Magdalynka

by Olha Derkachova

The sun's rays gently lay on the tiny violin as Magdalynka carefully traces her fingers over it, trying to remove them; she has her own strings, and she doesn’t need foreign ones, even if they are made of sunlight. Because if she takes them, what will God play on? The little violinist, pressing her violin against her chest, makes her way to him, and it's already warm enough that she can go barefoot. She knows the path through the thickets well – she will not lose her way. There is the God's glade. Everyone calls it that, not only Magdalynka, because in the middle of it stands a stone cross with Jesus crucified upon it. Neither time nor weather has power over it. They say there used to be a church here, but the people abandoned it. Then pilgrims began to visit because isn’t it a miracle: it's been here for centuries, yet not a single crack! The stern cross and the kind God upon it. Not merely kind: calm and smiling, as if he does not feel pain. Magdalynka often asked her father why this is so since nails in one’s palms are painful, being on a cross is unbearable, yet he neither screams nor cries. Her father would answer that maybe it’s because Jesus accepted what was destined for him, and when one accepts, one immediately finds peace, and when one knows that their death is a salvation for all humanity, then isn’t it a reason to smile even through terrible pain and suffering.

"Did he die for me?" Magdalynka questions in awe.

"For you, for me, for mom, and for grandpa and grandma," her father replies.

"For my music teacher too?" she persists.

"For him too," her father laughs, pulling his daughter close.

"And for that little boy who visited my godmother and tried to break my violin?"

"For him too," her father chuckles, hugging her closer.

On God's glade, clouds never linger. But the pilgrims desired greater miracles and healings than a smiling God on a cross, so they swiftly forgot the way here. This happened before Magdalynka was born. And they say it was one of her distant ancestors who carved the cross.

Magdalynka doesn’t require miracles. It's enough for her to stand barefoot in the grass, look up, and share a silent conversation with God. It’s fortunate that almost no one comes here, so she can play for God without feeling shy, as she is immensely shy around people. Despite how much her music teacher tried to persuade her or how often her father assured her that there was nothing to fear, that it was only a matter of perception, like taking the first steps into water after the cold; terrifying because during the first seconds it's so biting, but make a few more steps, and you no longer feel the fear or the cold. But the girl couldn’t so much as move on stage... Here, it’s different. She smiles at God, stands at his feet, and begins to play. And he looks down at her, listens, and smiles.

She sighs and remembers her promise to her father, that when he returns from the war, she’ll find the courage to go on stage and play. For him, for her mother, for her grandparents, for her music teacher, for her godmother, and even for that little boy who nearly broke her violin.

In the evenings, she asks her mother how it will all be at that concert, what kind of dress she will have, what to do if she suddenly stumbles, and what if rockets fly in the sky again, as happened before. Her mother soothes her, saying that’s why her father went to war, to ensure there would be no more rockets, assuring her that Magdalynka will have the best dress, as confirmed by her grandmother who’s sewing it, that indeed it’ll be the best and Magdalynka will be the most beautiful, and her grandfather assures that nothing terrible will happen even if she slips because everyone has the right to make mistakes, and there will be more concerts later, and every time Magdalynka will get better. And who knows, perhaps she’ll become the soloist of the largest symphony orchestra. Magdalynka drinks warm evening milk and imagines herself stepping onto a huge stage and the audience filled with her father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, music teacher, godmother, and even that little boy who then… She imagines and nearly spills her milk because it’s so joyful yet frightening to think of such things. She dreams warm dreams where music pours across the sky like warm milk, dreams without war, where her mother isn't crying or whispering anxiously with grandma…

On God’s glade, it’s silent... Magdalynka brings a bouquet of flowers, places them at the feet of the cross, and gently sits down beside it... Today she is without her violin and has slipped away without permission, but no one noticed. They remain in silence. She listens to the wind. But what does God listen to? There is no one to ask… She presses against the warm cross...

“Magdalynka, it’s time, let’s go...” Grandpa gently takes her by the hand and helps her stand.

The girl doesn’t ask why it’s time. Or who said where to find her... After all, he is her father's father… She walks beside him silently... For a moment she glances back at the smiling God and turns away… It’s time for them now...

She stands and gazes at the coffin. She was told that her father is in there… But they did not let her open it, to hug or kiss him. How could that be? Stern men raise the coffin and carry it out into the sun. Magdalynka remembers how her father used to lift her up into that same sun. Was it different then? She laughed and asked him to lift her higher so God could have a better look at her.

“He sees you,” her father smiled, pressing her to his chest.

“Always?”

“Always.”

“Even when I sleep?”

“Even then…”

No more... He won't be there anymore... Who will now lift her so high...

“Wait!” she cries out to the men.

She takes out her violin. The first timid movement. Then with more confidence. More. And more. Her hands tremble. Someone unseen steadies her violin. Music... Not the one her father taught her to play once, she’s grown now! It’s different. The kind she wove with the wind and her mother's tears, while they waited for her father. She’s no longer afraid... She’s no longer afraid of anything. For she plays for her father! She ends the melody at the most unexpected moment, as the war ended their happy life…

And somewhere deep within the thickets, in the glade that’s always sunny, God weeps...