

It Began With A Dream

by

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CHARACTERS

CHILD, 10, male or female.

WOMAN, 20-30.

ELDERLY WOMAN, elderly, late 80s.

ACTIVIST, male, 25-30.

MAN, middle-aged, 40-50.

(Lights up.)

ACTIVIST

(Speaks with thick Russian
accent.)

It began with a dream. A dream of a self-
sufficient Soviet Union. A dream of
industrialization: moving us to the forefront of
the world. Within five years, all would be worth
it. All would be right.
That was the dream.

ELDERLY WOMAN

MAN

(translating in
English while the
ELDERLY WOMAN
speaks in
Ukrainian.)

The dream that turned into
a nightmare.

The dream that
turned into a
nightmare.

WOMAN

A dream doesn't consist of ignorance, oppression,
or murder.

MAN

A dream is filled with hope.

CHILD

And hope has a future.

ELDERLY WOMAN

(In broken English.)

And you have taken ours away.

(One person begins to sing.
Slowly, they all join in.)

ALL SING

(As they sing in Russian, the
words are displayed on a
projection screen in English.)

Hey, our harvest knows no limits or measures. It
grows, ripens, and even spills over onto the
earth, boundless over the fields; while the

patrolling pioneers come out to guard the ripening wheat-ears of grain. We've hardened our song in the kilns fires and carry it aloft like a banner, offering it to you, we've hardened our song in the kilns fires and carry it aloft like a banner offering it to you, and in this way, Comrade Postyshev, we are submitting our report of the work we've done, we are submitting our report of the work we have done.

CHILD

Holodomor.

(Blackout except for a spot on the activist.)

ACTIVIST

It was my job.
It was my job to come to your house.
It was my job to enforce collectivization.
I took the grain you planted. I took the equipment you needed to grow your crops.
When that wasn't enough, I took the potatoes you grew in your garden.
I took the corn, seeds, and vegetables that you used to nourish the bodies of your already thinning children.
You hid the grain. You hid the potatoes. You hid the seeds.
And I am the one who woke you up out of your sleep, the only moments you were able to find true peace, and I found them.
I found them and I took them.
Because I believed in Stalin.
Because I believed in his plan.
Because it was my job.

(Black out. Lights rise slowly. A young WOMAN walks out, staring at the audience. She is dressed in modern clothes. In her hand is a folded letter, aged. She pauses for a moment and then begins.)

WOMAN

I found this letter in my grandfather's attic after he passed away. He never talked about his cousin. I never even knew we had family who'd been through the famine-genocide.

Kharkiv. April 24, 1933.

My dear cousin.

I turn to you because there is no one else. I am scared and fearful—not only of the days to come, but of each passing second.

They have taken everything: vegetables, eggs, and every last bit of grain that dusted our once beautiful land. There is nothing, cousin.

The famine has destroyed the town we once laughed in. The sun that used to warm now burns and dries the tears that we cannot help but shed. We open our mouths wide in the rain, needing something to fill our deprived bodies. Soon, they will find a way to take that away.

My faith in the Lord is waning.

We are dying. With every breath I take, I am worried it will be my last.

I am watching my babies die. They are so young. Yadviga is only seven, and Valentyn will be four next month. Their bellies are swollen. We have been eating grass and leaves for almost a month now. William went to search for food yesterday and came back with a cat. He kept the children outside while I killed and boiled it.

I have heard more, Dayvd.

Graves are being dug up, looking for gold to purchase anything edible. An underground organization has formed. They are killing humans and turning them into food. This is the world in which we live.

We cannot hide from death. All I ask is that you pray. Pray to the Lord and beg that He hear our prayers and take this pain away. If we only had some bread, I would always be thankful and would praise Him forever more. Pray for our souls, cousin. And remember our names...

(WOMAN looks up from the letter. She places it on the ground at the edge of the stage, near several candles. WOMAN steps forward and

lights four candles, as she says their names.)

Anzhela, Dmytri, Yadviga, and Valentyn.
Seventy-five years later, we remember your names.

(WOMAN turns to leave the stage. As she does, she hears the CHILD begin to speak. Intrigued, the WOMAN takes a seat near the wings of the stage, and listens to his story.)

CHILD

My father died.

My mother and I had to watch it happen. That was hard. I remember the beginning. I remember the men coming into our house and taking all of our food. My mother would cry at the table and I would hide in the corner, behind her. But it was my father I'll always remember. At first, he wanted to fight. He would get angry. But each time, he became calmer. And eventually, he would stand at the window while they tore our house apart, knowing he could do nothing to stop it, do nothing to protect me or my mother. And so, my mother would keep crying, and I would keep hiding.

(The CHILD sits down and takes a small toy out of his pocket. He kneads it in his hands for a minute before speaking.)

I'd been sick before. And I used to think I knew what it was like to be really hungry, when I was sent to bed without dinner for not doing my chores. But you don't. You don't ever know what it's like to be hungry until you haven't eaten real food in days or weeks.

Watching my father die was hard. It was like he just... gave up. I don't remember much about it. Death became... normal.

After that, things just got worse. I remember watching my mother change. I remember hugging her before it all started—and I could never get my arms around her waist. And I remember laying my head on her lap at night. She was so comfortable. And I'll never forget the first time I hugged her

and my hands touched. I remember dropping my arms and backing away.

I remember one night. My father was still alive and we hadn't eaten in four days. It was the dead of winter. There were no bugs. The lakes were frozen, the ground was dead. I was in my bed, trying to sleep. I heard my mother crying and my father talking softly. I remember her saying that it would break my heart. I remember her saying she didn't know if she could do it; that I'd suffered enough. And then I only remember sounds. The sound of my dog struggling as they pulled him outside. The sound of the rope being tied to the tree. The sound of my father picking up the ax. The sound of my mother's sobs. And the sound of the ax. Not once. Not twice. But three times. After that. It was quiet.

(CHILD pauses. He reenacts his memory, simply, as he speaks.)

I remember the first time I saw myself. It was raining hard. And I went outside and looked up at the sky, catching rain drops in my mouth. It wasn't food, but it made my belly feel full. I saw a puddle, about three feet away. I knelt down and I leaned over. And just as I was about to put my mouth to the water, I saw my reflection. It... it wasn't me. My face was so thin... and my skin... it looked like the paper I used to practice on in school. And my eyes... they... they didn't look like they fit in my head. They looked... old. And that was when I realized.

I was going to die.

(CHILD walks to the edge of the stage and lights two more candles. The WOMAN has silently walked over and placed her hands on the CHILD'S shoulders.)

This is for my parents.

This is for my dog.

WOMAN

(Lighting another candle.)

And this is for you.

(Blackout. Spotlight up. The WOMAN is sitting on the side of the stage, again, cradling the child

in her arms. They watch the following interactions.)

ACTIVIST

I believed.
 I believed in the plan.
 I believed I was doing the right thing.
 I believed.
 I believed until I saw your children turn into deformed creatures before my eyes.
 I believed until their bellies bloated and their faces grew old and they lost their spirit.
 I believed until the bodies began to pile up on the streets. Slowly at first, one at a time. And then three, four, dozens at a time.
 I believed until it was my job to collect not the food, but the bodies. I forced myself to think of other things while my warm hands touched their frozen skin. Many of their eyes were still open, the expressions still visible on their faces... as if they were sitting, perhaps in the middle of a conversation, and just... ceased to live. Those eyes... staring into mine... cursing me for their death.
 I believed until I realized that many of the bodies I was loading into my cart were still alive. They moaned and moved their lips slightly. And I lifted them up, as gently as I could, and laid them in the cart, knowing that they weren't dead now, but they would be by night. And with each body I touched, I said a prayer in my head... for them. And for myself.
 I believed until the happy, cheerful sounds of the Ukrainian villages were destroyed. Until I realized that silence isn't quiet at all. Silence is deafening.
 I believed until I saw my reflection.
 And I saw not a man who believed in a cause.
 But a man who killed for effect.
 I no longer believed.
 But I never had a choice.

(In the middle of his monologue, the ELDERLY WOMAN begins to enter the stage, listening to his speech. Behind her, a MAN and

walks over to the ELDERLY WOMAN,
holding her arm for support.)

ELDERLY WOMAN / MAN
(in Ukrainian) (in English)
(The words overlap, here. The
voice of the ELDERLY WOMAN is in
the background, and the male voice
is dominant.)

You speak of choices.

You speak of choices.

You speak of belief.

You speak of belief.

You speak of sorrow.

You speak of sorrow.

You know none of it.

You know none of it.

I was there. I was a
child who watched my
family literally
wither away.
I had no choice.

I was there. I was a
child who watched my
family literally
wither away.
I had no choice.

I watched men like you
steal and murder for
your beliefs, as you
ate heartily the food
grown on our lands.

I watched men like you
steal and murder for
your beliefs, as you
ate heartily the food
grown on our lands.

You took, not only
our food, but our
our music, our language,
our traditions, our
religion, our freedom,
and our culture. We
had no choice.

You took, not only our
food, but our music,
our language, our
traditions, our
religion, our freedom,
and our culture.

You took it all.
You had a choice.

You took it all.
You had a choice.

ACTIVIST

I wish you could know the thoughts in my head.
I wish you could hear the prayers I offered.
I wish you could understand the pressure put-

ELDERLY WOMAN / MAN
You wish I, you wish that
I... You wish I, you wish
that I...
Why not wish changes for
yourself? Why not wish changes
for yourself?

ACTIVIST

I do. Every moment of every day I wish that I
could turn back time.
I wish that you, and the millions of others that
suffered, never knew the word Holodomor.
I wish that the last memories of your family were
not of their deaths, but of their lives.
I wish I could find the words to take the pain
away.

But... I can't.

But I am here now, with you. Remembering the
lives of those lost - the lives of those I
killed, and the lives of those who survived.

(He walks to the edge of the stage,
and lights two candles.)

This is for your family.

This is for you.

(He walks over to the woman and
kneels down at her feet. He begins to
cry and holds her dress. The ELDERLY
WOMAN is in disbelief, and then
gently touches the ACTIVIST'S
forehead.)

(The CHILD has been watching and
stands up from the side of the stage.
He walks over to the candles,
prepares to light one, and says the
following, while looking back at the
ACTIVIST.)

CHILD

And this is for you.

(He lights the candle and walks to
stand next to the ACTIVIST. Blackout.
Lights up. Spotlight on the MAN, with
dim lighting in the back on the
ELDERLY WOMAN, who is kneeling in the
back, eyes closed in prayer.)

MAN

This is my mother. And she loves to sing. I used to ask her all the time when she started singing. And she would take my face in her hands and say "when the world was dark." Now, as a kid, I used to take that literally. And then, as I grew and matured and learned about the famine-genocide, I also learned about my mother.

They took away religion, so they thought, but they prayed more than ever. They took away tradition, but they still celebrated each morning they woke up and felt the warmth of the sun. They took away music, but they still sang. My mother sang when life became too much to handle. Her voice soothed her family. She sang for food. She sang to forget. She sang to escape. She sang to survive.

My mother lives two separate lives - the Iryna that is the caring mother I know and the Iryna that is a survivor of the Holodomor. As her son, I strive to know both... but she makes that impossible. I don't know what she went through, and I probably never will. Hell, I don't know if I want to. What I do know is that it made her strong, almost invincible. After what she went through-nothing can bring her down.

Each morning, when she wakes up, she lights not one candle, but ten. I can only guess why there are ten. Ten candles for family members, ten candles for friends, or perhaps each candle represents the one million lives that were lost. To this day, she wakes up, looks out the window, and says to me, "It's a beautiful day." There could be a tornado right outside, carrying cars, and animals, and who knows what... and yet, it would still be "a beautiful day."

(He chuckles, looking back on the memory in his mind.)

What's unfortunate is that with each breath she takes, and every survivor, for that matter, we're one step closer to losing the men and women who lived. The statistics are only numbers without the names and stories to give them meaning. Their stories need to be told. The ten million dead can't be forgotten.

(The ELDERLY WOMAN has gotten up, and walked over to her son. He looks at his mother and smiles.)

Maybe she doesn't live two separate lives. Maybe that's just my way of dealing with it: separating the images of my mother, tortured and starved, from this strong woman who stands here with me. But the things I do know: the stories I've heard, the bits of hushed conversations... well, they help me to create my own memories and my own images of the Holodomor.

And when she is gone, I think I'll remember the Holodomor the same way my mother does. I'll light a candle, cherish each day, and *never* forget where I came from. And when a memory is triggered, my mother closes her eyes and begins to pray. And sometimes, when it hurts the most, she'll *still* start to sing.

ELDERLY WOMAN

(in Ukrainian)

Swiftly as birds, one after another, fly over our Soviet homeland.

ELDERLY WOMAN / MAN

(In Ukrainian and English, respectively, and hand-in-hand.)

The joyous refrains of town and country: our burdens have lightened, our lives have gladdened.

(While they are singing, ALL characters enter the stage. Each joins in singing, in Russian, Ukrainian, and English. While they are singing, the lights on the stage dim slightly, letting the candles burn.)

ALL

Swiftly as birds, one after another, fly over our Soviet homeland the joyous refrains of town and country: our burdens have lightened, our lives have gladdened. Our burdens have lightened, our lives have gladdened.

END OF PLAY.