

A CLOSE CALL

MY NAME IS **ONDREJ** AND I WAS BORN IN A LITTLE TOWN IN SLOVAKIA CALLED **RIMAVSKA SOBOTA**. I HAVE LIVED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM FOR 7 YEARS, BUT I STILL REMEMBER HOW IT WAS TO ATTEND SCHOOL BACK IN SLOVAKIA. MY MEMORIES FROM THOSE TIMES PUT THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE. I HAD SOME TEACHERS WHO REALLY LIKED ME AND OTHERS WHO DID NOT. THIS IS FINE IN MY OPINION, YOU CANNOT BE LIKED BY EVERY TEACHER.

BUT NOW I CAN SEE THE PROBLEM WAS THAT 70% OF THE TEACHERS DIDN'T LIKE ME BECAUSE I WAS **ROMA**. THIS QUICKLY CHANGED ONCE I MOVED TO THE UNITED KINGDOM AND ENROLLED IN BABINGTON ACADEMY. BECAUSE EDUCATION WAS INCLUSIVE, I QUICKLY IMPROVED MY GRADES AND BECAME AN A-LEVEL STUDENT. THERE WERE STILL MOUNTAINS TO CLIMB, BUT INSTEAD OF HOLDING ME BACK BY SENDING ME TO A SPECIAL SCHOOL, MY TEACHERS MOTIVATED ME TO LEARN AND TOLD ME I COULD GO TO UNIVERSITY. THE DIFFERENCE IS TREMENDOUS.

THAT IS THE STORY I WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU.



IN SLOVAKIA, I ATTENDED A SCHOOL IN WHICH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION WASN'T A REALITY. BECAUSE I WAS ROMA, MOST TEACHERS DIDN'T LIKE ME. WHEN YOU ARE A KID THIS IS CONFUSING: YOU KEEP TRYING TO PROVE YOUR WORTH BUT, IN THE END, YOU JUST LOSE INTEREST IN STUDYING.



HOWEVER, I THOUGHT I COULD STILL EARN TEACHERS' RESPECT IF I WAS HARDWORKING, SO I ALWAYS SHOWED DEDICATION. LIKE OTHER NON-ROMA PUPILS, I ALSO GOT HIGH GRADES.

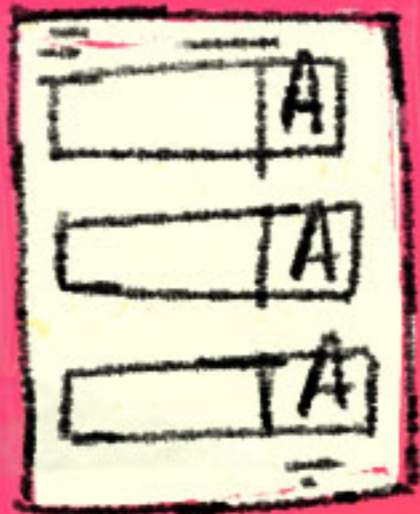


FOR SOME REASON, THIS WASN'T ENOUGH. THE HEAD TEACHER WANTED BOTH ME



AND MY BROTHER TRANSFERRED TO A SPECIAL SCHOOL.

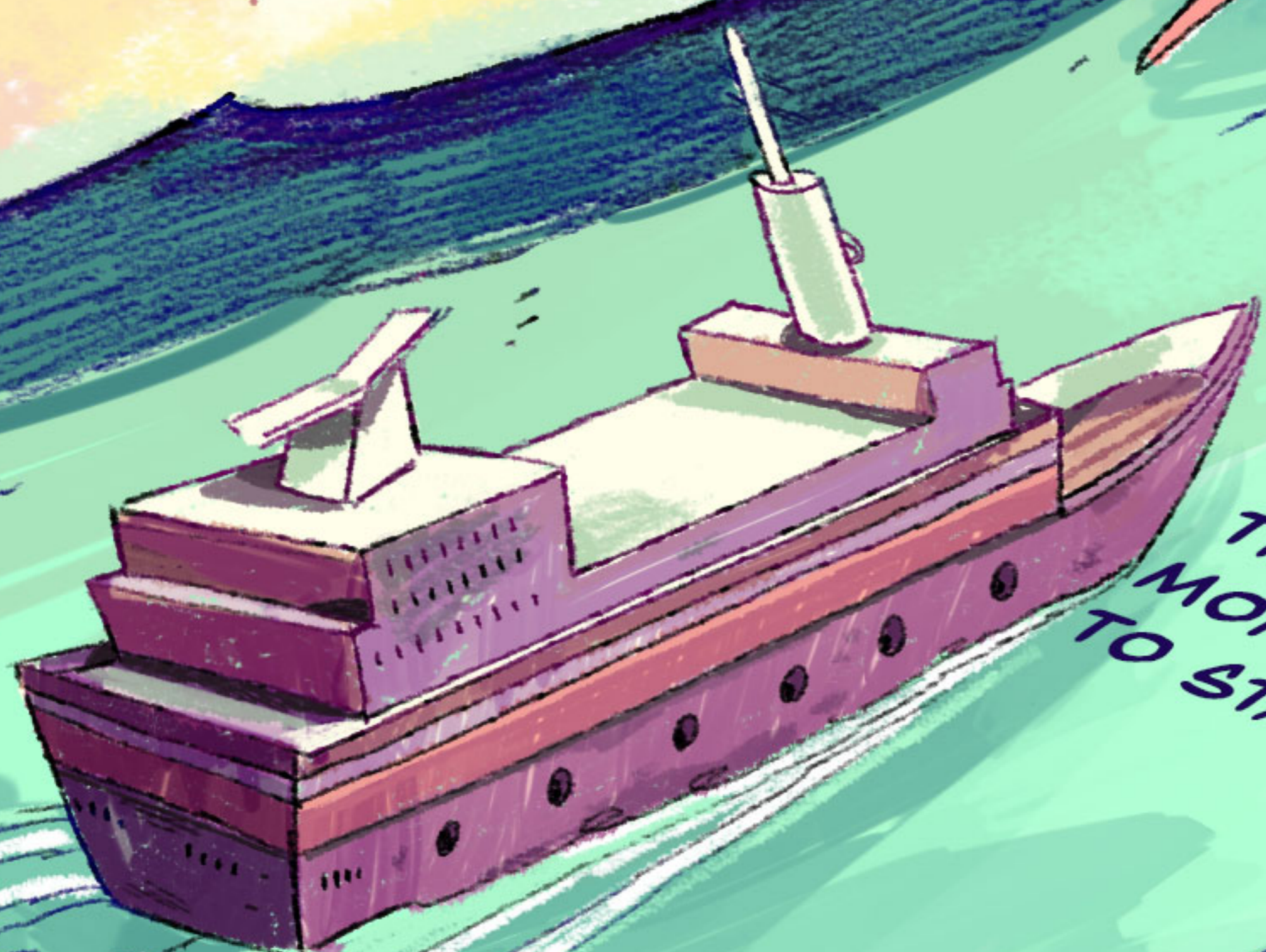
MY DAD GOT REALLY UPSET, SINCE HE KNEW IT WAS ONLY BECAUSE WE WERE ROMA.



MY BROTHER NEVER ATTENDED THE SPECIAL SCHOOL AND I EVENTUALLY ATTENDED THE 'NORMAL' ONE. BUT ONLY FOR SOME MONTHS. MY FATHER WAS STILL NOT HAPPY. HE WANTED US TO FINISH HIGH SCHOOL AND GET HIGHER EDUCATION, BUT THIS WAS NOT POSSIBLE IF YOU HAD BEEN IN A SPECIAL SCHOOL.



HE THEN HAD THE IDEA THAT WE SHOULD MOVE. ONE OF OUR AUNTIES LIVED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND SHE TOLD MY PARENTS THAT SCHOOLS WERE MUCH BETTER THERE. SO WE PACKED OUR THINGS AND, WITH THE LAST REMAINING MONEY, LEFT TO THE UNITED KINGDOM TO START A NEW LIFE...



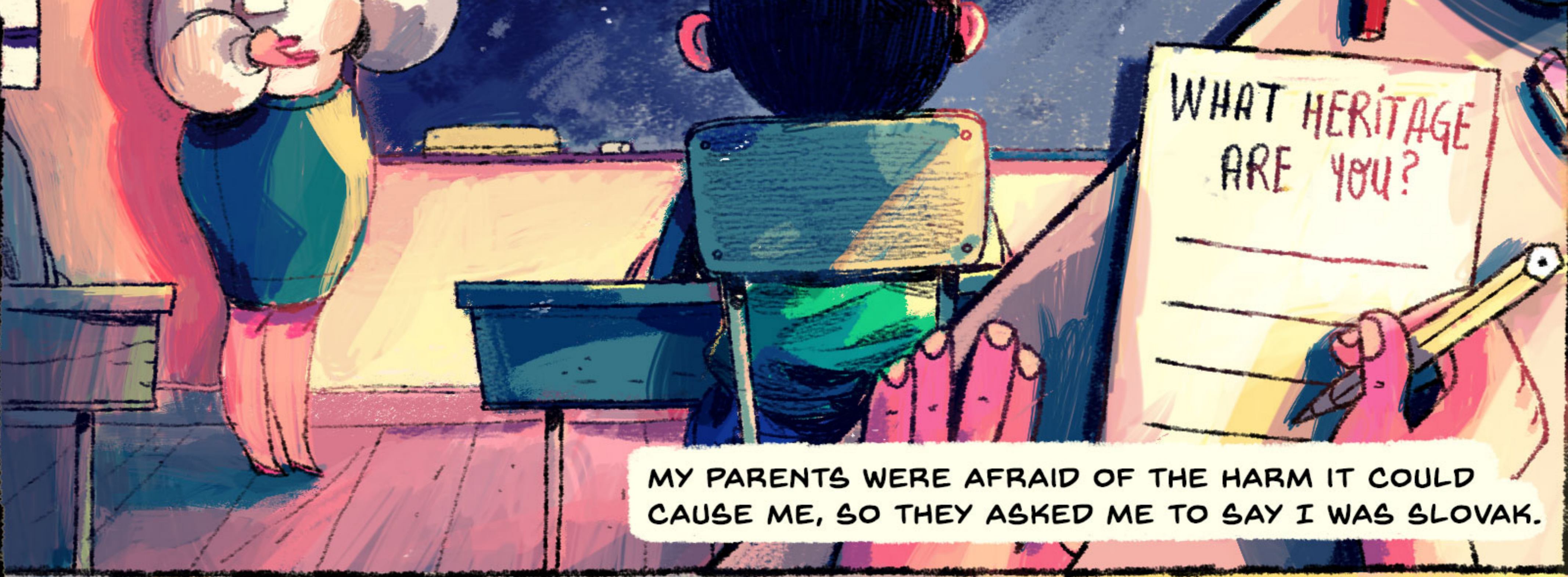


WELCOME

WHEN I FIRST WALKED INTO CLASS, I WAS INTRODUCED TO EVERYBODY AND WHEN ASKED WHAT MY HERITAGE WAS I SAID ROMA.



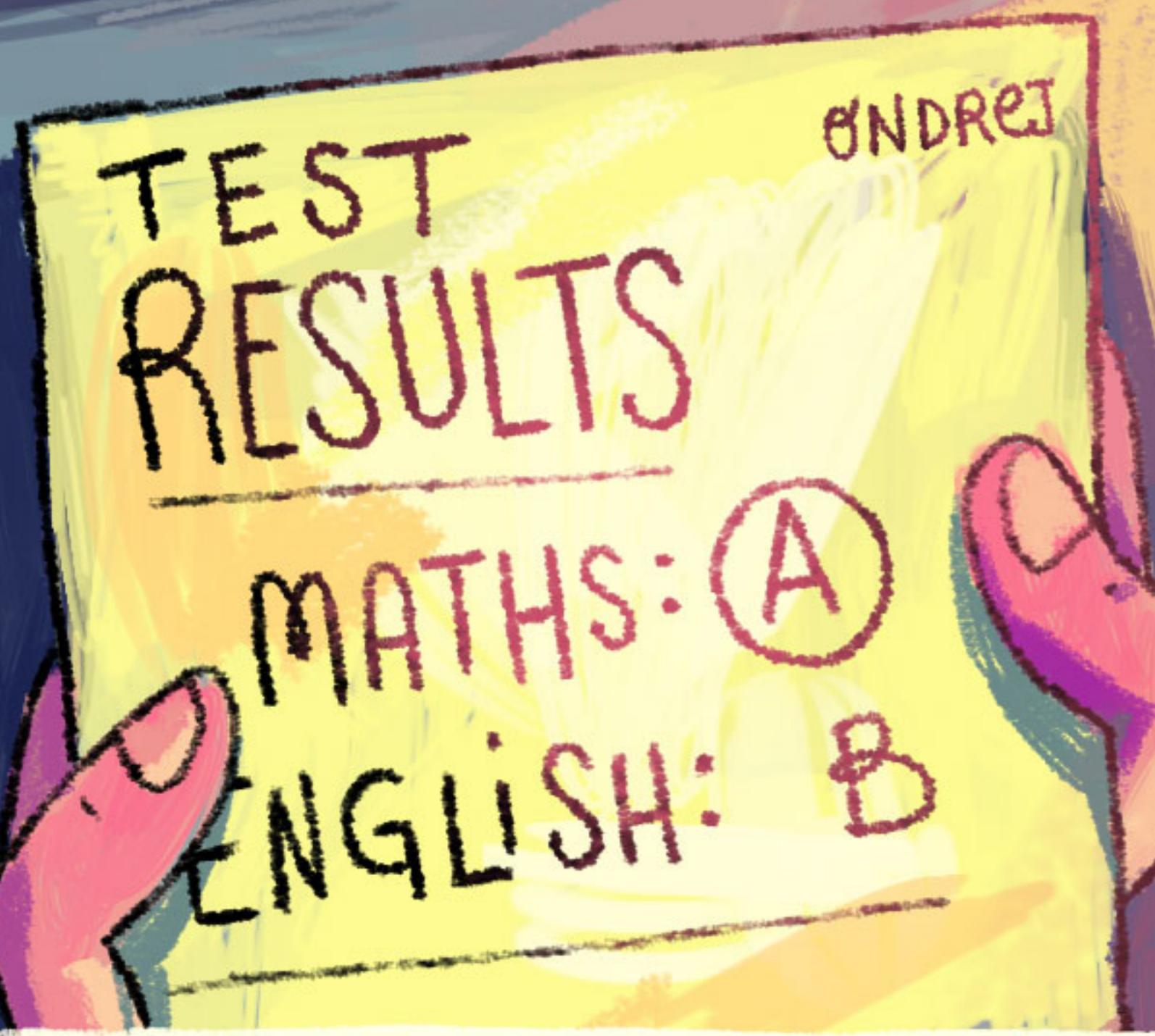
MY PARENTS WERE AFRAID OF THE HARM IT COULD CAUSE ME, SO THEY ASKED ME TO SAY I WAS SLOVAK.



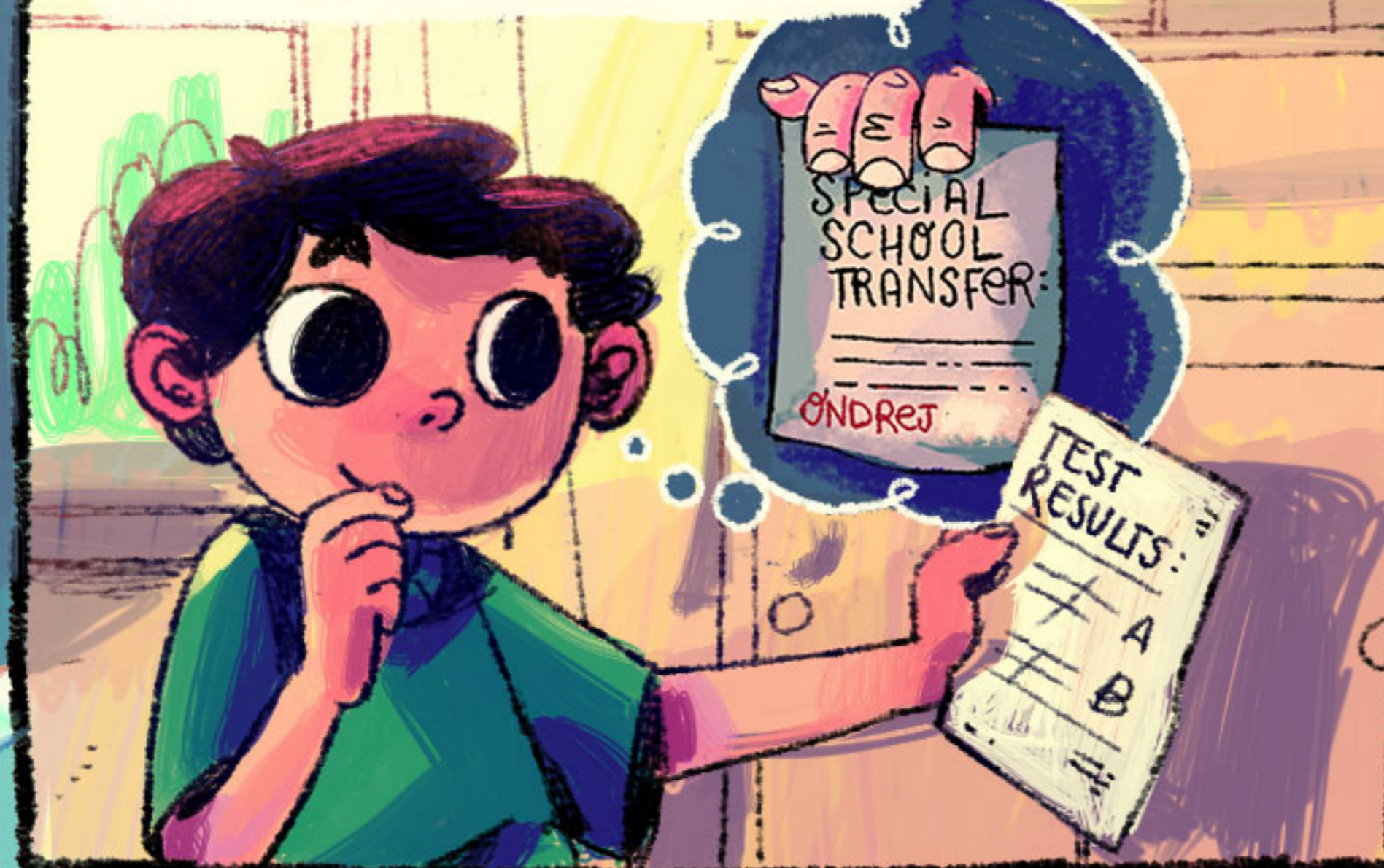
IN BABINGTON, MY EXPERIENCE WAS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. TEACHERS KNEW MY ENGLISH WAS NOT PERFECT, SO THEY REALLY HELPED ME.

HAPPY ST. NICHOLAS' DAY!

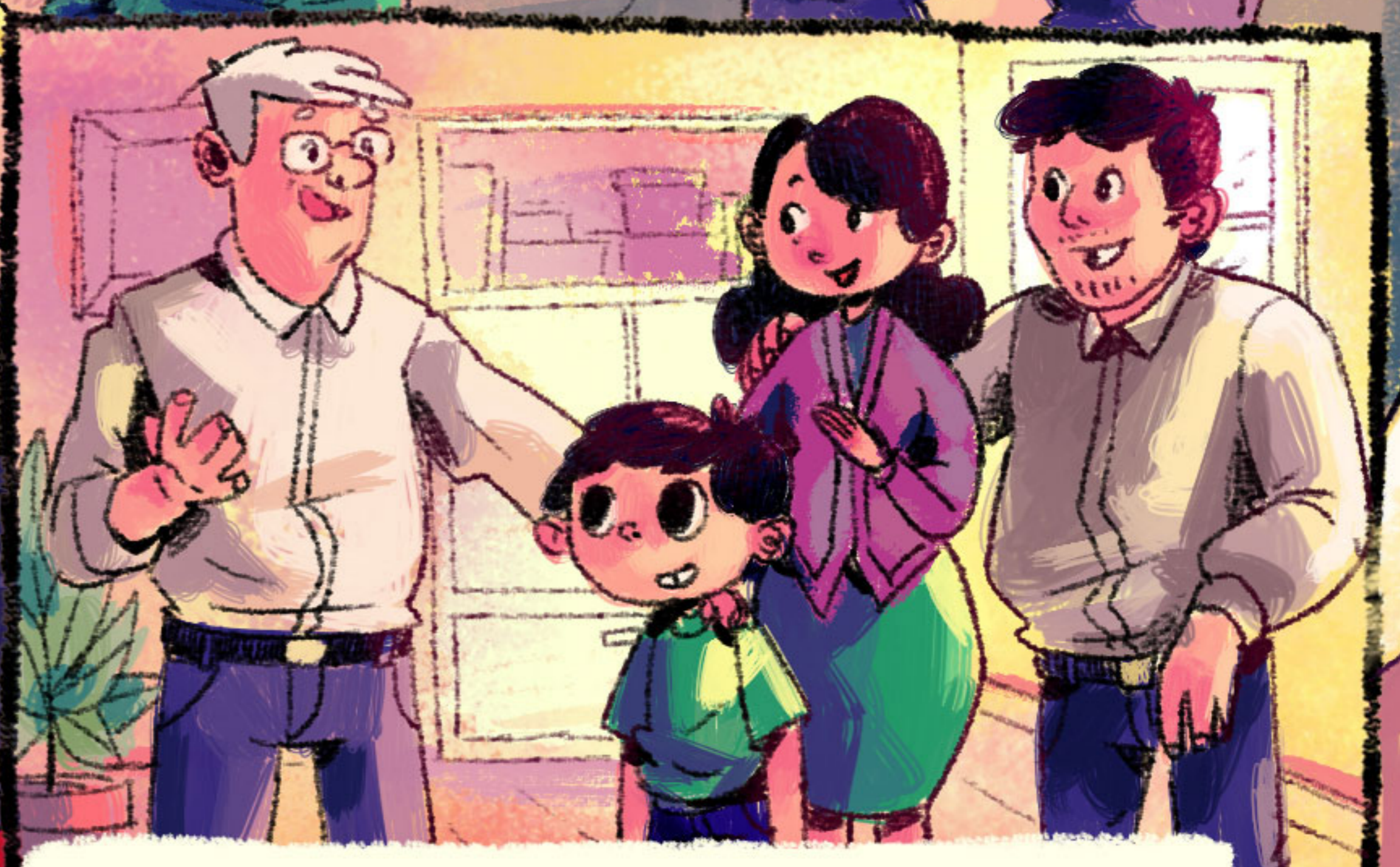
IN DECEMBER WE CELEBRATED ST. NICHOLAS DAYS FOR THE EASTERN EUROPEAN CHILDREN, WHICH I REALLY APPRECIATED, AS IT SHOWED THAT THE SCHOOL KNEW WHO WE WERE AND LIKED TO RESPECT SOME OF THE THINGS WE DO AT HOME.



WITHIN 6 MONTHS I WENT FROM NOT KNOWING HOW TO ANSWER THE QUESTION "WHERE DO YOU LIVE?" TO BEING IN THE TOP ENGLISH CLASSES.



IN THE SAME YEAR, ALL THE ROMA KIDS PARTICIPATED IN A PLAY ORGANISED BY TWO TEACHERS ABOUT A ROMA BOY LEAVING SLOVAKIA AND GOING TO A SCHOOL IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.



BY THE TIME I WAS FOURTEEN, I WAS A TOP STUDENT IN ALL THE SUBJECTS AND MY TEACHERS KEPT ENCOURAGING ME TO DO BETTER AND TRY HARDER.



WE PERFORMED IT IN A REAL THEATER IN THE CENTER OF TOWN FOR AROUND 500 PEOPLE, INCLUDING OUR PARENTS... AND LET ME TELL YOU, THEY ABSOLUTELY LOVED IT.



WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IS THAT WHILE IN BABINGTON, I WAS TREATED WITH RESPECT AND THE PEOPLE AROUND ME APPRECIATED ME FOR HOW MUCH I TRIED RATHER THAN FOR WHAT ORIGINS I HAD. SO, I BEHAVED WELL AND RESPONDED TO MY TEACHERS WITH RESPECT.

I WISH MY SCHOOL WAS LIKE THIS...

BY THE TIME I WAS FOURTEEN, MY PARENTS WERE PROUD OF ME CLAIMING MY HERITAGE AND SAYING I WAS ROMA. THEY KNEW THEN THAT I WOULD NOT BE TREATED DIFFERENTLY.

THAT SAME YEAR, THE TEACHER WHO TAUGHT FRENCH CAME TO MY HOUSE TO TELL MY PARENTS I SHOULD GO TO UNIVERSITY, WHICH IS QUITE A BIT DIFFERENT FROM A SPECIAL SCHOOL

NO OTHER 'ONDREJ' SHOULD HAVE TO MOVE TO A DIFFERENT COUNTRY SO THAT HE OR SHE CAN HAVE ACCESS TO A FAIR EDUCATION.