

What Kurdish Sounds Like to Russian Ears

Once upon a time, a woman knew Russian from the inside, and then began to understand Kurdish through one person.

She did not learn Kurdish from a book.

She learned it from tone.

From the moment the voice became faster when the woman was angry, softer when she spoke about home, lighter when she joked, and heavier when she came close to something she did not want to explain.

At first, she did not understand the words.

But she began to understand when the woman in front of her changed.

And that was enough.

Russian, to her, was a language whose limits she knew well. She knew when a sentence was short because nothing more was needed, when brevity became a warning, and when silence carried more meaning than speech.

Kurdish was something she learned from the outside.

She did not know its rules.

She knew the woman's face when she spoke it.

She noticed that her voice changed when she switched into Kurdish.

Sometimes it became warmer.

Sometimes sharper.

Sometimes there was something in the sentence she could not hear when the woman spoke another language.

Once she asked:

“Why does your voice change when you speak Kurdish?”

The other woman looked at her as if she had never realized it changed at all.

Then she said:

“Because it is my language.”

The answer was simple, but it stayed with her.

Perhaps everyone has a voice that only appears fully in the language they never had to translate.

After that, she began noticing the words that returned again and again.

Family names.

Words used in anger.

Calls from one room to another.

The words that came just before laughter.

She remembered some of them without knowing how to write them.

She was not interested in speaking Kurdish perfectly.

She only wanted to know when the woman in front of her was happy, when she was upset, and when she was saying something she did not want translated.

And sometimes, she knew.

The woman would speak Kurdish to someone on the phone, end the call, and say:

“Everything is fine.”

The Russian woman would look at her.

“It is not fine.”

“You do not understand Kurdish.”

“No.”

“Then how do you know?”

She would shrug.

“I know you.”

That was when the language became less important than the person.

Russian was a language she understood from words all the way into silence.

Kurdish, she learned in the opposite direction.

She began with silence.

Then tone.

Then the face.

The words came last.

And with time, she understood that knowing someone's language does not always mean being able to translate what they say.

Sometimes it means knowing that "I'm fine" is not true before the sentence is translated at all.

Russian remained the language she knew from the inside.

Kurdish remained the language she entered through another person.

Perhaps that was why it never felt like merely a foreign language.

It felt like a room in the house of someone she loved.

The room was not hers.

But she knew when the light was on.