Paint Me a Sky

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Olga sat on the floor, stirring blue paint in a large plastic bucket. She had started this renovation a month ago. She decided to repaint the walls in the living room and refresh the ceiling. Every evening after work, she'd take a brush, a can of paint, and gradually, the room transformed into a sky. The walls used to be light lavender here. But Olga suddenly craved the delicate color of the sky, like in spring when nature is just waking up from a long sleep, and the sky, not yet heated, rejoices in the first warmth.

She dipped her brush into the paint, wiped it on the edge of the bucket, and stroked the wall. Just a little more to go, and she could start arranging the furniture. Then maybe she'd paint the hallway. Or the kitchen, though the kitchen would be more challenging. She'd have to move the refrigerator, meaning she'd need to call for help again—from neighbors or relatives. They already wondered why she needed all this, considering the war, inflation, fear. Yet she was renovating.

The bedroom and her son's room she wouldn't touch. They would stay as they were when they were still here until they returned.

Suddenly, her mobile phone rang. Olga tossed the brush aside and rushed to it, tearing off a glove in her haste. She pulled it off and grabbed the phone, her heart pounding wildly.

"How are you?" her friend Lyudmila's concerned voice echoed.

"I'm okay," Olga replied.

"No calls?"

"Not yet," Olga suppressed a sigh.

"It’ll be fine," assured her friend. "They’ll call, for sure."

"Yes."

Olga returned to the paint bucket. The phone did not ring again. At ten, she took a shower and tried to sleep. These last six months, that wasn’t easy. Memories surged in heavy waves, pressing her down against the cold sheets.

This year was the hardest of her life. The worst part was that none of it depended on her. It felt like a natural disaster, a tsunami, impossible to control or withstand. This year, war had burst into their lives.

When Maidan started, Olga's husband and son would bring supplies there after work and drive those aiding on the Maidan back to their homes. Olga stayed at home, glued to her laptop screen, crying, frightened and lost. But when they started killing people in February, she couldn't bear it and went to St. Michael's Monastery on her day off, where the injured were brought. Beaten and bloodied, they groaned and screamed; the air reeked of smoke from their clothes soaked with blood. Trying not to cry, Olga moved slowly among the people lying closely packed on the floor of St. Michael's Cathedral, laying down bedding, settling the wounded, covering them with blankets, repeating like a mantra, "It will be alright. Everything will be fine."

When the ATO began, she knew what her husband and son would do. Olga understood it was how it had to be; they could do no other. But how would she live without them? Maksym was only twenty-three. Practically a child still. He had just graduated from university and worked for only a year at a firm as a manager. Her husband was already fifty. Not old, but not as strong either. Still, they both silently packed their travel backpacks, kissed her, hugged her tightly, and promised to come back alive. And she knew they would. For it couldn't be otherwise. It just couldn't.

Every evening, she laid the phone beside her on the couch and waited, staring at the laptop screen, scouring the internet for photos of cities, towns, and villages in the east, trying to imagine them.

Olga dozed off only closer to morning. She dreamt of a red sky, and around her were sounds of gunfire and people running somewhere. She leapt out of bed. The cold silence of the summer morning filled the room. She looked at the opposite wall. There hung a painting they had once bought together at an art gallery—a seashore, small houses on a slope rising above the water, boats on the sand, and above it all stretched a tender blue sky. They looked at this painting and dreamed of one day visiting a place just like it. Imagining walking along the shore, admiring boats rocking on the waves, breathing in the wonderful salty scent of the sea, feeling immensely happy and free. With the gentle sun above them, and the sky blanketing them in its tender blueness.

But instead, came war. With the money they had been setting aside for years for that dreamed-of journey, her husband bought quality helmets, bulletproof vests, and other military gear for himself and their son. And now, the tender blue sky appeared in their living room.

Olga crawled out from under the blanket and trudged to the kitchen. She warmed the kettle, drank tea, and sluggishly headed to work. In the evening, her friend called.

"Listen, we're going out of town for the weekend. Come with us. It'll distract you a bit; you can breathe some fresh air."

"But there's poor reception there."

"The internet isn't great, but phone reception is fine. Come on, you won't regret it."

Olga thought for a moment. She suddenly wanted to find herself somewhere she could forget about everything, if only for a little while. But she knew such a place didn’t exist. Because you can't forget yourself.

"Alright, I'll come."

"Great," Lyudmila rejoiced. "We'll pick you up by eight tomorrow."

They zoomed past wheat and cornfields. Sunflowers nodded at them with their large yellow heads. Everything was so peaceful and bright, it felt like none of the horrible events in the country were happening, no one was shooting at anyone, and people weren't killing each other in this dreadful reality.

They sat at a table, eating salad and grilled meat, talking, while Olga forced herself to follow along. Finally, dinner ended, and everyone retired to their rooms. The night was warm and quiet. Crickets chirped in the garden, and the sharp fragrances of night flowers burst through the open window, filling the space.

Olga got out of bed, pulled on pants and a t-shirt, and left the cottage. She stood on the doorstep for a few minutes, then headed to the gate. The night was clear, with electric lights streaming from a few windows of neighboring cottages—people there were still awake.

She walked slowly along the grassy path. Soon the garden plots ended. A grove loomed ahead. Olga turned on the flashlight on her mobile and confidently stepped under the trees' canopies. The intoxicating night scents intensified. Moonlight barely seeped between the branches, and a soft rustle of leaves could be heard. Crickets never ceased their song.

Finally, the lake glistened in the moonlight. Olga took off her clothes and stepped into the water. The coolness bit against her skin. She went in deeper. The shores were out of sight, but the crickets sang on, and the night potion tickled her nostrils. Olga took a deep breath and submerged. Water filled her ears, nostrils, unexpectedly stinging her eyes. She resurfaced and began to swim.

A long-forgotten feeling of joy gradually filled her. The moon gleamed in the sky, and the stars beckoned to distant galaxies, where maybe someone, too, was swimming in a night lake.

The sky was beginning to gray. She pulled on her clothes over her wet body, picked up her phone from the grass, took a last look at the lake, and moved towards the trees.

In daylight, they drove back to the city. Her friend and her husband dropped Olga off at her building and left. She opened the door with a familiar motion and froze. Tattered boots with scuffed toes stood on the shoe mat. Olga felt a flutter in her chest. The light in the kitchen doorway was blocked by a tall, broad figure.

"Hi, Mom!"

Sobbing, she rushed to him, wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly, enveloping him in her love.

"Alive... You're alive," she repeated.

"It’s all fine," he reassured her, kissing her chestnut hair colored by gray.

"For good?" she looked into his blue eyes, so much like his father's.

"Yes," he replied.

Olga pressed against his broad chest again.

"Oh, you must be hungry," she said, pulling away to rummage in the fridge.

"Don’t worry, I’ll take a shower first," Maksym said.

"Alright, son."

Olga quickly made scrambled eggs, chopped a salad, and brewed tea. Maksym changed into a t-shirt and sweatpants. She looked at her son. He hadn't changed; still slim. But of course, he wouldn't gain weight; he wasn't at a resort. Only his gaze was different. More serious, with a slight sadness in his eyes, as if a quiet thought was flowing in their depths.

"So why’d you decide on a renovation?" Maksym asked, devouring the scrambled eggs with salad. Thankfully, his appetite hadn't disappeared.

"I just felt like it," Olga answered, somewhat guiltily.

"Then I'll help."

"Thank you!" she looked at his suntanned hands with rough skin and stains ingrained in his nails.

After breakfast, Maksym began painting the unfinished section with broad, swift strokes.

"Did they demobilize you by rotation?" Olga asked, mixing the leftover paint in the can.

"Uh-huh," the young man said, examining the wall.

"When will this war end…" Olga looked at her son. "And Dad will return…"

"I don’t know… But it will definitely end with our victory. That, I know for sure."

A fire flickered in his eyes.

"Yes."

Maksym wiped the brush on the bucket's edge.

"Alright, see how I did."

Olga marveled at the wall.

"Thank you, son! It’s so beautiful!"

"You did great. I just finished it up a bit."

His white t-shirt was dotted with blue paint spots.

"Take it off, I’ll wash it quickly before the paint dries."

Maksym hesitated.

"Come on, hurry!"

Olga extended her hand. He slowly pulled off the t-shirt. A small round scar showed on Maksym's shoulder, right under the collarbone. A worried shadow crossed his eyes.

"Mom, it's okay. I'm alive."

"So it wasn’t rotation… And you were in a hospital… You didn’t tell me…"

Maksym looked at her guiltily, a little from under his brow, as he did when he was a child.

Olga hugged him silently, pressing against his broad chest.

That night, for the first time in many months, she fell asleep almost immediately. Olga awoke at dawn. It was already getting light. She looked at the opposite wall. Green-blue waves rolled onto the shore, and the sun shone above the sea.

It's okay; they still had everything ahead. The sea, the sun, and a blue, cloudless sky. The war would end. Orest would return. And they would go to a quiet seaside. Because dreams should come true. The main thing is to believe and wait.

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