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Auswärtiges Amt



The Knock on the Door

Ihor Bilyts

Translated from the Ukrainian by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

Constant anthropogenic noise.

Oksana. There was a knock on my door. At night. Everyone was asleep, and I was asleep. I had had a tough workout just before that. I was tired. In general, I get tired quickly. It was not easy to make me go in for sports, but I finally started to take care of my own health. Because nothing is more important than health. Everyone always said that at all my family's birthdays. When I'm tired, I'm angry. *(Pause)* Why are you knocking on my door in the middle of the night? That scares me. I was asleep, but now my heart's beating louder because of that knock. I was very scared. My heart is going to break right now. My thoughts begin racing in all different directions. Who is it? Later, I found out. Everyone found out who knocked on my door. At first, I thought I was dreaming. This kind of thing can't happen. Who would want to break into my apartment? Stop that. Stop! You're scaring me. It's not right to knock on someone else's door like this, and enter my apartment. This is my apartment, my refrigerator, and my ficus plant. Enough, I said. Enough.

Taras. I can't sleep at night at all. I've tried various sleeping pills and herbal teas. I tried everything in Google's Top Ten. But on this night I fell asleep. That was very unusual for me. I had a strange dream I will tell you about later. If I have time. You know, I don't like long conversations. If I am left alone with a stranger, or even someone I know, I will suffer through awkward and hateful pauses. I don't know what to talk about. I can't even talk about the weather, because it's so silly. Then someone immediately started knocking. A knock, you say? They were kicking my door down! With horrible banging sounds. I won't tolerate this. I hate it when people behave rudely. For example, people waiting in lines, or sitting in minibuses. You know all those Soviet jokes. But this was just incredible impudence. They knock my door down, and don't even take their shoes off when they barge in.

Lesia. I considered Dostoevsky to be my writer. He seemed like he wrote using my

own thoughts. Basically, I thought I saw the world as Dostoevsky saw it. Everyone has their favorite writer. Lesia Ukrainka, for example. Too much pathos. Taras Shevchenko - no one will believe you. Dostoevsky you can brag about. I thought, "Yeah..." (*Pause*) Then there was that knock on my door. They banged like thunder. I immediately called my mother. No, she dialed me, and I answered immediately. Because the phone was already in my hand. I was going to call my mother. But she called first, and that was good. Because for a moment I thought, if my mother is asleep, and I wake her up, she will be frightened. And she has a weak heart, weak legs, weak nerves. She is weak. Mom said, "*There, it's begun.*" "*Nothing has begun,*" I tell her although I'm shaking myself. But maybe it had begun? What are you talking about? Go back to bed. But I can't lie down myself, because people are already traipsing around my room. People? Who are you? Name yourselves!

Vasil. I won't say I didn't expect it. I was going around very depressed. I'd go out for a beer, a movie, or a date, but I was always depressed. What was wrong? Enjoy life, what else do you need? But I felt cramps in my gut, a long imperceptible pain that continued for a very long time. I can't say for how long. I should have put up a fight, but I just drank my coffee and kept hurrying on. I wanted to scream, so I listened to music on headphones. I can't even describe the pain. Now everyone feels it. No one believes me, but I could sense them coming up the stairs. I heard their footsteps at the door, the air swirling as their hands moved to knock on my door. When they knocked a second time, it was the first time I had ever thought the end had come. It's all over. Life is over. It will never be the same as before. Indeed, it won't be... but it's not the end. I'll say this. With every passing moment I thought it couldn't get any worse. But it did. When they wandered around the apartment, when they touched all my, our, me... Then it got worse and worse. Everything has its ups and downs. There is nothing I can't survive. Or so I thought. I thought that for a very long time. (*Pause.*) Who could they be that, even when I said, "*Don't! Enough! Stop,*" they didn't seem to hear. Although I knew they heard me. For some reason I thought I was understood. Now there is no way of knowing.

Oksana. I retreated to the corner of my apartment. MINE!!! I ran there, thinking about

myself. I saw nothing. I just ran. I feared for my safety, afraid it would be the end of me if I stayed. And now... I really regretted that I didn't remain where I had been standing, even though it might have been a bad option. But now, here in the corner of MY OWN apartment, I wanted to go back. Because... Who gave you the right? I asked, *"Who gave you the right to come in here, going back and forth destroying everything?!"* Meanwhile, they destroyed everything. Then another thousand, maybe million, questions tore at my head, then imperceptibly descended down into my chest, and pressed on me so hard that I shed tears as long as I stood there in that corner. Enough! I can't go on. Is this the end?

Lesia. Mom, where are you now? Yes, I'm fine. I'm lying, because I fear for her. Nothing will happen to me. But I think I won't be able to go on. What's wrong with me? Something will happen that I can't withstand. Stop it! They don't hear me. I wanted to understand why they were here, why are they doing this? What is it you want? But they just destroy. Enough! I spoke about myself because I was afraid of attracting attention. I was afraid they would look at me, and I froze. I didn't move or look at anything. Sometimes I thought about my mother, and worried. Sometimes I thought about myself, and I was afraid. What is this for? Why is all this happening to me? Why did I love Dostoevsky? Here he is. This is what he leads to. As for me, I've had it.

Vasil. I tried to hit one of them and I was knocked down immediately. They were bigger, and there were more of them. Many more than I. So I lay there. Stretched out on the floor. Only my heart was in motion. It beat like a frightened rat in my chest. I wanted to scream. Not from fear, but from anger. But my mouth was clamped shut. I could not open it. Their presence pressed on my throat. I could not even force them out of me by inducing vomiting reflexes. Where will I find the strength to expel all of this out of me? I can't do it. I don't want to. Enough, already. But my mouth and throat are blocked. I can't breathe...

Taras. How much time has passed? No one helps me. I screamed. They pay no attention to me. They don't say what they want from me, but I'm ready to give anything for things to be as they were. Hey, give me back my past! What is this? What are you doing?

Give me back everything that was! Stop! I don't want this. I'm afraid. I'm so afraid. What will happen to me if this is how things will be now? It's not fair. Okay, let me out. Please let me out. I did nothing to you. I'm surrounded, and I can't get out. I want out. There's the door. Let me go. I did nothing to you. I'll do anything. Just don't press on me like that. There is not enough space for all of us. Perhaps I don't exist already. I don't want this.

Lesia. I remember very clearly how they began getting under my skin. Why is everything erased from my memory, and this too... I don't remember my mother's words, or where my father is buried. Through the main gate to the left, then straight, or left again? Have things run amuck, am I wishing someone luck? Is there anything I can do, so as not to feel their fingers separating my skin from my body? I remember every second of it. How unusual it is to be lacking skin. I would rather not pay attention to this. But they fill me up with their dirty hands. Why are they so slow? Why can't they do it all at once? Hit me, only don't touch me with your dirty hands. I didn't know I could stand this for so long. What should I do? Then I look into the eyes of one who has penetrated deep beneath my skin. He was almost invisible. But I found his eyes. He stopped. And my skin, my body, froze, and hardened, and grew coarse. He clearly didn't expect that. Because he himself began to pull his fingers out. Maybe he was afraid he would be stuck there. Then he understood his position, and began ripping my skin from the bone with even greater force. And all the rest, all those beside me, and all those who were beneath my skin, they all began ripping at me and penetrating me utterly and totally. I even liked that, because I understood for a moment that this was the end. Both for me and for them. I no longer worried about myself and my skin. I knew they would be incinerated here. And I, too, began to burn. But most importantly, they began burning inside me. Some ran away. Some pushed others in panic, preventing them from coming out from underneath my skin. I managed not to laugh. I was afraid I would lose my concentration, and that this fire that now burned wildly would be extinguished.

Taras. I nearly dissolved into them. I became part of them. I moved with them. They didn't mind, they considered me theirs. I knew from the beginning, however, that I was not of them. It cost me great efforts to hide that. I even destroyed things too. Yes, I also

destroyed everything in my apartment. Whatever had been mine now lost its meaning for me. I became meaning itself. I pretended to hate everything as much as they did. These chairs, this lamp, this table. Especially my gadgets. While one of them devoured my iPhone and iPad, the others drooled. Their saliva flowed into pools, filling the room ankle high. Some of them gnawed at my new wallpaper, purchased for \$30 per meter, or even my brand new toilet. My socks quickly unravelled. I lay in wait, expecting something. Eat, eat your fill, treat yourself, here are some dishes, and there is a painting, no? Why not? You don't want paintings? Then I'll give you a boiler, and a smart air conditioner. Eat, eat. Due to my excess of anxiety, my fear became anger, and their saliva became poison. Poison, that biological weapon that they so loved to bandy about. It is good that I partially dissolved into them, and they did not sense the poison in my blood. Yes, you didn't see it either, but I bit through my own veins in order to spread the poison drop by drop on all my things. Everyone contains enough poison to destroy. Don't be shy. Eat. And now die.

Vasil. Although I was torn to pieces, I felt more whole than ever. It's a good thing they tore me apart so badly. Now I was in touch with each of them. I got in their way with my fingers. My teeth smiled in the corridor. I listened to their secrets with my ears. Over and over again I tripped them up with fragments of my feet. Oh, how much imperceptible joy there was in this. Now I can avenge them with as much vengeance as I can muster. They didn't understand. They thought I wasn't there if I wasn't whole. Fatal mistake, fatal mistake. At that moment when the whole me was sufficient, every atom of the cells in my body was ripped apart by a nuclear explosion, scattering their particles like fertilizer. They will never be so "great" again.

Oksana. I saw what was happening, and I couldn't believe it. It's so easy to destroy everything you've done, built, and dreamed of. I've been building this my entire life, up to that very moment when you destroyed it. Do you think that will be forgiven? I endured for a very long time. Unfortunately, I didn't have room enough to get a good running start. They rubbed their greasy bodies against each other, up against my broken walls, all along my shattered floor. When I felt I could bear it no more, I realized I had been standing in the

corner far too long. I cursed and hated myself for many, many long seconds as I stood powerless in that corner. Yes, someone might say I didn't have room to get a good running start. But I realized I had enough. I unleashed myself on the enemy, slicing through them with my own being, first cutting one up and then another, and finally an entire legion. I cut through them like jelly. Their guts, and more, trailed after me. Pleasant warm blood washed over my uneasy face. Pieces of meat fell off of them with every sharp movement I made. What a joy. You must try it.

Lesia. When everyone left, I stayed with my mother. She couldn't move without help. At first, when the air raid siren would sound, we would go very slowly down to the basement. But there was less and less medication, and soon my mother couldn't walk at all. For a while, I begged the volunteers to bring me some medicine. During the shelling, I would go wherever I could looking for medicine. Every day I took money, my passport, water, underwear and socks, and I went out asking and looking for medicine. And when it would show up somewhere, I would go get it. What else could I do? What would you do if your mother was prone on her back and dying? The Russian soldiers made fun of me. They searched me, and I thought I would never get out of there again. But their commander forbade them to touch me. He even took me home so that no one would touch me anymore. When we got home, he raped me, without ever taking off his machine gun. He began coming to see me every day. He brought food, various things, diapers, which they confiscated from our volunteers. Then he says, *"I like you. Come with me. I'll pick you up at home tomorrow."* *"I can't,"* I said. *"I have my mother."* And he shot her before I could scream.

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