Sisters

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- Shall we put them together?" little Hannusia tipped over a box of puzzles in the middle of the room. She frowned her light, almost transparent eyebrows and jutted her jaw forward deliberately.

Ira opened her mouth to say that not today or at least not now, but seeing her daughter's determined look, she just sighed.

- All right, – Ira sat next to her and began to absentmindedly turn piece after piece. – Look for the corners.

Hannusia, not believing that her mother had agreed so quickly, started busily sorting through the pieces of cardboard, looking for the right ones, snuffling and chattering like an old granny.

Ira was annoyed at how easily she had once again succumbed to her daughter's manipulations, yet at the same time, she felt guilty for not spending enough time with her. Due to the war, Ira had left the country, and for the last few months, she had been 24/7 with the little perpetual motion machine named Hannusia. Last week, Ira managed to pull off a complex logistical operation that she barely believed would succeed and almost fell apart at the end: she brought her mother here to Poland for a week and went back to Ukraine to handle some affairs and, most importantly, to see her husband. Ira had dreamed so much about this trip, about meeting Pavlo, about Kyiv, about her home and—oddly enough—about putting on her dresses again, which she missed like close relatives. She had often dreamed of being in the elevator, approaching their apartment, ringing the doorbell. Or of stepping off the train at the station and falling straight into her husband's arms from the train car steps. However, the trip turned out to be difficult. Everything was rushed, hurried. Meetings were hectic, conversations fragmented and not about the most important things. Just seeing Pavlo, Ira couldn't shake off the thought that in just a few days, they would have to part again. This thought tormented her so much that it didn't allow her to enjoy the moment of the meeting. She also had to do something she least wanted – meet her younger sister, Liza. Yet, it was a condition set by her mother, who was constantly trying to reconcile them. It wasn't that Ira and Liza fought, but it was also difficult to call their relationship good.

- Mom, you're not putting it together, - her daughter reminded her, pulling her sleeve.

- Yes, yes, Hannusia.

Ira looked at the sea of puzzle pieces and couldn't get into the process, as she kept thinking about the trip.

She and Liza hadn't been fond of each other since childhood. Their age difference was only a year and a half—Liza was an unplanned child, but Ira always felt she was the unplanned one. Because the age difference was so small, Ira didn't remember herself without her sister. Whatever she did, wherever she went, that little chatterbox, whose mouth never seemed to close, was always around. Their mother even wanted to send them to first grade together because "Lizochka is so smart, she can study with older kids." Their childhood was filled with constant rivalry, a harsh competition for their mother's hugs and father's praise. Their relationship became more or less normal only when they took turns going away to study. And although both stayed in Kyiv after graduating from university, they had fewer interactions and, consequently, fewer fights. At one point, they even got closer: Liza, who somehow chronically struggled with partners, ended up with an abuser. Leaving that relationship, hiding its problems for a long time, was a slow and painful process for Liza. That was when their childhood squabbles took a backseat, and Ira sincerely offered her sisterly support. New tensions in their relationship came in 2020 when Liza started dating a guy who supported Russia. The entire complexity of the situation lay in the fact that Denys cared for Liza, sincerely loved her, and was a decent guy in every respect—except one, which was crucial for Ira. Yet, eventually, she convinced herself that her sister was happy, which seemed like a miracle after all the failed previous relationships. Ira decided just to avoid communication with Denys and not to think about his political orientation. This worked until February 24.

The first thing Ira did that morning of February 24 was call Liza. She yelled into the phone, not hearing or listening to what her sister was saying. Ira screamed as if Denys himself had started the war. She wanted him to hear her through the phone speaker. When her sister just hung up on her and stopped answering the phone, Ira couldn’t believe it. Then she started texting Liza until Pavlo made her stop. Then she cried powerlessly on her husband's shoulder, only to get angry again, and the cycle continued.

What frustrated Ira the most was not understanding Liza's stance. She asked her directly and indirectly, but Liza always avoided giving a clear response about her position. This evasiveness was typical of Liza, who could wriggle out of any situation, slip away when it seemed she was cornered, dodge responsibility. Ira didn't know how to be like that. Ira could only go head-on, directly.

- Mom, I'm hungry, - Hannusia looked at Ira reproachfully.

- Mhm.

- Mhm, what?

- Sorry, let's see what we have in the fridge, - Ira looked at the empty shelves and thought about the last conversation with Liza and Denys.

Their mother insisted on the meeting, and Ira knew she had promised. Holding off until the last moment, she invited her sister on the day of her departure to Poland, practically just before the train and subtly hinted that Liza should come alone.

Liza showed up with Denys and put on quite a show. She brought Belarusian marshmallows for tea, raised her eyebrows mockingly, expressing great surprise as to why Ira had come without Hannusia, and then went on and on, indignantly recounting how her colleague's 22-year-old son wasn't allowed to cross the border for studies. "It's a violation of the Constitution!" Liza repeated for the third time, waving her hands in the air. When her sister stepped out to the restroom, Denys leaned towards Ira and in a tone one uses to soothe children upset over not getting candy, said, "Don't worry, everything will be fine, ours will be here soon." Ira shivered as if a nasty slug had crawled over her and tried not to listen. When they finally got ready to leave, Liza insisted on helping Ira clean up the teacups, though Ira wanted to get rid of the guests as quickly as possible and didn't need help from her chaotic sister who couldn't even place cups straight in a cabinet. The cleanup turned into a tug-of-war and scrambling over cups, spoons, and cloths slipping out of each other's hands. When Ira closed the door behind them, she quickly started packing the rest of her things, not understanding what and why she was even putting them into the suitcase. On the train, scrolling through the news feed, a thought suddenly occurred to Ira that made her break out in a sweat.

- Mom, look, look.

Ira was looking through Hannusia and saw nothing.

- Mom?

Ira was struggling between two realities. Hannusia kept pulling at her, while Ira was irritated that she was being distracted from her thoughts. The more Hannusia demanded attention, the deeper Ira tried to delve inside herself. She felt that somewhere in the corners of her mind, she would find some solution. She replayed everything she had already pondered hundreds of times, then circled back to the starting point. Thinking brought her no relief and was more akin to picking at a wound, but she couldn't stop.

When Ira was about 14, she read "Gone with the Wind." Dissatisfied with the ending, she wrote her own. Then she rewrote it, and then realized how much she enjoyed the process. She started a notebook and in her perfect handwriting, where each letter nestled up to another, she recorded ideas. Of course, Liza, who copied everything her sister did, got a notebook for jotting too. This infuriated Ira, just as much as everything her younger sister did, but what irked her the most was how good little Liza's writing was—they shared the same desk, and Ira had access to her sister's creativity. It wasn't just Ira who liked Liza's work, their mother and father praised her too. Liza was taking everything most precious from her, and this was no exception. Ira found a way to vent her anger: with a red pen, she would mark all of Liza's mistakes—a great many in her sister's work. Still, chaotic, careless Liza appeared to be creatively gifted and wrote in a way that impressed her audience, even if it mainly consisted of close relatives. For Ira, this audience was the most important.

Inconsistent and illogical Liza chose not to develop her talent and went into real estate, continuing to write fanfiction as a hobby, while Ira got so into correcting her sister's texts that she eventually became an editor. While she enjoyed the work, transforming chaotic, often illogical thoughts that contradicted each other into beautiful, structured texts without errors and awkwardness, the profession didn't satisfy her ambitions.

- Mom, do you hear what I'm saying? Or are you just humming? - Hannusia drilled Ira with her gaze. - Look how I drew!

On the train, Ira suddenly realized she could inform on Denys. Why not? Wasn't he a collaborator spreading misinformation, stirring things up? Reporting him and getting rid of another scoundrel supporting the vile country. This thought brought her instant relief. But for a moment, Ira felt as if she was on a Ferris wheel crafted from her thoughts: here she was at the very bottom, thinking about turning Denys in. Ira imagined people coming for him, putting him in handcuffs, taking him away. Feeling some relief, she rose higher on the wheel. She imagined Liza crying, miserable. Ira remembered it well, having seen it before. It seemed to Ira that if she could rise just a little higher, she would reach the top and finally feel the victory and inner peace she so craved. But suddenly, she imagined her sister's gaze and felt a profound pity for her. Then she found something within herself that prevented her from doing anything that would hurt her sister. Ira tried to grasp this something inside herself, understand how it worked. But it was akin to trying to understand how she moved her leg, swallowed, or breathed. Although at the top of that imaginary wheel, Ira still saw nothing, still stared into nowhere. The feeling of relief disappeared, replaced by a crushing sense of failure and pain. The cycle descended back to its starting point, returning Ira to where she began.

- Mom, let's play with this, - Hannusia shook a doll in front of Ira's face.

- Mhm, - Ira hummed to herself, not looking at her daughter.