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BEHIND THE CURTAIN

When Oleksiy Ivanovych died, even more sugar was needed to keep him going. But at least the house grew quieter, and everyone under its roof breathed a collective sigh of relief. In the final stretch of his earthly journey, Oleksiy Ivanovych had taken to howling for hours on end, much to the irritation of his daughter, Raisa.

Raisa worked as a nursery teacher, and her early shift in the toddlers' group began at an ungodly hour. She had, of course, tried reasoning with Oleksiy Ivanovych, but owing to certain circumstances, reasoning proved futile. So she simply stuffed the slimy slit that had once been her father's mouth with a pair of socks she found lying by the bath. It would be wrong to say the problem was entirely solved, but the old man's noises changed. They became muffled, taking on the steady hum of a refrigerator. So it seemed even to Raisa as she drifted off to sleep.

That guttural humming carried her back to the carefree Julys spent at her grandmother's dacha, where she used to fall asleep to the

accompaniment of a fat old Donbas refrigerator.

One day, shortly after Raisa's daughter, Nastya, came home from school and switched on the tiny black-and-white television in the kitchen, which looked more like a peephole in a door, the humming that had long since become part of the flat suddenly stopped. Squinting at the murky screen, Nastya had been watching the figures in their cropped tops when the silence fell. Uneasily, she looked around, then fixed her gaze on the bathroom door. The silence seemed to fill every corner, as though Grandad had somehow gathered his strength and might appear in the doorway at any moment. For some reason, it never occurred to her that he might be dead. And rightly so. For Oleksiy Ivanovych, having reached the threshold, had cast off his human existence and embarked upon another life, one unknown to anyone.

Of all the things Oleksiy Ivanovych loved, there were two above all others: taking baths and saving money. So, having run himself a

bath, he would lie in it for hours, hidden behind a curtain made from his wife Zinaida Ostapivna's dressing gown. The filthy polyester curtain, riddled with holes like the starry sky above the shores of Katsiveli, did little to conceal Oleksiy Ivanovych during these moments of blissful repose. His family had firmly fixed the image of him in their minds: drifting soundlessly through the dark grotto of the bathroom. Every wall in the bathroom had a large mirror hanging on it. Even the door. So whenever the old man opened his eyes, four pairs of gleaming white eyeballs would suddenly be laid bare in the half-light.

Once his bathing ritual was complete, he would drape a waffle-weave towel over his body, then sink all his clothes into the cooling water and spend a long time trampling them with a pair of long wooden tongs. Thus went the weekly wash. The water gradually turned a murky brown, a film of dead skin flakes gathering on the surface, until the bath resembled a large saucepan in which the soup had gone sour. For extra cleanliness,

Oleksiy Ivanovych left his clothes to soak for no less than seven days, occasionally prodding and stirring the broth with the same tongs. At the end, having pulled the plug, he would climb into the bath and spend a long time treading on his clothes, listening pensively to the fading squelches beneath his feet.

One day, towards the end of one of his weekly washes, Oleksiy Ivanovych lost his balance, slipped on a wet overcoat and fell, striking the back of his head hard against the corner of the bath. From that moment on, his gaze acquired a permanently enigmatic expression. He refused to leave the bath. Zinaida Ostapivna tried to pull him out, but he had become so thoroughly rooted beneath the layers of sodden clothes that he simply would not budge. Some of the thoughts stored inside the balding little ball of his head had spilled out onto the floor when it met the cast-iron edge of the bath. From then on, he communicated in short bursts, skilfully combining whatever words remained in his brain with gestures.

For instance, pointing a crooked finger at the tap and letting out a prolonged uuuu, Grandad was telling them it was time to turn on the water, as the clothes in the bath had almost dried out. Consumed by curiosity, Nastya tried to find out why Grandad wouldn't go back to his room. But he would turn away from her and slowly sink beneath the water, settling on the bottom of his own ark, leaving only a stream of bubbles in reply. Even reminders about the television failed to stir Oleksiy Ivanovych's interest. Before long, Nastya gave up trying to get her grandfather to talk and began silently observing the new developments in her family.

Despite the obvious strangeness of the situation, feeding him proved to be the only real difficulty. Whether out of sheer spite or as a result of the blow to his head, Oleksiy Ivanovych flatly refused to eat. Nastya even tried tempting him with a school pizza that cost seventy kopecks, which she had been saving up for over several days. But whenever he managed to bite off even the tiniest

morsel, he would immediately spit it out, start screaming and then take ages to calm down, much to the irritation of the grown women in the family.

Nastya felt sorry for her grandfather. One evening, she brewed his favourite tea, made from fruit peelings he used to dry by hanging them in garlands all over the kitchen units. She added a generous amount of sugar and brought it to him.

Gripping the mug with his bony fingers, he drank it greedily, with great pleasure, and asked for more. Peace descended upon the household. From then on, Oleksiy Ivanovych began drinking vast quantities of sugary tea. And when the peelings eventually ran out, he switched to sugar water. Grandad failed to notice the difference, much to the relief of both Zinaida and Raisa. And when they grew too lazy to keep stirring sugary drinks, the sack of sugar was moved into the bathroom, and sugar began to be added directly to the waters surrounding Grandad.

At first, Nastya was naturally embarrassed to wash herself in front of her grandfather, so her mother, Raisa Alexeyevna, would stand nearby, periodically barking at her father to close his eyes and turn away. Oleksiy Ivanovych offered no resistance. He seemed to understand perfectly well. But before long, there was no longer any need for supervision, as Oleksiy Ivanovych's eyes had become completely crystallised in sugar. His pupils stopped darting anxiously from side to side and settled into a single, vacant stare. His eyelids, lashes and eyeballs became encrusted with tiny white crystals, exactly like the Drunken Cherry sweets, if you bit the tops off.

Nastya liked those sweets, although she was never allowed more than two at a time. She would ask Grandad to move over, and he would obediently draw up his thin legs, wrap his knobbly arms around them and huddle in the corner like a long-legged, desiccated little spider.

All in all, Grandad had improved in appearance, and Nastya was now quite happy to

come into the bathroom on her own, gazing at those sweet-like eyes as she stood beneath the running tap. From that moment on, they stopped switching on the bathroom light, so as not to frighten Oleksiy Ivanovych. “Sugar eyes can't blink. It hurts them to look at the light,” Zinaida Ostapivna whispered, drawing the bathroom door curtain shut.

Everything changed when Zinaida Ostapivna, in a state of extreme agitation, woke her daughter in the middle of the night and announced that she had heard Grandad. He had spoken to her, though not as he used to, not in the old-fashioned way. Something different. She had come home late from her shift and gone straight to the bathroom. That evening, it was her turn to feed Oleksiy Ivanovych. As she entered his tiled kingdom, she noticed an unfamiliar smell. It was something like fermentation, rather like the smell they used to get when distilling moonshine from fallen plums, only stronger, with a distinctly fizzy quality to it. The aroma teased her nostrils, and with every breath her

body grew more languid, while the weariness of the evening dissolved into the sparkling air.

She breathed in the fumes greedily, sensing a new quality taking shape inside her: a sort of fluffy bliss. That was how she later described it to Raisa. Everything had become fluffy and soft, she said. Even she herself. She, a stout, life-worn woman no longer in her prime, had become as light as a September spider's thread. With some difficulty, she managed to focus, topped up the water as usual and added the required amount of sugar. Then she lowered herself onto the tiled floor and leaned back against the bath. Behind her came a bubbling sound. That was how she described it: the sound of bubbles.

The hissing grew louder, rising and falling in little waves, until it began to sound as though it were coming from inside her, as though the bubbles had filled Zinaida Ostapivna herself. And then it happened. Grandad told her all thirty of his names, from which she was to choose one and use that name, and

that name alone, from then on. She was to forget all his former names, feed him sugar and wash him once a week, just as he had done back when he was still Oleksiy Ivanovych. She was also to keep watch by the bathroom door and talk to him. What she said was of no importance. The important thing was to keep talking.

As Zinaida Ostapivna listened to her husband, she writhed on the bathroom floor, contorting herself, whether in pain or pleasure she could not say, hiking up her dress and spreading the fingers of both hands and feet. But she decided not to mention that part to Raisa. And so Zinaida Ostapivna spent the entire night keeping vigil beside her husband's bath. She dashed off to fetch a scrap of paper and a pen, then, by touch alone, wrote down everything he told her: all thirty names and every instruction he had passed on. From that night on, Oleksiy Ivanovych became Shiraturao.

The following morning, the women sat down, drew up a timetable and divided the

duties between them. A week later, Raisa Alexeyevna brought Nastya her first glass of Grandad-water. “Drink,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Drink. Grandma’s cataracts have cleared up. There’s no illness in the world we need fear now.”

Nastya took the faceted glass and had a sip. Her mouth filled with sweet, prickling bubbles. The water from beneath Grandad tasted rather like the kvass sold in those yellow barrels. There were all sorts of terrible rumours about those metal tanks, the worst being that maggots bred at the bottom. That particular rumour had put Nastya off the drink for good. But this was quite another matter. She knew perfectly well that no worms had taken up residence in Grandad’s bath, so she happily drank the lot and handed the glass back to her mother. Raisa staggered out of the room.

It wasn't long before a terrible pain seized Nastya's stomach. Doubled over, she lay there with her eyes squeezed shut, hoping it would pass. But it only got worse. Waves of nausea

kept rising inside her. Nastya broke out in a cold sweat, struggling to hold back the violent kicks from within. Eventually, she could take no more. She opened the window and spent a long time vomiting out of the third-floor window, splattering the sill and the ends of her hair. From that moment on, Nastya never drank Grandad-water again. She either poured it out of the window or, if her mother insisted that she finish the glass in front of her, went into her room and made herself vomit by sticking a ruler down her throat.

Nastya took no part in Oleksiy Ivanovych's bathing rituals, except on the days when her mother and grandmother went to the dacha to pick tomatoes. On those occasions, all the responsibility for looking after Grandad fell on her shoulders.

Nastya had no desire to wash him, so she simply topped up the water and added more sugar. For this, her grandmother would strike her painfully across the face with a dishcloth.

Under such poor care, the water surrounding Oleksiy Ivanovych grew darker and, turning thoroughly sour, began to injure his delicate, almost translucent body, eating away at his flesh and leaving sediment in the water. The entire week's batch of the drink went to waste, while Grandad, unable to find relief from the pain, tossed heavily about in the bath, whimpering and scratching at his sores. He kept the whole household awake.

Zinaida Ostapivna, being a kind-hearted woman by nature, would tie her husband's hands together, allowing his skin to heal more quickly. While Grandad was recovering, she would wash him with a yellow bath sponge and pity him like a little child. Of course, she understood that the creature before her was no longer quite the same being. She knew its name was Shiraturado. And yet he looked so very much like her husband that she simply could not bring herself to resist speaking to him in tender, affectionate words.

Most often, Nastya was the one keeping watch outside the bathroom door, talking to Grandad about school, what she'd had for breakfast that day, how the rubbish bins had started stinking in the heat, and how her classmates had nicked the sandwich she'd brought to school and thrown it down the hole in the toilet. She imagined that Grandad, listening to her in silence, would let out a hoarse sigh now and then, overwhelmed with sympathy. Never, in all her short life, had anyone listened to her so attentively as he did during those moments.

In early autumn, Grandad began to shed his skin, just as had been foretold that very night. The first to go was the new, transparent flesh on his leg, just below the thigh. It peeled away in a neat oval sheet. Grandmother put on a pair of rubber gloves, carefully lifted the delicate, almost liquid skin and gently placed it in a plastic bag filled with water.

The following day, she and Mum went to the market. Having prepared a story about a

unique exotic drink, they sold the contents, bag and all, providing detailed instructions on the washing ritual and the correct dosage of sugar.

A fortnight later, it happened again. This time, however, other women were waiting for them at the market, acquaintances of the first satisfied customer. According to Mum, a veritable battle had broken out over Grandad's flesh. Encouraged by such success, the women began taking not only little bags of skin to the market but jars of the drink itself. "For the conversion of the unbelievers," they called it, giggling and clinking their glass containers on market mornings.

They would return home pleased with themselves and slightly tipsy. Nastya would be waiting for them with whatever excuse for a meal she had managed to put together. Since August, she had been the only person in the house doing any cooking. After supper, Zinaida and Raisa would shut themselves in the kitchen to count the takings, while Nastya seized the opportunity to creep

towards the bathroom and spend a little more time talking to Grandad before bed.

In the mornings, after managing to rouse her mother with some difficulty, Nastya would announce that she was off to school. Receiving no coherent reply, she would leave, pulling the door firmly shut behind her. Her mother and grandmother, exhausted by the demands of Grandad and the market, had begun to tire terribly and spent almost all their time asleep. They would get up towards nightfall and head straight for the bathroom. They no longer bothered pouring the water into glasses. Instead, they drank straight from the bath, clearing a space among the clothes with their hands and pushing Oleksiy Ivanovych over towards the wall.

In class, Nastya listened to her teachers with only half an ear. Things were going badly at school, her marks were slipping, but there was nothing she could do about it. She spent the whole day worrying that a draught might blow the front door open. She imagined the neighbours, having finally had

enough of the sour smell coming from flat seventy-three, letting themselves in and taking Grandad away while her mother and grandmother lay in their beds, fast asleep and oblivious to the world. She would stuff as much sugar as she could into her pockets from the school canteen and race home the moment the bell announced the end of lessons. She only allowed herself to breathe freely once the front door had closed behind her with a loud click.

Seeing Grandad in his usual place, she would kneel beside him and feed him the sugar she had brought, placing it directly into his mouth. It seemed to her a special treat, somehow different from the sugar in the sack. Sometimes Grandad bit her. His teeth had grown thin and sharp, like little needles. He never drew blood, nor did he mean any harm. He simply mistook her hand for the sugar. So she never took offence. She would gently explain that the sugar had run out, but that she would bring him some more tomorrow.

And so, amid the family's daily chores and concerns, autumn passed.

When Nastya was alone with Grandad, she never called him Shiraturao. After all, Grandad wasn't a name. It was a title. She still recognised him, and liked to think that he recognised her too. It seemed to her that, having taken up residence in the bathroom, the two of them had found a new kind of closeness, one neither had ever known before.

Of course, he had changed considerably. His mouth had spread sideways, and his cracked lips resembled layers of pancake frills, stacked one on top of another and greased with butter. Strips of greenish ridges had appeared across his skin. Every now and then, some stray cardigan would get tangled in these ridges, and Oleksiy Ivanovych would spend the whole night noisily sucking at it, drawing out its sweet moisture.



Shortly before New Year, while Grandad was enjoying a piece of sugar loaf from Nastya's hand, he sank his teeth deep into the flesh of her palm. Zinaida Ostapivna had to prise his jaws apart by force to free the girl. Nastya screamed, kicked and sobbed, shouting that she was his granddaughter, but his jaws continued to clamp shut with the dull certainty of a hydraulic press. Once her hand was free, she ran to her room and cried inconsolably for a long time, mourning something

she could not put a name to. The wound healed badly, just like the wound in her heart, which Nastya would have given anything to forget but could not.

The flat was enveloped in an all-pervading smell of fermentation, and the days began to crawl by at an agonising pace. Nastya no longer went to see Grandad after school, no longer talked to him before bed, and did her best to avoid that part of the hallway where the bathroom was. Her mother and grandmother continued looking after him. Every night, Nastya could hear their shuffling footsteps, whispered conversations and the clinking of bottles.

About a fortnight earlier, having got up to use the loo towards dawn, Nastya had been cautiously creeping past the accursed bathroom when she noticed her mother's slippers discarded by the doorway. Then she heard slurping noises, women's moans and Grandad's rumbling, laboured breathing, all tangled together. Holding her breath and squeezing her eyes shut, she bolted back to

her room, banging her foot painfully against an iron exercise bike that stood in her way. From that night on, Nastya never ventured out to use the toilet after dark. Instead, she made do with a pen holder and the window.

As darkness fell, the flat turned into a living bubble of rustling and rasping sounds. Nastya would lie awake for hours, staring hypnotically at the doorway, until sleep finally overcame her exhausted body. Her consciousness, however, refused to switch off, stubbornly conjuring images of bitten-off hands and bloated bodies floating in yellow kvass barrels.

During one of those sleepless nights, Nastya finally decided to barricade herself in. She wanted to push an armchair up against the door, but the old, heavy thing refused to budge under her feeble efforts. So she piled chairs, winter jackets and desk drawers across the doorway, then hung a glass tumbler from the door handle. Having completed her fortifications, she promptly passed out right there, without even making it as far as the sofa. It

was the soundest sleep she had had in months. She now saw her mother and grandmother very rarely, mostly in the mornings before school, when they were already asleep.

Deprived of his prescribed conversations, lonely and forgotten, Oleksiy Ivanovych was becoming increasingly agitated. More and more often, he would beat his hands against the wall, splashing himself onto the floor. Raisa Alexeyevna had to cover the bathroom with plastic sheeting and scatter towels everywhere, taking particular care to protect the corners of the room.

"Last thing we need is to flood the neighbours," she grumbled irritably, stamping a towel into place beneath the far wall with her heel and glaring at the man who had once been her father. Left alone for long stretches, he would whimper or whine, for which he earned a sock stuffed into his mouth. But now his humming stopped quite suddenly, cut off mid-note. The absence of that sound became absolute, like deafness itself.

...The American teenagers on the television froze mid-frame, the picture dissolving into static. On the table to her left stood a three-litre jar, set aside for the market. It was almost empty, which meant Mum and Grandma wouldn't wake up until late at night at the earliest. There was no point running to them. Nastya shifted nervously on her chair. Her eyes forgot how to blink, widening as her gaze fixed on the grimy expanse of the bathroom door.

The metal handle twitched restlessly to the left, then to the right. It paused for a second. Then, with a soft click, the door swung open.



Illustrations: Gurge Feodor

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