

The Saltamontes Chronicles, Part 1:

Escape from Darkness

Plot Overview

It is the year 2015. Adam, an old man of over seventy, is looking back on his extraordinary, difficult and stormy childhood, when he and his adopted brother, despite the almost impossible odds (but aided by determination, dreams, good people and their very own Happiness Production Machine), managed to find the perfect home and a family.

The action begins in the summer of 1945 in Szczecin, at an orphanage which is to be relocated in central Germany following changes to the border after the end of the Second World War. The orphans, who up till now have spent much of their time in the cellars during the air raids, hungry and maltreated by the carers, who favour a strict Prussian upbringing in the hope they will grow up to be 'tough individuals', hardly know what love is, and haven't experienced a normal childhood. Among the carers, however, there is one exception: Barbara, who is trusted by the children and secretly kisses them all goodnight.

It is under these conditions that two boys who share an interest in science and technology build an amazing Happiness Production Machine out of discarded pipes, cardboard, wire and other rubbish that they find lying around. Onto it they stick pieces of paper with their dreams for the future, the most important being travel, finding a family and getting a forever home. The Machine is also a way for them to distance themselves from all the sadness and fear in the other children, help them escape their grim reality and seek solace in their dreams. The two boys are eight-year-old Adam, and Alex, who's probably thirteen, but who everyone at the orphanage tries to persuade is ten because of his height. In fact, the children have no idea precisely how old they are because their paperwork has been falsified; nor do they know their parents or their heritage. Brought together by their common dreams and interests, the boys begin to call each other brothers and promise each other that they'll never be separated. They also plan to live together in one house in the sunniest place on earth, which they choose together on a map they have by some miracle managed to come across. That place is Iano, in Italy.

Unexpectedly, Adam is adopted by an unknown woman who claims to be his aunt. Adam is unhappy in his new home, is treated badly, and when he is threatened with the belt for being sad and for crying, he decides to run away at night, back to the orphanage, through a cemetery. Meanwhile, Alex is devastated after being split up from Adam, and when he discovers that the orphanage is to be moved deeper into Germany, to Heidelberg, following changes to the border, manages to find out where Adam's adoptive family lives and at night sneaks out to find his brother. Fortunately, they run into each other at the cemetery and make it back to the orphanage just before departure. Adam manages to smuggle himself unseen into the back of a lorry. During a pit stop in Berlin, the brothers rescue a homeless dog, which they call Meatball. After arriving at their destination at night, the carers count the children. Adam decides to spend the night in the lorry, fearful that there won't be a bed for him and that he'll be sent back to his 'aunt'. When he wakes up, he realises that the driver has set off on another job, and ends up being taken to a suburb of Paris. When the driver makes his first stop at a tavern, he discovers that he's carrying an extra passenger and his dog; nonetheless, he invites him into his cab and brings him food. Adam spends a second

night in the lorry, but early the following morning it's stolen, and Adam and his dog find themselves thrown out onto the pavement near a metro station. The lost and lonely little boy, now in a strange city, decides to spend the night in the dark, dirty bowels of the Paris metro. There he comes across a man, Daniel, who takes care of him, teaches him how to charm rats, finds food for them both and protects him from the more violent 'residents' of the metro. One day, Daniel decides that it's time to go above ground and start living normally. They both start work de-ratting restaurants and shops, and with the proceeds rent a modest room. Daniel, who before the war was a chemistry lecturer and lost his entire family in the conflict, teaches Adam French and also decides to make the boy legal and adopt him; he therefore contacts Barbara at the orphanage in Heidelberg. Adam wants to stay with Daniel, but is scared that Barbara will be forced to send him back to his 'aunt'. His fear is so great that, seeing no alternative, he runs away again, not, however, before writing a farewell letter to his beloved Daniel. Mindful of the promise he and Alex made, Adam sets off for Italy and Iano, where he believes his brother will also be heading. He climbs unseen into a random truck which is going to Italy. It soon becomes apparent that the drivers are criminals who, after unloading the lorry in Orléans, sell the boy, and Adam finds himself locked up by his new owner in a basement. He is saved from disaster by his faithful dog Meatball, whose frantic barking draws help from local residents and the police. The gangsters are quickly arrested and Adam, who has fallen ill through hunger and exhaustion, is taken in by Annabelle, the wealthy owner of a tenement building and some local vineyards, a kind-hearted woman with no family of her own. She gives Adam his own room, clean sheets and clothes, and takes him to an upmarket restaurant, and Adam then spends his free time visiting Orléans, where his curiosity and cleverness lead him to discover, hidden in the cathedral wall, a strange symbol of a grasshopper, which leads to secret rooms hidden behind. Back at Annabelle's, he learns that, for centuries, there have been tales of a secret brotherhood that lives underground, and that his discovery is important because it provides proof that the legends are true. After hearing all this, Annabelle makes Adam promise that he won't run away, and swears to him that she'll sort out his legal position. She promises that she'll take care of him and take him on a journey to St-Martin-du-Canigou, where she has family business to attend to. Adam is excited at the thought of the journey, especially since it will be made in a luxury car. On the way, the ladies (Annabelle and her inseparable servant, Béatrice) stop off in Cahors at a friend of Annabelle's, Madame Boulot. While they're at her home, they all have a frightening experience in a mysterious underground city hiding the skeletons of giants, which is located right underneath the house of its unsuspecting owner. The city under the house in Cahors and the mysterious grasshopper discovered by Adam in Orléans are strangely linked, and scare Madame Boulot enough to leave Cahors with her servants, Fabien and Antoinette, and accompany Annabelle on her trip.

Meanwhile, back at the new orphanage in Heidelberg, Adam's 'brother' Alex confesses to Barbara the whole story of Adam's escape from his supposed family and his subsequent disappearance. Barbara begins a search for him, but despite a message from Daniel, all trace of Adam is then lost. Alex is lonely, and despite reassurance from the carers that a new life is beginning with no air raids or hunger, with safe places to play and the chance to go to school, he often runs away from the orphanage to visit Heidelberg, which captivates him with its beautiful architecture. In the market square he comes across an old man, Heinrich, who is curious about the boy and invites him to his home, where his wife treats him to mouthwatering doughnuts, and where Heinrich tells the knowledge-hungry Alex some

fascinating things, including the history of the city. At this time Alex also comes across a thirteen-year-old girl, wearing a long grey dress with black gloves, who goes to the local church every day and somehow disappears into the wall. Heinrich explains that this girl goes there to light candles in memory of those who once lived in an underground city. This fails to satisfy Alex's curiosity, however, and he cleverly manages to engineer a meeting with her, makes friends with her and, despite her initial resistance since she is sworn to secrecy, succeeds in persuading her (after himself swearing to keep the secret) to let him go with her, just the once, into the room hidden behind the church wall. Once there, they both light the candles, go further down some stairs and find themselves in a large library filled with leather-bound books. Each book is embossed with a strange symbol of a grasshopper, the same image that was on the door to the room, hidden in the church wall. Unfortunately, the girl's visits are subject to a strict time limit, violently enforced by her stepfather, and since the books' contents prove fascinating to them, they arrange to meet there in secret at night. Upon his return to the orphanage, Alex is told the wonderful news that Heinrich and his wife would like to adopt him, which he desperately wants, but because of his arrangement with Catarina (the girl's name), he asks to stay one more night at the orphanage. This night proves to be a turning point in his life. Catarina is thrown out of her house by her stepfather, and ordered to take the train to Naples to live with distant relatives. Alex, who has been looking out for her outside her house with the Happiness Production Machine, which he has brought to show her, impulsively jumps onto the train after her. They travel together as far as Munich where, since the tracks have been blown up, they're left to their own devices. Alex takes the initiative and finds them a place on a lorry heading for Parma. Along the way, the two of them have lengthy conversations about themselves, which brings them closer together, and Catarina very prudently suggests, for reasons of safety and bearing in mind that they're both minors, that they should tell people that they're orphaned siblings heading to Naples to stay with family. During one of the nighttime stopovers, there's a terrible accident. Thanks to Alex and Catarina's quick thinking, the lives of their travelling companions, two related families with small children, are spared, for which they're eternally grateful, and they take the two into their home in Parma. There they come across a music teacher, Tiziano, who offers to give the musically-talented Catarina free piano lessons. Alex, meanwhile, persuades his 'sister' to go with him first to Iano, and only then possibly on to Naples, especially since Catarina doesn't know her family well and is afraid of them. Following a minor misunderstanding and Catarina's initial hesitation, Alex doesn't wait for her to make up her mind but sneaks out of the house by himself, which causes great pain and heartbreak for both of them. Alex's road to Iano is filled with dangerous situations – he suffers from hunger, has to prevent the theft of his Happiness Production Machine and seeks shelter in a barn, where he discovers a plane and meets its friendly crew, Alberto the mechanic and Enzo the pilot. The airmen promise to get Alex to Iano but, faced with sudden danger, they have to set off immediately in the plane, taking Alex with them, for Andorra, Enzo's family home. Alex is given a very warm welcome, and makes friends with Enzo's son, Roberto, who is the same age as him, but the very next day he sets off with Alberto on his magnificent newly-acquired motorcycle over the Pyrenees to Italy, and Iano. The road, however, is treacherous and the weather extreme, and Alex falls ill with a very high temperature. Horrified by the state of Alex's health, Alberto stops along the way in France, at a small, deserted town, St-Martin-du-Canigou. The only inhabited building where they can possibly stay is Stéphanie's guest house. There, Alex gets some tea and is put to bed, and Alberto goes off on his motorbike to fetch a doctor. Alberto has never been to the town before, so he stops to ask a group of people

standing in front of one of the houses where the doctor lives; his eye catches one of the women in the group. That woman is in fact Annabelle, who has just arrived with Madame Boulot and their companions, including Adam. On the way back, Alberto advises the group to head for Stéphanie's since Annabelle's uncle's house seems to be deserted, and then takes Annabelle up to the monastery to find out what's happening with her family. When they get back to Stéphanie's, it turns out that Adam and Alex know each other and they tell everyone their stories. Their joy upon meeting is indescribable. But before night comes, the whole company is again involved in an unbelievable situation in the catacombs at St-Martin-du-Canigou, to where their cars are suddenly and mysteriously transported. In the underground rooms, the car owners are blackmailed by unknown men; under pain of death they will only get their cars back if they stop showing an interest in the mysterious Saltamontes Brotherhood. Annabelle, Madame Boulot and their companions have no choice but to agree, and the cars equally mysteriously reappear in the car park. The next day, everyone, including Alberto, who is now very attached to Annabelle, sets off for Iano, but on the way they stop for the night in Frontignan on the Côte d'Azur, at the very modest cottage of a seventy-year-old fisherman and poet, Emmanuel Sol. Both boys enjoy the view of the sea and accompany Emmanuel on an early-morning fishing trip. Madame Boulot then announces to her friend Annabelle that she has found her place on earth and soulmate here, and will therefore not be going any further with them. Annabelle carries on with the boys and Alberto, and stops off after another six hours in Monaco, where they plan to spend the night at a friend of Alberto's. Unfortunately, the man and his wife have been murdered during the war, and at the house they find only a weak and frightened little girl who has been in hiding, his daughter Amélie, who they look after and take with them the following morning. Alberto turns out to be a real life-saver, as the soldier turned mechanic watches over Annabelle and the three children, and on two occasions stops the theft of Annabelle's car with his quick thinking. During one of these attempts, Alex is kidnapped, but manages to escape into the forest but has to make his way to their destination under his own steam, which is a worry for Adam. The rest of them travel through Tuscany and finally reach Iano. When they get there, Adam gets a surprise: Annabelle stops in front of a house, and who should come out but Daniel and Barbara! As evening falls, Adam sees the distant figure of Alex, dragging the Happiness Production Machine behind him. This time it is his invention which saves his life, as a stray bullet from a sniper gets stuck in one of the pipes. Thus it is that all the boys' dreams have come true, especially since not long after, Alberto and Annabelle get married, adopt all the children and live in a large property in Tuscany which Annabelle has bought.