Darya Rusak

I Have Straw in My Bed

I have straw in my bed. Long, sturdy twigs that shine like gold and look so ridiculous in my almost unfurnished apartment with bare, peeling walls. I'm used to the dirty gray color of the ceiling and the black color of mold in the corners, but certainly not to this sunny yellow on my torn sheets.

I have straw in my bed. It looks like a broken wreath, which grandmothers in the villages teach little girls to make. I don't know, I've never had a grandmother. And I never went to the village either, preferring to suffocate in cigarette smoke on the eleventh floor, even during school holidays. Dad always said that going somewhere was a waste of money, and I should be glad that I had a roof over my head in the very center of the capital, and not on the outskirts among homeless people and drug addicts. You'd think they weren't here. Yet here they are, knocking on doors, peering through the keyhole, stretching out their thin, bony hands covered with dirty scars, and begging, demanding, blackmailing, killing…

I have straw in my bed. Dad died in April, and now it's October. At the funeral, some disgruntled lady said that I was almost eighteen, which meant that no one would bother finding me a guardian. I looked at my reflection in the tombstone and couldn't believe I was over twelve.

And I thought that now Dad would never put my hair in pigtails for me. And then he wouldn't laugh or say that I looked like a scarecrow who drives away not only birds but also people. Dad always took care of me. And he used to say that after his death, I needed to find another man. Otherwise, I would not survive in this world, among tinted jeeps speeding along dusty roads and girls in tight dresses wistfully watching them go.

When Dad and I lived together, he always threw noisy parties, where the whole city seemed to come. It was impossible to breathe in our cramped rooms, especially because of the intoxicating mixture of cologne and alcohol spilled everywhere. I wanted to hide under the covers and wait for everyone to leave, but they kept having fun, and then cried and laughed hysterically. A day later, they would leave. But I would stay. And Dad's friend was with me. A blond man with the kindest smile our apartment had to offer.

It was Dziamjan who I thought of first after Dad's death. He always paid attention to me at these parties. He usually asked me how I was feeling, complained that this was not the best place for a little girl, and once even gave me a straw doll with two pigtails. Dziamjan said she was very strong and only he could break it.

Dad taught me to obey men, so I didn't argue. I had no right to do that. I just politely thanked Dziamjan, kissed him on the cheek, as he always loved, and promised to take care of the doll. She took her place on the shelf in the bedroom, from where she could see the whole room, and began to watch me from there both day and night.

After Dad's death, I grieved with her, and sometimes it even seemed to me that her little straw arms were gently hugging me. It was as if she began to leave her shelf to serve me. She gave her all, shed tears from her painted eyes, and never asked for anything in return.

But Dad taught me to ask strong men for help. So I found Dziamjan.

He came and turned into the third inhabitant of our apartment. The doll took his appearance well. It even seemed to me that she remembered her real master. Together with Dziamjan, we cooked and talked about various minor things. He even combed my hair, like Dad used to do, but he never made the tight pigtails. Dziamjan left my hair loose because he liked it that way much more. It was uncomfortable for me: my never-trimmed strands got into the plate and often fell out. I endured, as my Dad taught me. I endured afterwards, as long as Dziamjan enjoyed it.

And now I have straw in my bed. An untouched, perfectly preserved doll looks at me sympathetically from its shelf.

I turn around, and my hair scratches painfully against my bare back. Shocked, I carefully take one strand, suspiciously hard, uneven and unpleasant, and bring it closer to the dim light of the lamp. Straw. And instead of my palm with a scattering of moles, there is straw. Tightly bound, golden, smelling of something dry and sad. As if in a dream, I turn to the old mirror and shudder.

I have straw in my bed.

My eyes are made of straw.

My whole obedient body, ready to serve and please my master, my weak hands, designed for other people's touch, my soul, which does not exist without someone else, it's all straw.

I'm the straw myself.

The doll silently drops tears. I cry with her.



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