\*\*The Big Cleanup\*\*

by Marianna Kiyanovska

Tanya usually opened the door, stepped inside, locked it behind her, and dropped the bags at her feet—laptop, groceries, cat food, and litter. She placed her leather bag on the entrance table, leaned her back against the door, and began to scream silently. Her eyes screamed, her forehead, chin, nose were screams, her mouth was a scream, her teeth were screams, her entire being was a scream, but only a faint wheeze, a hoarse sound escaped her throat: neighbors lived behind the walls, behind partitions, above and below, and they weren’t to know anything—absolutely nothing about this scream, or about the midnight sobs, or about the small scars on her stomach, legs, and arms (suicide was not an option for Tanya, but pain—oh yes, pain was).

They arrived here, to this small apartment, on March 6th, when dozens, no, hundreds, no, thousands of civilians had already perished, though supposedly no one was intentionally killing them at that point. On March 1st, a Tuesday, their largest square in Ukraine, Freedom Square, was shelled and destroyed—at eight in the morning, just as Tanya was approaching work, ten killed (it seemed). And by night, they were already on the road, days spent at the train station, she doesn’t even remember in which city, who slept, who didn’t, what they ate, whom they spoke to. People approached to help them gather their belongings, another train, another packed carriage, everyone standing, breathing—and that somehow made it both cold and warm at the same time. Another station, night, air raid alerts, the border, and finally exhaustion weighed them down so they couldn’t open their eyes, whispering while eyelids, hands, and feet felt like stone. And now—March 6th, Forgiveness Sunday. May you all perish, bastards, subhumans. March, cold, an exhausted, half-dead soul torn apart waiting for the hosts, late by a few minutes, which felt like an eternity. Tanya felt something similar right after the accident: a distorted sense of time, or non-time, she looked at a clock—not believing it—forty seconds, three minutes, eight… When the ambulance sirens wailed, inwardly she had turned gray, dried up like ancient elders until she was just bones, scattered by the wind. But then a face came close to hers: a nose, eyes, teeth, lashes, a cut on the chin, a messy brow, a foul breath: “Can you hear me?” And she didn’t know if she could.

Before, when Tanya had a few free hours, even in the rain, she simply disappeared to wander around town, for friends, for other people there existed another time. Guests often came home, her parents liked it, though it was somewhat of a disturbance. There was a ritual: towards the end, about half an hour before the farewell hugs, her parents joined for tea, her mom would rustle with the wrapper of her favorite biscuits placed on an ancient Viennese cloche, a trophy from her great-grandparents, something Tanya hadn’t even thought of as something significant—Valera in the next room would be fiddling with his Lego, Micha asleep with the cat, dad brewing fresh tea in his own way, as he said—“under a coat,” covering the teapot with a specially sewn cozy with openings for the spout and handle. Where is that teapot cozy now, where is the Lego? The cat remains, but even it has grayed. And there is no more Valera. Funny, quiet, focused Valera. He’s grown up, two years is no joke for a boy like that, reaching almost two meters. As if he’s a completely different person.

Deprived of their home, the familiar surroundings, the parents became childlike. Micha immediately went to war, and it was the right thing, but Tanya knew: they would never be together happily again. They would never have sex again. Even if both survived. Even if their old Kharkiv home survived, if no one plundered their apartment, even if they somehow managed, now and then cheating fate to live until they could return, to be together—there would be no more sex with Micha.

Here in Warsaw, which, if you really wanted, somewhat reminded one of Krakow, the five of them settled rather well. Tanya took on three jobs, one remotely, so she had to clean the kitchen and bathroom at night, donning rubber gloves, cleaning everything, restoring it to its place because two elderly parents, a scatterbrained teenager, and a cat contributed to a pile of mess—cleaning the toilet, once a day, at night, she allowed herself to realize this was not home, not her home. Not her home. Not theirs. Not their own. At home, everything doesn’t have to shine with cleanliness. But here—everything did. Amidst shiny tiles, sitting on the floor, she thought—how lucky she was to leave in the dark, return in the dark, not needing to look out the window where instead of their familiar trees with their rich scent, even in winter when she imagined they smelled, maybe sometimes smelling of snow, her husband said it smelled of the “Mivina,” saying the odor of “Mivina” would float out the window and linger on the branches, on the trunk, on the living shoots. Then their son would chime in: but fry some onions, the smell of onions overcomes everything. And now it’s remembered as happiness.

But now Tanya had—of her own, truly hers—only the nightly kitchen cleanups and the daily silent scream at the threshold. Her home, her apartment, her dwelling, her family hearth, her house—not stolen from her, but rather killed, even if the building itself wasn’t bombed, like those in Hostomel, in Mariupol, in Northern Saltivka, where she and Micha had an ocean of sun, air, and sex—on top of the high-rises, even before the total privatization of all the attics. But her home, her home within her, was equally killed. It’s like eating from a pot that had once held human remains, as her friend who miraculously escaped Mariupol had told her, after burying everyone, truly everyone. She had one pot, gathering human body parts that couldn’t fit in a pillowcase, gathering them to bury. And she buried them. Once. Again. A seventh time. But now she only eats bread, chocolate, biscuits, candies from boxes. Drinks water only from a bottle. Because that pot with human innards had embedded itself in her like a bomb shard in her belly. Doesn’t let her live. Doesn’t allow her to breathe.

And now Natasha’s pot doesn’t allow Tanya to live. It’s partly why she cleans so intensely, scrubs and polishes, makes everything shine. Her mother, a gray-haired, beautiful mother of an adult daughter, sees in all this, and even in her, not Tanya, but a woman without mood, no time to adapt her new character, her new evident pain to the vital needs of four uprooted beings—the son, the parents, the cat, from everything Tanya could now give them—only a roof over their heads, food, order. Survival values. Her mother doesn’t blame Tanya for anything. She almost continuously remains silent. Occasionally, she might drop a piece of paper onto the floor, sweep crumbs onto the floor, sprinkle some sugar, himalayas of salt, some grains, some broken macaroni… Not to spite Tanya, of course. But it all seems to accumulate and accumulate… And if it weren’t for Tanya’s daily cleanups in the kitchen…

In the first few weeks at the new place, they tried something, made efforts. Sat together at the table to eat, so at least during Sunday lunch they could talk. But even this fell apart. From that, one thing remained: dad found himself an activity, now he sits at the kitchen table, turns on the iPhone in “TV for the cat” mode, and he and the cat watch the fish swim. Sometimes he turns on background music—Bach, but very, very, very quietly, so the music sounds almost like a whisper. Dad even breathes louder than Bach plays. Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565 blends with the wheeze from his chest. His hands rest on his knees, his face is attentive, focused on the music. The cat watches the fish with its eyes, also focused. This is the way the cat and dad bring order to their minds.

It’s all somehow strange, truly strange: the more everything’s broken, the more they’re unable to do without each other, despite mutual endless irritation and even anger.

A room, a kitchen, two beds, four people, a cat. Tanya sleeps on the kitchen floor in her sleeping bag. Good for the spine. The parents together on a relatively narrow bed—they’ve become much smaller than they once were. Frail little old folks. The son, covered head-to-toe with a blanket, looking like he might be Ayu-Dag in Crimea. A cat-mountain on Bear Mountain, but only at night, because during the day the bed, one and the other, is bustling with life: mom reigns on hers—with handicrafts, perhaps, Valera on his, with three laptops, each for special needs. Dad—in the kitchen, with the cat, since there’s almost no space for him in the room. During the day, it seems there’s no place for Tanya to be in the apartment.

Late at night, when Tanya finished everything and was already laying down to sleep, her mother emerged into the kitchen—around half-past one. Tanya thought she came to drink some water. Tanya knew that her mom knew that she knew: the second year of barren, terrifying but seemingly full and seemingly safe life—was destroying, destroying all of them. So Tanya guessed, her mother would ask her to return to Kharkiv. Tanya would have to say “no,” and she’d become even more of a stranger to her mother than she already was. Because Tanya couldn’t think about Kharkiv. The explosions of Russian rockets on Freedom Square opened some kind of dreadful infernal hole in Tanya’s soul, which sucked everything into itself—conversations, plans for the future, the lives of plants, the cat’s youth and that of her son. And there was no way to overcome the gravity of this black hole, to break away and finally, to start living at least a little.

But her mother sat, for some reason in “dad’s” spot, picked up and moved the saltshaker from one place to another a few times, reached over, filled a glass with water, and said, “Let’s do a big cleanup here, and leave. Somewhere. Anywhere. To the sea. There are cities. Gdańsk. Oslo. Home. Somewhere.”

And then her mother went over to the slightly open door to the room, leaned her back against the doorframe. She opened her mouth and began to scream. Deafeningly, like an air raid siren, causing the windows to rattle.

And then Tanya finally allowed herself to scream too, to howl, to sob—at full volume.

Her mother choked back a sob, hesitated, and said, or rather repeated in almost a ripped, husky whisper, incredibly quietly: “A big cleanup! A big cleanup! A-a-a-a-a!!!”