

Andreas Steinhöfel



If My Moon Was Your Sun

Illustrations by
Nele Palmtag

with cd audiobook and music



This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

For my father (N. P.)

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If My Moon Was Your Sun

Andreas Steinhöfel
With Illustrations By Nele Palmtag

Translation by Matthew O. Anderson




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This is the story of Max, the one you read about in the newspapers or saw on TV. Do you remember? No? Max lives in a small town – one much smaller than yours. A few hills rise up around this town, all of them covered in trees. Between the highest hills runs a brook, which is followed on one side by a stony path with patches of dry grass – haven't you seen the pictures? What perfect summer scenes they were. You can imagine how they hurried along this path, Max and his grandfather, followed by Miss Schneider: three little hasty human dots whizzing by. Why were they in such a hurry? Well, you see, because they were running away. Because everyone was chasing them. Because that was the day Max kidnapped his grandfather. . . .



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(2) *A Summer Day - Morning (Prokofiev)*



Early one morning – just a week after his ninth birthday – Max woke up filled with a feeling that something was missing. The feeling tugged and tore at him, it was endlessly deep and glowing, and it burned him from inside.

A long time ago, while searching for that place where our feelings of longing live, some people believed that they had discovered the spot. Longing, they claimed, lives in the heart. But Max knew better: his body was made up of billions of tiny cells, and, since each one of these cells hurt, it could only mean that his feeling of longing lived *everywhere* in him. And, what's more, if his soul was also made up of cells, then his longing filled



each of them too, because it flooded through every part of him. No heart by itself could ever have enough room for so much longing.

And so on this morning Max climbed out of bed – long before his mother was awake. He brushed his teeth, dressed, and packed his backpack in the kitchen with care; and only after he had passed halfway through the still-sleeping city – when the sun stood just above the houses and kissed the crests of the rooftops – only then did he realize what was driving him to put one foot in front of the other so quickly and decisively.

Max grinned and walked a bit faster.



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(4) *A Summer Day - Baseball (Prokofiev)*



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When Max opened the door to the nursing home, he was met with a muted, buzzing noise, the kind a beehive makes. He had been coming here for almost a year now, and that's how he knew that many of the old folks woke up early after a short night; they didn't need much sleep anymore. Most times, like now, a few of them sat together in the big common room reading the newspaper or playing cards or Parcheesi. Others shuffled between the tables or stood in the surrounding area with wrinkled foreheads and slight, quizzical smiles on



their faces that looked the same as they had the week before, and would look next week too. “They’ve lost their marbles,” Grandfather had decided during Max’s first visit. With a knowing wink, he had added, “Just like me!”



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Actually, a year ago, grandfather still had nearly all his marbles. But his mind, as Mama had explained, was unfortunately functioning less and less well. Soon it wouldn't be enough for them to stop in at Grandfather's house now and then, as she and Max did. He would need someone to look after him all the time.

"Can't I do that?" Max had asked.

"When - during recess at school?" Mama had bit her lip. "I'm sorry, dear. I know that you're very attached to your grandfather, but it's not like he'll be gone forever if he moves into a place like this."

No, thought Max, as the door silently closed behind him, *not gone forever*. But he would be far away on the other side of town in a house full of old people who lived there as though trapped in a cage. The doors could only be opened from the inside if one of the staff typed a number code into the keypad on the wall. None of the nursing home residents knew this code.



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Max tried to act as he always did in the nursing home: quiet, calm, and well, *Max-ish*. The few old faces that had quickly looked up when he came in were already looking down again. He nodded to Leon, the caregiver who had let him in. Leon smiled back briefly before he disappeared in a hurry down the next hallway. Everyone here knew Max.

He took a deep breath. It smelled like weak tea – peppermint and chamomile. The common room, with its warm yellow walls and windows that reached all the way down to the floor, was the exact opposite of the schoolyard with its hubbub and commotion. In here, quiet and warmth were the order of the day, and no loud words were ever spoken. For just a moment, Max felt comfortable and drowsy – the atmosphere of the nursing home surrounded him like a soft, protective blanket. For just a moment, he thought that what he'd like most was to breathe out slowly and stay here forever.



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(6) *A Summer Day - Waltz (Prokofiev)*



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“Is the sun shining out there?”

A chirping sound. Max stared at the woman who was now blocking his path. Her spindly body was strangely crooked as though it had been cobbled together out of rough-sawn boards. From beneath a spider web of hair, her haggard face examined him closely. He tried remembering who she was – yes, this was Miss Schneider. When she was younger she had been . . . what exactly? His grandfather had told him, but Max couldn’t remember. A teacher! Yes, a teacher of . . . something or other.

“Look out the window and you’ll see for yourself,” he said.

“The window on the left or the right?”

“Both, and the one in the middle too. Now, can I get past?”



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Miss Schneider smiled as though he had just handed in an exam that, but for a tiny detail, would have earned a perfect score. But she didn't seem to plan on getting out of the way. Max pressed his lips together, hard. As if to say, *well, if you won't move, then neither will I.*

Still smiling, Miss Schneider stepped aside.

“Oh boy, oh boy! Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!”

Three more “oh boys” later, Max stood before the door to his grandfather's room. He knocked and – without waiting for a response – turned the knob . . . and as the door opened, I want to tell you *why* Max felt the way he did, *why* he loved his grandfather so much. If you had asked Max yourself . . . well, he probably would have fumbled about for the right words. In the end he would have blurted out something like this: “Because he loves *me* so very much.” And if you had replied, “Wow, Max, what a great explanation,” only then, perhaps, would he have told you (and this was just one of many examples) how it felt to sit in the garden – surrounded by the



sweet smell of autumn – and rest his tired head in Grandfather’s lap after they had picked apples, and to feel the great, heavy hands that lay so gently on his head. And throughout all of this Max had listened to his grandfather humming – a sound you could only just hear, a sound that always seemed to be rising from him. Max had never been near his grandfather without hearing this gentle humming, and when he had asked what it was, this humming that softly and tenderly wove its way through air and light, Grandfather would say the names of famous composers: Brahms, Schubert, Mozart.

One of the two windows in Grandfather's room was crooked. You could open it enough to let in a little air, but not all the way. Grandfather sat fully dressed – *looking sharp*, as he himself would have said – at a small table, bent over the newspaper. He seemed to be having one of his better days. When Max entered the room, a bushy eyebrow shot upward questioningly.

“Who are you?”

“Santa Claus,” said Max.

“Nonsense,” snorted Grandfather. “You’re my grandson.”

“Max.”

“That’s right.” He peered over Max’s shoulder.

“Where’s your mother?”

“Work.”

“Father?”

“Flew the coop.”

“Ah, yes, right. And too bad for the chickens.” Grandfather set the newspaper down in front of him. “What are you doing here so early?”

“Picking you up,” answered Max. “We’re getting out of here.”



“Oh, we are, are we?”

*If I close my eyes now, thought Max, I can smell apples.
And then I'll start to cry.*

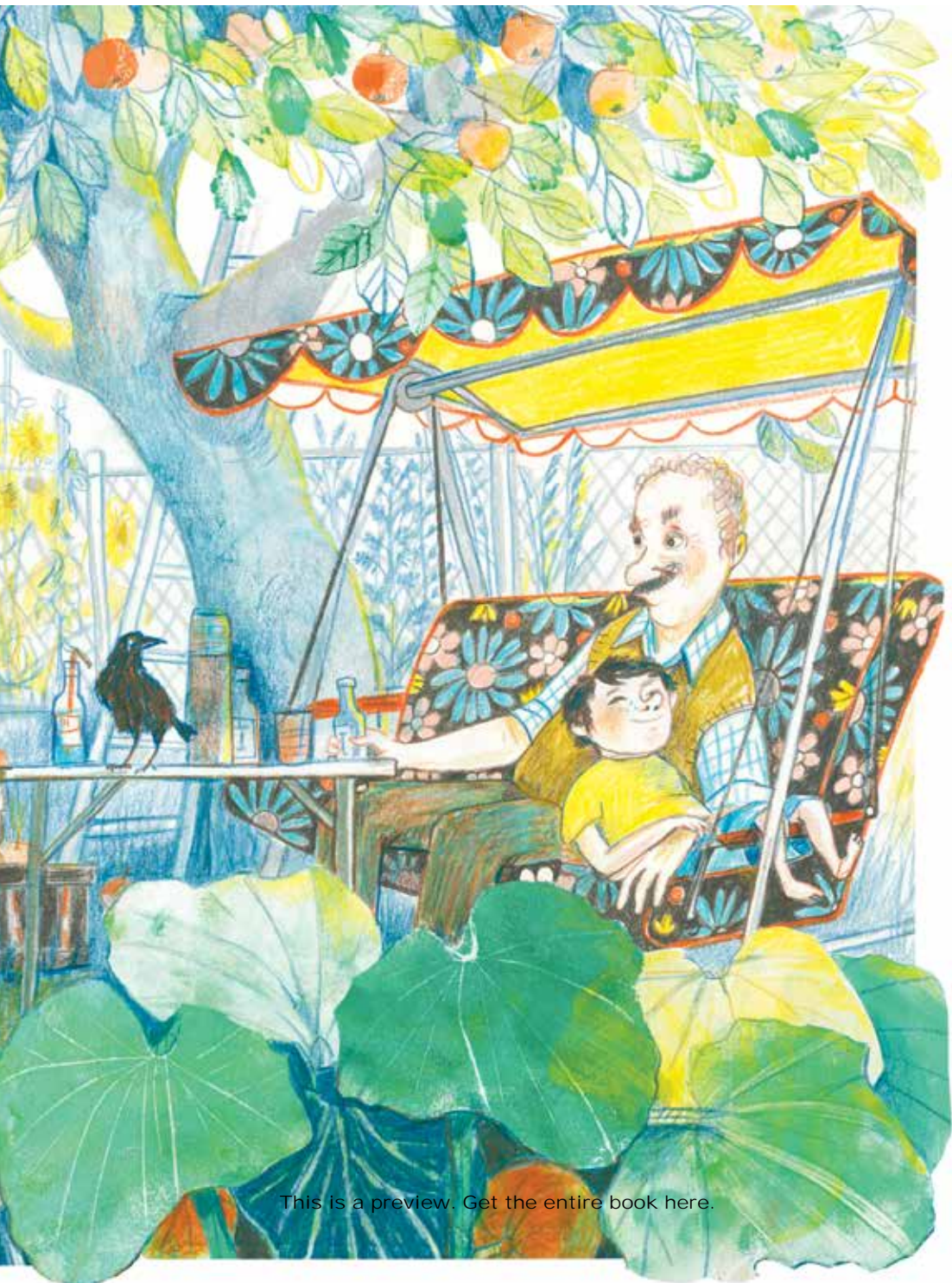
He reached out a hand.

Grandfather began to hum.



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(8) *A Summer Day - Regret (Prokofiev)*



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