Sea Landscape

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A few more brushstrokes. The final touch. Done! Finished! Olga carefully closed the freshly painted front door of her house. She sat on the doorstep. Her legs were giving way from fatigue, and her eyes were tearing up from the pungent paint.

For a whole week, she had been tidying up the house—moving things out, shifting heavy furniture, whitewashing the walls and ceiling (she never wallpapered them as she disliked wallpaper), painting the doors, windows, and floor. Before the repairs, she had tended to the vegetable gardens—both her own and her elderly parents', who lived in the neighboring village, and canned fruits and vegetables. She did it all by herself! Her daughter, a university student, worked as a camp counselor in a children's summer camp for the entire summer break: the child needed money to buy clothes and cosmetics. One pediatrician's salary wasn't enough to stretch...

Three days left of the vacation. And she felt even more exhausted than before it. However, tomorrow she was going to the sea. A friend had invited her, who was vacationing at one of the seaside resorts. She wouldn't have agreed, probably, if not for the opportunity: while the paint was drying, sleeping in the house was not advisable. Of course, she could have stayed with her parents for those two days, but Anzhela had pleaded so earnestly for her to come! They hadn't seen each other in over six years...

Anzhela was Olga's best school friend. They grew up on the same street. Then they parted ways to different universities: Olga went to medical school, and Anzhela to an architectural one.

Olga married early to a guy she didn't quite love, but whom she faithfully waited for to return from the army. They lived under the same roof for ten years, like two strangers. When they divorced, it seemed both of them sighed with relief. Since then, Olga lived alone.

Anzhela was a different case! She always said her chosen one would be a wealthy city dweller. She got a job at a large architectural firm in Kharkiv and married its owner. She lives without knowing troubles. Vacations wherever she pleases, starts secret romances behind her husband's back "just to have something to remember." This year, she decided to vacation closer to home. For two weeks, she was carefreely swimming in the sea. While for Olga, the sea was just a stone's throw away, she never had the time... The last time she dove into the sea was three years ago.

...The sun-kissed and happy Anzhela looked stunning in her white sundress and a green ribbon in her hair—to match her eyes. The friends talked for hours in the luxurious room of the resort until Anzhela finally said, “Let’s go to the sea, you're as pale as a mushroom!”

Olga hesitantly stood in her swimsuit in front of the mirror. She thought perhaps a new one was needed. This one seemed a bit snug. Then again, at 40, the figure wasn't what it was at 25: the tummy hung slightly despite eating little, red capillary "threads" showed on her legs... She glanced a bit enviously at Anzhela's slender figure. Anzhela caught her gaze: "Olga, don't fret! You look fine. I spend half my life in gyms, pools, and beauty salons. Naturally, we're somewhat different."

Having swum to their heart's content, the women returned to their room: they drank coffee, reminisced about their childhood, and gossiped about acquaintances. In the evening, Anzhela announced that the sea, stars, and this room were at Olga's complete disposal, and she was going on a date: "Olka, such a man! An athlete—all muscles. A young Schwarzenegger! In short, breathe in the sea air and relax. You don't need to wait for me."

...The sun was sinking towards the horizon, seemingly soon to drown in the sea. Olga walked along the beach. She spotted the artist with the easel from afar. He was dressed in a white embroidered shirt and white linen trousers. The wind tousled his gray, neatly trimmed hair, his bare feet imprinted on the white sand, making his tanned face stand out oddly against all the white. The man occasionally glanced into the distance, working with his right hand. The left sleeve of his shirt, tucked behind his belt, was empty...

Olga approached him and hesitantly stopped. Glancing at the easel, she saw a small copy of the vast seascape with a sunset. The painting appeared so "alive" that it seemed the waves on it were also leisurely splashing.

"How beautiful!" she blurted out.

"Do you really think so?" the man asked.

"Very much! It seems you're a talented artist!"

"Thank you. I just chose a profession to my liking. Are you enjoying the sea air?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to have tea with me? I have a tasty herbal one."

"With pleasure."

They walked to a large flat rock lying nearby. The man pulled a thermos and two cups from his backpack.

"Can I help?" Olga offered.

"Don't worry, I've got it," the artist smiled, deftly pouring the tea. "Alexander," he said, extending a cup of the aromatic drink.

"Olga," she replied, amazed at how he could hold two cups of hot tea with one hand. She glanced furtively at the empty sleeve...

"A trivial car accident," Alexander commented. "The driver of the oncoming car fell asleep at the wheel. They saved me, but not my arm. The worst part, my best friend who was with me, died. I awoke from a coma completely gray at forty-five. But all is well, in four years I've grown accustomed to managing everything myself.

"Do you live alone?"

"Yes, my wife left me after the accident."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's all right. She was much younger than me. Why stay with a cripple? I once left my family for her, and then she left me. You reap what you sow... Let’s talk about the sea instead! Did you know the Azov Sea has had various names over time? The Greeks called it the Meotian Lake, the Arabs and Turks the Dark Blue Sea, the Tatar-Mongol conquerors called it the Fishy and Bream Sea... It's also been known as the Dark Blue River; Thracian, Surozh, Kaffa, Cimmerian and even White Sea... Its modern name comes from the city of Azov, established during Peter the Great's Azov campaigns. There's an intriguing legend about this sea. Let me tell you..."

They sat on the rock. A moonlit path shimmered on the water. Olga, holding her breath and losing track of time, listened to Alexander.

"Sorry, I've been chatting away while you should be resting, Olga. If we sit here another hour, we'll witness the dawn," he gently touched her hand.

"You're such a captivating storyteller; I could listen forever... It feels like I've known you for a long time," the woman replied.

"Strange, I have the same feeling... Unfortunately, I'm returning to Kyiv tomorrow."

"I'm heading home too."

"May I walk you?"

He escorted Olga to the door of her room. He kissed her hand and wished her "sweet dreams at dawn." But she couldn't sleep. Never in her life had she felt so cozy, calm, and at the same time so stirred as next to the barely acquainted artist. Could this have been their only meeting?...

Unexpectedly, Alexander came to see Olga off to the bus. In his hand was a neat parcel:

"Olga, it's the sea landscape you liked. As a memento." She noticed he was quite nervous. "I don't want to seem intrusive, but... well... could I ask for your phone number?"

Alexander's gray eyes looked at her with such hope that Olga, whose heart was pounding wildly in her chest, suddenly dared to ask:

"Do you often paint seascapes?"

"Yes, I almost come to the sea yearly."

"Have you tried painting the steppe?"

"No, I've never had the chance," Alexander was surprised. "But I'd love to try!"

"What's holding you back? Our steppe is beautiful!"

"When?" he whispered with dry lips. "When could I... see your steppe?"

"Even today! It's only seventy kilometers away..."

...They sat side by side on the bus, timidly holding hands. Outside the window to the left sprawled an endless steppe, generously dotted with wildflowers; on the right, a sea of sunflowers yellowed, following the sun. Along the road grew plump white and red hollyhocks that seemed to be begging to be painted...