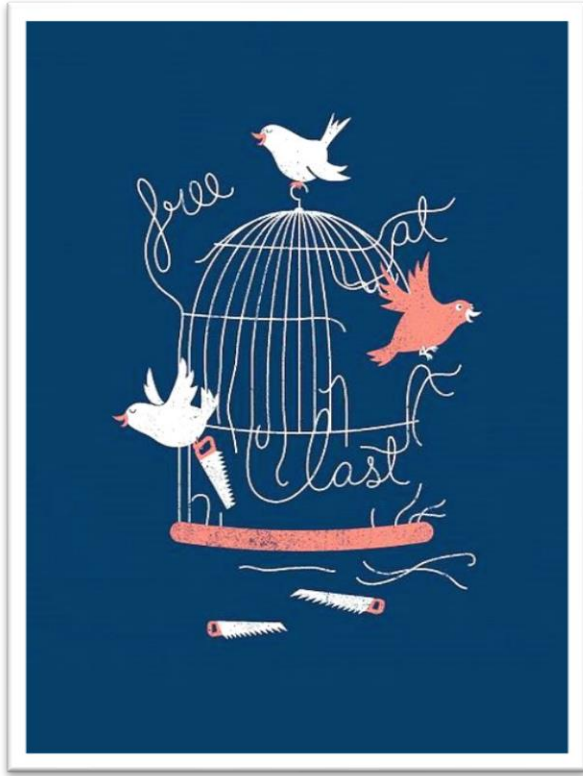


## ANDI'S FATHER



Andi had three friends and each of them had a famous father.

Alex's father was a surgeon, one of those physicians to whom rich and important people go in order to have their appendixes removed.

Rafael's father was a violinist, a well-known musician who gave concerts all over the world.

Gino's father was a film director. *He tells actors what to do*, Gino proudly explained.

Andi's father was a sales assistant in a menswear shop. He was a bit short, wore gold-rimmed spectacles and was totally unknown.

Andi only saw his father at the weekend because his parents were divorced. Whenever his friends talked about their fathers, Andi never said anything. What could he tell them anyway? *My father sold a gray flannel suit last Tuesday?*

Alex went to Africa in the summer holidays because his father wanted to photograph lions. Raphael went to New York because his father was going to perform there. Gino went to Serbia because his father was shooting a film there.

Andi's father wanted to go to Tuscany, in Italy, because he liked the landscape and enjoyed visiting old churches. Andi was not sure he wanted to go, but his parents had decided that he would spend some holiday time with his father every year.

And so Andi went to Italy with his father. Truth be told, he enjoyed being there a lot. They stayed at a small place full of vineyards, went for walks and visited old churches. Not many, actually.

One day they went to visit the market of a small village. They bought tomatoes and garlic for the spaghetti sauce, as well as grapes and peaches for dessert. Andi's father took some coffee in a bar and Andi drank orange juice. They then went to get the car they had left parked nearby.

Andi was the first to notice the birds. He stopped, horrified. Somebody had aligned on a sun-beaten wall twenty-some tiny cages, each of them with a bird locked inside. There were sparrows, finches and one blackbird. Desperate as they were, the birds threw themselves against the cage bars.

“People can really be mean!”, exclaimed Andi.

His father looked thoughtfully at the cages and said nothing.

Nobody around them seemed to care about the poor animals. People walked at leisure, spoke to each other, laughed, all the while paying no attention to the flutter of wings and the desperate cheeping of the birds.

Andi’s father approached a cage. The sparrow, in panic, tried to flap its wings but the cage was too tiny. In a quick and resolute gesture, Andi’s father opened the door of the cage. The stunned sparrow found its way out and vanished in the air. Andi’s father opened all the cages, one by one.

“They’re staring at us,” Andi said. “Please hurry!”

But only when the last cage had been opened, did his father pick up the paper bag he had put on the floor and give his hand to Andy.

“They will bar our way,” whispered Andi, afraid.

A little ahead, some people had stopped and were talking to each other in a low voice, all the while looking sternly at Andi and his father.

*We will need Superman to come and rescue us now, though Andi, looking sideways at his father. How weird! My father seems to have suddenly become taller. And look at how resolute he looks. He looks exactly like Superman before a duel of life and death.*

Although the people in the street looked upset, nobody did or said anything and they all stood aside to let Andi and his father pass. When they both turned the corner, they hurried to the car. Andi took another look at his father just to make sure he had not really got taller. *I wonder if anyone of his age can still grow up. It must have been a trick the sun played on me.*

They left the village in silence and Andi looked in the rear view mirror to make sure nobody was following them. Before them, there were hills coloured in shades of pink, purple and light-blue. Dark cypresses stood against the summer sky. Later in the journey, they stopped to eat some juicy peaches under an olive tree. Over their heads, a bird perched on a silver-leafed branch, began to sing.

“Here is one of your admirers!”, said Andi to his father.

He couldn’t wait to tell Alex, Rafael and Gino just how brave his father had been.