Photo of a Perfect Life

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"Grandma, why are we going to church to pray for grandpa if you don't believe in God?" A girl around seventeen fidgets with the zipper of her faded backpack, trying to divert her thoughts to something simple and mundane. The small dark circles under her eyes reveal that Morpheus did not visit her last night.

"Ira, what if God does exist?"

"Grandma, what are you saying? You're a physics professor. You've got 'The Atheist's Handbook' in a prominent place at home," her granddaughter notes with a touch of irony.

"Why do you keep pestering me about that book? So I put it under some flowerpots, so what? Listen, my little cuckoo, I can’t control the outcome of the surgery or how long anyone will live, but I can light a candle for their health."

"So, it's like, not for grandpa, but for yourself? Fine, let's go."

Ira takes her grandmother Valentina by the arm and leads her towards the old chapel on the premises of the cancer hospital. Both walk with a composed, confident step, holding their backs straight. They quicken their pace as if the outcome of grandpa's fate directly depends on the speed at which they reach God's temple.

Meanwhile, Tatyana arrives at the hospital. She sits in her car for a moment, mechanically crumpling a piece of paper in her hands, focused on the path of a fly moving across the window. Then she tightly clenches her fists and finds herself outside in two seconds. She strides confidently toward the administrative building, her back straight, mentally rehearsing the upcoming conversation with the chief physician, where she plans to provide specific instructions on how her father should be operated on and what the result ought to be. A family trait of academia.

"Tanya, we're here," her mother's voice stops her midway. Spotting Valentina and Ira emerging from the chapel, Tanya is quite surprised: "Maybe they were just admiring it as an architectural structure to distract themselves."

Within a few minutes, all three are seated on a narrow, worn-out bench. Initially, far apart from one another as if leaving space for someone else. A space for worry.

"Are you going to see the chief doctor?" Valentina turns to avoid seeing her daughter's face.

"I don't know," Tanya's voice trembles unusually, "Mom, if the surgery is successful, how much longer do people live after it?"

"Tanya, yesterday our neighbor was informed that her son died at the front within a second, and half a year ago, your classmate Hania died from COVID. Tanya, how long do people live?" Valentina says, almost in tears.

The wind whirls sharply between the women. Ira snuggles closer to her grandmother. Tanya moves closer and opens her phone to the photo gallery. There’s the whole family by the river, there’s grandpa with his students at a lecture, there’s the festive table in the garden at Easter.

The women gaze at the screen, as if clinging to events and moments that now seem perfect. Oddly enough, they can’t recall that grandpa couldn't stand the students and they him, that everyone had a fallout at the river over some insignificant issue, or that grandpa always scowled at their Easter celebrations and stubbornly refused to greet anyone. All of this fades now. The moments in the photos are perfect. The years lived together seem perfect. As if there were no arguments with grandpa over a late dinner, for in his strict opinion, he was never involved in that process. As if there weren’t Tanya's resentments about her father always praising other people's children and using them as examples. As if Valentina's children and grandchildren were never just her problems. As if there were no frequent instances of grandpa returning tipsy because he and his colleagues stayed late at the faculty. As if only what’s in the photos exists. It’s not about forgiveness, but about the strange human tendency to idealize what you’re on the verge of losing.

"The surgery was successful," the nurse’s voice brings them back to reality, "You’ll be able to visit him soon."

The girl in the angel-colored gown indifferently walks back to the building.

The women remain seated motionless, embraced. Tanya continues scrolling through the photos of their perfect life. Ira strokes a small icon in her pocket.