SHORT STORY

Mamo and Sinku*

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She was standing on the side of the road next to naked winter poplar trees. Old, short, bent and cold. She waved her hand several times and I put my foot down on the brake. She opened the front door and together with the chilly air asked, “Sinku, are you going to Bucha?”

“Yes, mamo, I am.”

She sat in the front seat, put her false leather handbag on her knees and slammed the door.

“Fasten your seat belt, mamo.”

“Sorry, sinku, I don’t know how to do it.”

She smelt like my grandma from the village where I was normally spending the whole school summer holiday. A mixture of fresh cow’s milk, dry hay, pig’s manure and smoke from the wood fired stove.

“Thank God you are going my way. I was hitchhiking for almost an hour, there were not many cars passing through, mainly officials.”

“Why are you going to Bucha, mamo? It’s still not safe there.”

“Eh,” she sighed deeply, “I am looking for my son…”

She unzipped her handbag and got out a photo of a man in his fifties, wearing an old fashion peaked cap, sitting on the front step of a simple house. He looked very tired and I managed to notice his missing index finger on his left hand.

“Are you from there? Maybe you’ve seen him?”

She was trying to be helpful and put the photo on the steering wheel. I looked at the picture again.

“No, mamo, I am from Kiev. I’ve never seen him.”

The woman stared at the photo. I had to ask, “What is his name?”

“Mikolai.” She got out a handkerchief. “I named him in honour of my father.” He came to Ukraine and became a driver at the collective farm and I just loved him like only a daughter can love her dad. He died in a car accident when I was fourteen. And at his coffin I promised to call my future son by his name — Mikolai.”

She asked me to stop by the deserted train station. She got money from her right coat pocket and put the note facing Lviv Theatre of Opera and Ballet up on the dashboard.

“Thank you, sinku.”

“Mamo, take it back!”

I tried to sound strong and kind at the same time.

“It’s just for petrol, sinku.”

“Take it back! It’s not even my car. It’s work’s car.”

She looked at me, then her eyes found proof — a folder with the paperwork wedged between the two front seats, and this convinced her, so she took the money back.

“What is your name, sinku? I will put a candle to your health in the church.”

“Mikolai, mamo, my name is Mikolai.”

A few days later I got the order to take a coffin from Bucha’s morgue to the cemetery. I got there just in time and recognised her straight away. The same old brown coat, the same dark grey winter boots, just her scarf was different, today she was wearing black. She was standing next to the entry, a little bit away from the other 20 to30 people, and she was waiting for my hearse to arrive.

Nowadays people are happy to see my car with its long tinted windows. Now they know that I will take their coffins to the cemetery, and they will have closure. Their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and even the children will have rest, and the family will know that they won’t need to walk around the town searching in the basements and wells. Before the war, when people saw my hearse they always cried, because they knew that I would take their loved ones from them. Now they are happy, because I am taking their coffins to a better place.

She waved to me exactly the same as she had on the road. And I stopped.

“Sinku!” She shouted in the open window. “Are you coming to me? I am Olena Mykolayivna Stepanova.”

“To you, mamo, to you.”

“Oh, Mikolai!” she smiled showing her golden tooth on the right side of her mouth. “It’s very good that you will be helping me!”

I opened the backdoor of my hearse to check if everything was ok and thought it could really use a cleaning when I have a day off.

Four men carried the coffin out of the morgue, and the crowd outside parted silently like the Red Sea in front of the Israelites. The mother was walking behind the coffin trying to help

verbally.

“It’s good… just gentle… he is heavy… he always was a very strong man… thank you… this way… this is our car…”

The men put the coffin in the hearse, and the mother reached into her handbag taking out a bottle of vodka.

“It’s for you, guys. Commemorate my son Mikolai, please.”

The tallest man with very black hair and dark stubble on his face replied, “No need mamo, too many people to commemorate. We have our own and at the end of the day we always drink a few shots to all the people that were taken out of our morgue.”

Then he turned towards the coffin and quietly, like he was addressing only the person inside, said, “Rest in peace, Mikolai. Forgive us all.”

His colleagues echoed him, “Rest in peace… Rest in peace… Rest in peace…”

The new cemetery was very bright with the fresh graves covered with blue and yellow plastic wreaths. Fresh hollow rectangle holes were waiting for the arrival of more coffins. I saw a few small groups of people. I didn’t hear the words; just sometimes a hysterical woman’s cries were cutting through the heavy cemetery silence. Two workers showed us the pit for the coffin with the clay walls polished smooth by hand shovels. Nearby there was an old wooden stand for the coffin. Four new planks were holding the frame and protecting it from falling.

“Is it strong enough?” sceptically I nodded towards the frame.

“Should be alright. We just don’t have time to make a new one.”

The workers, the mother and I lifted the coffin from the hearse and put it on the wooden frame. It stood strong.

“Are you going to say goodbye?” asked one worker with a straw hat in his hand. It was the beginning of spring and still quite cool, but he had a traditional straw hat and I couldn’t stop thinking how weird it was.

“Of course sinku…” replied the mother.

The workers got out the hammer and lifted the partly nailed lid of the coffin.

I wasn’t able to see the face of the deceased. The whole body was covered with the net curtain material with the church's design on it.

“Here we go sinku... My sinku… How did it happen? It should be the opposite; you should’ve been burying me first. But they killed you…” The mother was gently caressing the body over the net veil, “Sinku, my sinku!”

She fell on her knees and began to wail, holding her forehead against the coffin.

“Why did you leave me?? Who is going to visit me?? Who is going to help me?? Who is going to bury me??”

She was singing the mother’s song. The song had different words, but always with the same melody. I’ve heard it many times at the funerals of children of different ages. It’s a mix of the animal type wailing and something very traditional which is passed down to all mothers from generation to generation as a part of their DNA. I looked at the workers; they were standing still with their heads bent towards the fresh sand. I am not sure how many times they had heard the mother’s wailing, but I am pretty sure every time they’re standing still and listening.

After a good ten minutes the worker with the straw hat came to the mother and softly said, “Ok mamo we should let him rest in peace.”

She stood up and took off the veil from her son’s face. I looked. Right in the middle of his forehead there was a little cranberry-sized hole. I couldn’t stop staring. The hole was so neat and tidy and I started to wonder if it went through his whole head.

She kissed him on his bluish lips. She put the veil back on his face. And she told the workers to close the lid. Her voice was calm and solid and she didn’t cry.

They put the lid back on and the worker wearing a slightly oversized uniform coat banged his hammer on the edge of the lid. The sound echoed through the whole cemetery and made me feel like hundreds of nails were going into the coffin at the same time. The mother was looking and when the hammer stopped she ran to the coffin, laid her head down on the lid where her son’s head with the bullet’s hole was. She yelled, “ARH-ARH-ARH!”

She yelled like a person who had jumped from a cliff towards the bottom of the valley knowing that only death would stop the pain.

The worker in the straw hat came to her and put his hands with dirty nails on her shoulder. It looked like he knew what he was doing.

“Mamo, mamo, mamo,” he kept repeating. But she kept yelling.

He shook her and yelled back right in her ear, “Mamo!!!”

She had reached the bottom of the valley. She looked at him, then at the coffin, silently took a few steps back and stood on the orange sand. Her body was slightly swaying from one side to another like she was hearing a song in her head and dancing or like she was rocking a crying baby in her arms and trying to put it to sleep.

The workers lifted the coffin and put it on the edge of the grave. They threaded two thick ropes under each end of the coffin and began to lower it down. They were concentrating on the job and passing short comments to each other: “Your side!”, “Slow down!”, “Hold on!” The mother was watching like a customer watching the glazier repairing a broken window in a house, hoping that nobody drops the glass and everything would be alright.

When the coffin touched the ground the workers brought up their ropes.

“Mamo…”

But she had already grabbed a handful of fresh soil and threw it into the grave landing on top of the coffin. The coffin sounded hollow. She did it three times. After she had finished the workers got their spades and started to fill the grave. With every shovel stroke the coffin sounded deeper and deeper. I looked at the mother. She stood on the edge looking into the hole and her tears were running down the wrinkles on her face.

The metal cross with the small name plate was put at the head of the grave, “Stepanov Mikolai Mikolaevitch, 9.05.1975 — 22.03.2022”. The mother wrapped a white and blue towel around the cross, whispering something to her son’s initials. Then she ran to the hearse, brought a checked bag and got out a plastic water bottle. She asked me to pour some water on her hands. Firstly, she got out of her pocket a little hand sanitizer and rubbed it in and then washed it off. The workers and I followed her lead. She put a plain white plastic cover on the handmade tiny table. Rye bread, biscuits, lollies. Everything in neat piles. She cut apples and oranges first, wiped the knife with the clean kitchen towel, and cut salami and cheese. She got out plastic cups and a small bottle of Zakarpatsky Cognac.

“Please,” she pointed to the table with her hand. “To commemorate my son…”

The man in the straw hat opened the bottle, poured cognac into four cups and raised the cup saying, “Rest in peace, Mikolai!”

Everyone repeated after him.

I couldn’t drink because I had to drive, so I secretly threw my cognac on the ground and got a lolly from the table. I wasn’t hungry. The workers were eating and nobody was talking.

We were driving back in heavy silence. The mother was looking out the window and I was thinking about washing the car. Suddenly she shouted, “Sinku, could you please stop here!?”

She got out of the car and went to the little shop on the side of the road. She came back with a look of satisfaction on her face, a box of seedling tomatoes, cucumbers and small paper bags of seeds, “Thank God, I saw the sign and you stopped!”

Spring was coming.

* Mamo — an address to a woman mother’s age, literal translation from Ukrainian is “mother”
Sinku — a woman's address to a man her son's age, literal translation from Ukrainian is “son”