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THE GOSLING

He opened one eye, then the other, gave a tiny squeak — and was born into this world. His mother looked at him, covered him with her and her eyes dimmed with tears: the flock had to fly away that night. Her mate and older children had joined the flock in the morning to forage in a winter-wheat field and practice flying over it and the floodlands before departing for the torrid lands, while she had remained to brood her late autumn egg. She had still hoped that nothing would hatch from it — but no, here he was: a hunched, damp, sad-looking gosling with a chip of eggshell sticking to his tiny beak; he was drying under his mother's wing unaware that his brothers and four sisters had been born in springtime when they should have been, whereas he had popped out in autumn, today, when the hoarfrost sprayed the green leaves of the water lilies and the geese's nearest neighbors, the landrails, had left long ago.

She was trying to make up her mind what to do. Flying with six children across three seas was a laborious effort, so where could she take her seventh child? She could not possibly put him under her wing or on her back — he'd fall. And here winter was approaching, the floodlands would freeze — what then? Spend the winter with a nestling? And what about the wind, and the snow, and frost and ice, and foxes, polecats, martens, buzzards, falcons, stray cats, dogs, and hunters? What would she and her nestling eat? It would be the death of them.

For the first time in her life the old goose did not want to go on living. She considered herself a long liver, since she had survived three summers and three winters. The first autumn she had made the passage across three seas to the torrid lands, her flock had met with such murderous gunfire from the reeds that she was the only lucky one of her generation to have remained alive. She might have asked her elders what to do with the nestling, but there was not a single grandparent in the flock. Geese did not live long enough to become grandparents. Besides, her mate was young, one passage her junior.

She lifted her wing and looked at her little mite of a child: the gosling blinked at her drowsily and sank into slumber.

What a worry you are to me, she thought.

From the floodlands downstream, the wind rolled ruffled waves, ringed the reeds by the water's edge with white frothy collars, and bowed them with a dry rustle over the goose, covering her completely; while they were bent, she took a nibble from their long hardy leaves and wanted to nibble them again, but they straightened up. She tensed, waiting for the wind to bend the reeds again so that she could snatch one leaf at least, but the wind suddenly changed direction and bent the reeds over the empty nests.

Through the reeds she saw the gander and her children flying out of the glow of the dipping sun. On landing, the children started to preen themselves. The crops under their young yellow, beaks were so full it seemed they could not think of going anywhere that night.

The gosling peeped from under his mother's leg and saw his father. And the gander saw him, too.

He adjusted his wings and said to her:

"Fly off and eat something. But be sure you don't collide with an airplane over the winter-wheat field."

"All right," she said. "I'm off."

"Fly through the gray. Don't fly through the blue. And be quiet. Once you're above the reeds, climb higher to the right: there are three humans in ambush already behind the reeds."

The goose flew off. A number of shots were fired at her, or perhaps at the flock. When the flock settled on their nests, the gander saw that the old geese were missing. Old geese fly low over the ground, so they must have paid with their lives.

The gander stretched one wing, then the other, looked them over again and folded them.

His wings were in order. The older children had huddled up to one another for warmth, stuck their beaks into their wings, and were now chattering.

"Somehow we'll cross this sea, and the second, and the third, if we aren't shot down," the gander told them and looked at his late autumn child.

Raindrops started to fall out of the nut-brown sky. A drop hung on the gosling's beak and in it he saw his father: he had wary eyes, a gaunt reed-like neck which kept moving back and forth over the gosling and turning at the faintest rustle. Father also had a high, soft gray breast: the gosling pushed himself into its feathers and it was so warm there he dozed off again.

A shot cracked from the direction of the winter-wheat field, followed by three successive reports from the reeds; the children drew their beaks quickly out from under their wings and looked at their father.

"Do we take off or stay?"

"Stay," the gander said, though his heart was thumping so wildly it roused the gosling from sleep; it crawled out from under his father's breast, looked into his yellow eyes, and asked:

"Why are you hitting me with your breast?"

He'll die, the gander thought. That instant a flutter of wings beat the air and the breathless goose dropped to earth heavily, knocking the ears from the reeds.

"Are you all right?"

"I seem to be. Phew, what shall we do now?"

"Take the children and fly off. I'll stay behind with the little one and drift downstream somehow until he's grown up and using his wings."

"I won't fly." Black rims appeared around her eyes, as yellow as her mate's. "I'll stay with you and the little one. The children will leave with the flock."

"With what flock and where to? Take a good look — there are only young ones left. You're the oldest of them all, so you'll fly and lead them. You won't survive with the nestling here. Do you hear?"

"Yes," the goose said. "Well, shall I get ready?"

"Yes. Night is creeping up and so is the mist. Take off into the mist. Nobody will see or get you in it."

"What about airplanes?"

"They don't fly here in the mist. By morning you'll have reached the reserve. Touch down there without any hesitation and don't be afraid of anyone. Fortify yourselves there. From the reserve you'll head over the sea. Fly low over it. Nobody will touch you over the sea. Farther on decide what's best for the flock. Choose only rainy and dark nights for your passage."

"And what if you don't make it with the little one?"

"Don't worry. Take care of the flock and the children — that's the main thing now. Be cunning and cautious. I'll try to join you with the little one in the spring. Just look what a fine baby we've got — he's no sooner born than he's speaking. There's a cocky gander for you!"

The goose went up to the gosling, picked the chip of eggshell off his little beak, and said:

"It would be better if you hadn't been born or-spoken at all."

In the dead of night the geese took off and flew away. The goose led them through the mist up into the sky; unable to hold her emotions in check, she honked to her mate in farewell. No sooner had she honked than random gunshots broke from the winter-wheat field and the reeds.

The gander stretched his neck. Only the whisper of the reeds reached his ears. Then came a scream. He listened more intently. No, it wasn't the scream of a goose but of a human being. They must have hit one of their own, he thought, for in the dark it was difficult to make out sky or ground. The gander bent his neck and listened to the gosling's breathing.

With the departure of the flock he suddenly felt the night growing heavier, bearing down on his nest with its damp darkness; it crept up his back and into his wings as if it wanted to hide in his plumage and dry out there. Once cheerful and dear to the geese, the reeds above the gander were silent now in a way that was furtive and hostile, and the water was addressing itself to someone obscurely. Suddenly an otter, a fish in his teeth, surfaced before the nest and looked greedily at the gander and his young one. The gander hissed at him menacingly, as if to say: "There aren't enough fish for you, are there, so you want my child as well? Just you try and get closer — I'll snuff the life out of you!" The gosling fled for cover under his father's belly and legs, and gave a tiny squeak. The rain started to pour out of the sky with increasing force, loosening the nest and making it lighter. Any minute the water would pick it up.

The gander wrapped his wings round the nest with the gosling in it, and kicking his legs against the hostile water, guided the nest to midstream. By the reeds the water was cross and peevish, either because of some root or hole that got in its way — here it eddied and boiled with anger, always finding something disagreeable; but in the current, it was lithe and free, not asking who was floating on it or where to, as it rushed on easily under the autumn sky and made the bottom of the riverbed sing. What did it care that a gander was riding it, steering his nest with a fledgling aboard.

In the middle of the stream, the gander breathed with relief; he guided the nest without paddling. While the nest was being carried into the rapidly advancing darkness, the gosling could not have his fill of watching his adroit father. Happy at the sight, he tickled his palate with his tongue, stretched out his wings for his father to see, crawled up to the edge of the nest and said, "Daddy, I want to have a swim! I'll have a dip!" — and jumped into the water.

The gander froze. Barely holding the nest steady with one wing, he scooped the gosling out of the water with the other and put him back into the nest.

"I'll give you a dip all right, you little fool! I'll give you one! What about catfish, and pike, and perch!" That moment he felt teeth cutting into his leg under the water. He jumped swiftly onto the nest, which went into a spin in the racing current. The nest will far apart and we'll perish, the gander thought. It was a new nest he and his wife had built from reeds of two years' standing — people used such reeds to shelter greenhouses from the winds in winter.

From downstream, lights and music appeared out of the depth of the night, and the water rushed nest, gander, and gosling more eagerly toward the musical lights. As they drew closer, neither the rain nor the darkness could dim their colors. The gander looked round at the shore — it had disappeared from sight.

He started to paddle with his left wing to get farther away from the lights and pass them by. The water under his wing resisted with a giggle, while the perch beneath the nest gnashed their teeth. He pushed off with his right wing. It was stronger than the left one, because for some reason during every passage he had led the winds had always buffeted his right wing. Being in the sky was one thing, though, but water was something else. It twisted, jerked and pulled at his wing: the nest would not obey him, rushing toward the lights, and presently the black gleaming bulk of something huge rose out of the dark night just in front of his beak.

"Jump!" the gander barked, and the gosling fell into the water. His small yellow body was swallowed up by the black oncoming hill.

"A bird!" shouts came from the barge. "A bird!"

He had already winged over the barge when his pinions caught on an antenna and he tumbled onto a heap of coal. A searchlight was turned on him from the wheelhouse; a man came running his way and the gander threw himself to right and left on the coal, blackening his feathers as he thrashed about, while the man shouted in the direction of the wheelhouse: "Keep the light steady; I can't see anything!" The man crawled on all fours, his hands and eyes roving over the coal. His hand and onion-laden breath passed by the gander — the man had crawled toward the bow of the barge. The little one's perished, and so will I, the gander thought. I should have kept close to the shore instead of swimming in the middle of the river. The barge chugged slowly into the current, carrying the gander away from the flock and the gosling.

"I didn't find him!" the man shouted from the bow. "He's not around. Dim the light, 'cause you're blinding me and I might fall into the water!" He crawled again on all fours back to the wheelhouse. The gander raised his head just then — of all the foolish things to do! He wanted to see if his pursuer had passed or not, but for the splashing of the water and the chugging of the engine he didn't hear the man coming right up to him to grab him by the neck with both hands.

"I've got him! I have! Here he is!" the man rose to his feet in the beam of the searchlight, holding the gander by the neck. The gander gasped for breath. And then he hit the man's face with his wings, both the sound and the injured one; the man fell on his back onto the coal, while the gander, his neck twisted to one side, threw out his wings, hardly daring to hope they would bear him, but they did, lifting him into the air. Black as the night, he was airborne again, plowing through, the dark with a wobbly head. Now, where was the gosling, he thought, where did I jump into the water, where is the water, and what am I flying over now — water, field, or reeds? The gander let out a scream, but because of his constricted throat it was only he who heard the scream. He dropped lower and started to wheel for a long time, screaming again and again. Presently he saw it — the water, the sweet water that had been so kind to his little feathered tribe, with its warm, shallow inlets and, in summer, mosquito-infested reeds, where he and his gosling were born. It picked him up in a whirl neither his legs nor wings could withstand, and now this unkind black water took him on a willful ride the whole night long until dawn when he collided with the metal girder of the dam of a hydropower station.

The gander knew the station arid the tall plants rising on either side of the steppe river. He and his mate had once had so much of the smoke that they never flew over the plants again.

The gander turned his neck — something crackled in it lightly, and he dived into the water. Once he was under the surface, he saw a blay and pecked first at one, then at another: the fare made him feel good. He surfaced and leaned his injured wing on the water — the wing caused him searing pain as if he had leaned not on water but on fire. The wing's ruined, he thought, and looked sadly upstream to where his fledgling was supposed to be. Where am I to look for it, on what shore?

He kicked his strangely numb legs against the water and swam upstream. The bow of yet another coal barge slowly pushed out of the sluice, the gander dived and thrashed his legs vigorously, heading for the shore for as long as his lungs held air. When he was out of breath, he resurfaced, and that instant someone shouted from the barge: "A bird!" The gander slapped both wings against the water, and not believing his good luck, took wing, heavily, hunched, his beak plowing through the water.

Three anglers in tarpaulin garb were walking inland away from the deserted dachas. Seeing the gander, they raised their spinning rods, whistled, and broke into a noisy halloo; the gander was lost, his neck started to jerk frantically, and he dropped onto the water. His wings would not support him any more. With one eye he cast sidelong glances at the barge in the middle of the river, and with the other he held the anglers.

They had no boats and the water was too cold for them to wade into, but they had spinning rods instead. Moments later spoon baits started to explode around him in golden flashes — the anglers were set on catching the gander with spoons at any price. He dived, resurfaced, dodged the spoons in every possible way. One of the anglers was no mean sniper: his spoon landed right on the gander's beak—that could have been curtains. But he had been born under a lucky star, because the spoon and the hooks slid down his beak and plopped into the water. Then, summoning into one thrust all the strength he had left in his wings, and oblivious to any wheres and whys except for the imperative to escape destruction, he rose heavily into the air. Behind his back the barge gave a whistle and the sniper with the spinning rod spat into the air in despair.

The gander plowed through the air with effort, his eyes searching frantically for somewhere to hide. Fortunately for him, an islet of willow scrub showed gray from above. He had almost reached it when he saw a blue motor launch pushing off. He had to turn back! But where could he find the strength for that? Fly higher? What with? So he dived into the water and hid under the waves.

From the boat he saw two people in the boat — a man in a green tracksuit and a woman in a red raincoat and with a yellow scarf. Both of them were standing. The man was holding the end of the long scarf and pulling at it as if he wanted to tear it off and tie head with it. The woman kept covering her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook. Then the man tore the scarf from her neck in the end, threw it to the bottom of the boat, jumped into the water, and swam to the shore. The gander resurfaced from behind a wave and saw the boat with the woman in it drifting downstream and the man walking along the shore upstream in the same direction as the gander had to go.

On the islet the gander nibbled greedily at the rust-colored willow leaves and bark, then settled on the sand and started silently grooming his injured wing.

And what about the gosling? He was simply bathing in bliss! No sooner had his father shouted, "Jump!" than he plopped out of the nest into the scintillating blackness; the black moving mass brushed against his side, a wave picked him up and pulled him into the night. The drifting black silk of the water enveloped his tiny yellow body, covered him with a wave, then uncovered him again, immersed him and pushed him to the surface, and then dragged him onward. What was everything like around him when everything was just black? He could not see either himself or his father;

there was only a drizzle beating against his little head, the smell of food hung in the air, but he could not make out where it was coming from. The night was full of noises; it could have been the rustling of the reeds — so paddle on that way, little gosling, and don't be too afraid; if anything happens, just breathe in as much air as possible and — dive. He seemed to have heard

voices on the shore. The gosling listened intently — it was just the wind playing on the water and an iron chain fastened to a boat. I won't scam anywhere, because I'm not afraid, he reasoned. Since I can't see anybody, nobody can be able to see me. He swam up to the boat, went round it, chose a quiet nook on the leeward side, and dozed off. In his dream he was grown up already, living among geese who screamed at him, and then the bowers of bliss disappeared.

"Hi, silly."

"I'm not silly. I'm wild."

"Well, since you're wild, come to me; don't be afraid. I'm a steel smelter, and this here is my wife and our three sons who're steel smelters too. I'll put you in a barrel by the shed for the night, so that nobody hurts you, at least my, that is, our geese."

"They won't hurt me."

"And what if they do?"

"Oh no, they won't."

"Anyway, the less you're gawked at the better."

"Now look what a beautiful neck I've got — just like an old gander's. Warm me!"

"Well then, I'll bosom you."

"But I'm dirty."

"Look, Valentina, how he's sitting in my bosom. He dozed off. I'll take him to the blast furnace and show him to the boys. He's jerking his legs — must be dreaming he's swimming. Give him some water, and switch off that TV set or else he won't fall asleep;"

"Hey look how he's clung to you."

"Pa, give me the gosling. What do you need it for, if you got your own geese."

"But they're domestic geese."

"Let me have it, Pa."

"And where would you keep it, on the balcony? Besides, your kids will torment it to death the very first day."

"What about me having it then, Pa?"

"Oh no. You'll be drafted into the army in a month!"

Somebody seemed to be walking in the dawn turned gray with hoarfrost. The gosling wanted to look out of the barrel, but he could not jump up to the rim. He tried to flap one wing, then the other, after which he flapped both and jumped onto the rim of the barrel: he saw his long-necked gray daddy, lean and bedraggled, waddling from the river across the leafy potato tops in the kitchen garden.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko