"…as the heart dictates…"

Oleksandr Ponomarenko

The hot wind from the east dried the earth in the garden, and watering all the planted in the evening was beyond the strength of Mykhailo Pylypovych, no matter how much he wanted to. His back, arms, legs—his whole body ached, but he got used to it because, as people like to say today, it had long become his lifestyle. Besides the garden, he also needed to prepare firewood for the winter so that when the frosts crack, he could warm his body, weary from four decades of hard work on the collective farm. It was fortunate that there was that forest, considered not a forest but a self-seeded grove where the village council head used to allocate plots to townspeople before the war, those who yearned to live in nature's lap. There you could take as much wood as your heart desired, and no one would say a word. But the saying goes, "God helps those who help themselves": he would rise at dawn and carry the wood, but eyes do what hands no longer can. To somehow survive, he had something from the garden and was raising two pigs to send something to the city for the children by Christmas and Easter and to somehow feel the holiday atmosphere himself. If he didn’t work in his seventies, he might as well clamp his teeth on a shelf or lay himself alive in a pit to not die of hunger, because the pension was enough only for bread, electricity, and the cheapest cigarettes. He tried to quit smoking, but it was beyond him: with the heavy thoughts of the war, not just smoking—it made him want to howl like a wolf.

However, today Mykhailo Pylypovych wasn’t thinking about the garden, the wood, or the rain he awaited as manna from heaven to save him from fetching water from the well each evening—today his daughter and granddaughter were supposed to return from Poland. His hopes weren't in vain: a familiar melody rang out from the phone in his breast pocket, and, pressing it to his ear, he heard the familiar voice of his granddaughter:

"Grandpa, we’re coming from the bus stop."

After lunch, Mykhailo Pylypovych immediately asked his granddaughter:

“So, Oksana, how was it in Poland?”

But instead of his granddaughter, his daughter first joined the conversation:

“You know, Dad, life is really built on paradoxes: once we fought with the Poles, and today they are our best friends. And vice versa: for centuries, Russia considered itself our blood brother, and today it drops bombs on peaceful cities, rapes children, and—imagine!—eats our dogs.”

“Exactly, daughter, but we will prevail, for with us is '...the truth, and power, and will...'. And you, granddaughter, what do you have to say? What are your impressions of what you saw in Poland?” he asked his granddaughter.

Smiling, Oksana replied:

“Well, firstly, grandpa, Poles call things by their names, if they invite someone over for coffee, for example, they drink coffee, whereas if you invite Grandpa Petro over for coffee at Christmas, you're drinking coffee after you've polished off half a liter of vodka together, while in their homes, they first serve soup, then dumplings, and only after dessert do they drink wine or vodka... And their borscht is not borscht at all: they throw boiled beets into the broth and add croutons... In the garden and orchard, they have the same as we do: pears, apples, cherries, and everything’s tended by Mr. Simon as if it were adorned with a wreath, with me and Mom helping him. Honestly, he cried when we left. He even has his own pond at the end of the garden where he raises fish… The Poles love nature… Once we went to the city, visited the park, and wild boars roamed as if they were domestic, and once Mom carelessly hung her purse with documents on a bush, a boar came and took it in its snout—we barely got it back. And if they saw you tapping birch sap in the spring, they’d definitely fine you a hefty sum.”

“Oksana, I'll go to the cellar right now and bring you some of our birch sap kvass, infused with roasted barley—it’s the best relief from this heat.”

Bringing the kvass from the cellar, Mykhailo Pylypovych found his daughter and granddaughter changed.

“Dad, we’ll help you in the garden, and tomorrow is Sunday, so we’ll go to church and to my husband’s grave—he often appears in my dreams, and it hurts the most that in 2014 they brought him back in a sealed coffin.”

Mykhailo Pylypovych wiped away an uninvited tear and stepped out into the yard. From the west, a fresh wind drove heavy dark clouds across half the sky, and in about half an hour, a warm summer blessing rain fell. It passed quickly, and beyond the far horizon appeared a colorful rainbow.

Before going to bed, his daughter asked him:

“Dad, Simon invited Oksana and me to move in with him, and I don’t know... In Bucha, we have nothing left…”

Mykhailo Pylypovych saw two large tears streaming down his daughter's cheek.

“Cry, dear, and you'll feel lighter, and I won’t contradict you: do as your heart dictates—just be happy. 'Everyone has their fate and their own broad path,' wrote the Kobzar. Everyone bears their own cross…”

Outside, it thundered, and heavy raindrops drummed on the roof. It was the 714th day of the war.

Funeral

People visiting his yard were surprised: the night frost had dashed many hopes for a bountiful harvest this year. Blackened leaves on the grapes, mulberry, walnuts had withered, not to mention the potatoes, which seemed not to have survived on their plots—sheer black dots on the ground, but in Yosyp’s garden, it seemed as if the frost hadn’t touched a thing, because all the elite grape varieties: “Nadia,” “Augustine,” “Cabernet,” had been carefully covered with blankets, old rugs, and other rags; precautiously, Yosyp had made small fires around the perimeter of the garden—the breath of smoke and embers in the ashes helped the potatoes remain unscathed.

…Indeed, there was much to be surprised about when entering his yard that day. Just beyond the fence—a small pool where not only exotic fish swam but also ordinary crucian carp, and a plastic, lifelike duck; at the other end of the garden, shaped like a phaeton—a swing for his granddaughter; and everywhere along the fence—a multitude of flowers; in the house, on the windows and the floor—lemons, pomegranates, and oranges—Yosyp had a knack for this.

…Everyone knew him as a master with golden hands, whom people called "doka" in the local terms. Without higher education, he could repair any computer, any mechanism with program control, pouring his heart into every work.

…At each family celebration, there was his own wine—it wasn't something you’d find in a store: you wanted not only to drink it but also to savor its aroma, and when people asked how to make such, he would reply jokingly, “Simply because I love wine very much.” Though, he never actually drank it himself.

…Some people entered the yard, others exited, because everyone wanted to see him. After examining the yard, where everything was in perfect order, they entered the house and were amazed as well: in the coffin, he lay as if alive, his large golden hands folded over each other, for his golden heart had been ill since childhood; his daughter and granddaughter cried; his wife's face was white as chalk—she had stopped crying, having shed all possible tears. Elderly neighbor women wailed—there’d be no one to clear the orchard in spring, fix the tap, set a lock, or install an alarm—and you can’t do without these because around them were only bandits and thieves. Who’d connect a satellite dish almost for free to watch a hundred channels on TV? Neighbor kids cried, for who would repair their bicycles?

…His friend Ivan was surprised because they had agreed the day before to go fishing on the Stuhna, but alas, it didn’t work out. On the Stuhna, when the fish weren't biting, conversing, Yosyp loved to repeat: “That’s not the problem.” Evidently, even during fishing, he thought about things at home.

Former coworkers marveled and recalled how at one time, he called himself not Yosyp but Sashko because he was somehow embarrassed by his name... And then one neighbor said quietly to another, “See? Yesterday managed to cover the grapes, and at night he passed away. The other responded, “There’s a reason to be surprised: doctors after the heart surgery said he’d live five more years, but he lived another seven: maybe if he worked less, he would live not fifty, but sixty. And if we all worked and cared as he did, Ukraine would be the richest in the world. But look at the youth today: they couldn’t care less about potatoes or grapes: they reckon it’s better to buy in the market—true masters have dwindled, and the country is in debt up to its ears.”

…He was dressed in an embroidered shirt; the face in the coffin was remarkably peaceful, and it seemed as if he would rise any moment and say, “That’s not the problem…”