Mia

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"Watch out, there's Mia," the writer pointed under the table.

I nodded and moved my feet. Alla and I had agreed to meet at one of Wroclaw's retro cafes. Alla had been writing books and living in the city for ten years. I had arrived in March of '22, spent two years working anywhere I could, and had just landed my dream job at a local newspaper. So, the interview with the writer seemed like an interesting task.

"Mia is a Pomeranian, black with tan markings," Alla explained. "Mons was red," she murmured. "Mia's a very obedient girl, so she won't bother us."

"Uh-huh," I said as I turned on the voice recorder and got my notes ready. "Tell me, how did you start writing?"

Our conversation flowed leisurely as I sipped fruit tea and nibbled on meringue. Unbelievable! It was so much better than making hotel beds!

A crumb of meringue fell on my jeans.

"Mia will probably be delighted," I smiled.

"Oh no, she's not allowed that," Alla replied sternly. "Here, take this. These are her treats; you can give her one."

A dog treat slipped from my hand and rolled under the table.

"That's better," Alla smiled. "Don't worry; she'll find it. Lately, Mia has been helping me a lot with my writing. My muse, so to speak..."

We talked about creative plans and changes in readers' preferences after February 24th. Then Alla headed to the bathroom, and I reviewed my notes. Had I missed an important question?

"Excuse me, are you Vika?" a tall man approached the table. "Alla mentioned you. She's my wife. While she's away, I wanted to tell you something... A few days ago, we lost our dog, Mons. To Alla, he was like a child. It happened so unexpectedly... So, please, don't be surprised if she acts a bit, umm... unusual. Imaginary friends, that sort of thing... A writer's imagination mixed with trauma..."

I only blinked in confusion. Imaginary friends? Seriously? The man fell silent and smiled apologetically. Alla was approaching us.

"Darling, we've just finished! Can we go home now?"

"Of course!"

Alla thanked me for the conversation, and then the man handed her coat, and they walked to the exit, arm in arm. I rubbed my eyes: a leash hung empty behind Alla. Brrr, I wasn't imagining it, was I? I was sure I had seen Mia under the table during our conversation, exactly as Alla described her. I must need more sleep. I checked that the voice recorder had captured our conversation, gathered my things, and left the café. Outside, a cool spring evening greeted me.

At home, I compiled a list of weekend events worth attending, sent it to my editor, and then sat down to transcribe the recording. How hard it turned out to be! It felt like sentences were running away, and words were getting lost. I couldn't shake the image of that leash from my mind. Can you trust a person with an imaginary dog? Is any part of what she says even a little bit true?

I sat before my laptop late into the night; my student neighbors had long since fallen asleep. Finally, I closed the interview file and yawned. I'll finish tomorrow, with a clear head.

But there was no clear head in the morning. Instead, there was news of shelling in my city. Here, a thousand kilometers away, I felt it so acutely! My sweaty fingers scrolled through the news: air raids, explosions...

Eventually, I returned to work. I kept reworking the interview, but I didn't like the result. With such a text, they'd soon show me the door! Neither language skills nor a philological education would save me. Could being a chambermaid really not be such a bad option? At least there were clear work shifts, unlike here where I could sit over the text 24/7 and come up with nothing!

Finally, I gave up. Made some coffee and opened Facebook. A photo with the caption "A year ago, an enemy missile took you from us. Remembering." stared back at me—Tanya, my student.

I remembered rushing to her for French tutoring sessions in the evenings. That girl would show me her collection of French comics, and we'd read and laugh together. She was 12 then, and she dreamed of studying in Paris. Her dream shattered, just like thousands of Ukrainian dreams.

Tears streamed down my face. How many more of our people need to die? I felt the apartment was too cramped, lacking air. I grabbed my backpack with the laptop and dashed out.

Thoughts and memories of Tanya wouldn't leave me. I didn't believe it a year ago, nor do I believe it now; some crazy conviction inside me insisted that Tanya was alive. Meanwhile, my footsteps carried me back to the café where I had spoken with Alla yesterday.

I peeked inside and immediately saw her at a table. The girl looked exactly like Tanya in the photo. But for some reason, a different name slipped from my lips:

"Mia?"

The girl nodded and smiled.

"But why Mia?"

"Think about it, you're the language expert," her voice reminded me of Tanya's as well.

"Mia-Moi-My... So you're mine..."

The word "hallucination" hung on my tongue.

"Yes, I'm your guide," Mia nodded. "I can be what you need me to be."

I finally sat down at the table with her.

"Can I ask what you're really like?"

"Oh," Mia suddenly became a bit... translucent. "I lived in this city many years ago. I loved the parks and the river and was so frightened by the posters with twisted symbols..."

"Swastika," I whispered.

"Yes. Hatred grew in the city, it just hung in the air... Hatred took my parents. Then I was hidden by their friends, then despair replaced the hatred... And then my new family refused to leave, and our house was simply demolished with all of us inside..."

"What a horror!" I shuddered.

"Now I'm an angel of Wroclaw. I flew over the river and live in the café. Everything here reminds me of my childhood: the gramophone, the china... I help wounded souls who reach out to me."

"So, your real story... Is it in the archives?"

"Unlikely that my name is there. Just a mention of how the Reich, in despair, tried to build a new airfield at Grunwald. Twenty thousand people died then... But perhaps we should talk about you. After all, you came to me with a request?"

"Oh yes, I didn't know how to present the interview. Imaginary friends just didn't fit in my head! But now I know you exist. Will you help me?"

Mia-Tanya agreed. I spoke phrases aloud, and she nodded, and the puzzle finally began to take shape. I realized she wasn't the friend I once knew, yet her presence brought comfort. I managed to weave Mia into the text of our conversation with the writer, but I made her invisible. I wrote about pain and healing, about invisible support and the power of stories that have helped throughout the ages, no matter how hard times were. And they have to help us now.