The Pearl

by Svitlana Vertola

"Swee-ee-et corn, baklava, fresh shri-i-imp!" I shout into the loudspeaker, hoping it will somehow boost sales. In response, the vacationers only lazily turn from side to side to get a better tan.

"They're like kebabs on skewers, honestly..." I think to myself, and for some reason, this image makes me want to laugh. Although the hunger is more pressing. Soon, I might turn into a reddish shrimp myself, freshly emerged from boiling water. It seems my city-pale skin wasn't ready for such intense sunbaths within the first days of working on the beach.

Pavlyk and I didn't think long about it—once we closed our semester, we immediately decided to rush off to work by the sea. Mom was reluctant to let me go. She tried tears, persuasion, threats, bribes, and promises to send more money next semester. All of it, in turns. But I was adamant—I was tired of sitting in the dormitory, living only on my parents' food.

I craved freedom, money, and the prospect of relaxing by the sea after a day's work seemed wonderful. We had a roof over our heads, food, albeit barely, and the rest were just details. However, after a shift, my legs felt like falling off, and all I wanted was to sleep. But that's just acclimatization, right?

When I stumbled into our humble abode that evening, Pavlyk had already disappeared, after generously spraying my favorite deodorant under his arms. What a Casanova! The water in the outdoor barrel had warmed up nicely during the day, so I allowed myself a comforting shower to wash off the sea salt, sand, and fatigue. The straps of the food boxes chafed my shoulders, but a few crinkly bills in the pocket of my shorts, now hanging on the fence, made up for those temporary inconveniences. I certainly wouldn't complain to my mother, lest a humanitarian aid package be dispatched from Khmelnytskyi to Zatoka by charter flight. Do I need that?

The spa-like procedure clearly did my body good because I felt quite refreshed. I decided to take a walk myself, after all, that's what we came here for, isn't it? The sea now seemed far less romantic, and what kind of adventurer would return to their workplace during leisure time? But the salty scent of the waves beckoned me, and instead of heading to the disco, my feet led me to the sandy shore decorated with shells. During the day, they painfully dug into my soles, but now, under the moonlight, everything was different.

"Gathering souvenirs?" I heard behind me.

"Yeah, looking for pearls." I blurted out without thinking.

The unfamiliar girl laughed, and I turned to get a better look at her. A knee-length blue dress, hair tied in a high ponytail, a genuine smile and a child's plastic bucket in her hands, presumably filled with sea treasures.

"I'm Asya. This is my younger sister's." she explained, still smiling. "We're leaving for home in a few days, so I'm trying to preserve these vacation memories through shells."

"My family and I are also soon returning to our hometown." I lied, the first thing that came to mind. For some reason, I just didn't want to admit I was a beach vendor. What if she laughed? After all, it's not exactly a dream job.

With Asya's appearance, my life suddenly gained new colors. It seemed even sales were better, and the people were somehow friendlier. During the day, I would try to sell all my goods, but would go far so as not to accidentally catch Asya's eye. And in the evening, I would come to our impromptu dates, hoping that the mutual interest between us was no mirage, but something real and genuine.

"Why are you taking the goods deep into our points? Where are you disappearing to? Tell me everything!" Pavlyk wouldn't leave me alone, demanding details, but I just kept silent. Matters of the heart cherish quiet.

Days flew by in the blink of an eye, making me wish I could shout, "Hey, stop! Wait up!" But, of course, it was in vain. I felt too comfortable and happy with Asya. And when she returned home... I didn't even want to think about it. On the day of Asya's departure, I was not myself. I wanted to finish everything quickly and rush to her. But, surprisingly, she found me first.

"Can I have one corn? The sweetest." The girl appeared before me from nowhere again, but this time I didn't know where to hide from embarrassment.

I quickly handed over the first cob I grabbed from the box and tucked the cash into my fanny pack. I acted like a fool, and it seemed I swallowed my tongue, unable to clarify the situation for Asya.

All day, I rehearsed my apology in my head, but in the evening, she wasn’t at our spot. She didn't come in an hour, nor in two. And in the little house where Asya stayed, another family had already moved in, with two loud kids. I had saved exchanging numbers and that long-desired kiss for our last evening, something I hadn’t dared to do throughout our interactions.

"Shhh..." the sea quietly whispered, offering a false hope that this could somehow still be fixed.

On September first, Pavlyk and I, like the rest of our classmates, attended lectures in the auditorium. I sat on the bench apathetically, building a fort with my backpack and books. Learning stubbornly refused to enter my head, so I wanted to stay unnoticed yet avoid a demerit in the class leader’s journal.

"Hello, girls and boys!" Our student advisor peered into the auditorium, looking at our sleepy faces. "A new student has transferred to your group from another university, so your numbers have grown."

"What a beauty!" Pavlyk blurted, jabbing me with his elbow.

"Get off me." I grumbled back, frowning. There was only room in my heart for one beauty, whom I had managed to lose at the seaside because of my own lies.

"But look!" he pushed my backpack aside, revealing... Asya!

"Found..." I joyfully murmured to myself while my heart made wild leaps. Our eyes met, and this time, I firmly decided that I wouldn't stay silent. I had hesitated too long as it was. Truth be told, I wasn't expecting anything anymore.

"What did you find?" Pavlyk asked, intrigued, trying to guess the trajectory of my gaze.

"My ‘pearl’." echoed in my head, and I confidently stood up to apologize to Asya. To start everything from a clean slate. Or from the untouched sand washed clear by the sea, carrying away all the failed inscriptions and traces, leaving behind new shells of long-awaited impressions, hopes, and moments.