

MESSIAH
by Elena Alexieva

translated from the Bulgarian by Elena Alexieva

When the doctor raised his head from his papers, he was surprised to find that there was someone in his office; he hadn't even heard him enter. The man was standing shyly in the shadow by the door, it was now that the doctor realized that the short winter's day had already come to an end and that he had been working there, in the twilight, for God knows how long, straining his already tired eyes.

"Come on in."

The man stepped forward somewhat stiffly, took a chair and sat down. Now that he stepped out of the darkness, he looked more thoughtful than shy.

"What can I do for you?"

The man hesitated, cleared his throat, then said in a single breath:

"I'm here because I need an operation."

The doctor looked at him questioningly. "You'd better tell me first what your complaints are. Then I'll decide whether you need an operation or not."

"I have no complaints," the man said and moved uneasily. "I just need an operation, that's all."

"Listen..." the doctor began, intending to explain how fed up he was with knowledgeable patients who'd come here only because they couldn't take the scalpel and start cutting themselves. But something in the stranger's look made him overcome his irritation and go on more calmly. "Don't rush into a treatment. Let's see first what your diagnosis is."

"I don't have any diagnosis," the man insisted stubbornly. "I'm not sick. I came here because I wanted to."

"And what is it that made you want to come here?"

"I need to...well...How can I put it...It's on the tip of my tongue. Well, I want you to neuter me."

The doctor burst into laughter and even slapped his desk in amusement.

"Good God! How am I supposed to neuter you?"

“Just like that”, the man replied seriously. “So that I can’t have any children.”

While trying to calm down, the doctor studied the strange patient. He was of medium height, well-built, with a gloomy, unshaven face. There was nothing remarkable about him, except for the fact that he was obviously haunted by some weird obsession.

“Now listen to me... What’s your name?”

“Joseph.”

“Listen to me, Joseph. First, what you want me to do is called a vasectomy. And secondly, it’s not done on a whim. You must have a very good reason, because as you know there’s no going back. Are you married?”

“Yes.”

“Does your wife know what you’re up to?”

“She does. We’ve talked about it. “

“And?”

“She agrees,” the man said quietly and fell silent.

By now it was completely dark in the office. The doctor reached out to switch on the desk lamp but then decided against it. Across the desk he could barely see the outlines of the man who had introduced himself as Joseph. These outlines, as still as they seemed, in fact kept changing and stirring and transforming, and the more he looked at them the faster they moved, as though the man was made of some kind of thick liquid ready to spill out any minute; as though there was some external force that kept it in place; as though the liquid was helplessly straining against its own surface. His eyes began to hurt from the strain. The doctor switched on the lamp and blinked. Joseph’s face was just as calm and somber as before. It occurred to the doctor that it was this face that the surrounding darkness was streaming from, not from his office window.

“We’ve got six sons. Ezekiel, Daniel, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zechariah.”

“Wow, those are some names. And all of them boys. Well done.”

“Never mind ,” the man interrupted. “Let me explain. My wife is very pious. I work all day but the money’s never enough. We make ends meet somehow. But one more mouth to feed will ruin us. We’re desperate, that’s why we made this decision.”

“I see.” Leaning back in his armchair, the doctor was listening attentively. “So what’s your job?”

“I’m a mechanic.”

“Well, I guess it could be worse...Tell me, Joseph, have you ever heard of contraception? Condoms? Pills?”

“Sure, I have,” Joseph was losing his patience. “But that’s what I’m telling you, my wife... that is, we...we’re very pious people. Our faith prohibits the use of such things. It’s hard to explain. But I’ve thought it all over. This is the only solution.”

“And this neutering, as you call it...What does your faith say about it? Isn’t it a sin?”

For a moment it seemed that the man had not heard the question, so lonely and absent did he seem, gazing somewhere over the doctor’s shoulder, towards the window, or perhaps nowhere in particular. The darkness in his face thickened. His light green eyes had become almost black.

“It is a sin,” he said suddenly with a heavy, painful calm. “But this sin will be on my conscience alone. I am prepared to face the consequences. As long as I save her. My Mary – she’s an innocent soul. But there’s no way for you to understand it, Doc. Trust me. That’s the only thing I’m asking of you.”

Without even realizing it, the doctor had reached out, his fingers playing nervously with the lamp switch. The light flickered. The whole story, the man’s pathetic chatter, the late hour, the six boys with their ridiculous names – he found all of it extremely annoying. He took a small post-it note, scribbled something on it and handed it to Joseph.

“Here, this is my phone number. Now I want you to go home and think it all over again

carefully. No need to rush. If you ask me, you’re on your way to making a serious mistake. But if you insist and you’ve really decided to do it, call me. We’ll run some tests and see what we can do. And now leave. I still have some work to do.”

The man took the note, folded it carefully and slipped it into his wallet. Then he turned around and left without a word. The doctor followed him with his eyes, mumbled a habitual “Good-bye,” waited to hear the man’s steps going down the stairs, then rose to lock the door.

Joseph walked down the street. Being a newcomer, he didn't know this part of town, but he walked at an even pace without looking around, as if he either knew where he was going or didn't care. Thick fog was slowly creeping into the cold night air. Although he was shivering in his worn-out jacket, Joseph was feeling fresher than an hour ago, in the doctor's office. This probably had to do with the lightness inside him, now that he had managed to smoothly utter all the lies he had invented months ago, lies which, innocent as they were, had been oppressing him as if he had planned a crime. In fact, all of his guilt lay in his excessive love for his young wife, Mary. They had married recently. Shortly after the wedding, the pastor who had performed the ceremony insisted that they move here, where they were welcomed by anxious strangers. The local pastor never smiled and was in the habit of staring sternly at Joseph every time they met. Joseph was never able to rid himself of the suspicion that they tolerated him only for Mary's sake. At the beginning, when the rumor of the prophecy appeared – and that was before the marriage – both of them regarded it with disbelief. First, because all sorts of prophecies had been circulating since time immemorial. And second, because it seemed completely incredible that it could happen to them. One day, however, the pastor summoned them, all excited, pale and stuttering. He told them that the night before, while he had been arranging the chairs in the church, Archangel Gabriel had appeared to him and revealed that the prophecy was about to come true, and that he, the pastor, was entrusted with the crucial mission of organizing everything in such a way that God's will might be fulfilled accordingly and without delay. Infected by his anxiety, confused and scared witless, Joseph and Mary went home and talked all night, holding hands. Mary cried. Joseph held her and kissed the tears that came running down her cheeks. He promised to be by her side no matter what, regardless of all the aging pastor's prophecies and visions. She made him repeat his promise once, then twice. When she finally believed him and calmed down, Mary huddled up like a little girl and fell asleep.

Joseph would never forget that night. It filled him up like salt water filling up the lungs of a drowned man – mercilessly, to the brim, leaving no room for anything else. From that night on nothing was the same. Until then, he had known all too well who he was and what his modest task in life was: to get married, produce progeny, raise and educate his offspring, and afterwards, in the same humble and simple manner, present himself to his Creator, hoping for a more pleasant and meaningful afterlife. After that moment, however, he gradually began to realize that his role was going to be somewhat different. And worse: that he had no role at all. Undoubtedly, something was expected of him. But it had nothing to do

with Joseph himself. He was just an extra who had to silently cross the stage without even showing he was there, but without whom nothing of what was supposed to happen would have been possible. Joseph was the guarantee that the miracle would not seem perverted – as, in fact, it was – but on the contrary, decent and fully compliant with moral law.

That afternoon when he saw them off to the train bound for their strange new town, the pastor repeated that all they had to do from now on was to wait. He even looked at Joseph meaningfully and tapped him on the shoulder in a way Joseph found more humiliating than friendly. All that was required from him was patience and continence. Friends and strangers kept asking Mary how she felt. No one asked him anything. He walked by her side unnoticed, persistent, ready to fall at her feet like a shadow so that she could walk untouched by the dirt he himself had to wade in every single day. He bought her gifts. He talked to her in a soft, tender voice he had never before found in himself. He listened to her. He invented a future for the two of them which, though impossible, kept them warm as if it had already turned into a happy past. Again and again, he kissed her tears, swallowed them, gathered them inside himself so that they could never return to her. He had promised her this. And that's how it was going to be.

She ought not to know that he was struggling with himself and that this struggle exhausted him and made him feel degraded. While they were waiting for the divine blessing to come over her virginal womb and to plant the child there that everyone called the Messiah – as if it had already grown up – Joseph was struggling with the desire to plant his own seed inside her and to make her the mother of his ordinary human son. In order to be with her in this trial, to devote himself entirely to her and to forget about his own self, he had to love her fully, the way he did, as much with his heart as with his body. Sometimes he longed for her so badly that the mere touch of her skin was painful. And worst of all, he never thought of this love as sinful. If he suffered anything, it was not remorse but the inability to have his love fulfilled. The preaching and admonitions of the new pastor, who was all too familiar with the male nature, drove him mad. He'd talk to Joseph like a lion tamer trying to appease a wild beast who he wouldn't trust for a second. To him, love existed only as God's love. All the rest was ignoble, faceless lust.

According to the prophecy, it was in this town that the miracle was supposed to occur. That's why they had come here. They rented a small cozy apartment where Mary spent most of her time. Joseph found a job in a car-repair shop. He didn't earn much, but it was enough for them. They often went to church. They had no friends. Many people helped them, but no

one dared share their life. People watched them from a distance, with a peculiar mixture of bewilderment and curiosity. Some probably even envied them. Joseph and Mary tried to make a couple of closer acquaintances but quickly gave up. They rarely went out and never walked too far. They were lonely. On top of everything, winter came. There was no snow, only a dry chill and fog. In the morning, on his way to work, Joseph would gaze at the sky hopefully, searching for invisible snowflakes. Snow always excited him when he was a boy, and now, without even realizing it, he waited for it more eagerly than ever. He needed even the smallest occasion for joy. His frozen hands in his pockets, he walked trying to recall all the winter games he had ever played. Sometimes the wind would sting his face, and Joseph would button the collar of his jacket up to his nose. Other men passed by, hiding in their scarves and collars. All he could see of their faces were half-closed eyes and cheekbones stiff with chill. They looked alike, all of them going to work. "Here," he thought. "That's me, Joseph. And no one else but me knows that I'm Joseph."

On one such winter's morning, tormented by insomnia, helpless in his resistance to the warmth of Mary's sleeping body that he had been holding in his arms all night without moving, careful not to wake her up, Joseph finally made the decision that had been haunting him for some time. He had his doubts, of course. He wondered which was the greater sin: abstinence, which seemed so unnatural between a husband and a wife and which was on its way to turning his love into blind lust; or the desire to tenderly cajole Mary, to break down the tension between them and sweep away divine providence once and for all. There was no one to ask. He was left to his own devices. All he knew was that he couldn't go on like this; he alone could find the narrow, hidden path that would lead him out of this impasse. He vaguely felt that he was facing something bigger than himself, bigger even than the longings that tormented him and over which he had no control. This monstrous, unknown, dangerous thing was God. Joseph didn't fear him, or rather, he did, but not for himself. He feared him for Mary's sake. The rage that might befall her would destroy her, and God was easy to enrage, his cruelty knew no limits. He was capable of exterminating entire nations because of just one person. Joseph didn't want to take such a gamble. He was only prepared to risk his own life.

As if the constant anguish and doubt weren't enough, the guys from the repair shop wouldn't leave him alone. Not that they were mean, they just joked because it made time pass, but often they just went too far. The reticent and introverted Joseph, new in town and recently married, quite understandably became the favourite butt of their jokes. If he happened to be late for work, he was met with ironic glances and comments. 'How's life, Joseph?' they

asked. ‘You don’t seem to get enough sleep, eh? That’s life with a young wife.’ And they’d burst into laughter. In the evenings, when he preferred to go straight home instead of joining them for a drink, they’d tease him again. ‘Rushing to get home, eh?’ they sniggered. ‘Go on then. You have a good reason to rush.’ Not that they were bad guys. But they were rubbing salt into his wounds. Once, in an attempt to play along with them, Joseph decided to join them after work and have a tippie. When he finally got home, he found Mary more upset than he’d ever seen her before. Because he was not in the habit of coming back late, she had panicked. She didn’t know where to look for him and could do nothing but wait. She was utterly helpless. Throughout the following day, Saturday, she didn’t talk to him. Joseph never dared do it again. Of course, the guys from the repair shop immediately knew what was up and had him on even more. Now, when they went for a drink, they didn’t even invite him. All they said was, “You’re in deep shit, Joseph. If your wife doesn’t let you stay out late, even God can’t help you.” And they laughed at him as heartily as ever.

He walked down the street. Although he didn’t know this part of town, he was sure that he was somehow going to find his way. And indeed, after a few steps, far in the distance he saw the boulevard and the bus stop he was looking for. It didn’t matter which bus he took – all of them went downtown, and from there it was easy. Joseph walked faster. This time he had told her he was going to be late but he still didn’t want to be too late. Of course, he had mentioned a plausible reason: there was too much work so his boss had asked everyone to take on some extra hours, promising a nice little bonus. Mary had no specific interest in money, but she was happy that her husband had been able to find a job he liked – at least that’s what she thought, for he never told her about the teasing of his co-workers; on the contrary, he kept repeating what nice guys they all were and how quickly they’d become friends.

There was a third way, of course, but Joseph had long ago rejected and forgotten it. Nevertheless, lately he realized that he kept trying to figure out how many of the people he met in the street might be interested in what was looming for his family, and the meaning it would have for all of humankind. The guys in the repair shop would laugh in his face if he even hinted at such a thing. Then they would make such fun of him that he’d have to quit his job. Or the doctor: it was for him that Joseph had had to make up that stupid story about the six sons, which the doctor most probably never believed. But had he tried to tell the truth, the doctor wouldn’t have listened at all. He would have kicked Joseph out of his office and that would be it. Now at least he had gotten what he had gone there for. He had made the first step.

Strange, he thought, how you can get anything you want with a lie. And he counted on his fingertips how many times he had lied today, this week, this year. In the past, the fingers on his left hand would do. Then he added the fingers on his right hand. Lately, he couldn't even decide where to start and where to stop. It was typical of lies – as Joseph noticed more frequently now – to breed other lies. He suffered most of all, however, when he had to lie to Mary. At such moments he tried not to look at her. He'd say what he had to say, then he'd change the subject or think of a reason to leave the room. The fact that he was lying to her for her own sake didn't help much. He tried to imagine their life without any lies. The third way, which he had long ago disregarded, would have brought him right there. It was the way of those who didn't have his faith and were never tormented by the question of whether to go with or against God – it simply didn't matter for them. They thought God was irrelevant and unimportant, like a children's game. They were busy people. They rushed back and forth from morning till night without giving it a thought. They had never heard anything about a Joseph and a Mary, not to mention the Messiah those two were going to produce. Joseph kept meeting such people. He peered into their eyes, eavesdropped on their conversations. They seemed happy. Yes, if he could choose, Joseph would rather be one of them.

The bus that he boarded after a long wait was emptier than he had expected. Although there were vacant seats he chose to stand. He always traveled like this because it was easier to observe the passengers' faces. He had seen such faces painted by an artist whose name he didn't remember but who he knew had died hundreds of years ago. The one and only time he had seen the artist's works, they had made Joseph bristle. Since then, however, wherever he turned he saw those faces alive. Ugly as they were, when they moved they didn't seem as terrifying as the artist had painted them. The faces only scared Joseph when he pictured them crowded around Mary's maternity bed, eager to see the mysterious heavenly child creep out of her womb, longing to witness the travails of the mother who hadn't conceived like them but who would give birth like everyone else. Sometimes he'd dream of them crowded on top of each other, curious, and then he'd wake up and press his innocently sleeping wife in his arms. He'd fold her into his arms, hide her head on his chest, catch the breath from her lips and warm it up in his own breath, just to make sure that she'd be safe. Then suddenly, though still very carefully, he'd push himself away from her, rolling to the other side of the bed. He wanted to howl like a dog. This reflex had become uncontrollable: in everything he saw a threat to Mary, and most of all in his own self.

Sooner or later, though, this was going to change. The doctor had given him his phone number, hadn't he? Joseph would call him next week; why not even tomorrow? He'd tell the doctor that he had made up his mind, that he had no hesitations, and that he was ready for the operation. And he had the money, too. He would pay whatever it cost, and if it wasn't enough, he'd borrow. Joseph felt relaxed at this thought, as if he were not planning a mutilation but rather a wing transplant. He longed to tell her that he had found a solution and that nothing would prevent them anymore from being truly together, as husband and wife, but he had prohibited himself from doing so. It would upset her; she'd cry, argue, beg him to give it all up...No, he'd better not rush it. He'd better arrange everything first, have the operation, recover, and then he'd give her the *fait accompli*. That's how he finally got home, took off his jacket and shoes in the vestibule, smoothed his hair in the mirror, and went into the kitchen where Mary was preparing dinner.

"Are you tired?" she asked softly.

"A bit," said Joseph. "But more importantly, I'm starving."

"Poor thing!" She smiled at him. "Me, too, I got hungry waiting for you."

He quietly approached her from behind and put his hand round her waist. There was mild resistance. Mary gently pushed his hand away. He wanted to ask, "Are you happy?" or even "Are you happy with me?" but instead stepped aside obediently and sat at the table.

At first they ate in silence. Joseph furtively glanced at her chipping off bits of bread, lifting them with thin fragile fingers to her mouth, her lips parting as if for a kiss, the bread slipping in between and disappearing. As though she's eating communion bread, he thought, and said:

"What did you do today?"

"Well, nothing special. The usual. Except that two women from the church came. At the pastor's request."

"Again?"

"Joseph!" She said reproachfully. "These people are trying to help us any way they can. They don't have to do it. We must be grateful."

"I've never asked them for anything," he mumbled.

"That's what I mean."

Silence fell again over their modest dinner. Joseph hated to argue with her. Whatever it was, she always prevailed. She was wiser than he was and he secretly took pride in that fact. He waited for a while, enough for his embarrassment to recede, and asked again:

“What did they want?”

“They helped me with the household stuff. And they also brought clothes for the baby. They’re very nice, I’ll show you. Just like new. They also gave me some good advice. Told me about their kids. In fact, they were very kind.”

“You mean you already...?”

“Oh, no. Not yet.” Mary gave him another smile, sweet, gentle and somewhat distant.

“Look, I can’t get used to this.” He reached out and placed his hand over hers. “You haven’t even conceived the baby yet, and they keep hanging around as if it is already underway. What if all this turns out to be some fabrication? What if nothing happens?”

She fell silent, then without looking at him she said gravely:

“It will happen. You’ll see, it will. We just have to believe.”

Normally, in the evenings after dinner, they’d listen to the radio or read the newspaper Joseph had bought in the morning, on his way to work. They hadn’t yet managed to put money aside for a TV set, although he very much wanted to buy one, even on deferred payment. It would be good for Mary, she wouldn’t feel as lonely staying at home all day long. Lately, a woman from the church had taught her to knit, and now she took the baby jacket she was working on, and with great concentration and diligence began to adorn it with patterns. Joseph dared not interrupt her with silly talk, so he quietly slipped out on the balcony and lit a cigarette. He thought of the things he could do to kill these long winter evenings until he managed to save money for a TV set. In the town they lived in before, he had had a hobby that had even won him some fame: he used to make wooden toys. Often, people came to order toys for their children. Joseph worked with enthusiasm and imagination, which brought him the renown of a true master. Then he gave his creations away, which made him feel happy. Since they had moved, however, he hadn’t touched wood. Dust was covering his tools now, resting in the toolbox in which he had brought them. He thought he could resume his hobby now. He could even sell them if he found willing customers.

When he finished his cigarette, Joseph suddenly felt the exhaustion of the long day sweetly fog up his mind and press down on his eyelids. Tomorrow he'd have to get up early again. He went back in, closed the balcony door and headed for the bedroom.

"I'm going to bed," he said.

Mary raised her eyes from the baby jacket, looked at him absentmindedly, and mumbled to herself, "Okay."

She followed a bit later. In the light of the bedside lamp her face appeared delicate and somehow sorrowful. Joseph drowsily contemplated her for a while. Sleep was slowly settling over him. She turned off the light and rested her head on his shoulder, listening to his steady breathing. She loved falling asleep like this.

"Joseph," she whispered but he didn't move. Mary hesitated, then quietly placed her hand on his chest where his heart was beating right underneath her palm. "When he is born, you'll love him like your own son, won't you? Won't you, Joseph?"

Joseph didn't reply. He lay there silent, heavy, engulfed by darkness, as though his entire life would pass like this.