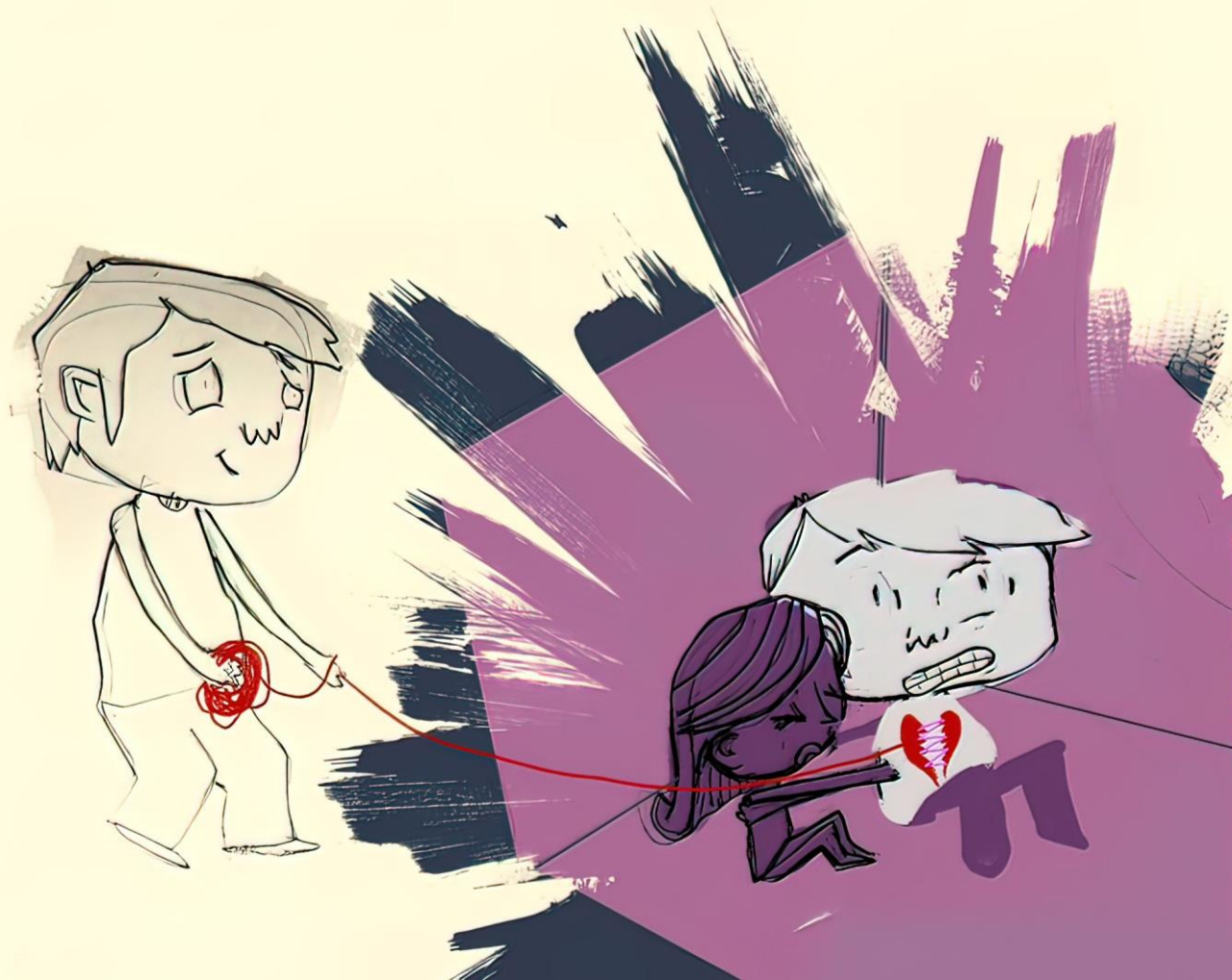
I also began to feel closer to my grandparents, as if I was breaking through a barrier that was invisible but very tough. But still the nightmares and broken nights kept coming and I thought that maybe I'd just have to get used to them.

ADIOS

The word "ADIOS" is rendered in a bold, purple, brush-stroke font. The letters 'A' and 'D' are outlined in yellow. A black dragon is positioned behind the letters, with its head and wings visible. Cyan ribbons are wrapped around the letters, and a small purple dash is above the 'I'.

20. GOODBYE TO THE MONSTER

I began to draw pictures about the monster whenever it came into my mind, because I remembered what Carla had told me when I first began seeing her, that what we don't express will stay inside us forever and make us feel bad. With her help, I wrote another letter to my father. In it, I let go of everything I thought and felt. I let go of the hatred and rage inside, the bitterness... and finally, I said GOODBYE to him forever. I'd decided that I never wanted him in my life or in Lara's ever again, and that's what I told him.



21. HEALING

The pain I felt for my mum was getting a bit duller. I'd let myself be guided by rage, guilt and sadness, always hand-in-hand with that pain, but it was slowly getting smaller. Little by little, it was taking up less space inside my head and heart, leaving room for other feelings that made me feel better.

22. THE PATH TOWARD ACCEPTANCE AND OVERCOMING TRAUMA

More and more years went by... and here I am with the new family I've made. I can't say that it was an easy path - it wasn't - but I can tell you that with help things definitely get better. I'm still not sure if I could leave the island completely, maybe I never will - I'm still guided by the girl who'd been there for the longest time, ACCEPTANCE.

I know a part of my mind is still there with the lost children. I know because I still sometimes have nightmares and a feeling of emptiness inside, but I know too that all the learning about feelings, with the help of my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, Lara, Carla and the children of the island, helped me to leave behind the bad memories and to hold on more and more to the good ones that I had and have.

Accepting the past so I can build the present and the future is a daily fight which with MUM's help I know I'll win.

FOR CAREGIVERS AND PROFESSIONALS

The story of 'The Path of Grief in Lost Children' is intended to shine a light on the children who are orphaned as a result of male violence, focusing on their grieving process. These children have to experience or survive terrible grief. They face a doubly traumatic situation, having to come to terms with the murder of their mother and assimilate the idea that this was done by a person to whom they are also emotionally tied. Their world reels without the anchor of these two main attachment figures.

This means they have to work through two grieving processes simultaneously - the death of their mother and the disappearance or absence of their father. This is compounded by the fact that their new caregivers are likely grieving from the same loss and the fact that they are already traumatised by a history of domestic violence. This situation is devastating for children, inflicting terrible psychological damage, which is sometimes exacerbated by witnessing the murder of their mother. And they must travel this path without their main attachment figure, their mother.

The death of the mother results in the rupture and/or death of the family system; since it is the father who murdered the mother, it cannot be rebuilt. Their trusted reference model has failed, making it difficult for these children to trust other adults. It is very likely that they will become more distrustful, fearful, withdrawn and less accessible children in general; hence the metaphor of the island included in the story.

Because of all these factors, this grief may easily become pathological. Early intervention in this process and protective measures are therefore of vital importance.

As I have explained, this is not common grief and as such it has distinctive characteristics, which we have tried to convey in the telling of the story 'The Path of Grief in Lost Children'. In general, the phases of this grief are more intense and prolonged, and children therefore need more help to overcome it. It becomes a grief with an associated trauma that conditions their childhood and, in many cases, adulthood. The phase of shock, denial or dissociation, common in the first moments of grief, usually persists over time. The minds of these children are not prepared for such an impact, and they escape from their pain by denying it and creating a fantasy about what happened, which in many cases can delay the consequences and make them more long-term. Adult accounts show us that emotional blockage can last for years and in some cases may never pass.

The feelings of guilt run very deep, often seated in conflicting emotions surrounding their relief at losing the father figure and their terrible anguish at losing their mother, coupled with the feeling of self-reproach for not having acted in another way to prevent what happened.

Anger, helplessness and sadness are often intensively interwoven in their lives and the way they are managed is often affected. These are children who have lived with violence in their homes since the moment they were born; during their childhood they have doubtless learned from an inadequate reference model in terms of many developmental aspects at these ages, such as ways of communicating, emotional management, social skills, safety and protection, and emotional bonding. This makes it more complicated to work through the grief without the help of professionals.

Their grief is conditioned in turn by the media impact of this murder on society. These children can feel stigmatised at school and within their social networks. This may sometimes even force them to change schools and friendships to avoid feelings of shame about what happened.

Another handicap along the way is the fact that the caregivers who become new reference figures for these children are usually going through the same grief, since they have lost a daughter or a sister. Taken together with all the necessary bureaucracy involved, this means that they cannot be completely physically or emotionally present to deal with the immediate needs of these children. Accounts by new caregivers underline the fact that it takes months or even years for them to process all the necessary paperwork to obtain legal custody.

This guide is intended to be of use to caregivers and professionals in general who work with children who have suffered this type of loss. Through this story, it is hoped that these children can identify with other stories similar to their own and allow themselves to externalise emotions and verbalise facts that may be suppressed and/or blocked.

With hope that the lost children can, through their guides and companions, find some light along the shadowy path to ACCEPTANCE and not lose their way.

Vanesa Bielsa Soro

