

The Little Man and the Sea

Marta Tarnawsky

A water-filled moat encircled the hill and castle, and beyond it were high ramparts and a palisade, with openings for archers-defenders. There were also three drawbridges over the moat, but they were not actually built. Even his brother Mark couldn't manage to do that, and he is the older one here. The bridges got destroyed every time the enemy appeared on the scene. Then they were rebuilt. On the highest tower of the prince's castle fluttered a flag. The blue ribbon from mom's dress was perfectly suited to be a flag. Attached to the handle of a broken shovel, it fluttered in the wind like a real flag, and was reflected with sparks of pride in the pupils of Mark the Builder.

When a tar barrel caught fire nearby—a sign that the Tatars were attacking the castle—the bridges were destroyed first, and then a real battle ensued. Maxim liked this. Destroying the castle with sand balls was much more interesting than building it. Stepping one foot into the castle yard, he tore down the guard tower and triumphantly pulled out the shovel with the blue ribbon. His brother's punches made it clear to him that such heroics were undesirable. Running away, he threw the blue ribbon into the watery moat. His angry brother rushed to catch him but must have changed his mind, for he abruptly stopped and turned back to his castle.

Maxim ran to the ocean. Last year he would have run away from this water “coming at me,” frightened by the roar of the surf, but now he is at one with the sea. “I like this big pool,” he says to his mother. “Who invented it? God? And who poured in the water?”

Maxim takes a few steps into the water and watches as a noisy, white-maned wave rolls toward him. The wave breaks far ahead only white foam reaches Maxim, and then spreads in wide arcs on the sand. Emboldened, Maxim takes a step forward and tries to catch a handful of the white sea foam in his small hands. “Why is the foam in the sea white?” He is already running to his mother, to pester her with questions.

The beach, like a huge flower garden, burns with bright colors. Their large umbrella, green with yellow stripes, is just over there. Maxim runs over and stops at a green beach chair. He stares hesitantly for a moment at the woman wrapped in a white towel. His small eyes are surprised. It's not mom. He hears a familiar phrase in a foreign language, “Hi there, little boy” but Maxim catches sight of another green umbrella and runs there, not looking back.

The shovel he lost this morning is here, on the sand. Ah, what joy! He had been looking for it. He must tell Mark he found it. But neither Mark nor

his castle are anywhere to be seen. The castle reminds him of his brother's punches and his own forgotten guilt. The boy looks around for the green umbrella again. But here again, unknown faces gaze at him indifferently from under wide straw hats.

Searching, he randomly made his way down the beach. He did not let go of his newly found shovel. Only slightly smaller than he was, it dragged along behind him, bouncing over scattered shells, and leaving an uneven, barely visible trail on the sand.

Again he went toward the ocean. Near the water's edge some boys had dug a channel into the water, and a stream of waves was rocking the boys' boats in it. One was an aircraft carrier—just like the one in the shop window yesterday. And next to it a yacht with three sails and a small Indian canoe. The boys were now digging a second channel, and Maxim looked on with interest at their work.

"Our Dnipro's the largest river, And on its waves the sailboats glimmer..."—he knew this rhymed tale by heart. But it immediately reminded him of his mother. He left the boys and started searching for their umbrella again.

He was no longer looking for a green one with yellow stripes but looked under each umbrella. But everywhere there were the same strangers—tanned people wearing dark glasses and hats made of colored straw.

A large paper kite climbs into the sky. A black monster is painted on its red surface, and a long tail of thin colored ribbons is attached to its end. For a moment it becomes a terrible black monster, but the kite is already fluttering in the wind, the pattern on the red paper no longer visible. The kite becomes a spot of color in the big blue sky. The sky is dotted with white clouds, like lambs. However, Maxim already knows that rain comes from clouds, and rain frightens him. True, he does wonder what happens to the sea when it rains—will there be thunder? Better to find mom already. Again he looks under the colored umbrellas for a familiar smile.

A tourist boat sails near the shore. Children on the beach shout and wave to the passengers. Maxim, too, laughs and shouts. He has already sailed on this ship, and it was so nice! Seagulls had flown up close to him and just snatched pieces of food from his hands. Some day he will sail by ship far away, to the other side of the ocean, to that place where mom, pointing, says: "Ukraine is over there." But in fact he does not believe it takes all that long to get to this other side: he can see that the end of the sea is not so far away.

The hot sun is beating down on Maxim's back, the shovel weighs down his hand and gets in the way. The sound of a loudspeaker reaches him from the boardwalk, but it is almost drowned out by the tide. Besides, it's in a foreign language—and what's that to him? Even if it is about a lost, blond, four-year-old boy in blue shorts.

On a blanket nearby sits a little girl eating cherries. Her mother just took them out of a bag and is handing them to the child one by one, having first bit into them and tossed the pits into the bag. The girl looks at Maxim with

mocking eyes, her small mouth smeared with red cherry juice. Maxim really wants cherries. He looks sadly at the girl, puts the thumb of his right hand in his mouth, and sucks, sucks ...

Suddenly, behind him, his mother's voice echoes. His mom! Full of happiness, he flies into his mother's arms. "Mom, mom! I want some cherries!" He shouts loudly and cheerfully, wondering why his mother looks so angry, and why there are tears in her eyes.

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