

A path of family violence: from the family of origin to the adoptive family. The story of Akos

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Abstract

This piece of work illustrates how adoptive paths are often transformed into difficult and painful situations as the history of the family of origin of the adoptive child is unacknowledged and the traumatic situation that is often at the origin of the request for adoption is underestimated. As Alberto Eiguer states when he speaks of the unconscious reasons that can structure the request for adoption in the couple. "...They dream of finding a child who has lived a difficult situation in order to save him, but ignore the fact that they are reacting according to the trans-generational history of their family: abandonment and maltreatment could have been a past family reality." (Eiguer, 2007). The adoption of Akos is inserted in a history of unknown violence, where maltreatment, abuse and abandonment are the only words which appear in the meagre/poor and superficial biography of the adoptive bureaucracy. The institutional violence of the adoptive procedures is added to the family violence from which the child is depository and emergent. The "cure" to rid the traumas becomes the uprooting of a new beginning without the processing and mourning. Without processing the reason for the separation, states Armando Bauleo, a mechanism of segregation and deposits of family problems are set up, where the minor finds himself in the position of being the scapegoat in a situation of suffering and of denial of the trauma in the adoptive family.

Key words: adoption, trans-generational transmission, family

The identity game: the story of Akos

When I met Akos he was a beautiful nine year old boy with bright eyes and elegant features. Akos and his seven year old sister had been in Italy for a year. Born in Hungary, they spent their early childhood with their natural family and then when they were six and four years old, they were taken away from their family and put into foster care awaiting adoption. Paolo and Giulia are the two adoptive Italian parents who met the children in Hungary. The information of the children's history is scarce, almost inexistent. They were victims of abuse and maltreatment by their natural parents and the father committed suicide by hanging. The children were taken away from their natural family due to this traumatic family situation. Nothing more, their history is summarized in a few brief notes written on a sheet of paper. Their stay with the Hungarian foster family does not seem to have been very easy, especially for Akos who seems the liveliest and more turbulent: he was often punished physically to stop his impetuous nature, Akos's second name is Attila. This name is very popular in Hungary, but it has a negative connotation in Italy as it evokes the cruel invasion of the barbarian king Attila in Italy where still today they say "...when Attila passed

the grass no longer grew....”. This way of describing the invasion and violence has remained in the current Italian language so much so that any person who is particularly aggressive is called “Attila” that is, exterminator. The same name which represents a national hero for the Hungarians is a barbarian for the Italians. Giulia tries to resolve this problem, which appears superficial, but is significantly profound at a granted level of denial and assumption of a psychological, social and cultural identity and decides to change the name Akos Attila with a milder Italian Alberto. The entire psycho therapeutic path is suspended for the child between these three identities. For more than a year **Alberto** is well adjusted to his new environment and to the adoptive family and he has a “good control of his aggressive impulses” as the neuropsychiatrist where he was taken for a first consult stated. In the school environment, Attila, the agitated and impetuous child, begins to manifest sudden and rapid “agitation” characteristics of retaliation towards his classmates: pushing them to the ground, and pushing them off their chairs without any apparent reason. The teachers, underline the fact that the child fits in well with the class, has developed a good linguistic capacity and is learning adequately but are concerned about his conduct, which is violent, especially, towards the smaller class members.

Attila, during the sessions, invades all the psycho therapeutic space destroying the room in a rapid succession of creative and destructive fits, of ordered games, stereotyped and very structured and “barbaric invasions” where he breaks, scribbles everywhere with colours, throws, jumps, moves in an uncontrollable crescendo which assumes “vandalistic” characteristics for the psychotherapist who feels invaded and unprotected. Akos appears to be the name the child prefers and so we decide together during the sessions to use this name. It is his first name, it appears on his birth certificate, encloses his story and it is connected to an identification of an origin.

Therapeutic path: the disclosure

I tell Akos that we must help each other face a difficult period where we must confront many fears that will make us feel that we have to escape. I talk to him about Hungary and Italy, trying to work my way between the mothers and the fathers he has had and he tells me a story through which emerge, in his drawings, mocking and persecutory ghosts (slide 1) that invade all the sheet of paper with a smirk and an empty look where the round and jiggered head indicates a separation of the mind of sharp, cutting elements and limited sketches. Akos draws ideal families where Alberto materializes (Marco in the drawing) between a mother and a father in an almost happy picture (slide 2) and sketches anthropomorphosis couples (slide 3) where the father is a gorilla with a smiling mouth full of sharp teeth. A type of indefinite King Kong where the king aspect is mortified by a large hole below the stomach, index of traumatic elements referred to the masculine and paternal figure. In the background there is a “Monkey Saltapassi” the female and feminine figure, scratching, is a little distant from the other and also marked on the stomach with a small swirl similar to a foetus. “The Saltapassi Monkey” is so called because it can be here in a moment and there in another “ says Akos explaining to me how he has lived

the maternal function in pieces, with mothers who were “jumping”, in the sense that they disappeared (in Italian jump also means not keeping, not remaining in the correct place). He was forced to adapt to being a son who had to follow (inversion of roles) the jumping of a maternal figure while she did not follow her steps, but instead jumped and become another (natural mother, foster care mother, adoptive mother...). He draws himself smiling (slide 4) with an irate hairdo so as to indicate his aggressive defence, Attila, a result of his violent experience and situation while the smile indicates his happy side, winning and communicative. He is also the kitten (slide 5) lost in the hills (the place where he lived in Hungary) where the coloured element of the collar indicates also the traumatic element of the suicide of the father by hanging; this drawing is followed by the “red ghost” (slide 6) as he calls it, an empty and vague shape, suspended on the sheet of white paper, another ghost “made of air”, he says, underlining the inconsistency, but highlighting the persecution. I wonder if the blood red ghost could be the father, or the mother whose tracks have been lost or some ghost between him and I of violence or of passion.... And however the panorama of his whole world is what he draws during a session (slide 7): there are three isolated trees on three hills, every tree has a hole in its bark (the traces of his traumas re-emerge) while threatening and imminent clouds (the sadness and the separation) are soothed by a sun wearing glasses (I wear glasses and Akos has made himself a pair with cardboard and an elastic which he often wears during the session). I tell him that this drawing makes me wonder if him and I could see better, and illuminate all the places (the hills) where he has been and understand what happened and how it happened. We both need good glasses! During a session Akos builds a sling which he then transforms, he says, into a fishing rod with a line that ends in a noose: The fishing is rapidly transformed in a series of “hangings” of various objects. While he continues this activity he seems isolated, distant and absorbed ...I think he is showing me a submerged experience in his subconscious, the suicide of his father, where the sling of a childhood game is transformed into a sinister pitch where puppets hang, along with pieces of matchbox cars and stuffed toy animals. The drawing of the toy car (slide 9) occurs prior to Akos lying on the bed, telling me quite desperately “I don’t want to stay with this family any more. I want to go to my friend Lorenzo, I like it at his house...”. Lorenzo is a Chinese classmate who emigrated to Italy with his family. Giulia, the adoptive mother, during the family group sessions, says she wants to discourage this friendship she does not want the children to be together because “Lorenzo is often left to look after himself... and he is one of the less clever children in the class, I wouldn’t want Akos to be like him”. The anger and desperation of the child appears in the drawing: Akos draws a black car, rich in detail, but then while he is drawing he begins throwing white liquid paper on the drawing dirtying the paper, and added to the already wet and torn paper he covers what is left of the car in red, he then uses sticky tape to try and fix the drawing. Of the beautiful car only the wheels remain. The rest is buried under a layer of repressed material that has also invaded the room where we are having the session, which seems, in the end, a slaughterhouse. The internal world of Akos seems devastated as is this beautiful

(black) hearse, I think the car has a connection to his trip to arrive in Italy (the adoption) and that the red of the violence and the white that cancels indicate a conflict that engulfs Akos.

The family secret

In a family session, Giulia the adoptive mother said with a whining voice that the teacher is constantly complaining about Akos: he does not pay attention in class, he causes fights.....and even at home he does not want to do his homework, he comes to a standstill and remains with his head held low in silence. Paolo adds that this behaviour irritates him a lot. He sees Akos' silence as a challenge which is hard for him to tolerate. While he is speaking, Klaudia, Akos's sister, sits on his knee and shows him one of her drawings trying to draw his attention to her in all possible ways even wanting kisses. Giulia is sitting opposite her husband watching this scene and says that Klaudia knows how to be affectionate while Akos does not show this affection and Paolo does nothing to understand him. There is a lively exchange of comments between the two and Paolo accuses Giulia of being too apprehensive with Akos, always worrying that he has all he needs, meanwhile he thinks Akos is cunning. Akos is sitting by himself in an armchair and, contrary to his sister, is still, rigid and when questioned by his parents does not answer. His eyes are glazed staring into space. There is evident suffering, while Giulia tells about the day he "ran away from home" and she alerted the police who found him playing at his Chinese friend's house. I am astounded by the escalation of exaggerated measures that Giulia and her husband take. I think that their capacity of "reverie" compared to the child's anguish are blocked, frozen. The opposite behaviour of the two siblings strike me: Klaudia is seductive, tries to please the adoptive parents in perfect "Oedipal love style", I wonder if this attitude is the result of induced behaviour by precocious seductive experiences suffered earlier and reactivated in the new adoptive family. Akos seems annihilated, terrorized, as if he is about to be interrogated. Giulia continues insistently to try to get Akos to talk and not keep everything inside. I think Akos, in that moment, is the emergent for that family group in a distressing situation which regards all. I report this, my impression, to the family and add that maybe, between themselves, they have difficulty communicating something that they "are holding inside" immobilizing their relationship. Giulia after a brief silence, tells about her brother who at the age of 9, while he was at home and she was looking after him, "playing" with alcohol and matches had caught fire and had consequently died due to the burns. Her parents in that moment had considered her responsible for the accident and she, for a long time, had remained petrified (like Akos during the session) by the pain and the guilt. She had never spoken about the accident as she was afraid her dream of adoptive mother would vanish.....that of having a family and children.

Reflection

Alberto Eiguer writes: “Filiation is a long trip. It is possible to travel together without having the same starting point” (Eiguer, 2007). This statement regards the possibility of rebuilding, through adoption, of family ties restructured and creative where it is not necessary that a father and a mother have generated (the starting point) the child in order to install a parental tie. Parental ties, which, in the case of minors that have already lived their early childhood in their family of origin, have already had a story and a development. Adoption, in this case, is inserted into a story of violence, where maltreatment, abuse and abandonment are the only words that describe the scarce and superficial biography given through the adoptive bureaucracy. The institutional violence of adoptive procedures adds to the family violence that the two children come from. Armando Bauleo, highlighting how adoption is an instrument which has clinical-therapeutic aspects for the treatment of juvenile hardships, suggests how a minor taken away from his family and declared adoptive must be able to elaborate the reasons for this. This seems important because the segregation mechanism of the family problems where the minor sees himself as the scapegoat of his family of origin are not set up. At the base of every adoption there is a separation and so a necessary time for mourning where in the case of Akos and his sister, a large persecutor is tinged by their past experiences including the suicide of their natural father where it is not understood whether the children know of this or not. By a strange fate of destiny Akos is also *the depository* of a family secret of the adoptive family where the degree of trauma takes on dark shades of the mourning process and of blocked and crystallized guilt. Leon and Rebecca Grinberg consider adoption as a particular form of emigration where the adopted child must face the unknown, sometimes the deceit and the ghosts of an unknown origin. For these authors the central element is the elaboration of the ghosts of their origins. And Akos other than knowing his story expresses his violent ghosts even if his history and identity are violently denied. He must be Alberto: but who is Alberto? Is he a guilty projection of an adoptive couple who try to “repair” a traumatic situation that occurred in the extended family? As Eiguer states when he talks about the subconscious reasons that can structure the request for adoption in the couple Giulia and Paolo: “...They dream of finding a child that has lived through a difficult situation in order to save him, but ignore that they are reacting according to trans generational history of their family: Abandonment and maltreatment could have been a reality of the past generations.” (Eiguer, 2007). Alberto is an Italian child who must “forget”, through re-naming, his Hungarian identity: he can no longer be Akos, neither Attila, but this, represented by the attacks of anger and aggressiveness introduce the sane necessity of an integration of the split parts of his explicit personality of the three proper names. It is necessary that Akos-Attila-Alberto enter into a painful but creative communication. It is necessary that through present family ties, past broken ties are a sealed constitutive of an “internal group” says E. Pichon-Rivi re, paranoid and violent. But also in the present adoptive family Akos meets at the base of family *ties* a “ghost” (the death of a child) that articulates the family Self (Fischetti, 2003).

About the family

“We, on our part we affirm the Argentinean psychoanalyst E. Pichon-Rivière – we define the tie as a complex structure that includes a subject, an object, its interaction and the learning and communication process. These concepts form the base of our concept...”. Every individual psychology is social, the formation of the psychic is from the first moment tied to the environment and to the family group so the individual grows and develops only on the inside of a relationship. At birth the child is immersed indiscriminately with the world, where I and the other are melted together and form a symbiosis. The family, as affirms J. Bleger, represents the primary group where to contain: “an enormous identification, mixed and multiple that makes the family a group of primary participants which is basically characterized by symbiotic relationships and where all the members deposit their most immature and psychotic parts of their personality” (Bleger, 1989). A certain degree of symbiosis called by Bleger “*necessary*” seems to be the indispensable base of every human relationship. The function of the family is, so, to serve as a container and protection for the fulfilment of the more immature, primitive and narcissist parts of the personality, but in the direction of the development of the more mature parts in the research of the elaboration of the pathological addictions. For the Operative Conception of Group (Pichon-Rivière, Bleger, Bauleo) the family is a group with specific tasks and particular dynamics. The family is the group whose specific task is to transform significant learning experiences regarding the differences of the sexes (there are males and females), the generational distances (there are adults and children), and the flexibility in taking on various family functions (Fischetti, 2003). The elaboration occurs inside the family and overcoming the indiscriminate I-other occurs as long as the symbiosis from necessary is transformed in pathological. In carrying out its tasks the family meet conscious and unconscious obstacles, that are latent and obvious and must elaborate confusion, persecution, and depression. The individual behaviour, in this perspective, is the result of conscious and unconscious functioning of the family group where the single component is spokesman and depository. In other words through isolation and separation mechanisms a component of the family can fill the position of *depository* and *emergent* of the family conflict, beyond his discomfort, also of the latent family difficulties produced by distorted and disturbed ties. Akos is the emergent for his family of origin of a tragic *family myth* where the suspicion of incest are entwined with the trauma of violent deaths. But within the adoption Akos, for the adoptive family, continues to be the emergent of a *family secret* (the death of Giulia’s little brother) lived with guilt and shame, heavily segregated and deeply active and influential in the adoption process and parenting.

About adoption

Donald Winnicott underlines the fact that a child who has lived a deprived experience is capable of responding to a new relational and environmental situation only if he has had in his past, a *sufficiently good* family life.

Therefore theoretically assuming Winnicott's indication appear evident that it is necessary to possess a detailed knowledge of the history of the family of origin of the child being adopted, understand the vicissitudes of their parental ties with the parental figure and deepen the understanding of their relationships (especially international adoptions) with the environment, the culture and the language which not mistakenly is called "mother tongue". Understandably this will make it possible for another family, the adoptive one, to fit into new ties without the confusion and misunderstandings of the past that often compromise the tenderness of the language of affection of adults regarding children (Ferenczi, 2002). We must reverse the violent stereotype of adoption seen as a cancellation of one's identity, as a traumatic break with constituent past of the child. To complete this elaboration it is necessary that within the adoptive family history and inside the network of extended family ties there is the capacity of transforming the hostility and the persecution through the elaboration of passages of life and their traumatic aspects. This consists of family groups who assist parenting which must not be transformed into an illegitimate appropriation made into a violent expropriation of one own psychic roots. Akos, for the adoptive family, should have been Alberto because it should have worked as a cancellation of another dead child, of another little hyperactive and destructive Attila who, while playing, burnt. Akos should have been Alberto in order to hide a deep failure lived as a prohibition to the possibility of becoming a parent. Beyond the inheritance of the ties marked by violence, Akos unconsciously took on the deafening family secret inside the adoptive family! Echoing the words of Sandor Ferenczi "It was my intention to point out only that children welcomed with firmness and without affection die easily and willingly, or better they can use one of their many organic means for a rapid death, or if they escape this destiny, they conserve a certain pessimism and boredom of life" (Ferenczi, 1929). There is no doubt that Akos was a child "not welcomed" or "left to himself" and that this, his destiny, continued paradox idly in his adoptive family. But it is also true that his destructive response and his request to leave this family.... are to be interpreted as sane rebellion and a break in the misunderstanding where he, fortunately, is not a child, as states Ferenczi, with "less joy of living.

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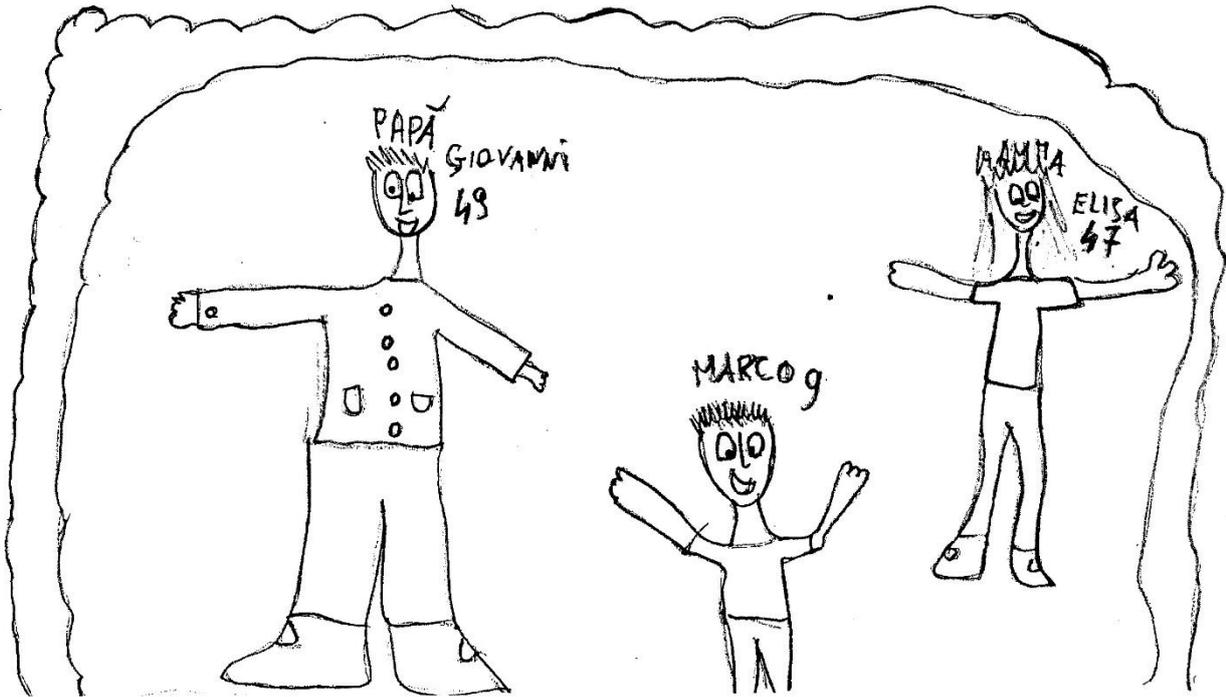
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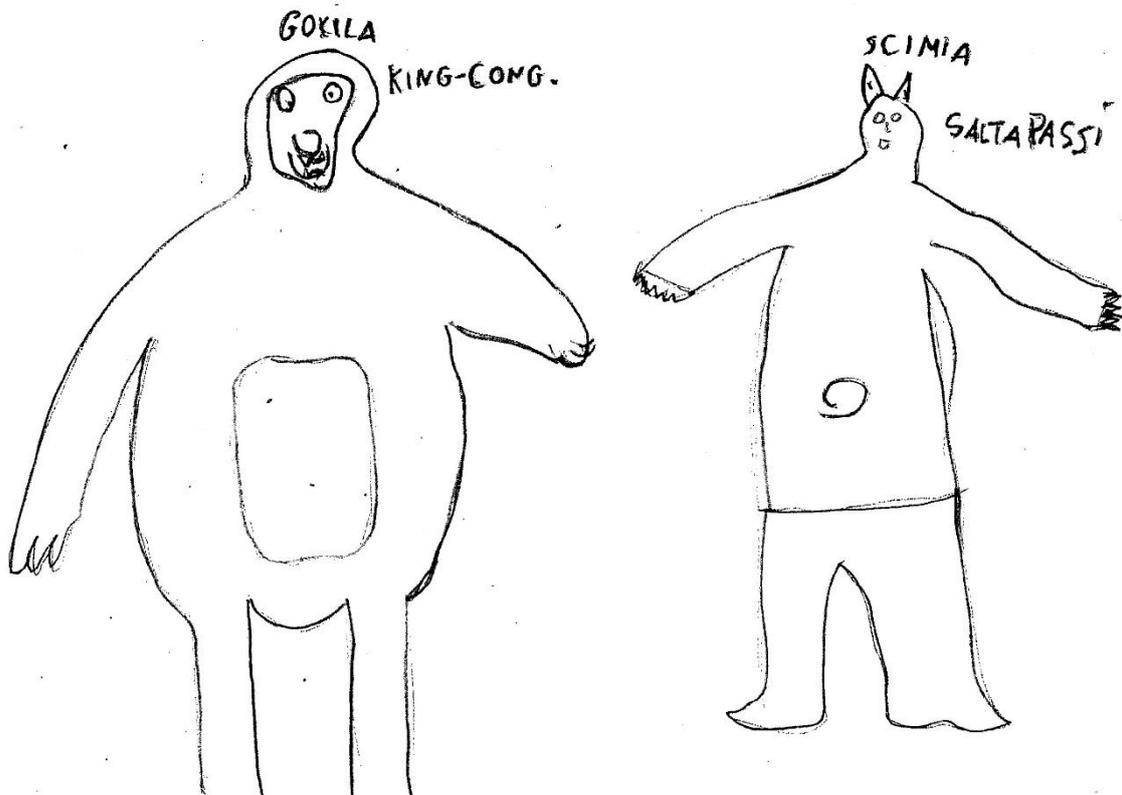
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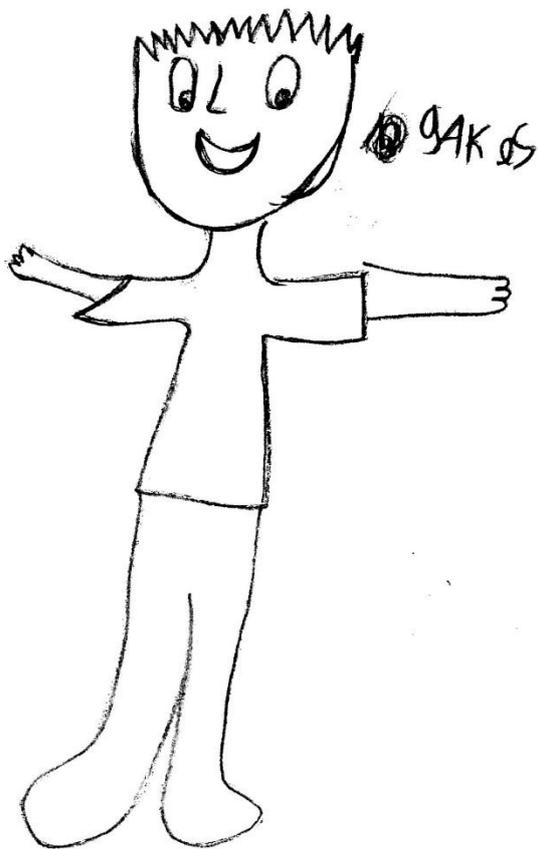
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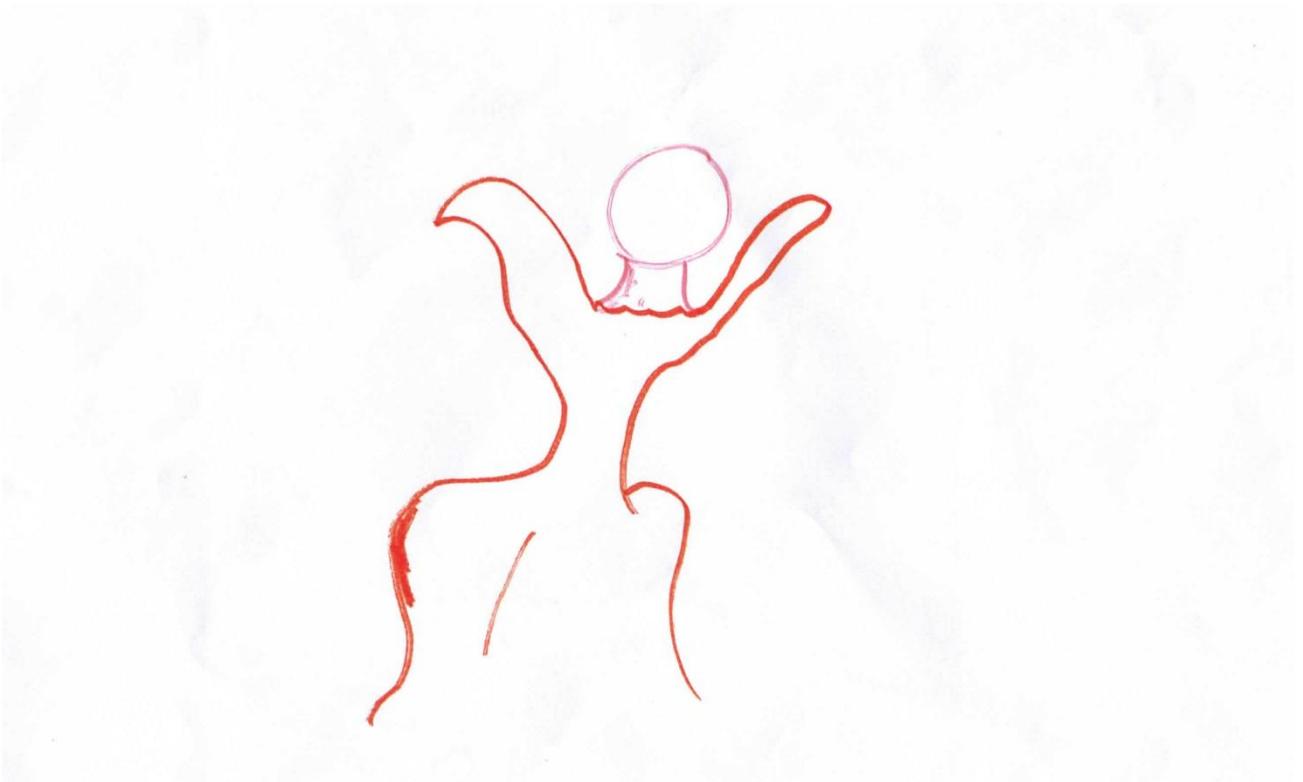
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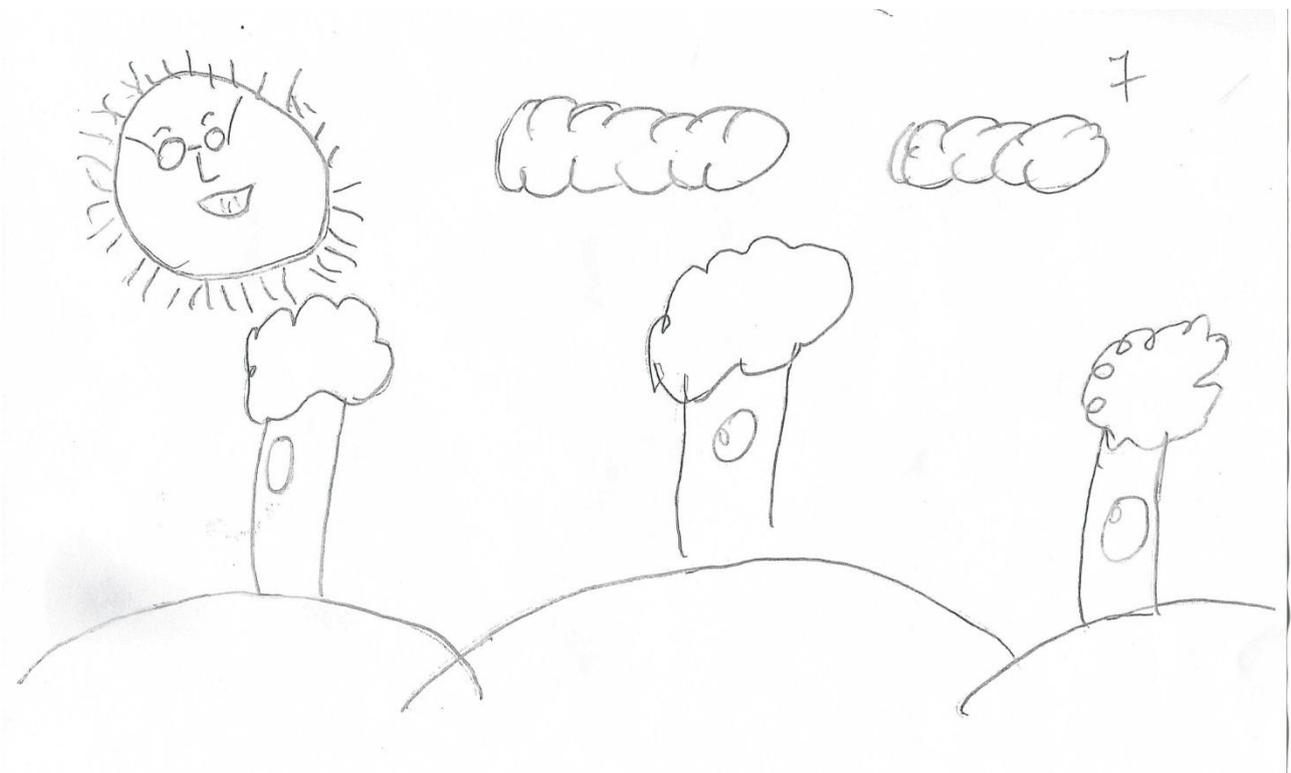
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