Two Candies

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"Her name was Lenočka, and I hated that name in advance. What an embarrassment for a woman over fifty to be called that!

I remember that day as if it were now — Kyiv, a chilly spring noon, and me — I was heading, no, I was rushing to this Lenočka. Racing. With only one goal — to take back my own child, whom she had taken from me.

I burned with anger, burned with impatience. How dare she tell me that now it was her child. Officially, you heard, officially! As I flew up the marble steps of the subway, I imagined this she-wolf and the expression on her face when I would say that I had the right, that I was filing a lawsuit, that my son would return to me..."

Madame Aneta poured ruby wine into my glass and smiled slightly with the corners of her lips. I froze, so as not to miss a single word.

Everything that was happening seemed unreal to me. On the outskirts of Paris, in the elegant cottage of madame where I had stayed for a few days while fleeing the war in Europe, everything seemed magical: her charming smile, the barely noticeable French accent, the sweet wine, which she so hospitably offered me... How could I repay her? What did I bring her from Ukraine?.. A magnet with a view of Kyiv and an assortment of colorful candies. She politely twirled the magnet in her hands, attaching it to the metal strip of the secretaire. But when she opened the bag of candies, poured them all onto the table, placed her hands on them, and froze, deeply lost in her own thoughts. As if embracing. As if conversing with them.

And there was such longing in that gesture that I was left speechless, and I could only wait for her to say something, or at least move.

After some time, she gathered all the candies into the bag and, after carefully packing it, returned it to me. Thank you, she said, thank you. And she left the room.

The next day, and for several days in a row, she didn't mention my, probably unsuccessful, gift. But in the evening, on the eve of my departure, she invited me to the living room and, pouring wine and settling in a striped burgundy-gold armchair, she told me her story:

"I was twenty-eight then. I lived with a man named Sashko, and although it didn't seem like we were headed for marriage, I got pregnant. We weren't sure if we wanted a child, we hesitated for a long time, but time passed, it was too late to change anything, and we reconciled with the idea that we would have a son. The pregnancy was difficult, and the birth even more so, but little by little I filled with hopes for a future for the three of us.

When Mykhaylyk was born, he was an incomprehensible and helpless bundle of cries, but Sashko, who came to pick us up from the maternity ward, bravely took him in his arms without hesitation. He carried him to the car, then settled next to the half-conscious me.

And then there was an accident, and I don't remember anything more.

I came to my senses much later, to such an extent that I couldn't even imagine. The state I found myself in was so severe that there was no room for thoughts of anything but recovery. The only thing I was told over time: Sashko died, Mykhaylyk was unharmed, and I spent a year and a half in a coma. It took me about the same amount of time to recover. And, as soon as I returned to an acceptable state, I began to look for my child. It turned out that Mykhaylyk had been officially adopted by Sashko's father and his second wife, Lenočka.

For long days and nights, I chose words for a conversation with this Lenočka, and I knew that I wouldn't give up until my child returned to me.

So, I went into the meeting armed with legal knowledge, anxiety, anger, and determination. Of course, the adoptive parents had been raising him for almost three years, but until the end of this term, I had every chance to win him back, as a full-fledged and blood mother who is now in a position to take care of him.

We met at a playground. A light-haired boy with a dreamy smile, like Sashko's, was swinging on a wooden swing that creaked softly, disturbing the relaxed silence. Even without seeing him properly, I already felt: it's him! My little one, my own flesh and blood! My heart rang and thudded with church bells. Next to the swing stood an older woman, dressed in a blue jacket, wrapped in a white scarf... Modest, unremarkable, quiet.

- Oleno? - I exhaled.

- I'm glad to see you, Anya, - she nodded and softly called to the child:

- Myhayliku, let's go home, darling?..

I was struck by how radiantly he smiled, asking:

- Are there pancakes at home?

- Yes, sweetheart, - the woman answered, transformed by the reflection of his smile.

- Then great! - the boy eagerly extended his arms to be lifted off the swing.

Noticing how attentively I was looking at him, he became shy and hid behind the woman, pressing his curious little face into her jacket, cautiously peeping out. Oh, how madly I wanted to embrace him, to scoop him up in my arms, to dash far, far away, where it would just be the two of us... But I knew that he would most likely be frightened by this rather than pleased. So I literally held myself in check, clutching my elbows with my palms.

- Let's go, - the woman said to me and, taking the little one by the hand, headed to the nearest of the houses.

She poured me tea, placed a bowl of candies, but I was not in the mood for visiting. With youthful fervor, I blurted out everything to her — that I had the right, that there would be a court case, that she had no chance. I added that I was, of course, grateful to her, that my son was alive and well, but he had a mother, and that mother was me.

I must say, Lenočka listened extraordinarily patiently to everything I had to say to her. She slightly smiled, slightly grieved, all the colors of emotions visited her mobile face, almost unwrinkled. Finally, she said:

- You're right, Anya, you can win Mykhaylyk back in court. But think first of all about him. I've been with him since birth, he knows no other mother but me. If you take him, it will be a huge shock for him.

- He’ll get used to it. - I was almost shouting. - He will love me!

- He certainly will love you, - my interlocutor replied. - But not right away. It will take him years to understand what happened, to come to terms with it, to forgive. Is that what you want?

- I want him back. - I insisted.

Lenočka looked away and thought for a moment.

- You know, Anya, - she finally said, - when I was eighteen, I was caught by several scoundrels, they humiliated me, raped me, put a bottle in my vagina, and, until it shattered, they kicked me in the stomach. By some miracle, I survived, but the shards cut everything, nothing womanly was left. I understood that I would never be able to have children, and all I wanted was peace. For a long time, I couldn't communicate with men and only Volodya, Sashko's father, managed to warm me when my life was already beginning to decline. So when Sashko died, and you ended up in a coma, we had no doubt that your Mykhaylyk was a God's gift, and our holy duty was to nurture and raise him. I could never even dream of the happiness of being a mother, and yet here it came. I beg you, young lady, don't take him away, leave it as it is. You see, he is happy with us. And your happiness, I am sure, will find you one day too."

I remember how I lacked the air to scream, to stop her from speaking, but I seemed to have turned to stone, stunned and crushed.

She took a candy from the bowl and pushed it towards me. And I would never have taken it, that pathetic bribe, but Mykhaylyk, who suddenly ran from the children's room into the kitchen, decided to join the conversation. He climbed onto Lenočka's lap, and, taking another candy, placed it next to the first one. Not understanding what was happening, he was pleased to have done something good and kind, and, once again flashing Sashko's smile, he pressed tightly against the chest of his not-so-young mother with confidence and trust.

Then I took the two candies and left. Without a court, without decisiveness, and without claims. And for several endless days, I mourned my fate, her fate, perhaps both together. Until in the hospital, during a routine examination, I met Jacques, my current husband, and moved to France. You’ve seen our younger twins, and the eldest is camping with friends. We are truly very, very happy, but... eating candies, you understand, I can no longer..."

And, falling asleep to the flickering distant hum of the night Paris, slightly tipsy from wine, and even more so from the conversation with Madame Aneta, in some unconscious impulse, I pulled two candies from the package. Slowly unwrapped them and placed them in my mouth, one by one. And it turned out they were dizzyingly sweet, slightly bitter, noticeably salty, and incomparably, breathtakingly fragile.