

On Sunday Morning

Ievheniia Kononenko

“Shut the door after me!” her mother-in-law shook her by the shoulder, as always. No! She wouldn’t wake her precious son.

“Just a minute,” she answered groggily. As mother-in-law shuffled to the exit she crawled over the “precious” one, put on a robe, and locked the door. She did not return to the warm bed, but sat down in the kitchen, pulling the door closed behind her. The hour hand has not yet dragged itself to seven. There are no signs of morning outside. Empty streetcars crawl along sluggishly. Sweet nocturnal tears slowly flow from her eyes down her cheeks. The precious husband and son will sleep till ten. Then the mother-in-law will return from the markets. She has a couple of hours of her own.

Every Sunday the mother-in-law makes the rounds of the big Kyiv markets. From Lukianivskyi she goes to Zhytnyi, then to Besarabskyi, then if she still has time and money, she’ll go to Volodymyrskyi. It’s a religious ritual. She will talk about Sunday’s marketing till Wednesday. Then she’ll start imagining where she’ll go next Sunday. She never takes the house key, as if to emphasize for the umpteenth time that she is not registered to live here. Since she is not the mistress of the house, why would she carry the key? Let the mistress of the house close the door behind her.

Ever since her parents and younger brother had moved to a new apartment, leaving this streetcar-shaped apartment to their daughter and her family, her mother-in-law lives with them almost all the time.

“At least she’ll speak Ukrainian to the little one,” the precious one had said, though it was a stretch to call the language she spoke Ukrainian. But she fetched the kid home from kindergarten sometimes, and every so often she would cook dinner. And she couldn’t stand the idea of going back to her provincial hometown, where her wild, peasant son-in-law reigned supreme.

“Oh, dear, the world has gone mad! The earth is rotating in reverse!” the old woman complained to her busybody old neighbors in the courtyard, and they nodded empathetically.

“Did you ever see anything like it? A mother-in-law living as a tenant in her daughter-in-law’s house! How can a household survive this way? I tell her: ‘How can you peel off so much of the potatoes? Did you plant them? Did you dig them up? Did you bend over them with your backside in the air?’ And you know what she says? She says: ‘Now there’s radiation, even on TV they advise people to cut thicker peels off potatoes.’ That’s

what she says! What kind of respect for your elders is that?!"

Actually, her mother-in-law was quite content. Only a trivial detail stood between her and complete fulfillment—a residence permit, that little stamp establishing her as a legal resident of the apartment and the city.

"I could get a job at the Institute, as an orderly. Work a whole day, then three days off. The extra cash wouldn't hurt. But I can't get the job without—"

But the daughter-in-law refused to grasp this "without." There was no need for an elderly woman to find work—they weren't starving. And, by the way, how was her own house back in the provincial capital? Wasn't it high time she visited her daughter and son-in-law there? Mother-in-law would shut up and drop the subject for a long time. Otherwise she might find herself going back to her small town and living with her peasant son-in-law again. That would mean Sundays not at the Sinnyi or Lukianivskyi market, but at the local "Harvest" bazaar—true, she'd know every single soul there, but the produce wasn't quite as good and the atmosphere certainly wasn't the same.

So nothing changed. Streetcars kept rumbling down the street and the streetcar-shaped apartment kept shuddering from the noise. The rare holiday was even worse than the boring gray weekdays. On Sunday mornings the mother-in-law set off on her market ritual, the precious one slept in a stupor, and she sat in the lonely kitchen, listening to the streetcar sounds.

Pulling the doorknob to close the kitchen door completely, she flipped on the tape-recorder. The songs of her youth clattered hoarsely from the tape. That was the so-called pre-Petrine era—the "precious" one's name was Peter. The music dispelled what remained of her lethargy. Streetcars passed more frequently outside. She heard the precious one roll over in bed. The last thing she needed was for him to wake up, still tired and angry. It had happened before. She turned off the tape-recorder. Glancing at the door she got down on her knees and pulled out a notebook that lay behind the jars of last-year's jam in the cabinet. She flipped the pages—it was her own writing. Some had as few as two or three lines, others only one... These torrents on the window in the cold autumn mist...

"My God, what nonsense," she whispered, rolling her eyes. A couple of years ago, when she was pregnant and came home out of an unexpected, invigorating fresh rain, she sat down at the table and wrote:

Under rain, scents of intoxication
Under rain, unsettling meditation...

Her precious husband had crumpled the paper and shoved it into her mouth. Later, of course, he had begged her forgiveness and for three days he wouldn't let her put on her own shoes. All the same, after that incident, whenever images whirled in her mind like tropical butterflies, and the faint

rustle of a cosmic wind echoed in her ears, the taste of ball-point ink appeared on her tongue. This morning the cosmic wind was silent. Somewhere, of course, it was wailing or laughing, but her soul wasn't receiving the signals. One evening its signals had been so intense that she couldn't resist jotting them down on a sheet beside the telephone. The precious one had looked over her shoulder, "Oh, wow! We are so-o-o ta-len-ted!"

Now she knows all too well that the only time for cosmic wind is Sunday morning, when the precious one is snoring, the little one is sleeping, and the permitless mother-in-law is making the rounds.

When her parents moved to their new apartment, her mother had warned:

"Live any way you want, my dear. Just don't sponsor your mother-in-law's residence permit. Because as soon as she gets it, the balance of power will shift in her favor."

She maintained the balance and she did not forget anything. She remembered how in the very first month of their marriage, when they were still living with her parents, the precious one had broken off the handle of a cup from the good china to mark it as his: it was not to be used by anyone else. She remembered how, displeased with the pillow he'd been given in Kyiv, he brought back from the village a pillow his grandma had given him. Once, in the middle of the night, he had pulled it out from under her head. But life rushed onward, like an express bus, without stops or pauses. The mother-in-law and the little one slept in the bedroom, and she and the precious one slept on a fold-out couch in the so-called living-room. And at night the mother-in-law could be counted on to set out for the bathroom just when the precious one recollected that he had a wife.

"Is this the parade ground?" The son would yell and the mother would mumble that in such cases she and her deceased husband went to the barn.

"Why would you screw the deceased," the daughter-in-law would remark to her husband's delight. He didn't care that his wife didn't respect his mother. The only thing he cared about was himself.

Autumn's gray tears streamed down the windows, and the streetcars rumbled by, muffling the signals of the cosmic wind.

One day a blazing meteor cut through this gloom. It was Rybina's birthday. She and the precious one always went to her parties. Rybina lived as she wished, not as she was supposed to. She dressed in bulky sweaters and tight slacks, dyed her hair in various colors, married, divorced, and then married again or just lived together. The precious one looked forward to Rybina's birthday parties so he could criticize her lifestyle afterwards with a sense of his own superiority. But this year the Streetcar Drivers' Association was hosting a screening of the film "Pan Volodyiovsky." Only that one night! She would go to Rybina's alone, they agreed.

It was crowded, as usual, and, as usual, nine out of ten of the guests had not been there the year before.

"Marcello is coming," Rybina had bragged.

Marcello turned out to be an ordinary-looking guy in blue jeans and a sweater—he didn't look at all like a famous movie-star. The fanciful name was probably not real, maybe just a variation on his surname. What his real name was she never did learn.

They talked all evening. At one point, Rybina had freed herself from the embrace of a red-haired dentist and rudely squeezed between them, but they continued talking behind her back or across her chest and she soon left them alone.

They walked home together. A heavy rain had passed earlier. He picked her up to carry her across a puddle, but he couldn't manage and set her down right in the deepest spot. It was not far to his place so they went in to dry their shoes. They were alone. A woman's underwear and some toys were scattered about, but that didn't matter. What mattered were the bookcases, filled with her favorite books—books her parents used to buy, books she had dreamed of. She was drawn to a shelf of poetry. He stepped up behind her.

"You know," he said, "in the library I once found a poem written on a yellow index card—it had been used as a bookmark. Just three stanzas. I took it home and still read it sometimes. Now, where did I put it?"

She began to recite:

The love is gone.
It wasn't ever there.
Yet twilight graced the boulevards
And streets—they sang, they sang
And goodness was a given.

Dumbfounded, he put his hands on her shoulders:

The sky was far and high
And the stars were scattered too wide—
They didn't fit into the patch of sky
Confined by tightly woven high-rises.

He tried to kiss her on the mouth but she wouldn't let him, so he kissed her eyes, cheeks, ears. The stanzas, read aloud for the first time, sounded hollow and foreign:

But lights closed their eyes in such bliss
Through lilac tide,
Through lilac mist
And a piano's echo
Played amiss.

They kissed. And everything else followed. Because they were adults and knew what to do next. A light in the next room stayed on. A street lamp peeped through the window.

The phantom of that moment did not stay—
Was it part of a stranger's dream?
His whispered "You're so lovely!"
And the naked shadows on the wall.

Those lines had come to her long ago. Of course, the kitchen notebook had stored the memory of that evening. My God, how fast time flies—it was three, no, almost four months ago. How is he? Does he, like the precious one, hurry home to have a tasty dinner and then sprawl comfortably on the sofa? And does the owner of the scattered underwear also crawl indifferently over him in the morning, to make breakfast for her family? Does he remember Rybina's birthday and what happened later? How fast time flies!

The streetcars have turned off their headlights. The hour hand has passed nine. The mother-in-law will soon be back.

The water in the bathroom began to flow. The precious one started blowing his nose with conviction. He'll soon grind the coffee. They don't have an electric coffee-mill: he grinds the coffee by hand. He's proud of this contribution to the family; it's his muscle-power at work. The little one woke up. She went to him. The mother-in-law returned.

"At the Lukianivskyi Market chickens were going for nine rubles, but they were scrawny. I bought some at the Zhytnyi market for twelve. Something inside me said: 'Buy now!' And I was right: at the Besarabskyi Market, they were selling the same chickens for fifteen. But I got some sauerkraut there. Peter, here, try the sauerkraut!"

"Get out of here with your damned sauerkraut! Can't you see I'm grinding coffee!"

"To hell with your coffee," the mother-in-law said, offended.

Translated by Svitlana Kobets

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