"Liberator"

By Yulia Berezhko-Kaminska

Old Granny Marusya was never afraid to think about death.

Her own death.

A death that would visit her like that neighbor who left this world young, leaving her husband with two preschoolers—an old, familiar acquaintance; her arrival would evoke a mix of surprise, curiosity, a heavy premonition of parting with her kin and loved ones, and something else Granny Marusya herself couldn't comprehend. This death-neighbor would sit on a creaky chair at the head of her bed and silently watch the utterly faded, parched old woman as if understanding and granting Marusya time to think her earthly thoughts, to finish conversations in her mind with everyone she longed to see but couldn’t. Death would allow her to calmly, without haste or distress, leave her children and grandchildren warm memories imbued with her final instructions, wishes, directions, ancient secrets, and a collective parting of love and gratitude.

Granny Marusya didn't like to do anything in haste or at the last moment, so she prepared for her death slowly, consciously, and peacefully. She had already secured a cemetery spot beside her husband, Yakiv, and had neatly stacked shawls in the attic, adding new shoes, a blouse embroidered with red roses, and a skirt, all labeled: "For the funeral". Even a special pillow was ready, upon which kind hands would lay her elderly gray head for eternal rest. The pillow cover was embroidered with white-on-white thread. The old woman saved money from every pension—crisp notes wrapped in a floral handkerchief. She gathered the family relics together too: several towels embroidered by her grandmother, golden earrings and wedding bands, a chain with a cross, two silver spoons that were gifts for a child's first tooth, and they remained unclaimed at home. She even included a set of new embroidery threads purchased during Soviet times.

Granny Marusya wished for a quiet death. Someday. When her body weakened, and Yakiv would visit her dreams every night. She wanted to depart like people usually do who've done no evil during their life but whom fate hasn't particularly shielded. Not like when her mother turned gray overnight at twenty-three—when her father was captured in the midst of World War II and returned much later, a different man. Not when she ran almost barefoot to school, freezing her battered, dirty feet, and shivered like a dry leaf over bread crumbs during the hungry post-war years... nor in youth, bent to the ground by endless weeding of long potato and beet rows, feeling as though her back would never straighten. Fate didn't shelter her even when Marusya stepped on the wedding carpet: her husband played his fill, loved and left, moving onto someone else in the village—using his hands not for chores but for a young wife. She sat in the dark, cold house, beaten for nothing, unable to even move. But leaving? She couldn't. Where to? To whom?

She left later. With two daughters in her arms. Returned to her mother. And there she stayed, in the old house for years, warming the lonely bed...

Yet Granny Marusya wouldn't talk much about those times. Rather about her work—the embroidered shirts. From the moment she learned to cut, sew, and then embellish with double fringes, decorative stitches, and beads—her mind was consumed by those shirts. She embroidered all her love, both unblossomed and withered, with colorful threads. And despite fashion dictating otherwise, few women could resist Marusya's shirts. The paths to her home may not have been broad, but they certainly led far.

Along one of those paths, love visited her in her mature years. Yakiv came by at his sister's request for shirts and ended up staying among Marusya's embroideries—he couldn't find his way back, nor did he want to...

Her joy was simple: in the daily labor performed with ease and serenity, in the planted flowers lavish with blooms, in her daughters—girls who grew up calm, pleasant, and smart. Yakiv became her greatest inspiration and support. The only sorrow—it didn't last long...

And now she was alone—past eighty. Her eyes couldn't see the needle, her hands trembled, and her legs struggled to lift from the floor, as if Earth's gravity held her captive. Lately, she felt worse, having fallen ill and weakened. Her daughters lived abroad with their families, calling their mother to them, but she wondered, what would she do there in Spain—not knowing the language, nor customs? Unwilling. A lively friend—tiny, younger—often visited from the other side of the village, helping and comforting. Neighbors checked daily, her friends didn't forget. But at nights, anxiety crept in—the country was becoming restless, the news channels broadcasted gloom—signs of war were imminent. A war one didn't want to believe in, didn't want to come...

In February, Granny Marusya was bedridden. Sleepless nights were filled not with rest but with melancholy and the urge to dispel oppressive visions—dreams of thrilling premonitions of something savage and inhuman. But none of her nightmares compared to the horror she awoke to one morning. Everything around her roared, thundered, shook under merciless strikes. Russians were entering the village sinisterly; their tanks slithered in, reeking of diesel, cannons, and mortars roaring, setting the horizon ablaze from all sides...

Granny Marusya couldn’t breathe from fear. Each blast jostled her bed, tearing through her mind in waves of explosions reaching her house; every second, wrapped in a blanket, she wondered which wall would fall next.

By evening, Grits, the neighbor, burst into the house, flustered—bringing warm porridge and pickled tomatoes.

"We're leaving. It's war. What about you, Granny Marusya? There's no room in the car. But I'm looking for another way. People will help. We won't leave you."

He stood, transferred the food to her plate, washed his dish—and left.

Marusya didn't touch the porridge, only sucked on tomatoes with dry lips, wiping the juices with her sleeve.

"War, you say... As if I didn't know already..."

But the neighbor never returned. What happened? Who knows... Hours stretched like days, and the days blurred into one solid lump of fear, pain, and anxiety.

"A quiet death... A quiet death I wanted... and here they rage like mad creatures..." the old woman muttered into the darkness.

Then another day broke. And someone knocked on the door. Friend or foe? Granny Marusya froze, tense, tightened—there was no doubt the Russians would go from house to house. But how would they go? And with what intent? She knew what the Germans did when barging into homes, it was a common childhood tale. But the Russians... We fought against the fascists with them... How could such thoughts even arise?

The knock repeated, then the door creaked open, and Yuri—a young man from the neighboring street—peeked in.

"Granny Marusya, are you here?"

"Yes, here, here," she replied, "but I've nowhere to go. No strength."

The youth, brushing clay off his boots at the threshold, approached her bed. Outside, another explosion cracked, as if a lightning bolt struck right at the gate.

"But you must. Don't you hear what's happening? Houses are burning: the Shramkos' was destroyed, the Potapenkos'..."

"But leaving is no longer possible—roads are cut off; the village is under... orcs... We have to go to the basement."

"Oh... thought of that... I know, it's necessary, but I can't crawl into the cellar. Can't you see?"

"Well, can you even get up?"

"A bit, if I must, only then..."

Yuri stood, deep in thought...

"Let's gather what we can. To my basement. It isn't luxury but doable. We'll need warm things—it's very cold there."

Granny Marusya didn't budge. The house shook again from a blast.

"Where are your clothes? Here?" Yuri yanked open the lacquered wardrobe doors, a relic from Khrushchev's time.

He packed what he could. He transferred. First, Granny Marusya, then things and documents. It wasn't far, but frequent explosions weakened his knees, forcing him to fall to the damp ground.

They barely settled in Yuri’s basement, dug beside the house. Dark, yet surprisingly spacious, though not too deep. He laid cardboard on the cement floor, dragged in a folding bed, placed mattress on top. Then settled the old woman there. On a wooden crate he set a tiny camp stove with a gas canister, cooking some stew with canned meat. During a lull, he fetched a bucket of water from the well. But warmth was scarce. Marusya shivered beneath several blankets.

"Darn it, no electricity for the heater... No worries, if it calms down, I’ll build a fire in the yard and bring hot water and embers in a clay pot. At least some warm air," he soothed her.

"Why didn’t you leave?" Granny Marusya raised herself slightly.

Yuri briefly shrugged, gestured dismissively:

"Who knows what’s best. It happened so fast... Our folks, those who left, who knows how many made it? They’re shooting on the roads. And the men—especially them. What if they don’t like something about me? And where to go, with what? Better stay here and see... Upsetting, no signal—guess they cut it somewhere. No clue what’s happening all around..."

"Why are you fussing over me?"

"Well, how could I leave you alone? How? Uncle Grits asked me to watch you. I promised. So I needed to do that. You’d not even cook for yourself... And now this is happening... Am I not humane?"

"And your folks where are they?"

"They... went to the city before this—to relatives—just happened to be there when it started. And me—stuck here. Cattle stayed, with our documents, belongings. Didn’t expect things this way..."

"Will you leave if it worsens?"

"They won't flatten the village..."

"We shall see..." Granny Marusya exhaled.

That's how they began their underground life—turbulent, noisy, terrifying. In prayers and deep thoughts. Each lost in their world. Yuri—pondering his girl, just igniting the first stirring relationship but not yet a fiancée (will she ever be?), to relish her tenderness, beauty, youth, her vibrant, delightful body... How’s she in Bucha?... Along with his parents and sister suddenly and cruelly cut off from their village? Would he even survive to leave this place?

Granny Marusya—lost in her musings: about daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. If only the war ended, to gather them all, but when, but where, and will they ever meet in this life? Her thoughts drifted over endured and unfulfilled events. About Yakiv, for whom her heart morphed between a fluttering bird and a hot lump in an icy shell, repeatedly freezing in fear and causing all her body to ache. About abandoned embroideries, silver spoons "for the first tooth", and ancestral towels, her quiet-death postponed... perhaps—but was it ever deserved?

"Aren’t you afraid of them wandering house to house?"—one moist March night, Granny Marusya asked into the darkness.

Yuri didn’t respond. He only sighed heavily, and it seemed his breath released a sticky fear-ball that settled like a thick cobweb on everything in the cellar.

"Our guys, aren't they scared facing orcs?"—he managed to squeeze out.

The morning brought an unusual, unsettling silence. Suspicious silence, more tense than constant shelling and gunfire. Something changed. But what?

Yuri ventured into the yard. Through the planks, a stare met him from a dog, vanished during heavy shelling, now reappeared. He smiled at it, glad but hesitated to call. Surveyed—deserted. So peaceful it seemed untouched. Pauper-bitter air from the smoke lingered.

He stood, contemplated, then wordlessly sneaked to the fence—to glimpse the street. No one. Empty. Houses only—those without windows, those without doors, some shattered roofs, and the charred beams, rubble piles, with standing chimney-stoves...

Regaining composure, Yuri hastened to inspect his place. Beneath him, glass crunched, curtains puffed outward, plaster blanketed the TV and table. "Essentials into the cellar, cover windows..." he thought, heading for the porridge before it burned and feeding the stock.

"Did you notice if mine’s intact, Yuri?" Granny Marusya called as he returned to the cellar.

"Couldn't see from here. Once possible, I'll check, retrieve what’s needed."

Overhead, some heavy machinery rumbled. Very heavy. Near, oh so near. Yuri extinguished the burner, ascending from the basement.

There, in the yard, a Russian soldier—aiming a rifle directly into Yuri's eyes while a tank positioned at the fence stood, another soldier peeped from its hatch—a Buryat.

Yuri instinctively raised his hands. His heart pounded like a thunderous bell within his chest.

"Who are you? Name, surname, passport."

“Yuriy Konstantinovich Kovalenko... Passport... in the cellar.”

“You alone there?”

“No, with my grandma.”

“What grandma?”

“Maria, a neighbor...”

“Why here?”

“This is my home...”

“Why didn’t you leave? To sabotage? To leak coordinates?”

“No, living in the cellar... I..."

"I’m asking, why are you here?"—the Russian moved closer, nudging Yuri with the gun.

“This is my home...”

“I know that. Why didn’t you leave?—Not a free man?”

“I can't—without my grandma... she’s bedridden.”

“You’re not free, because of your bedridden neighbor?”—grinning, the occupier signaled his partner:

"Brother, let’s get closer..."

The tank belched a dense cloud of diesel smoke and moved toward the wooden fence, loudly crushing it beneath its tracks, directing its cannon toward the cellar door.

“Open it!”

“What do you mean ‘open’?”—Yuri’s voice drowned in a bottomless well and returned as a faint echo.

“Are you kidding me? Open the door, I said!”

“I can’t, my grandma’s there...”

Without a word, the soldier nodded sideward. With an explosive burst from the cannon, Yuri jerked to the ground, shielding his head. The cellar exhaled fire, splintered planks, and... tiny red pieces of human flesh.

“Well, now you’re free from your granny. You’ve no granny now. Go where you want. You are free!”

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Granny Marusya longed for a quiet death. Apparently, she hadn’t earned it yet.