

THE KYIV SYMPHONY

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On his way home from the grocery store, hands weighted with buckwheat and potatoes, stooping, he shuffles up six flights of steps because the elevator in his building has been broken for a month, since the start of the war. Two men in loose black suits, under which, he thinks, they can easily hide guns or even grenades, smoke next to his flat. They stand back-to-back, one facing the stairs, the other his door. The latter, with a cigarette clamped between his lips, twists the doorknob, then rings the bell. The men don't seem nervous or even curious. Their somewhat numb, somewhat flaccid expressions make him think that perhaps their visit is intended for another citizen and they came to his flat by mistake.

Or not.

Once in his living room, offering him a cigarette that he politely refuses, they ask him to write a symphony, a pompous, victorious march to welcome Russian soldiers back home from the war. In their hands—yellowed sheets of music, a requiem to his orphaned youth.

They discuss his payment, a disquieting sum of rubles he can use to remodel his flat or build a country house, plant an orchard. He loves apples, doesn't he? Things will be arranged for him: foods, drinks, medicine, trips to the Black Sea, a doctor, a driver.

“Excuse me, what year is this?” he asks, his eyes drawing in the men's smiles dry and crooked like old branches.

“What year do you want it to be? 1941 or 2022?”

“1946.”

The night he last saw his mother, from his bedroom window etched with frost. She appeared no bigger than a dancing figurine in his music box—chin raised, red hair curling behind ears—treading through the snow in her house slippers toward a strange car parked on the curb, opposite the playground. He felt a tingling sensation in his toes, as though someone was pricking his feet with a needle.

Later he would think of that moment as the one when everything was still present and yet something had been already missing, something very important though elusive, like fog or snow flurries that disappeared as soon as one touched them with a bare hand.

After the visitors finally left, he calls his son—a bitter disillusioned filmmaker, who’s been despising their motherland for years and is now vehemently hating it. He named his son Dmitri, after Shostakovich, because fifty-six years ago he’d harbored a faint hope that his son would grow up a famous performer or composer, possessed by musical genius, the two of them becoming rebels, forced into isolation by artistic camaraderie. How silly a dream that was; how fatuous a pursuit. His wife used to say: “Man supposes, but the universe disposes.” Indeed. Dmitri was born tone-deaf; he didn’t learn to play an instrument or truly appreciate classical music. He’s never married either or dated women long-term, and he suspects that his son might be gay, but as a father, he’s been afraid to ask, to pry, to discover the shattering embarrassment of a truth neither will then be able to deny.

Dmitri’s attitude toward their country has been the cause of their many arguments, followed by weeks of spiteful silence. But their creative urge and love for the arts has always allowed each man to step over his pride and mend the relationship, and they continued their weekend gatherings and heated intellectual debates. There’s been nothing harder, and there’s been nothing easier because like Janus, the god of beginnings and endings, they have the same head but two faces—one looking to the past, the other to the future. In the last eight years, however, since his wife died, their meetings have become less frequent, more of an obligation than desire, curtesy than passion, at least on his son’s part. They no longer argue so much as bicker, two birds hanging on a crippled tree limb.

Monday evening is dark and blustery; wet snow like spittle flies in the air. His son has suggested they meet in an hour at the Vorontzov *banya*, his favorite bathhouse. They can buy birch *veniks* and flog each other in the steam room and purge all the “special military operation” thoughts from their conscience. No one can spy on them either, unless the men there have cameras implanted into their nipples or assholes. The building—gray and squat, with scuffed walls and barred windows on the first floor—was built before the revolution, but it has changed owners many times after perestroika. The price for a two-hour visit, though still affordable, will soon double, as with everything else in the country: sugar, flour, toilet paper, medicine, soap. They’ve been warned to procure in advance, to fix teeth and replace joints as soon as possible. Cancer treatments and heart surgeries might present a problem; all equipment is imported, and to get certain components or new parts, especially during Covid and after more sanctions, will be nearly impossible. Aeroflot planes have stopped flying, and he suspects that before long the borders will be closed, the Iron Curtain grinding back in place. It’s hard to imagine the future, if he and his compatriots were to have one.

Most of the men at the *banya* look old, wrapped in damp, flimsy sheets as they rest on benches, drinking beer or hot black tea with mint or thyme, the aroma too strong, irritating. A few men jump naked in a pool of mossy-green water as soon as they emerge from the steam room. Others stand in showers or lather with sponges or wash cloths, dragging them up and down their backs and flat buttocks, which resemble cracks in concrete walls. He’s always felt uncomfortable seeing other men naked, especially old men, with their shriveled genitalia like some squished fruit in a nest of brittle hair. He’s one of those men: bald, frail, with ashy skin. Yet, there’s also something liberating in the ritual of a communal bath, the vulnerability of exposed flesh, the acknowledgement of your own mortality at the sight of your undressed neighbor, whose balls droop, just as small and helpless as your own. He thinks that a *banya* is where people should gather before Judgment Day. One comes into the world naked, and one should depart naked, too.

The argument has started when pretty much everyone left the steam room and he and Dmitri begin lashing their bodies with the birch *veniks*, the long scrawny twigs tied together at one end. Red, sweaty, with knotted graying chest hair, Dmitri has turned around and accused his father of killing his mother. It took her years to

die—from loneliness, from disappointment, from heartache, from the misery of not being able to join her family, her parents and cousins who'd emigrated to America because he, his father, refused to leave, and she refused to leave without him. She died from cancer, true, but in reality, as grim and hopeless back then as it is now when Russians have become dogs tearing at the throats of their neighbors, in reality—she died from a broken heart. And he, her husband, is to blame. A Jew, she married him despite her parents' objections, their premonitions and admonitions not to tie her life to his, her devout soul to his gentile one where the only God was his intolerable music. Still, she'd wanted to marry him so they could emigrate together. He didn't love her, Dmitri says, he only loved his music, which the government prohibited him to play because it was too new, too vulgar, too Westernized—his wasn't the music for the blessed motherland, the kingdom of peasants and workers, but that of their masters, the bourgeoisie. His mother had sacrificed her life for his. But then, years later, he betrayed her by refusing to desert his beloved country, which has always tortured people and is now killing them without any feasible reason, just to prove that it can, but also to fulfill its geopolitical ambitions, its great destiny, as the president and his henchmen often boast. The people are greedy and shameless, and also dumb. The paucity of thought, the paucity of heart, the paucity of spirit. Such people deserve such a president. Why? Because.

“Because why else would they support all those crimes?”

“Fear. Fear of being annihilated as a nation. Fear breeds hatred.” He tries to justify his son's accusations, but it seems as useless as warding off bullets with his hands. Pitiful too. The struggle of the doomed.

“And now those fuckers are asking you to write a song for them? A war symphony? After sending your mother to the gulag and banning all of your music because you were the son of an enemy of the people?!”

“I'm the last Soviet classical composer. They discovered my requiem while searching someone's flat. They have all of my old sheet music. Apparently, the thief who stole it decades ago is now in their custody.”

“And you believed them? Are you kidding?” Without glasses, his son looks like a helpless myopic giant, bewildered by his own anger. “They stole it, all of it. You've always been on their do-not-trust list. And now they need you. They need

your music. To show people that nothing is forgotten. To control them, just as they always did. They want you to be their Shostakovich. Only you won't be able to microfilm the score and smuggle it to America."

"No, I don't have the equipment. Or the man's genius. Or his courage. Shostakovich began writing his seventh symphony right after Hitler had invaded."

"Do you honestly think he could've composed such a massive piece in such a short time? Six months?"

"He was determined. There're witnesses. Memoirs."

"Forget that. He started writing it earlier, and it wasn't about Hitler but Stalin. The tyranny that silenced the people, held them hostage. Shostakovich could talk to them through his music. Those still alive and those who'd been murdered. How else could he've expressed his grief without being removed from society? The bassoon solo in the first movement—Stalin expected a grand finale with brass and fireworks, and instead he got that eerie, haunting sound, like a mother's voice pleading for her murdered children. The Leningrad Symphony is a death march."

Steam rises before their eyes, and his son lays his *venik* on the bench, grabs a hand towel, and swirls it a few times above their heads.

"Are you coming over on Saturday? I want to play the requiem for you. Assuming I can still hold a violin."

At first, his son doesn't answer. But after a while, when the steam grows around them yet again like a dense, impenetrable fog, he says, "I'm fleeing to Armenia next week. Then Italy. Will you go? Before it's too late?"

"It's already too late."

"Coward."

"I'm tired of defending myself."

"That's why we live in this hell—your generation are a bunch of cowards who erected shit shrines." His son picks up the *venik* and whips his shoulders and then his chest.

"At least we were capable of making art."

"That no one was allowed to see."

“But everything was allowed when *you* were growing up. Perestroika. The collapse of the empire. So much hope, so much promise. Where did all the gold go? All the diamonds? Oligarchs, your classmates, they fed this government.”

“Oligarchs *are* the government. They want to take it all back, all the land, all the mines, all the oil wells. They’re rebuilding the gulags too.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Will you be ratting me out to FSB when they come to collect the duty?!”

He refuses to answer, but stands up from the bench and flogs himself with such force that a few birch twigs break off and fall on the floor.

Late at night, smoking in his bed, he tries to remember his wife’s face, not her terminally-ill face, white like hospital walls, with the sunken eyes and dried-up mouth, but one full of spring, full of lust, full of fire burning holes through his heart. He has no pictures of her young, with poplar fluff in her thick, spirals of hair and her lips smeared with powdered sugar from eating *ponchiks* on a park bench. She chewed so softly, wrinkling her nose, like a child, shy yet mischievous. On their wedding day, they eloped to Odessa, where the streets smelled of fish and where he played violin, just for her, on the beach, the moon low, swaying in the black silky folds of the night sea. Now he thinks of her as his music—hidden in an empty, airless box and immured inside a stone vault he can never open or touch again. Dmitri is wrong; he did love her, all his life, but he’s loved his country too, despite its loneliness, its poverty, its incorrigible drunkenness and tyranny, the ruling despots who feast on people’s blood like leeches.

It’s been three days since he and Dmitri fought at the *banya*, three days he’s spent listening to Russia’s most brave thinkers who protest the war. All the independent media has been cut off, so he watches YouTube recordings his son sent him and that he can access using a code. Many famous politicians, sociologists, actors, directors, musicians, writers, singers, and talk-show hosts fled the country during the first week of the invasion, but they continue to make anti-war posts and record their conversations and raise money for Ukrainian refugees and those who’ve been wounded and left behind in their native land, which now resembles smoldering ruins. He sees pictures of dead men, executed at close range, their hands tied behind their backs. Bodies of women and children lying on the streets.

Bloody hair. Torn arms. Severed legs. A young mother nursing her newborn in a bomb shelter. Crowds of terrified people in a train station, which he first mistakes for WWII footage.

The authorities in his homeland have always possessed the means of persuading the public. Recently, they've started arresting people on the streets and searching their homes. Or could it be that his son is exaggerating? Could all those photos and videos be fake, the tragedy manufactured, unfolding only on computer screens? Why won't the world negotiate? How did one tiny president manage to convince such an enormous country that attacking a sovereign state was the single righteous thing to do? How can they justify the barbarities? Or not know the truth? Or not *want* to know the truth? Which, he supposes, is always too detrimental, too shameful, too complex, and yet simple—thou shall not murder, shall not steal, shall not covet. *Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor.*

He wants to send money or food to those in need, but he has no credit card and very little savings. All his life he's taught music, the most peaceful of all arts, even though his government insisted otherwise, curtailing his creative efforts. And now, the only chance he has at recognition is to compose a victorious symphony. The whole country will hear it; it'll be broadcasted on the national radio and TV. Russia's finest musicians, those who haven't left, will perform it in the Great Hall of the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, where he once was a student.

"How can you be so sure that you'll win?" he asked the men, whose hollow eyes resembled those on a carnival mask.

"How can you *not* be so sure?" they asked in return, expelling smoke through their nostrils. "Or do you believe differently?"

He does.

Wars have never ended well for those who started them.

After his mother disappeared and because his father and grandparents all had been killed between 1941 and 1945, he was supposed to be placed in an orphanage. A neighbor took pity on his seven-year-old soul. She was a Ukrainian woman, who'd married a Russian soldier and who had no children. Her name was Marina, and her hair was long and straight, the color of sunflowers. When she braided it, he unbraided it, watching it flow down her back like honey. She cooked the most

delicious borsch, bright red, mushy and garlicky, and that tasted as though it had beef in it. She taught him to love *salo*, slabs of pork fat she cured herself, with a thread of pink meat still clinging to the brown rind. Her *galushki* made him cry. Even now, when he remembers how soft, how tender the dough was, boiled in water or milk and served with butter or sour cream, his mouth fills with saliva and his eyes with tears. When she died, quite young, in her sleep, right before Easter, he composed the requiem, which he got to perform only once, in his school, for students and colleagues, before somebody ransacked his flat and stole all his sheet music, but not his precious violin—his mother’s last gift. Up until a few days ago, he believed it had been an accident.

Sitting in his living room, holding the old sheet music, he recalls the argument he had with Marina, when he’d decided to quit the conservatory after those in charge had denied him a chance to compete in Rome because they’d discovered that Marina wasn’t his real mother, that he was the son of a woman accused of anti-Soviet propaganda and sent to labor camps. The authorities thought he might defect.

“You can’t drop out now,” Marina said. “Less than six months before graduation.”

“I don’t care. I won’t be wasting my life playing in those pathetic adolescent concerts, with those pathetic second-rate violinists who don’t know the difference between Shostakovich’s fifth and seventh.”

“For an artist, it shouldn’t matter where he performs, as long as he gets to do it and does it to the utmost of his abilities. The act itself is what matters, not the accolades.”

“I want to become the world’s next greatest violinist and composer, but they won’t let me! Don’t you see?!”

“But they can’t force you not to think or not to write your music.”

She was right, of course, although there had been moments in his life when he wanted to end it, all of it—his failed career and his inability to pretend, to kowtow to his colleagues whose mediocre skills could only be justified by their mediocre mentality and their servitude to the country’s ever-magnifying belligerent ideals. How little empathy he felt for those people, how much anger.

He gathers crumbs of food from the table and brushes them off on the floor. He doesn't know if he can still compose or play violin. It's been too long since he's done anything creative or worth anyone's attention. He is an old man, whose son deems him a coward and a murderer, and whose country has stolen from him all that he once had—his mother, his music, his dignity. He has nothing to lose, yet he feels oddly liberated, free from any responsibility or obligation. If he disappears or dies, not many will lament. He'll be one less person in line for bread or toilet paper. One less person to torture or send to the gulag. Life, if useless, heralds oblivion and death. Death, if purposeful, bestows absolution.

He lights a candle, then brings it to the tip of his cigarette, inhaling. His wife used to say: "It's bad luck to steal smoke from candles. You'll die alone." But what does he care about death or luck? Especially now, when all the rules of civility have been broken in the world, and when his heart, engorged with pain, shakes like a wired bomb about to explode? Never before has he felt so lonely or homesick, not even when his son took him to Rome, years ago, on his birthday. With obedience, he trudged after Dmitri through cobblestone streets and piazzas, where gaudy, sculptural fountains splashed in the sun and ancient basilicas, those impossible monuments to human will and worship, rose in the sky as though reaching into heaven. In front of the Colosseum, eating the green fruity gelato he could only compare to Marina's gooseberry jelly—it was that thick and that delicious, sticking to his teeth and then melting at the back of his throat—he thought how much the ruins reminded him of his own life and that of his country: layer upon layer of eroded rocks, the deserted arena surrounded by the crumbling façade, the gray remnants of once-prosperous once-cherished civilization.

He finishes his cigarette, but it continues to smolder in the ashtray while he writes a letter to his son, who has the key to the flat and will bring his cat on Sunday, before fleeing the homeland. He tries not to be sentimental while apologizing to Dmitri for bequeathing him such a shitty country, but also for not paying more attention to his love life, for never asking him if he's gay. *Are you?* Then, he instructs his son to take from under the dining room table the old violin and a large paper folder with the symphony he plans to complete in a few days. Dmitri is to photograph the score in case the Russian border patrol confiscates the

folder. *Pass both—the violin and the music—to a Ukrainian embassy in any country you run to. The last solo must be played by a bandura (better kobza). They should be able to arrange.*

One more thing

I know that you don't believe that I killed your mother, but you had to say it to sever yourself from me. You could've emigrated so many times, but I kept you tethered. You probably have doubts now. Don't. When you read this letter, I'll be gone. Don't look for me. Leave. Find a place where you can create. Don't come back. Not even if they tell you that I burned down the Kremlin and will be executed in Red Square. You can't help me. Save yourself. Remember that Italian movie (one I struggled to finish), where an old filmmaker asks his student to look through a telescope? Everything seems so bright and close to the young guy because it's his future. But when the filmmaker turns the telescope around and the student looks once again, only from the other side, everything is distant, far away, like the old man's past. What I'm trying to say—don't drag my past into your future, my artistic failure into the possibility of your success. Make a decision and follow. Don't look back.

P.S. Shostakovich's symphony was not the music of death but of survival.

Hours dawdle, and then roll by, and then fly out the window as the first birds settle in the trees charcoaled against the muslin sky. He's scribbling away, pouring all of what he's seen and heard in the past days, weeks, years, decades, into his music, which, at first, sounds crude and explosive, an amateur doodling of an excited teenager, a hurricane of thoughts and feelings he struggles to conquer and tame. Years of experience and subverted passions rush through his mind, feed his emotional tempest. His blood churns, heart aflame, the artistic fever in his bones. As he continues to compose and the sun continues to grow in the sky like a luminous succulent fruit, and the birds continue to grace the world with their innocent warbles, the room transforms into a house, into a village, into a forest his mother and he roamed in the summer, gathering spongy, red-capped mushrooms and eating wild blackberries off bushes. She sang folk songs, disappearing into the trees. There was almost an excess of sensation in the melody, a palpable ache, as well as flashes of high notes among drawled, lugubrious ones—a violin's harsh *fortissimo* descending from D-sharp to A.

The sun rises high before dipping low, and finally disappearing from the wounded earth, and he now sees himself shivering on the ground floor of a half-crumbled building, much like those in present-day Ukraine, during an air raid,

surrounded by dirty, starved, emaciated children and women rocking them in their bloody arms. A missile darts across the sky, like a shooting star, illuminating a muddy field, where, all day long, he'd been crawling through the trenches, fighting rats and mice, scavenging for food. But all he found were bones, and more bones, black like sunflower seeds.