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Survivor's Syndrome

Translated from the Ukrainian by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

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The End

Every one of us was killed
already that morning.

We are no longer
what we were then.

We died.

On February 24
of the year 2022
a neighboring country killed
us all.

The old world went up in
flames and smoke, splintered
and disintegrated.

Hundreds, thousands,
millions of our worlds
disappeared, destroyed
forever, irreversibly.

That week I had decided to
go on a date. Winter was
coming to an end, but it was
still gray and cold. I wanted
finally to change something.

We made the date for the day
after tomorrow, February 24,
the year of 2022. We were to
meet in the center of town, sit
at a cafe, walk the streets.

That day, the day after
tomorrow, never came.

Something else entirely
came about and ruined that
day. You think you want to go
for a walk?! There was no
city in which to meet and
have a coffee, there were no
more streets. Something else
entirely happened. Other
lives of other people now.

We'll have to become
acquainted again, set a new
date, meet at another time.
Everything will have to be

reassembled, piece by piece.
And the pieces themselves
will be completely new. But
when will that be?

Who will I be?

Who will we be? Where will
we be? What will our purpose
be?

The apocalypse has come.
Everything that was
is no longer.

What remained were
vestiges, shadows.

We used to watch TV series,
drink beer and cognac, we
stayed out late at coffee
houses, visited friends,
bought paperback books,
hugged, talked about art,
played cards, laughed,
danced to music on our
phones. We went to the
movies, drinking beer and
eating nuts.

This all disappeared one gray
cold morning, swept into the
dark abyss by the sound of
an air siren. This is how
worlds disappear. Like a day
that ended and never came
again. Like a flower that
clamped its petals shut under
a gust of wind and never
opened again. Like a laptop
suddenly disconnected from
an outlet. Like a sun that set
in the west but never rose
again in the east. Like a man
stabbed in the heart from
behind. This is how worlds
disappear - like a light bulb
going out, like water draining
from a bath, like eyes being
shut on a dead man's corpse.
Our world was no better than
a light bulb. Just as fragile
and finite. That's how it
turned out. Our world was

imperfect. It was alive.
It was killed.
The Apocalypse now
has come.
There is no fear.
He whom we feared
is now long gone.
Traces, remnants, shadows -
we have retreated to another
side, an Atlantis beneath the
surface of the sea - we still
see it, but the image grows
weaker.
Our life now is a graveyard of
all the plans, desires and
aspirations that we had
before February 24, in the
year of 2022.
We now live in a world in
which our world no longer
exists. How can that be? It
just is. That happens too.
Forests through which we
used to wander are mined,
and devastated by tanks.
Bridges we used to take to
visit relatives are destroyed,
our relatives are dead or
gone crazy. Friends are held
captive in captured cities, or
have left for where they never
had any intention of going.
Theaters are bombed to dust.
Theater actors guard
checkpoints with machine
guns in hand.
What kind of world is this?
This is a world of war. And
what is war?
It is something that cannot
be. Ever. But it is. How can
that be? It cannot be. We live
in a world that cannot be.
What could not happen has
happened. The unspeakable
has happened, the unreal
has happened.

Are we alive at all,
we who survived?

Who am I now?
How did I survive those first
days? I remember little, those
days are already buried
under some big,
impenetrable pillow. All we
did was wave our arms as if
they were wings, so as not to
fall into the abyss that our
lives had become.
It turned out we had wings —
those of us whom we now
have become.

I still don't understand -
where are we? We are in
different places at the same
time, like ghosts. Like foggy
clouds, we fly wherever our
thoughts lead us - to where
our friends, family and loved
ones now sit in basements,
shuddering from rocket
attacks, or just frozen in fear
for someone's life.
We now hover over all of
Ukraine like ghosts. Our
bodies obediently remain
where we left them. We are
only half of our bodies, or a
third. We are carried here
and there by the invisible
winds of war

Our bodies are like children.
We command them to be
polite and obey their elders.
Sit still, hold this backpack
with documents, carry us
onward, until our thoughts
and souls carry us to those
who are dying beneath the
bombs.

Where are we? Our places

and spaces have been replaced, spread out, confused. Train stations function, but they are no longer train stations. Cafes function, but they're not cafes. People sit and drink, but that is no longer drinking. A drunken friend called me recently. He was sitting with another friend. His friend had a bottle, they both got drunk. My friend got very drunk, sat there drunk and happy, listening to music on his phone, remembering funny stories, and then he went home and suddenly woke up. He remembered everything. Dark, empty streets surrounded him on all sides, and his windows were taped shut.

A territorial defense patrol stood under the bridge. My friend called me. What should I do, he asked, I was drunk, I had fun and suddenly I woke up. There's a war going on. It's very scary. There is a patrol under the bridge. Why did I get drunk? What's so fun about getting together with music and funny stories if there's a war going on? Don't worry about it, I said. Just hang up and go home quick. Curfew starts in five minutes. You'll be stopped by a patrol.

And you're drunk. Damn, he said. Curfew! And I was so happy half an hour ago when I was drunk! Go home quick, I said. And don't drink anymore. I won't, I won't, fuck, I won't, he said and hung up.

Those who have no tomorrow should not drink vodka. It's pointless. After all, your hangover will come today, it won't be postponed 'til morning. We have no tomorrow. There is only one, big, swollen today. Heavy, gray, swollen clouds spread over the entire horizon, in all directions, filling all the cracks.

No matter how much you drink, you'll still come back to this today. Nothing lies behind the gray clouds. The road to the future is gone. It must be found again, just as we look for... What? For nothing. Finding your future is finding your future, nothing more.

Who knows how to look for it? We must learn this from zero, from scratch, from the emptiness of the day's eternal gloom.

Just as we learned to fly over the abyss by the power of wings we previously did not have.

Hanging over the abyss bifurcates or even trifurcates you.

I went for a walk. It was around mid-March, a bright, high, dazzling blue sky, the warmth of the sun falling on shrunken faces, caressing them like a mother's hand. A light breeze blows, children's laughter wafts in from somewhere. And your body responds, it responds to this spring around you. Your gait relaxes, a faint smile appears on your lips. But it's just your body, you yourself don't

