**Old Lady's Hands**

Valentina Bulava

 I couldn’t bear looking into her eyes. They seemed emotionless to me, but, deep inside, I could see there was an unbearable pain. I felt like I had no right to see it—not after all my failures. I think I knew how she truly felt. Even though I had never experienced it myself, I had seen many situations like this one. I looked down at her hands. They were still. A heavy sigh left my chest. My behaviour felt unprofessional, but there was nothing I could do about it.

 Pressuring silence hung in the air, broken only by the crackles of the fireplaces. She couldn’t make a sound, and it made things even more difficult for me. Maybe she did want to say something. I didn’t know. Realizing that this old lady was much stronger than I was did not help at all. To my shame, I wished she had cried at least a little. Then, I would know what to say, how to comfort her; I was trained.

 I was almost sure she sensed what I was about to say. She knew it before I opened my mouth, but I still had to say those words. “We have found him, Mrs. Shams,” I said, quietly. “I am sorry. It was probably an accident. We will investigate further,” I added, still looking down. I wasn’t sure about the whole accident thing.

 Her hands were still as before, lying on her lap. They only twitched a little when I said, *accident*. She only swallowed nervously once. You would never tell how bad she felt unless you looked into her eyes, but I would not raise my own; I would not dare. Age did not diminish the elegance and tenderness of her hands. For those, who knew her well, her long, slim fingers were an indicator of her musical past; Mrs. Shams had been a piano player. A fresh, simple manicure, without any bright nail polish or even a basic French-style strip, made hands look even younger.

 Mrs. Shams was a tidy woman, always looking after things no matter what. “You know, he loved this living room the most.” I had a sense she thought her husband was dead from the start; she just wanted to know for sure.

 “This room looks so clean and feels cozy,” I tried to compliment her. I didn’t know whether it was an appropriate thing to say, but it provided her with more opportunities to open up. At the end of the day, I felt close to her, like she was my auntie.

 “Thank you, darling,” she said. “Can I offer you another cup of tea?’

 “I’m ok, thank you.” I didn’t want her to move. I would have to look at her when I accepted my cup. She crossed her hands again, still resting them on her lap.

 “Yes, I think I knew it's coming.” She answered the silent question hanging in the air—the one I was too afraid to ask. Of course, when you live with your other half for over fifty years, you develop a strong connection. And you know when something is wrong.

 She was 78. She had many wrinkles, and I could see her blue veins through her pale skin. The nail on the little finger of her right hand was shorter than others. I noticed before; she had bitten it at times when she was too deep in her thoughts. Or when she was nervous. Not now, though. There was a ring on her left annular: the signs of infinity, wrapped. It once was shiny, probably white gold or silver, but it now grew dim.

 “It’s a very beautiful ring,” I said and regretted it the same second. What the hell was I thinking?

 “He gave it to me when we were celebrating our anniversary fifty years ago.” I raised my eyes only to meet a calm smile. “He said it meant that we would always be together—for eternity and beyond.” What a strong spirit this lady had. She kept her smile on even now. I felt my heart shrink. It occurred to me that she probably hadn’t taken the ring off for decades. I could not hold tears anymore.

 Once again, I realized how unprofessional it was, but I did get so close to her during this investigation. Searches for missing people wouldn’t usually go on for so long, but she asked me personally. She was very persuasive, and I was doing the best I could. I swear I couldn’t say *no*. I remember her eyes, full of tears and hope. I remember her whisper, full of pain. She took my hand in hers, and I felt how strong they were for such a skinny old lady. It was like she was trying to hold on to life itself. Now, her hands looked relaxed, like there was nothing to hold on to anymore. I would have to interview her again for the ongoing investigation, but, now, I sensed she needed some time on her own.