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I open my eyes to see falling white flowers.

I am lying on my back, a young girl dreaming in the springtime of Ukraine, and the branches of the lilac tree above me are moving from side to side in a warm wind. *Syringa, buzok, lilac* in a trembling morning light.

The sunshine touches my face as it tumbles between the bright leaves. It moves from side to side with the wind and brushes gently over my skin, painting it golden, shadow, golden, shadow. A girl in a white dress, painted gold and warm and springlight. I open my eyes and close them. This spring, the nights and days are stretching themselves out in a half-heat sleep, the garden is full of high grass and early poppies, and the fragrance of the lilac draws out the sunshine hours in a heavy flowered dream. Barely open, barely closed.

There is another scent here, quite distinct from the white star lilac. The smell of the black earth. I turn my head to the side, so that the sunshine is brushing just one cheek golden, and my skin is close down, touching the soil. Above me, the wind moves the leaves before my eyes between spectrums of light. White to gold, gold to white. I slowly turn my springtime head. Golden to black. I close my eyes. The smell of the dark earth enters my senses and I breathe deeply.

It is *Ukraina*. It is home.



I live in Bukovina, in a village that lies between the black and golden flats of farmland and the wolved forest peaks of the Carpathian Mountains. I am seven years old. The house where Mama and I live is a faded brick red, and our windows are painted in a cracked white and bright turquoise blue. There is a wooden gate with a broken latch that opens onto the dusty village street, and a path through our garden leading to a narrow white-painted bench next to the kitchen door. Our land stretches in layers of high grass and scattered flowers down to the woods below.

I am sitting now on the wooden bench, the *lavochka*, and I swing my warm legs up and down. Next to me, the kitchen door is open. Across the garden is the lilac tree and I watch as tiny flowers are carried down in the breeze, drifting to the ground below, to the pressed dark earth where I love to lie, daydreaming, gazing up into a panoply of lilac stars.

This garden, this spring, this dazzling sunlight, the sound of a solitary bird singing, feels like a dream shimmering around me. The white lilac, my thin dress, the constant deep smell of Ukrainian earth; it could all be a dream were it not for a streak of dirt on my skin and the touch of cold water when I wash it off. Cold water splashed from a silver bucket on a spring day. A dog barking in the distance. A faint smudge of dirt and my skin rising against the droplets. I look up into the light. Streaks of memory now forming against a background of falling gold.



Sometimes I prefer to sit in the tree above. A bird. A leaf. A single star from a cluster of lilac. I catch a thread of song across the garden and release myself into it, shift the girl into a quiet background and enter the breath of music, which carries me into the bird.

And for a moment I am that music, shimmering against the air, and then I am creating the music. It is I who am singing. I am within the spirit of the bird. And I look around me at the springtime garden and I know why I am singing. The insistent green that is everywhere! The birds that are returning to familiar gardens! The flowers exploding into bloom with every new instant of sunshine!

I look down and see that the lilac cups are filled to the brim with night-time dewdrops and I stop singing and urgently dip my head down and push my beak into the yellow centre to drink the delicious liquid. The scent and the taste are sunshine flowers and I dip again and again and splash my wings into the dew so that my feathers are sprayed with the droplets.

The rush of so many sensations makes me suddenly dizzy and I clasp the branch with my claw feet and open my wings, letting the warm wind calm me, blow my feathers dry.

I jerk my head from side to side, dark eyes darting around, and below I glimpse the outline of a girl, a star in a black-earth sky. I see her, a flower from the tree, a gleam of sunlight, me – a bird! And then I look up from the middle of the branch of bright leaves into the whiteness all around me. The wind touches my damp feathers. The river is not far. I turn my head, checking the air above and the girl below turns her cheek to one side. I open my wings and rise up out of the tree, flapping hard, a song gathering itself inside me. I fly towards the river.



A voice calls out to me in the garden.

I am swinging my legs out high from the narrow bench, my hands holding the edge of the wooden plank. Swing leg, swing leg. My head is warm with golden light. I put my hand up and touch my hair. Tangled curls. *Black like the soil*, as Mama says. A smell all around of heavy sunshine.

“An-ge-la!”

My mother’s voice is calling. Tiny flowers fall around my shoulders as the three sounds move slowly towards me from the kitchen window, where Mama stands looking out at me. The lilac drifts like snow as the droplets of her voice push through the morning’s heat, and I swing my legs up and down on the bench, which is covered in cracked paint, whitewashed, nails banged unevenly into rough planks. I imagine the reverberation of each nail. *Bang!* A blow, a shudder of wood changed forever. *Bang, bang,*

bang. Swing the other brown leg. Every time I swing my leg, the bench is changed forever. The motion of my swing, my drifting thoughts on this flaking seat, the lilac that has fallen and touched my skin.

Mother's face is framed in the window, her golden-brown hair gathered on top of her head and pinned loosely. Her face is round and wide and flat, pale and winter. My own face – spring lilac, brushed with sunshine. The window is painted in whitewash like the bench, faint cracks and flakes coming loose from the wood, fading, deteriorating, every moment, I think, our lives passing by and through, opening and closing, and all the while they are quietly falling apart, disappearing into the dust around us.

Mother, deteriorating, calls, “An-ge-la!”

I stand up from the bench with the droplets of her voice covering me, and skip to the kitchen door. I stand halfway in the doorway so that she can see me through the window frame into the garden, and at the same time, in the kitchen. She laughs, her eyes creasing, hair tumbling from its pins, and she holds out her hand to me.

“I'm making a cake,” she says.

Mama, Mamochka, Mamusya, Matenka moiya!

Mother's face, pale and winter, flat and wide and the most beautiful thing in the world to me. Mother's warm body like bread from the oven. Like a blanket around me on a dark, snowy morning, the cold well water in the midsummer dust. Mama, you are every comfort to every sorrow! I want to disappear into the dough of your body, pushing myself back in, you would roll and knead me into yourself and I would be safe forever.

The spring breeze lifts my hair in the doorway. I want to fly!

Mother hands me a jar of dark honey. On the kitchen table is a chipped bowl and I take a spoon from the drawer and stand over it. The honey is hard and grainy, almost black, and it smells alive, like the earth. Alive with growth, with work, with buckwheat, feelers, pollen, the weight of petals, the beating of wings, and now this dark, solid sweetness. The spoon bends as I dig it into the mass, and when I pull it out it is misshapen. I taste the honey with the tip of my tongue. It is alive, black, soil.

Mother's hands are sprinkled with flour, which she is pouring through a sieve. On the windowsill is a glass jar of sour cream. She passes it to me

and I spoon the cream into the bowl on top of the honey and Mother comes to the table and checks the bowl and pours in the flour and a cup of chopped walnuts.

“Mix it, Angela,” says Mother, and she lights the stove and I push the wooden spoon down to the bottom of the bowl and carefully fold in the cream and flour and the thick honey, and the kitchen will be growing hotter, and the inside heat will soon fill the room, moving all around and towards the window to meet the golden heat outside. An infinitesimal pause between them, trembling in their separateness before they merge, the scent of the baking cake and the scent of the lilac; rising dark honey and fallen white petals. I move the spoon around the bowl.

Mother opens the window.



“Angela, bring the rainwater.”

The cake is rising in the oven, and I run outside to fetch the shallow metal bucket, which is balanced on top of an old rabbit hutch next to the outhouse shed. I carry it carefully into the kitchen and put it down on the wooden table. Mother is waiting for me, holding the comb that we share from the bedroom next door. I peer into the water to check for leaves and insects, and I dip my finger into it to catch a floating petal and a few flecks of dirt.

“It is time to brush your hair,” says Mother. She pulls the loose strands out of the comb and drops them into the bucket of potato skins and scraps of purple beetroot. Three of its teeth are missing. She dips her hand into the rainwater and sprinkles it onto my hair and then she dips the broken comb into it and starts to run it through the wispy ends.

“There,” she says as she combs, drawing out the curls, easing the tangles with her fingers. “Now your hair will always be beautiful.” She sprinkles the water again over my head and she bends down and kisses my hair and the rainwater touches her lips and I shiver, because a drop of water has fallen onto my neck, and because her touch on me is the closest, safest feeling in the world.

“Mama,” I say. “Just like you, Mama.” And she touches her own hair quickly with her left hand, and then bends down to me again.



When she has finished with the rainwater, my hair woven into a long black rope, I take the bucket back to the shed and put it carefully on top of the hutch. I dip my fingertips into the water and taste it. Warmish and like old leaves. I can smell the honey cake rising in the oven, and my damp hair in the sunshine makes my head and neck tingle as I walk back to the kitchen. Mother is bent over, peering through the dark glass at the cake. She turns her head around to me.

“Go and play,” she says. “I’ll call you when it’s ready. Pick some flowers to put on the table.”

“Which flowers would you like?”

She stares at me for a moment, and then shakes her head.

“Any,” she says, and then she straightens up from the stove and picks up the comb from the table and turns away from me into the bedroom, her printed housedress hanging loosely around her.

I go out of the kitchen and back into the garden and I walk slowly down the path, the tall grass on each side of me. The flowers call out to me and I answer them. I blink, and I am inside them. *Blink!* And I am an intricate construction of fibres held together by the pull of beauty, a strange gravity, suspending colours and filaments and cambia through long, sunshine moments.

And who are you? The flowers ask, as I move through them, into them, beside them.

A soul, a spirit, I answer. *A flash of light moving through this body, burning through this single human life. I am time. I am myself. I am the river.*

And to my answer, they bow their heads, and the wind blows, and we sway, petals quivering, stems bristling in the wind. We, here, alive.