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I Want to Stop

By Natalia Blok

Translated by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

Today a summer rain falls outside someone else's window, from someone else's sky.

Tomorrow I will change my home for the twelfth time in a hundred days since I left my apartment in Kyiv after 24 February 2022.

Location 1. A Basement.

Natalka

I spent my first night in a basement that was not intended to be a bomb shelter. It was very cold and there was no toilet. It had an earthen floor. People sat in a narrow corridor listening to the explosions. I played on a glucophone. I wanted to sleep, eat and leave it all behind. My dog, Athena, pestered everyone there, and climbed up in their arms. She was freezing. She was looking for warmth and a home, and I was too. Time passed. I tried to doze off sitting on a chair. I couldn't do it because of the loud explosions. They were very frightening. In the morning, people who had spent the night in the subway came to the basement. I had once heard that the subway could be a big bomb shelter, but it never occurred to me that this knowledge would be useful.

The people who spent the night in the subway said it was even colder there. That's understandable. It was the end of February out there. Some people left the basement, but quickly returned. They said the air raid siren was wailing, and at dawn there were even more sounds of explosions. I left the basement when it was already light outside. I went home with my boyfriend and Athena. She ate and finally went to sleep. I decided to lie down too. But I didn't undress because we might have had to run to the basement again. I crawled under the covers fully dressed, in my jeans and a sweater. Then the air raid siren wailed again.

Location 2. A Synagogue

Athena.

Natalka and Serhiy took me with them in the car. I was very happy. I love to ride in cars. A car always brings me to good places. For example, the sea. Or a big park. Or the forest. Or a river. I got in the car and was prepared for an adventure.

We drove for a long time, but there were no adventures. I slept awhile, looked out the window, and tried to climb into Natalka's arms. I scratched the door with my paw, asking to go outside. Lunch time came and went. Then it grew dark. I could only hear the sounds of thousands of other cars. I started to feel sick. I wanted to drink and eat. And go for a walk. For some reason, we kept driving, without stopping. Sometimes it smelled like a forest, and sometimes something terrible, like the smell near our house now. I did not understand why it all took so long. Why don't we go to the sea somewhere, or why don't they don't let me run, or relieve myself? And why don't we stop? Natalka smelled of nerves with fear and anger. She did not sleep for two nights running nor did she eat anything or drink any water. Finally we stopped somewhere. Natalka got out and began talking to two strangers in strange clothes. I had never seen anything like this before. They finally let me out to pee, and I peed near a beautiful house. I like to pee in interesting places. Then finally – finally! – we entered a warm room where everything smelled like the clothes of those men. They gave me something to eat. I scrambled up on the bed with my legs, and Natalka hugged me and told someone on the phone that this rabbi from Zhytomyr was very nice because he took in a dog, even though the laws of kashruth forbid it – after all there was a war going on. If it weren't for this rabbi who

thought we were Jews from Kyiv, we would have spent the night in the car. I think rabbis are good people. They may look strange, but they smell good. I fell asleep on the bed.

Location 3. Ternopil.

Natalka

We left Zhytomyr early in the morning. My friend from Israel had given me the telephone number of the synagogue where we spent the last night. It turned out to be something of a secret phone, which was why they let the dog and me spend the night. Of course, at first they thought we were Jews, but no. I have only one percent Jewish blood. And that's according to the DNA test I did in America. We drove all day, then stood in traffic for another night. In the morning we were in Ternopil. Another friend of mine from Kyiv had negotiated for me to live there for a few days, get some sleep and somehow come to my senses. His friend's elderly father had died three weeks ago, and the apartment was still empty.

Finally. Finally, I was able to wash up. Eat. And then, with Athena and my boyfriend Serhiy, lie down on real sheets. The lady of the house kept asking what we needed. Neighbors came by to drink tea. But I just wanted to sleep. Air raid sirens blasted from time to time there in Ternopil, and checkpoints were erected on the streets. All the bandages, iodine, aspirin, paracetamol and everything else that can be bought without a prescription and put in first-aid kits sold out in the pharmacies. There was almost no gasoline. And it was already very expensive at the one place that had it. But at least there was some to be had. Because there was none between Kyiv and Ternopil. I had two months worth of my medication with me, and Athena's lymphoma medication for about that time as well. None of them was available in pharmacies any more. The air raid sirens were wailing, but bombs were not yet falling. We had to go on further. I waited in the apartment for my friend Anya, who also needed to be taken out of my Ukraine, which Russia had begun to destroy. Then Serhiy informed me he was going to stay and fight.

Location 4. Poland. A Pansion.

Athena

I had not yet become accustomed to our new house, where it smelled of medicine and old things, and there were many rooms, when Natalka began packing things again. I was happy because I thought we were returning home, and I would play with my toys, and sleep in my chair. I quickly got in the car, Anya and Natalka too. For some reason Serhiy did not want to. We left. But it was much worse than before because we lived in the car all that day, then all night, then another day, and then it got dark again. We kept driving, then stopping some times, but we never arrived home. Finally the door opened and I smelled grass, other dogs, and even horses. Yes, I am already a full-grown dog, and I am familiar with horses, and I know how they smell. They let me pee, and then took me into a big wooden house. There were children there. I love children very much. These children hugged me. Gave me cookies. I was happy. This wasn't my home, but it was a good one. Kids, lots of cookies. I slept with Natalka on the bed. In the morning we went for a walk in the field, and I got to know the horses that I had smelled the previous night. But Natalka would not come near them. Because they pawed at the ground. I am an experienced dog. And Natalka was sad for some reason. She was not happy about anything. She constantly looked at her phone, hugged me almost too often, and let me play with the children and take delicious cookies from them. She let me sleep on the bed with her. I had no bowls there. But I learned to drink water even from a plastic cup. I liked running in the fields, and I met a new friend who lived here. He knew Polish and was not afraid of horses. He said he was a hunting dog. As for me, I am a pet companion dog. For those who need a friend. Natalka bought me so she would have a friend. Everything was good. I still missed home and Serhiy, but there were none of those scary sounds that Natalka and I were so afraid of,

plus there was a bed. Nevertheless, after a few days, Nataalka again decided she needed to move somewhere. To be honest, I didn't want to get in that car anymore. Although this time she brought me to a place of nature.

Location 5. A Warsaw Hostel.

Nataalka

After a day at the border, we were given shelter by Polish friends who had a tourist business near the border in the Polish Carpathian Mountains. Their house was full of refugees, and many more were still on their way. The owner of this mini hotel asked on the first day how long we would be here. After sleeping for a few nights, we decided we should go further. In Warsaw, I had a friend who ran a network of hostels, and was now providing free accommodation in them to Ukrainian refugees. Anya and I packed our backpacks again, took Athena and her food, put everything in the car and headed for Warsaw. We were there by late in the evening. It was here that I realized I was a refugee. We were given a separate room with a view of the city center. There were two narrow beds in the room. And that's all. We put our things on the floor and sat down on those beds. There was no bed linen. Because there were so many refugees, the hostel did not have time to wash it. I lay down on that bare bed as I was, and wept bitterly. I didn't like it there. I wanted to go home. I wanted my own bed. But there was no place for me to go in the middle of the night, in a foreign country in a foreign city. And the other women with children were in even worse conditions. Because they lived in two bunk beds, four or six to a room.

Athena

We are back in a city. It smells of cars here, but this is not my city. There was no chair for me to sleep on in the room we entered. There was no carpet on the floor for me to lie on. There was nothing. I walked around the room and started scratching at the door to be let out in order to find something more suitable for life. We could go to the car, there is a seat for me there! Nataalka got out of bed and left the room with me. It was very noisy. And I smelled fear and despair. And children. There were many children here, whom I adore. But for some reason their mothers did not let them play with me. Except for one. She did allow it, and began to talk to Nataalka. She even smiled. Her child took me by the leash and we went for a walk. There was a lot of everything here. Then I realized no one was holding my leash anymore and I headed toward the smell of cookies. Then everyone around started shouting something about a fighting dog and a muzzle. Nataalka shouted back that they were fighting dogs themselves. I hate muzzles. I know this word and this thing very well. When I wear a muzzle, I can hardly breathe. I can't smile. I cannot eat, drink, or take whatever I want.

People were shouting as I smelled sausage. It just lay there all alone on the table. Nataalka held me by the leash. That sausage smelled so good. I looked at it, and she watched me. I politely but loudly asked her for some sausage.

Bow, wow, wow. Please give it to me. I am so hungry! People shouted at Nataalka even more, and she let go of the leash. I grabbed that sausage from the table, and quickly swallowed it. So that no one could take it away. By then, Nataalka was dragging me into that room with no carpet or chair. But I was satisfied. Finally something good had happened in this long day.

Location 6. A Warsaw Apartment.

Nataalka.

After the hostel, and after all those scandals with my dog, Anya and I finally had some personal space. A three-room apartment, where the landlady, old Barbara, had died a month ago, was made available to us for a whole month by a kind Polish family. Dasha and Liuda were also there with us.

We were all refugees and we were happy to have a place to sleep. Our landlords constantly asked us what our plans were for life, whether we were looking for a job, and where we would move to after this apartment. I don't know where. I had not planned to leave Kyiv for a long time to come. Now I had to come up with a plan where I could be while Russia is killing us on our country's own territory. This was why I, and all the girls, were always so nervous and worried. Every day we shared our plans about where we might go. Anya said she would go anywhere she could find a job. I was looking for an artistic residency. I'd been invited to Dresden. And to Portugal. I read up about these countries. Dresden had already written that they could not take the dog. Every day Anya found a new job in a new country. But then she didn't want to go there anymore. We all wanted to go home, and we didn't like all those other countries. It is one thing to go as a tourist, but another thing entirely to live there. France is dirty. Macron appears to fear Russia. Germany won't give us weapons, and is full of disgusting Russians who celebrate Victory Day like crazy every year. Poland is bursting with Ukrainians. Polish artists want to help me. One, a defector from Moscow, declared in Russian that he was a Pole, and said I could live three hundred kilometers from Warsaw in his country home. He was offended that I refused to sit somewhere in a village with a Muscovite. Then I got a call for a job in Krakow. But... I didn't want to be there alone. I was afraid. Women's rights and some medicines are still bad in this country, and abortions are prohibited. I didn't want to stay there. I did agree to stage a reading of one of my plays at the Warsaw Drama Theater at the beginning of April. I won't go to Portugal either. It is too far away. Finland is still an option. But it's cold there. My first husband is in Prague, so that doesn't work. I've been to Sweden, I'd freeze there too. And Italy and Spain don't suit me because I don't know any theater people there that I could cooperate with. In short, I want to go home. Amsterdam is not my kind of place. Austria is too old and cute. I have not been to the Netherlands, and I have no desire to go there. Canada is a long way from home. In my opinion America is not my style either. Britain takes Ukrainians into their homes like pets, but something does not attract me at all in those cold islands. I still fear the colonial thinking there, like they have in Russia. Poles constantly ask what my plans are. Shit, what should I do? Where can I go? Ukraine is being bombed.

Location 7. Basel, Switzerland. Anna's House.

Athena.

Natalka took just one backpack, me and my girlfriend Yulia, whom I adore, and we got on the train. We rode for a day, and part of a night, then arrived at a large apartment where Anna lived. Oh joy, the children! Because before that, I had had my own chair, but there were no children. The children were very happy to see me. They dressed up in their clothes, fed us chips and hugged us. The little one even learned a little Ukrainian. She shouted "Athena" so loud, oof! Then she hugged me. And then they took me to the theater. No, it goes without saying that I'm a bohemian dog, and I've been to theaters before. But here they put me on stage. I sat there, and the audience looked at me. Natalka said something, and then they all started clapping. It reminded me of the explosions back home. I was very scared and tried to drag Natalka down to the basement. Because when there are explosions, you have to look for a basement. Natalka would not go to the basement. And then the rumbling sound was over.

At home, I slept in bed with Natalka, played with the children, and walked by the river. They bought me new food, because the food Natalka brought from home had ran out. Moreover, we went to some institute, where Natalka began to cry. She cried for a long time on the stairs, and then she cried on the street. I felt sorry for her. She probably wants to go home, too, and misses her toys. I know that my ball is now under the table where she likes to sit. She has so many of those toys, and she left almost all of them behind. Or maybe she is hungry? I always get worried when I'm hungry. There are good dogs here. And they talk to me in German. Some in Italian. I met a dog near the woods who spoke French.

Natalka.

We came to Basel to take part in a theater event about Ukraine. Readings, and a panel discussion. There was another at the Institute of Slavic Studies, where a good Russian came on Zoom and, while we talked about death and rape and the loss of loved ones and our homes, she said with a sad look that her performance had been canceled. I laughed nervously. Athena and I live with Anna. There are five rooms, three children, Anna, and the woods next to the house. I like it here. But we'll have to leave here too. First, Anna is worried that her children might be allergic to Athena. Second, Athena's cancer medicine ran out in Warsaw, and, third, I promised to do a reading there. I look at these beautiful children, and I think how lucky they are to live in a country where there was no war.

Location 8. Warsaw Again.

Athena.

I must have become famous. Every day they take me to the theater where I go on stage. I even learned to enter in the right places with the actors during rehearsals. Nataalka smiles more often. We go to the theater by bus. I even learned to sit politely on the seat and look out the window. True, a woman once shouted the word *kaganets* at me, which means *muzzle* in Polish. Nataalka was in a good mood. She turned to the window too, and hugged me as tears streamed down her face. The woman was silent. Why does Nataalka cry so often now? Well, what could I do? I got off the seat, lay down on the floor and rolled over... Nataalka always smiles when I roll on the floor or in the grass. So I rolled around the bus. Some people smiled. But the woman who was screaming started screaming even more. Nataalka got up and we got off the bus. She didn't cry anymore.

Nataalka.

I returned to Warsaw, which now resembles Kyiv even more. Ukrainian refugees with children everywhere. They are desperate, and I am too. The girls in the apartment have decided where they are going. Anna will go to Spain. She found a job there until September. What will happen next? We hope the war will end. Yulia will take a residency in Dresden. Liuda will go to a friend in Holland. And Dasha found a new home in the Netherlands. No one stayed in Poland. Me either. We all left Warsaw the day after my reading at the theater. I bought nothing new. I left in Warsaw my car, my winter boots, and the hope that everything will end soon.

Location 9.

Basel, Switzerland. Carmen's Apartment.

Athena

We moved again, now to Carmen's place. She has no children at home. But there is a chair for me. Maybe now I am no longer a domestic dog, but a nomadic dog of some kind? Can a dog be a migrant? A migrant, nomadic dog. Nataalka took everything out of her backpack again. If I were her, I wouldn't ever unpack that backpack. Unless she needs to get my food. What is the point of constantly packing and unpacking it?

For some reason I always want to sleep here at Carmen's. I sleep on the carpet. For some reason I don't have the strength to climb up onto the chair. But it is also very nice on the carpet. Nataalka sits down next to me. Carmen bought me a ball. But for some reason I can't be as happy as I was before. I miss the one that was under the table back home in Nataalka's room.

Nataalka.

Carmen is a wonderful woman. She wanted to take in a Ukrainian refugee. And Anna recommended me. I live with Athena on the second floor of her apartment. She signed a contract to keep me here until October. I went to the humanitarian center and got a spring raincoat and a few other things. I was surprised that there was no need to pay. I took the coat, tried it on, and then wanted to go to the

checkout. But there was no cash register. Then an actress of the theater in Basel saw the coat and told everyone in the theater that her daughter had donated this coat to charity.

The lymphoma drugs did not help Athena. Too much stress probably. They had always helped before, but these months of continuous travel, stress, and worries took their toll on the dog. She sleeps all the time. She does not want to eat or walk. And these were my last pills for her lymphoma. They don't even sell them in Switzerland. So this is where Athena will die. I push her around in a carriage because she can't walk.

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Natalka Blok. 06.06. 2022 Munich

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