



Алена Викторовна

The Wardrobe Filed with Shells

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«Автор»

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The book, that might have a magical therapeutic effect on you. Some childhood memories fade. Others wait quietly for years, hidden like seashells in the back of an old wardrobe. In this deeply personal memoir, Alena Babenko returns to the world of her Soviet childhood—not to recreate history, but to rediscover the moments that shaped a life. Through vivid, often humorous, and sometimes heartbreaking stories, she explores family, love, loss, kindness, shame, resilience, and the invisible beliefs we inherit without ever questioning them. More than a memoir, *The Wardrobe Filled with Shells* is an invitation to open the forgotten drawers of your own memory. Because every family has its stories. Every childhood leaves its echoes. And sometimes, by remembering another person's past, we finally begin to understand our own. A warm, honest, and beautifully reflective journey for readers who believe that the smallest memories often hold the greatest truths.

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The Wardrobe Filled with Shells

THE WARDROBE FILLED WITH SHELLS



your memoir about the shells we wear — and the woman underneath

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Preface



I looked up from my plate and saw my grandmother from the kitchen window. The house we lived in was very big and shaped as a curved shell, so we could see the windows and the balconies of our neighbours.

She was standing outside a fifth-floor window of our old Stalin-era apartment building, washing the windows of a woman she had met only a few days earlier.

I froze.

I was just over twenty. My grandmother was about sixty-five. Today, many people would hardly call that old. But things were different then. Her generation began thinking of themselves as elderly much sooner. And her health had already begun issuing reminders. She suffered occasional dizzy spells, and I knew it perfectly well.

She was not standing on a ladder.

She was not on a balcony.

She was standing on the outside windowsill of the high fifth floor.

I did not scream. I did not rush to the window. I did not call out to her. I sat there, unable to move, telling myself over and over that it would all end well.

A completely absurd thought flashed through my mind. People say, “He died in a car crash.” “She died in her sleep.” “He died at work.” But does anyone ever say, “She died washing somebody else’s windows”?

For some reason, it was that very silly thought that calmed me.

An hour later, my grandmother came back home and lowered herself wearily onto a chair.

“Have you lost your mind?” I burst out. “Why?”

She looked at me as though the question itself was strange.

“I felt sorry for her.”

That was all.

No long explanation.

The woman in the building opposite ours had become seriously ill. They had not even known each other. My grandmother heard about this woman from the old women sitting daily on the bench down the building and gossiping, so she offered to help, and simply begun doing what she believed was right.

First she washed the windows. Then she started bringing food. Then, while the woman was in hospital, she fed the woman’s husband every evening. Then she helped him with other things. And then with more. And more.

The story did not end the way all fairy tales do. Little by little, help became expectation. Expectation became obligation. And gratitude turned into resentment.

At the time, I thought I knew exactly where my grandmother had gone wrong. I was certain I would never do the same.

Years passed.

Then one day I caught myself saying her words, repeating her actions, even feeling what she had felt.

Only then did I understand that the story had not ended on the day my grandmother climbed down from that windowsill.

It had continued in me.

CHAPTER ONE

I Did Not Know How to Receive



We lived in a small house.

Only four apartments. But it had a large garden.

My grandfather had built the house years earlier. He was in charge of a government communications facility. The place was almost secret; the life around it was entirely familial.

Everyone knew everyone. We celebrated New Year's together. The children grew up as one gang.

In the evenings, the adults would stroll along the street full of roses and fireflies and then, without fail, drop in on one another for coffee.

Coffee required chocolates.

And when guests came, a new box was opened. It was considered respectful to offer something with coffee or tea. It was the proper thing to do.

Every other evening, our neighbour Galya came to see my mother. Mum made coffee, opened a fresh box of chocolates and said:

"Galya, please, help yourself. They're delicious."

And every time, Galya laughed and gave the same reply:

"Oh, please! It is honour enough that you opened a new box for me. Am I supposed to eat them too? That would be sheer impertinence."

We all laughed with her. I thought it was simply a good joke. It took me many years to understand that it was not a joke at all.

It was a philosophy of life.

Do not take up too much room in another person's life. Do not ask. Do not accept. Do not inconvenience anyone. Do not become indebted. Do not allow others to spend more on you than absolutely necessary.

No one ever said these words to me. Yet somehow, this was exactly how I grew up.

Had there been a world championship in saying, "Thank you, but no, I'll manage," I would have stood an excellent chance of winning.

I did not know how to accept help.

And the funniest part was that I considered this a virtue.

...

Several years ago, my husband and I lost our jobs at the same time.

It was not the worst thing that can happen in life. But it was the first time the ground beneath my feet seemed to disappear.

One day, a friend sent me a message. No long conversation. No expressions of sympathy.

She simply transferred two thousand dirhams to me and then wrote:

Please accept this. I truly want to help you. Someday, when everything is all right again, you can invite us to dinner. For now, just let me do this for you.

For several minutes, I stared at the screen. Not at the amount. At the reply button.

It sounds ridiculous. A grown woman sits there, unable to type the word "thank you", because a genuine battle is raging inside her.

One part of me understood that I truly needed the help. The other was frantically searching for a way to refuse it—or at least to return the money as quickly as possible.

I was ashamed to accept it.

Ashamed. As though I were doing something wrong.

And suddenly I remembered Galya.

It is honour enough that you opened the box.

Good Lord.

Had I really spent my whole life living by that sentence? I genuinely believed that accepting something was almost indecent. Giving help—certainly. Offering—gladly. But taking? - No.

I wrote one word.

Thank you.

No explanation. No apology. No promise to repay everything at the first opportunity.

And do you know what happened?

Nothing.

The world did not collapse. I did not become a worse person. No one began looking down on me. Quite the opposite. I think that was the first time I felt not humiliation, not my own supposed shamelessness, but care. Real care.

...

A couple of years later, a colleague's boyfriend asked me to help him propose to her. All he needed was one day off for her.

We arranged it with the manager. We did not deduct the day from her annual leave. We simply gave it to her.

When our bride-to-be came back, I decorated the office. I filmed videos. I was as delighted as if I were the one getting married.

A few days later, she came up to me carrying a bottle of French wine.

"This is for you. From both of us."

Once again, something inside me flinched. I wanted to refuse—not because I did not want the wine, but because kindness should not be paid for. I believed that kindness always returns, but not directly. I kind of imagined a wider circle: you help me, I help someone else, someone else to someone else and one day it returns to you from where you do not expect....

Then she said:

"You did it from the heart. And now my fiancé wants, from the heart, to do something nice for you. Let him."

LET HIM...

Those two words stayed with me for a long time. Suddenly, everything fell into place. Perhaps receiving is also a form of generosity. Because when we refuse another person's kindness, we sometimes deprive them of the joy of giving it.

It took me more than fifty years to understand that.

And I think that was when this book began.

I thought I would write about the people who had left their mark on my life. It turned out that all along, I had been trying to understand just one woman.

Myself.

CHAPTER TWO

There Is No Toilet



I was three years old. Until then, I had never attended nursery school. At home, everything made sense.

Grandmother. Mum. Dad. My own potty. My own bed.

Then one day I was brought into an entirely new world.

After a while, I needed the toilet. I went up to the teacher.

“Where is the toilet?”

She pointed.

“Over there.”

I went.

I opened the door. Looked inside. And came straight back.

“There is no toilet.”

She laughed.

“Of course there is. Go and look more carefully.”

So I went again.

But the toilet had still failed to show up to me. There was only a hole in the floor. That was what nursery-school toilets were like in those days.

I honestly did not understand why everyone was calling it a toilet. I came back once more. No one explained anything to me.

Adults sometimes seem to think certain things are obvious—especially when those things are obvious to them.

Then what was bound to happen, happened. I returned home carrying the first real humiliation of my life. Not because I had done something wrong, but because I had failed to understand what, apparently, everyone else understood.

I barely remember the nursery school itself. I do not remember the toys. I do not remember the teacher. But I remember the feeling very clearly: asking for an explanation was dangerous. Because instead of an answer, you might get laughed at.

It is astonishing how long such discoveries can live inside us.

Later, at school, whenever I did not understand something, I almost never raised my hand. Being silent was the shell for me.

Better to get a poor mark. Better to sit there and puzzle it out by myself. Better to search everywhere for a crib sheet. Anything rather than admit aloud that I did not know.

Now, many years later, I think of that little girl with tenderness. She was only three. She was not afraid of looking foolish. She simply did not know.

Fear came a little later.

CHAPTER THREE

Little Tragedies: Grandmother



I think my grandmother sincerely believed that the world was held together by small things. Not by love. Not by politics. Not by economics.

By lids placed the right way up, doors closed quietly, and people who did not inflict unnecessary noise or worry upon one another.

At the time, I thought she exaggerated terribly. These days, I increasingly catch myself noticing that some of her little tragedies have quietly become my own.

Story One

The Lid

If you remove a lid from a saucepan, you must never put it down with the inside touching the table.

Why?

Because the inside touches the food. Therefore, it must remain clean. This was so self-evident that no one ever explained it to me.

One day I went out to take away the garbage. Large metal bins stood in the courtyard. I lifted the lid. Carefully, I placed it upside down. Threw away the bag of garbage. Closed the bin.

Suddenly, laughter floated down from above. Grandmother had been watching me from the window. By the time I came back upstairs, she could hardly contain herself.

“Why did you turn the rubbish-bin lid over, madam? You might as well have worn an evening gown and a hat to take out the garbage!”

I stared at her.

“What do you mean?”

“You put it down as if it were the lid of a saucepan!”

Only then did I realise that I had not thought about it at all. My hands had long since learned the “proper” way.

Incidentally...

More than thirty years have passed. I still automatically turn every lid over, even when I know perfectly well that a rubbish bin could not care less which side of its lid has touched the pavement.

Story Two

Millions of Nerve Cells

My grandfather was, in fact, an extraordinary man. Kind-hearted. Impossibly calm. He never became angry with anyone. I do not think he knew how to annoy people.

With one exception.

My grandmother.

And even then, entirely by accident.

The toilet door in our flat had a heavy metal bolt. My grandfather opened it perfectly normally, the way any person would.

Click.

At once, my grandmother’s voice came from the kitchen:

“That’s it! Millions of my nerve cells have just turned black and died!”

Sometimes she added:

“How can anyone live like this?”

“You are not alone in this flat!”

Grandfather smiled apologetically.

“All right, all right...”

An hour later, it happened again.

Click.

“That’s it! Another few million nerve cells have turned black! They are now dead and irreplaceable”

The funniest part was that Grandfather genuinely tried. But he was forgetting. Every time. Or misjudged the force.

And every time, Grandmother suffered with complete sincerity.

Back then, I thought she exaggerated too much. Today, I open doors so quietly that sometimes even I cannot tell whether I have opened them at all.

And each time, I mentally count my nerve cells. So far, they all seem to be alive.

Or almost all.

Story Three

Baba Yagha and the Postman

But perhaps the most enduring of my grandmother’s rules was something else entirely.

I was eighteen. It was a day off—that rare luxury of having nowhere to rush.

I would wake up, go into the kitchen, and we would have breakfast. Before I had even finished my tea, Grandmother would look at me closely and say:

“Right. Go and wash your face again. And put on some make-up. Don’t walk around like Baba Yagha”

“Grandma, why? I’m not going anywhere today.”

She looked at me as though I had just proposed repealing the law of gravity.

“What if somebody comes? And you open the door looking like Baba Yagha”

“Who will come?”

“Anyone. A neighbour. The postman. People we know. A woman must always look immaculate, even when she is not expecting anyone.”

I used to roll my eyes. I thought it was absurd. What postman? Who on earth would dream of judging my looks at nine in the morning in my own home?

Many years have passed.

Postmen have disappeared. Delivery drivers, admittedly, remain...Neighbours are now more likely to send a message than ring the bell.

And I still sometimes catch myself, even on a day when I have nowhere to go, washing my face, doing my hair and putting on make-up first thing.

Then I hear the familiar voice inside me:

What if somebody comes?

The remarkable thing is that, most of the time, nobody does.

Except Grandmother.

She still appears in my head now and then at the exact moment I look in the mirror on a weekend morning.

...

Sometimes I think a person is made not of beliefs, but of hundreds of such ridiculous little things. We are rarely raised through long conversations. We are raised by the way doors are closed. The way lids are put down. The way people greet one another. Apologise. Help.

Then one day, you suddenly realise that you never chose half of these habits.

You simply loved—and cared for—the person beside whom you grew up. Or absorbed a rule passed silently from one generation to the next.

CHAPTER FOUR

Undeserved Shame



If anyone asked me when I first felt truly ashamed, I would answer without hesitation.

In first grade.

The strangest thing is that, even now, I am not sure there was anything for me to be ashamed of.

...

I was seven years old.

There were fifty-two children in our first-grade class. No one seemed surprised by that in those days. Our teacher was an Honoured Teacher, the sort parents dreamed of getting for their child. She selected pupils herself from local nursery schools. Being placed in her class was considered a stroke of luck.

I was one of the lucky ones.

Because I was tall, I was seated at the second-to-last desk. Behind me sat two girls who were even taller.

It was one of the first weeks of school. My grandfather had taken leave especially for me. Not because he had nothing better to do. My parents were working, I was only seven, and the walk to school involved crossing several roads. Grandfather decided I was not ready to do it alone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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