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# Panickers like you

Oksana Maslova

*Translated by Oksana Maslova and John Farndon*

## A Monodrama

### Voice: Female

When we left the store, Hitka handed me some money. She had already bought us snacks, and now she was holding out the change. Not much, just 500 crowns. And I couldn't take it. It seemed to me that as long as I did not take her money, I was not homeless. But even though I try to deny it, the facts are as follows. I am 38 years old, I have been involved in art almost all my life: curator, playwright, writer, journalist – and I am homeless.

This story began in 2014, and my crazy journey began on 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2022. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 23, I was choosing a new sweater, a painting for the exhibition poster, a gift, and going on a date.

Then at five o'clock in the morning on the 24th, I was woken by an explosion. My heart jumped out of my chest. I hurriedly grabbed my suitcase and began to throw everything in I could see. Another explosion. I rushed to my daughter. She was sleeping sweetly, and I hesitated – should I wake her or let her sleep on?

I don't have a car, so I couldn't go anywhere. So I left her in peace. I wrapped my little one tightly in a blanket. like a cocoon, a soft cocoon that drowns out all sounds. I curled up next to her and covered her ears with my hands. She smiled sweetly in her sleep and hugged me. Another explosion. The apartment where we were lying had large panoramic windows, and I could hear the explosions through them. But I only had a blanket to protect my child. I realized what I must do next.

I called all my friends with cars and tried to persuade someone to pick us up and go.

- Oksana, don't panic. It's a distraction. Russia won't attack all Ukraine. Only Donetsk and Luhansk.
- Take it easy, girl! Not in our region. It just won't happen.

Finally, one person agreed to pick us up.

During the day, there were more frequent explosions, and message pages were sprinkled with photos of 'smoke' mushrooms. My little girl was scared. I told her to collect her own bag of toys. She chose two fluffy ones and a car with a steering wheel. 6 hours later, it became clear that our friend would not pick us up.

"Turn on Rada TV, it will calm panickers like you," he said and hung up. By some miracle, I managed to buy a train ticket to Lviv.

We walked to the station, with two backpacks and a wheely suitcase. People walked by with their dogs, smoked and drank lattes. All the time, my mother was calling, saying: "What are you doing? Come back! There will be no war."

We boarded the train with a one-way ticket. In a few days, Ukrainian Railways will run free trains from all regions of Ukraine to the West, and by 4<sup>th</sup> March, they will transport a million people fleeing the war. But not everyone will be able to get on a train.

Our train was 5 hours late.

"Weird times," said the conductor quietly, hiding her eyes which were wide with fear.

I called ahead to my friend in Lviv. He is the father of a big family. And a good friend. He waited for us in the car at the Lviv train station. Together with friends, we went to the nearest crossing point - Krakovec. Mutual help chats were spreading on telegram, and Polish people wrote that they were taking Ukrainians from the border and sheltering them for the night.

- I am already across. I can take three people in the car.
- Gray beard, the numbers are as follows: I'll turn on my headlights – come up
- I will take you to Warsaw.
- I will take you to Krakow.
- Warm tea in a thermos. Women and children only.

So we drove with the feeling that the worst was behind us.

How wrong we were.

We got to within 6-7 km from the crossing. Other cars with license plates from Kyiv, Dnipro, Kharkiv and other cities tried to squeeze into the queue.

We crawled the next 3-4 km. It took 30 hours. Six of us in one car, with a minimum supply of food and water, for 32 hours.

It became icy cold at night. The children slept on top of me, while I looked out the window. The third day now with almost no sleep. Families with babies in their arms were walking past in the freezing night. I looked at them and thanked the universe that my child was warm and sleeping that night.

In the morning, we learned that there was neither food nor water at the nearest petrol station.

- What do you want, everything has been taken.
- It's not only you.
- Female toilets, where? No! It's impossible. Get lost.

The frost was so hard that the road was covered with ice, and for the first time I regretted that it was already spring in my native southern city, and I had not thought to put on anything but sneakers and a light sports jacket. Both for myself and for my daughter. But it was only three kilometers to the border. So we walked, passing abandoned cars and bottles with yellow liquid, and saw thousands of people waiting. Children were lying on the ground.

- Mummy, I want a drink? Please – I'm hungry too.
- Girl, where are you going?! Everyone has children here!
- Look, it's the end of the line.
- No, I don't know where the end is, ask somewhere else.

We returned to the car and drove back to Lviv then tried to get on the train to Przemyśl, but it turned out to be impossible. So we fell asleep to the howl of sirens. My daughter cried all the time and asked to go home. But in the morning we were lucky enough to get on a train to Uzhgorod.

It was hard to find anywhere to sit - many foreigners pushed forward, brutally pushing women and children out of the way. I managed to put my child into a space, then got in myself. I just breathed out – but then I saw a small child, three years old, overwhelmed by a crowd. I started calling:

- Child! Careful! Child!

Every one froze for a few seconds. We pulled the infant out and sat her next to us. She sat still as a doll, just blinking. Soon, though, her mother made her way to us - as I found out later, a professor of literature.

There were eight of us in a single compartment, with people sat on the floor and in the vestibule. The children began to play, while the Carpathians rose picturesquely outside the windows.

- Mum, mum! Look at the mountains!
- Mum, lambs! How funny they are!
- Mummy, mummy look at the mill! Like in my book.
- Mum, look, there is snow. Mum!

There were volunteers waiting at the station. A woman in a red jacket picked up our suitcases and took them to the Owl's Nest. This is a coordination centre for refugees. The citizens of Uzhgorod very quickly organized themselves and provided food, water, and a place to stay overnight. We spent the night on the floor, on mattresses, four of us in a room

'under repair'. They invited us to the restaurant for breakfast and served hot, delicious food 24 hours a day.

- Do you like borscht or bograch?

I ate a portion of bograch in 3 minutes! Only then could I relax.

I learned about an evacuation train to the Czech Republic, from Chop to Prague. So, after breakfast, we set off for Chop. We stood in the station building for 7 hours waiting - holding our place the queue, along with many others. When the train arrived, people ran towards it, and my child got pinned between a suitcase and an armed border guard. She did not cry, just whimpered quietly. Someone shouted at us, someone pushed us. There were only women and children, from two months old to 15 years old. And everyone tried to get on the train.

- Child! Where is your mum?

Some person in a police uniform grabbed a baby from the crowd and, as if on wings, plucked it to safety behind the backs of the border guards

.

Mala poked me. I think now I know how to move the sea. A sea of people.

And there we were getting on the train. For a long time, though, I couldn't get through the door. Then I realized: backpacks and a suitcase were in the way. By some miracle, I manoeuvred my own backpacks and suitcase through.

The train carriage is like from another world. Clean, pleasantly smelling, spacious. And refreshments! Several bottles of water, bread, pate, mashed potatoes for the kids.

The kids began to eat at once. From time to time officials looked into the compartment and asked if anyone needed help, and brought more food: goodies, juices, mashed potatoes. Then the kids were given toys. They all seemed to have thawed out - they started running around the carriage and playing, getting to know each other, little groups dashing from compartment to compartment.

- What's yours, eh? A little dragon?

- No, it's a dinosaur!

- Why does he have wings?

- Because it's a flying dinosaur!

The staff on the train were very friendly – they compensated for their ignorance of Ukrainian with sincere smiles, and all of them tried to treat the little ones with candy from their own pockets.

At some point, I caught myself discussing trends in modern poetry with Oksana.

- You understand, Oksana, rhyme is not the main thing in poetry. And this proves it to us...

We learned that the train would not arrive in Prague, but would stop in Ostrava. It was about three in the morning.

Strong policemen, who looked like supermen, carefully carried sleeping children and suitcases, and put us all on a comfortable bus and promised to take us to a safe place. We drove through the dark city. I admired the lights and wide streets. We are definitely safe now, I thought. And fell asleep.

I woke up and saw that we were approaching the flag of Ukraine. Predatory rings of barbed wire snaked along a high fence. A barrier went up and down. A masked man entered the bus and told us in Ukrainian in a low voice to hand over our passports so we could stay there the night.

- Please place passports in the folder for my colleague. If the child does not have a passport, attach a birth certificate.

By four o'clock in the morning, we are behind the fence, and the children are sleeping. This is a refugee camp.

As we go in, they hand out packages - dry food (bun, bread, pate) and a hygiene kit (toilet paper, toothpaste, toothbrush, shower gel). There are narrow corridors – with doors both sides covered in handwriting and handprints. In each room, there are narrow metal bunk beds. There is some basic bedding. On the windows, nothing. My little one started crying.

- Mummy, take us away from here, take us away!  
- Mummy, Mummy!

But almost for the first time in this whole crazy trip, I couldn't do anything at all. To all questions, the staff waved their hands and said – don't understand Ukrainian. My English came in handy, though. I managed to get some information from a Polish woman who was here and helped us settle. Passports were promised in the morning.

By the 8<sup>th</sup>, our passports had still not been returned. Many women began to panic. There were rumours that we would be sent to a more closed camp.

- We are refugees.

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