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Auswärtiges Amt



GOETHE
INSTITUT

An Insect

drama

Me

- You`re wastrel, you are my shit!
 - My children have no right to make mistake! They cannot be weaklings!
 - My love must be deserved! For me to love you, you must make me proud of you!
 - You don`t know what`s better for you! You aren`t able to make right decisions!
 - My children can be only geniuses! They`ll be solving integrals while still on the potty!
 - I can crush you anytime like a bug!
- You`re gone, you died, it is all in the past. Let me go, please...

Still, sometimes a person who died more than 20 years ago holds me in a cage. He`s long gone, but I hear his voice in my head on and off. I argue with this voice, proving that I`m worthy. Worthy of love, worthy of respect, just worthy...

Brother, 1984

Radiator and wall in a child`s small room are splashed with small dots of blood. Blood from nose turns out to be orange, not red. A boy with a smashed nose crouches under the radiator. His face is smeared with blood too. White T-shirt in red tomatoes is torn on the shoulder. There`s blood on his chest too. Red strangle marks on the neck. He does not cry. Eyes are wide open. Dark pupils widened in horror. Loud snore similar to a roar is heard.

Mom rushes into another room. She screams: What have you done? What have you done to him?". Drunk father sleeps on the couch in the living room. Mom screams and screams. Dad opens his eyes. "Fuck you!", – he says and lowers his head.

Mom takes brother in her hands. He goes limp. Mom takes off his T-shirt, wipes out blood under his nose. Brother starts to gulp down sobs and weep quietly. Several years after, my brother will be treating stuttering for a long time. I stand and can`t stop staring at blood drops. It looks like someone crushed a whole swarm of mosquitoes here.

Train, 1984

The New Year holidays are in two weeks, and I will be 7 years old in a week. It's weekend. Dad got tipsy and decided to visit granny, taking my brother and me with him. It's cold outside, snowy, and slippery. On the way father adds alcohol. When we approach the train station, he is already noticeably wobbling. We walk across the railroad tracks. There is a train ahead. We go inside to get across, the doors close and the train starts moving.

We get off at the first station. It's cold, there's not a soul in sight, dad falls down. His nutria hat flies off and rolls on the ice like a big puck. I start crying: "Dad, daddy, get up, please, get up". My brother holds his hand. Father mutters something incomprehensible. We are trying to lift him, he is very heavy. We see a bench at the bus stop. "Daddy, let's go sit on the bench, please, daddy". Dad tries to get up, gets down on his knees and hands. He looks like a big clumsy beetle floundering in the water. He`s not wearing gloves. Hands are quickly turning red.

It`s getting dark. Cars rush past, blinding us with the headlights. My brother and I weep quietly. A taxi stops. The driver asks: "What are you doing here? Are you lost?". He sees my drunken father, hears my confused story, and thinks for a few seconds.

The taxi is warm, music is playing, smells of gasoline and tangerines. The driver smiles and winks at me and my brother in the rearview mirror. We are eating tangerine. Dad sits in the front. His head is bobbing from side to side. His hat is lying next to me.

My crying mother opens the door. The driver tells our story. Mom rushes to the bag and saying, "Thank you. Thank you. God sent you. Thank you. Thank you", tries to slip the driver money. He stops smiling and sharply walks out the door. "Happy holidays", – he throws in, getting into the elevator.

Psychiatrist, 1983

We have a long talk with the doctor. Mama sits on a couch nearby and wrings her hands_nervously. Small office under the stairs with a sloping ceiling. Well-worn white furniture. There are pictures from fairy tales on the walls, and old dirty rubber toys on the shelf. Children psychiatrist, a guy of twenty-eight or thirty years, is questioning me about my life, emotions, feelings, school and family. Finally, leads the talk, where he needs to. "How long have you not seen giant insects?", – he asks carefully, smiling to me friendly. "Haven't seen for a very long time. They disappeared. The last time was in winter", – I answer honestly. "Okay, good", – the doctor says and switches attention to mom. "Think for yourself, why would you even need this? The girl is absolutely normal, a clever one. She's going to school in a year, and this medical record will pin her down. At school questions will arise, they'll refer to special facility and then, you know for yourself...", – he was telling mom. She was nodding and pressing together interlaced fingers. "But how to get her off record now?", – she asks at last. "Let's do it this way, – doctor says, – I'll delete record in general medical card, and our, special card I'll give to you. Okay?". "Thank you", – mom gets up, takes my thin medical card, cover crossed with a red line.

While mom talks to psychiatrist, I recollect the last episode. It was in winter, several days after New Year, late evening. The attack started as always from legs itching under thighs, annoying ringing in the ears and feeling that my head is three times bigger than my body. And then I saw it – big light green caterpillar on the windowsill. It was of a size of a large zucchini and half-hanged from the windowsill disgustingly twitching its fat sagging body and standing out sharply against a white background. I started screaming: "Mom, Mom, help, they'll eat me!". Mom didn't know what to do during attacks and how to help me. She just sat beside and held me so that I don't harm myself, staring into my eyes full of horror.

Then I felt movement in my hair, jumped up abruptly, screamed and started hitting myself, trying to shake off an insect. And then they were everywhere: several caterpillars were arising blisters under my thighs, a huge black bug moved his long antennas on the windowsill, beside him, on the dark window glass, spreading his wings and readying to jump, was gigantic green grasshopper. Panic came over me. I was shouting myself hoarse, trying to take off thighs, covering my ears to not hear their rustling and streaking, beating myself to throw them away. After half-hour of unbearable terror, I fell into the morbid sleep. And the next morning nobody believed that I really saw them, even mom.

Overnight stay, 1988

TV working too loudly is heard even though the pair of doors. Me, mom and brother in front of doors. Brother's holding a dog, I'm holding a bicycle. Mom desperately presses the doorbell hard and long, for the tenth time already. It chirps like a bird. There's no movement behind the doors, just TV rumbling. Drunk dad fell asleep again and locked himself with three key turns. There's no way to unlock from outside.

We go down and silently wait on a bench for dad to wake up. More than an hour passes. It's around ten in the evening. The street is getting darker and crackling of crickets in the grass is audible. We go up to the seventh floor. TV is already silent. Mom rings the doorbell again and again. No movement.

We think what to do next. We have no money, so we can't take ride to grandparents. A neighbor from the old flat lives nearby – old-wife Halia. We go to her. She doesn't open the door cause she's asleep maybe, and can't hear ringing due to poor hearing.

We go back to the bench near the block entrance. It's eleven in the evening. It's dark, evening chill touches shoulders and spine. My brother and I are hungry. Mom sits, holding her head in her hands. She doesn't know what to do. I raise my head high and see our windows. They're so close and so far. All rooms are lighted brightly.

Neighbor from the eighth floor approaches the entrance. Greets mom and asks what happened. In two minutes we are already eating borsch with sour cream. Sleepy and tired, brother and I lay on mattresses on the floor. I hear mom talking to the neighbor and crying quietly. Falling asleep, I feel smell of someone else's bed linen. In morning we come home. Sober dad fries omelet. He's shaven even too clean. Hands slightly shaking. Not a single word about where we spent the night.

Father, 1991

He hadn't lived with us for about a year. It happened after he pierced my mother's head with a metal tape measure. Blood splashed out of a small hole in her head with a soft chirping sound. It flowed down a thin stream down her neck. It was soaking her gray and purple knitted sweater with sticky liquid. In the hospital, they cut off a piece of her thick, long brown hair, only slightly touched by gray.

While mom was taken into the ambulance and to the hospital, doctors called the police. My father quickly washed his face and put on his military uniform. The second lieutenant who arrived at the scene looked sideways at the big star on his father's shoulder straps, saluted and asked hesitantly, "Comrade Major, what happened?". "Everything is fine", my father replied, his tongue tied.

They reported at work what had happened. Dad had an unpleasant conversation with his management and a temporary transfer to a small town in the region. He left home because he took offense at mom. It was the poorest but the happiest year of our lives.

On holiday on March 8, he came back with an apology, a suitcase, and a bouquet of red carnations. For several hours he stood on his knees, begging, persuading, and mother forgave him. For six months, my brother and I finally had dad. The three of us would run around the pond in the morning, read books aloud, go to the movies, go camping on vacations, cook together, dig and put large red worms in an empty tin for fishing. Father didn't drink at all, not even beer.

This lasted until September. Until my father's birthday, when he came home very drunk for the first time. Staggering, he stepped into the apartment and threw a bunch of flowers mixed from different bouquets on the floor. For the first time in a year and a half, dad made a scandal with beatings and humiliation. It all returned at night, that was exhaling the scent of dying flowers.

The bird, 1988

The beginning of October, warm autumn. We went to Michurine together with father's comrades and their families. There's a river, endless fields, dotted by gophers burrows, huge haystacks, various herbs and lots of boulders, covered by moss.

Men drunk a little. Someone brought pneumatics. Started shooting birds. Several dry suppressed sounds were heard. Birds rushed away. One little grey and yellow bird fell to the ground. Women made a fuss. "What are you doing? Children are here! Enough!". Rifles were hidden, and they returned to alcohol.

In evening when we came home, I had a dead bird in my pocket, wrapped in a burdock leaf. Under her right wing, a little hole was gaping, dried blood around it. In slightly parted beak, a grey-pink tongue was visible. Eyes tightly shut. Dry clawed paws are twisted on the stomach. It had already been frozen. I hid it behind the bed and believed it would come back to life.

Mom counted me out in two days. She noticed that I often look behind the bed. There, in a shoebox, the bird laid, first maggot larvae started moving under her thin violet skin. I put water and bread crumbs beside her. Mom explained, that the animal is dead, started to decay, and it have to be buried.

Late night after we buried the bird in the backyard, mama told dad what happened. And falling asleep I was thinking about the bird. It seemed to me that along with a bird, something died and froze inside myself. That every shot is death and every death leaves no hope for resurrection, it ends up with funeral.

Road from school, 1986

Classes are over. The last one was PT. I don't want to change into school uniform cause it's hot. Going fast, I'll be at home in twenty minutes. But I don't need fast. I go by "rescuing route", which takes several hours. There are plenty of interesting places on the way. First – dense privet bushes near school. Those thickets are teeming with sparrows who like the taste of little black berries. Head is buzzing from the sparrows chirping. Small birds are fighting, messing around in the dust, feeding grown-up fledglings. Other – a wall, tightly entwined with wild green-burgundy grapes. A wall of a house with shattered windows. Red bricks are ruined here and there. Big red ants live here. They scurry up and down the grape trunk. Taking few steps away, you can see how the ants move the plant. Third – high and thick rusty pipe not far from home, that looks like a rocket that stands on a cement pedestal. Rust falls off in flat layers. It has a bit sour metal smell and dirties fingers. One could hide between the fasteners which are the size of me. But my home is a few tens of meters away. And dad will be back home from work very soon...

Goodbyes, 2001

Someone else's house, crowd, no opportunity to come near the coffin. "Move, it's daughter, give a way". It is unusual to see father without military uniform. God, I hated it so. It was necessary to sew tiny buttons to the shirt, many buttons. While adjusting the shoulder straps, you would prick all your fingers to blood. The hated arrows on the trousers you had to iron through wet gauze and breath in damp steam that smelled of wool.

Dad looks solemn and serious. On the bridge of his nose is usual angry wrinkle. The lips, blue from suffocation, are tightly pressed together. The shirts collar slightly overpresses waxy wrinkled neck. Yellow hands with purple nails are folded on the stomach and tied with gauze tape. He is very thin and looks taller than he was in life.

It seems that everyone looks at me. I want to cry, but I can't. I recall the last meeting at house of father's new wife, Liuba. Me and brother both came there every Sunday to visit him. Then dad was already usually nervous about coming late nurse, who gave him morphine injections at home. After the anesthesia, he calmed down. We talked about all sorts of little things. He didn't want to let my brother and I go, but it was getting dark already. On the threshold, when we were putting on our shoes, dad started speaking quickly and quietly, looking at the floor and constantly clearing his throat: "I have been offending you very much, forgive me if you can. Nothing can be fixed now and I cannot be apologized. But forgive me if you can". Tears came to his eyes. I was feeling awkward. Then neither I nor my brother answered father. It was our last conversation. I broke down, tears flowed easily and abundantly. Father and the whole world around disappeared, washed away by tears. Only pure grief remained. Someone near was repeating again and again: "Come, kiss him. This is your father". I sobbed until my cheeks and chin went numb, and my upper lip was swollen and hot. Three short automatic queues in honor of the military man, three handfuls of soil on the lid of the coffin, three people from his past who keep aloof. A dozen shot shiny shell casings next to a fresh grave.

Mom, 1997

Mom's brother, our uncle Stepan, came to visit my mom. They are talking in whispers about grandma's health because drunk dad slept in the next room. Uncle was about to leave already, when father woke up. "Hi, Hrysh, – my uncle greeted in a friendly manner, – How are you?". "Hi", – my father hissed through gritted teeth, – "What is he doing here?" he asked mother right in front of Stepan. "Mom got worse..." mom began making excuses. "I'm very glad," the father cut off and walked away.

My mom casted quick glance at her brother. He fussed and rushed to put on his shoes. "I've told you not to set his foot here, – dad hissed, – What's not clear?". He slapped my mom across the face. Uncle rushed into the room. "Hrysh, why would you do this, huh? Don't. Why are you hitting her? Let's better go have a beer together." Father slowly turned to uncle and punched him in the head. He fell down. A fight broke out. The two men thrashed each other without a sound, bumping into furniture. Every time they approached a coffee table with a big vulgar vase decorated with a bees pattern and an old reed in it, mom shouted in a sharp high-pitched voice: "Careful, what are you doing, be careful, you're gonna break my vase".

Vacation, 1987

Tomorrow we're going to the Azov Sea for 12 days. Mom is packing. Open bags with clothes, dishes, food, and documents are scattered around the apartment. In the corridor, the Chaika centrifuge is rattling. Mom will bring the wet laundry again, and it will hang outside our cabin for a couple of days. She fries cutlets. My brother and I are building new worlds out of wooden cubes in the playroom.

The doorbell rings. The driver is holding my dad. He is drunk as a skunk. Mom takes his shoes off and leads him into the room. Returns to cutlets and laundry. Peace lasts for about an hour. Then dad wakes up. He shouts: "You! Bitch! Come here! What did you say?". Mom comes over. "I didn't say anything. Hrysha, go to sleep. I'll still be getting ready for half a night."

It's quiet for a minute, until a loud scream echoes through the apartment. "Aaaaaaaa, – dad screams, – Aaaaaaaa". My brother and I habitually turn off the lights, run to our beds, and cover ourselves with our heads. Dad is coming down the corridor. He staggers and bumps his shoulders against the furniture. Stands in the doorway and looks at us in the darkness. I tense up, stretch my neck and start to think to myself: "Oh God, oh God, please, just make him go away". It works. He leaves.

The same way he stops in the doorway to the kitchen. One hand on his belt, the other leaning on the doorjamb. "So what?", – he asks. Mom looks at him tiredly. She knows well what will happen next. It's an unchangeable scenario. Whatever she says, he will beat. "Hrysha, go get some rest. I don't have time". His tongue is barely controllable: "Yeah, I see. Go away? Yeah?" Mom speaks quietly: "Hrysho..." "Shut up, bitch! I hate you", – dad interrupts. His eyes are bloodshot, face is contorted. He moves toward my mom. She covers herself with her hands and pleads piteously: "Hrysha, don't." A hit can be heard, another one. My mom yelps and starts crying. "Bitch, bitch, bitch", – each word is a new blow. "Help", – mom shouts. "Shut it, fool" another blow. I can't take it anymore. I run to the kitchen. I'm scared, but I have to do something because mom's asking for help. "Dad, don't!" He smiles: "Oh, the protector has come. So what's next?". I don't know what's next. Mom is sitting on the floor, holding her lower back. Her eyes are swollen, her face is red and wet with tears, upper lip is trembling. She looks so charmless. "So, what's next, huh?", – dad asks again. I start feeling sick. "You're all against me!", – he tries to grab me. I run away and close the door. My brother helps me hold it. My father jerks and jerks until it opens. There's nowhere else to run. Dad hits me on the back with a wide swing. My breath is caught, it hurts very much. I fall to my knees. I see tears dripping onto the carpet. I see a fleecy

pattern, small debris – threads, feathers, crumbs, and a spotted red ladybug crawling a little further along the carpet. The blows continue. I hear my loud long scream. Mom runs in. “Don't touch her, get away!”. She wraps me and covers me with her body. I feel her body tense up and prepare for strike. But dad turns around and leaves. “Fuck you...”, – he says. Mom starts shaking from silent sobs. “Mommy, don't cry”, – my brother says and starts stroking her hair. I feel it stinging and tugging between my shoulder blades. The first round is over. There are two or three more to go this night.

Zone, 1989

Many times I was in my dad's office. A long table of the “T” letter shape, green worn chairs, two telephones, an ashtray always full of Prima cigarette butts, some magazines and papers on the table. The place smelled of cigarette smoke and dust. I always wondered what was behind the huge dirty-blue metal gates with bundles of barbed wire on top. They opened automatically with a sharp metallic sound, letting out and in trucks and “bobcats” of a khaki colour. But dad always said: “It's a zone. Children don't belong there. You can't go there.” But one day father asked me: “Do you want to go with me beyond the gate?”. Do I want to? Sure thing! “Then you have to get up at six in the morning, – father remarked, – you sleep in, I'll go without you”.

When we approached the big gates on a foggy autumn morning, my heart was pounding like crazy. Dad was filling out papers at the window for a long time. Finally, the door to the left of the gate clicked and we entered a long corridor, protected by a double layer of lattice. Like a cage within a cage. On both sides there were soldiers with guns and shepherd, who were barking loudly non-stop. The bright light of the searchlights surrounded by myriads of gnats hurt my eyes. In the rays of light, I could see saliva splashing from the dogs' mouths as if from a sprayer. My eyes are blinded and nothing is visible behind the searchlights. I was not allowed to go further than the room of the officer on duty, where I stayed to wait for dad. I drank tea with bagels and thought about whether the people working in the zone were like those shepherd, trained to kill without hesitation.

The wind, 1988

Everyone had gone to the after-school groups to do their homework, and the schoolyard emptied. I stayed sitting on a low fence in the shade of an old maple tree. The autumn sun was pleasantly heating, and a warm strong wind rose up dust, chased fallen leaves on the asphalt, and helped small spiders migrate on long strands of web.

In the middle of the schoolyard, wind moved a large dry brown maple leaf. As it moved, it made a scratching sound. The leaf looked like a dinosaur or a wonderful giraffe on thick legs with a very thin neck and small head.

I watched the leaf move for a long time, as if hypnotized, and it began to seem to me that it was alive. The leaf would fall on its side, then turn over on its back, then rise to its feet again, then lean forward. It was big and heavy, and even strong gusts of wind could not lift it into the air. As the leaf moved from place to place, smaller autumn leaves danced in circles around it. Sometimes the wind would die down, then the leaf would slowly sway from side to side, preparing to run further.

The leaf seemed very lonely. It reminded me of myself. I, too, have always been unable to join in the easy joint movement of children at school and in the yard, I had almost no friends, and I did not find understanding in my family either. I got up, carefully picked up the leaf by its long stem, and went home. For several weeks it stood on a bookshelf behind the glass until someone crushed it, turning it into golden dust.

A photo, 1995

On the third day after my grandfather's funeral, I put his photo in the closet. I put a piece of black cardboard on the bottom right side. Grandpa loved messing with us when we were very small. He told funny and scary stories, made up fairy tales, and took us to the local pond. He died at the age of seventy-six from a hemorrhage three weeks after the New Year holidays.

“Put it away!”, – Dad was tipsy, but not too drunk. “Dad, let it stand for a month at least”, – I put down the test and look at my dad. “I said, put it away!”, – he grabs the photo and starts crumpling and tearing it along with the cardboard frame. “Dad, no, give it back”, – I pick up the crumpled photo and try to smooth it. A lump forms in my throat, eyes are blurred by tears. There is a deep crease in the middle of the photo. It can't be smoothed out yet.

“Why are you crying? He's not worth it, – father tugs on my arm painfully, – Do you hear?”. I am overwhelmed with indignation and anger. I put the crumpled photo on the shelf and go on preparing for the session. “Why

didn't you put my parents here?", – he tears the photo again, tearing off the upper right corner. Blinded by anger, I scream in my father's face: "I hate you!".

It seems to me that I am a bystander. I stand by the closet and watch what is happening on the red and green carpet. Dad pushed me down to the floor, put his knee on my neck and is holding my wrists with his left hand. With his right fist, he hits my left temple hard. The blows reverberate in my head like an echo. It only hurts when the fist hits my head. I do not scream. I see a dark marker pen, fallen into the two-week-old dust under a large three-door cabinet. The legs of the cabinet are firmly connected by a thick white cobweb. Maybe somewhere in a corner its owner hides – a spider with long, clumsy legs.

I hear my brother's frightened scream: "Dad, what are you doing?". Father abruptly lets go of me. I sit up, my head dizzy, nauseous, everything floats in front of my eyes. I feel humiliation. My head feels like cotton wool. Brother brings water and helps me lie down.

After half an hour of half-forgetfulness, a decision comes to me. I pack my things in a small red sports bag. I take my books, notes, and all the money I have. I tell my brother that I'm leaving home to live with grandma. He's confused. "Wait for mom, – he says, – don't do anything stupid". I get dressed and leave. Everything feels like a dream.

The next day at the hospital, I find out that I have a brain concussion. The third one in my short life already. I take vascular medication for a month, sleep a lot and finally feel safe.

In half a year, my father comes to visit. I hide from him under a blanket with my head covered. He gets down on his knees, asks for forgiveness, calls me to come back home, even cries, it seems, kisses my feet. I keep silent and remember loud echoes of each blow in my head.

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