\*\*The Apple Leaf\*\*

\*\*Olena Makarchuk\*\*

Galyna notices her son's shrunken body on the sofa the moment she steps over the threshold of their home – the single room by the hallway is instantly scanned by her eyes.

— Honey, what happened?

She lets the shopping bag fall to the floor. A tin of canned corn rolls out and heads toward the entrance door. It seems like Galyna’s heart is rolling right behind that can. Andriy slightly shrugs his shoulders, and this somewhat calms her: who knows what she had already imagined... She kneels beside her son, wrapping an arm around his shoulders:

— What’s wrong?

— Nothing, — his voice is hollow and troubled.

Had Andriy been crying? Is that why he turned his face to the back of the sofa so his mother wouldn't notice his tears? On the floor lies a crumpled Ukrainian language notebook. Galyna picks it up and opens it.

— Give it back! — Andriy shouts, snatching it from her hands and hurriedly stuffing it into his backpack. But Galyna manages to catch a glimpse of the title of his essay, "The Apple Leaf," and the grade – four points. Four? On a twelve-point scale? A wave of indignation washes over Galyna: she knows what the essay is about; Andriy read it aloud yesterday. "Calm down, don’t show how upset you are!" she commands herself. She’ll visit the school tomorrow.

There’s dinner on the table, and she calls her son. He eats, his head bowed low, mechanically chewing his favorite cabbage dumplings. Galyna’s indignation flares up again, and she turns her back on her son so he won’t notice. Tomorrow, everything will be sorted tomorrow.

After Andriy falls asleep, she carefully retrieves the notebook. Perhaps she misunderstood something when she heard it? Maybe it’s full of mistakes?

"The Apple Leaf

Actually, when everything began, I wasn’t a leaf yet. Rather, I was sleeping soundly, curled and tucked within a bud. That's what Mother Apple Tree told me: how an horde came during the winter, and the first shell shorn off half the tree. The apple tree stood split in two, and only because people had more pressing concerns was it spared from total destruction.

The horde stayed in the village, occupied the houses, and by the time I sprouted from the bud in spring, sticky and brazenly green — they were still here. They were surprised that the half-destroyed apple tree had turned green, so they set a target on it, fired a few shots. Hot bullets lodged in the tree’s trunk, and then they forgot it, left it alone.

I grew, darkened, matured, covered with the dust from their armored vehicles and tanks rushing back and forth. Autumn came. A dozen scrawny and bruised apples had long since fallen, I turned yellow, faded, lost my resilience. Then a battle broke out. One of those who came to drive the invaders from the village fell near Mother Apple Tree. He had a small hole in his chest, like the tree's trunk, so I tore myself away to cover it, to stop the bleeding. I fell and finally settled right over that hole. But I didn’t stop the blood, just turned from yellow to red. The wind sighed and carried me further down the street..."

Galyna cries openly now; there are no mistakes, yet the grade is indeed four points. If translated into the five-point system she learned in school, it’s equivalent to a nearly failing grade. But why so low?!

The next morning, before work (luckily, her store opens at ten, so she has time), Galyna approaches the Ukrainian language teacher. Olena Ivanivna is new to their school, having come from another city. She looks displeased as Galyna calls out to her, demonstratively glancing at her small wristwatch.

— Excuse me, Olena Ivanivna, I’d like to know why Andriy received such a low grade for his essay.

— Because he lied.

— I beg your pardon?

— I understand your desire to help your son, but you shouldn’t do everything for him.

The teacher calmly meets Galyna's gaze. She leans in so close that Galyna can see her lipstick slightly smudged in the right corner of her mouth. And Olena Ivanivna appears to be Galyna's age, though from afar she seemed almost like a recent graduate from the teacher's college.

— But Andriy wrote it himself!

— Do you think I cannot distinguish an eleven-year-old's work from that of an adult? — her light-gray, almost translucent eyes bore into Galyna, hypnotizing her. But she insists,

— Andriy wrote it himself. It’s an essay about his father who died in the war.

— Are you going to play the sympathy card with me? Try to justify deceit with the child’s grief for his father? Don’t manipulate! And I have a class to teach!

Olena Ivanivna yanks the door handle and slams the door shut almost in Galyna’s face. She presses herself against the corridor wall, taking a few seconds to compose herself. An elderly janitor tugs at Galyna’s sleeve:

— What’s wrong, dear? Do you need a sip of water?

She approaches with a plastic cup – there’s a large cooler right here in the school corridor.

— Why is she like that?

— Oh, dear, life isn't always fair!

And what then? Is that what she’ll tell her son? "I’m sorry, Andriiko, life isn’t fair, and I can’t protect you"? This thought haunts her all day. Transfer him to another school? But who can guarantee there won’t be another Olena Ivanivna there? Or even several of them?

In the evening, she returns home and from the smell, it’s clear that her son has fried eggs. She eats with pleasure, listens to his school stories, and waits to hear what he’ll say about the Ukrainian language teacher.

— Mom, why did you go to see Olena Ivanivna?

Galyna’s fork freezes halfway to her mouth.

— Did she scold you because of that?

— Oh, her scolding is like rolling downhill, — Andriy says. Galyna recalls this was her late husband’s favorite saying, and her son has picked it up. She’s almost ready to cry when suddenly...

— When Olena Ivanivna yells, she looks like Goose Manya, remember? The one Granny had?

Galyna bursts into laughter, surprising even herself.

— We’ll get through this, son.

— Yes. I walked home through the park. Look at this beautiful apple leaf: fiery yellow, almost red. I’m going to press it, alright?