

Sonechko

Word count: 1,993

My grandfather pressed his forehead to the radio the way other men pressed their foreheads to icons.

He sat on the low wooden stool with his back curved into a comma, hands gripping his knees so hard the knuckles went bone-white, and he never smoked during the broadcast. Smoke might travel through the vents.

I was six years old. I lay on the rug with a wooden truck and pretended to drive it along one of the geometric lines in the pattern, dark red into dark brown into dark red, but I had positioned myself so I could see the orange glow of the radio dial reflected in the lenses of my grandfather's glasses. Two small orange moons on his face. I watched the moons more than the truck.

The static came in thick rhythmic waves. Shhh. Shhh. Shhh. To me, it did not sound like a machine. It sounded like a blizzard locked inside a box, like ghosts trying to whisper through wool.

The voice came through in pieces. A word, then nothing. The name of a city that sounded like a crack in the ceiling. Then the wool again. My grandfather did not move. His face twitched only when a fragment broke through, and then his whole body leaned forward another centimeter, as if he could lift the words out of the static with the angle of his spine.

He called him Majestatea Sa. Never Mihai. The formality was the only dignity he could offer from a room that smelled of boiled cabbage and the cold iron of the radiator. His Majesty. Two words held up like a candle in a cellar.

I believed the King lived inside the radio. A small golden man in a suit, in a tiny room filled with

snow, speaking into a miniature microphone. The static was the snow. The jamming was the wind that men outside were blowing against his windows to keep his voice from reaching us.

Behind me, from the kitchen, came the other sound. My mother had turned the television up. Some festive broadcast, an announcer with a bright official voice, music. She was building a wall of sound. She was filling the apartment with noise loud enough that the King's voice could not leak through the walls into the hallway where the neighbors lived.

I lay between the two signals. The forbidden one in front of me, the official one behind me. The apartment had two heartbeats that night, and they were beating against each other.

Then I turned my head and looked at my mother through the doorway.

She was bent over the iron grate of the stove with a wad of cheap gray steel wool. She scrubbed in hard vertical strokes, straight up, straight down, the kind of strokes you use when you are trying to scrape the metal off the metal. The grate did not squeal. It made a low grinding sound. Grind. Grind. Grind. A counterrhythm to the static from the living room.

Her shoulders were locked. Not shaking. Locked. Her breathing was shallow and held, broken once by a wet snuffle she covered immediately with a cough. She was not cleaning. She was punishing. The stove was the only thing in the apartment she was permitted to punish.

She wore the deep forest green headscarf, heavy, itchy wool, plain, no flowers. She wore it inside the apartment when she worked, to keep the dust off her hair, she said, though I had begun to suspect the dust was not the point.

The front door of the building banged shut somewhere below. Heavy boots in the stairwell. Rising. She stopped. She straightened. She reached up and retied the headscarf, pulling the loose village drape into the tight Romanian knot tucked hard under her chin. The fingers were reddened at the knuckles, cracked from the winter. They worked fast. A physical knot to keep secrets from spilling out.

The boots passed our floor. Continued upward. A door opened and closed two floors above.

She exhaled. She did not retie the scarf back to the loose style. She left the knot tight. It would stay tight for the rest of the night.

She used to call me Sonechko. Little sun. The word was soft and round and made of velvet. The words came from somewhere warm, somewhere I had never been but had always somehow remembered.

Now she used only my Romanian name. Flat. Clipped. Spoken with the sharp rhythmic certainty of the Bucharest streets. As if tenderness were a dialect she could no longer afford.

Tonight, with the King's voice leaking from the living room and boots on the stairs and something happening in a city whose name sounded like breaking, she was more Romanian than ever. She scrubbed in Romanian. She breathed in Romanian. The knot under her chin was Romanian to the bone. The Ukrainian was underground, buried beneath the green wool, the stove grate, and the name she no longer used for her son.

I turned back toward the living room. The static had thinned. The King's voice was clearer for a moment. My grandfather leaned closer.

But my eyes went to the table.

She had been preparing it between the bouts of scrubbing. The Christmas meal was a week away, and I did not know whether Christmas would happen this year, because the adults' faces suggested that the calendar itself had become unreliable. She set the things out anyway. Plates. Glasses. Napkins. She built normalcy the way she built the wall of sound, deliberately, against all the evidence.

Then the spoons.

She took them from the drawer. She placed them beside the bowls. One. Two. Three.

She stopped.

She looked at the third spoon. Her face did not crumble. It did not soften. It turned to stone. A specific kind of stone, the kind that forms when something liquid is forced to become solid too quickly.

She picked up the third spoon. Slowly. She put it back in the drawer. She did not look at anyone.

She closed the drawer with the soft click of metal meeting wood and turned back to the stove.

I knew whose spoon it was.

I knew the name the way I knew certain words were forbidden. Not because anyone had explained.

Because the air changed when they were spoken. The name was Irina. I thought of it as something between a prayer and a swear word, too heavy for ordinary use, too dangerous to say out loud in a house where the walls were made of ears.

I thought Irina had turned into the air we breathed in the apartment. Unseen but heavy.

There had once been another child. I did not know what had happened to her. My mother did not know either, or pretended not to, or had decided that knowing would be another door she could not afford to open.

My father had told me one thing about her. One specific thing. She never liked the soft part of the bread. She would dig it out with her thumb and give it to the birds, just to eat the burnt crust.

That made her real. Not a ghost. Not air. A girl with a stubborn appetite and a preference for the edges.

I looked at my father at the table. He sat with a glass. His eyes were red. His breathing was wet and uneven. The broadcast had made it worse, or maybe it was the season, or the bread on the table whose crust was intact because the person who would have eaten it was not here.

My grandfather turned from the radio. He looked at my father. There was something in the old man's face I did not have words for then but recognize now. Not contempt. Not pity. A baffled tenderness. As if crying at a kitchen table were a custom from a foreign country he had heard about

but never visited. Real men, my grandfather believed, did not cry. But there sat my father, crying openly, without apology, and my grandfather did not know what to do with that, so he looked away. My mother brought the soup to the table. She did not look at the drawer where the third spoon had gone. She did not look at my father's face. She said:

"Shut the door; the heat is escaping."

She was never just talking about the radiator.

The King's voice had stopped. The static returned, then silence. My grandfather reached for the dial and turned it back, slowly, until a state-sanctioned peasant song filled the apartment.

He crossed himself. Once. Very small. Near the heart. The gesture was so contained that if you were not watching for it, you would think he was brushing a crumb from his shirt.

He stood. He went to the window. He looked out at the dark block across the street, at the same gray concrete the window had faced for decades. I could not see what he was looking for. Perhaps a motorcade. Perhaps a crown. Perhaps just the confirmation that the world outside the glass was still the same world it had been an hour ago.

My father pushed back from the table. He went to the balcony. Through the glass door, I watched him stand in the cold. His breath rose in white columns. He let the world see his face. My grandfather watched him through the glass and shook his head once, gently, the way you do at something you find both impossible and true.

The apartment had emptied of men. My grandfather at the window. My father on the balcony. Me on the kitchen floor with the wooden truck beside me. I had stopped pretending to drive it.

My mother stood at the sink. Her back was to me. She folded a damp kitchen towel. She did not just fold it. She smoothed it with her thumb, over and over, a gesture that had nothing to do with the towel and everything to do with hands that needed something to hold.

The green headscarf was still tied tight under her chin.

Then she began to hum.

It was low. So low I almost did not hear it over the folk music from the radio. It was not the Romanian carol she sang loudly when neighbors passed in the hallway. This was the other one. The one from underneath. A minor-key melody with round soft sounds that came from somewhere below language, pulled up from the soles of her feet.

She was humming it into the porcelain of the sink so the sound would not travel through the walls.

I lay on the floor and listened.

I did not know what the melody was. I did not know it was Ukrainian. I did not know that my mother was, in that moment, being the woman she spent every other moment of the night hiding. I did not know that this lullaby had once been sung to a girl who preferred burnt crusts, who dug the soft bread out with her thumb, who had a name I was not allowed to say. I did not know that in four days the man in the radio would no longer need to hide in the vacuum tubes, and that the walls would stop having ears, and that none of it would bring back the girl or the country or the lullaby's first listener.

I knew only that the sound was the softest thing in the apartment.

And that my mother was singing it to no one.

She stopped. She wiped the steam from the kitchen window with her palm. Behind the glass: the same gray concrete, the same dark blocks, the same December sky that did not yet know what it would become in four days.

She looked at her palm. It was wet from the glass.

She dried it on her apron.

She retied her headscarf. Tighter.

The heat escapes anyway.