Corals

by Mykhailo Budzhak

Oliana had dreamed her whole life of owning a coral necklace – big and red like "Spanish cherries," strung on a slender cord, gracefully adorning her neck, shimmering with a ruby shine visible from all the way down the street. To say:

"Don't you recognize me? It's me, Oliana, Ivan Petryshyn's youngest daughter. I'm in my prime."

She didn't just dream – with each new hundred or so she earned, she'd squirrel away the money, placing it between the pages of an old photo album, then tucking it behind a neat stack of unread books in her closet. “There, no one but me ever looks,” she comforted herself. “They’ll wait for their day.”

The thin bundle of banknotes, embraced by silence and steady calm, lay silently amidst the slender pages – waiting. But Oliana’s patience ran thin. Whenever she went to the market in Kolomyia for some "errand," she'd spend whatever free time she had sneaking into the store with the large windows and blinding lights, if only to spend a "moment or two" gazing at that dreamy marvel.

And so she did. She would linger by the big counters, illuminated by a myriad of bulbs, examining every speckle of the necklaces that sparkled with ethereal light in her hands, as they danced across the polished glass in the most wondrous shades. These fleeting moments, when her eyes and soul brushed against something profound and sacred, were perhaps the highlight of her life.

The not-so-young shop assistant – sporting short-cropped and dyed red hair – had long grown accustomed to witnessing this ‘female ritual’ with curious eyes, standing aside, watching indifferently. She understood: many women came by to gaze at their golden dream, but not everyone dared to buy. Because it costs a lot – a whole three of Oliana's salaries. Yet the way Oliana tenderly touched the coral beads, pressing them to her chest; how her eyes lit up like stars in a Christmas sky at the lightest touch, the shop assistant immediately sensed: she wouldn't let her dream slip away. She promised to shave a dozen or two from the price, to keep it hidden away from prying eyes and store management – under the counter. Even, “for an absolute guarantee,” she wrapped the small, velvet-covered box with the treasure in red paper and tucked it at the very bottom of a narrow store cabinet.

"Don't worry," she'd wink slyly at Oliana from behind the counter with sparkling eyes, "they'll wait for you…”

And whether it was those unwittingly spoken words or the sight of her cherished dream put into safe-keeping, Oliana felt a sweet relief spreading through her body, replacing the lump of burden that had been pressing beneath her chest all those days and months. She exhaled:

“I will wait,” – she breathed, “not long now. The corals will be mine. And not just one strand, but several.”

In her mind, Oliana already saw herself adorned with the beads: "big...on a slender cord." Walking down the street, stealing glances from young men. "And her face, like an apple, and a figure: 90 – 60 – 90." And all those beauty bands embraced by coral. Genuine ones; big and bright red like in the old pictures. Oliana knew: today's young women – those over eighteen – don't hunt for such rarities, like corals, especially at such great expense. Relatives across the distant lands of Italy and Spain send them shiny, even large trinkets. Hoping the lads, like hungry magpies, would flock to the shine. And it's known, such girlish playfulness often snaps shut with strong doors. But those foreign embellishments offered no joy to Oliana: grey and dull; they strangled one's neck with a thin thread like a museum mannequin, their clattering echoing like clay bells – hollow and lifeless.

Oliana didn’t yearn for them – she wanted the real deal. Large, red...spanning the whole neck. Those for which lads, in olden times, would trade a pair of good oxen at the market, and young maidens would only don as their most precious adornments for their wedding. "There must still be such things," Oliana comforted herself with the thought. In luxury – and guarded – shops. Hidden in shiny, silk-ribboned boxes. Only on shop windows do such necklaces not stay long – a maiden's eye knows their worth.

"These are the real deal," they say, gasping simultaneously, "a genuine article. At the market in Lviv, traders don't even blink – they 'jack up the price': demanding several hundred dollars."

And while your large eyes lock onto those shiny, dewy "Spanish cherries" of beads, the vendor will softly, behind the counter, polish them with a silk scarf:

"You won't regret it."

And Oliana had no regrets over the money. They, like those enticing sparkles, were in her hands – and then gone. They never linger. Just where would she get her hands on twelve thousand? The pay is small at the clinic where the girl has been working as a nurse for the third year. Those yellowish and elongated paper "Shevchenkos," quickly and discreetly dropped by the accountant onto her bank card, barely last a week or two before disappearing from her wallet. They only allow her to stand silently by the window, gaze at the sunlit red marvel, and comfort herself with the hope:

"They haven't been snapped up yet. Maybe I'll save enough."

But saving was never Oliana's strong suit. For as spring sneaked closer, the pull of a new, "second-hand-shop" top, adorned with little blue ruffles, became irresistible – the old one sank, hung near the elbows; and the power to refuse a sweet pink blouse was beyond her, for it seemed the store mirror had smiled and winked at her from the wall:

"It suits you perfectly. To go with the red corals."

“…But, – Oliana then kept driving off her sorrow for a long time, – it would have been better had they not tugged at her heart so much." Because at the end of the month, as she found herself in the city, crossing the street near the bus station to the supermarket, she had to keep her head high, like a soldier at a parade – afraid to even turn her head towards the shop with large panes and dazzling displays, fearing the short, 'boyish' red-haired saleswoman would recognize her, catch her on the sidewalk and grab her by the hand.

"You, madam, – she'd say with anger, – you reserved the corals. The most expensive ones – for twelve thousand hryvnias. You must buy them. Because by the month's end the store owner will deduct that shortage from my salary."

And Oliana would lack the courage to confess:

"There's still a lack of two dozen 'paper Shevchenkos.' They haven’t lingered in my stash."

Both Oliana’s heart and pride would ache bitterly. "Because I want to…" And with even deeper regret would she find herself surprised: those "Spanish cherries" corals "on a slender cord…" were no longer on the display.

"Women today have money," the neatly-clipped saleswoman would smile but helplessly shrug her hands, "they'd rather save on food than let go of something pleasing to the eye."

And from those words, and the assurance: "Who knows when there will be more, for the current 'traders' smuggle only Chinese goods across the sea, Turkish corals even rarer," Oliana feared most. Covertly, she kept an eye on the city’s large windows and shiny displays. She divided her salary "into small change." Smoothed out with her palm, she'd put aside, with a sense of injury, a few “Shevchenkos" behind her book stack – not letting go of hope that those 'wooden dollars' would someday fulfill her longstanding girlish dream. For, Oliana felt, if only she had the corals, her life would have unfolded differently. She would not have stayed in the village, beside her sickly mother, but would have gone to the city with her peers. To the dormitory. And there, who knows? Maybe her fate would have spun differently. To how many girls the city roulette turned both heads and lives around. It's a city, after all. All sorts of people gather. The world spins a livelier tune for them, and youth, like in toy vending machines, quickly lays out fates in lucky slots. Oliana knows this from her peers and often laments the carefree years. "They, – as anyone wise would say, – never return."

But her mother was ill; she needed care. And then, a job at the clinic fell into her lap. Not far from home. It was sinful to refuse, and even more sinful to leave it. After all, some coins always jingle in your pocket. Only when the long autumn evenings set in does her young heart cry. Because her thirties have already passed. And still, she appraises herself before the mirror. “Not far off the ‘standard template’ – 90 by 60. If only I had corals... Around the whole neck...

– Though, – sometimes the girl admits sadly, – where would I wear them in the village?

The café is small: with instant coffee and cheap spirits – you won’t linger long. And the club (actually, called the People's House) – even smaller; an old – "the age of the late Austria" relic, with peeled walls, rusty, perforated roof, like a sagging hat resting against the riverside ashes. It doesn't collapse but remains locked for weeks. Padlocks prevent the doors from flying open. But as pre-holiday Saturdays arrive, the club manager Ivan Muzyka, also the church cantor, shoulders them apart, switches on the boombox to "play some jeans for the folks," the cheap, red-from-noise Panasonic shrieks "from all holes," creaking with rusty voices as if trying to shout to every one:

– Why are you here? Where are your peers?

Indeed, there are not many around Oliana's age left in the village. Two moved to Spain for work. They decided to stay. "Because, – they question over Skype, – why go back to the village? What is there for the young to do? There’s neither a factory nearby nor even a collective farm." Another three have “perched on side gigs in the city” – euro renovations, "raking in cash,” and the boozy "thank you" drinks turned them into "pickled cucumbers." However, speaking of whom Oliana couldn't help but shed tears for, there was one lad, a true heartthrob from Antonivka – Andriy. After university, he came to the village to teach history to the kids. A couple of times, after dances, he'd even walked Oliana home. Conversations were sweet, never enough nights to talk themselves out. But as the storm raged over at the Kyiv Maidan, followed by the Donbas, he volunteered to fight for Ukraine. He promised to call every day and more if possible. "Just, – he asked Oliana, – wait for me… I’ll carry you in my arms." But his voice from the phone went mute. Only pale glimpses on her tiny Samsung screen blinked with short texts: "So, how's it going?... We’re faring well. Beating the orcs…" But soon, even that – fleeting hope for Oliana snuffed out. Rumor had it: there, in the trenches near Luhansk, there’s no way to recharge batteries – it's wartime, you know; and the separatists with orcs, every day, night shell with mortars upon trenches. No time for calls. So Oliana bore no grudge against him.

“Just hope he returns alive. We’ll have plenty of time to talk.”

…And then it happened. At the village council, they distributed money for "land shares" – a generous gesture from the leaseholder. And Oliana decided:

"Either now or never."

She clenched those twelve thousand hryvnias tightly in her fist – to prevent splurging on “nonsense,” she bolted from the council office down to the road and caught the next bus to the city.

The young, cropped-haired saleswoman, as usual standing by the shiny counter, surreptitiously observed the familiar 'female ritual,' and immediately recognized Oliana.

"I’ve just been thinking about you," she brightened, "about the corals," and, already with a smile, added, "I knew it… They’re worth it..."

And for the first time in her life, Oliana felt her world spinning.

"For the corals…"

With eyes blazing like Christmas church candles, she was returning home. Clutching the small, shiny box against her chest as if to quiet the heartbeat thundering like an Easter bell. And as the bus halted by the hillside chapel, from where a narrow path led home, Oliana couldn’t resist – she broke into a run, breathless: feeling no ground beneath her feet. She only heard the beads in the velour box chime against the sides – whispering amongst themselves – delighted they wouldn't gather dust in the shop shelves but would see the light of day. And Oliana hesitated to disturb them, "I’ll take a look at home," she reassured herself, "before the mirror. It never lies.”

…And in the home’s quiet, the large corner mirror greeted her with a smile, a sunbeam, from which large and red beads, like ripe Spanish cherries from thick foliage, rolled forth. They filled with glow, sparkled with igniting sparks, and winked at her with tiny smiling eyes:

"You've done well. We told you so..."

Oliana reached for her lipstick: oh miracle, as cherry-hued as the corals. She outlined her lips. And in the sunlight's reflections, her old dream – on a slender cord, playfully adorned her entire neck; It flashed with a pinkish glow and smiled at Oliana:

– Quite something, … not bad...

And she felt as though an old, unrelenting longing slowly began to melt away from her heart.

"Andriy should see this."

…Then someone knocked at the kitchen door. And so loudly and abruptly that even the rusted hinges of the front door opened without a creak.

"We're here for you," in the mirror’s edge, between the beads, Oliana caught sight of two pairs of women's eyes.

“For me?” The girl wasn’t even surprised when she heard this rehearsed phrase. With it, day in and day out, small and shrewd petty peddlers shuffle through the clinic, pushing towels, "Polish cosmetics," toothpaste "from branded manufacturers," or some shiny Chinese trinkets into one’s hands. Oliana never inquired about who or what, and she never inspected photocopied documents. Why would she? When misfortune comes around someone, what else is there to ask?

But among the young women – mere girls – standing across from her with glassy, like a display case eyes, she recognized volunteers. Once a month, they visited from the city, going from house to house, asking for at least a few coins for soldiers’ medicines. Because in the hospitals, as usual, not everything is there. And they returned to her.

"Would you join in helping? Today we're,” their playfully wandering eyes darted over the room, “raising money to treat a guy from your village."

Out of habit, Oliana reached for the old photo album behind the stack of books. But then she caught herself: "What’s left in that ‘stash,’ as all, to the last 'Shevchenkos' and 'Lesia Ukrainkas' went for the corals." But not wanting to let the volunteers leave her home empty-handed, she said:

"Wait a moment," she shut the door gently, "I’ll find something."

She dashed across the road to the Karpyuks. They sell garden produce at the market, they have money. But a press of the hand only caused the neighbor's door to sorrowfully creak, as if it answered for its masters: they haven’t returned from the city yet, haven’t sold their goods.

Not even a “poor little” hundred was lent by old lady Paraska – "gave her last for the light bill and bread."

"So," in defeated resolve she addressed the volunteers, "take what I have."

From her coat pocket, she withdrew a small handful of jangling change – two or three barely silvered 'dimes,' a few smaller, five- and two-hryvnia coins. The women with the glass case appreciated even that:

"Even if just something," they said, "to bring Andriy some cheer," and for some reason, their moist eyes cast a glance so suggestive at Oliana, it seemed they knew more than what they divulged.

"Him?" she inquired again.

"The worst is behind," the volunteer girl, only recently a schoolgirl, sheepishly pursed her painted lips. "He suffered a concussion at Bakhmut… Lost a leg, a hand… but," through flowing tears she attempted a smile, "he’s coming back to life. Even paints..., – and closing the door as she left, she placed a small piece of wallpaper, torn from a wall, on the broad windowsill. – Just a keepsake for you."

Oliana's gaze danced across the carefully-drawn colorful scribbles, stains, and what struck her soul with force. In the edge of a thick, worn piece of paper, she recognized the familiar garden, the rain-faded green wooden bench, and a girl with black hair and red corals like Spanish cherries. And felt, as an invisible hand gripped her near the chest – leaving her unable to expel a word, nor a concealed sigh from the heart, and amidst the silent house, a loud:

"And I waited so long, tried so hard…"

Caught the volunteers, by now smiling yet somber, by the gate.

She unfastened from her neck what was most precious – the corals, placing it in the glass case. And only as they struck the plastic base did she perceive: her present dream had shattered in two – of corals, “red, …around the whole neck,” and hope that Andriy would return – so youthful… Maybe not too late.”

…And laughing in red glints was the large house mirror; yet the young heart cried longer.

But perhaps for the first time in recent years, Oliana didn’t regret them…