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WHAT MAKES THE WORLD SPIN

A gray hail cloud, its white chilly rifts pierced by the yellow rays of the evening sun, was retreating toward the town of Uman. White hailstones with sharp blue edges were still sizzling on the tilled field after their mighty impact, and two field sparrows huddling in an acacia tree in a shelterbelt nearby chirped in low voices turned dry for fear, asking each other whether they were dead or alive after the wild tumult of the hailstorm.

The dark-brown-rimmed eyes of puddles on the hushed country road along the shelterbelt gazed into the sky, and the water from the melting hailstones inside the empty magpie nests fell right into the eyes of the puddles, drop after drop.

My dapple-white nanny goat with bulging eyes delightedly regarded the bluish bump where a hailstone hit me on the forehead when we were trying to run away from the storm.

I had pitched my tent on the bank of the Kodyma River and was angling for ruffs, when suddenly a torrential downpour broke loose, followed by a hailstorm. Usually quiet and knee-deep even for a frog, the steppe river instantly swelled, churning with bubbles like boiling milk, smashed down the reeds, washed out the dry and packed duck nests, whirled their blackened addle eggs and feathers, tore into my tent, inundating my transistor radio on which our famous Nina Matviyenko was singing beautiful folk songs just then, snatched up the inflatable raft with the white plastic bucket holding my day's catch, and dashed further on to the sound of pelting hail and clapping thunderbolts.

I rushed forth to save the bucket and raft when the wind swept into the tent filling it with air like a balloon. It swayed from side to side and started to rise slowly into the sky. I threw myself down on the tent, grabbed the pegs the Kodyma had already flooded, and started to squeeze the air out of the tent with my body. The hailstones thrashed my back so violently I had a feeling they were scraping off my skin like scales off a fish. But I was set on dropping dead rather than giving away my tent to the elements. Flashes of lightning fell on my four-legged companion who circled round me and bleated dementedly, her face gray for fear, as she vainly tried to escape the stinging hailstones. The Kodyma, however, was not yet satisfied. Its water reached my hands, legs and back. I raised my head and, gasping for air, jumped on my feet, pulled the tent out of the ground and water, shouldered the wet bundle with everything there was in it, and dashed off to a Scythian barrow nearby. The goat followed me at a run.

"Pitch the tent or I'll throw you back into the river I saved you from!" I shouted at her. She only bleated piteously in response. So I covered her with the sodden bundle and slid down the slippery feathergrass of the barrow to retrieve anything that could still be saved.

The raft, bucket, fishing rods, boots and raincoat had disappeared, which I hardly regretted, but what made me really bitter was the loss of the can with homemade cooking oil. Up to my neck in water, I plodded round the willow tree, groping with my feet for the can I had tied to a

root, but instead I came across somebody's creel with crayfish that had been washed downstream. Well, that was something at least. Halya would be glad to have them.

I threw the creel on to the bank, climbed the barrow, chased the goat away, pitched the tent as best I could, found my thermos inside, and went to milk the goat. She blissfully screwed up her bulging eyes as I squirted the milk into the thermos. Moving her hail-battered horns left and right, she looked with misty eyes at the gray-blue evening landscape smelling of dampness; then she scanned the barrows of which there were quite a few around and, reassured that the one we were on was the highest of them all, dribbled more milk into the thermos.

At the sound of cows mooing in the village of Zabary hidden behind the reeds on the far bank, my nanny increased her yield, because down at the dairy farm it was milking time as well.

A silver moon rose from behind the tilled field.

The crickets, dry by now after the rain, came to and started to chirr, reminding the road and the steppe of their perpetual purpose — to run and to spread respectively. Water flowed in an unintelligible gurgle into the dark ditches along the shelterbelt. Yet another raindrop, heavy, silvery, and the last one, kept building up on an acacia thorn, wavering whether to break loose or not, and in the end, it dropped leisurely into the black eye of a puddle, now rimmed with silver instead of dark brown.

"Who, who?" came the cry of a kite in the sky over the steppe

"Who? Nobody!" the echo from the reeds on the far bank hurled back gruffly. "Who, who... I'll show you who... You'll regret your whooing yet..."

I lay on top of the barrow between the tent and the dozing nanny, trying to guess where that kite could be at that moment.

A satellite flew over the kite I did not see. It carried a yellow candle in front to light the way for itself and for God.

"Stop it! Stop gnawing at my head. Stop it!"

Presently I noticed gophers scampering one after another out of their holes in the barrow; they spit tiny bits of gold into the wormwood, dived back into their holes and jumped out again with gold in their teeth that were of gold as well.

"I'm a King! I'm a Scythian King! Don't you gnaw at my head — it's gold. Don't dig your holes around this place!" the King shouted at them from his tomb.

"But we haven't got any other place to live in but your tomb, what with our children to care for and winter approaching. You, King, could at least take pity on us," the gophers whimpered back and kept on spitting out the gold and digging their winter quarters.

The crayfish rustled in the creel lying on the river bank.

Something slapped on the water close to the bank and then splashed noisily in the middle of the river, sending silvery ripples toward the reeds; the ripples scattered in silvery bubbles and then subsided; water beetles now paddled out from under the leaves of water lilies to look at themselves, at the frogs, and at their nearest neighbors — also frogs.

Bluish clouds of smoke, or mist perhaps, rose over the far from mute wall of reeds, somebody was drumming away on a tambourine in Zabary, and, judging by the muffled barking of the dogs and the blinking evening lights going on in the village, Halya had to come any minute now. That I could see by the behavior of the nanny: she stared fixedly across the Kodyma at a point known to her alone, and then she must have picked up the sound of Halya coming, because she gave a plaintive bleat into the early autumn night

The black bow of a paddle boat pushed out of the dark brown reeds onto the silvery surface of the Kodyma, and Halya waved the paddle at me.

The boat was warm to the touch as I pulled it ashore. Halya stepped down onto the grass. We embraced. Her hands were cold with the chill of the night, the water, the dusky village she had come from.

"Why are you dressed in a white smock?"

"Ask me something easier. I got into the boat and started to paddle when I saw on the water something white with a paddle in hand — it was simply my own reflection. I'd come home running from the dairy farm when it was already dark, grabbed a bundle of cornmeal for your polenta to go with the cooking oil, and hurried to you just in what I had on at that moment — the smock I had been milking the cows in. And where's your canvas?"

"On top of the barrow up which the Kodyma chased me."

"You know what my great-grandmother told me today? 'I had a dream you were dating him on a barrow of all places. So watch out,' she said. 'There must have been a reason for such a dream.' But then Grandma interfered: 'Mama, you never experienced love in your life, so why lecture others how to go about it? She's been his sweetheart for long. Halya, you keep dating that boy and don't be afraid of anything, because this life is like a poppy — in the morning it's blooming and in the evening the petals fall off.' This made Great-grandmother really mad. 'When you were her age you fooled around just like her,' she lashed out at Grandma. 'Do you think I don't know? I know everything and I see everything!' My mother, though, just listened to their argument without saying a word. Oh, I brought you some salt here." Halya raised her suntanned arms and took a matchbox with the salt out of her plaited hair. "I put it in there in case the boat overturned. The river isn't deep, but my boat is leaking. The day seemed long like an eternity. I thought I'd die until the moment I met you. Why are you looking at me like that? Why, tell me? Is it because I'm barefoot and dressed like that? But I told you I was in a hurry to see you."

The oncoming chill of autumn crept into the riverside villages amidst the quietly hushed steppe, and either because the King had turned over in his sleep or because he had disturbed the gophers in the process, the lovers had a feeling that the barrow had started to spin like a toy round the star-studded sky.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko