\*\*Morning Station\*\*

by Anna Bagryana

Halyna didn't realize how night had fallen. The landscapes outside the window had long turned into a continuous darkness, occasionally broken by the sparse lights of streetlamps or windows of unfamiliar homes. Someone in her compartment had turned off the light, plunging it into darkness. The girl sat on the clean bed, her cheek pressed against the cool window pane, listening to the rhythm of the train wheels and continued to go over all the possible stories... the one she had to tell her parents tomorrow morning. There had to be a story.

Initially, she thought of making up a story that the father of her child was at war. He had gone to defend Ukraine from its enemies. He left and vanished, with no word since. But then they'd start asking about his family, requesting the address of his parents, digging, probing... Even if she said he had died, the same series of logical questions would arise, ones she couldn't answer...

The truth? No! Never! Her family was too conservative for such a truth. Oh, God, if she told her parents she got pregnant during a holiday romance with a blue-eyed brunet, from whom she hadn't even asked for a contact number because she left hers, confident he would find her in Kyiv... That this was her first real, perhaps most passionate, and possibly only love of her life... That she gave in completely to her feelings and sensations, without wanting to consider the consequences, enjoying every moment spent with her beloved... No, her parents would never forgive her for such a truth. It would be the greatest disgrace for their family! Just imagining her mother’s reaction was terrifying. And her father’s?... They raised her so strictly, believed in her decency...

A provincial fool! Perhaps. Yet, she had—albeit brief—true happiness. And the child was the fruit of that happiness. She hadn’t even considered an abortion. She remembered how a few of her university friends resorted to such sin and regretted it deeply afterward, haunted by dreams of unborn children with bloodshot eyes and outstretched hands, as if pleading for salvation. No, she would have certainly gone mad from that!

She decided to say nothing to anyone, at least until she thought of the best possible story... Or until it was no longer possible to hide the growing belly... She hadn’t told her boss at the company she worked for. Nor her colleagues. Nor her friend Maryna, with whom she had been renting an apartment for several years in Kyiv.

She smiled sadly in the darkness. Maryna always teased her, calling her a "walking virtue," because once Maryna broke free from her parents, she began partying in the capital to the fullest, as she put it. Halyna had long lost count of her friend’s suitors, simply marveling at how Maryna changed men with such nonchalance. How wasn’t she disgusted with herself?...

And now, what a surprise—from a "walking virtue." Maryna had immediately understood because the changes in her friend were more than obvious. She interrogated her for all the details and then, "just as a friend," suggested Halyna find "that scoundrel" and forcibly drag him to the registry office. But Halyna refused outright. She wasn’t even sure if Bohdan was the real name of her child’s father... After all, no one had promised anyone anything. They were just happy together. It was a period, an episode that he probably had long forgotten. But she never could...

She stroked her belly, feeling slight movements from within. She realized how deeply she loved the one living inside her. It seemed she was about to burst into tears from her own love. Carefully, she got up and went to the corridor. As she made her way to the restroom, she happened to glance into the last compartment, the door to which was open. Inside, she saw two young men in camouflage, a bottle of vodka on the table, and... crutches lying like a bridge between the two lower bunks where the young men sat.

On her way back, the compartment was already closed.

She tossed and turned in her temporary bed, trying to find the most comfortable position, but she couldn't fall asleep. It was too cramped—both for her body and her thoughts. She couldn’t come up with a story for her parents, and the time until their meeting was inexorably decreasing. The sound of the wheels reminded her of this, like a ticking clock.

The only fallback was a story about rape. But that was so degrading! They’d ask why she hadn’t reported it, why she hadn’t told them, where and when a decent girl might have been for such an attack—her mother would faint, and her father... No, better not to think about it at all. Her parents could never accept the child of some maniac...

She wanted to step out again. Near the restroom, she bumped into one of the soldiers. He stood by the open window, smoking. He looked about thirty, very thin, with an unshaven face and weariness in his eyes.

“Please,” he stepped aside courteously for Halyna.

She nodded instead of saying thank you. When she left, he spoke to her again:

“Expecting anyone?”

“The doctor says it’s a girl.”

“That’s good. They won’t send her to war.”

She remained silent but didn’t hurry back to her compartment. She felt a need to talk to this stranger. It could distract her—at least for a little while—from her own problems.

“Is your husband not at war?”

“No.”

“That’s good. God grant it stays that way. There's nothing good there.”

The young man fell silent, finished his cigarette, and tossed the butt out the window. Halyna feared he might leave, abandoning her to her oppressive thoughts, so she decided to continue the conversation herself.

“And you've been at war long?”

“Almost seven months. As long as your pregnancy, I’d say.”

Halyna blushed immediately.

“Are you returning?”

“No, escorting a comrade.”

“Is he wounded?”

“If a place where a leg once was can be called a wound, then yes.”

The girl felt a lump of air stick in her throat. She didn't know what else to ask to keep this random night-time companion by her side, but nothing sensible came to mind.

Finally, the young man spoke:

“One can live without a leg. And with two missing, they live, too. But for my friend, it's a great tragedy. He lay in the hospital for one and a half months, attempting suicide three times during that period. His parents know nothing because he always tells them on the phone, ‘Everything’s fine, I’m alive and well.’ I want to take him to my home for now. Perhaps I can find a psychologist to give him the will to live. For now, I’m keeping him afloat with alcohol, though I know it’s a deceptive remedy...”

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“He used to. Don’t stand too long by the open window, or you might catch a cold. You must take care of yourself and the baby.”

After these words, the young man gallantly opened the corridor door for Halyna.

She returned to her compartment and tried to sleep again. But she couldn’t. Her thoughts had multiplied. Now she thought about the young man who slept in the end of the car. Her problem, compared to his, seemed laughable. Even embarrassing to compare. Who knows, maybe his injury meant he lost not only his leg but also the ability to be with a woman, to be a father... Hence the tragedy. Hence the lack of will to live. Unfortunately, such cases are not uncommon.

Suddenly, like a flash, a crazy, irrational idea struck her. Propose to this young man... how to put it... her hand and heart, or something?... Why not? This way, she could save both herself and him. If only he wouldn’t get off before she could... But how could she imagine it? Enter his compartment in the morning, wake him up, kneel, and say, “Please, be a father to my child”... No, she was really out of her mind to even consider such a thought. Was her fear of her parents so strong that she was ready to tie her fate to the first man she hadn’t even seen face to face? How would she live her whole life with someone she didn’t love, especially an invalid? Yes, it’s true, he’s a hero. But he is not her hero. Because she didn't love him. Because she still loved “that scoundrel” who, after their romance, might have changed dozens of girls... Was it worth going to such sacrifices? Definitely not. Better to tell her parents she was raped... Better to be alone, without a husband. The main thing is that she will soon give birth, and no one can take away from her this sacred right—to be a mom, to give life, to rejoice in new life, to love her child with boundless, pure love...

She was awakened by the conductor’s clear voice:

“We’ll arrive in half an hour! Hand in your bedding, wash up, because I’ll soon be closing the restroom!”

Halyna quickly got up from her bed, grabbed her towel, dashed into the corridor and... almost fainted.

Striding toward her, leaning on crutches, hopping on one leg... was her Bohdan.