Will you come?

Maryana Lelik

"Ms. Regyna..." Maria peeks into the office. "Sorry, there's... it's an emergency. I tried..."

"Again? I asked you to find reliable entertainers with no issues. Should I start getting angry, or can you handle it without me?"

"It's just Nazar... he wants... I tried to handle it..."

"Come in and speak clearly; I don't have time for your frightened eyes. Is something wrong with the boy?"

"No, it's just that Nazar wants you to read the story, not Spider-Man. He said that Spider... well, that the entertainer should leave."

Maria's voice trembles, her knees shake. She might lose her job now.

"Who did you find, Maria? So many adults, and all of you can't handle a five-year-old?" Regyna asks, but her eyes no longer hold their usual coldness. The boy is a firecracker! And his sister, too.

Maria senses even the smallest changes. It seems she won't be fired today, she exhales.

"I searched for the best, I swear, with recommendations."

"Understood. Sort it out with the best there, and bring the boy to me. I have a minute."

Maria nods.

Regyna smiles. He said this morning he doesn't want entertainers for his birthday – standing his ground. Just like his mom.

Regyna loves her son. And she loves her daughter too. But entertaining and fussing over them is not her thing. It makes her nauseous when someone starts a conversation about children's parties. Organizing a congress or symposium, an international conference – that's delightful. But there are special people for children's entertainment. And money doesn't play a role here, to each their own.

Regyna is a good mom, she knows that. She will say "good night" and ask how their day went. For everything else, there are assistants, and they must be the best. Like Maria, for example. And before her, there were Anastasia, Ilona, Daryna, even Roman... Regyna will keep searching for the best until she finds them – that's essential for her. That's what being a mom means, not round-the-clock care, dark circles under the eyes, tangled hair, and sleepless nights. At night, Galyna Ivanivna stays with the children. During the day – Maria. And Regyna is the mom. Only that matters.

Anyone who disagrees forgets the way to her home. That's why Sviatoslav left. And she's fine with it – less arguments, less stress – she's her own master.

"Oh, you're here already? Come in..." Regyna doesn't get up to greet the boy, doesn't open her arms for a hug, just nods slightly, and surprisingly, the child understands what it means, sits beside her. "What happened, tell me."

"I don't want that man, he's scary."

"Why? You like watching cartoons about him."

"It's not about him. I like the cool Spider-Man with sticky webs, but that’s just an ordinary man, he couldn't even climb the wall when I asked him."

"Well, Nazar... Maybe he was tired or something," Regyna glances at the large antique clock on the wall.

"Spider-Man has unlimited strength, he can't get tired. He started reading a story, and then he cried! Spider-Man never cries, and his mask is real, while that man had a painted one, and it started smudging when he cried. I was scared of him. I want you to read."

"Nazar, you understand that I have an important meeting now, and I can't just drop everything and read to you. But Maria can. And she'll read to you now," Regyna gave a meaningful glance at the girl.

"But it's my birthday! And I want you to read!" the boy jumped to his feet and tapped his fashionable shoe.

Regyna laughed.

"You're quite the manipulator, it seems! Alright, Maria will get rid of that man now, and he won't scare you anymore. You'll go play outside with friends who came for you. And this evening, we'll go to a restaurant and talk about everything, okay?"

"I don't want to go to a restaurant, I want you to make pancakes like last time."

"Oh no! That's not happening, not even on your birthday! I don't like cooking, and you know that. I'll offer you this: we'll order pancakes at home, and I'll read to you in the evening, okay? But this offer is only for today."

More than entertaining children, Regyna dislikes cooking and shudders at the thought that her home might smell of food. She remembers from childhood how it smells afterward, after the food… and drinking… So – no! She and the children always eat in restaurants. Always. Once she had to showcase her cooking – when they filmed a program about her as an exemplary businesswoman and mother. It was her worst experience. It felt like someone took her outer shell and filled it with something vile and disgusting – cooking, folding clothes, hugging... Although there were more clients after that program, that was the price.

"Nazar, go to the nanny," Regyna stands up from the couch. "That man is probably gone by now, and your friends miss you. Maria?"

Maria pulls the boy by the hand, who resists, not wanting to leave, hugging his mother's knees.

Regyna looks at Maria so that her hands start shaking again.

When the nanny leaves with the boy, closing the door behind them, Regyna applies lipstick in front of the mirror, straightens her skirt, and sits down at the computer.

"Greetings, dear colleagues! I called this emergency meeting for several reasons..."

...

Regyna looks at the cheap clock. The guys will arrive soon – she needs to be friendly, smiling. It's hard for them there, and cold, so at least for this hour of dinner, let it be easier and warmer here. She glances at the tables – neat and tidy. On one, she notices a slightly crooked tablecloth and rushes to straighten it.

"Tea or coffee?" Regyna smiles. She pours all her love into this question. She asks as if a mother is meeting her tired adult son at the door, whom she hasn’t seen for months. As if a loving wife looks into his eyes, wanting to pour all the untouched warmth into that cup. Like a sister who wouldn't begrudge her brother anything but pretends they’re at odds. "Coffee?"

"Ah, no, it's too late for coffee," the soldier says tiredly.

"Then tea. Choose – we've got ten types. A restaurant-like assortment."

"Something simple, but strong," the man says cheerfully.

"Well then... I'll make you black tea with bergamot and add ginger syrup with honey – for boosting immunity. Will that be good?"

"Couldn't be better," the soldier laughs, feeling his body relax, as if someone took the backpack off his shoulders.

"Kol, come on, hurry, it's not just you here," the guys call.

Mykola knows there’s already a line behind him, but he wants to steal at least one extra second near Regyna.

The guys could make their own drinks, but nobody can do it like Regyna – those drinks are genuinely healing: strength returns, joy appears out of nowhere, fatigue vanishes. She adds something in there, only doesn't say what, the sly one. How she organized this kitchen in a tent in the middle of winter, in the middle of the war. Talent!

Mykola sighs, steps away – let the guys warm their souls too. He’ll wait for tomorrow evening…

He senses someone quietly approaching and standing behind him.

“Here’s some more sugar for the tea,” a boy says quietly and lowers his eyes.

“Thank you, young man!”

“It’s my birthday tomorrow!” the boy smiles.

“Oh, congratulations then!” Mykola smiles too…

A birthday… It sounds like from another life. Mykola used to be invited to birthdays often. He was an entertainer. After growing up in an orphanage, he promised himself he’d do everything possible to make the world have fewer sad and grieving children. That entertaining gig was so warm for him, so good…

In 2014, he went to fight. And after an injury and rehabilitation, when he was "discharged," he wanted to return to the business in 2020 because he loves children and always has.

Once, he was invited to such a beautiful house, like in the movies. All the kids in costumes, masks... A pleasant atmosphere, like a Disney cartoon. But the birthday boy – the fussiest brat the world had ever seen. Mykola had to climb the wall, weave some web. No matter how Mykola tried – it was all wrong for him: he sulked, furrowed his brows, stomped his foot. Spoiled little kid. Costumes, masks, gifts – oozing out of his ears. They'll grow up in luxury and won’t consider people as people. And what are these parents thinking, raising them like this? They didn’t even appear at the party – everything was decided by the nanny. Later, they asked Mykola to read a story... and he couldn’t hold back... There, Spider-Man saves the whole world, but he... he couldn’t even save "Scorpion" and "Grom" – not even two! Just two! He cried, unexpected for himself. And that little one yelled: "That's not Spider-Man, that's just a man, I'm scared of him. Kick him out!"

Mykola didn’t need to be chased away – he left himself. And didn’t even take the money. He has no right to scare children, can't. They still have to grow, become strong, and they'll gather fears without him. He sat without work for half a year, and then... then came his time. He never confessed to anyone, not even himself, but he was happy when the commander called on February 24... And Mykola became an entertainer again, no shame in that: he can disguise everything so well, apply makeup so the commander’s mother wouldn’t recognize him – let the bastards choke – they won't notice a thing.

Mykola takes another sip of the healing tea.

"And what's your name, birthday boy?" Mykola pulls up a chair next to the boy.

"Nazar," the boy whispers even quieter and thinks for a long time before sitting next to the soldier. "It's my mom who makes the tea."

"Really?" Mykola leans forward. "You have such a wonderful mom! And her tea is the tastiest in the world."

"She can't cook anything else," Nazar says honestly, "she doesn't like how it all smells. But she loves tea."

Mykola laughs. The boy laughs. The tea steams, the guys quietly chat.

"You're lucky to have a mom," Mykola says. "I... I don't even remember my mom..."

"Me neither," Nazar confides, and Mykola feels his back start to tense, fingers grow numb. He remains silent, barely able to breathe.

And the boy is delighted to have found someone to listen.

"Mom Regyna took me and Nina from the orphanage. She came with her friend, Aunt Yana, while we were playing – that's what Nina told me because I was too small to remember. At that time, Uncle Sviatoslav was with us, but then he went to another family. I think he just didn't want to listen to me because I cried a lot every night, Nina told me. And when the war started, he called mom and said he wanted to be with us again, that we could run away to another country together, but mom said no, we don’t want to run. And then she cried for a long time, I saw it in the evening, and she drank wine. But I don’t cry anymore, I'm already grown up, and I won't scare anyone now. Nina said that mom will never forgive him. But I forgive everyone – that means I'm good. And you're good, like Mykolai. And you have a beard, like Mykolai. And that man in the gray jacket said you can weave nets that nobody can see. And I want to see them. My favorite Spider-Man can weave webs just like you weave nets. And mom and Nina promised that they’ll make me pancakes in the evening – I love them the most, I simply adore them. And I will ask mom to invite you to my birthday. Will you come?

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