

The Grandma's Story

1.

Lena is sorting buttons, Grandma is singing.

A button for a jacket, a button for a skirt...

Small mother of pearl buttons, carved wooden buttons, big shiny plastic buttons. Lena is taking them one by one from a can and place on the table.

“A button for a vest, a button for my dress...”

“Grandma, tell me a story!”

“What story?”

“About the iron bird.”

“Listen, my love.

Once upon a time, in one country, a cruel king reigned. He sat on the red throne in the fortress and watched his people. If they were happy, he sent a giant iron bird to take them. Sometimes other people watched their neighbours and informed the king That they were happy, even they were not, because they just envied their neighbours and wanted them to be taken by the iron bird and all their belongings be handed to them. Yes, sometimes they just envied.

There was a little girl with a big family. They worked on the land, had some livestock, and felt happy. They tried to hide it, but happiness is not the thing one can hide for a long time.

Their neighbour had become jealous of their nice house and friendly family, so he wrote to the king and asked to send the iron bird after these nasty happy people, and the hard-fisted king did so.

The iron bird came and swallowed the happy family. In its spacious iron stomach, there were many other folks as the bird had been catching happy people day and night, and they were not happy anymore. In the daytime, the bird flew too close to the Sun and the people suffered from heat; at night, its metal was so cold that they shivered and could not fall asleep.

Moreover, they had nothing to eat, so they starved and died. Although the bird was very big, sometimes it swallowed more than it could carry. In this case, it got rid of some of its live load. The girl and her family were among the lucky: the bird spat them out and flew away.

They found themselves on a deserted shore of the great ice sea. It was all white, so they called it the White Sea. Men tried to find some wood and build huts and women tried to find some berries and mushrooms to eat. Slowly, through short cool summers and long freezing winters, they settled and got used to living on the unfriendly shore. They built a tower to watch the iron bird, but it never came. They had survived, but they could not be happy again. The girl's long black hair got silver spikes, and her parent's hair became white, like the great White Sea.

The girl had two brothers. The oldest one was eager to leave their village, because he didn't like their hard joyless life, and looked for the way to escape. He approached foreign ships, which passed by once in a while, as if to sell some food or fur, and asked sailors to take him from this frozen land and from the cruel king's reign. Finally, he disappeared, just didn't come home, and the girl's family never met him again. The girl's father believed that the king's men came at him or the iron bird found him again, but the girl's younger brother

thought that one ship had finally agreed to take him to the new land across the sea where he became happy and free.

The girl chose to be patient and wait. The tyrant king was pretty old when he sent the iron bird after them, so she expected him to die sooner or later. Her parents died first, miserable and tired. Her younger brother got married and started family in their house; the girl got married too, but her husband got ill and died. She brushed her long whitening hair and kept working. She even got a little bit of happiness because she had a little son. Children have a magical ability to make their parents happy every day by just smiling at them. This tiny bit of happiness meant very much in the girl's world, and she was afraid to hope for more.

Once messengers came to their village and said that the cruel king had died. Now the girl's family could return to the warmer lands. The girl's brother didn't want to leave, so she decided to try alone. She took her son, moved to a small peaceful town and started a new life.

“Was she happy then?”

“Hard to tell. She was not afraid to die from cold or hunger any more. Her son and his children could be happy, that was enough for her.”

Lena takes the buttons one by one, puts them in the can, and carefully places the lid.

2.

Lena is sorting documents reading their titles aloud; her father is listening and commenting.

He cannot read without his glasses. Grandma had died two weeks ago.

“Some bonds.”

“Old ones, they are worth nothing now.”

“Insurances”.

“Let me see...”

“Rehabilitation certificate dated 1992.”

Lena’s dad sighs.

“Let’s keep it. Did she tell you this story?”

“What story?”

“About her deportation. In 1930, Stalin decided to get rid of farmers and take all their property. He launched a deportation campaign in villages. Neighbours’ reports on innocent people worked too. Your Grandma and her whole family were dispossessed and sent to the far north by barge. She was 11 when it happened. The authorities did not allow them to take anything, did not give them food or medical help. After they arrived, they had to build huts by bare hands. Eventually they developed a labour camp settlement and lived there like prisoners for many years. I was born there. After Stalin’s death, we were allowed to return to the main land, but only to the Siberian region, far from the capital. Only in 1992, the government issued this rehabilitation certificate to your Grandma, which meant she was not considered a criminal anymore.”

They sit in silence for a couple of minutes.

“Yes, she told me about that,” Lena says.