

ESSI KUMMU

illustrated by Marika Maijala

Chatty Elias

(Puhelias Elias, Tammi 2012)

SYNOPSIS

Elias, who has just started year 1, is sitting at the window on a rainy autumn morning looking at the sky with his chin in his hands. In the hall, Dad is trying to get his three year-old little sister Inkeri dressed but Inkeri is tearing off her clothes as fast as he can put them on. There have been a lot of changes in Elias' life. Elias and Inkeri's parents have recently separated and the children live one week with their mum and the next with their dad. Dad's new girlfriend Marita and her daughter Venla sometimes come to dad's for a sleepover.

On the way to school normally chatty Elias is so quiet that Dad asks what's the matter. Elias answers that he's thinking about Priit, his best friend who lives next door to Grandma, his mum's mother, in Estonia. Priit likes sitting up in the big pine tree in Grandma's garden. In the summer before school started Elias and Priit played out in the fields around Grandma's house until late at night. They built a tent out of Grandma's sheets and wrote secret codes in a shared notebook. While Elias was at Grandma's, Dad packed his things from the old house into the car and moved to a new home in town.

In the playground Dad and Elias give each other a high five and Dad reminds Elias to always keep his phone with him. At school his friends also notice that Elias is quieter than usual today. Kalle asks Elias what's wrong but Elias just shrugs his shoulders. You can only talk about these kinds of things secretly with your very closest friends. Dad once read Elias an old Chinese fairy-tale which said that an invisible red thread links the kinds of friendships where people have to be apart from each other even though they don't want to be. Lots of information and thoughts run along that kind of thread. The red thread is a bit like a phone.

After school Elias gets to walk home all by himself for the first time. He wanders about and ends up at the harbour by the sea. Elias thinks about the time before his parents split up, when he and Dad and Mum and Inkeri were on their way to their cottage. There is a flock of black crows in the sky and Elias knows that they are birds that always stay together. Elias has completely forgotten his phone and suddenly Mum and Dad are behind him, they have come to look for him. Elias hugs his mum tightly.

Mum comes with them to Dad's house. Marita and Venla are there too and all of them squeeze round the small kitchen table to eat. Inkeri wants to sit on Mum's lap all the time and tickle her ear. Then Elias suddenly asks why Mum doesn't live with them any more. Mum and Dad explain that they can't be together all the time any more because if they do, there are lots of hard feelings to deal with. But they will always be able to be with Elias and Inkeri, that doesn't feel hard at all. Mum and Dad explain that there are lots of families in the same situation. The children have one home with their dad and another with their mum. And anyway Mum explains that you can never be separate from people who you really love, because they are always with you all the time.

On holiday, Elias and Mum go on a boat over the sea to Estonia. Elias sits silent and anxious on the bus all the way from Tallinn to Pärnu. Once they have arrived at Grandma's he doesn't stop to eat or drink anything because he can't wait to see Priit, who is sitting in the tree as usual. When Priit hears a familiar voice from the bottom of the tree, he wobbles and falls off his branch. Fortunately he isn't hurt. Elias and Priit sit quietly for a long time just looking at each other. Only then does Elias finally start talking again.

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Chatty Elias. Practice Kiss

(Puhelias Elias. Harjoituspusu, Tammi 2015)

SYNOPSIS

It's the summer holidays and Elias is with his mum at the beach. Elias looks at a girl and a boy who are about the same age as he is, 8 or 9. When they kiss each other, Elias points them out to his mum. Mum says they are practice kisses because the girl and the boy are just starting to practice love.

In the evening Elias goes to the summer show of his little sister Inkeri's circus school. Inkeri is getting changed for the performance backstage with the others and Elias and Mum wait in the foyer. A group of circus school girls come into the foyer in their leotards. When they stream past Elias he starts to feel shy and ducks his head. Mum comes from the cafe with coffee and juice and asks what's the matter but Elias just waves his hand. Mum thinks he is saying he has a cough and starts to giggle at him, which almost makes him cross.

After the summer show Mum takes Inkeri and Elias back to the cafe. Suddenly Livia, who is in Elias' class, comes up to him. Elias can't think of anything to say and he gets really hot. They exchange a couple of words and then Livia goes back to talk to her brother.

The next weekend Elias and Inkeri are back with their dad, baking for Inkeri's fourth birthday. Inkeri's friend Maija is there too. Dad's new girlfriend Helena doesn't come round as much as she used to, maybe because she and Dad used to argue too much. Dad talks to the girls in the kitchen until they put the cakes in the oven and then comes to sit with Elias in the living room.

Dad asks whether Elias has a girlfriend. Elias doesn't seem to have heard the question but after a while he starts talking about his friend Toni who is going out with Oona. Elias is afraid that no-one will ever fall in love with him because he thinks he is so ugly and Verna in his class said that he smells. Dad says that the girls he liked used to pick on him at school too. Dad assures him that there is someone for everyone out there in the world. You just have to be your own true self as much as you can. Dad teases Elias about girls and they have a wrestling match on the floor of the living room with Inkeri and Maija cheering them on.

Mum comes to pick them up and take them to their other house. Inkeri and Maija sit next to each other on the back seat, holding each other's hands and giggling. In the front seat, Elias tells Mum that Dad's love life isn't going very well because Dad and Helena argue so often. Mum says that everyone practises love all through their life and adults sometimes have to start all over again from the beginning as well. Once you've kissed someone, friendship isn't as easy as it used to be.

It smells of baking at Mum's house too. They haven't even had time to get their coats off properly before Maija's phone rings and she has to go home. Inkeri and Maija say goodbye with tears in their eyes.

Mum says that while Elias and Inkeri were with Dad, Mum's new friend Inari has come to visit. The two women made lots of pots of tea, read books to each other and talked for hours about grown-up things. Elias thinks that when Mum is with Inari she's different from how she is the rest of the time. She laughs more loudly, puts her hair in a ponytail and talks with her mouth open. His little sister starts to laugh too and to joke around with Mum. Elias thinks Mum and Inkeri are terrible barbarians. He runs into his own room and slams the door over and over again because he's so angry. Elias thinks grown-ups should know how to behave and how not to.

Alone in his room in the evening Elias thinks about his best friend Priit, who is always sitting in a tall pine tree over in Pärnu. He takes their secret notebook out of his desk drawer and writes about barbarians. Elias sometimes has a strange feeling, as if he had lost something valuable, or as if he was missing something that he hasn't even found yet.

The next morning Elias has been to the sauna and is watching television wearing only a towel when Inkeri's friends Anna and Ella ring the doorbell and ask if they can come for a sleepover that evening. All three of the girls are giggling in the hall and Elias slams his bedroom door again. He vows to Mum that the next night he's going to go to bed with his clothes on because the house will be full of girls. He takes his and Priit's secret notebook out of the drawer again and writes: "You always have to have your clothes on because of girls." Later he adds "Kissing is probably really revolting". Then he puts the notebook in an envelope and writes Priit's name and address on it.

Mum, Inkeri and Elias take the envelope to the post office. Then they buy ice cream. Livia is buying ice cream too. Elias and Livia smile at each other. Elias thinks it's nice that he doesn't have to ask Livia specially, she just comes up to him easily when she wants to. Suddenly the head teacher walks by and Elias and Livia giggle and rush to hide behind a bush.

When they have finished their ice creams, Elias and Livia go down to the jetty. Elias thinks what's special about Livia is that she doesn't feel like a girl. Although she is like the other girls, Elias always forgets that Livia is a girl. He sits next to her on the jetty and tests the water with his foot. And that's when it happens. Elias can only think of one thing. A kiss. And then Elias and Livia kiss.