

THE DAMN BITTER TRUTH

A Play in One Act

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1

In front of the camera stands Georgii, adorned in a woman's dress and a wig.

VOICE (OFF SCREEN). When you're ready, press the "record" button. To stop, simply press the "pause" button.

Georgii removes the wig and then presses the record button.

GEORGII. People fall in love instantly, within the first five seconds. One, two, three, four, five. Bam! (*Looks at the clock*) Five seconds! Did you feel that "bam"? My name is Georgii. When I was a kid, I dreamed of learning the language of dolphins. Now, I work as a taxi driver. I'm wearing a dress I call "Sweet Lies", but I swear I won't lie. I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me, Lord.

Georgii's mobile phone rings, prompting him to quickly press the "Pause" button.

GEORGII (*into the phone*). Sorry, darling, in the middle of something. Let's catch up later. Bye.

He turns off the phone.

GEORGII. I'm craving a smoke, but I've quit...

He sighs deeply, then hits "Record."

GEORGII. Alright.

He sighs heavily before finally pressing the record button.

GEORGII. I'm tired of living a double life, of constantly lying and then fearing the truth will be exposed. Yes, I confess, I am a coward. Terrified, desperately so, of the truth. Perhaps it's because the truth was force-fed to me in my formative years, primarily by my Grandpa.

At the tender age of four, he shattered my innocence with a single sentence: "Georgii, there is no Santa Claus. So no matter what wish you make at the stroke of midnight, come morning, there will be a sweater under the Christmas tree." The bitter truth!

On the eve of December 31st, as the clock struck twelve, I fervently wished for that sweater.

By the time I turned eight, another revelation: “Your beloved dog didn’t run away, as your Grandma claimed. Sirko passed away due to kidney failure, and I laid him to rest behind the fence.” Grandpa pointed to a small mound, marking the burial spot. Another bitter truth!

I adorned it with flowers in mourning.

Then, at eleven, Grandpa’s voice carried a new weight of despair: “Dad didn’t just vanish to work, as Grandma insisted. He committed a grave crime, and now he faces the consequences – prison.”

That evening, Grandpa took me to the detention center, a month later - to court, two months later - to prison. The bitter truth! It tastes salty, like tears. Or like blood. Because while you listen to it, you clench your teeth hard, biting your cheek, which then heals slowly, constantly reminding you of its presence.

I decorated the bitter truth with abundant tears, and it grew within me, piercing my insides with its stems. Grandma comforted me, stroking my head. She said, “Better a bitter truth than a sweet lie.”

At the time, I wanted to send this truth to hell and desperately, uncompromisingly lie!

“Did you wash your hands?”

“Of course I did!”

“Did you do the test?”

“Of course I did!”

“Do you love me?”

“...”

Her name was Tamara. She was beautiful and she wanted me.

“I love you, Tamara!”

Of course, I didn’t love her, but I was 18, and most importantly, I believed that lying would make the world a better place. I met Tamara for three months - only at her place, only during the day, until she told me, “I’m in the pudding club!”

“What for? To ruin my life?”

Tamara was planning and dreaming, and I was drinking. She was choosing a dress, and I was hitting the bottle. She was thinking about moving - and I was hitting the bottle heavily, because I knew I didn’t need this child.

That day we were resting by the river. The sun was shining, Tamara was drilling:

“You’re not paying attention!”

And I heard:

“There is no Santa Claus!”

It felt like Tamara was cutting through me with a saw:

“You don’t think about the future!”

And I heard:

“Your dog died.”

Tamara’s words felt like she was chopping with an axe:

“You don’t love me!”

And I heard:

“Your father took his own life in prison, all because of the truth.”

I got angry and dived from the tower into the water. She got angry and dived after me. She didn’t think; she was only 18. Impulse! A bump. Then a scream.

“Quick! Call 911!”

And I distinctly heard:

“Get ready to be a dad.”

Eight hours later, I became the father of a six-month-old daughter. She weighed less than a kilo, and that was a bad sign.

We were immediately warned:

“Her internal organs could be immature.”

We were intimidated:

“Her lungs might not open.”

We were persuaded:

“Leave her alone. She might end up in a vegetative state.”

The bloody bitter truth!

Tamara did not have a grandfather who poured poison into her ear almost every day since she was a little girl. Tamara was frightened:

“Why aren’t you saying anything? It’s better to abandon her – we’re not ready for this!”

I looked at Tamara and thought:

What if I had wished for an airplane instead of a sweater under the tree? Maybe I would have found a plane! What if Grandpa was just an old fucking goat?

The sun was scorching, and Tamara was drilling. I didn’t say anything.

“You can’t even take care of yourself!”

“I really can’t! It’s the bitter truth.”

I went to see her one last time. A tiny creature in a box.

The nurse said:

“You can’t take her in your arms!”

I was relieved.

I immediately remembered Grandpa’s mug, which I broke to pieces, and many, many other fragile things that I had also broken. I didn’t want to shatter her too. But if I refused, would it mean that I would break her anyway? Poison her with the truth? How much does she need? She doesn’t even weigh a kilo...

I recalled the concerns about her lungs, about the possibility of her being left in a vegetative state, but despite it all, I couldn’t.

I called her Victoria.

“You idiot!” Grandpa cursed, threatening to sign his house over to my brother.

And I persisted:

“That’s exactly what I wished for under the Christmas tree!”

Grandpa, incensed and boiling with anger, yelled:

“Get out of the house!”

But I kept on:

“That’s precisely what I wished for under the Christmas tree!”

Grandpa flushed red with embarrassment and swung his stick.

It turned out Grandpa had a heart, but unfortunately, it wasn’t working properly. I didn’t know how to mend his ailing heart, and the ambulance didn’t arrive in time. We laid Grandpa to rest in the old cemetery. A month later, Grandma passed on, leaving me bereft of the comforting touch of someone stroking my head.

I secured a job as a taxi driver, hung a swing from a tree, and purchased a stroller. The sun shone brightly, Tamara kept pestering, and Vika was growing up. And through it all, I couldn’t help but ponder: when will happiness come knocking at our door?

Finances were tight. Vika beamed, while Tamara fell silent. And amidst it all, I couldn’t help but wonder: maybe this is happiness?

Winter arrived. Vika’s very first word was “dad”. Tamara took offense and left. “How will we manage?” I asked, cradling Vika in my arms.

In response, my daughter peed on my trousers. I laughed, then I cried, then I laughed again. And in that moment, amidst the laughter and the tears, I realised: this was the beginning of our life together.

2

GEORGII. So, I became a single father, driving solo passengers in my taxi with my daughter Vika in a child seat next to them. That's how we lived for the first three years. She had the thrill of exploring the world, while I was stuck with no personal life, consumed by fatigue and apathy. Then came kindergarten. She had drawings, hedgehogs made of cones, and autumn-winter-spring holidays. Meanwhile, I had taxi - home - taxi.

And then there were those looks!

Compassionate looks that only women can give. They would follow us in the shop, on the playground, at a holiday event - always brimming with sympathy.

With pity in their eyes, they would ask:

“Is your wife dead?”

I would lie and say she died of cancer, during childbirth, or from a heart defect. Sometimes I'd tell them she jumped out a window or drank herself to death.

They would gasp and then offer to help:

“Would you like me to cook for you?”

“Would you like my daughter's old clothes?”

“Would you like me to be intimate with you?”

They seemed to favor compassionate sex the most.

This turned into a sort of trap, as these women assumed a single father couldn't say “No”. He had no right. And so this forced intimacy began, creating a distance greater than any war could. I'm unsure what they're fighting for in this battle. I battled against the truth. The truth about who I am.

The mobile phone rings. Georgii presses the pause button.

GEORGII (*into the phone*). Amiran, yeah, I called. Hey, can you pick Vika up from school today? If she cries, buy her ice cream. Thanks.

Georgii hangs up his mobile phone.

GEORGII (*to himself*). Sweet ice cream instead of the bitter truth (*into the phone*). I'm considering starting smoking again... No, I'll hold off. Vika hates it when I smoke.

Georgii turns to the camera and presses the record button.

GEORGII. I was exhausted from pity sex, so I joined a club for single dads where I could be honest. There, I met Amiran, who had twins and whose wife had died of an overdose. It felt like this was my life: me with my daughter, Amiran with his Daniel and Natella, and a world filled with “women” who offered themselves out of pity.

I stopped trusting these women. I even began to look at my daughter and wonder:

“Will she become like them?”

At the time, I had no idea that I would end up wearing the dress myself. I was clueless about everything back then.

It happened on August 23rd. Victoria was almost seven and was riding a swing with Natella. Amiran asked:

“Have you enrolled Vika in school?”

“I forgot!”

I ran to the nearest school, persuaded the principal, and explained the situation:

“I am a single parent!”

She sympathized, a tear trickling down her cheek. I stepped into the corridor to avoid being overwhelmed by the waves of pity.

The principal sobbed and suggested:

“Go to room twelve, your teacher is there.”

I headed to the class, armed with a worn-out story:

“Her mother left us, I’m raising her alone, I’m exhausted.”

I was prepared for another act of compassion at a school desk.

What I wasn’t prepared for was falling in love.

People fall in love instantly, in the first five seconds. One, two, three, four, five. Bam!

3

GEORGII. Her name was Maria. She taught my daughter to read and restored my ability to trust. This was precisely what I longed for as a child, even before my mother got sick: to feel happiness. We sat by the sea, and I held my mother's hand, wondering: why is she so warm and soft? That autumn, I experienced my paradise again.

Amiran said Maria and I were alike. He believed it was a good sign, the key to a long life together!

The sun was shining, but Maria never complained.

Vika called her “Masha”.

I called her “my beloved”.

Vika wanted to call her “Mom”, while I wished to call her “my wife”.

But she wanted to take a tour.

Maria said:

“I’m off with my girlfriends to have some fun!”

“What’s the point of this excursion? It’s five hundred kilometres away!”

She smiled:

“I’m seeking new experiences”.

I couldn’t resist her. Her smile melted me. My kisses melted her. Vika melted knowing we were a family now.

We were a family.

A call came in the middle of the night.

A cold voice spoke through the phone:

“A tour bus flipped over. Seventeen fatalities, three survivors, and one in a coma.”

She’s in a coma. Maria.

I can’t recall how I wound up at the hospital. Tubes, IV drips, urgent surgery. I’m sitting on a hard chair in the corridor, waiting anxiously.

I hate myself.

I hate her.

I hate excursions.

Sitting on that hard chair in the corridor, I made a decision: we’re having a wedding, living happily ever after, and no more new experiences! I held tightly to the thread of my happiness.

And then came the “however”.

Emerging from the operating room, the surgeon stated:

“We’ve done everything possible, however....”

With the thread cut, my happiness fluttered off, leaving nothing but bitter truth behind.

Why aren’t there punching bags in hospital corridors? I’d punch them. Or gymnastic mats! I would’ve crashed onto them. Instead, I sat silently on that hard chair, resenting the excursions. But what did excursions have to do with it? They were pointless. In reality, I hated myself.

Only myself.

For losing her.

“It’s important you rest. Go back home.”

I don’t think the nurse was all that worried about my rest. She probably just didn’t want to see me sitting there on that hard chair, unable to speak.

I walked away.

Meanwhile, Vika was at home, peppering me with questions:

“Where’s Masha? Is she alright? Is she okay or what?”

Not a word escaped my lips.

“Dad!”

Not a word.

Tears streamed down Vika’s face.

“Is Masha dead?” questioned my daughter.

I can’t handle it when she’s crying!

“Is she dead?”

Vika’s tears make me ready for anything.

Even if it means lying.

Anything else, but not tears.

Anything but these damn bitter tears that wrench my gut.

“She’s still in the hospital!” I lie.

Me!

The one who hoped for a sweater under the Christmas tree.

Me!

The one who wanted to call Maria my wife.

There’s still the task of informing her mother about her beloved’s demise, delivering her attire to the morgue, and organizing the funeral paperwork. Who will do it?

Me!

I shouldn’t be dishonest with my daughter!

I’m the one who deceives!

I moved Vika to a different school to distance her from Maria’s coworkers. From their compassionate stares. From the bitter truth.

“Masha is still in the hospital, in a coma! Taste your sweet lies, daughter. What do you make of it?”

Is it tasty?

From that moment on, everything went from bad to worse.

Vika asked:

“Dad, may I go to the hospital as well?”

The sun was shining, Vika was nagging - my daughter clearly inherited that trait from her mother.

I was trying to find a way to refuse her a hospital visit, but she persisted:

“Is Masha dead?”

“What makes you say that?”

“That’s what the aunt who used to come over to cook borsch at our house mentioned to me.”

This is compassion in practice!

“Masha is not dead!” I said out loud.

I’m not sure why those words came out of my mouth!

Why do I keep lying all the time?

“You’ll see,” I assured my daughter. “Tomorrow, we’ll go to the hospital together. You’ll see it firsthand. But first, let’s go to Amiran’s. You can play with Natella!”

The children will play, and we’ll drink until morning! Because there’s nothing else we can do. Because then everything will go to hell.

4

GEORGII. It was cold the next morning when we hurried to the hospital. I was carrying a bag containing a woman’s wig and Masha’s dress, the very one she had passed away in. I had carefully washed it to remove the blood stains and kept it in my closet as a remembrance.

Georgii adjusts the dress on himself.

A dress “a sweet lie”.

At the hospital, I sorted everything out, then in the ward, I donned the dress and wig. The nurse hooked me up to a ventilator, taped over the tubes to hide my face as much as possible, placed a saline drip into my vein, and called for Vika.

I lay there, praying with all my heart.

“Let her hold on to this lie. After all, our all-night drinking with Amiran wasn’t in vain! It was precisely at six in the morning that his words came back to me:

“You and Marie looked so much alike! That's a very good omen! It signifies lastingness!”

The nurse left Vika with me for five minutes. I felt my daughter's warm tears on the cheek, sensed the depth of her love, and realized I had no right to take that love away from her!

I have no choice but to lie!

The money for the ward, the additional visits, and this sweet hell commenced.

I felt terrible. Initially, I thought it was due to the cheating. I was losing track of the days, I quit my job, and I barely cooked. Amiran suggested I get tested, while Vika was busy making cranes.

“Why do you need so many cranes?”

“I'm going to make ten thousand cranes, and then Masha will get better!”

“Who told you that?”

“I read it on the internet!”

“The internet...”

I went to Amiran. At first, I drank in silence, then I screamed for a long time.

“On the internet! Why would anyone write that? Bring me that liar, I'll cut off his hands!”

Georgii presses the pause button.

GEORGII That's it. I can't stand it anymore! Who am I deceiving? I love smoking!

He takes his time smoking, enjoying every moment, and then hits the record button.

GEORGII This entry is probably the only drop of bitter truth in the entire internet's barrel of rubbish and honey. By the way, honey is pollen consumed and regurgitated by bees. Pollen! Here's another truth you don't want to think about when you're enjoying a slice of “Honey Cake”.

This damn bitter truth!

Because Masha is only part of the story.

The real problem is me.

I'm declining.

Physically.

I told you that I took tests... The kind that cost a lot of money and take forever to get the results. And if the results are positive, people cry with grief. And if the results are negative, they cry with happiness.

I'm crying with grief.

I've stumbled upon the bitter truth again, like a peppercorn in a soup.

A damn peppercorn.

And then there's Vika and the cranes... She has already made 9,567 pieces. She believes this will cure Masha. And I don't know what to do with all this. How can I resurrect the dead? Or at least stop myself from dying!

Perhaps the medicine that makes my hair fall out and my teeth deteriorate will help me. I say, maybe it will! No one gives guarantees. But there are chances. And if it doesn't, I will die in a year.

What memories will I leave behind?

There aren't many alternatives.

A father who passed away on the 8th of Mar

A deceased father on her ninth birthday.

Or, if fate spares me and the tumor doesn't claim me in the spring, then my daughter will have a deceased father by New Year's.

No matter how you look at it, it's bitter.

What should I do?

Should I implore Vika to give me back those darn cranes?

Or should I finally come clean with her? Drop her a message on Viber, somewhere between emojis and hearts? And also let her know that Santa Claus isn't real. It's our job as parents to shatter illusions.

Georgii looks at his watch, presses the pause button, dials a number.

GEORGII (*into the phone*). Vika, are you free? Listen, darling, I need to talk about Marie... It's important! How much is it? Ten thousand?! Oh! Congratulations! I'm so proud of you! Me?.. No, I didn't need anything. I just called. Really! Shhhh.

Georgii hangs up the phone, crying.

GEORGII. Ten thousand! She did it.

Tomorrow, Masha is going to come out of the coma.

Georgii exhales heavily, presses the record button.

GEORGII: People fall in love instantly, within the first five seconds. One, two, three, four, five. Bam! (*Pointing at the clock*) Five seconds! Did you catch that "bam"?

I am worn out by the illness. I am disheartened with life. I have become lost in this deception. But! As long as I still have "now", I will confess! I will complete this video...

I was so scarcely loved! Almost none at all. Until I turned three, it was my mother. Then a bit, it was my Grandpa, and just for three months - Maria. That's how fleeting my joy was. And all I

crave so intensely are those five seconds, and then - bam! But no. Instead, I'm drifting in a sea of global falsehoods, where I'm cloaked in increasingly complex shades of truth.

My name is Georgii. When I was a kid, I dreamed of learning the language of dolphins, but now I work as a taxi driver. I'm wearing a dress I call a "sweet lie", but I wasn't lying. I was telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth...

Tomorrow, I will confront the Apocalypse. Ten thousand cranes will soar from my hospital room window. Alongside them, my daughter's trust in me will perish. Christ and I cannot resurrect anyone. I can't even heal myself, let alone others... All I know is how to deceive.

But I have my "today", sitting here in front of this camera, and I confess - I don't want to lie anymore. But I also don't want this damn bitter truth!

Because nobody wants this damn bitter truth!

Because what we all really need is just one thing - genuine, true, damn love.

Georgii presses the pause button.

The end

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