



Peter Svetina, ANTON'S CIRCUS
Forget-Me-Nots (book series), edited by Jana Bauer
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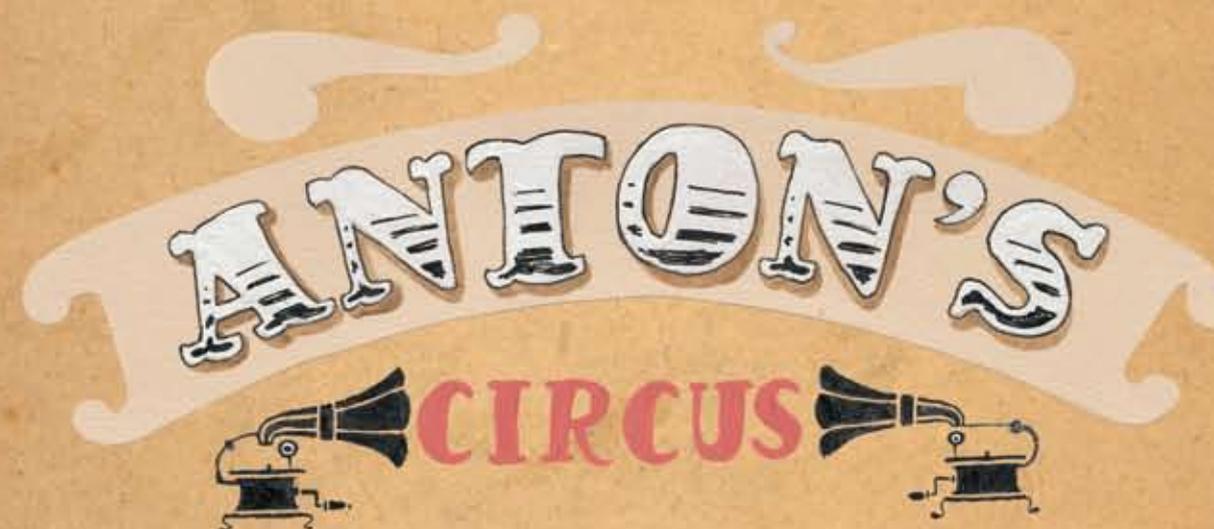
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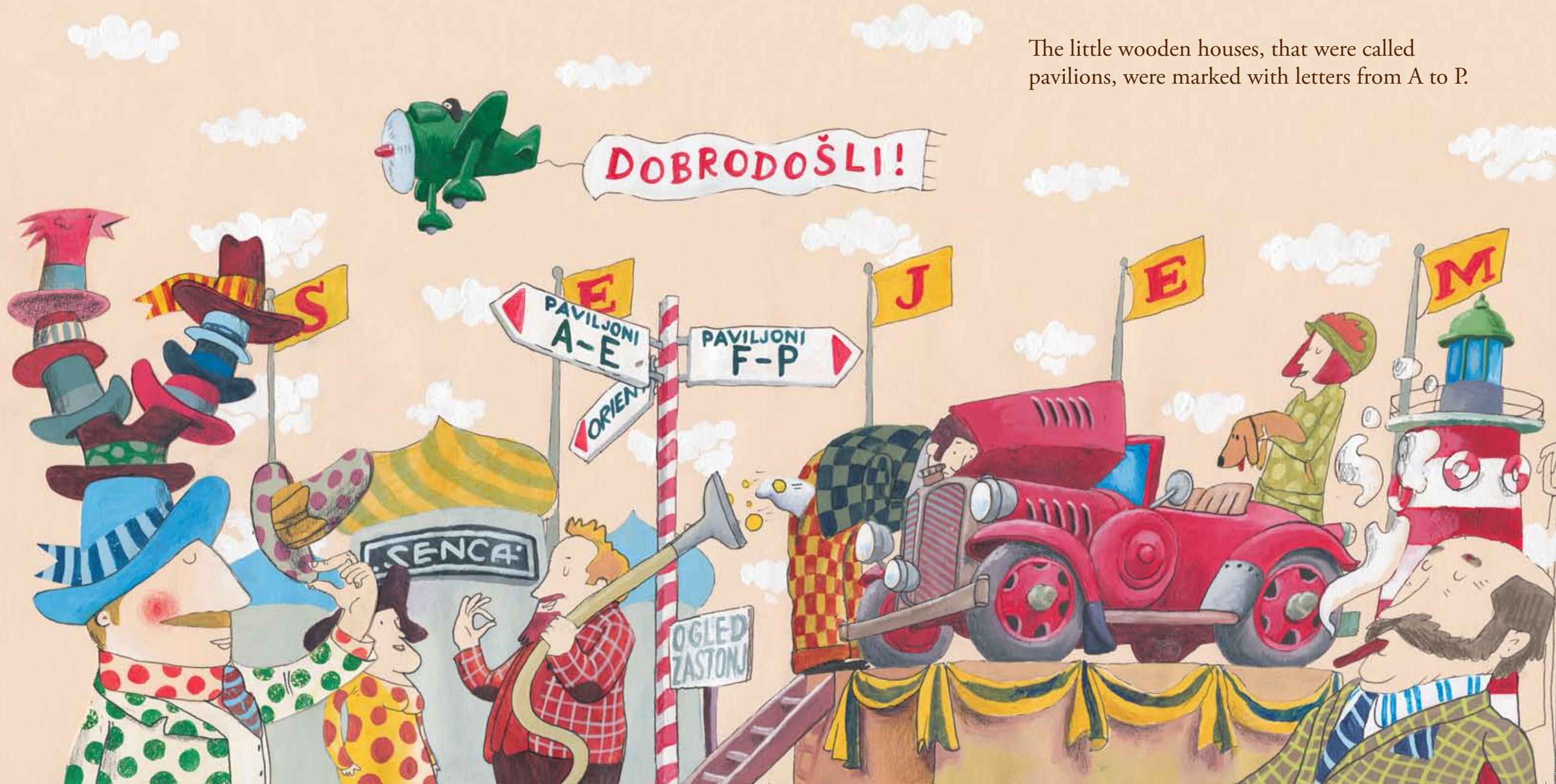


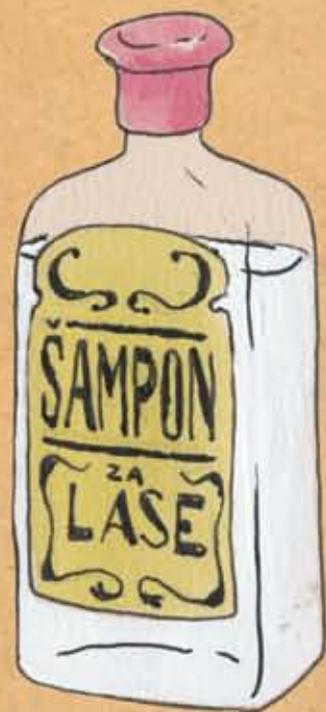
ANTON BON was a thickset man with a bushy moustache. When he still worked on a ship, he brought a lion back from Africa. Leopold the Lion. Then he left the maritime profession and started a circus with the lion. The Great Comedy Show of Anton Bon and Leopold the Lion. They travelled from place to place, Anton put his head in the lion's mouth, the lion pretended to be very frightened when Anton sang the aria from Verdi's *Traviata*. Later they were joined by a group of fleas and the circus became even better.



ON exactly the same day that the train carried them to Ljubljana, a fair opened opposite the municipal alehouse. A huge fair. That's why they called it a grand fair.

The little wooden houses, that were called pavilions, were marked with letters from A to P.





ALL kinds of merchants and peddlers and coffeehouse owners and tobacconists settled into the houses and in one there was even an entire merry-go-round. Cigars with the Van Baren trademark were sold, vacuum cleaners and noodle-making machines, Panama hats made from straw, Fedora hats made from felt, sewing machines and furniture, knit swimwear for ladies and gentlemen, walnut strudel and elderberry juice, sausages with bread and beer. There was a great deal of beer since the municipal alehouse stood opposite.

Only pavilion F was empty.

And who should walk by pavilion F but Anton Bon who had come to the fair to buy shampoo for his hair and for his lion's mane? The idea came into his head that he could set up his circus in the empty pavilion. And so it was: that afternoon they gave their first performance. Through a magnifying glass, visitors watched the fleas as they pulled a tiny coach and four, jumped across barriers, and marched in the rhythm of the polka. Then Anton and Leopold appeared. Anton pressed his head between the lion's jaws. He didn't sing the aria from Verdi's *Traviata* because he had caught a cold on the train.



THE next day something terrible happened. When Anton washed his and the lion's hair with the new shampoo, the fleas said that the smell was unbearable and soon moved out. Nothing helped: not a cap on Anton's head or a scarf over Leopold's mane. The fleas were gone. From then on, Anton and the lion performed alone.

VISITORS soon tired of the short circus performance without the fleas or the aria from Verdi's *Traviata*. They saw it once, they saw it twice, and then they stopped coming. Each day there were fewer visitors. On Tuesday, there were none at all.

On Wednesday, Anton and Leopold the Lion found themselves in a quandary. What could they do to lure the audience back?

"Leopold," said Anton, "since we lost the fleas, our little comedy show no longer has a spark. Even the word circus is too long for a performance as short as ours. We have to think of something new. A play. What do you say? Real theatre that makes the audience faint from horror and sigh with relief at the end? That's what we need!"

"Grrr," growled Leopold the Lion.

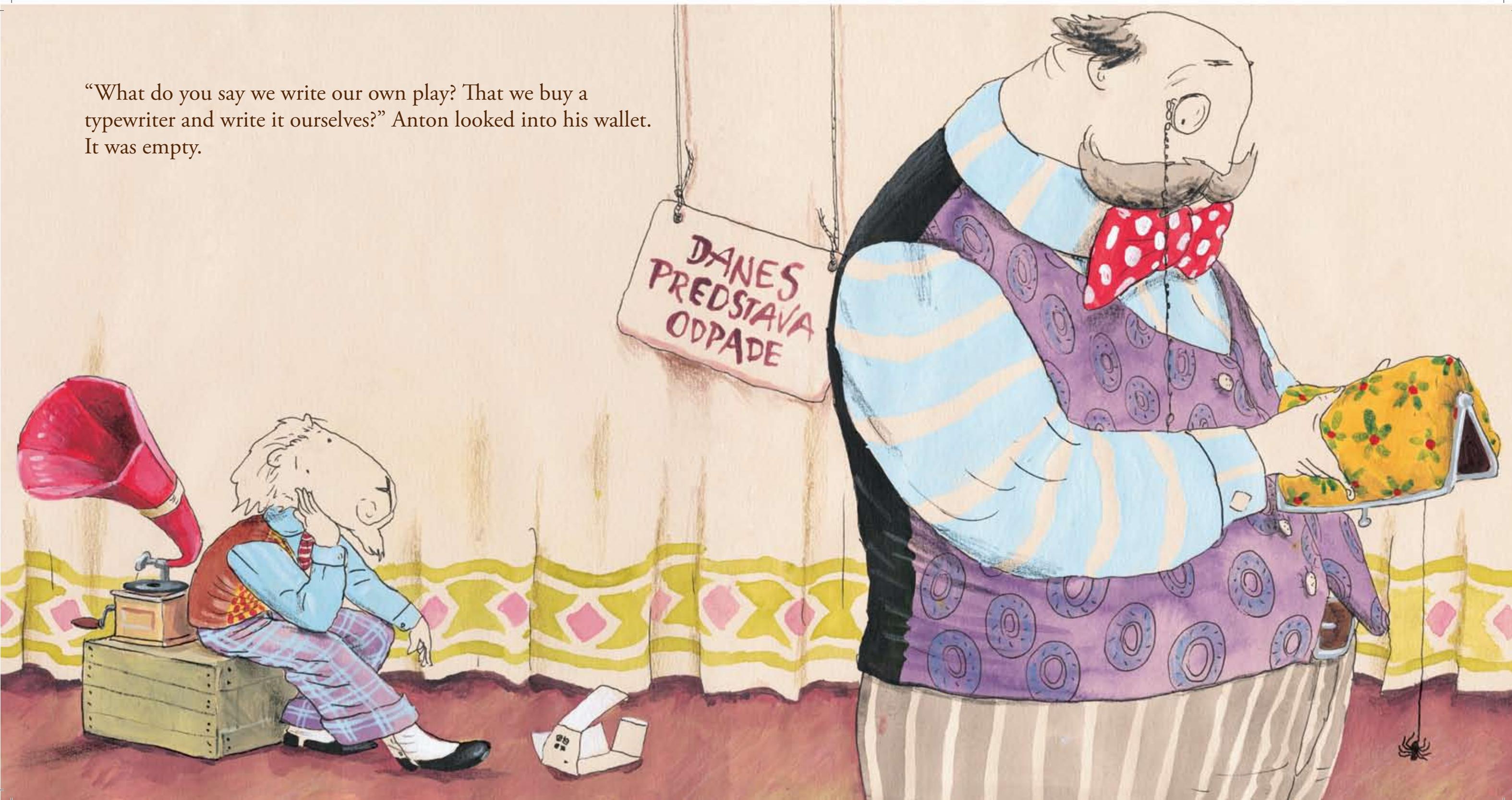
"What do you say?" Anton asked.

"Grrr," Leopold the Lion said again, pondering what might be arranged.

Anton twisted a paper flower between his fingers and slid his shoe across the floor. He looked quite desperate.



“What do you say we write our own play? That we buy a typewriter and write it ourselves?” Anton looked into his wallet. It was empty.



LEOPOLD THE LION did not hear Anton's last question. He walked right out of the pavilion and through the fairgrounds. He was a well-mannered lion and he would certainly have greeted passers-by and doffed his hat to the ladies if he had met anyone at all. But there was no one to meet. Even the tram that ran out of the city was empty. Strange, since only shortly before, it had been filled with people. Strange. Had something frightened them? Had they all gone to lunch?



And where did Leopold the Lion go? He went to the library.
Yes, he went to the library to look for a play.



HE lumbers up to the library. Three steps and a door. He turns the handle. The door is locked. Aha, because of the noon lunch break. But Leopold the Lion isn't so easily discouraged. He strides around the corner and peeks through the window. The windows are high. Good that he is so big. The first room belongs to the librarian. Piles of books on the table and the floor. The second room is curtained. The third room, the window is ajar... What's in the third room?

Three rats sit in the middle of the room and read books. Actually, they eat them. One page and another page and another and another...and the book is eaten.



“OOH, that story was filling,” says Teodora, the first rat.

“Your tummy is full,” says Rosalie, the second rat.

“How are you going to squeeze back through that hole in the floor?” worries Anastasia, the third rat.

They still haven’t figured out how Teodora will squeeze back through the hole in the floor when a cat lunges into the room. A bit tiger tom.

“Are you mice or rats?” asks the cat.

“We’re rats, clearly!” Teodora exclaims. “Can’t you see how fat we are?”

“Silly!” cries Anastasia. “Now he’s going to eat us!”

“Whoooooosh!” the cat blows. “I’m going to eat you up!” He licks his lips.

“You see? He is going to eat us!” sniffs Anastasia.

“Which one first?” wonders the cat, and again licks his lips.

“Wait, wait!” Rosalie interrupts. “You can’t eat us just like that!

You look like a distinguished cat, like an aristocratic cat...”

“That I am! Fabricius von Schwarzenkatz, known as Kapone.”

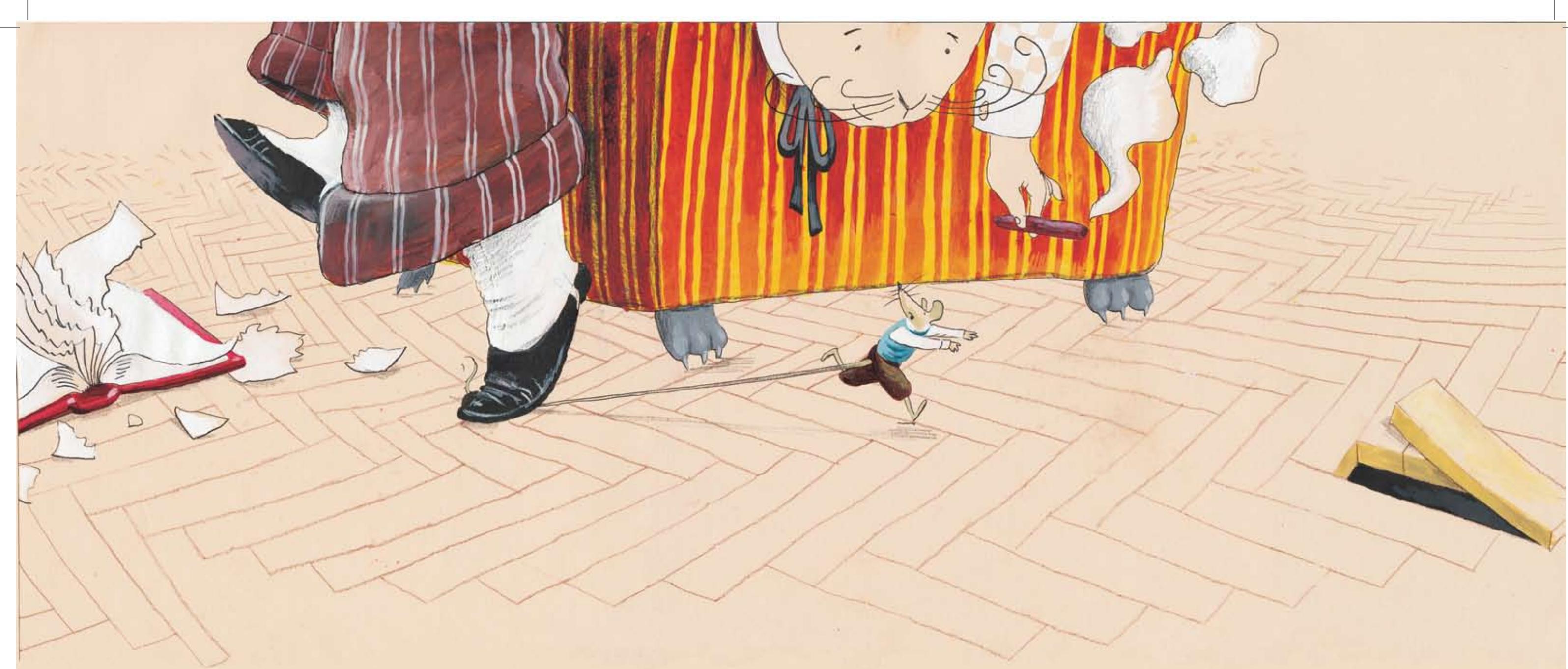
“Well then, please,” Rosalie responds, “will you go and eat us like some kind of country bumpkin! That won’t do! You have to maintain your dignity!”

“Yes, you’re right,” said Kapone, scratching behind his ears with his paws. “So how do you think I can eat you with dignity, in a way that befits a distinguished cat such as myself?”

“Look,” explains Rosalie, “sit down there on that pillow and listen to a story that we are going to tell you. We are in a library, if I may remind you, so first a story.”

“Alright,” growls the cat. Because, after all, an aristocrat is an aristocrat, especially if the aristocrat is a cat.

“And so it happened,” begins Rosalie, “that there were three brothers living in the city. When their father lay on his deathbed, he called the brothers to his side and said to them: My dear sons, I am not long for this world. I would like to settle my accounts and give you that which I have to give so there will be no disagreement later on. Louis, you take my sports car.”



“Thank you,” says Teodora, who plays the role of the eldest son Louis, “and farewell father.” She makes to leave.

“And where are you going, my dear?” growls Kapone, jumping forward to intercept her.

“DO NOT interrupt! That’s not in the story!”

Kapone sits back down.

“Now then,” Rosalie continues. “You, Franz, take my silver pocket watch.”

“Thank you,” whistles Anastasia, “thank you a hundred times and God bless you!” She also makes as if to leave.

“On my whiskers!” cries Kapone and jumps up again.

“Goodness! You are suspicious!” says Rosalie.

“And impatient!” Teodora adds.

“Listen until the end,” instructs Anastasia. “The third was named Blaž. You, said his father, you will get my gramophone player and my cat.”

“Your cat!” Rosalie, who plays Blaž, says. “What can I do with a cat? If I skin it, the fur wouldn’t even be enough for slippers!”

“What!” Kapone roar. “You would skin a cat?”

“He wouldn’t, you understand? He’s just thinking aloud. And then the cat speaks. He says that he’s a special cat. He knows how to sing.”

“What does he sing?” asks Kapone.

“The aria from Verdi’s *Traviata*.”

“And that cat was very much like you, while we’re on the subject,” adds Teodora.

“Hmm, well yes, I’m not going to say anything,” says Kapone. It is plain that the compliment pleases him.

But then he remembers why he is here, and meows: “Thank you very much, my dears, thank you for the moving story, but now the time has come for my lunch.”

And with one single jump, he throws himself onto the rats.

But before he can open his mouth, Leopold the Lion roars from the window.

“RRRRRRROOOOOOAR!”

Kapone, the cat, stops in his tracks. The rats freeze.

“And what game are you playing?” Rosalie asks Leopold the Lion after a moment has passed. “Why did you scare us like that? What kind of theatre is this?”