A Happy Child

I found out I was happy the day my parents got executed. I went to the neighbors to ask where Mom and Dad were, and Mr. Ihor said they were executed. I didn't get it and asked again, "What do you mean?" And Mrs. Ira, Ihor's wife, said: "A happy child—he doesn't know what an execution is."

Nobody told me more, but I felt a bit better. If the neighbors knew where my parents were and what happened, then it must be okay. Mom always said the worst thing is when you don't know what happened to someone: "My soul's not at peace when I don't know where you are and I start thinking something bad." So if they got executed, at least it sounded like something real—like "fed," "washed," "tucked in," and now… "executed."

I left Mr. Ihor and went home, but they didn't let me in. Men in uniforms with guns were by our fence, and others in the same clothes were carrying boxes into our house. I said hi and tried to walk in, but someone grabbed my shoulder and turned me around, saying, "куда ты прёшься, недоумок?"[1] I almost fell at the feet of a soldier who was carrying a wooden box into our yard.

I saw something like this before when my parents were fixing the house. They had workers then, with lots of boxes and tools, and I got in trouble for getting in the way… So I knew what to do—leave and let the grown-ups work. That's what I did: I walked along the fence to the hole behind the bushes that only me and Brovko knew about. Brovko, by the way, also got executed because he was barking.

I liked when grown-ups told me why and how things happen. So even though I didn't know what an execution was, I felt better because I understood why: Brovko really did bark. I asked Ihor why my parents were executed, and he said, "Your dad, because he was a cop; your mom, because she screamed and ran at them with her fists—she wouldn't have caught the bullet otherwise." That made me calm again—Dad really was a policeman in Oleshky, and Mom was super fast: she could catch a jar or even a fly, so of course she could catch a bullet easily. Maybe she caught it to give to me. She liked giving me cool stuff: a bus ticket with matching numbers, a rock with a hole, a shiny piece of glass. So I hope when they come back from the execution, I'll get my bullet too.

Then I crawled through our secret hole and snuck into the backyard under the pear trees. The guests in army uniforms were there too. They were throwing down stuff from the attic—old blankets, my highchair from when I was a baby, a a carpet damaged by moths. When I got closer, a box of Christmas ornaments flew was flying down. I guess they didn't know what was inside, because it broke open and all the sparkly bits went everywhere. I ran to pick them up—Dad could fix them—but they yelled at me, so I only grabbed a "Romashka" candy with a string, for the tree. We always hung candy on the tree with string. Not the cheap ones Mom called "sweeter living through Chinese chemistry," but the really good ones—" Hershey's Kisses," "Spartak," or even "Raffaello." "Romashka" was Grandma's favorite, so I hid it in my pocket and tried to do what the man with the gun said: "съебаться."[2] Since I didn't know that word either, a kind man with a rifle explained to me, "Go away, it's dangerous here. There's going to be a firing point in the attic"—and he pointed up. "Go away. Go to your people."

And while I didn't quite understand what a "firing point" was (Mom and Dad didn't let me play with fire, and I thought the guests were going to play with it up in the attic and were clearing space for that), I understood perfectly that I had to go to my people.

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[1] "Where the hell do you think you're going, you little idiot" (Originally spoken in Russian)

[2] "Fuck off" (Originally spoken in Russian)

“My people” were Grandma, my godfather Serhiy and his wife Lyuda, and my kindergarten teacher, Olga Andriyivna. Mom said, “They’re ours, you can trust them and take candy from them. But don’t take anything from others’ hands.”

I went to my godparents first. Their house is two doors down from ours. I knocked for a long time, but no one came. I sat down on the porch to wait, and that was when I noticed that there was someone in the cellar, which jutted out into the yard like a subway entrance: among the boards painted blue all around, something white was moving. I got closer. It was them! I asked, “Are you playing hide-and-seek?” but nobody answered. I put my ear to the wood and heard Lyuda whisper madly: “Are you crazy?! What do you mean ‘take him’? You want us to get executed too? They’ll say we’re hiding a cop’s kid.” Then I couldn’t hear more, so I looked through the crack. First, I saw nothing, then I saw them—Lyuda, Serhiy, and Oksanka sitting on the steps, with jars all around. I think I saw tears on Serhiy’s face, but I’m not sure. I asked again: “Are you playing hide-and-seek?” and looked through the gap. Lyuda got up fast, came to the door, and hissed: “Go away! Forget this place! No one’s here…”

Of course! Hide-and-seek! When we played cops and robbers and I found someone’s hiding spot, they said the same thing: “Go away, forget it, no one’s here!” I got up and left fast so I wouldn’t give them away. I hoped the robbers didn’t see me whisper. You should never betray your own! I hoped my godparents would win—they were always nice to me.

Then I ran to Olga Andriyivna’s house. Men in uniforms and big trucks with boxes were everywhere. Maybe Grandma’s letters to the deputy worked, and they came to fix the roads! I was surprised they all had guns, but then I remembered what Dad said: when they built the road to Simferopol, people stole stuff. So maybe the guns were to stop thieves. That was clever!

Andriyivna’s house was far, and I only went there with Mom or Dad, but I knew the way. Or I thought I did. Because when I got to the street corner, her house wasn’t there! It was strange because the house was big and had two floors—the kindergarten was downstairs, she and her family, nicht Tolik and children Valerka and Raika upstairs. You could always see it. I turned onto the street, the pump was there… but the house was gone! Just smoke where it used to be. When I got closer, I saw burnt pieces. Our toys, books, and glass were everywhere. It didn’t smoke much, but it smelled like grilled meat when we went out on a barbecue party.

I think what the fireman said on Emergency Day happened: Andriyivna played with matches and burned it down! But it was weird—usually there are people running, yelling, trying to put it out. But this time, no one. Just uniformed men talking. And no Andriyivna. Maybe she went to the education office get scolded. She always said people scold her at the education office. I never knew why. But today she should be scolded for playing with matches!

I hoped the guests at our place wouldn’t burn the attic. There were treasures there—holed stones, tickets from Mom, my Iron Man toy, 20 hryvnias from Christmas carols, 50 from Grandma, and my laser pointer (but it needs batteries).

I found my favorite toy—Carlson, a school planner, a little dirty, and a pencil with a pony. The planner was probably Valerka’s—had two ninja stickers. Rayka wouldn’t like those. Olga gave us Valerka’s old planners to practice writing for our timetables. First, we wrote words, then lessons or things that happened. This planner looked dirty, not new, but I didn’t care. I tucked it and the pencil in my pants, took Carlson under my arm, and went to Grandma. I had no other “my own” left.

Thank God, Grandma hadn’t gone anywhere and was looking at me, as always, from the photograph on her gravestone: with a slight smile, yet still stern, as befits a respectable person. And Grandma was respectable—before moving to the cemetery, that is. She lived with us and worked as a secretary at the food plant. Everyone knew her and respected her. But bout six months before the move, she fell ill and took to her bed. After work, she often said that she needed to be quiet and lie down so that no one would bother her, but that time, for some reason,

my parents grew anxious, started fussing, and began calling an ambulance. She left for a week and came back—quiet. She never went to Lida's, never milked the cow again, never watched TV. She only lay there, gazing at the icon of the Mother of God, and the icon gazed back at her. Sometimes it seemed to me they were playing a game of who would blink first. Grandma always lost. The doctor said she had a stroke and wouldn't get up, but I think she's just resting.

She's lived here for six months—since winter. Mom said she's lying in the ground now like in her room. Right, Grandma said the ground helps and feeds you. She didn't like city doctors and called them silly. I hope the ground makes her better soon. It's lonely without her.

I took the Romashka candy from my pocket and put it under her photo. Mom and Dad always left something yummy for her—a cutlet, pastry, or a sausage sandwich.

I sat on the bench Dad made to wait for Grandma, opened the planner I had, and started writing what happened to me today. I used the pony pencil. Big kids had four lessons a day, but I'm big too already, so I wrote five things:

1. Guests with guns came to our house.
2. My godparents are playing hide-and-seek.
3. Andriyivna played with matches and burned down the kindergarten.
4. I found out I'm happy.
5. My parents and Brovko got executed. I hope they're okay. I'm waiting for them—and for my bullet.

Vitya, 5 years old.