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Orange in Bloom

THE BIRD'S ARRIVAL CHANGED everything. I don't know why it decided to land on my balcony when there are *sotni* across Kyiv—most of them with at least a better view of the city, if not the Dnipro River. I live alone on Saksahanskoho Street in the centre of the capital and my balcony overlooks the garbage dump. When Ivan was alive I'd be on my hands and knees scrubbing it clean, but now I can barely manage, with dust overtaking my rooms like the wild mushrooms in the dead zone near Pripyat.

The bird is a scrawny thing yet so full of energy that it hasn't stopped singing during the two hours it's been sitting on top of my bookshelf, a small fluff of green-and-yellow perched on an old photo of Ivan. It's one of the few good photos I have, when Ivan still had all his curly hair and teeth, and before the bullet pierced his left leg during the war and turned him into a cripple. That would have made a lot of men bitter but my Ivan was the one who knew how to pick up everybody else's spirits.

Anyway, I don't mind the bird sitting there, chattering away, filling up the silence that's usually broken up by the radio. He's got a tuft of white down on the back of his head, like the bald spot Ivan had when he first started losing his hair. I'm guessing this bird's a boy, not by the dark blue on top of his beak, but by the way he's been pecking my fingers ever so lightly. Only a boy would be this gentle to a lonesome widow with too much time on her hands.

My house is never quiet if I can help it but today I don't turn on the radio or TV. I know there's going to be trouble in the streets sooner or later with the election results being reported one way, as if everything's already been decided, even though most of us know that the voting went the other way. In most countries, a man with a criminal record could never become president. But here in Ukraine that distinction hasn't stopped the government-appointed nominee. So if I hadn't been sitting on my living room divan, listening for sounds of trouble, I never would have heard that bird in the first place. And that's how it all started.



The streets are quiet, more quiet than usual, or maybe I'm anticipating trouble in the way I often worry about everything. Ivan used to tease me about it—the little quirks I have, like carrying an umbrella in my purse (even on sunny days) if I wake up with a particular ache in my bones. I can trust my bones better than any weather forecast and being prepared for unexpected events can mean the difference between calamity or a minor inconvenience. That's why I always carry a small flashlight in my pocket, so I can read my newspaper if the power goes out on the metro. It hasn't happened to me yet but the power's always going off in our building so you can never be too prepared.

I used to carry carrots in my pockets. It gave me something to do when the tram or trolleybus ran late. But now I've switched to sunflower seeds. Easier on the jaw. Seeds are what made me pull out my boots and *kozyh*, made me for a moment, at least, forget about the possible dangers outside my front door. I need to provide food and shelter for my new little friend. Of course when I tell Svitlana, my next-door neighbour, about my plans, she grabs me by the arm and whispers into my ear.

"Troops. At the outskirts of Kyiv. Just waiting for the word to storm the city."

Svitlana is a petite woman but you wouldn't know it from the mark of her nails on my skin.

"Don't be ridiculous," I say, shaking her off. "You know that a parakeet is a good omen. I'll be back in an hour."

Svitlana is often too dramatic for her own good but I have to admit a secret part of me is pleased that she'd been astonished, even envious that I'd chosen to ignore her advice and proceed out the door. To be truthful I was a little uneasy, but there's a pet shop not too far away, just around the corner from that overpriced store where they sell fancy toys from Germany.

I walk past the tram stop, my head bent against the wind, the cold pushing me forward with quick steps and for a second, maybe two, I feel like a young girl. A young girl out looking for adventure. A minute later I get more than I bargained for when I hear shouting.

"Look out, Babusia."

A group of boys come flying at me and before I can step away, one of them grabs me around the waist and I'm spinning around as if we're at a country dance. It's all so quick and frantic that I can't shake him loose and just when I'm sure we'll both hit the pavement, he lets go. I almost fall then but I'm too busy catching my breath and my balance to yell at him and they're a block away, laughing, before I can muster the words.

“Hooligan. *Bez vyhovannia*. Probably one of those supporters from the Blue camp,” I mutter, although I’m not sure of anything anymore.



We’ve all been asked to pick between blue and orange, as if a colour can really identify who you are or what you believe in. I’ve always been partial to the colour blue, ever since my mother sewed a beautiful blue dress for my first *lyalka* when I was five years old. Orange is loud, obnoxious really, yet when it comes to the election, when it comes to choosing between what has always been or something new, I’ve got to throw my vote behind this new colour I’d never include in my wardrobe. I made up my mind when they poisoned the frontrunner and turned his face into a gray mask of pock marks.

To be truthful, though, I probably made that decision a whole lot sooner than that. When my sister Valia’s son, Kostyk, volunteered to help with the cleanup at the Chernobyl plant, he thought he’d make some good money. He’s still alive but he hasn’t had one day of good health since that time. I guess you could say it’s all connected or you could say that the front-runner decided to poison himself but all I’m saying is I wasn’t going to stay home on election day.



The shop owner’s a bit surprised to see me looking for a cage while people are gathering on the *Maidan*, readying to protest the elections. I can see him sizing me up as he tells me this and then he leans over and pats me on the hand.

“Best for you to get home as soon as possible, Babusia. Things can get dangerous very quickly.”

For some reason his comment annoys me. The incident with the boys was unpleasant and unexpected yet now that I’m actually out on the street I find that I’m a little more curious than afraid.

“I’m not as feeble as you think,” I tell him, tightening my grip on the bird cage.

I can see him looking me over from my worn boots to my plump, lined face but I straighten my shoulders and stare him down in the same way I talk down the sellers at the Bassarabskiy *bazar*. He shrugs and then laughs, delighted by my response.

“They’re setting up tents, I hear. Tell them Dyma sent you.”

I can still hear him laughing as I leave the warmth of the store behind me. It’s about a fifteen-minute walk, maybe less with the wind pushing me

forward, and even though I'm not quite sure what's propelling me on, I realize that I'm not ready to just turn around for home. Not without taking a quick look at what's happening in my own city.



It's a concert, a music concert, a rock concert, a dizzying blur, fur coats and hats, shoulder to shoulder, orange and orange, splatters of blue, a pilgrimage of sorts, a rally, a protest, flowers, flowers and the *militisia* at the sidelines, standing, watching. There must be hundreds, thousands jammed in the square, lining the streets. I feel faint. I feel cold. I feel giddy. I shout "yes." I shout "yes" to change, "*tak ... tak ... tak*," until my nose starts streaming and I taste the tears running down my cheeks. If only Ivan could be standing next to me. There's too many, too many of us, the *militisia* won't fire, won't fire on their own. I stand for moments. I stand for eternity. I stand until I can't feel my toes and remember the bird cage at my feet, the parakeet in my living room. I push through the crowd. I smile at everyone. I smile at a man waving a blue flag. He looks like my Ivan. He scowls back but I know he's watching me. I can feel his gaze on my back. I lift my head up so he can see I feel no fatigue.



Every day I go back. For the next seventeen days until it's over. Sometimes by myself, sometimes with Svitlana. But I don't go empty-handed. The tents the pet shop owner told me about on that first day were no joke. Khreshatyk is no longer a pristine boulevard of shops, restaurants and cafes. Overnight everything's changed. That's where they've set up the tents and it's where I bring *holubtsi*, *pelmeny*, poppy seed *bulochny*—anything I can prepare. I haven't done this much cooking and baking in years, but there are people here from all over the country with only a few, if any, belongings. Every day there is talk of bloodshed, of troops coming in from the east or even Russia. But surprisingly I sleep more soundly at night than I have in years. I can't even feel the little bumps in my mattress, the pain in my hips. In the mornings I sing folk songs to my little bird. He likes to sit on my finger and gaze into my eyes like he's about to tell my fortune. I've named him Pomaranchyk, not for his coloring but for the colour of the revolution outside. I let him fly around the living room so he can have his freedom. Then after a couple of hours, I pack up all the food I've cooked and head for the *Maidan*.



Siberian cold. Rain. Snow. People and more people. It feels like a nonstop New Year's celebration on the streets of Kyiv. Orange umbrellas, balloons, ponchos. Sometimes there's yelling. Blue flags versus orange scarves. Men bussed in from the eastern regions shouting in our faces, trying to turn the clock back. A few of them are around my age, many much younger, but there's nothing I can say that will change their minds.

I usually head for the orange tents to pass out food, but today I speak to the ones with blue hats and blue ribbons tied on their arms who stop me when they recognize my satchel and realize I'm passing out food. One of them looks like Ivan, the one who scowled at me on my first night on the *Maidan*. Now he's grinning, bobbing his head in recognition. Up close he's not as handsome as Ivan was, but even so he's got nice blue eyes.

"What are you smiling at, old man?" I ask.

He laughs, a hearty sound that catches me off-guard. "You're not going to let an old man starve to death, are you?"

"Didn't they feed you on the bus?"

"No cash or food for me," he says. "Some of the others got money to come here but I got a free bus ride and some vodka." He steps closer and whispers into my ear. "You know I always wanted to see Kyiv. This seemed as good an opportunity as ever."

I can't help laughing at that. I give him a little more food than I originally intended, but stop short of doling out the entire bag. I nod at him as I turn away and then hesitate. "You didn't just come all this way for the scenery, did you?"

"Well," he says, looking around. "It's not so easy to shrug off the threats. Not when your boss is ordering you who to vote for. But in the end—where's the truth?"

I grimace although I perfectly understand his feelings and all the confusion and fear behind them. Yet in the past few days I've come to believe that anything is possible. I want to tell him that he needs to open himself up to each day like he's reliving that first kiss with the girl he's had his eye on for years. That standing and shouting in a square with thousands of people may give you the kind of power that can bring about change. But I don't say anything because there is a line we must all cross on our own.

Instead I take him by the arm and invite him home to tea. I tell him about the parakeet who flew onto my balcony and changed my life. Later we will return to the *Maidan* and I hope that he joins me up front, near the stage. No matter what happens next, everything has already changed.