Antonivka

Halyna Hakutna

She remembers telling her late husband, Vasyl, while setting the lunch table under the little roof of their summer kitchen for him and his friend, "And why are you building such a big bunker, as if it's the end of the world or a war is about to happen?" Who could have known back then that the only things left in their yard would be that cellar, Hans's doghouse, and the wooden summer kitchen that miraculously survived, along with a rabbit hutch in the far corner? Four chickens were huddling there now, which she had barely managed to find in the garden among last year's dry brush, where they had panicked and hidden after the first, most terrifying shelling. The house, garage, barn—all had turned into a pile of broken bricks and debris, from which the skeletons of furniture and remnants of household possessions jutted out.

Yuhina took a blanket and went to the garden. It used to be Vasyl’s domain. As soon as the snow melted, he would vanish there until dark. In the fall, he would share baskets of apples, plums, and pears with relatives and neighbors because what would the two of them do with so much? They hadn't had children.

At least that's what she used to say—they did have a son, Andriyko, gentle and silent like his father. In the summer after seventh grade, he went swimming with the boys in the pond and drowned.

The dreadful grief that befell the family seemed to chip away at their marital life, and through that chink, the joy of former closeness slowly dripped away. Already reticent, her husband became even more withdrawn, and Yuhina felt like he held himself responsible for what had happened (for it was him who had let the son go to the pond with the street kids that July morning), even though she never thought that and never uttered a word about it. While still not old, Vasyl fell ill with a terrible disease that people in the village didn't even dare name aloud for fear of tempting fate (they would say he died of "that misfortune"), and she believed that lifelong black sorrow was the reason...

When Vasyl was buried next to Andriyko, Yuhina remained alone in the big house. Farm work somewhat dulled her grief, and neighbors would visit almost daily. The street kids would also frequent the yard to play with her gentle dog or enjoy the white cherries and mulberries. Moreover, they would bring her dogs and cats for care, and she did not refuse anyone, tending to them as she had worked as a veterinarian on the farm until her old age.

But the garden... Without Vasyl, it somehow immediately fell into disrepair, growing thin and reaching toward the sky, as if hoping to find its owner there. And now it stood ravaged and wounded, some of the trees slashed as if by a knife by shells.

Yuhina gathered the branches fractured by shells and broke up some dried wormwood to start a fire. How fortunate that they hadn't dismantled the old stove in the summer kitchen! That stove, though it grumbled and spat out smoke, refusing to take moist wood into its belly, eventually calmed down a bit, the tongues of flame licking the round burners, the chimney humming.

She was about to throw the blanket over her shoulder when suddenly, the dog in the yard started barking hysterically; then, a burst of gunfire cut through the air, short and loud, followed by a plaintive whine... Her heart fluttered wildly in her chest. Dropping the blanket, the old woman jogged into the yard, nearly losing her worn slippers.

They were standing by Hans's doghouse, two of them. Even if they weren't in foreign uniforms, she would have recognized them as enemies instantly—Asiatic cheekbones, the dark pupils barely visible in the narrow slits of wide-set eyes, a flat nose, bow-legged, squat. Descendants of nomadic horde warriors, Buryats.

"Babushka, are there strangers here?"

"What strangers when I'm the only one here?" Yuhina felt they didn't understand her, and in a gesture encompassing what remained of her yard, she repeated, "There's no one, no one! Just me..."

"And what's there?" one of the invaders gestured with his gun at the cellar door.

"I live down there," she said, frantically trying to find the right words in their language, "You see, my house, my dom, I mean, got bombed, so I live there..."

"And there's definitely nobody else there? What if we check?"

"What is there to check? Check, go ahead. There's potatoes, cabbage, my bed, and that's all..."

"And you sure there ain't any canned meat there, babushka? If we search?"

"What canned meat..."

But one of the soldiers was already heading to the cellar... It felt as if her heart, which was pounding in her chest, had suddenly stopped and dropped somewhere deep inside. "What will happen, what..."

But then, a thought flashed through Yuhina's mind, and she clung to it like someone falling into an abyss clutching a weak twig on a rock. Suddenly, she dashed to the end of the yard, glanced back at the invaders, and waved them over enticingly, "Come, guys, over here, idyom, I say, rebyata, after me..."

She felt as if she had suddenly split into two: one unreal version addressing these murderers as "rebyata," while another looked at the first from the sidelines, whispering, "Lord, help me, give me strength, Lord..."

The horde soldiers, cautiously and lowering their gun barrels, slowly followed her around the corner of the kitchen.

"Here, take them, rebyata, take them, I don't mind..."

At first, they froze, then, as if on command, they both burst into shrill laughter, reminiscent of the croaking of frogs:

"You're something else, babushka..."

One of them slightly opened the cage door, began feeling around for the chickens who'd gathered in a corner in fright. Yuhina hurried over to the basket with old sacks near the wall, hastily handing one to the invader who was already holding two chickens by the legs, flapping helplessly in his hands.

Within a minute, the booty was in the sack. The strangers, chuckling and chatting among themselves, headed for the street. One of them looked back, baring his teeth: "Good job, mother, the motherland won't forget you, we need more like you here..."

Yuhina stood transfixed, watching them go until their foul-mouthed speech faded away. With unsteady legs, she trudged to the doghouse, knelt, peered inside, her body going cold with suspicion, reached her hand into the darkness and encountered the sticky bloodied body of her Hans. Only then did the old woman start crying silently, pressing her hands to her chest, bowing her head in her old scarf; if anyone had seen her then, kneeling by the house, they might have thought she was praying.

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"Aunt Zhen, what's wrong?" In the flickering light of the oil lamp she had made when she had to move into the cellar, his pale, beard-stubbled face looked much older than it was.

She had found this young man in her garden, sitting with his back against a fence post. That morning, the frigid air still echoed with the loud aftermath of a nearby battle rolling south; the village was steeped in the smell of burning and gunpowder. His military pants' right leg was soaked with blood and caked stiff. A lock of blond hair sticking out from under his helmet clung to his forehead. He looked very young to her then. He didn't say anything, just looked up at her silently with eyes darkened by pain. He held his rifle in his dirty hands against his chest, and Yuhina thought involuntarily, "as if cradling a girl."

She still couldn't understand how she managed to drag the young man to the cellar, down the stairs, and onto the bed.

"Hang in there, son, hang in there, I'm coming..."

Yuhina climbed upstairs, rushed to the kitchen. Standing on a stool, she quickly pulled down her fraying doctor's bag from the worm-eaten cupboard, hurriedly looked inside. "Yes, yes!" - a few vials of painkillers, some antibiotics, an old syringe in a metal box...

And only then, when she cut the leg of his pants and took off the tourniquet to treat the wound, did she finally ask:

"What's your name, son?"

"Sasha... Oleksandr..."

"So, Sasha it is..."

He slept nearly the entire day, while Yuhina bustled up and down the stairs, setting up their cramped dark quarters for the two of them. She dragged in a cot for herself, stuffed a sack with hay, placed it near the door where it was drafty since there was no other space available.

In the evening, he developed a fever, and by morning a wrenching dry cough was tearing at his chest...

He barely touched the soup, only ate one potato that she peeled for him: "Thank you, Aunt Zhen, I just can't swallow anything..." And how could she treat him when all that was left in the cellar was potatoes, jars of pickled cucumbers, and half a barrel of sour cabbage? He could use some chicken broth, but... (She hadn't told Sasha about the Buryats or Hans, fabricating a story that occupiers had fired blindly down the street, aiming at the air to intimidate.)

While scooping some sour cabbage, Yuhina also pulled out ten soaked Antonovka apples. Her dear Andriyko loved these. Whenever she used to chop up the big creaky heads of cabbage in the fall, he would always ask, "Mama, put more apples in," and then he couldn't wait until they were ready. Indeed, when finally brought up from the cellar, they filled the whole house with a fine, sweet, and somehow festive aroma.

She offered Sasha two large apples with yellow almost transparent skin: "Try them..." When returning to the cellar after stoking the stove, the boy unexpectedly asked: "Aunt Zhen, may I have some more, please, if there are any left..."

She feels it was that very day he began regaining his strength. He gingerly rose up, taking a dozen steps leaning on a makeshift crutch carved from a pear branch that Vasyl had whittled for fun once.

She hadn't confided the secret of her "tenant" to anyone. Not out of distrust, but...

In the evening, pulling up a stool, the old woman would sit by Sasha’s bedside and talk to him, sharing stories of her own childhood, about Vasyl and Andriyko. Sasha listened, sometimes asking questions, occasionally laughing. He spoke little about himself, but Yuhina already knew he had a mother in a big city who had raised him on her own and who, in order not to drown in misery, probably clung to the hope bound in those words "missing," for they provided any glimmer of hope.

The lamp flickered, shadows playing in the dark corners, a mouse rustled in a nook, the old garden creaked with branches, disturbed by the March wind. And there was something almost biblical in this scene: a fair-haired young man draped in a coat, an elderly woman beside him, and a small cellar nook protecting these two amid the hell of the Great War.

They parted in a month (when the pear trees in the garden were in full white bloom) by the slanting half of the gate. From the camouflaged car, Sasha’s comrades cheerfully shouted, urging him on, bearded men in helmets.

He hugged the old woman, touched his lips to her wet cheek, speaking kindly, joyfully and a bit awkwardly: "Take care... I’ll come visit again, I promise! Just make sure you soak some Antonovkas for us, mam Zhen..."