Silent Witness of Love

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Pain. It squeezes. The heart. A cold fist. Metallic, angry fist. If it were foreign—I would push it away. But this fist is my own.

The breathing exercise "Flower-Candle" is very simple: I inhale through my nose to smell the flower and exhale slowly through my mouth to blow out an imaginary candle. Psychologists say that our emotional state affects our breathing, but breathing also affects our emotional state. Slow down your breathing and you'll calm down. In theory. In practice, this damned cold fist squeezes my heart tighter. It's a pity I'm not a bird—I could have flown away. But instead... my heart waits. And I wait, standing at the edge of the sidewalk. I watch the endless flow of cars. None of them resemble the one I'm waiting for. Could it be a mistake? Maybe not today? I'll wait another half-hour, then again and again. I must wait. Inhale the flower, blow out the candle, inhale the flower, blow out the candle, blow out the flower, inhale the candle... damn.

You said at the first meeting that you were married. And not in that usual way: it's just a formality, we don't even sleep together, it's just for the kids. No, you laid it all out plainly: "I love her and I can't live without you." I laughed: "Are you crazy?" We’ve barely known each other for half an hour, and you can't live without me? You replied seriously: "I'm shocked too." And you kissed me.

Maybe try another exercise? What else do psychologists recommend? "Safe place." Relax (I can't!), close your eyes (I'm in the middle of the street!), take a few breaths and exhales (I've done a thousand!) and imagine you are in the safest place in the world (do such places exist?), it could be real or imaginary (can I fly to the Moon?), the main thing is that you feel comfortable, warm, and safe (can we not repeat "safe" too often?), look around, what do you see? (nothing), what do you feel? (nothing), are you comfortable? (no).

I never would have thought that this could be about me—a mistress of a married man. Not deceived, but voluntary. Not unhappy, but so happy that it hurts even more. You said that it was also against your rules—to play on two boards at once. Your chess comparisons have always been so inappropriate. And that "checkmate" at the end of every joke. How could I laugh at such jokes? I should have cried, but with you, I didn't want to. Not even when you rushed out in the middle of the night and left. When we never spent Christmas together. When your child got sick and you canceled our vacation. And when you were five hours late for my birthday. Five hours! I didn't cry even when you looked at the two stripes, smiled, and said you've always dreamed of another son. Three sons are wonderful. But mine will be the third. And she gave birth to the first and second, and that's not fair. She has a debut, I have a defense. Understand? You understood everything, you always understood everything, but you weren't going to change anything.

I don't know if it's the same for everyone, but those videos on YouTube always make me feel better—I'm probably subscribed to all the psychologist-bloggers in the world. One of those bloggers once said: "If you watch every one of my videos and your life doesn't change, maybe it's time to see a real psychologist?" He got blasted in the comments: so you admit you're not real? He deleted that video. But I understand what the blogger meant, I should see a psychologist, a living one, with flesh and blood, not just a picture on my laptop screen. I will, someday. For now, I try "Butterfly Hug." It's a simple exercise—cross your arms over your chest like butterfly wings and hug yourself with them, tapping your collarbones gently with your fingertips. An old man stops beside me and asks with concern if I'm alright. He's never heard of "Butterfly Hug." A pity, because it really makes me feel a bit better. The fist seems to loosen its grip. But the car is still not here. Maybe they'll take another route? Is there another? What if it was all her? She found out about us, about me, and changed everything?

The son is your spitting image. Especially the eyes—black as night. I thought all babies were born with blue eyes, something to do with the lack of pigment. But our son's eyes were black from the start, deep and far too wise. Even now, at four years old, his gaze is just as wise. It's as if he always understood everything, never surprised that daddy was sometimes there and sometimes gone, took it for granted that other dads played in the park, while he only saw his dad at home. It made me so angry—it's one thing for me, you couldn't go anywhere with me because the town is small, they'd see, start talking. But the son... you could have at least once taken him to the playground. So that others would see and believe that you were his. But you weren't, no, you were, but you weren't.

Another half-hour and that's it, I can't wait any longer—the kid will wake up, I've left him alone in the apartment. Just come, please. Is that too much to ask? The fist again. Squeezing again. "Butterfly Hug." Psychologists advise not only to tap yourself but also to say something like a mantra. A simple calming phrase. "Everything's okay" or better yet "everything will be okay." Because, after all, those are the most calming words in the world, even though they annoy many. They used to annoy me too. Now—not anymore.

Small town, officially 32,000 residents. But I've never met your wife. Sometimes I wondered: did you make her up? But your Facebook is filled with family photos. I never understood: how can all that coexist in one person? In one such wonderful and simultaneously dishonest person? Loving me, spoiling our son, vacationing with us, and then doing the same with them a month later, being just as devoted to them as to us. How I wish I could hate you for all this. But I can't. Because I love. Because although you were a liar, you were an honest one, as paradoxical as that sounds. You never gave me false hopes. You never promised anything, but you did everything for us to be happy. And we truly were. So you never lied to me. And to her? She didn’t know about me? She couldn't know. And you didn’t want her to, otherwise why didn't we go anywhere together? You were scared. And again, your paradoxes: you feared little, were ready for much, but much isn't everything. And perfect people don't exist. Neither do perfect relationships. And while I speak of you as if I'm angry, in truth, I'd never want to imagine that our first meeting didn't happen. You made me feel like myself. Not perfect me with not perfect you.

I see police lights: blue and red. All the cars ahead pull to the right to let a procession pass. The procession is large—after the police cars, there's a van with yellow and blue flags, I know you're there, followed by a series of cars, with an ambulance visible at the end, probably just in case someone feels unwell. I've seen this before. The passersby have too—because they move closer to the road and kneel on one knee. I want to kneel too, but I can't—my legs are like stone, they won't bend. Flower-candle, safe place, butterfly hug, candle, place, butterfly...

When the Russians attacked us, the queues at the recruiting offices reached the skies—everyone wanted to go to war. And you did too. You said it was every man's duty—to defend his land. I replied: "Not every man's." You have three sons, you have a legal right to leave the country. And that would be fair! You didn't believe it was fair and that having three children gave you any advantages over men with two, one, or even none. I hit you with my fists on your chest and screamed that you were a coward! You were just afraid to confess to your wife that you had me and our son! You said let me think you a coward, but you would go to war. And you did.

And now you're coming. They're bringing you. And that unbearably sad song "Plive Kacha" plays. In a loudspeaker, a male voice with a tremor says: "Hero on a shield! Bow, hero on a shield!"

I blocked you on all messengers. If you don’t want to, neither do I. And I'll never show our son even your photo. You brought it on yourself! You could have just told her and taken us all to safety with the kids' birth certificates. But you… you donned the uniform and after training headed into hell. Yes, I knew everything about you because I blocked you, but not her—her Facebook was open. She wrote about the funds raised—first for armor for you, then for a thermal imager, a drone, a car. Your friends called you a "hero" in the comments. And I looked into our son's black eyes and didn’t understand: is this what heroism is? Going to your death. You knew nothing about war, you yourself said you had never held a weapon before all this. You were a civilian, ordinary, simple, but mine! I went to church every Sunday. Prayed for you. Holding one of the prayer books, once I asked: will we see each other again? I opened the prayer book at random and read the answer—the first line on top: "Silent witness of death, silent witness of love..." What does that mean? The son cried, I got distracted and lost the page. No matter how much I searched afterward—I never found those words again. But they turned out to be prophetic.

I kneel, feel the jeans soaking through and the cold spreading through my body, penetrating it. And now it's not a fist, but giant metal claws squeezing my heart. And your heart is being transported to the cemetery, to be buried with honors, hero who fought the Russians until the end. "Bow, hero on a shield!" There’s already a whole avenue of yellow and blue flags at the cemetery, where soldiers will line up and under salutes to the sky, they will lower your coffin into the ground. But I won’t see you, because apart from the soldiers, there will be your friends and relatives, there will be your sons and she—the official widow. There won’t be a place for me there. But you'll always have a place in my heart. I inhale the flower, blow out the candle. Loved you and will always love you. I imagine a safe place. And I forgive. I hug myself with butterfly wings. You are not a coward, you are anyone but a coward.

The last car in the procession stops, the door opens, and she gets out. Beautiful, but pale as if all the blood had left her with the tears, in a black coat and black lace scarf. I kneel and fear to look her in the eye. And she offers me her hand and says: "Get up, we'll go together." "Do you want this?" I ask with a trembling voice. "He would have wanted it," she replies.

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