Confession of a Caregiver

by Olena Skuovatova

I looked at the old woman's thin fingers, twisted by arthritis. They clenched into a fist and then relaxed, like the gills of a fish tossed ashore by a wave. Focus on the fingers, just them — under no circumstances look into the eyes.

If I catch that gaze, I'd be sleepless for several nights again. And I need sleep to have strength. To have the strength to smile and wish health to those who will never recover, to have the strength to turn and wash helpless bodies that were full of life not long ago, to have the strength to call my mother, to have the strength... not to go mad.

The old woman, whose name I don't remember—it's enough that it's written on the bed's headboard—groans. I get up, pour water into a glass, and bring it to her parched lips. She can't drink, only makes helpless smacking sounds. "Just don’t look into the eyes," I repeat like a mantra.

I don't have to be here. I should have gone to the others. Checked the condition, gave water, and then continue performing my duties. There are many rooms, all need to be visited to ensure everything is okay. Tomorrow is Saturday, and our nursing home "Sunny City" will have visitors. And, as fate would have it, it's my shift again. A constant staff shortage forces us to work overtime. Few are eager to care for the elderly. Not even promises of housing, announcements in trams, or recruiting at language courses for foreigners help.

The old woman convulsed, and I realized what kept me in this room. At least in the final moments of her life, she wasn’t alone—for some, even that is a luxury. Before my eyes, her body gradually slackened and relaxed. Her hands finally released the crumpled sheet. Now I can look at her face. It resembles a baked apple, just taken out of the oven.

I even smell the caramel aroma of baked apples and honey in the air. Now my mother will call, "Tetiana, come, I baked something delicious." This memory echoes with pain in my chest. I think it’s time to get a mammogram. The medical insurance will cover it if I can find the time.

Now that the old woman has died, I must inform the head nurse. If I linger too long here, questions might arise. I throw a farewell glance:

"Sweet dreams to you, madam," I say and exit the room.

In the corridor, I meet Herr Müller. He speeds on his electric cart, as if he’s already started the Paris–Granada–Dakar rally. I jump aside to avoid getting under the wheels. The old man laughs loudly and waves cheerfully. Oh, if only my mother had such a machine, she would still surprise her neighbors. But in Ukraine, this luxury is inaccessible, so she hasn’t gone outside for many months, imprisoned in the walls of her own home. Now she only has a patch of sky and branches of an apple tree, twisted like the fingers of an arthritis patient, in the window pane.

With a heavy sigh, I walk along the impeccably white walls. Here everything is white. They’re the easiest to maintain because you don’t have to choose colors when stains appear. Germans are so practical. I’d have put up wallpaper, something cute and cozy, with tiny flowers, or even with Mickey Mouse. The elderly love Disney cartoons. When they gather in the hall and watch them with pleasure, it’s sweet.

The head nurse listens to my report about the patient’s death. Not a single muscle on her face twitches, as if I told her something mundane. When I finish, she starts performing her duties with robotic precision.

But none of this interests me anymore. Very soon, a new resident will appear in the room. We have a waiting list that’s a year long.

This is an expensive nursing home. Only those who not only earned a good pension but also saved something or purchased additional insurance can afford it. Some had to sell their property to spend the remaining days in this house with a mezzanine. More precisely, their children did because few willingly agree to move to the "Sunny City." My mother would tie herself to the bed but wouldn’t leave her home.

We had a patient who refused to leave her house but was brought here by force by her children. Once here, she stopped eating and drinking. We—the staff—can offer, but we can’t force-feed. It’s a taboo, one of many learned in our care courses and adhered to like commandments. That woman died in a month. She was supported by IVs until she melted away, like ice in a martini glass. Damn the expensive martini named "Sunny City."

I gently knock on the door of room thirteen. Hearing a cheerful reply, I enter.

"Oh meine Liebe. Schön dich zu sehen!" Peter exclaims.

He sits on the bed and nods at the chessboard. He knows I can’t play with him, but he invites me every time. Once, I had a night shift, and we spent the night playing. It was our secret, for which I could be fired.

Peter is still a fairly upbeat old man. His daughter placed him here, worried his heart might give out when no one was around. I think he agreed not to worry her. His daughter is nearing fifty and is planning to have a child for the first time. Her nervous state made Peter agree to this.

I walk around the room and sit on a chair. I like the plants that occupy the entire space. They are lush and green, and it’s clear their owner knows gardening. At home, Peter had a wonderful garden; I’ve seen pictures, and now he misses it greatly. Sometimes he semi-jokingly says that once his daughter gives birth and calms down, we’ll get married and live happily in his house. Peter’s cherished dream is to become the first to escape from here alive.

His proposal amuses me. The last person to court me was my husband, Pavlo.

We lived happily. He worked as a director of a small enterprise, but his real passion was gardening. In the early days of the full-scale Russian invasion, Pavlo joined the Territorial Defense, then they were transferred to the Armed Forces and deployed near Kharkiv. There he went missing, and now there’s not even a grave where I could plant a tree in his memory.

The painful memory burns inside, and I try to return to Peter. He senses my state. He stands up, approaches, and gently strokes my hand, like a little boy wanting to comfort his mother but not knowing how.

I nod gratefully, wish him a good day, and head to the next room, where the twins await. They lived together their whole lives, neither having children nor husbands, and now they share one room between them, like a mother’s womb they once split.

The twins don't need company, so I can perform my duties and stay in my own world. I remember how Pavlo joined Territorial Defense, how I moved to my daughter’s, and we hid in a basement with her and my grandson. From the stress, the little one began to stutter, and we decided to go abroad. First to Slovakia. We waited there for a few weeks and, realizing it would not end quickly, moved to Germany.

In Ukraine, I worked as a German language teacher, so the choice of country was obvious. Exhaling, we tried to settle down. My daughter attended language courses, my grandson went to kindergarten, and I looked for work. I was offered a position at a school. They were creating integration classes, so my skills could be useful, but I wasn’t ready to deal with children’s noise and boundless energy.

Like a somnambulist, I wandered the streets, not understanding what I wanted. Once at the edge of a park, I saw a house with a mezzanine surrounded by a garden with neatly trimmed boxwood shrubs. There, on the lawn, a barbecue was grilling. I didn’t know then that they did that every time a patient had a birthday.

On the lawn, grandfathers and grandmothers chatted, played ball, tossing it lazily to one another, or just basked in the sun, offering it their yellowed faces.

In my state, it was precisely the place I needed. I walked along the low fence and found myself at the entrance. A notice hung there stating that the nursing home "Sunny City" was hiring staff. I thought: it’s fate. Although I later realized that the notice was always there, and when it faded so much it was unreadable, it was replaced with a fresh one.

My smartwatch lit up: "air raid alert over." I deliberately don’t delete this app—it reminds me that the war continues and who our enemy is. Here, in the tranquility of bourgeois life, it’s very easy to forget, to believe in the world of kind, calm, always smiling people.

I discreetly swiped away the notification and saw three missed calls from my mother. I bade farewell to the twins and sneaked away, hoping to avoid being seen, to the smoking area.

I quit smoking at twenty-three, started when I got this job. I lit a cigarette, took a drag, and dialed my mother. When she became paralyzed a year ago, I wanted to come and take her to us. But she was unwavering: "This is my land. I was born here, I’ll die here."

A neighbor watched over her, and I sent every penny I could save. But the constant worm of guilt gnawed from the inside. Someday it might turn into cancer or some other evil.

Mother told me they buried the neighbor's boy who died at the front yesterday, that the neighbor doesn’t visit often because she has many cares, that the old cat grew bold and now sleeps on her bed. I listened, knowing I should head to the patient who needed a diaper change every few hours, but I lit a third cigarette.

"I so want to go outside," my mother sighed sorrowfully. "Out there, beyond the window, the very apple tree is in full bloom," she sobbed.

Pavlo planted that tree. He bought it five years ago and took care of it as if it were a child. It wouldn’t bloom, though it grew big, and my husband kept waiting, not cutting it down, believing its time would come.

I saw the head nurse approaching. I hung up and quickly hid the phone. She saw my tear-filled eyes, thought I was mourning the deceased old woman, and sympathetically touched my shoulder. I reflexively stepped back:

"I’m returning to Ukraine," I said, sniffing.

"But why? There’s a war..."

"The apple tree has bloomed, so it’s time for me to go home," I replied in Ukrainian; however, she wouldn’t understand.

I crumpled the cigarette pack in my pocket, threw it in the trash, and went to administration to write my notice of resignation.