

The Crib

Elena sat on the edge of the tall bed that took up almost half of the tiny hospital room. It was not clear how it could ever be brought inside. Even the gurney could not pass through the doorway when her daughter was brought to the department from intensive care. The short, frail doctor had to lift the patient in his arms, carry her through the hallway and carefully lay her down on the bed.

Elena rested her hand on a thick book lying on top of an old Soviet woolen blanket at the feet of her sleeping daughter: “Three Musketeers” by Alexandre Dumas. As a child, Elena loved to read about the adventures of brave, noble warriors, but now the novel seemed naive to her, and even a little silly. But her daughter liked the book, and Elena read it aloud to her. It was a little distracting for both of them and slightly brightened up the room in a shabby hospital of the nineties.

Three days ago, her daughter had surgery, for the second time in four months. She had her spleen removed. Anemia did not allow the child to actively grow and develop physically, and the doctor insisted on surgical intervention. At the age of twelve, the girl looked eight or nine years old and did not gain weight.

The second anesthesia seemed to be tolerated relatively better than the first one. The daughter was on a dropper, which was supposed to wash the traces of anesthesia out of the body and fill it with glucose and vitamins. Some indicators in the blood tests went off scale, while others, on the contrary, did not reach the lower limit. Doctors ran around the hospital in horror and convened councils.

Elena herself was terribly afraid of injections and even fainted when she was tested. And when the procedures were carried out with her daughter, the mother ran out into the hall and, like a tigress in a cage, wandered around in circles, nervously biting the skin on the back of her hands. But she had to be brave and, with trembling hands, learn to regulate the dropper herself, stop it at the right time, and even change the bottles with medicine.

As a child, Elena almost never got sick. And if she caught a cold, then it never occurred to her parents to stay with her on sick leave. Like most of their peers, they were busy building a bright future for new generations of Soviet people, and they had absolutely no time to bother with their own children.

Drip-drop... Time got depressingly stuck in the regulator of the medical apparatus.

Elena was tormented by fear, confusion and loneliness. Her heart was breaking at the sight of her pale, fragile daughter. The youngest son had just started his first grade, and his mother could not be with him in such an important and responsible year. The boy, like a ball, was being thrown from relatives to relatives. And the child was lacking maternal care.

Despite the fact that the father took his son to school and picked him up when his days off fell on school days, he was not there for any of his daughter's surgeries when she needed fatherly support as much as her mother. He dropped by the hospital for a formal visit only once for ten minutes. Duty fulfilled. The relatives cannot complain.

Elena divorced her husband a few years ago, but they had to continue huddling all together in a tiny apartment. The children did not know anything about the official separation of their parents, but they could not help but notice the tense relationship between their parents. Elena and her son once even had to ask her friend for asylum after a fight with her drunken husband.

She felt sick from the memory of that evening and the hateful, repulsive smell of beer emanating from her husband. He got so angry that he started throwing things at the wall. He broke the rotary phone. It became dangerous to remain at home.

Her daughter was visiting her grandmother at the time.

Drip-drop...

Hmm, grandmothers. They once vowed that they would help Elena with her children. They both just cannot get sick at the same time, right? At least one of them will help out. And both grandmothers fell ill in the same year. Diabetes, asthma, surgeries, a wheelchair... They themselves needed constant care. But persistent ladies held on to life with an iron grip. And even tried to help Elena.

Elena wanted to please her daughter in any way she could. But she had no money. She was being torn between home and the hospital, her son and her daughter. She could not work.

Recently, she accidentally found out that her ex-husband, secretly, took possession of her tiny apartment, inherited from her distant relatives, which she rented out and with the money from which she could somehow feed her children. Elena herself wore a plastic bag in her boot: the sole was getting wet mercilessly. Elena was catastrophically unable to buy a new pair of shoes.

She did not count on pennyworth alimony. It seemed that her ex-husband, stealing from his own children, was taking revenge on *her* for something.

Drip-drop...

A nurse entered the room.

“Mommy, move aside, please. I must give an injection of antibiotics,” she said sternly and patted the child on the shoulder to wake her up. “Here you are. How is your scar going, by the way?”

The nurse checked the white bandage with dried burgundy stains on the girl's stomach.

“It seems to have stopped bleeding. Be more careful in the future. Do not strain so much that the seam does not separate even more,” the nurse instructed the child. She removed the dropper, measured the girl's temperature (she still had fever), collected medical instruments and left.

“Thank you!” Elena called after the nurse.

“Mom, will you buy me my favorite cake, Bouchée?” Unexpectedly asked her daughter.

“Of course, I will. Once you get better, we'll go to The North Café.”

Elena did not yet know where she would get the money for this. In the late nineties, going to a café was for her, as for many, a luxury. But she will figure something out. Perhaps, her brother will help her out again. Elena was grateful to him. Her brother often gave her a helping hand.

“Are you hungry?” Elena looked at her daughter in amazement.

“Yes, a bit.”

The dark, stuffy, tiny room seemed to light up. The child regained her appetite.

The girl was able to eat just a quarter of a green apple: green ones were her favorite. And she took a sip of sparkling water.

“Will you read “The Musketeers” aloud to me?” the girl asked quietly.

“Do you want it now, darling? Let me read it then.”

That evening, after her daughter fell asleep, Elena climbed into a crib with slats that was huddled against the opposite wall in their room. The hospital did not bother to provide a couch for the parents, who were on duty around the clock at the bedside of their children. Therefore, only a chair remained as an alternative place to sleep for the whole month. Elena had to curl up and hug her knees to fit into the tiny space. She gradually began to sink into a disturbing, sensitive sleep...

by Nadezhda Bezuevskaiia