European Stories from Ukraine

2024

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This publication marks the 15th anniversary of the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) and our continued support for the Ukrainian book community. Since 2019, the EUPL has gone to two Ukrainian authors: Haska Shyyan (2019) for her second novel *Behind Their Backs* and Eugenia Kuznetsova (2022), also for her second book, *Ask Miechka*. The EUPL Consortium thank them both for accepting to take part in this very special edition with their two new short stories.

This book was published in collaboration with the Literary Agency OVO, and we are especially grateful to its Managing Director, Viktoriya Matyusha, for her invaluable support in coordinating the translators, editors, and illustrator, Sofiia Sulii. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Andrey Kurkov for kindly agreeing to write the foreword. We deeply appreciate all of their contributions.

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OVO LITERARY AGENCY

Haska Shyyan, Eugenia Kuznetsova

European Stories from Ukraine

Foreword by Andrey Kurkov

Illustrations by Sofiia Sulii
Translated by Dmytro Kyyan and Kate Tsurkan

Contents

Foreword

by Andrey Kurkov

Introducing contemporary Ukrainian literature to a foreign audience is no easy task, as an educated reader often draws on 'prior' knowledge—typically the country's classic literature—before exploring its contemporary works.

Ukrainian classical literature remains largely unknown to foreign readers despite a few recent translations, leaving a crucial gap in the connection between Ukrainian classics and European traditions and history. Today, introducing contemporary Ukrainian writers to the world is both an honourable mission and an incredibly rewarding task, especially given that the significance of all things Ukrainian—history, culture, and literature in particular—has been amplified by Russian aggression and deliberate efforts to destroy Ukrainian identity itself.

But before we talk about female representatives of contemporary Ukrainian literature, allow me to intrigue you with a few figures from Ukrainian classical literature. This will allow you to see modern works as a continuation of certain European literary traditions.

Among my favourite figures from Ukraine's past is a certain Giorgio da Leopoli. He also called himself Yuriy Drohobych, though his real name was Yuriy Donat-Kotermak.

A representative of the Renaissance era, poet, philosopher, astronomer, and astrologer, Yuriy Donat-Kotermak was born in the town of Drohobych, near Lviv. After studying at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, he remained there as a lecturer. He later worked at the University of Bologna, the oldest university in Europe. In 1481, he was elected the university's rector.

In February 1483, he published a book in Latin titled *Prognostic Evaluation of the Current Year 1483* in Rome. It is considered to be the first printed book by a Ukrainian author.

One hundred twenty seven years later, in 1610, another Ukrainian thinker, writer, philosopher, and theologian, Meletius Smotrytsky, published a polemical work titled Płacz. He wrote and printed his works in Polish.

Finally, in 1722, Hryhorii Skovoroda was born in Ukraine, becoming the most renowned Ukrainian philosopher-mystic, poet, theologian, and author of philosophical treatises, earning him the nickname 'Socrates.' Skovoroda wrote in Old Ukrainian, Church Slavonic, the Sloboda dialect of Russian, and Latin. During his lifetime, his works were not published due to ecclesiastical censorship.

It is on this solid foundation that the illustrious Ukrainian classical literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as contemporary literature, stands—even when many contemporary Ukrainian authors might claim that there is no connection between their works and those of their classical predecessors.

Contemporary Ukrainian literature is primarily represented by a new generation that can boldly be called the 'generation of war.' This generation, through its creative work and hyperactive civic stance, has pushed older writers off the national literary stage. These older writers, which include Yuri Andrukhovych, Oksana Zabuzhko, and Maria Matios, had to contend with the post-Soviet political, moral, and economic crisis, and address the apathy of the post-Soviet reader with their own work. Without them and other representatives of this generation, it would have been difficult for the new generation of Ukrainian writers to find their own audience.

In Ukraine, as in any other country with a strong reading culture, literature evolves unpredictably and dynamically. This has been especially true since 2014. With the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war, writers have felt a personal responsibility for the country's future, for the future of their readers, and have become simultaneously chroniclers, witnesses, participants, and judges of current events impacting the life of Ukraine.

Ukrainian military prose, including documentary works typically created by war participants, veterans, and volunteers, has become the most prevalent genre. However, mainstream literature has not lost its energy, continuing to invite readers to understand and analyze their own place within the context of contemporary Ukrainian life and Ukrainian history. Of course, the ongoing war also appears in works that are not dedicated to it. Since this war has touched the fate of

every Ukrainian, it is inevitably relevant to the fate of every Ukrainian literary character.

The two authors featured in this book do not write 'military prose.' They write about life as it is in our country at this time. The prose of Haska Shyyan and Eugenia Kuznetsova reflects our reality, addressing our dreams and problems, and tackling life's issues that are often uncomfortable to voice but are nonetheless essential to resolve.

Haska Shyian made her mark in Ukrainian literature with her novel *Behind Their Backs*, for which she received the European Union Prize for Literature in 2019. This novel sparked considerable debate in Ukrainian literary circles due to the painful issues that the protagonist, a young woman from Lviv named Marta, tries to resolve. These issues include artificial versus genuine patriotism, one's personal involvement or lack thereof in the country's fate during the war, questions of tolerance and aggression, and the balance between dictatorship and the freedom to choose one's own path. With millions of Ukrainian refugees now in Europe, *Behind Their Backs* has gained even greater social relevance.

The central theme of Eugenia Kuznetsova's fiction is home in its various meanings and nuances—home as a community, a sanctuary, a shelter, and a refuge. In her novel *Ask Miechka*, Yevhenia depicts of a happy home.

Forced cohabitation in the same house of relatives with very different principles and attitudes towards life is the theme and plot of her latest novel,

The Ladder. The situation described in the book is also a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The protagonist, a young IT specialist named Tolyk who emigrated to Spain just before the war, finds his once spacious three-story house quickly becoming uncomfortable and too small when his refugee relatives arrive. This is a novel about personal space, coexistence, and tolerance.

Eugenia Kuznetsova is noted for her ability to describe complex and even dramatic situations with irony and benevolence—this is her signature style.

Ukrainian literature is currently experiencing a very dramatic and active period. New bookstores are opening, and writers who have become soldiers continue to write novels even during the war. Among those to watch are Markiyan Kamysh, Sofia Andrukhovych, Artem Chapeye, Kateryna Mikhalitsyna, Oleksandr Mykhed, and Artem Chekh. Their books can be found in translations into many languages. They, along with Haska Shyyan and Eugenia Kuznetsova, whose works are featured in this publication, are shaping the literary world of contemporary Ukraine. This world, open to foreign readers, will help them better understand Ukraine, its history, and its present.

Translated by Dmytro Kyyan and Kate Tsurkan

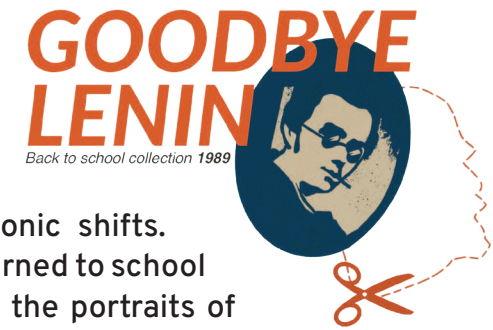
Euromirage

by Haska Shyyan

The summer of 1989 was like a ski lift secured below one of Lenin's outstretched arms with the other end lost up in the foggy mountain summits.

In May, we were inducted into the Young Pioneers. It already felt somewhat out of place, yet all the rituals were observed: we tied our scarves and took photos by the monument of the Leader, who stood with his back to the Lviv Opera House, and no one even bothered to hide their indignation at such disrespect. Not that I was ever particularly troubled by this lisping dwarf in a cap—he mostly just irritated me with his omnipresence and the excessive attention given to him, whether in profile or full-face, as a bald old man, or as an angelic curly-haired boy that looked almost like a cherub. Lenin this, Lenin that—how much more can there be, I thought to myself. The only aspect of Soviet officialdom that managed to capture my childhood attention was the funerals of two pre-Gorbachev leaders. On those days, mourning ceremonies were held in every city across the Union, and from the window, they seemed to me like a travelling circus imitating sorrow, with the best part being that we didn't have to go to kindergarten because everyone was given a day off to mourn.

During that summer of 1989, everything changed radically. Who knows why? The complete collapse of



the USSR was still two years away, and the Berlin Wall still stood intact, though it probably was already feeling the powerful tectonic shifts. However, when we returned to school on September 1, 1989, the portraits of Lenin had disappeared from their place of honour above the blackboards. They had been carefully and somewhat conspiratorially not rehung after the classrooms had been whitewashed, so there weren't even any faded squares left, only a few treacherous nails here and there. Soon, in some places, they hung portraits of Shevchenko, in others, Jesus, and in a few, a branded clock featuring the Nesquik bunny, which merchandisers were distributing to schools.

Perhaps the reason for the hasty decommunisation was the American students who came to our school as part of an exchange program. They didn't wear uniforms; more than that, they wore jeans! That glaring symbol of the corrupt West, full of temptations! And even that wasn't enough for them. Back then, everyone was required to write with fountain pens, and one of the American girls, unaccustomed to such an old-school device (which, by the way, is now back in fashion), ended up completely staining her jeans. In her defence, it's worth mentioning that water was supplied on a schedule in Lviv—from 6 to 9 in the morning and from 6 to 9 in the evening—and fully automatic washing machines seemed like some-

thing akin to a spaceship from a sci-fi movie. This ink-stained manifesto, filled with unheard-of and unseen audacity, sowed the seeds of a widespread youth rebellion. Everyone rose up against the uniform, each day boldly wearing whatever they found in their or their parents' wardrobes, gradually moving away from the standard brown dresses with white aprons and stiff jackets. The Pioneer scarves were no longer even mentioned.

Interestingly, the teachers and school administration accepted all of this without any resistance or even disapproval, as if they themselves had been waiting for that wave of freedom, one that would carry them away as well, out of a world they had long dreamed of escaping, where they were weary of living. Who knows what caused more trouble: the total daily discomfort and the nighttime lines for essentials or the underlying distrust among people and the lies of the system? But the intolerability of average Soviet life had reached a critical point for the vast majority, regardless of age or profession.

That summer, like several previous ones, my mother's classmate, who had been living in the GDR for about 10 years, also came to visit us. She and her husband had a cool trailer that they hitched to their orange Wartburg car, setting off on long road trips across several borders. They had bought the trailer specifically so their five-year-old daughter could sleep comfortably when they had to stay at the borders for a day or two. They would park it in our yard,

which was securely locked, and this pristine white capsule, equipped with all the essentials, seemed to me the perfect combination of a refuge from hard times and a shuttle, or even a portal, that could instantly transport you to a better life. One of the signs of possible miracles was that from its neat little doors, you could occasionally retrieve a piece of Wrigley's gum and Milka chocolates, like from a magical chest. As a child, these attributes were enough for me to believe, without question, that wherever such impeccable trailers were built, the world must be better, and everyone must have fresh breath. This was only confirmed by the OTTO catalogues they also brought for us to look at. We couldn't actually order anything from them, of course. But those catalogues were the best gift—I still remember the smell of the pages, the identical clothing models in eight colours (amazing!), and the pages with lace lingerie and breast massagers, which were sometimes torn out if someone borrowed the catalogue to flip through for a few days.

At that time, the unification of Germany was being actively discussed. I remember our friends once remarking that it was hard to understand why the Soviet republics were trying to break away from Moscow when Europe was striving to eliminate borders. Such a question could only arise from those who had not been direct victims of Russia's centuries-long toxic imperial practices. In reality, the answer was simple: we also wanted to unite with Europe, but to do so, we first needed to become free.

Eventually, when the borders were finally opened a bit to bring the allure of the Western world closer, my grandfather set off one day on quite the European journey in his yellow Lada. This happened after the Wall had already fallen, and it was possible to travel not only to the Dresden Gallery but also to the home appliance stores in West Berlin. There, he spent a significant portion of his savings, exchanged from rubles to Deutsche Marks, to buy a VCR. The box alone was impressive, featuring elephants and giraffes running across the savannah. After several unsuccessful attempts to connect the VCR to the TV, it remained in that box, and I imagine that the elephants and giraffes might one day break free from my grandmother's storage, like in Jumanji.

Maybe it's time to try selling this magical box to a new generation of old-school enthusiasts eager to watch home video archives, starting with their parents' three-hour wedding tape recorded on VHS. The snowy and wave effects that are now painstakingly imitated on Instagram were once real. And this device would be perfect for watching *Goodbye, Lenin!* and *Das Leben der Anderen*—a screening like that would serve as a particularly nuanced historical reference. You could even recreate the atmosphere of the illegal video salons, a business that laid the foundation for the success of several well-known Ukrainian politicians and many other entrepreneurs, both big and small.

Meanwhile, with the eyes and ears of a child, I watched how what is known as the national liberation struggle, the fall of empires, and decolonisation

unfolded. There was the Revolution on Granite, a student hunger strike on the October Revolution Square in Kyiv, which had not yet been renamed to Independence Square. And then there was the commemoration of the 71st anniversary of the Unification Act, which, in pre-digital times, demonstrated incredible solidarity and coordination when, despite the December weather, over 300.000 Ukrainians held hands to form a living chain about 500 kilometres long, connecting a vast part of the country from west to east. There's a blurry black-and-white photograph of my parents in our family albums where you can sense how cold their feet were in unsuitable shoes somewhere along the Kyiv highway near Zhytomyr.

The actionism of those times was a manifesto of art untouched by monetisation. When there was no money, creation had to happen without it and not because of it. As a result, everything turned out completely differently than it would have a budget planned two years in advance. Sometimes it was a failure, but surprisingly, much more often, it was dazzling, phantasmagoric, and filled with absolutely unique energy. Only now do I realise how lucky I was to have had the chance, between the ages of 10–12, to immerse myself in the formation of the cultural layers of new Ukrainian literature, music, and performance art—the Vyvykh festival, the performance by Bu-Ba-Bu at the Lviv Circus, Chrysler Imperial at the Opera House, and the concerts of the earliest lineup of Mertvyi Piven at the Les Kurbas Theater are among the brightest memories of my pre-adolescence. These names and

GOODBYE LENIN

Back to school collection ***1989***

events may not mean much to people, even to those in Ukraine—they never became a mainstream culture in a media space occupied by Russian showbiz. But for those in the know, it felt like cutting, even with a nail file, the tow rope pulling you unwillingly into the Arctic waters and the eternal frost of an icebreaker when all you wanted was to drift with the warm current toward the dreamed-of ports of Europe. Europe was a haze and a mirage—a generalised myth of well-being, cosy and enticing living, and well-appointed interiors, as seen in books, movies, and catalogues, in contrast to the grey, gloomy existence marred by Soviet communal neglect.

Lviv, the city where I grew up, with its generous Franz Josef-era architectural landscape, offered me a glimpse of the modest charms of the bourgeoisie and shaped my standards of European aesthetics. All travel directions were always considered in the West-East axis, even if they involved northward or southward shifts. Politics prevailed over climate—crossing the western border, just about 60 kilometres away from us, was the subject of trepidation, measured in stacks of documents and weeks of visa ordeals. I first managed to cross this portal around 1993, during a time of financial collapse in the entire country when my parents hadn't been paid for several months, so it seemed like an absolute miracle. With a group of schoolchildren, we crossed all of Europe by bus and took a ferry to England from Belgium. Not having seen much along the way, I judged the level of pros-

perity of the countries we passed through by the state of the restrooms at gas stations. Once they smelled better and warm water flowed from the taps, I felt as though I had passed through a portal into a better dimension. For many years after that, I associated the Western world with the nauseating smell of fast food, which only appeared here about 15 years later, although we quickly understood that it wasn't something to be celebrated.

It seemed to me that after just a month, I had come back completely different, fueled by Coca-Cola and orange juice, dressed in clothes fashionable among European teenagers, and dreaming of a pair of Doc Martens boots—a dream that, thanks to my parents' considerable efforts, finally came true on my 14th birthday. Walking in them on the cobblestones of Lviv, I felt almost as if I were in Vienna or Prague, those places featured in postcard sets that shaped my naive teenage perception of 'the most European' Europe.

I wasn't the only one to have this naive idea. As soon as the assortment of shops, restaurants, and building materials got diversified by imports, the prefix 'Euro-' became a sign of quality, even if the imports were Chinese or Turkish. Back then, everything was labelled 'Euro-', from renovations (which, as it

turned out later, had nothing to do with what apartments in Paris or Stockholm looked like) to dry cleaners, lawns, and markets… If something had just been renovated, coated in a caustic bland paint, clad in white plastic panelling, and adorned with alabaster lions, it was enough to add the prefix 'Euro-'.

There was something inherently deceptive about this, my intuition told me, and logic added that to truly understand what 'Euro-' meant, one had to travel and see for themselves. It was around that time that I came up with the generalised metaphor, 'Why should I go to Mariupol when there's Barcelona?' This is how some of my casual acquaintances in Barcelona learned the name Mariupol long before pointing it out on a map with one's eyes closed became mainstream, as often happened with Ukrainian place names, for unfortunate reasons. Back then, I wouldn't have been able to point out Mariupol myself, unlike Barcelona.

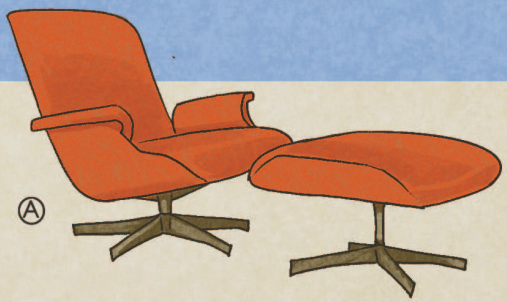
In Barcelona, there were *Vicky and Cristina*; in Mariupol, there was *Little Vera*. Little Vera was the protagonist of a film from the late Soviet era, where the director no longer tried to embellish reality and even crossed a Soviet moral boundary by showing the first sex scene in its cinema. But this sex was far from sexy. *Little Vera* was unpleasant to me, even disgusting, and I felt particular revulsion at the sight of the can of fish on the table next to the iron bed that rocked with Vera's defiance against the missionary position. Vera's breasts hung pointedly, and she was ready to want a child amidst all of this. I imagined it as a still-

born anchovy in that tomato tin. I could almost smell the metallic, fishy odour. Anchovies in Barcelona never smelled like that, even when laid out on bread with tomatoes. In Barcelona, children played in the streets with water from antique fountains, water that was safe to drink. Meanwhile, in Mariupol, a French program to revitalise the water supply system would try, unsuccessfully, to provide drinkable tap water sometime in the 2020s. It wouldn't succeed before the Russian occupation of the city. But that was still far off, as was the realisation that Gaudí's swirls would prove more enduring than Azovstal.

Yet there were still a dozen carefree years before the shocking realisation that the incantation 'never again' doesn't work. We believed that our first generation of future happy retirees was already emerging, who would sip sparkling wine on squares and terraces at noon, regularly play tennis, and feel beautiful. This difference united very different European countries and drew the most attention during travel. Every time I saw such elderly people, I had a strong desire to import this 'Euro old age.'

Somewhere from the beginning of the 2000s, the portal for field research into European life was Kraków. First as a final destination, and later, when Poland entered the Schengen area in 2007, as a transit port—this was where the nearest low-cost flights available to us departed from. To get to Kraków, we had to cross the Ukrainian-Polish border. We knew everything about manoeuvring through the various

TAKE A REST YOU DESERVE



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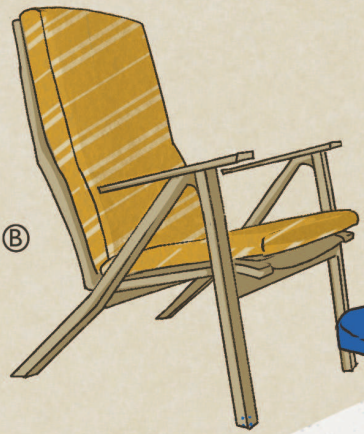

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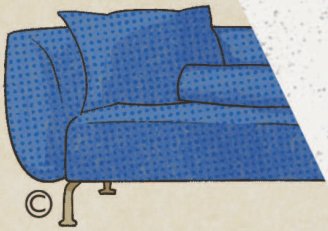

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ЄВРОРЕМОНТ

- гіпсокартон
- плитка
- стяжка
- шпаклівка
- електрика
- опалення
- штукатурка
- натяжна стел

checkpoints. In the process, we also observed the clever inventions of smugglers from the villages near the border. They brought alcohol and tobacco into Europe and returned with a variety of goods for different small businesses. My personal favourites were a pair of twin brothers who created a scene reminiscent of the fable about the race between the hare and the tortoise—one was responsible for the Ukrainian side, the other for the Polish side, coordinating the smuggling of goods through the pedestrian crossing. The locals, like ants, brought onions, car tyres, meat, women's sanitary pads, men's sweaters, and sometimes even entire truckloads of shoes or bicycles to their yard, which the village women in colourful scarves would carry across the border one by one each day. All these goods accumulated in the brothers' yard, out in the open, laid out like at an Eastern bazaar in the middle of the village dirt, with turkeys roaming around and the owner strolling among them, holding a fan of small, greasy banknotes and twirling the keys to an old car on his finger.

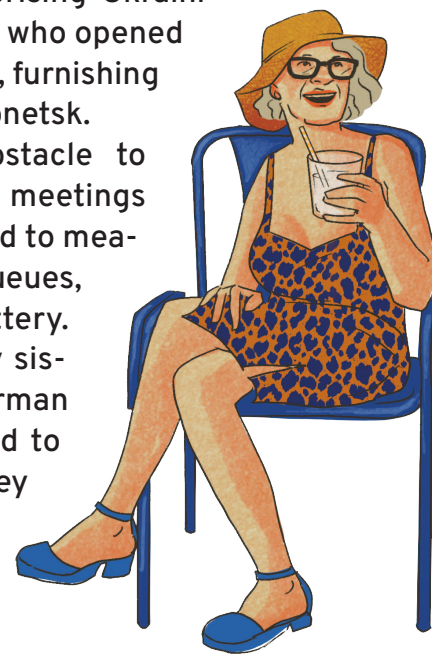
One time, they gave me a ride 'to the other side, to get there faster.' In the Mercedes Sprinter, a symbolic picnic was laid out, including cognac, broken chocolate, fresh young cucumbers, and tomatoes. The driver took a swig from the bottle, stepped on the gas, and bypassed the long queue with a five-year-old boy sitting on his lap steering the wheel. Everyone smoked except for the boy. A frantic border guard ran towards us, but it turned out she was a classmate of the driver, so with a golden-toothed grin, he offered her some co-

gnac and chocolate through the window. She playfully shook her fists at us, and soon after, having successfully passed the Polish customs control, we found ourselves in the middle of a yellow rapeseed field with the sign 'Sprzedam' ('For Sale'). The driver and his partner unloaded numerous cartons of cigarettes from under the van's lining and handed them over to the driver of a small car, who appeared out of nowhere. Before disappearing just as suddenly, he courteously gave me a ride to the train station in Przemyśl.

I never had a scratch-off map to mark my travels, but my exploration of Europe and its people unfolded dynamically, and I took greater care to maintain a valid Schengen visa than I did to schedule regular medical check-ups. When someone at an international student party once innocently exclaimed, 'Schengen? What's Schengen?', it wasn't the first time I struggled to suppress my envy of those who could simply move around Europe without noticing borders and without gathering stacks of paperwork to prove that there would be someone to look after them during their short-term visit, while also proving that they had deep enough roots in Ukraine to ensure their return.

After all, Poland must have analysed the fact that visits from Ukrainians significantly boosted the economy. The mass market hadn't yet entered Ukraine, and the allure of the OTTO catalogue whispered that everything abroad was better and that everyone deserved an IKEA cabinet. If, for modern European authors, assembling a set of budget Scandinavian furniture is a metaphor for a relationship entering a boring

phase, in Ukrainian texts of that period, it was more about shared euphoria in replacing the tiresome Soviet lifestyle. To make this euphoria more accessible to the people, Poland introduced shopping visas under which an entire industry of visa centres emerged, allowing not only consumer needs to be met but also many others: museums, resorts, new acquaintances, dates. And although Ukraine wouldn't achieve visa-free travel until 2017, travel had already become accessible since 2011—only for residents of a few western regions, though. The first shopping visa was given for a week, and from this trip it was necessary to return with a convincing check in order to get the next visa for six months. This only intensified the semi-legal trade: after all, Ikea has now become easily accessible thanks to enterprising Ukrainians from the border regions, who opened entire successful businesses, furnishing homes from Chernivtsi to Donetsk.



Another significant obstacle to spontaneous getaways and meetings was the border. We were used to measuring it in hours spent in queues, and it always felt like a lottery. Once, on our way home, my sister and I picked up two German hitchhikers who had decided to explore Ukraine. At first, they were shocked that you could spend more than 20 minutes at a border

crossing, and then it turned out that they only had ID cards and no passports, so they had to limit their visit to Poland. The border crossing that time went fairly quickly, and we amused ourselves by transporting two thuja trees for the owners of a small business from the neighbouring car instead of the German hitchhikers since, as it turned out, you could only bring one tree per person into Ukraine.

Another time, I was not so lucky when a vigilant Polish border guard discovered that six months earlier, her Austrian colleague had been less diligent at his post at the Vienna Airport and hadn't stamped my passport when I left the Schengen area. As a result, I was detained as a malicious trespasser. It took five hours, along with two border guards who were much more interested in finishing their movie than receiving my boarding passes via email, to prove that every time I entered Schengen, I also left it. The most certain proof of this was my very presence where I was. Incidentally, my car was packed to the brim with IKEA cabinets.

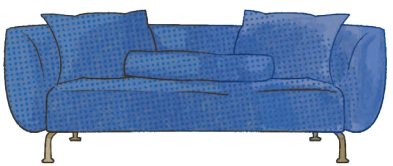
When I wasn't travelling to Europe, I arranged my life so that Europe came to me. Couchsurfing became my personal simulacrum of the Erasmus Programme and student-shared apartments in Vienna or Berlin, which weren't yet accessible during my university years. I discovered the diversity of Europe through the people who stayed with me and through the homes where I stayed, which gave me detailed insights into the lives of their owners and their predecessors. The little interior details, the food, family stories, photo-

graphs, trinkets on dressing tables—all of these were pieces of the European puzzle, revealing and reflecting who dominated where and when, where the centres of influence were, who was historically more fortunate, and who less so, who was processing which traumas, and who felt shame or perhaps didn't, even if they should have.

It was often the case that the recipe for survival of the people I was casually chatting and drinking with was shaped sometimes by the cowardice and conformity of previous generations and other times by the courage, valour, and openness to others. Europe has never been straightforward, homogeneous, or uniform—it has always been a gallery of diverse faces, many of which stood on opposite sides of history, yet now strive to create a shared space and narrative, sometimes quite tangible and at other times resembling a clumsy mirage.

This was a period of many friendships for me, both short and long-lasting. One day my sister and I decided to embark on a road trip, though this one was not like the one our grandfather once did in 1993 to purchase a VCR. In 2011, there was no need to travel this way at all, but we wanted to go on a kind of Euro-tour to visit those who had stayed with us in Ukraine. Among them was a group of students from Cieszyn, a small town that, by its very existence, embodied the

TAKE A REST YOU DESERVE




BON VOYAGE
ПОЛЬСЬКІ ВІЗИ
СТРАХУВАННЯ
ВІЗИ
В ЧЕХІЮ
ЛИТВУ
ШЕНГЕН ЗА 3 ДНІ
ВІЗИ НА
США
КАНАДА
АНГЛІЯ
ПАСПОРТ УКР
PASSPORT UKRAI
ВІЗИ
ЗАПРОШЕННЯ:
робочі 360/180
від Воєводи 360/360
бізнесові для шенген віз
ПІЛГОТОВКА ВСІХ НЕОБХІДНИХ ДОКУМЕНТІВ, СТРАХУВАННЯ
Термінова реєстрація у візові центри

history of Europe's divisions and reunifications: its two parts, separated by the Olza River, are in different countries, Poland and the Czech Republic. Their names are written differently: Cieszyn in Polish and Těšín in Czech, but they sound the same. When I look at the spelling in Slavic languages that use the Latin alphabet, reproducing sounds that cannot be transliterated into English, many of which are also part of my first and last name, I regret that I cannot borrow these letters with tiny tails and beaks for transliteration.

Although drug laws in the Czech Republic were much more liberal than in Poland, crossing the border between Cieszyn and Těšín was completely casual, and no one thought of counting passport stamps for five hours.

We didn't experience such luxury even when Ukraine and Poland were host countries for Euro 2012. However, despite the cumbersome border crossing, hosting the championship together was a sign of good neighbourliness and openness to guests. And not just any guests, but football fans! New airport terminals appeared on the same occasion that would soon welcome their low-cost flights. On the day of one of the matches, I took a photo in Lviv's Rynok Square that I still consider one of my best street photos: a Danish fan—a tall, dazzlingly handsome young man in a Viking helmet—kisses a round, sweet Ukrainian auntie on the cheek who came to the city centre to witness all this wonder. The auntie is squinting and glowing with happiness. The young man is too. To be honest, the dazzling aspect of his beauty was actually the red face

paint with a white cross across his entire face with a similar manicure design on his pinkie, which he playfully shows to the camera. Without these, he might not have been quite so handsome. But for shared joy, it didn't matter.

Symbols of that championship remain in many cities: there is still a small witty sculpture that marks the area of the Swedish fans' camp on Trukhaniv Island in Kyiv, and there are still prop balls—both big and small—here and there on city flowerbeds. When I come across them, I think about how similar balls are faring in Donetsk. Did the Russian-appointed occupying authorities destroy them as harmful symbols of Europe when they seized the city in 2014? Just as they destroyed sculptures at the Izolatsiya Arts Center, which was turned into a prison and torture camp for Ukrainians. I have never been to Donetsk, but I hope the balls are waiting for liberation. And that the airport, whose new terminal lasted from Euro 2012 until 2014, when it was completely destroyed in the early battles of the war, will resume its operations like other airports in Ukraine.

My friend, originally from Luhansk and now living in Berlin, managed to take her parents on a dream trip to Italy in the brief window between 2012 and 2014. She loves to recall how her father—a simple worker—cinematographically drove the family to the airport in an old Zaporozhets, visiting old friends along the

way; how he tried out a display Porsche convertible at the airport, and how later, in some Italian monastery, he found common ground with a Catholic monk on the topic of distillation technology without any translator. Before the war and the occupation of her hometown in 2014, my friend managed to move her parents to Irpin, a town near the capital that the world might never have heard of if not for the full-scale invasion in 2022 and the photograph of people sheltering under a destroyed bridge (once again our toponyms only become recognisable through bad news…). They also had to be evacuated from there, but the Ukrainian military liberated that house sooner, and they were able to return.

Less than a year before the start of this war, which no one in Europe expected because of the 'never again' mantra, my daughter was born. Half Ukrainian, half French, made in Budapest, born in Lviv, raised in Lviv, Kyiv, Brussels, and Lviv again. In November-December 2014, I decided to spend some time with the baby where it was warmer and flew to Barcelona.

In Kyiv, the EuroMaidan was unfolding: the 'Euro' part was genuinely connected to Europe, perhaps for the first time, and it was filled with greater meanings than a vain touch-up that reeks of bad taste. It all started with a student protest in support of Ukraine's European integration, which the authorities were suppressing. It grew into the Revolution of Dignity. After all, we Ukrainians make revolutions every ten years to complete what we failed to achieve the last time.

We were strolling with my daughter on Barcelona's city beach, the stroller sinking into the damp, cold sand, and she was touching the sea for the first time. Her father received a message that a Lenin monument had been toppled in Kyiv—the interval in the decommunisation of my school years and the city centre was 26 years. Getting rid of idols is not an easy job, especially when it's not clear what should fill its empty physical and spiritual space. Decommunisation sometimes took on thoughtful artistic forms and sometimes bizarre kitschy ones. Statues of leaders were melted down into hetmans and Cossacks, re-cast into Shevchenkos and Olympic champions. Gilded, shattered, blue-and-yellow, decapitated, face-down in the mud, covered

in graffiti—they became tools of political manifestos, museum exhibits, and scrap material, accumulating intrigues and detective stories, and were left to fend for themselves in forests and dumps. Often, Soviet idols relegated to the dustbin of history were used as garden gnomes, propping up sewage pipes. Rarely were sculptures and their parts used to decorate cafes or homes. This is how the story of Lenin's head from Besarabka ended—shattered and turned into an artistic spider installation, it ended up in a corner of a Kyiv apartment belonging to a politician. The ideologist of communism, who significantly contributed to the failure to establish statehood and elite structures in Ukraine a hundred years ago, finally received at least symbolic retribution.

The Revolution of Dignity was the first of three periods of Independence (there was also the Granite Revolution in 1990 and the Orange Revolution in 2004) and the first one during which peaceful protesters were killed. Having orchestrated these deaths, the Russians started an open war, although propaganda did everything to ensure that for another eight years, until the full-scale invasion, many still believed 'they were not there'.

During my pregnancy, I could never have imagined that war would become the backdrop for almost all of my daughter's childhood. Not directly, fortunately, but still very tangibly, no matter where we

Makeup trends 2014

were. The pandemic also marked a few of these war years. But to be honest, in comparison, as someone with introverted tendencies, I remember those years as cosy ones of peace, even if they were enforced. When the pandemic first began, there was talk about how the virus thrived on cold metal, so I somehow thought that weapons would become dangerous to touch. I also believed that no one would be able just to take up a gun and shoot down a civilian aeroplane, killing 298 people who had the misfortune of buying tickets for a flight that would pass over a war zone—a war that people were afraid to acknowledge as such and tried to dismiss as a minor local territorial-ethnic conflict.

Given my grandmother's experiences of being born in 1940, I spent my childhood believing that to have children during a war was shortsighted to the point of madness. Because of this, I too wasn't immediately ready to recognise the war and call it by its name. Even when, a few days before the full-scale invasion, my daughter and I watched *Where is Anne Frank*, I still neither wanted, nor was able, to imagine just how relevant that experience would soon become for far too many Ukrainian children. Soon, I realised that I had forever lost the luxury of feeling at peace and believing in that peace. Once, everything was peaceful, even if we didn't call it by name. Sadness was peace, as were mischief and silly jokes, frustration and defiance, envy and irritation, procrastination and neurosis—all of these were manifestations of peace. Peace was dentist visits, failed exams, vacation

requests, romantic woes, serious illnesses, inevitable ageing, natural deaths, scenes from apocalyptic films, and macabre plays. Now, even when I try to construct a peaceful discourse, the most I can manage is to talk about non-war, which, in essence, is still about war. Now, smiles are war, walks along the shore are war, sexual experiments and gourmet indulgences, sybaritism and hedonism—it's all one big war. I look at the generation 20 years younger than me, and my heart aches for them, having to start relationships and marriages, study and plan careers, and dare to have children in wartime. I understand that the hyperinflation of the 1990s and the wild business era of the 2000s were just amusement parks compared to the daily choices and decisions they face. To get married now means risking becoming a widow or widower, and to have a child means contemplating the possibility of leaving them orphaned.

The full-scale invasion caught us in Brussels. We ended up there in September 2021, but not because we believed the warnings of U.S. intelligence. Personally, even while translating analysis from international think tanks, I made every effort to believe only the ones that suited me more: those that said there wouldn't be 'a major war.' Our life in Ukraine was very comfortable and dynamic—we just wanted a change of scenery for a bit, so we decided to travel around Latin America and then try living in the capital of Europe. Back then, I adhered to the philosophy that 'home is wherever you are,' which, as it turned out, also belonged to peacetime privileges.

For the first time in my life, the Great War attracted the keen attention of so many different people, including the parents of my daughter's classmates, neighbours, and casual acquaintances. And this attention was directed at me as a Ukrainian for the first time in my life. A wave of unconditional support and tears of solidarity was a source of strength during the first weeks when my body, rejecting food, sleep, coffee, and alcohol, was sustained only by Coca-Cola, this symbol of unattainable prosperity from the 1990s. But besides compassion, the war also awakened a curiosity that I wasn't always personally prepared for. I'm an escapist by nature—I react to danger by freezing and succumbing to irresistible, almost lethargic sleepiness. Life hadn't prepared me for struggle or passionate speeches—it was enough for me to quietly rejoice that in response to my saying I'm from Ukraine, no one was asking, 'Is it in Russia?' anymore. I always thought I wrote to avoid speaking, but now, every word carries an unbearable weight of responsibility regardless of its form. (It should be noted that while working on this text, I made an effort to capitalise 'Russia' out of respect for grammatical rules. Although it seems like an act of revenge in response to powerlessness, my finger usually does not rise to press the Shift button).

I realised that my myth about Europe was a myth about carefree living, which quickly turned out to be an illusion. One Sunday, at 12:15 in the afternoon, I went into a PICARD store on Vanderkindere Street. Frozen, ready-made meals were one of the many small things that brought me here to live. In Western Europe,

I always felt I was patching up some gaps from my youth. I enjoyed watching young people reading paper books on relevant topics, like *Race, Class, Ethnicity, Sexuality: When It Became an Issue,* in neat little trams and attending Sunday morning porn festivals where the genre was approached with deep reinterpretation. After that, I managed to drop by PICARD because frozen meals, despite the variety and availability of fresh and healthy food offered daily by trendy hipster Kyiv restaurants, turned out to be some kind of old fetish and unresolved issue from the 1990s. So, I grabbed all these frozen stews, duck legs, blueberry pies, mini snacks, and pastries. The photos on the boxes stirred my imagination, and I felt like the mum from the movie *La Boum 2* (which, it turned out, was more popular in the late USSR than in France). The cashier was hurrying from the back of the store towards me, blowing on his hands, with a grimace of pain on his face as he approached the cash register, which somehow perfectly fit the movie scene in my head.

'Hurt yourself?' I empathetically start small talk in the style of a French script.

'Ouch, hit my knee,' he complains, adhering to all the rules of the genre.

'Don't worry, it's already the end of the work week,' I try to encourage him. 'I was lucky to make it in time so I wouldn't starve to death.' I am proud of the witty remark.

'But I'm working on Monday and Tuesday, too. So much for the end of the week, that's life,' he continues. 'And where are you from?' he changes the topic.

‘From Ukraine,’ I say, in a roundabout way, relaxed, not trying to draw too much attention or shatter any illusions about my image, carefully placing my finger on Apple pay so that my money, located somewhere in a bank within a war zone, will transfer on the first try. The transaction is successful, which feels like magic to me, as if I’ve literally touched the beyond.

‘Coool…,’ he says, snapping his softened Francophone ‘l’ in half with a bite.

The small talk cuts off somewhere in his throat. He feels awkward. So do I. My friend, who had to travel a lot for international events and endure a lot of big and small talk with very different people, described this in one of her poems as the ‘coffin suit’ effect. Because when you say in the company of others that you’re from Ukraine, from that place, you feel as if you’re wearing a massive costume of a cartoon character—not SpongeBob or a giant panda, but a coffin. It’s kind of cute, but it nonetheless directly reminds you of death.

I fully understand that, to a large extent, I created the mirage of Europe for myself—it was like my own private ‘mini-Europe’ park that I didn’t want to lose. I sought out its details wherever I could, like on the Alsemberg highway, where there was a little shop that turned out to be a real find. Its entire window display was filled with delicately hand-painted cyclists, thin-wheeled iron riders conquering mountains and meadows. Inside the shop there were even more cyclists packed in sets of five and seven, along with bags of coloured glass balls. It turned out they were made there.

Behind the shop, there was a small studio where they were hand-painted. I was struck by who would need so many cyclists and why. Eventually, the owner of the business approached me, a round, bald man in his 60s.

'What are you going to do with all these cyclists?' I couldn't resist asking him directly.

'Oh! What do you mean? This is the best entertainment in the world!' he answered me with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old boy. 'You take this set, for example, lie down at the beach, and roll the ball in the sand. You have no idea how unpredictable the trajectories can be due to resistance, terrain, and wind. The place where the ball stops is where you put your cyclist. Believe me, you'll never be bored at the beach again with this game. I've been playing it with my friends since childhood.'

He didn't ask me where I was from. For a moment, it felt like our former world was possible again. I imagined the dunes of windy northern beaches, where the sand never gets warm enough—chasing after the balls and cyclists seems like a good strategy to avoid freezing in the August wind. These figurines, like peaceful tin soldiers, each with all their arms and legs, carefully hand-painted with the finest brushes, there in that little workshop behind the glass…

'And one more thing,' he says. 'When there's no chance to play at the beach, but you really want to, we have this 1.8-metre long track,' he unrolled a strip. 'I designed it myself. Here are the various obstacles: the skull means…'

New set of figures

MINI-EUROPE PARK

And then, my perfect world shut down. I, of course, imagined minefields. I imagined a company of brave cyclists, some of whom I knew by name. I have shared memories with them. They charge into battle against Russian soldiers, taking them down with their bare hands. I've never played with toy soldiers, but now I want to play with cyclists on windy dunes. I said nothing about my envisioned scenario to the game inventor. I just pretended to listen to how many steps to take back and how many moves to skip if the ball stopped on a cell with a skull. And I thanked him silently for not asking where I was from.

During one of those Brussels evenings, my daughter and I lay in bed for a long time before going to sleep. Some Danish indie band was playing and this music created a cocoon of comfort. I think my daughter has very unexpected and mature musical tastes for a nine-year-old. Unrelenting light poured in through the window. If anyone asked me what I miss the most about Brussels, I would say without hesitation that it's the light: transparent and sharp, so bright it feels like it pierces you deeply, illuminating your internal organs. The sunset plays intensely with all shades of orange and pink. An idyllic evening. If there's an embodiment of paradise in the world, it's June in these latitudes. And suddenly, my daughter said, 'This song should be removed from the playlist.'

'Bored?' I was surprised.

'No, I just listened to it a lot that January, before everything. Do you remember those happy days?' She sighed as if she was not nine but ninety years old.

The song ended by itself.

'You see, now this "pre-war" bubble has burst. I will no longer be a carefree child. It's a shame when something constantly reminds me of this.'

She clicked REMOVE.

Soon, we decided to return to Ukraine.

My daughter turned 11 in Lviv.

The cycle has been completed.

We continue to seek unification with Europe, but for this, we must first become free.

Translated by Dmytro Kyyan and Kate Tsurkan

St. Andrew's Day

By Eugenia Kuznetsova

On the street where old lady Kateryna lived, Yana was told about how the stove was a portal to the otherworld, the spirits of the dead that wander outside the windows on Christmas Eve, combing hair for a suitor, and fortune-telling by the barking of winter dogs. Ten interviews a week was quite decent.

On that evening when she and Maksym saw the celestial path of St. Nicholas with their own eyes, and when she got scared of the short, frequent gunshots and crouched in the snow, Maksym led her away by the shoulders and said it was happening far away. Switching back to the formal version of 'you,' he kept repeating, 'You don't look like a drone at all' and 'Unfortunately, they haven't hit anything yet, and it will fly further and explode wherever it's shot down.'

Since then, they'd only seen each other at the gate for a few minutes whenever Yana went out. 'And that's fine,' Yana thought as she circled another house on the map for an interview.

There was a persistent knock on the door. The power outages had transported her back to a time when people began appearing at each other's doorsteps again.

'Hello,' Maksym said. His eyes shone evenly in the morning light.

‘I’m heading to the store,’ he said. ‘Maybe I can get you something?’

Yana stood there in her fleece pyjamas with a vest over the top. Instinctively, she assessed her appearance, as women often do, and realised she didn’t look her best. But Maksym didn’t see it that way. In fact, he was doing his best not to think about anyone’s appearance—be it Yana’s or anyone else’s.

‘I was thinking of taking the bus,’ Yana replied.

‘Well, come with me then,’ Maksym said calmly. ‘Or do you need the bus for your ethnographic research?’

‘Will you wait while I change?’ Yana disappeared into the bedroom.

Outside, a red Renault was warming up. It moved silently through the melting snow, whispering as it went. Maksym only had to brake occasionally to glide down to the road, and then merge onto the highway where a snow-packed track had already been carved out and scattered by trucks heading to Kyiv.

‘Maybe you’re out of Parmesan?’ Yana asked.

‘Seems like we’re out of everything,’ Maksym replied. ‘Pills for my father and everything else. Plus, we’ve got guests coming, so I need to prepare something. At the very least, I need to buy a case of wine.’

‘Guests?’

‘Yeah, it’s my birthday. They’re coming, even though I didn’t invite anyone.’

‘Oh,’ Yana said, ‘Happy birthday!’

‘Thanks!’

‘How old are you now?’

‘Too old. But I feel like I’m fifteen.’

‘Strong and capable?’

‘Lazy and unteachable.’

‘Well, I wish you happiness, health, and love.’

‘Thanks,’ Maksym smiled.

‘May our shared wish come true.’

‘True. You know what’s annoying, Yana?’ Maksym asked as he merged onto the highway. ‘If Russia suddenly collapses, my dad might not even remember it existed.’

‘Maybe it will happen at the moment he regains awareness?’

‘Will that moment ever come?’ Maksym wondered.

‘On the other hand,’ Yana said. ‘he already sometimes lives in a wonderful world where Russia doesn’t exist.’

‘He can afford to,’ Maksym answered with a bitter smile.

Dirty clumps of snow flew from under the trucks on the highway.

In the supermarket, Yana felt uncomfortable around strangers, as if she was revealing too much about herself. So she tried to pick things that didn’t say much—neutral items like bread, cheese, apples, milk, and cereal. She also grabbed everything she needed to make *kalyta*, a round honey cake baked or St. Andrew’s Day, using the recipe she had copied down from old lady Todosia: sour milk (although kefir would do), oil, baking soda, flour, spices, poppy seeds, and honey. She also picked out some carrots and some leafy greens for herself.

‘Do you keep rabbits?’ Maksym asked.

His cart was piled high with beer, meat, sausages, sauces, and, on the top, a mountain of packets of crisps and nachos.

‘Guests,’ he smiled. ‘Let’s swing by the post office and then pick up the wine.’

Yana noticed that traffic was blocked just as they were about to cross the road to go back to the car. Cars had stopped, people were getting out onto the shoulders of the road, and girls in white suits with jackets draped over their shoulders were emerging from the pharmacy. The newspaper kiosk vendor came out in a sheepskin coat. Yana glanced back at Maksym—he had placed the bags beside him and knelt down. Everyone around who was near the road did the same. Yana realised that they were bringing a fallen soldier through. She quickly set her own bag down next to the others but ended up kneeling on a pack of nachos that had fallen out of Maksym’s bag. It crackled horribly.

Yana knew how people honoured the dead but had never witnessed it herself, so she didn’t know where to put the bag of carrots or where to look. Eventually, she stared at the ground, where a pile of dirty, half-melted snow from the day before yesterday lay. A wrapper from a Chupa Chups lollipop glinted in the snow. She was too afraid to raise her eyes and look at those following the coffin draped in a flag. Nearby, an older woman, struggling to kneel due to her tight skirt and

coat, sighed loudly as the song 'Plyve Kacha'[1] played from somewhere nearby.

'How many of them, how many of them…' the woman murmured to herself.

Tears started rolling down Yana's cheeks, which seemed out of place and awkward to her amidst these bags, the crushed nachos, and especially next to Maksym, with whom she wanted to remain neutral, like her selection of groceries. Maksym, on the other hand, briefly took her hand, then immediately let go.

They drove in silence to get the wine until Maksym, having parked the car, said: 'Lyuba even said to me, that she hoped there wouldn't be a military funeral today. She said it would be a bad omen for Slava's arrival.'

Yana looked at Maksym questioningly.

'Slava, my brother,' he clarified, 'he's serving.'

'In anthropology, that's called magical thinking,' Yana said. 'Lyuba sprinkles poppy seeds around the house to ward off the spirits of the dead. Your Slava has nothing to do with it.'

Maksym nodded and added: 'And this wine too, for fuck's sake. Perfect timing for a celebration.'

'But Saint Andrew's Day is tomorrow. I'll bake the *kalyta*.'

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[1] A Ukrainian folk song. It is a lament about a young soldier preparing to go to war. It was also used as a requiem for protestors killed during the Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity, 2013–2014, and has been used for the fallen Ukrainian soldiers during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

* * *

The birthday was to be celebrated in the living room, which had glass doors leading out to a wide wooden terrace with steps descending to the garden. It was there, in the living room on the sofa, that Yana had once seen black cats in the darkness, illuminated by Maksym's flashlight. Next to the sofa stood two large armchairs: one orange, adorned with large green monstera leaves, and the other somewhat lower, with Eastern motifs. A portrait of his father in a white coat hung on the wall. Not the one Yana had seen in the studio—this was a different one. The figure of his father was recognizable, but his head still had strands of dark hair. Nearby hung several small-format landscapes—gloomy, painted with broad strokes. Another wall was entirely occupied by bookshelves made of rough wood that stretched from floor to ceiling. The shelves were chaotically dotted with colourful books, except for the top, where the monotonous and identical-looking complete works of someone, probably untouched for the last thirty years, sat. Perhaps Maksym had read a story assigned over the summer back when he was a student, and that's when the complete works of Jules Verne came in handy, but now, both those adventurous worlds and the monotonous dialogues of Turgenev had stood unopened for decades. Some of the shelves looked like a first-grader's mouth after losing their milk teeth—clearly, until recently, they had held the works of Yesenin, Bunin, and Kuprin.

While Maksym was busy preparing for the celebration, Yana kneaded a stiff dough just as old lady Todosia

had taught her: 'until your back is soaked.' She got tired quickly, so just to be sure, she kneaded it a little longer. Once it became elastic and firm, she sculpted ears of wheat, birds, and flowers on top. In the middle, she pressed out a hole with a white Ikea cup. In the sterile white kitchen, the decorated *kalyta* looked out of place, as if it had just landed there from another world. Yana coated the *kalyta* with honey and sprinkled it with poppy seeds. In the oven, the birds expanded and began to resemble something from the video game *Angry Birds*. The flatbread came out light-golden and almost classic, if not for the birds that had puffed up from the baking soda. Then, Yana set the *kalyta* in the freezer to cool down and got ready for the birthday party, putting on jeans and a loose black sweater. She let her hair down and put on some black pearl earrings, which contrasted beautifully against her light hair. Once dressed, she tied red ribbons around the cooled flatbreads and took them to Maksym.

'What a beauty!' Lyuba greeted her. She was stirring some cheese spread for the sandwiches.

'This will be quite the party,' she said, sighing, 'where no one will even have a chance to sit down properly.'

A low table stood by the couch, and near the terrace door was a wide windowsill. You could open the window and use it as a bar counter.

'They'll let in the cold,' Lyuba said, following Yana with forks and a plate of the spread. From the window, Maksym could be seen. A man stood next to him, somehow resembling Maksym himself in posture and


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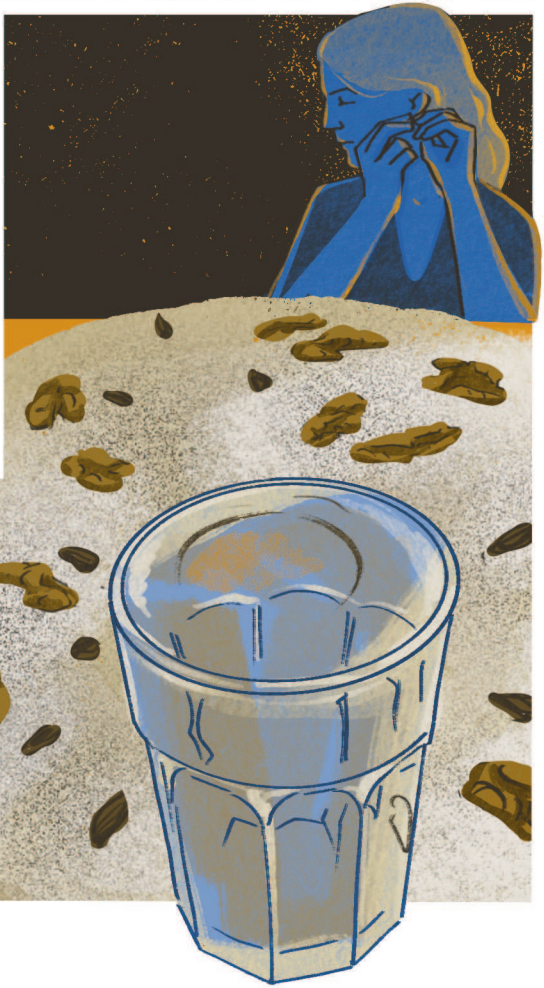


in quick movements. They both peered into the grill, where the magical power of fire was clearly transforming wood into coals, which in turn would transform plain sausages into festive food.

'His brother's here,' Lyuba said, squeezing past Yana and the chair to reach the table. She was carrying a tray of mini sandwiches on crackers. 'No funeral today?' she asked.

'No, there wasn't,' Yana replied confidently.

Maksym had cleared the terrace of snow in the morning. 'Just let it try to fall again,' he had said. Snowdrifts lay around the perimeter. On the steps leading down to the garden, a woman sat on a yoga mat, holding a cup with both hands and occasionally glancing back at Maksym and his brother.

'What beauty,' Yana heard her say as she opened the door. 'Nature, peace, birds singing!'

There were no birds to be heard in the background.

'The birds flew somewhere warmer,' Maksym said.

'And where there are no power cuts,' the other man remarked.

His voice was similar to Maksym's.

'I meant it figuratively,' the woman turned and saw Yana. 'Good afternoon!'

Now the other man noticed Yana too.

'Ah,' he said, 'this is the young researcher you've been talking about.'

Maksym smiled warmly at the coals, lifted his eyes,

and said, ‘Let me introduce you: this is Yana, this is my brother Slava, and this is Maryna.’

‘Maryna, Maryna, my one and only love…’ Slava hummed, touching the skewer to a hot, ash-red log, which crumbled into coals at his touch.

The outlines of the garden were slowly dissolving into the twilight. The sun hadn’t had time to rise and get tired before it was already rolling behind the horizon, leaving the cold winter sky.

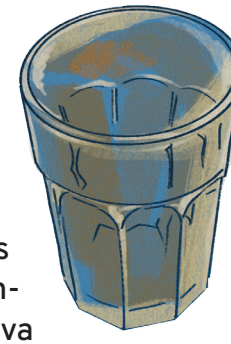
‘It’s not even four yet, and it’s already dark,’ Lyuba said. ‘Maksym, go fuel up the generator, because if everyone comes and the lights go out, it’ll be a mess.’

‘Will you help me?’ Maksym asked Yana as he walked by.

Yana placed the plates on the windowsill and, putting her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, followed Maksym.

The generator was in the garage, which was next to the workshop, cluttered with paintings and books. The garage, it turned out, also housed statues, old lamps, and piles of Soviet-era tourist albums filled with black-and-white photos of factories, quarries, blast furnaces, and other attractions of the socialist regime.

‘Let me give you some context,’ Maksym said as he entered the garage. ‘Slava’s a bit jumpy. He came home from the war for Christmas on leave. He was jumpy before the war too. Now he’s the same, just more tired. Maryna, his wife, has a calmer soul.



Their son, also Slava, is a real handful, even worse than his father.'

'And where is their son, Slava?'

'Who knows where he is. Maybe he's already set the barn on fire. We need to find him. My mother, Svitlana, is in my father's room,' Maksym continued, opening a gas canister, 'and my old friend is coming too. Slava doesn't like him, but Maryna does. His name's Eduard. He might bring some woman with him.'

'Thanks for the briefing. Any other instructions?'

'Don't fall for anything. I'm the only normal one here,' Maksym said, glancing at Yana. 'Every time I pour gas,' he sniffed the canister, 'I remember when my father and I used to go to the sea.'

He crouched down by the generator.

'My father used to carry two gas canisters in the car and would say they were, "just in case we get stuck in the middle of a field." As a kid, I'd think, "oh, how I wish we would get stuck in the middle of a field." With my father! We'd build a shelter in the cornfield, spend the night somewhere out in the open, and no cars would pass by. No one would be able to refuel us—we'd just stay there like that. If we got hungry, I thought, we'd hunt a rabbit and roast it over a bonfire. At the time, I was really into making rabbit traps and was convinced I could catch one in ten minutes—well, maybe half an hour tops. So one time, I went ahead and took those canisters out before we left. "Someone stole them, damn it," my father said, and he was angry all day, right up until we arrived at the sea. Meanwhile,

I kept waiting for the gas to run out and for us to get stuck. But the gas station was open, and we didn't get stuck. I didn't get to have more time with my father, as usual. Those weekends at the sea flew by in a blink, and soon I was back with my mother, washing my feet, combing my hair, and going to school in a freshly ironed shirt…'

'Are your parents divorced?' Yana asked, listening to Maksym while watching the stream of gasoline pour into the generator.

'Yes, I remember a little of when they were together, but Slava doesn't remember at all. Oh, and one more thing. My ex-wife is coming by. She and my mum are great friends. And my mum's heading back to Berlin tomorrow.'

'Isn't it hard for her to travel so far alone?'

'She gave birth to me when she was nineteen, so it's not too tough yet. My father was treating her for gastritis. Cured her so well, I was born. Let's grab the glasses from here. They should be around here somewhere…' Maksym opened an old cupboard, where enormous soup tureens were lined up like an exhibit. One had a duck's head as a handle, and another had a bas-relief of rabbits on the side.

'So how old are you?' Yana asked.

'Well, judging by the fact that you keep stubbornly addressing me formally, it's about time for me to kick the bucket.'

Yana picked up four glasses in each hand, while Maksym carried six more.

Standing in the doorway was his mother. Tall, with silver bobbed hair, thin lips, and dark, pencilled eyebrows. She was dressed in black pants and a long grey sweater, matching her grey hair.

'Ah, there you are,' she said to Maksym. 'Can you imagine, I gave your father two children, and he didn't even recognize me. Spent his whole life with those ultrasound techs of his, and now he's mistaking me for the head of the lab. And the head of his lab was this old, nasty woman. Even in his forgetfulness, he somehow managed to spit on my soul,' she glanced to the side, then, suddenly remembering, turned to Yana and said, 'I'm sorry, my name's Sveta.'

'Good evening,' said Yana.

'So, my son is almost fifty now.'

'Mama, mama,' Maksym quickly interrupted, 'no need to say that, it hasn't happened yet.'

'He was such a difficult child,' his mother continued. 'Oh, how I struggled with him. And everyone kept saying, "It'll get easier soon, it'll get easier." So, by fifty, should it finally get easier?'

'First of all, I'm not fifty yet,' Maksym replied.

'What's the difference? For men, age is like water off a duck's back.'

'So, has it not gotten easier at all?' Maksym asked as he opened the door with the hand that wasn't holding glasses, letting Yana, who was carrying a tray of glasses, go in ahead of him.

'Now it's unbearable.'

Maksym smiled at his mother.

‘Don’t let in the cold,’ she said. ‘And why aren’t you coming inside?’

‘I’m waiting for someone, we haven’t seen each other yet.’

The only person his mother could call ‘someone’ was Karla. Ever since Maksym and Karla had finalised their divorce, his mother stopped referring to her by name, simply calling her ‘someone.’

From the terrace, they could see a black BMW pulling up to the gate, and out stepped ‘someone’: a woman with dark hair, just like the colour of her car, tied back. Karla had brought a bottle of whiskey and a bouquet of red roses. She hugged Maksym, handed him the roses and the bottle, and said:

‘We need to talk.’

She had a slight accent.

‘I thought I’d only get roses like these at my own funeral.’

‘Sorry if it’s premature,’ Karla replied, ‘I’ll bring some to the funeral too.’

Karla’s eyes were black as night, and her thick dark eyebrows made it easy to imagine she could be more like Maksym’s mother’s daughter than Maksym himself, with his light-coloured big eyes and broad smile.

Lyuba stepped out onto the terrace and asked:

‘Can anyone come for a visit? The last one before bed, someone’s feeling anxious.’

‘I’ve already been,’ said Maksym’s mother, ‘and besides, I’m the head of the lab. Karla, dear, go for a visit.’

At the door, she quickly gave Karla instructions, although Karla was already familiar with the unex-

pected twists of her former father-in-law's dementia: 'Complain about something, nod, take the prescription, and schedule for Tuesday because he doesn't like to see patients on Mondays.'

First, Maksym's mother went in.

'Elizaveta Pavlivna,' Maksym's father said to her, 'you should be heading home already. I'll see the last patient and then head home too. At your age…'

'Elizaveta Pavlivna,' she muttered under her breath, 'that Elizaveta Pavlivna was as ugly as an old rat!' She headed for the door. 'He never treated me well, and he still doesn't, even after losing his mind.'

'There's a woman here to see you,' Lyuba quickly said.

Karla entered the room. He was sitting at his desk, a bit anxious, in his office chair, with a white coat draped over his shoulders.

Karla sat down on the chair opposite him.

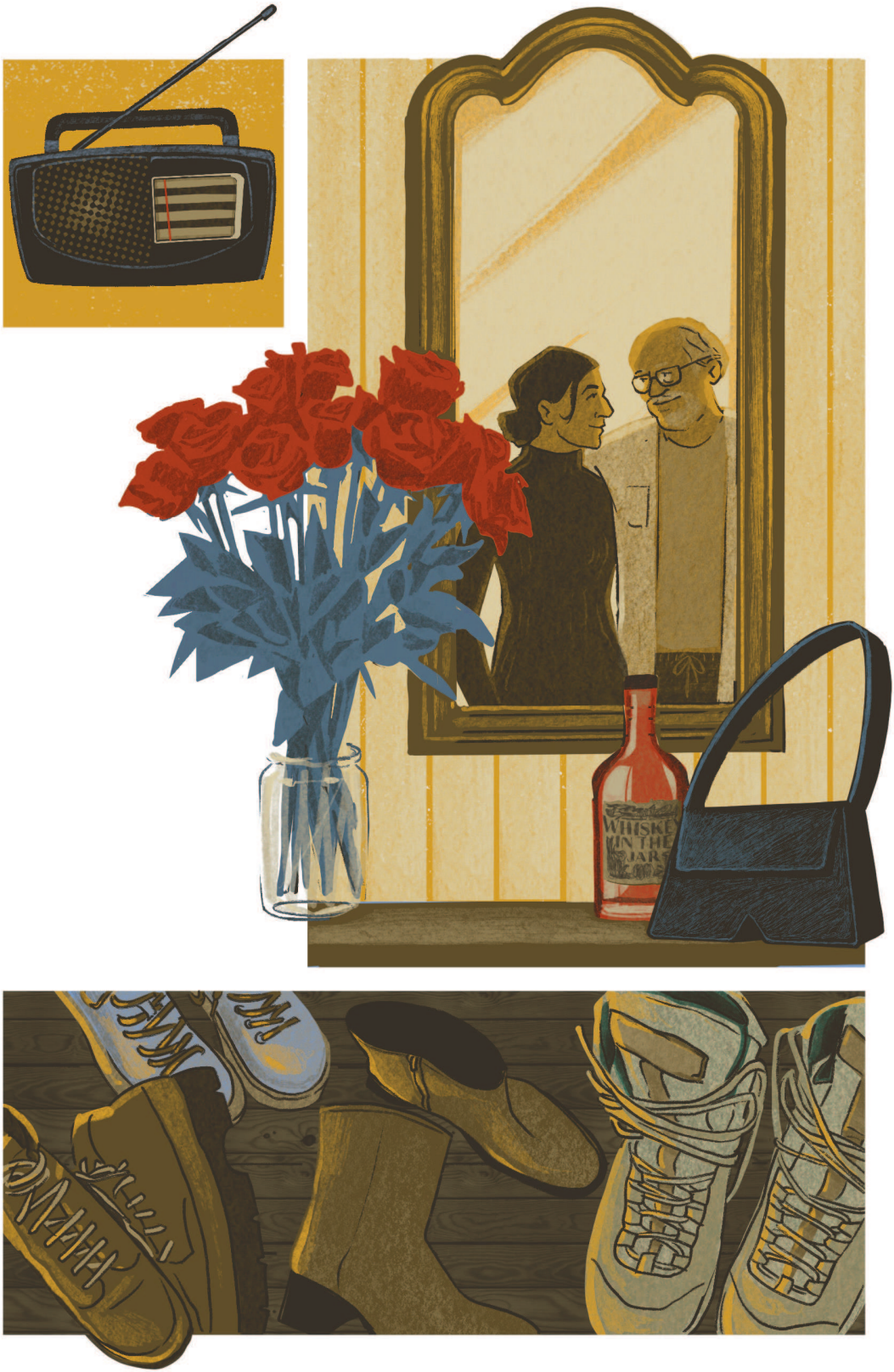
'What's bothering you?' her former father-in-law asked.

'Headache,' she said.

'Are you here on a student exchange?' he asked, quickly catching her accent.

'I'm from the GDR,' Karla improvised.

'Of course,' her father said, switching to Russian. 'Everyone complains to me about headaches,' he muttered to himself, then added again in Russian, 'But I'm actually a gastroenterologist.'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‘When I eat something fatty,’ Karla replied, ‘I feel heaviness.’

‘Don’t eat fatty foods,’ the doctor responded, then paused and addressed Lyuba, who was standing at the door, ‘Leave us for a moment.’

Reluctantly, Lyuba stepped out, leaving a small crack in the door in case she needed to rush back in.

‘I can tell,’ her father said, ‘that you’re not from around here. Maybe you have more information. This morning, I accidentally caught the Voice of America. They were speaking in perfect Ukrainian about the war, and saying that the Pentagon is sending ammunition to Ukraine.’

‘That’s true,’ Karla sighed, ‘Ukraine will soon be free.’

His hand trembled. He wanted to say something out loud, but then quickly scribbled something on a piece of paper in shaky, elderly handwriting and showed it to Karla.

She couldn’t make out the handwritten Cyrillic, so she nodded and, folding the note in half, put it in her pocket.

Through the crack in the door, Lyuba saw her father getting agitated and quickly rushed over to Yukhymovych’s desk. She slid a piece of paper toward him.

‘Here’s a diet plan for your pancreas,’ she said. ‘Let’s go rest now.’

Her father glanced at Karla once more, then at Lyuba, raising his eyebrows. As he walked around the desk, leaning on Lyuba for support, he looked at Karla

again and gave her a pat on the shoulder, the kind of pat sworn brothers-in-arms give one another.

Karla took the pancreas diet note from Lyuba's hands, said her goodbyes, and left.

Maksym's mother was standing outside the office.

'Let me give you a hug,' she said to Karla. 'Who would have thought we'd see each other again under such circumstances.'

'Sfeta,' Karla said quietly, her German accent softening the 'v', 'we need to do something about David.'

'What's going on with our boy?'

'Our boy is thinking about going to war.'

'What?' his mother raised her eyebrows in despair. 'Don't worry, he's too young, no one will take him.'

'He's young now, but by summer I won't be able to stop him.'

'Maybe the war will be over by summer? We won't let him go. Slava needs to talk to him.'

'And what does his father think? Of course, it's easy for him—he's missing an eye, they won't take him, but doesn't he care about his son?'

'Maybe it's not so easy for him being without an eye,' his mother said. For a moment, it was Maksym's mother speaking, not Karla's friend.

'Sfeta, you know what I mean. I'm fifty-five years old, he's my only child, I didn't give birth to him for him to go off to war, he's half German, he shouldn't have to... And his father needs to explain that to him. Does Slava have any influence over him?'

‘Karlochka,’ Maksym’s mother purred, ‘we’re a team, we’ll do everything we can.’

‘He won’t listen to you. To him, we’re just ridiculous, panicked women who won’t let him become a hero.’

It was already dark, and the lamps in the living room had been turned on. Slava was pouring wine into glasses. Cold, snow-covered cats began to gather on the couch for the night. One fluffy cat had icicles stuck to the fur on its belly, which it was busily chewing off and scattering around—melting and leaving small dark piles of wet fur.

Taking advantage of the moment when no one was around Slava, Karla approached him.

‘Slava,’ Karla said, ‘David wants to join the army.’

‘Let the milk dry on his lips first,’ Slava replied.

‘What?’

‘I said, let him grow up. How old is he? Thirteen?’

‘Your nephew is seventeen,’ Karla said irritably, ‘seventeen! Where’s Maksym?’

Makysm had gone to the doorway to greet more guests.

Headlights flashed outside. A car had evidently stopped behind Karla’s BMW. At the gate appeared a man in a green shirt thrown over a white t-shirt. He was bald, fair-skinned, with a thin beard and an earring in his ear. Behind him walked a tall, slender girl with a short fringe and a bob haircut. She wore a loose-knit dress and a scarf wrapped around her unusually long neck, as if she were intentionally stretching it, like in some African tribes. She had large, round glasses with thin frames.

‘Edik!’ Maksym said, smiling.

Edik was carrying a fruit basket. On top of the carefully arranged bananas was another package.

He set the basket down and hugged the birthday boy.

‘Old man!’ he said.

‘Edichok!’ Maksym replied.

‘This is for you,’ Edik placed the basket in Maksym’s hands, ‘a vitamin bomb! Bananas, pineapple, passion fruit! And this,’ he took the package off the bananas, ‘is a creative gift.’

Edik was an artist. He wrote lofty, industrial-democratic poems, heavy prose, and had ambitions of becoming a novelist, dreaming of being adapted for Netflix.

‘Here, open it!’ Edik said.

Inside the package was a small book.

‘This is my latest collection! Fresh off the press!’

The collection was entitled *Steel*.

‘I’m currently finishing a documentary about the war. It’s our duty now, there’s no other way.’

‘It’s going to be powerful,’ said the girl with the round glasses.

‘Oh, sorry, dear,’ Edik turned to the girl, ‘this is Eliza, a cultural figure and organiser. She hosted a book club for *Steel*, and that’s how our paths crossed.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Maksym said.

‘Oh, I have another gift for you—look,’ Edik pulled a small turquoise booklet with a golden ribbon from his breast pocket. ‘It’s a five-year daily journal. Just write whatever you want each day for five years. I, for ex-

ample, write three adjectives about myself every day. Today I wrote: "awed, excited, determined.'"

'And what's the point of that?' Maksym asked.

'The deepest insights are within us,' Edik replied. 'How's your father?'

'Same as always. Let's join the others. Karla's here too.'

'Oh, what's she doing here? Did she think these were already your funeral arrangements?'

'It just happened by chance—she wants something from me.'

'You've already given her everything you could,' Edik laughed.

Eliza followed them.

'Everyone's here,' Maksym announced in the living room, and just as he said it, the lights went out.

'Oops!' Edik said, 'We're on the same grid as the hospital, so they don't cut our power—lucky us.'

'And they don't cut ours either,' said Lyuba, getting up to go check on the father, 'they just sometimes turn it on.'

'Light the birthday candles!' Slava called from the terrace. 'I'm bringing the meat!'

'Where the hell is Slava Junior?' Maksym asked.

'We found him under the terrace, setting traps for rabbits. He cut off the tip of his finger, but we've already bandaged it. He's sitting over there,' said his mother.

In a dark corner, sitting cross-legged in an armchair, was Junior—


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a skinny, determined nine-year-old boy with a bruise on his cheek—examining his bandaged finger.

'Seems like not too long ago, you were just like that,' Maksym's mother said. 'Oh, you wore me out.'

At these words, Karla raised her eyebrows and glanced at Maksym. It was clear that seeing someone else's child reminded her of her own sorrow, David. Junior jumped up and ran over to his father. 'Give me a whole skewer, give me a whole one!' he demanded.

'God, you're going to hurt yourself with that skewer,' Slava replied. 'Give me your plate.'

'Dad, just give me the whole one, the whole one!'

'Give him the whole thing,' Maksym said. 'If he doesn't hurt himself with the skewer, he'll find something else to get into trouble with anyway.'

Junior grabbed the skewer and quickly opened the door to go outside: 'I'm going to eat in the trench!'

'Has he already dug a trench?' Maryna asked.

'He finished it by noon,' Slava said matter-of-factly, as if it were the most obvious thing.

'Well, to the birthday boy's health!' Edik raised his glass. 'To many years, Maksym!'

Everyone raised their glasses.

'Start the generator!' Slava said. 'There will be dancing!'

'I'm coming with you,' Karla said, catching up to Maksym as he was leaving the house.

Maksym walked ahead.

'As his father, you need to do something,' Karla said from the darkness, addressing Maksym's back.

'What can I do?' Maksym turned around.

Karla silently motioned with her hand, as if to say, go on, people are waiting for the dancing.

'I've talked to him,' Maksym said over his shoulder, 'but you need to understand that in exactly seven months, you won't be able to make any decisions for him anymore.'

Karla stood in the doorway of the garage. Against the slightly greyish, not yet fully dark sky, her figure was silhouetted in black.

'Decide? No. But you can always influence him,' she said. 'Only you and Slava can do that. You know how it is—the parent who's always around is always less of an authority to the child. That's the price of always being there,' Karla's voice carried a note of bitterness.

'I'll talk to Slava,' Maksym replied and yanked the generator's cord.

Karla had wanted to say something more, but as the generator roared to life, she simply turned and walked back along the trampled path to the house. Maksym followed, leaving the garage doors open. Running toward him, dodging past Karla who stepped aside, was Junior, waving a skewer.

'Look, look what I can do!' he shouted. 'Watch this!'

He stopped, pulled an apple from his pocket, tossed it into the air, and tried to spear it on the skewer. But the apple flew too high, and as he chased it in the night sky, he tumbled to the ground, skewer and all.

'For this kid to make it to adulthood,' Maksym muttered to himself as he helped Junior up, 'we'll have to lock him up somewhere…'

Meanwhile, inside, Yana was giving instructions on how to bite the *kalyta*. Slava found a broomstick, Lyuba shook some ash off the stove and handed over the poker. The *kalyta* was tied to the broomstick with a red ribbon. Yana had instructions written down by old lady Todosia and knew this tradition from books, but Lyuba had practical experience with *kalyta* biting, so she took charge.

'Get on the horse!' she told Edik, handing him the poker. 'And you, you'll be Mr. Kalytiansky!' she said to Slava. 'Your job is not to laugh, or else you lose right away and get covered in soot.'

'Go outside and ride in on your horse,' Yana laughed.

With his eyebrows furrowed, Edik rode into the living room on the poker.

Slava climbed up onto the couch with his feet:

'Good evening, Mr. Kotsiubynsky!' Slava said, 'Where are you headed? Your documents and military ID, please.'

'A bit too realistic, my legs are going numb,' Edik said.

'I'm going to knock out your teeth now,' Mr. Kalytiansky followed his job description.

It was easy for Kotsiubynsky not to laugh.

'Go ahead, bite!'

Edik jumped towards the *kalyta*, but Slava quickly lifted it all the way up to the ceiling. Without losing his serious expression, Edik leaped onto the couch

and shoved Slava off. Slava ran, and just as he was about to reach the terrace, Edik finally caught up with the *kalyta* and bit into a fat little bird that had grown into it.

Then Maksym passed through Slava's checkpoint. Even the girls tried to bite the *kalyta*, though traditionally they weren't supposed to, but Yana, being a researcher of traditions, allowed it, saying they had to evolve to fit new culture and emancipation. Maksym enjoyed watching Yana jump up to the broomstick while he lay on the floor, looking at how her sweater lifted during the jumps, revealing her ribs. 'Here I am, almost half a century alive, and the same things still fascinate me,' he thought. Slava refused to play the role of Kotsiubynsky, fully embodying Mr. Kalytiansky. When both *kalytas* had been bitten, and now Junior, already covered in soot, was running outside with the broomstick on the terrace, everyone scattered into the corners of the room. Edik sat on the floor, leaning against the couch in a thinker's pose, and said:

'I believe the war will end by summer. Especially if Germany'—he looked pointedly at Karla—'gives us Taurus missiles. But Russia is running out of steam. We'll be in Crimea soon…'

'Who's "we"?' Slava asked.

'Well, "you",' Edik smiled. 'By the way, Slava, I'm working on a documentary project. Wanted to talk to you. How many missiles do you think Russia has left?'

‘How the hell should I know, Edik,’ Slava said.

‘Well, roughly?’

‘Where would I even get that information?’

‘But when do you think we’ll be in Crimea? We’re cutting off their logistics. Then we’ll take out their air defences.’

‘Edik, maybe you guys will, but from the woods, I can’t see Crimea. I’m not thinking about missiles and logistics. I’m digging.’

‘Look, I don’t want to take away your agency.’

‘What don’t you want to take from me?’ Slava asked, finishing his sausage and grabbing the beer bottle between his pinky and ring finger.

‘Well, I don’t want to speak for you. I want to give a voice to the military in the book. What are your conversations like?’

‘The conversations are about how digging frozen ground is tough, and clay soil is crap too… Sand’s okay.’

‘And any bigger-picture stuff? One American general said Crimea is a trap.’

‘Who the hell knows,’ Slava replied tiredly. ‘I’m not digging my way to Crimea…’

‘Our grandma,’ Maksym interrupted, ‘was a frugal woman. She didn’t want to pay for someone to plough the garden. She’d say, “Why should I pay when I have two big lazy grandsons? Let them dig it themselves!” See, Slava,’ Maksym turned to his brother, ‘grandma made a strong investment in your future career.’

‘And Kolya Karbid invested in your career. Now you have the unique vision of a one-eyed artist. Your paintings make me feel seasick,’ Slava said, pointing a

grilled sausage at one of the paintings on the wall. It depicted a street in a winter fog, with bare trees barely visible through it.

'Then don't look,' said Maksym.

'I'm just glancing,' Slava replied.

'We're practically in Europe already,' Edik continued, 'can you believe it? To be accepted into the European family, half our country had to be ravaged.'

'Who's accepted us anywhere?' Slava said.

'I'm telling you, that's what analysts say.'

'Let them say what they want. Europe's sitting there, waiting to see if we can pull ourselves out. Look at Germany,' Slava gestured toward Karla, 'Germany sent us helmets. What a great help…'

'What does that have to do with me?' Karla finally snapped. 'I have a son, by the way! And he doesn't want to send a helmet—he wants to send his head!'

'I was speaking figuratively,' Slava said. 'Don't get upset.'

'Why don't you talk to David instead?'

'I will. I'll tell him how things really are.'

'He's seen footage from Kherson, where they're carrying everyone in their arms, and now…' Karla trailed off.

'He's worried there won't be enough war left for him,' Slava smiled. 'Don't worry, there will be. Even Maksym will go, because there won't be any two-eyed people left. As for David, he doesn't need to fight for Ukraine. He's got a German passport, right? He might have to fight for Germany someday.'

‘Where’s Junior?’ Maksym pointed to an empty chair in the corner.

Maryna rushed to the terrace, shouting, ‘Sla-a-a-va!’

From somewhere near the riverbank, there was the sound of rustling.

‘I’m he-e-e-re!’

‘What are you doing out there?’

‘Getting ice!’

‘Oh my God,’ Maryna whispered and headed back inside to throw something on before going out to search for the ice collector.

‘Yana,’ Maksym said, ‘let’s go, we need to fetch some ice for the cocktail.’

Yana was chatting with Lyuba on the couch, and Maksym caught part of Lyuba’s conversation: ‘…so, wherever the bark comes from, that’s where your future husband will be…’

‘Yana,’ Maksym repeated, ‘let’s go before the kid makes himself an ice hole.’

Maryna had already run out onto the terrace. Maksym caught up to her and said, ‘Go back inside. I can hear him, I’ll bring him in. Just make sure Edik doesn’t fill Slava’s head with nonsense. I’ll head straight to the river, and Yana will circle around by the stream.’

Just outside the garden gates, a stream flowed towards the river. When Maksym was little, he and Vadik, who lived in the house where Yana now resided, used to build miniature models of the Dnipro Hydroelectric Station on this stream, generating electricity.

They constructed bridges, supports, and reservoirs, simulating the flooding of nearby villages. In June that year, a tributary of the Dnipro came right up to their doorstep, and Maksym dreamed of catching a carp from the window of his bedroom—maybe even a pike or a grass carp. His father encouraged him, telling him over the phone and on weekends how, when he was young, there were floods every year, and he and his grandfather would catch carp among the apple trees with their bare hands. 'And over there, under the plum tree, I caught a pike!' he would say, watching the mischievous spark light up in his son's eyes. Maksym wandered through the flooded orchard, looking for pike and carp among the apple and plum trees, but all he found were frogs. At night, he dreamed of schools of grass carp rubbing their shiny sides against the tree trunks, and mirror carp that glowed when you held them in your hands.

'He's lying to you,' his grandfather said. 'Don't stand in the water barefoot, or you'll catch a cold and get bone tuberculosis.'

'Like Lesya Ukrainka,' his grandmother added. 'If I catch you in the water again, I'll give you a good thrashing!'

Maksym knew his grandmother couldn't catch up to him, let alone whip him or send him back to his mother, so he kept wading knee-deep in the water, hoping for a lucky catch.

'Or a nutria might swim up and bite your toes off,' his grandmother played the fear card. 'Have you seen its teeth?'

Even the nutria didn't scare Maksym. Now, these trees were covered in snow, and the stream behaved calmly, staying within its banks. Moreover, it was completely frozen over by the frost.

'Careful here,' Maksym said to Yana, 'you could fall through somewhere. The frosts haven't been strong, and the current here always erodes the ground. You'll be my eyes.'

They walked along the stream towards the river, where clanging and dull thudding could be heard.

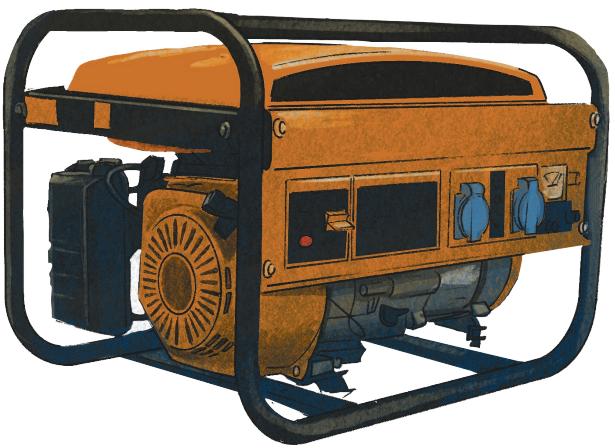
Emerging from the reeds, they saw Junior standing on the ice, hammering at something with a headlamp on.

'Slava,' Maksym called out, 'come here.'

'I'm chopping ice!' the child's voice yelled back.

Maksym leaned towards Yana. 'Turn on your phone's flashlight.' Yana turned it on and handed the phone to Maksym. He held it up and said, 'Come towards the light, Junior!'

'Uncle Maksym, let me finish chopping!'



‘Come here, I’ll show you real spring water ice! You’re chopping standing water, you blockhead! Come to the light!’

The thudding stopped, and the light from Junior’s headlamp began moving closer until he finally emerged from the darkness, armed with an axe.

Yana grabbed him by the sleeve just in case. ‘Let’s go home,’ she said.

Junior jerked away. ‘But Uncle said something about spring water ice!’

‘Let’s go, let’s go,’ Maksym said. ‘You can chop some ice for mojitos, right, Yana?’

‘It’s a bit cold and dark for mojitos,’ she replied.

‘We only live once. Maybe we won’t make it to summer, and we’ll regret in nuclear ashes that we waited for mojitos…’

Maksym stopped and gently nudged Junior onto the path ahead of him by the collar. ‘I’m not comfortable with you walking behind me with an axe,’ he said. ‘Chop here.’

They stopped in front of the stream, where, in one spot, it cascaded down as a frozen waterfall.

Junior swung the axe at the waterfall, and with a loud clatter, it shattered.

‘Where should we put the ice?’ Maksym asked.

‘In the hat!’ Junior confidently replied.

‘Yanochka,’ Maksym said, ‘give me your white hands and let them endure a little cold.’

Yana extended her palms, and Maksym poured a handful of sharp ice chips into them.

‘Uncle Maksym, do you want to go to war?’ Junior asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘Do you feel sad that you don’t have an eye? Would you like to be completely blind? Blind people have very sharp senses, so we could go hunting for hares together…’

‘That sounds appealing,’ Maksym responded. Yana quickly walked ahead towards the dim light from the living room windows, while the conversation between Junior and Uncle continued behind her.

‘Would you prefer to have your right eye blind instead of your left? You could be a sniper. They only need one eye, did you ask the enlistment office?’

‘I would like that,’ Maksym said. ‘I’ll check with the enlistment officer. You’re right. They still cover one eye anyway. Thank you.’

‘No problem,’ Junior snorted. ‘Maybe you’ll agree to something. And is David already at war?’

‘Not yet,’ Maksym said.

‘How old is he?’

‘He’ll be eighteen in the summer.’

‘I am so jealous of him!’ Junior sighed. ‘I still have eight years and two months to wait.’

Right in front of the house, Junior jumped aside and, running past Maksym and Yana, dashed into the house.

‘Oh my God!’ Lyuba exclaimed. ‘At least take the axe away from him!’

Yana, with her hands numb from the cold, tossed the ice into the kitchen sink. She felt someone stand-

ing behind her. It was Karla. She bent over the sink next to Yana and whispered, 'Tell him to influence David. He is his only son.'

Yana turned around.

'Who am I to tell him that? I'm just a neighbour.'

'You have influence over him. I can tell; I've known him for many years. Please, say something.'

'I didn't even know he had a son.'

'Just do everything you can, and you'll save a life.'

Yana spread her arms, shaking off the remaining ice and water.

'Please. I know him,' Karla stepped back and, already at the kitchen door, said: 'He'll ask you to paint him.'

From the living room came the sound of clinking glasses. Edik was proposing a toast. Karla left, leaving behind a bitter citrus aroma.

'Let everyone,' Edik said with a glass in his hand, 'come back alive. And to you, my dear old friend, my beloved friend, I wish inspiration and strength to rebuild all the bridges after the victory, all the schools and hospitals, all the houses. You have an endless amount of work ahead! May your hands never tire! Stay healthy, my dear friend!'

Edik, already a bit tipsy, approached Maksym and kissed him resoundingly on both cheeks. Then Maksym's father appeared at the door.

'I can't sleep,' he said, spreading his hands.

'Dad,' Maksym said, 'have a sip of wine with us.'

His father's wavy grey hair was illuminated by the orange lamp in the corner. He stood on unsteady legs in high socks and house slippers. Over his clothes, he wore a warm red flannel bathrobe.

'Liza,' he said to Maksym's mother, 'this man is calling me "dad" for some reason.'

'Liza,' she rolled her eyes.

'I'm your son,' Maksym said. 'We live together. Drink to my health.'

'You're my son?' The father stood bewildered, then laughed. 'Well, if you say so,' he couldn't stop laughing and shook all over. 'Pour me some!'

His father, with ironic disbelief, drank the wine, sat in a chair, and kept glancing at Maksym with affection and laughter. The wine brought the expected touch of drowsiness, his eyelids grew heavy, his hands weakened, his legs straightened, and he fell asleep in the chair, as only old people can, when the world gradually dissolves around them. When Lyuba's warm hands touched his shoulder and he opened his eyes, there was no one around except the dark cats sleeping on the sofa. The room was dimly lit by a lamp in the corner. Roman Yukhymovych looked around—the room seemed both unfamiliar and familiar at once, as if he were a little boy and his mother was about to put him to bed. Only the painting on the wall opposite depicted an old grey-haired man who vaguely reminded him of someone—someone who had once appeared in his dreams and grabbed him by the legs. Yukhymovych wanted not to look at him and he stirred to get up. Lyuba's hands supported him, and he slowly shuffled towards the bedroom.

Meanwhile, Yana stood by the hole in the fence, turning on her phone's flashlight to step over the crossboard. Her muscle memory wasn't working as well as Maksym's, and she really didn't want to end up buried in snow at the end of the party. Before looking down, she tilted her head up and saw the bright winter stars. They hung over the street, river, and stream like a solid, dense sheet. They were close and low like never before. It was so quiet that every movement was deafening.

'Yana,' came from the terrace.

Maksym was standing there.

'Yana,' he repeated.

'Good night,' Yana said.

'Woof,' he replied.

Translated by Dmytro Kyyan and Kate Tsurkan