

Someone Else's Child, My Child

Not Quite an Introduction

Since she broke her leg, it hasn't healed properly, and she's been bedridden for the past two weeks.

'If anything happens to her, the child will be taken to an orphanage,' - the girls from the bank told me as we were having coffee. 'All her relatives refused to take her.'

'She's good at every kind of *'untidy activity'*, and whoever isn't too lazy makes her work for a single plate of food', the girls said angrily. We've brought her sweets so many times, but she never takes them. She thinks she doesn't deserve anything if we don't make her do something in return...'

I glanced at my husband, sitting nearby, pretending to read the newspaper he had just bought, frowning as if not listening. My husband is from Khevsureti. You wouldn't easily notice if he's upset, nor would you easily see joy on his face. If you ever want to see him happy, you'll have to follow him into the nearby woods and watch how his face lights up with delight when he looks at the grafts he has made on the wild pear trees. Everyone fights the natural disasters brought by climate change in their own way. My husband—an engineer and economist from Khevsureti—does it like this: he goes out, lies down—this 140-kilogram man—at the base of a tree, and grafts. More than once, I've rushed to him, thinking he had fallen. But no—he lies there, gently breathing life into the earth, calmly wrapping a bud to the tree with a ribbon, tying it tightly so that the foreign piece might take root. Then he walks around to check on them—how they're doing, whether they're happy or struggling. He never says, 'It died.' He says, 'It's having a hard time,' or 'It couldn't quite make it.' Once, he soaked the seeds of a large chestnut species for three months, wrapped in cloth. They were starting to turn into mildew, but he didn't give up. And when the sprout cracked the hairy shell and began to grow strong leaves one after another, he nurtured it at home for three more years.

Then he planted it in the nearby forest and carried water in twenty-liter buckets every day.

He was just as happy when, on the way back from a business trip, he brought news that solar panels would soon be installed on the roof of the municipal building in our district, covering both interior and exterior lighting. 'You can't imagine what a big step forward that is!' he said. Unfortunately, COVID came soon after, and by the time the fear had passed, the project had moved to the mountains. 'Even better,' he said. 'The mountains and villages need it more — the village and the mountain are what keep the country alive.'

And when, before his major surgery, he was looking out the window toward the forest, I knew he was thinking of me, of the child we never had, and of those grafted trees waiting

for him in the woods, whispering to each other: 'Where did the man disappear who watered us and spoke to us?'

Until then, he had been actively attending meetings about solar panel lighting...

But this story is not about a calm Khevsur man at all.

Main Chapter

A grandmother and her grandson lived just across the bank. From the glass building, their small, sorrow-drenched house could be seen clearly. Even the boy's frightened eyes were seen. He was sitting on the wooden stairs of the house. The paint was old and cracked. The boy was as pale as the goose feathers. No mother, no father, no uncle, no grandfather... They were like an old dried tree with a single green shoot sprouting from its roots - the grandmother and the grandson.

And before that, the story was like this:

The child was left by his mother, or they didn't let his mother take him - I don't know exactly. The boy got his wings clipped and stitched into the old woman's lap: a year-and-a-half-old boy, namesake of his uncle who had died childless, the sole heir and last branch of the family line. The family's one bright point in a dim, joyless home - a tiny boy, bound to a black-clad grandmother with a white thread.

Nothing was harder than to see that boy, riding on the bent shoulders of his sorrowful grandfather, on his way to kindergarten, - a boy, without wings, as pale as the goose feathers.

As with most stories like this, the father - overcome with guilt and regret - began to drink. To buy his next bottle, he sold everything in house his ancestors had collected. Then he fell ill, and the last pieces of the oak-tree furniture, such as the mirror-topped cabinets, were covered in white sheets. Not long afterward, the sorrowful grandfather died quietly, and once again the mirrors were veiled in white. When the grandmother herself was gone, there was nothing left to cover.

And when the girls said at the coffee-break that she had been bedridden for two weeks, and in case of her death, her grandson would be taken to an orphanage, I immediately went to see her.

'I'll take a child,' I told her. 'Don't worry.'

She looked up at me with eyes washed pale from tears.

It isn't true what the movies show—the dying don't clasp your hand tightly. She had no strength left in her body.

So I brought him home. Giorgi was twelve then - no longer a child, not yet grown.

He packed quickly, with a look of great expectation, and followed me. Followed me and clung to me, like a fresh bud to its new rootstock.

It was the evening of September 21st.

We spent the next two days sketching out a hard but hopeful future - and nothing in that plan seemed impossible. On the third day, the grandmother passed away, finally released from her long struggle. To this day, I believe she went peacefully, knowing her grandson was safe. Giorgi didn't cry at her death, just His stomach hurt.

And just as the graft began to take, that's when it all began - the testing, the trial.

As if God said: 'Come, let's see how steadfast your so-called kind heart and will truly are.' That year, all the plans I had carefully outlined collapsed. I lost my income. We were left to live on my husband's salary, a bank loan, and our big but fading hopes for the future. And asked myself: could I truly bear the weight of raising another woman's child?

What could I do?

Calmly, I rose and took off my own wings, or rather, I tore them from my back and fastened them to Giorgi's shoulders, tight enough that they might take hold. He himself underwent the process of being adjusted. It hurt him, yes, but as the saying goes, *the wounds of the victorious heal quickly* - and Giorgi's did.

Then the great adventure started. We spent the following months fending off the 'well-wishers and relatives' who suddenly appeared once the boy moved to live with us. Parents of his school classmates used to come to complain that their child had been hit or hurt by him. I tried to answer with a decent smile, promising it wouldn't happen again.

What did they know of the road we had taken? How each day we tried to make up for lost years - learning together the cities, rivers, mountains, and pebbles of our country; crossing from one capital of the world to another in our lessons; venturing beyond the planet in our dreams. And how, at night, watching Giorgi in his sleep, I wept silently, knowing that on this entire planet there was not a single soul of his own blood left to care about this once-pale, freckled, wing-trimmed boy. Had there been even one, perhaps they might have shared my burden. But locked in a daily battle between survival and care, I had no luxury to be tender except at night, when I tucked in his blanket and whispered, '*God, please, give him the strength to do the impossible.*' And yes, I was too strict. How else could I be? I had no wings left myself. Ahead of us rose mountains to climb - and that kind of journey has no place for weakness or surrender.

Perhaps that's why I didn't cry when my parents died.

When I looked at Giorgi, I couldn't cry. Just my stomach hurt.

There is a strange thing about time. When you most want to get all of your work done, it begins to move quickly just beyond you. I couldn't accept, not even subconsciously, that the job I had considered the safeguard of my family's future was gone. Also, the street I had loved for seven years, the best years of my life, had slipped far behind me. I knew I couldn't escape reality, yet I could find a way to 'postpone' its full arrival in my mind.

One morning, at about half past five, a film ended on television and another one began, about the biblical King David. Just two weeks earlier, Giorgi and I had encountered that very biblical theme in his textbook while doing homework. Since we had borrowed the textbook, and I always helped him with lessons and listened to his retelling of the lesson, I thought I knew the story well. (At least, I believed in it). So, when the film began, I thought, How well-organized it is that television aligns with school programs and helps children grasp the material better using another type of media. Still, it was strange - who could watch films so early in the morning? Anyway,

I decided to keep watching and compare the Bible story and the movie. I ended up in tears. The film ended towards dawn. I could remember almost nothing of the plot; only emotions and hard feelings were left in my mind.

I went into the bathroom, turned on the water, and closed my eyes so tightly that they hurt. In the darkness, from a black-and-silver haze, a red desert rose, and the scenes from the movie flashed and passed with lightning speed. *'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Have mercy on me, O God...'*, - said David at the death of his beloved son born of Bathsheba. My heart grew heavier. Then David's voice faded, and I found myself repeating his words: *'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.'* Thanks to God! *'God will lead you where your mission lies.'* The last phrase echoed in me like a bell: *Your mission. Your mission.*

As a sudden downpour washes the dust from the leaves of a roadside tree, or a stone hurled from a cliff shatters into small particles, so my thoughts were washed clean, and the weight fell from my shoulders. Oh, my God, a long, long time ago, you had already written my mission. For all that I had once loved and hoped on 'my beloved street' was given to me for one reason only: to find that goose-feather-pale, freckle-nosed boy who was born without wings, so that when the day came that he was left alone in this world... he would not feel alone. And I realized that I was never the main character in this story. The *Saviour* of all had *His* own plans for this very child.

And now, when I gently dust his gold medals, his certificates, and diplomas, I feel joy and smile. Now I can smile at the hardships of those years, at the horns we broke through sheer stubbornness. I even smile at the disappointed faces of those who doubted and thought many different things about us.

I smile at all of it, because my wings start to spread wide and bright from my son's shoulders. Now that all hardships are behind, I can tell you that the responsibility for *someone else's child* is greater and more difficult than that for your own child. Still, if you can, please, give your wings to those children who were born without them!

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