The Translator's Hands

My mother's hands are dying in English.

In Bulgarian, they are *umirashti*—not dying but "in the process of becoming death," a distinction that exists only in languages that understand dying as labor, not event. In my Chicago hospital room, I watch her fingers curl inward like question marks written in a script no one here can read.

"Can you tell them?" she whispers in Bulgarian, the words rough wool against my palms. "About the pain?"

But which pain? The sharp glass edges of her cancer diagnosis, spoken in English by the oncologist three weeks ago? Or the older ache that began the morning we crossed the Austrian border, when she played Chopin's Nocturne No. 2 on an imaginary piano while the guards searched our suitcases, her fingers moving across invisible keys, the music existing only in the space between her hands?

The nurse enters. Kind eyes, tired smile. "How are we feeling today, Mrs. Kostova?"

I begin to translate, but my mother interrupts: "I am..." She searches for words in her fractured English, then gives up, speaking to me in Bulgarian: "Tell her I'm becoming transparent. That I can see through my hands to the sheets."

In English, transparency is optical. In Bulgarian, *prozrachnost* carries the weight of prophecy—to be transparent is to be inhabited by light. I tell the nurse: "She's experiencing some disorientation."

The nurse nods, adjusts the morphine drip. My mother's eyes follow her movements with the intensity of someone memorizing a musical score. When we're alone again, she says, "You've always been a terrible translator."

This is true. At seven, I wrote letters to my imprisoned father, trying to translate my days into something he could hold in his cell. But how to translate the sound of mother's silence at dinner? The way sparrows fell quiet when the State Security cars passed? I invented a private alphabet, symbols that meant "loneliness-shaped-like-an-empty-chair" and "fear-that-tastes-of-iron."

"Elara," my mother says now, and I lean close. Her breath carries the scent of approaching snow, though it's July. "When I die—"

"*Nedey*—" Don't.

"Listen. When I die, it will be in Bulgarian. My last words. Promise you won't translate them."

I want to promise, but I know better. In the end, someone always demands translation. The death certificate will require English. The obituary will need to explain her life in words that flatten *sudba* into "fate," as if destiny could exist without its Bulgarian weight of inevitability braided with choice.

Her fingers move again—Chopin's Nocturne. I recognize the passage: the moment where the left hand carries the melody while the right hand dissolves into ornament. She taught me this when I was nine, in our first Chicago apartment, on a piano borrowed from the church basement. "The secret," she said then, "is to let each hand forget the other exists."

Now I place my hands over hers, feeling the phantom keys beneath our interlaced fingers. We play together, this music that exists in no language, that needs no translation. Her hands are warm and solid, dying in every language simultaneously, living in the space between.

When the nurse returns, she finds us like this—four hands moving over invisible keys, playing silence. She watches for a moment, then quietly adjusts the IV line and leaves.

My mother closes her eyes. "Tell me," she says in Bulgarian, then switches to English, "what does the music look like?"

I understand. This is her final lesson in translation.

"It looks," I say slowly, feeling for the texture of each word, "like starlings. Dark against evening. The moment before they change direction."

"*Da*," she whispers. Yes. But also: I give this to you. Also: It is enough.

Her hands still beneath mine. The nocturne continues in the space where Bulgarian meets English, where music begins and language ends. In the silence that follows, I hear it clearly—the untranslatable truth that exists only in the pause between one heartbeat and the next, in the breath between languages, in the rest between notes.

Outside, the Chicago evening gathers itself into night. Somewhere, starlings are turning in unison, their movements writing something urgent across the dimming sky—a message in no language, in every language, in the language that only the children of exile can read.

Three days later, she wakes only once. The hospital room has become a borderland—neither here nor there, neither Bulgarian nor American. My mother opens her eyes and sees me writing in my notebook, the one with rough paper for Bulgarian thoughts.

"Still translating," she says in English, smiling.

"Always," I answer in Bulgarian.

She reaches for my hand. Her touch carries the temperature of old photographs, of letters that crossed impossible distances. She speaks then, seven words in Bulgarian that I will never translate, not for the death certificate, not for the nurse who asks, not for anyone.

But I will tell you this: they sounded like Chopin's Nocturne, that impossible moment when both hands realize they are the same body. They felt like cool marble under bare feet. They tasted of bread and salt, the traditional welcome that becomes, in the end, a farewell.

After she dies—no, after she *finishes becoming death*—I sit with my notebook, trying to write what cannot be written. The nurse brings me coffee, touches my shoulder gently. "What did she say?" she asks. "At the end?"

I look at my hands, my mother's hands, my translator's hands that have carried words across borders, through time, between hearts. They are empty now, curled like question marks.

"She said goodbye," I tell the nurse. This is both a lie and the deepest truth.

That night, I dream in the language my mother and I invented between us—not Bulgarian, not English, but the third language that exists only in the space between them. In the dream, she is playing Chopin on a real piano, in a room with no walls, and I understand that this is what she meant: some translations happen not through words but through their absence, not through music but through the silence that shapes it.

When I wake, my hands are moving over invisible keys, playing a nocturne that needs no translation, that exists complete unto itself, that carries my mother's last words forward into

every language and none—a message written in the grammar of grief, punctuated by love, spoken in the only tongue that matters: the one that remembers.