Meeting

by Olena Klymovskykh

"You are about to walk into the hall and see all your acquaintances," a tall man with an emotionless face, whose clothing color I couldn't quite discern, told me.

"All of them?" I asked skeptically.

"Absolutely," he nodded.

We were standing before tall doors made of dark, patterned material.

"But that's a huge number of people," I doubted.

"Yes, some will want to talk to you. It will take a while."

The man approached the doors. His clothes rustled softly as the doors opened, and I stepped into the hall.

Hundreds of eyes were on me. There was a sense that I needed to say something. I walked down a long aisle between rows filled with people. There was whispering on both sides, someone laughed, but stifled it. It was a bit stuffy, but bearable.

As I walked, I examined the ceiling that soared incredibly high, thankfully devoid of the massive crystal chandeliers I despise for their pompous look.

I tried to recall when I last shaved and nervously touched my chin. A day or two - not too bad. I glanced at my clothes from the corner of my eye. A shirt - not bad. When did I put it on? My memory was failing me. Jeans, sneakers. Good enough for a performance. But I had no idea what to say. I had to figure out what they expected from me.

Finally, I reached the part of the hall I identified as a stage and turned to face the audience. I encountered intense anticipation on faces that still blurred before my eyes. I couldn't focus on anyone. Suddenly, a sharp pang hit my chest, and I sensed that deep down, there sat those who were very dear to me.

I cleared my throat. Where was the blasted microphone? I couldn't possibly shout.

"Good day," I shouted, pulling air into my lungs.

"Speak softer and to each one," said an irritated voice from a woman in the first row.

I looked at the gray-haired woman who sternly peered at me over her glasses.

"What should I say?" I asked nearly whispering.

"He doesn't know what to say," the woman said with a smile to her neighbor in white. That one shook her head, observing me with interest.

"Look at him, grown so well. And he was a preemie."

"And his mother was small," the gray-haired woman replied. "There's nothing to talk about with us, son. But listen to the others."

I was at a loss. A sharp pain ran through my elbow, and I instinctively rubbed it. My head spun a bit. With effort, I shifted my focus to another face. A young, pretty woman reminded me of something distant, almost elusive.

"I don't recognize you," I confessed.

"Natalia Vasylyvna, forgot me, Serhiy?" she said gently and smiled. "And this is baba Masha, your nanny."

I shifted my gaze to a massive figure in a blue robe. God, baba Masha indeed. She used to whack us in kindergarten with a wet rag on our legs to stop us from running around. How long ago that was!

"You here too?" I began to realize who all these people were. Cold fear started creeping into me. Was this really all of them?

"And you, rascal, peed in my bucket once, remember?"

"I mistook it," I seemed to blush.

"That's alright. Go on, it happens to everyone."

It happens to me, I thought, and looked fearfully at the next face. My first teacher, certainly. I loved her, it seems. And she turned out to be so young and beautiful, with long hair.

"Loved," confirmed Larysa Mykytivna. "You called me Varisa. All of you little ones are so sweet."

"Not all," intervened an old thin woman sitting beside her. A long nose, sharp gaze under thick eyebrows, and bright red lipstick. I remembered this hag well. She terrorized us through the entire second grade. Smacked our fingers with a ruler as we wrote, lifting our hands and yelling, yelling. I was nauseous from the sound of a ruler hitting the wooden desktop and that bright lipstick. After that, I even avoided women with such lipstick.

"All of you were dunces and disobedient," she fixed her gaze on me, and I seemed to feel a draft on my neck with my hair.

"I hated you," I gritted through my teeth.

"I hated you too," she calmly admitted. "Here, I can tell the truth: I can't stand children in general. They irritate me."

"And 'here' is where?" I asked, suppressing nausea.

"Just as dumb as ever," she proclaimed triumphantly, stretching her colored lips in a smile.

"Screw you," I said, and the nausea finally subsided.

While she was saying something back, I moved to the next man in a blue tracksuit.

"Valeriy Oleksandrovych, thank you for making us do push-ups and pull-ups," I said genuinely.

"Good muscles, well done," my P.E. teacher praised me.

"You said back then it would be useful. And it did become useful. Can I shake your hand?"

"Not here, but I'm glad, kid. Go on."

Next, I saw the chemistry teacher. One time she dropped a test tube, and it shattered on the tiled floor. It stank for three days afterward. A history teacher who flirted with high school girls, a math teacher who preferred talking about life over math. They looked at me indifferently, and I had nothing to say to them.

And that curly brunette, she was from music school.

"Serhiy, how is your guitar playing?" she asked in a melodic voice.

"I never really learned to play well," I admitted, recalling the guitar hanging covered in layers of dust at the cottage.

"That's alright," she laughed, "you sang awfully too. It was your mom's push, she wanted you to have a musical education. But it's not for everyone."

Mom… my heart clenched. Could I possibly see her? I started searching for her face among others but only saw the school janitor who swore better than any of my acquaintances. I had to keep moving.

From the crowd emerged my neighbor with a large black dog I was afraid of. Then the shopkeeper who always shortchanged me by a few pennies. A red-headed kid flashed by. He loved sliding down the school railings. Once he fell onto the lower landing. An ambulance came to the school then. They said his spine was broken. I never saw him after that.

"How are you?" I asked him.

"I was in a cast for a year and a half," the boy replied, wiping his nose on his sleeve, "then learned to walk again. I'm alright now."

"I'm glad."

He nodded.

An unbearable pain shot through my arm again, and my heart raced because I saw Olya. My first love. Her fair braids rested on her shoulders, and there were slightly on her nose. Such blue eyes I had never seen on anyone else in my life. Even that ugly brown dress with the black apron suited her.

She smiled and lowered her eyes.

"Are you happy, Olya?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"It varies. And you?"

I pondered.

"I don't know," I honestly replied. I couldn't lie for some reason.

"You still have time to figure it out."

I nodded gratefully. Having time was good.

Next sat Vityok, a friend from the village, with whom I had fun summer vacations. I remembered that he died. He was on a trip with relatives in a car and got into an accident.

"Why did it happen? I missed you."

"I'm sorry," my friend, forever thirteen, replied. "The driver was speeding, the car spun out, and that was it. I feel sorry for the parents."

And my classmates were waving to me. I had once fought with that one. Hit him in the jaw.

"Sorry," I nodded to the guy. What was his name again?

He turned away.

"Where's Dima?" I wondered. He was my best friend.

"He's not with us. Go," the boys called out, laughing and nudging one another.

Of course, Dima is already thirty-five. He recently brought me a new first aid kit. I rubbed my forehead. Something important was slipping away. Where was I before all this? How did I get here?

A splitting headache took over. I grabbed my head in my hands. The hall buzzed with gasps and whispers. The unbearable pain shot through my arm again. The pain seemed to recede.

"Seryozha!"

Oh, that voice I didn't want to hear. We were friends at university. Vadik was very calm, ran faster than anyone else in training. But a bit boring. He was courting cheerful, pretty Marinka. And I stole her from him. He once caught us at a party where we were kissing. He threatened to punch me.

"I loved her, why'd you interfere?" he asked offendedly.

"You know, Vadik, it takes two in this process."

"Jerk."

"Bore."

Before I could come up with another insult, Katya appeared. The first serious girlfriend, first sex and first disappointment. I think she dumped me. Katya said nothing.

A lot of faces of college friends flashed by. Here with these, we drank at parties, with those, we went on grill trips. Teachers I didn't remember. The first boss shook his fist at me. I think he didn't like me. Dozens of acquaintances I met inadvertently. And here my chest ached again. I reached Vika.

She was in the festive dress we bought for our friends' wedding. Short, unruly hair. Brown eyes with long lashes. A small mole above her lip. We lived together for three years. At first, everything was great. Renting an apartment away from our parents. Worked, sometimes went to the sea. But gradually everything deteriorated. Nothing specific, just didn't want to rush home anymore. Accusations, suspicions, conflicts followed. And then Daryna appeared in my life. And I couldn't help myself. One day I left.

"You left me," she said, folding her arms across her chest.

"Sorry, I didn't love you anymore. Couldn't pretend any longer. I'm sorry."

"I had an abortion."

"I didn't know." The headache was unbearable. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Don't pretend. You didn't want to know."

"I thought it got away. You shouldn't have decided alone."

"With whom?" she laughed bitterly. "You were with your lover in Bali, weren't you?"

"You could have just told me."

"And what would you have done? Left her?" she shouted across the hall.

"I would have supported the child." I glanced around. A lump lodged in my throat.

"And do you think I dreamed of becoming a single mother?"

"But the child..."

"It's your fault!" she hissed. "I wished you'd never have children again."

I stopped breathing with horror. Daryna and I have been together for over five years. And she really wants a child. It turns out the problem is with me.

"Vika, I really didn't know. Maybe I didn’t want to know. I can't change anything now. You didn't deserve this. I plead with you, forgive me." I wanted to cry.

Her place was taken by my family. My uncle and aunt, cousins. Grandma, even grandpa, whom I barely remember. They smiled, said how adult and strong I became. I thanked everyone. The headache grew worse. Almost blinded by the pain.

"Do you know where mom is?" I asked.

They all turned back and I saw her. Thin and worn out by illness, as I remember her before she died.

"How could you leave me?" I suddenly blurted.

She looked at me with sad eyes.

"It happened. But you managed. You're a good kid. How's dad?"

"You know, we're at war. I moved dad and my wife to a safe place. And I’m saving people."

"I know, Seryozha. I'm proud of you."

And then I remembered. A high-rise building. Another one. The fire almost extinguished. We pulled a woman alive from under the rubble. And there was also a child. I heard a boy's voice. I already held his small cold hand, pulling him. But the slab that pressed on him was so damn heavy. Someone shouted: "faster". And then I don’t remember.

"Faster, son," said mom. "They’re waiting for you."

"And you?" I couldn't get enough of seeing her.

"I love you."

A sharp smell of medicine, a bright light hit my eyes. Tubes everywhere. Pain all over. The man in white was saying: "Faster, the heart won’t hold."

I reached the end of the hall. In the last row sat my father, Dima, and my partners from the brigade. They got up from their seats and surrounded me. Sitting at the edge was Daryna.

"I was yelling at you to move back," said Tolik, with whom I had gone on shift today.

"How's the boy?" I was terribly afraid to hear the answer.

"You almost pulled him out. Then it collapsed... And he stayed under you."

"Alive?"

"By a miracle. Scared, of course."

My heart eased.

My father was wiping his eyes. Dima looked somewhat astonished. The guys discussed how the ceiling collapsed. And I looked at Daryna. She was beautiful.

"I loved only you. Forgive me for everything."

I felt like I was seeing her for the last time.

She reached out and tried to grab me. She was shouting something, but her face moved away and became blurred, then disappeared. I turned to the doors that swung wide open. Beyond them, there was light.