Preserved Jam from Days Gone By

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"So we are quite old now, aren't we? Come here, let me take it off for you."

Thunder crashed to the ground, bending the trees low. There was the smell of wind and rain, mixed with apples and apricots. Vasyl stood on the porch, watching the thick branches dance across the sky, with lightning seemingly singing along in that eerie dance, creeping in height.

"Now, old friend, now. Let me take it off for you. Just let me get my shoes on."

Through the howling wind, the dog heard the old man's voice. His gray eyes couldn't see how the sprawling tree was bending before the doghouse. Only shadows flickered, raising the fur on the animal's scruff.

"Oh, it's all scattered now, everything tossed about. Soon the rain will hit, and the rye too. I'm coming, little dog, I'm coming. I'll probably take you inside; we'll get through this together. It's too scary to let you out in such a racket."

The porch, the color of sleep grass, creaked under Vasyl's feet. The strong wind tore the branches of the stout tree, tearing off sun fruits that rolled and stopped at the paws, muzzle, and rusty chain of the weary dog. Heavy droplets of rain pounded on the roof, drowning out the apricot downpour. The swaying leaves whispered against the blue, and the trunk groaned mournfully.

"Not ripe yet, and they've already fallen. There'll be fresh work after the rain. Even the willows have been broken. The apple tree won't withstand such a gale, either."

Vasyl walked along the golden-orange path, lost in thoughts of the past brought by the clouds' groans.

A heavy rain lashed against the cows' backs, and the sky smelled of grass and warm bovine bodies. The storm caught them early one morning, with several kilometers to walk home. A gray wall held everyone together – shepherds and herd alike. Alone, amidst the vast space drenched with rain, wormwood, thyme, wild mint, and St. John's wort, waves of grass gathered underfoot, soaking the cold little feet. The sturdy figure was gliding through the green sea, approaching the small boy and his mother. Through the thick downpour, not even a voice was heard; the giant covered little Vasylko with his coat, and through a gap, the boy stood still in awe as water poured and beat against the green stems at his feet.

The old man's visions were torn apart by the dog's whimpering. Dripping wet and exhausted, Vasyl felt the heavy pain that gripped him. A thick branch lay on him, covering him with its wet leaves. The dog stared into nowhere and whimpered pitifully. The man bent his fingers, trying to push off the ground, but only let out a wisp of breath. The apricot branches pressed his body to the ground, rustling right in the old man's ears.

"There it is. How am I supposed to get up now?"

The storm pounded the ground, leaves swirled, and apricots fell to the ground, knocking sides. The dog continued its hoarse howling, seeking Vasyl with empty eyes.

"I must have hurt myself, little dog. I can't move at all, just sifting through the muddy mush with my hands." The old man made several attempts to move and then quieted down.

In that corner, Vasyl had long been alone. His wife passed away, and... his son worked as a doctor in a big city. The old man lived as best he could. He didn't ask anyone for help, dragging his life like a cart. His days were spent in memories that came alive like wind in a young grove, and at night he would go out on the porch to his dog. Rusted doors opened to a world lost in weakness. Onion skins flew over the hardened grime of the floor, potatoes spilled from a sack, and the ceiling had long blackened from the stove's fire. Twigs and branches lay along the wall, interrupting the smell of dust and old things. A bucket of water stood on a small stool, glinting with its white essence. On the table were all sorts of things, including a few photographs in a thin frame, images of the Mother of God, and a recipe for jam on a worn piece of paper in faded green ink.

In the spring, Vasyl decided he would make jam from apples and apricots. It's good to have something sweet in the winter, even if just to spread on a crust of warm bread.

He remembered how his mother made it. She would take apples, peel them, remove the seeds, take out the stones from apricots, then cut everything and throw it into a wide pot, while the little boy stood on a stool, stirring the golden mush, as if cooking summer.

And then, as summers went by – the second, the fifth – that year, he realized he would be left all alone. The dog lay on its belly from dawn till dusk, breathing heavily. Shiny flies rummaged through its fur, laying eggs. The worn-out dog no longer had the strength to chase them away. Time and again, he would remember the buzzing swarm over his head, lift it to catch it, and for a moment, the dull thud of his teeth would pierce the air, not bothering dozens of flies bustling in his fur.

"Just like they heard long ago," Vasyl thought during the hottest days when the buzz of insects drowned out even an old man's thoughts, "They hear, the scoundrels, carrion before it's dead. Vile creatures, may lightning strike them."

The rain finally quieted, only the wind swirled around the earth. The dog lay as a dark spot in the yellow hollow, whimpering and occasionally brushing away invisible flies. The old man stirred under the leaves.

"What is this? I should get up. How to move?"

Slowly struggling, the man squirmed out from under the branch and crawled through apricot puddles toward the dog.

"Well, there you have it, tail-wagger. I wanted to bring you inside, and here I am crawling to yours. Oh, how it stings. Where to get up now? Whew. It stings."

Turning onto his back, Vasyl slowly pulled himself up until he finally leaned against the kennel. The dog, stumbling, came to the man and nudged his face with its nose. The fur buzzed and moved. The wet clothes clung to the old man's body. Mud and crushed apricots slowly dried on Vasyl's hands.

"Come here, little one, I’ll untie you. I won't feed you today. Good thing you stockpiled for me, it'll last a long time. Maybe someone will come to see how the old man is, huh? My little tail. It's just us now. Completely old."

The dog whined, laying its head on Vasyl's knees. The wind blew under the eaves, rattling the unlatched door. Evening settled on his shoulders, cold wrapped his chest, the warm dog's breath was not enough.

"And I so wanted to make mom’s jam this summer. It warmed me when I was young. I thought we’d go to the orchard, gather apples into a sling, and then you one end, I the other – we'd carry it to the house. But those cursed flies sensed your weakness. Gathered from the whole corner, like devils summoned misery. Oh. It stings so much. Didn't leave the old man to freeze, welcomed into your humble home."

The dog licked Vasyl's hands and panted heavily. The wind carried the last apricots, dropping them on the dozing man, spreading his fevered dreams.

Before morning came, the dog's body had cooled. The sun's glow spread across the apricot-strewn yard like a lake. Morning birds chirped in the bushes, heralding the daytime bustle. Vasyl stroked the old dog and watched as flies gathered at its open eyes. Frozen rivers had dried beneath his own eyes, he wiped his hands on his damp waistcoat and picked up a bruised apricot.