My Sister, My Bride

Pauline's husband left her on the eve of the Jewish New Year.

Having decided that it would be more convenient for both of them if he stayed in the apartment during the impending divorce proceedings, they entered a strange existence when two people, a shadow of each other for years, suddenly had to redefine themselves. Pauline felt her husband's soul slipping away further and further, up to the point when his self could no longer be revealed to her but came alive only in the calls and messages to the other woman, who was patiently waiting to take Pauline's place in his life.

Pauline continued to live because it was necessary. She had to dress in the morning, drink her black coffee and go to work, where she led meetings, allocated budgets, cut back expenses, and responded to letters. She needed to brush her hair for the night and rub the cream into small lines around the eyes to spend hours browsing through the old photos on her drive.

She looked at her grandfather, the eldest son in a large family. A mere boy of eighteen, he was drafted and thrown into the meat grinder of the frontline. His younger brothers and a little sister Anne were shot in a quarry on the outskirts of his hometown with a thousand other Jews of this little town in the quiet river valley.

Having survived the war, grandfather married a girl from an old family of musicians. Deafened by his memories, he wrote a novel about them and begot one more Anne, who later became Pauline's mother. He had read the manuscript only to the two best friends.

One of them disappeared with her grandfather and his violinist wife, but the other saw the exposure of Stalin's crimes and died peacefully at the end of the past century.

Twenty years ago, the novel was published to universal acclaim, filmed, and serialized. Pauline felt that for the sake of the dead people, she must see everything with her eyes.

Before, she never had enough time, but now, longing to leave this strange life as soon as possible, Pauline finally bought a ticket for a slow train to this industrial settlement.

After four hours, she found herself in the alley next to the station square, where, in the shadow of the ubiquitous silver-painted Lenin's statue, bustled the market stalls, smelling sharply of the local sour apples. Pauline went to a Jewish community center, a dreary one-story building with darkened walls. She immediately felt like a prisoner, surrounded by several people who had gathered for a Sunday tea and chat. Yet they were her people, and an administrator, a woman in thick glasses with brightly hennaed hair, was her too.

"You cannot get there on foot," she said, looking at Pauline's impractical shoes.

Pauline patted her bag.

"I brought sneakers."

"Does not matter." the woman shook her head. "This is beyond the city limit. I better call our driver."

The driver of a battered car, Mark, as the administrator introduced him, turned out to be a silent man, just slightly older than Pauline. There was something strangely familiar in his face, with a sharp outline of the nose and a mocking bend of the lower lip, as if a ray of a gleaming sun appeared in the cloud rupture, breaking an impenetrable wall of rain.

He drove carefully, muttering something unintelligible when hitting a deep pothole. Rickety barracks rose behind the rusting machines on the abandoned construction projects, soaking under the heavy rain.

Almost reaching the cliff, Mark pointed ahead.

“Go straight there, and you will see,” he paused. “My grandfather said that before the war, it was a sand pit. Afterward, it was filled with water. It is always cold, even in July.”

“So, people swim here?” Pauline put on her sneakers.

“Some do, “the driver answered reluctantly. “I did not swim once, even in childhood.”

Pauline slowly moved forward, feeling his eyes following her.

“This is how they were going," she gazed toward the abandoned land on the sides of the road. “The pines and the yellow birch leaves were the same, but ahead was a sand pit, and they had nowhere to run.”

She passionately wanted someone to run, to hide in the night and get to the local partisans. As far as Pauline knew, nobody from the thousand-two hundred Jews shot in the pit had survived.

She let the sand pass between her fingers. Down below shone a dark space of water. For a fleeting moment, she wanted to dive into the pit, escaping her confusing life.

The driver glanced at her hair color of the fall foliage and at her jacket, blackening the white sand as if she was a target. He had driven many people here before, who left stones on the slope, making already a rather large pile. On the way back, they always wiped their eyes.

The redhead also took a piece of gray gravel from the pit bank. For some reason, Mark was sure this woman would not cry. She closed the car door with exaggerated caution. Her long fingers fiddled with the pearl thread on the sharp clavicles sticking out below the long neck.

“Do you want a cup of coffee?” Mark asked suddenly, wanting this strange taciturn woman to stay close for as long as possible.

“With pleasure," Pauline answered mechanically, mentally scolding herself. What would she talk about with this man, staring at her with ill-concealed amazement?

In an empty cafe, they talked about everything. Pauline slowly developed a familiar feeling of meeting an accidental fellow traveler to whom one bares the most intimate only to part forever afterward.

Sometimes Mark averted his gaze, but when he looked straight into her eyes, Pauline imperceptibly blushed. They kissed at first slowly and gently, and then desperately, standing under one of the dim streetlights, kissed just as once Pauline kissed her future husband, the one who was leaving her now.

Pulling away from Pauline, Mark has run a hand through her hair.

“I did not want to tell you this.”

His face lost the youthful outline, and Pauline momentarily saw how he would age.

“What?” Pauline breathed.

“My grandfather was in the pit,” Mark looked into the darkness.

“Your grandfather was a Jew,” Pauline replied, realizing why Mark’s face looked vaguely familiar.

“No,” he paused. “My grandfather was a Nazi collaborator.”

“And?” Pauline still did not understand.

“He was one of the machine-gunners, shooting those Jews, including your grandfather’s family.” Mark lowered his hands. “I am sorry. I should have said it before.”

Pauline felt the slow retreat of the unbearable pain, tearing her apart all this time.

“It does not matter,” she shook her head. “This is not our war. Mark. What matters is here and now.”

Pauline again reached out to him, and Mark did not push her away. She listened to their breaths and to trees rustling outside, to the hasty words either forgotten by the morning or ingrained in the memory forever like a vague blueness of the tattooed number on the arm. Pauline felt Mark become something urgent and necessary for her, like the damp autumn air, the smell of an apple orchard from an opened window, or the beat of rain on the old roof, but then her long-standing nightmare returned.

His hands drove her to the cold place as if slamming the door in her face. Moving to the other end of the sofa, she bit her lips. Mark silently looked askance.

“It is not your fault,” he finally said. “It is me. Seeing you, I thought something was weird. Look here.”

Pauline picked up a black and white photo of a young woman with the same turn of a lean neck and a long nose with an elegant hump. Her mother cut her hair short, but this woman wore a mass of dark curls in a neat tower.

Pauline’s mother was named after her grandfather’s only sister, Anne, the last child in the family. Her great-grandmother probably carried the baby in her arms during the long road to the pit.

Mark stood by the window, looking into the grey stillness of an early morning. He did not need to turn to Pauline to realize she was not crying. Sitting at the table, she fidgeted with her long fingers.

“My grandmother came to the pit at night,” Mark said. “She heard a baby crying. My mother’s legs were wounded.”

Mark felt he could not go on, but the woman with hair the color of the fallen foliage silently waited for his answer. Mark ran his fingers on the wet glass, wanting the blackness of the window to reflect her shadow but knowing he would never see the golden flashes in her eyes again. The sand pit lay between them like an impassable barrier. He forced himself to continue.

“Grandmother pulled the girl from under the corpses and carried her to the village where her relatives lived. The family kept the baby in the cellar until the Germans left.”

Feeling the gaze of her dark eyes on his back, Mark coughed.

“My grandfather...”

“He is not your grandfather!”

Pauline screamed torturously, feeling the throat filling with the taste of apples and rain, sand and water, hate and love.

“Your grandfather was shot in that pit along with your grandmother! Have you forgotten about this?”

“Every day,” said Mark, tearing himself away from the window and looking at Pauline.

In the unsteady morning light, her face seemed dead, as if she looked at him from under the black water of the quarry.

“I remember it every day,” he repeated. “My mother was shot by the man who later raised her.”

“Did he return after the war?” Pauline asked.

“He left with the Germans and then returned, only to be imprisoned for ten years and to come back to the family afterward. I remember him well. He had no idea who my mother was. Grandmother explained that she had picked up an orphaned baby in a burnt village. Mum did not know anything until my grandmother told her the truth before she died.”

“She is alive, “Pauline swallowed a lump in her throat. “Now he will say that she is alive. Dear God, please make her live for my sake, for grandfather's sake, for my mother's sake, and the sake of this man. For the sake of all these broken lives.”

“She died when I was eighteen, “Mark said, finding, at last, the cigarettes on the windowsill. He lit up, hiding his face in the palm of his hand.

“What happens now?” Pauline squeezed her fingers painfully.

Looking at her weary face, Mark subdued a desire to step toward her to embrace her stiff straight shoulders, to hide her in his arms and protect her with his body from the ruthless machine-gun fire that found its last victims.

“Nothing,” he said. “I will take you to the station.”

Pauline froze, not daring to cross a line visible only to them.

“Don’t you understand? “

Mark pushed a cigarette butt into the can.

“My grandmother called my mother out redemption. I am also a redemption, Pauline, for everything that happened and might happen again, and so I should stay here.”

“Nonsense!”

Thrown toward Mark by some invisible force, |Pauline stopped beside him, not daring to touch his face.

“You must come with me because you are not alone. You have a family.”

“My family is there,” he pointed at the window. “They lie underwater in the pit and in the city cemetery. Have you got kids, Pauline?”

“No,” she sank back on the sagging sofa.

“Me neither,” Mark could no longer look at her.

“Everything can be different,” Pauline said softly. “We can be together.”

Still avoiding her insistent gaze, Mark sighed.

“I can never be with you. I already could not. Sorry.”

Sliding to the floor, Pauline shook her head, sending the ochre hair flying like a wave of autumn leaves under the wind.

“Let it be not so,” she pleaded. “Apart from you, I have no one else.”

Taking Pauline firmly by the shoulders, Mark lifted her to the feet.

“Me neither. There is no one left, do you not see, Pauline?”

“We are left!” Pauline escaped from his hands.

“I will take you to the station,” Mark repeated and Pauline realized that nothing more was going to be said today.

He drove slowly through the awakening town, a town of gray walls and low sky, the town of one night and many intolerable days, the town that Pauline was seeing for the last time.

Her train, swaying slightly, disappeared in the foggy horizon. Standing on the wet platform, Mark remembered her silent touch and sweet smell.

“My sister, my bride, closed source, sealed spring,” muttered he.

Mark had read this a long time ago, in another life. He walked through the empty station square to the car.

Paulina looked through the train window to the endless plain, suffused with relentless rain. Her fingers twitched, painfully crunching. She whispered in tune with the wheels, holding back the tears.

“No one is a war, no one is, nobody's land, nobody's draw. Not mine, not yours, not ours, nobody's…”

In the evening, after the start of the fast, having reached the synagogue, Pauline went up to the gallery. Closing her eyes, she remembered the yellow birch leaves and the apple smell of the night. The chorus picked up the cantor’s voice.

“This is my redemption,” boomed around.

Dropping her head on the barrier separating her from the rest of the world, Pauline stiffed a bitter animal howl.