She Won’t Return

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I didn’t have the keys to her apartment, but Asya, when leaving, left a spare key with the neighbor. Dressed in a striped bathrobe, the woman my age unlocked the door and went about her day. Asya had informed her of my visit. I doubt they were close friends, but there’s a war going on, and people are more inclined to acts of kindness, like watching over someone’s abandoned home if it’s nearby.

The day before, Asya called me and sadly informed me that her apartment was already up for sale—a hired person was handling it. Many of the items from the home had already been placed somewhere. Some were taken to the trash, and some left with acquaintances. It turned out she had left me a gift—a miraculous Israeli medical device with the word “laser” in its name. She said if I or any of my loved ones fall ill with something not too serious, the device would help overcome it. It came with a manual, recommendations, everything needed so I wouldn’t doubt its effectiveness. On the box, a phone number of a Russian-speaking consultant was handwritten, which I would later see. The device was new, unused. I searched the internet for information about the unexpected gift and was surprised at how expensive it was. I wasn’t looking for the price, but for reviews; nevertheless, the price popped up first. I called Asya back to ask if she wanted me to send her this “laser,” perhaps she needed it more than I did. She was adamant—no. She also mentioned that I could take anything from the apartment that I liked. However, there probably wasn’t much left. The realtor needed to show the apartment to clients, not remnants of someone’s old life, so there was practically nothing there, except maybe the furniture. No, no, don’t take photos. She didn’t want to know what it looked like without her.

I entered the room and saw it atop the cabinet. The wooden eagle, a handsome piece, was turned towards the door. It held its wings beautifully and gripped a polished perch tightly with its muscular talons, its head bowed, as if leaving the decision to me rather than staring at me. It knew I would take it. And I knew it too.

About three nights ago, I lay awake, staring at the laundry hanging on the balcony, wondering why I couldn’t sleep. Instead of unexpected life-changing decisions, wise thoughts, ideas, or business plans, trivialities came to mind. For example, where did the wooden eagle that sat atop my parents’ TV go? A typical portrayal of a proud bird carved in wood that adorned the homes of average citizens during my childhood and youth. Eagles were sold at souvenir markets from the Carpathians to Elbrus. Some stands had the year of production inscribed, sometimes the geography of where they were bought was indicated. They came in small and large, cheaper and more expensive variants. Ours was about the size of a rook.

Besides eagles, nearly every home was adorned with porcelain fish. Behind the display glass of cabinets stood half-liter mother fish surrounded by six baby fish. Alcohol was supposed to be poured into the big fish and then distributed into the baby fish. In reality, no one did that as drinking from the fish wasn’t practical. Porcelain factories produced blue, white, and other brightly colored fish. Our family had blue ones. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see fish at Asya’s, but there was only an eagle.

When my generation left their parents’ homes, no amount of money could make us take the fish or eagles into our adult lives. But standing in the doorway of someone else’s place, I felt an overwhelming love for the wooden eagle and simply had to give it shelter.

I sat for a while in a low chair, stepped out onto the spacious balcony where my friend once kept her plants. Naturally, they were no longer there. Asya only loved those plants that bloomed. I know she gave away her orchids to neighbors before leaving. She left Kyiv in the second week of the war with a small bag, uncertain she’d be allowed on the plane since she never had a foreign passport. By then, she had been living alone for a year; her husband, much older than her, had quietly passed away. The couple had no children. She herself was over eighty, though no one would ever guess it. Her employers forgot about her age and didn’t send her into retirement. There were no competitors for a super-specialist in hydraulic calculations. Petite, neat, not gray-haired, with rosy cheeks, always in heels. Even in winter, her curly head didn’t know a hat. The age difference never hindered our friendship.

I closed the balcony with a white chipped latch and once again looked around the empty room. Two old photo albums were fading in the spring sun on a desk. I thought they needed to be covered with something—previously, they were tucked away somewhere. Asya wouldn’t have liked that. We had a conversation about the albums a few years ago. Over morning coffee in a work café, she said it was time to destroy the photographs. She planned to start with the student graduation album, but couldn’t bring herself to do it; sometimes, she’d peek into it to recall someone’s face. She was going to burn them in an aluminum bowl in the kitchen sink, then air the place out. I pounced on her, saying she was talking nonsense, and it was a shame to hear it. Asya was embarrassed and sadly said the albums were needed by no one but her; she had no family left in Ukraine. Some were in the cemetery, others had left. She read that a star of Soviet cinema, very old, had recently died. She had no relatives either. The people who moved into her apartment threw out piles of her belongings, posters, and photographs by the house where she lived. Asya didn’t want that to happen to her pictures. Just thinking of them soaking in the rain or being swallowed by a garbage truck made her uneasy. Yet she feared if she burned the albums, she’d inevitably want to remember someone from her past life. Some friends she studied with were still alive, she kept in touch with them, although sometimes one would hang up when politics came up. Asya had once graduated from an institute in the city of Ufa. Her father, originally from Kyiv, was sent there to develop the gas industry, she had just finished school, went with him, and enrolled in a local higher education institution.

I opened the album lying on top. I knew something about the first photo. In it, little Asya in a pretty dress with embroidery on the yoke and a satin bow in her curls stands on a chair in a photo studio, holding onto the armrest. I know the dress is blue. She’s 4 years old. In her free hand, she holds a handbag. During the shoot, the bag contained a paper-wrapped rooster-shaped lollipop. It was her birthday, and her mother took her to the photography studio on Shevchenko Boulevard. She stood there, trying not to move on the chair as long as the photographer wanted, and her mother finally allowed her to engage with the lollipop. Asya laughed, saying she owed her birth to Soviet power and comrade Stalin. Her mother, having two sons, inconveniently got pregnant right after the law banning abortions was enacted. The family doctor allegedly promised to perform the procedure but hesitated—what if a colleague reported it? No one wanted to go to prison. So one refused, and then another. Time went on. And that’s how a girl named Asya was born into a Jewish family.

And the next day was Sunday, and they—Asya, her two brothers, and her parents—went to visit relatives. Her oldest brother didn’t want to go; he had just turned eighteen and planned to spend the day on the Dnipro with fellow students. The parents didn’t allow it. The guests were expecting the whole family.

In that household, they visited, there was also a girl Asya’s age. And she really liked Asya’s handbag. Her parents urged their daughter to gift the handbag, promising to buy her the same one tomorrow. However, Asya didn’t want to live without the bag until tomorrow and bit the girl on the hand when she tried to forcibly take it. The children cried and tried to fight, the parents scolded them and separated them, while neighbors—since it was a communal flat—stood at the door, trying to find out what was happening inside. According to Asya, the bag was made of red celluloid, but in the photo, neither the color nor material is visible.

Meanwhile, the world was engulfed by World War II. Asya's father worked as an engineer at an enterprise that managed to evacuate its workers and their families in time. The evacuation train took them to the city of Guryev on the Caspian Sea, there were four of them. Before leaving, they sent the oldest son to the army; the Germans were already advancing through Ukraine.

They returned from evacuation just as Kyiv was liberated. Neighbors handed them the death notice for Asya's brother, who died in the first weeks after the draft. His platoon or squad, who knows what they called it, camped under a large oak on the outskirts of a small town or village. The sound of artillery could be heard. Trucks were supposed to deliver reinforcements to the front line in the morning, where the soldiers would dig in and hold the enemy back. But either a mortar hit the camp or something randomly struck it, and Asya's brother, like many others, was blown to bits. All that remained of the oak was a tall stump. Another soldier, drafted the same day, who Asya's father miraculously found, recounted the death. The soldier was wounded at the oak, losing an eye. He didn’t know the name of the settlement, didn’t remember how they got there. He only mentioned the oak by the forest. No mention of a river, a church, no particular landmark other than the oak existed; there were none else. And the military office had no information.

They also learned that the family they visited just before the war was entirely executed in Babyn Yar in October 1941. The little girl who tried to take her handbag was also executed.

So then. Asya made it to Chișinău by bus, stayed overnight at a synagogue there, and then flew to Jerusalem. She thought she’d return. In Kyiv, there was home, graves of loved ones and others she tended at the request of relatives and friends in three cemeteries. Memories in albums and on Volodymyr Hill alleys. Her rural woman who brought homemade cheese on Wednesdays, and Asya would go to the Lukyanivsky market for it. But it turned out, the stress and flight triggered a heart condition that hadn’t been an issue before but now was. Doctors advised against flying. And there was no other way.

She sends me her photos surrounded by her brother’s great-grandchildren. All boys, all in kippahs. In their town, that’s how everyone looks. They rented her an apartment in the building next door.

The neighbor, who took the elevator with me, noticed the eagle tucked under my arm and warned me it was a bad omen to have an eagle in the house. An owl is fine; it’s a symbol of wisdom. She hinted at something.