The Unknown Flower (A True Tale)

There lived in the world a little flower. No one even knew it existed on earth. It grew alone on a wasteland; cows and goats did not go there, and the children from the pioneer camp never played there either. No grass grew on the wasteland, only old grey stones lay about, and between them was dry, dead clay. Only the wind wandered over the wasteland; like a sower grandfather, the wind carried seeds and sowed them everywhere — both in the black, moist earth and on the bare, stony wasteland. In the black, kind earth, flowers and grasses were born from the seeds, but in the stone and clay, the seeds died.

And once, a single seed fell from the wind, and it found shelter in a hollow between a stone and the clay. This seed languished for a long time, and then it drank its fill of dew, split open, put out fine root hairs, dug them into the stone and the clay, and began to grow.

Thus that little flower began to live in the world. There was nothing for it to feed on in the stone and the clay; the drops of rain that fell from the sky ran along the surface of the earth and did not penetrate to its root, yet the flower went on living and living and growing little by little higher. It raised its leaves against the wind, and the wind died down near the flower; from the wind, motes of dust fell onto the clay, motes the wind had brought from the black, fertile earth; and in those motes the flower found food, but the motes were dry. To moisten them, the flower watched over the dew all night and gathered it drop by drop onto its leaves. And when the leaves grew heavy with dew, the flower lowered them, and the dew fell down; it moistened the black motes of earth that the wind had brought, and it ate away at the dead clay.

By day the flower watched over the wind, and by night the dew. It labored day and night in order to live and not die. It grew its leaves large so that they could stop the wind and gather the dew. Yet it was hard for the flower to feed on nothing but the motes that had fallen from the wind, and to gather dew for them besides. But it needed life, and it overcame with patience its pain from hunger and weariness. Only once a day did the flower rejoice: when the first ray of the morning sun touched its weary leaves.

If, however, the wind stayed away from the wasteland for a long time, then things went badly for the little flower, and it no longer had the strength to live and grow.

The flower, however, did not want to live sadly; therefore, when it grew utterly sorrowful, it dozed. Still, it constantly strove to grow, even when its roots gnawed at the bare stone and the dry clay. At such times its leaves could not drink their fill of strength and become green: one vein in them was blue, another red, a third light blue or golden. This happened because the flower lacked food, and its suffering showed in the leaves in different colors. The flower itself, however, did not know this: for it was blind and could not see itself as it was.

In the middle of summer the flower opened a corolla at its top. Until then it had looked like a little blade of grass, but now it became a true flower. Its corolla was made of petals of a simple, bright color, clear and strong, like that of a star. And, like a star, it shone with a living, flickering flame, and it could be seen even in the dark of night. And when the wind came to the wasteland, it always touched the flower and carried its scent away with it.

And so it happened that one morning a girl named Dasha was walking past that wasteland. She lived with her friends in the pioneer camp, but this morning she had woken up and grown homesick for her mother. She had written her mother a letter and was carrying the letter to the station so that it would arrive sooner. On the way, Dasha kissed the envelope with the letter and envied it, because it would see her mother sooner than she would.

At the edge of the wasteland, Dasha caught a fragrance. She looked around. There were no flowers nearby; along the path grew only a little blade of grass, and the wasteland was completely bare; but the wind was coming from the wasteland and bringing from there a quiet scent, like the calling voice of a small, unknown life. Dasha remembered a tale her mother had told her long ago. Her mother had spoken of a flower that was always grieving for its mother — a rose — but it could not weep, and its grief passed only in fragrance.

"Perhaps that flower is missing its mother there, just as I am," thought Dasha.

She went into the wasteland and saw that little flower by a stone. Dasha had never seen such a flower before — not in a field, not in a forest, not in a picture in a book, not in a botanical garden, nowhere. She sat down on the ground beside the flower and asked it:

"Why are you like this?"

"I don't know," answered the flower.

"And why are you different from the others?"

The flower again did not know what to say. But for the first time it heard a human voice so close, for the first time someone was looking at it, and it did not want to offend Dasha with silence.

"Because it is hard for me," answered the flower.

"And what is your name?" asked Dasha.

"No one calls me," said the little flower, "I live alone."

Dasha looked around the wasteland.

"Here is stone, here is clay!" she said. "How do you live all alone, how did you grow out of the clay and not die, so little as you are?"

"I don't know," answered the flower.

Dasha bent down to it and kissed its glowing head.

The next day, all the pioneers came to visit the little flower. Dasha had led them there, but long before, while still some way from the wasteland, she had told them all to take a breath and said:

"Do you smell how good it is. That is it breathing."

The pioneers stood around the little flower for a long time and admired it like a hero. Then they walked all around the wasteland, measured it in paces, and counted how many wheelbarrows of manure and ash would need to be brought to fertilize the dead clay.

They wanted the earth on the wasteland to become kind too. Then the little flower, unknown by name, would also rest, and from its seeds would grow and not perish beautiful children, the very best, shining with light, flowers such as exist nowhere.

For four days the pioneers worked, fertilizing the earth on the wasteland. After that they went off to travel to other fields and forests and never came back to the wasteland. Only Dasha came once, to say goodbye to the little flower. Summer was already ending, the pioneers had to go home, and they left.

And the next summer, Dasha came again to the same pioneer camp. All through the long winter she had remembered the little flower, unknown by name. And she went at once to the wasteland to visit it.

Dasha saw that the wasteland was now different; it had grown over with grasses and flowers, and birds and butterflies flew above it. A fragrance rose from the flowers, the same as from that little flower of toil.

However, the flower of the previous year, which had lived between the stone and the clay, was no longer there. It must have died the past autumn. The new flowers were good too; they were only a little worse than that first flower. And Dasha grew sad that the former flower was gone. She turned to go back and suddenly stopped. Between two close-set stones a new flower had grown — exactly like that old flower, only a little better than it and even more beautiful. This flower grew from the midst of the crowded stones; it was alive and patient, like its father, and even stronger than its father, because it lived in stone.

It seemed to Dasha that the flower was reaching toward her, that it was calling her to itself with the silent voice of its fragrance.