Cherry Tree

by Kateryna Babkina

"Once, long before everything, I bought him a tree, can you imagine?" Lilia crushed the cigarette butt, though there was nothing left to smoke. She wanted to throw it away but hesitated, holding it between her fingers as if it were a wasp or a needle: in this place, nobody discarded cigarette butts on the ground. Nor did many people smoke at all. "He was so obsessed with that house and garden that I bought him a tree. Sent it by mail since he wouldn't leave the place while working on it, and I was still living in a room, working, and only visiting on weekends. People would've thought I was insane if I showed up with a tree. I wanted to get a cherry, but somehow ended up with a sweet cherry tree. They are all really the same," she paused, adding, "Not cherries and sweet cherries, I mean the trees, those little trees."

I walked beside her, almost forgetting to breathe. It was the first time in days that she suddenly started talking about something on her own. Not about what had happened, of course, but at least about something without me asking. Since I hadn't been asking many questions, we hardly talked much at all. I was trying my best to show her and Vasik the city. Vasik, or Masik, was full of life, questions, and contradictions, while Lilia wandered quietly, indifferent as if in a half-daze. She smoked long, thin, horribly smelly menthol cigarettes likely smuggled in by travelers from Ukraine—the kind we used to call "matches" in school. She drank coffee from vending machines everywhere—machines I never imagined existed in such numbers, scattered around practically every cheap store, which inevitably smelled awful as if someone had relieved themselves nearby. She reacted to things only when reality directly demanded something from her, otherwise silently walked around, smoked, and drank that swill.

Vasik managed to get himself a scooter, a gift from my neighbor whose children grew up, presumably moved out or went to college or boarding school. In my mind, they were still kids, like when I first rented the house, but evidently, they had outgrown not only the scooter but also their parent's home. Vasik knew everything about Big Ben, Tower Bridge, and the dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum—he seemed to know them all, and there were plenty. He recognized some pointy-eared characters in a comic or souvenir shop window, eagerly summarizing their thrilling adventures from a cartoon series, probably spanning numerous seasons. He was full of questions and, when they ran out, he always asked how to say one thing or another in English. Somehow, he chatted freely with my neighbor and didn't lack vocabulary. Despite his insistence never to speak "like a slob," Vasik surely spoke Russian. At least thrice a day, he wanted to ride the double-decker buses, insisting on sitting at the front, near the big window. If his desired seat was taken, he’d initially hold it together, only to eventually let out a loud, desperate wail, so I started hiding which bus number we actually needed. If our bus approached but Vasik’s favored seats were occupied, I’d claim it wasn’t our bus. Then we’d hop on some other bus, wander to god knows where, and find our way back somehow. Vasik loved it, and Lilia didn’t care. Where they lived, somewhere up north near Leeds, they had no double-decker buses.

In Sumy, at school, around springtime during our eleventh grade, we danced and kissed at a disco. I slipped my hands under Lilia’s t-shirt, fondling her breasts as much as I wanted, and she didn’t stop me. So, the following week, I met her before class and convinced her to skip school and come over while nobody was home. I wanted to buy her a pack of "matches," but I wasn’t sold any at the kiosk and couldn’t find anyone nearby to ask to buy them for me. Lilia shrugged and asked for the money, but never bought the cigarettes, just neatly folded the notes and slipped them into the small pocket of her tight jeans. At home, I offered her coffee, trying to use my mom’s fancy coffee maker, but Lilia didn’t like it, saying she preferred instant three-in-one coffee mixes. Of course, we had none of that at home.

I didn’t have much time, so I pulled her into my room almost immediately and started undressing her. Lilia didn’t resist. We had sex, and honestly, it was horrible and quick. Lilia didn’t even pretend to enjoy it. I don’t remember how she left. My issue was resolved—I was no longer a virgin—but I felt as if I had somehow violated myself. I didn’t think about how Lilia felt, and maybe it was guilt over this that later made me shove those memories into the deepest corner of my mind. Later, when I thought or talked about my first time, I always thought of Nina from my course, with whom I fell in love during our very first lecture together, and we stayed together throughout university. We even rented our first apartment together in Podil until Nina left to study in Denmark, and I went to work in London.

Lilia and I didn’t cross paths again after that; exams and admissions were looming, filled with nerves. Lilia didn’t attend the graduation event—probably because her family couldn’t afford such extravagance. I was accepted and moved to Kyiv in July, where my older brother was already living and studying. A year later, my parents sold our family and grandmother’s apartment in Sumy, moved, and bought one in Kyiv. Another year passed, they sold another apartment in Sumy and bought one for Denys, my brother. When I moved to London, they were trying to arrange something to buy me an apartment too, but it didn’t become necessary.

However, at some point, Lilia also moved to Kyiv, unbeknownst to me, and later, after getting married, to a place near Irpin.

"And that cherry tree bloomed just then," Lilia said thoughtfully, "For the first time. Vasik saw it."

And that was it. Initially, I thought "before everything" meant before the war, back in 2012, or something. But then I decided that for Lilia, "before everything" likely meant before the pandemic, which corresponded to before getting married and having Vasik.

Honestly, over these few days, I couldn't shake off a strange disgust towards myself for how awkward and out of place—hard to find the right word—Lilia seemed to me, with her grown-out glittery nails, grown-out roots of dyed hair, smelly "matches," and instant coffee. And all that had happened between us over twenty years ago. Or maybe it was guilt that I hadn’t experienced what happened to Lilia and Vasik? We walked, as cherry and sakura bloomed pink and white along the street, with occasional magnolias and colorful tulips in gardens behind ornate fences. Perhaps it was these flowers that made Lilia remember her tree. I had never bought a tree for anyone, and certainly, nobody had bought such a thing for me. Vasik-Masik zoomed ahead on his scooter, reaching the next intersection, impatiently pacing, shifting from foot to foot, waiting for us to catch up and cross the street so he could zoom ahead again.

Lilia spent nearly two years in the North, and then she needed to wait a bit in London, and Masha gave her my phone number—honestly, I never figured out who Masha was. I didn’t immediately recognize which Lilia this was, nor did I understand how I had given her my address. I didn’t offer to meet her and didn’t ask where, when, and how she would get here, and frankly, seriously considered apologizing and even paying for a hotel and sending her there by Uber, but I didn’t do that either. And then a few days later, Lilia knocked on my door. With Vasik, whose curious eyes were darting around, taking in my hallway and living room while he hid behind Lilia’s thighs clad in stretchy cheap jeans, and with a small suitcase on wheels. They had walked from the nearest metro station to avoid paying for a bus. Lilia had no stroller and carried Vasik along with the suitcase until she got the idea to seat Vasik—can you imagine?—right on the suitcase. Vasik told me all this, of course. Lilia just stood there. Then I said, "Come in," and she did.

I showed them to the spare bedroom upstairs, and ate dinner alone while Lilia washed and put Vasik to bed. Later that first evening, Lilia came down to the living room and sat there on the couch for a long time while I flipped through shows on Netflix, having no idea what to do. Occasionally, she would get up and smoke by the garden door, but then she’d return to the couch. When I finally said I was going to sleep, she quickly retreated upstairs, seemingly relieved. I felt awful because I realized what she had been waiting for.

Unfortunately, before he managed to enlist in the territorial defense forces, Lilia's husband was found, but not immediately. Their home area was in a terrible state. Lilia and Vasik somehow made their way to Kyiv, but not right away. I didn’t know the details. My former classmate, Lisovskyi, the only one I still knew where to find, told me all this. I just wanted to find out who Masha was. When Lilia could finally bury her husband, she took Vasik to Yorkshire because she couldn’t restore their home by herself, obviously. For half a year, they lived with people who volunteered to shelter them, and for almost another year in some kind of shelter for mothers with young children. Because when Vasik turned three, they could no longer stay there. Lilia worked at some factory, while Vasik went to kindergarten and was always sick.

One of the first evenings, I tried to discuss with Lilia about prospects, education for Vasik, a different social environment, different opportunities, and everything else that could await her here. She agreed with everything, nodded. Summing up, I asked if she’d consider the possibility of staying somewhere here since there's support, help, and documents. Lilia suddenly even seemed to perk up and replied briefly but emphatically, "God forbid."

From London, some transporter agreed to take her and Vasik for a minimal fee, but it meant waiting for a van to fill up with passengers and parcels.

In the evening twilight, as we were returning home, the transporter texted her on Viber that the van was full, and they'd drive tomorrow. Vasik, completely exhausted, hardly standing from fatigue, refused to let anyone carry him, insisting on holding onto the scooter because it wouldn't fit in the van, as Lilia said. Immediately, I promised him that once they got home, I'd buy him a scooter. Vasik asked if I was coming with them. I said no. Vasik was disappointed, but not because of me—how could I buy him a scooter if I stayed here and they were there?

That night, for some reason, I left the door ajar and watched them sleep: Vasik, sprawled out, face up, chubby-cheeked with his little hairs clinging to his sweaty forehead, and Lilia enveloping him somehow, utterly not Lilia-like—I didn't know or recognize the woman cautiously asleep beside her little boy. Her tank top had slipped, revealing a shoulder, and her skin on her cheekbones, forearms, and collarbones seemed to glow. Her hair, spread across the pillow, no longer seemed poorly dyed or fried by some home concoction. Her curves were refined, delicate. It made you want to protect her. I watched for a long, long time, much longer than appropriate, even disregarding that it wasn’t appropriate at all.

In the morning, they left, and Vasik’s scooter remained in the living room. I accompanied them to the van. Vasik asked—oddly, me—where they would live in Ukraine and whether there would be toys there. I said I didn’t know. Lilia said nothing. Then I assured Vasik that he'd certainly have toys, which I didn’t doubt since apart from a small toilet bag and some simple dresses, the whole content of Lilia's small suitcase belonged to Vasik, and Lilia nodded, probably thinking of something else.

“What do you think,” I asked her, “is that cherry tree still there?”

“What cherry?” Lilia asked.

“The tree you bought?” I clarified.

“What tree?” Lilia asked again, as if momentarily surfacing from her indifferent stupor. She glanced at me, and for the first time, I saw recognition, a memory in her eyes—maybe not of me, but perhaps of herself, yet a vivid, human recognition.

But then a squat, nervous man began ushering everyone into the van. He reminded Lilia that the child had to sit on her lap, and she carelessly nodded, her eyes dimming again.

Back home, I stared at the scooter in the living room, unsure what to do with it, feeling a burning regret. At first, I thought I pitied Lilia, whose life was turning out so tragically, returning to such uncertainty, but eventually, I realized that Lilia had someone who once made a home for her. And possibly somewhere, there was a tree she had bought, someone who loved her and whom she loved tended to. And Vasik-Masik. Lilia was going somewhere because she wanted to. But I pitied myself because there was nothing of the sort in my life.

In the evening, I spent a long time trying to call her, texted on Viber, and even sent an SMS—but the van was likely somewhere in France by now, and perhaps Lilia had taken out the British SIM card from her phone. I thought of how Vasik-Masik wasn’t wrong to doubt the seriousness of my intentions and the firmness of my promise. And that didn’t make me feel any better.