

# Binny: The Healing Power of Art

## ***UNEXPECTED MOVE***

- What is the purpose of your arrival? - The airport employee patiently waited for Katya's answer.

- I came to visit my old friend, - she smiled.

The man nodded and stamped her passport accordingly:

- Please proceed to the baggage claim area.

After picking up her small suitcase, Katya moved toward the airport door. She felt an unprecedented rush of energy, life was boiling around her, bright colors were flashing, and people were running around with passion. And she was beginning a new phase: America. It so happened that an old friend of hers had long ago moved here to live. She had settled in New York, started a family, and for many years had offered for Katya to move there. Old friendship was valuable for both of them.

- I know a lawyer who can help you get a Green Card. We have such a well-developed social system, you can work with special children, help them. In America, age is not a barrier to work, and you said yourself that you're suffering in retirement. Make up your mind, Katya, you'll love it.

It was tempting, but before, Katya was stopped by her own family, her own affairs, her own worries. But after her husband passed away, she began to think more and more often - why not? There are almost no relatives left, the apartment can easily be sold, and the opportunities to work with special children are really interesting. In addition, Olga, with whom Katya had a lot in common, would always be there. So she made up her mind, packed the required documents, was interviewed at the embassy, and received all the permissions. It was a surprise even to her, and in a few months she found herself at the airport in New York, where Olga was to pick her up.

- Katya? Katya! - There she was, happy and businesslike as always.

That day the friends could not get enough of talking, Olga found Katya a small apartment not far from hers so that they could see each other all the time. She also found a job for her friend at a day program for people with special needs. As Olga said, the U.S.A. had a well-developed system of helping special people and all of them over the age of 21 had the opportunity to spend time in such day programs.

## ***WORKING IN THE SOCIAL CENTER***

Katya looked thoughtfully at the people who were walking around the huge room. Many of them just walked aimlessly or sat staring into space, some were talking excitedly about something to

another person or just to themselves. There were people with autism, people with Down syndrome, and others.

The low level of development, of course, left a mark on their appearance, but there were also many who, looking at them, it was difficult to see that they had some kind of deviation.

- It's easy to mistake them as workers, - Katya thought.

The atmosphere at the social center was light and cheerful. There were smiles on many of their faces. It was obvious that they were happy to come to the program, happy to see each other.

- Katya! Have you filled out the paperwork already? - It's Katya's supervisor.

- Yes, Mrs. Evans. Maybe I should go help in the kitchen?

- Yes, of course. I'll make sure you've filled out all the paperwork correctly.

Paperwork is very important here, as it is in other places.

The kitchen was as busy as always. Smells were floating around, the cook was cooking lunch, and some customers were helping her as much as they could. Katya immediately noticed that the main helper in the kitchen was a burly young woman with Down syndrome. Her name was Binny. Like many people with Down syndrome, she was efficient and loved to work.

Binny rarely smiled, and you could almost never see her laughing. Food was her greatest passion. She was ready to fulfill any request just to get her treat. Many of the staff used it to manipulate her.

Katya didn't like it very much. In the week she had been in the program, she had already seen many things that clearly upset her. Like this one:

- Binny, wash these dishes, and I'll give you some applesauce.

“Here we go again, - thought Katya, - They talk to her like she's a trained monkey.”

Binny smiles happily; she wants applesauce, which is one of her favorite dishes. The only pity is that Elsa, who promised her a treat, will probably forget about it in a couple of minutes. Binny, meanwhile, will remember; she always remembers what other people promise her. And she gets terribly upset if they don't keep their promises.

The day passed quickly, everyone went about their tasks, and the supervisor told Katya that she would soon get her own group of students. That would be interesting, much more interesting than helping in the kitchen...End of the day. Katya is about to go home, but suddenly she hears a noise from the kitchen.

- Binny, let's go! Come on, let's go, silly! - Elsa tries to get her to go to the bus.

Every day at 3 o'clock, the customers are taken home. Binny usually goes nicely; the bus driver, Tom, always treats her kindly and Binny likes to ride with him. Sometimes he stops the bus on

purpose so that Binny can buy donuts. But today it's like she's glued to the fridge.

- Elsa, you promised her applesauce, - Katya carefully reminds her.
- I don't care what I promised, - the woman grumbles irritably, - Help me.

Suddenly Binny slides down and lies on the floor, not letting go of the fridge handle - there's applesauce, but the fridge is locked. Elsa doesn't give up. She is the boss here and will not indulge her various whims. She decides to pick Binny up by force and push her onto the bus. Katya just sighs - Binny weighs 300 pounds and it is clearly not a task for two women.

- Katya, call Tom, - says Elsa discontentedly, - Let him help us.

## ***GAINING CREDIBILITY***

On Katya's second day at work, the supervisor asked her to make a sandwich for Binny. While Katya got the bread and peanut butter, Binny followed her closely, keeping her eyes on Katya. Katya watched her out of the corner of her eye. Binny was clearly stressed out. Katya began to put a thin layer of butter on it - Binny tensed up, staring at the sandwich. Katya realized what was wrong and decided to put another layer, she felt Binny's face come alive. A third layer, and a wide smile on Binny's face. Bina is so happy

that she suddenly laughing happily hugs Katya,. She pats her on the shoulder, her joy is pleasant, but it's a pity that she's only happy about the food.

The peanut butter has incredibly raised Katya's authority in Binny's eyes, and sometimes she even smiles at her when they meet somewhere. One day Katya notices that Binny often stands at the soda machine. This vending machine stands at the entrance to the center, and customers often buy sodas there. A can of Pepsi costs 75 cents, but customers usually drop a dollar and Binny takes the change. If she's not in the kitchen, she's on duty at the machine. She wants the money.

“It's strange, - Katya thinks, - Because usually it's only the food that makes her lively.”

“Food costs money, - it suddenly dawns on her, - That's why Binny stands at the machine for hours, she wants money to buy food.”

Katya needs to fill out some more paperwork, so she settles down at a table near the machine to keep Binny in her line of sight. Two girls come up to the machine, one of them drops a dollar. Binny is already standing to her right, ready to take the change out of the tray. The girl takes a soda and reaches for her change. But Binny beats her to it and snatches the coin a second earlier!

Katya jumps up, ready to rush to the girl's aid, because Bina is quite a large woman and if anything happens, there could be big problems. Katya approaches and looks at Binny:

- It's not your money, Binny.
- I need it, - she said, her voice aggressive. Binny is ready to defend her prey.
- Binny, you shouldn't do that, - Katya feels she has to talk to her,
- That girl could have taken her coins. It's her money, it belongs to her, not you.

The girls were long gone. A couple of small coins obviously didn't interest them. They had better things to do. Katya's arguments have lost their force. Binny is silent. She turns her eyes away and then just turns around and walks away. Katya sighs; she's not at all sure that her words have had any effect in this situation.

## ***THE THEFTS***

A couple of weeks later, Katya caught Binny alone in the office, and she was obviously looking for something.

- Binny, what are you doing here? - Katya asked very carefully, trying to make her voice sound neutral.
- Binny looks guilty, she obviously knows she's doing something wrong.
- Binny, do you take other people's things? You know it's not nice, don't you? Binny, you can't do that. Other people might get angry. Why do you do that?

Suddenly Katya sees the woman's eyes fill with tears, she says:  
- I don't know, I don't know! - and she runs out of the dressing room in a whirlwind. She cannot be held back, Binny is almost twice Katya's size.

Katya returns home upset. She understands perfectly well that if the woman is caught stealing, there is no way to avoid a scandal. But she cannot tell anyone about it either - not to betray Binny. Katya is tormented by unpleasant premonitions.

To her dismay, they are justified the very next day. In the morning she suddenly hears angry voices:

- It's her! She took \$30 from my bag! - Katya recognized the voice of one of the employees.
- This is not the first time, I, too, sometimes lose money! - This is the voice of the cook. She has worked here for a couple of years. Usually she is very loyal to the center's clients, but stealing can throw anyone off balance.

Katya decided to try to intervene:

- What's wrong? - She saw Binny crouching in the corner, crying. Elsa is there too, looking at Katya with annoyed eyes:

- This one here... - she nods at Binny, - stole money from her bag. I saw her rummaging around in the office,- she says angrily, - Now give me the money.

Binny huddles against the wall and prepares to defend her prey.

- Elsa, she probably doesn't know what she's doing," says Katya sadly.

- She understands everything! - So she understands everything when she begs for food, but when she takes someone else's money, she is just an irrational child!

Katya would like to explain to them that it's all about Binny's addiction to food. She loves it so much that she tries to get it by any means possible. And her work in the kitchen makes her passion for food even stronger, she shouldn't be working here at all. Katya would like to say that they should be more lenient and clean up their stuff better and lock it in the office so that Binny can't take it.

- It's in her bag," said the woman whose money was missing. Binny always walks around with a small purse on her belt. Katya frantically tries to find a way to smooth things over, but things get out of control.

Seeing that her bag is about to be searched, Binny jumps up and tries to run away. The women begin chasing her until they corner her, grabbing her from both sides by the arms. Binny's eyes are terrified and she looks like a wounded wild animal being trapped. She begins to scream.

- Get her bag! - Binny's bag is snatched from her. The women search her and find the missing money. Their faces burn with

righteous anger and they continue to rebuke Binny furiously. She only cries, sitting on the kitchen floor.

This ugly story has an overwhelming effect on Katya. She is well aware that no one involved in this little tragedy has learned any lesson, which means the situation is doomed to repeat itself: Binny will continue her thieving business, trying not to get caught, and the staff will be angry at her and take away her stolen goods.

"It looks like everything will stay the same," Katya thinks sadly.

## ***BINNY'S BEAUTIFUL MINORA***

A couple of days later, Katya is sent to go with a group of clients to the pottery center. Three young men and Binny are on the client list. Maybe because Katya was so obviously protective of Binny, Elsa decides to let Katya try things out for herself. Katya is a little confused - she likes Binny, but she's difficult to deal with and if she decides to go on a rampage, she just can't be handled on her own. On the other hand, who knows if she might enjoy painting pottery? Katya decides that she absolutely must try. And she didn't have a choice.

Katya always has her camera with her.

"What if I manage to shoot all the stages of the class, and then make a photobook out of it, which I can use for future work," dreams Katya on the way to the workshop.

Once there, everyone must choose what they will paint in the class. Some take a vase, some like animal figurines. Katya chooses a beautiful little castle. Binny looks at the minors. She clearly likes them.

- Which one do you like, Binny? - Katya asks kindly.

Binny thinks hard for a long time and finally decides on the biggest minor. That's fine. Katya takes some great pictures of her. Now they have some white stuff. Soon they will turn into real works of art. Everyone gets to work.

## ***THE HEALING POWER OF ART***

Time passes unnoticed - everyone is engrossed in coloring, Binny especially. She sticks her tongue out from her diligence and works hard. Katya said that Binny can take the painted minora home. Bina likes to own things. She likes her minora. Katya took some pictures and suggested the others try their hand at photography.

Binny also took a couple of pictures of Katya coloring the castle and when Katya showed her the result, Bina laughed with happiness and pride. She was in such an excellent mood that Katya had never seen her before. Everyone laughed and joked a lot.

It was time for a break, and then a real miracle happened. Everyone took out the food they had brought with them and began

to eat. Suddenly Binny handed Katya her soda. She was amazed. Until that day, Binny had never offered her food to others. Even more surprisingly, Binny herself was surprised by her generosity, and laughed with happiness. She pulled out some crackers and began serving them to the boys and even offered them to the workshop workers. Katya had never seen her so happy.

When she later tried to share with Elsa and others the story of how art had miraculously influenced Bina, she was listened to with a condescending smile and disbelief. No one seemed interested in that. No one expected any change. But for Katya, it was very important.

## ***METAMORPHOSES***

At last the work in the workshop was finished. Katya wrapped all the finished products in paper so they wouldn't break and packed them in a bag. Binny did not want to part with her menorah and said she would carry it herself. The workshop workers, whom she befriended, put her menorah in a cellophane bag and tied a beautiful ribbon with a bow. They said they enjoyed having such visitors and invited her to come again.

Everyone gathered back to the social center and waited for their bus in high spirits. Finally, the right bus arrived and everyone began to sit together, trying to get close to each other. The driver

started to drive away, and Katya looked at the group, thinking about what a wonderful day they had .

Binny held her minora close to her and radiated perfect happiness. Katya looked at her and felt her own joy filled her. Everyone was chatting merrily. There was another young man with Down syndrome in their group. Katya knew him as a polite and hardworking guy with a mild sense of humor. He would lightly tease Binny with her minora, and the whole group, including her, laughed happily.

Suddenly, not far from them, she heard a Russian speech. One woman was speaking to another:

- Down syndrome is easy to identify from the very first day of life. I think these children should be put to death the moment they are born. The world would be a much cleaner place. I read that some countries do that.

It was as if a sheet of ice had fallen over Katya. She cautiously turned her gaze to a nearby chair, in it sat a woman who was looking at Katya's mentees in distaste. She kept saying something to her companion, but Katya could no longer see her. Instead of the well-behaved lady she suddenly saw a creepy monster, ready to pounce on her companions.

She looked at the happy Binny, who was so happy that she tried to share her joy with all the others around. Katya felt bitterness and fear, and she hurriedly picked up her charges and led them off the bus.

- We're not there yet, - someone in the group remarked cautiously.
- We'll walk in the fresh air, it's not far,- Katya smiled.

Fortunately they had a wonderful time, the weather was warm, they walked along the block and talked. Everyone except Katya was in a good mood. Katya felt the icy hand that had squeezed her heart at the words of that woman on the bus begin to let go. She looked at the happy Binny and felt everything inside her again filled with light and warmth and thought about the amazing metamorphosis that had happened today.

On that day, the magic power of art miraculously transformed Binny from a sullen creature looking for prey and taking it away by any means into a generous and open person willing to share the dearest things - food and feelings of joy of life that were overwhelming her.

At the same time the healthy woman from the bus, who in addition turned out to be a schoolteacher, was unable to see anything but outward signs of deviation from the norm and with her reaction and attitude she demonstrated such mental insignificance which turned her into a monster, from which she wanted to run away to the edge of the world