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Olena Kudaeva

One Day

A drama

Translated by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

CHARACTERS:

Nina Hryhorivna — 77 years old, retired

Maksym — 45 years old, her son

A one-room, rented apartment in a small town of the Donetsk region. The year is 2022.

I burst into the morning in wet panties. It's about six a.m., and once again I didn't make it to the toilet. After changing my panties, I take my antidepressants according to schedule. I can't eat for another hour, and I'm trembling. My sugar is on the rise. I pour warm water out of the kettle, my hands shaking, the kettle banging against my mug, although I don't hear the sound it makes. The silence is such that I think my eardrums will pop from the pressure. I warm up my hearing aid, and put it on.

I need to wash up, and brush my teeth. But I can't make myself do it, and I go back to bed again. I feel the bed shake from the movements of the elevator. I start my morning routines; no, they are rather rituals. I take my nose drops so as to breathe, and my eyedrops so I don't go blind altogether. I measure my blood pressure. A black blood pressure monitor, like a huge electronic watch, vibrates on my left wrist. My blood pressure is up. I rattle off a short morning prayer. Followed by my autogenic training. I repeat everything my psychotherapist taught me: "I have the strength to keep living. My body is filled with energy. The world needs me. I must get out of bed, eat and wash." And so it goes, ten times in a row. But still I lie in bed. Autogenic training has done nothing for me for a long time. I don't even know why I do it every day. It's just a habit, something automatic.

Every morning begins the same way: I run quickly to the toilet, remove my wet panties, throw them in the wash, and wash my hands thoroughly. On the way back to bed, I put on my glasses and examine myself carefully in a large, full-length mirror. Narrow, half-blind eyes, my mouth drooping at the corners, deep wrinkles from my flared nostrils to the corners of my lips, gray hair hanging straight down to my shoulders, saggy breasts, and a huge round stomach covered by an old, faded nightgown, out from under which protrude skinny legs blue from varicose veins stuffed into tattered slippers. I feel all of that at once. I turn away. I look at the

only photo my son brought me from Donetsk. In it I am 30 years old. A black and white portrait with long, wavy hair, big, shining eyes, high cheekbones, and slim white hands. Was I really ever like that?

Each morning I must decide why I will live today. You must find a way to get out of bed. It has to be something important. Today, I really need to wipe off the two weeks of dust that lies in a thick layer on my old furniture. Nice try. But, I go back to bed again. I slowly examine the bed sheets, which my son also brought from my home in Donetsk. They are already visibly dirty — shades of gray with spots. Memories flood into my head. My life before 2014. Donetsk. Trips to the supermarket. Walks with a friend in the area around the Donbas Arena. The smell of freshly cut grass. Towering photographs of soccer players in their black and orange striped uniforms. White lumps of poplar fluff building up against the curbs. The squeal of the Number Two trolleybus trundling down the center of Artiom Street. The smell of vanilla and fresh baked goods on Polygraph Street. The polished cobblestones of Ilyich Avenue. The smell of the Kalmius River with its swamps and algae. The racket and hustle-bustle of the market at the train station. A flea market in front of the railway institute filled with copper products, Soviet badges, CDs and scarves knitted by grandmothers. Here come the tears. I feel sorry for myself. I gradually fall asleep. I wake up again with a feeling of hunger tugging unpleasantly at my stomach. The clock says it's 1 p.m. I have to eat. I lower my right leg, and lift myself up on the pillows. I get up quickly. I feel dizzy. I turn on the TV. A news channel. I read the news ticker for five minutes. I turn it off. On my way to the kitchen, I approach a cage with rats that my grandson gave me to brighten up my life. I talk gently to the animals: "My little babies. My sweetie-pies. You're hungry too." My voice sounds strange through the hearing aid, as if I'm underwater. The rats clamor around the cage door as they tumble over one another, and sniff the air. I give them some niblets of dog food, which they grab greedily. They jerk their heads and run to opposite ends of the cage. I hear them gnawing loudly.

I go to the kitchen. I get two eggs. I turn on the inverter cooker. It clicks, hums and smells like burnt plastic. I put the frying pan on it, and it heats up instantly. I make scrambled eggs, fried on both sides, with no runny egg whites. I turn on the kettle.

I look out the window. It's foggy and gray outside. People, looking like insects from the height of the fifth floor, lean forward as they walk into a strong wind. I turn to the murky darkness of my apartment which resembles an aquarium. It smells of dampness, urine, dirty laundry, and scrambled eggs. Gray clouds of dust are piled in the corners. The neighbor's dog barks loudly. An incoming call whistles sharply. I hate that sound. I shake it off and go to open the door. My son has come. He brought medicine and the food I asked for.

Maksym: Hi, mom!

My son smiles, hugs me and kisses me on the cheek. He bends down and places the bags on the floor. A large flat phone protrudes from his back pocket.

Nina Hryhorivna: Hello, Max. Why didn't you open it yourself? Forget your keys again? You know how I hate ringing telephones.

Maksym: Yeah, sorry. (Takes off his shoes, takes the bags, goes to the kitchen.) How are you?

Nina Hryhorivna: Bad. My joints ache, my head is splitting. I only just got up. My blood pressure is up. You should put your phone in a safer place. You'll lose it, or someone will steal it. Anyway, why is your jacket so short? It's cold. Your waist isn't covered. You'll catch a cold.

Maksym: Mom, everything is fine. Let's look what I brought you. Here, Angelina sent this for you.

Maksym hands me my favorite nut paste, which, most likely, he bought for me himself. I accept his gift pretending not to guess his ruse. Let it be as he wants.

Nina Hryhorivna: Thank you. Come, sit down. Do you want to eat, or just have tea?

Maksym: Let's just have tea.

My son unpacks the bags. Puts the food in the refrigerator. Puts the medicine on the table. Washes his hands. Sets out cups. Pours the tea.

Nina Hryhorivna: How is Mykyta? Is he attending school, or studying online?

Maksym: The boy is good. He goes to school. Second shift. (My son sits opposite me, lowers his eyes, clears his throat.) Mom, I wanted to ask you... Come live with us for seven to ten days. You can talk to your grandson. We can go for walks together. Angelina and I talked about it and we decided...

Nina Hryhorivna: Oh, I know all about this. They talked and decided everything for me! (I spit out every word, break into a hysterical scream.) Your mother means nothing to you! You know I am sick! You know I can't be upset! But you constantly rattle my nerves. Even Doxepin doesn't help. I'd rather die! Lord, take me now.

Maksym freezes, pulls his head into his shoulders, looks at the wall. I am deeply ashamed. I want to stop and say how much I love him. But I can't. I start sniffing. I take out a dirty handkerchief, and I sob loudly. I look askance at my son's reaction. He sits and waits for me to end my performance. Waves of anger and self-hatred wash over me. I am frightened. I tell myself this is not me, it is my sickness. The pause lasts five minutes. You can only hear us taking turns sipping tea.

Nina Hryhorivna: Take me to Donetsk. Let's go at least to the first checkpoint at Deneeriv, or to Lenin Square in the city. I can't stay here anymore. We've been drifting for eight years. I want to go home.

Maksym: Mom, we've talked about that. More than once.

Nina Hryhorivna: So, let's talk about it again.

Maksym: Why? Nothing has changed.

Nina Hryhorivna: True, nothing has changed. But how long has this been going on? Eight years? A little less, yes? And nothing has changed. I feel bad here. A strange city, a strange apartment, strange people, everything is strange.

Maksym: Mom, you cannot survive there on your own. Your pension is three thousand hryvnias. I won't be able to visit you often. It's difficult to wire money to you there. How will you go to the store by yourself? Buy medicines? There are no decent medicines there, all the doctors are gone. Everything there is different now. Why do you cling to Donetsk, anyway?

Nina Hryhorivna: It's my home. It's where my ancestors are buried. Mother and Father are buried there. How many years have passed since we went to the cemetery? I don't remember anymore. I imagine what it must be like there. The leaves and the grass. It's probably so overgrown I wouldn't recognize it. Or maybe we wouldn't find any graves there at all.

Maksym: It's not safe there. (Speaks quietly.) I showed you a photo from my last trip. The tails of rockets are sticking up out of the ground. We have to think about the living. You have a grandson. And us, too.

We are silent. My son finishes his tea without looking at me. He stands. Shifts from foot to foot.

Maksym: It's time for me to go. I still have to go back to work.

He goes to the door. Puts on his shoes, puts on his backpack. He carefully takes out his wallet, takes out two five-hundred hryvnia notes, and puts them on the entryway table.

Maksym: Bye, Mom. Don't be sick. (Hugs me and goes out into the vestibule).

Nina Hryhorivna: Maksym, I will think about when I can come stay with you. The main thing is to avoid getting sick. Give Mykyta a hug and a kiss from me. Hello to Angelina.

My son stops abruptly, turns and smiles weakly.

Maksym: Okay, mom. I'll pass on your hellos. I'll stop by again on Friday. We'll talk.

I go to the bathroom for a cloth to wipe the dust off with. It would be good to clean things again. I wipe a thick layer from the TV screen. I notice a hole in the left shoulder of my nightgown. I'll have to sew that up.

My back starts to hurt. I sit in a chair to rest. I look at the dark TV screen. I missed a small triangle of dust in the left corner. It's too early to turn on the TV. It's coming up on four in the afternoon. I am thinking about my future trip to my son's. I want and don't want to go at the same time. I will have to get up every day at eight in the morning, wash myself immediately, get dressed, and have breakfast. That's awkward in front of my daughter-in-law and grandson. Discipline frightens me.

I haven't seen Mykyta since the New Year holidays. It's been almost two months. My grandson has grown older, he's grown long bangs that fall over his eyes. Mykyta loves me, but he doesn't really want to stay with me. He has witnessed my attacks several times, when I screamed out loud, and scratched my face.

Today I noticed how old my son has become. He has turned gray and soft. God, how I love him. Sometimes, I even call my grandson Max. But my son has become a stranger. It's good we have completely different characters. For some reason, I remember how I left my son with my husband once for a half a day to go somewhere on chores. When I came home I found Max under the heat radiator with his lips and nose bleeding. His white T-shirt was splattered with drops of blood. His drunken father was sleeping and snoring loudly in the room. Maksym started stuttering after that. He still has bouts of stuttering, especially when he is worried or angry. He never recalled or talked about that day. I still don't know what happened.

I fall asleep in the chair. Sometimes I can sleep the whole night through in front of the TV. I dream that I plant dark green beans on the graves of my parents. They have huge yellow pods and red flowers that fall at the slightest touch. I dig holes so deep that sometimes the shovel knocks on the lid of the caskets. Sleep really frightens me. I wake up feeling anxiety and guilt.

It's half-past-seven in the evening. I decide to eat some borscht. I have no appetite at all. I look out the dark window. A man is walking his big black dog under a streetlamp. A light rain is falling. I remember my first dog, a small terrier with big moist eyes and trembling paws. My parents gave it to me for my 18th birthday. I was so surprised that my mother agreed to take on a dog. She could not stand animals in the house. Cartoon. I called him Cartoon. He lived with us for several years before escaping through a hole in the fence.

After dinner, I get dressed and go to the balcony to collect the laundry. I sew up a hole in a sock. I feed the rats. Dust the closet and the bookshelves. I notice a red and yellow book. It was a gift from my son. Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere*. I sit down to read. I fall asleep.

Around eight o'clock in the evening I am awakened by the sharp sound of an air drill. A week ago, the downstairs neighbor was changing pipes in the bathroom. We had to let the plumbers in the apartment, who trampled through the corridors and bathrooms. After that, I didn't open the door for them again.

I turn on the TV. My son equipped me with digital TV, but I only watch three channels out of 200: news, TV shows, and old movies with subtitles. I can't hear the sound of the TV even with my hearing aid. I read the news ticker. The main news today is that Putin recognized the breakaway republics, Ivan Dziuiba died, there are new statistics on patients with COVID, and something about Eurovision 2022. Everyone is worried. I am anxious too. I nervously switch channels until I come across a show about overweight people slimming down. They undergo gastric resections, and are prescribed a diet and psychotherapy. If they want to stay in the program, they are expected to lose 35 to 45 pounds a month. Not everyone can do that. I think about my own habit of stress-eating bread and gingerbread at night, and I fall asleep again.

I wake up from a sharp pain in my right hand, which is swollen. A movie about detectives investigating a murder is playing on TV. They study a girl's corpse and create hypotheses about what happened. The clock says 11:30 p.m. I never got around to wiping the dust on the windowsills, or the large lacquered table. Out of habit I'm holding the small remote control in my left hand. I turn off the TV. I finally decide to wash and brush my teeth. I take off my hearing aid. I fill a basin with warm water. I feel better after washing. I think I have washed away tons of dirt.

The clock says 12:15 a.m. The day is over. I tear off a leaf from the calendar hanging over the table. February 24. World Engineering Day, International Bartender Day, Unity Day in Ukraine, St. Vlas Day, name days for Dmytro, Fiodor, Zakhar, Vsevolod, and Gavril.

I hope today will be better than the previous almost eight years. I close my eyes, and whisper my prayers.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

As we forgive our debtors.

Do not lead us into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

Amen.