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Maryna Smilianets

Borscht. Great-Grandmas' Recipes For Survival

Based on interviews with people who survived the Russian occupation near Kyiv in March-April 2022. The villages and towns of Ivankiv, Klavdievo, Babyntsi.

Translated by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

RECIPE ONE. KYIV BORSCH

Liuba – 60

Oleg – her son, 40

A cottage in a village. Liuba prepares borscht. A car is heard approaching. Liuba sets the table, hums a song, sometimes forgetting, then remembering the words. Oleg enters the house, he is frightened. oshelomlenny

OLEG: Ma, are you ready?

LIUBA: Ready, ready... I made the borscht, the sour cream is fresh. Sit down!

OLEG: But I asked you to get your things together.

DEAR: Go wash your hands, and sit down.

OLEG: Do you understand what is happening? This is war, Ma.

LIUBA: War, war... So you won't even eat your mother's borscht now?

OLEG: Where is your bag? Your documents?! Ma, pull yourself together!

LIUBA: Don't shout at me. Just look at him. Who did I make this for? White mushrooms, dried from last autumn. Just like you like it.

OLEG: Okay. I'll eat, and you go. Ma, get ready. Quick.

Oleg washes his hands, sits at table. Eats borscht. Liuba admires her son eating.

LIUBA: Have some sour cream. Garlic... bread.

OLEG: I won't eat until you start packing.

LIUBA: Okay, okay, I'm going.

Liuba finds a bag and throws everything she can find into it, a blanket, a sweater... It is clear she is only pretending to go somewhere. From time to time, she watches Oleg eat.

LIUBA: Tell me, is it good?

OLEG: Ma!

LIUBA: I haven't been home for so long. If it wasn't for all of this, maybe I wouldn't have come.

OLEG: Your passport, your pension... Wear sneakers for comfort!

LIUBA: You've been a worrywart your whole life...

OLEG: Ma!

LIUBA: Where are Oksana and Zlata?

OLEG: At home. Waiting for us. Getting ready... Nobody knows how long it will take...

LIUBA: Where are they going, son?

OLEG: Poland for now, then we'll see.

Liuba stops pretending she is going, and sits down opposite Oleg.

LIUBA: And you? They won't let you go.

OLEG: If they don't let me out, I'll stay in the West of the country. Oksana is frightened, she wants to leave.

LIUBA: Have your Oksana take a sedative. She wants...

OLEG: Don't start.

LIUBA: I think we should all stick together.

OLEG: Can we talk about it in the car?

LIUBA: It would be better if you came here to be with me. I can put Zlata to bed here, and you and Oksana can take the summer kitchen. It will be warm if you put a heater in there.

OLEG: Ma, don't you understand at all what is happening?

LIUBA: What is this hysteria? If they start shooting things, we'll hide in the cellar. You can even put down a sofa in there.

OLEG (*ironically*): How about a TV?

LIUBA: It's dangerous in Kyiv. You'll never get out from under the rubble if a rocket strikes a high-rise building. But what is there to worry about here?

OLEG: Ma, I told you – we moved to Bucha six months ago.

LIUBA: Well, I might have remembered if you had invited me to visit at least once.

OLEG: We just finished the renovations.

LIUBA: So you put all that money into your house, and now you're going to run away to a foreign country?

OLEG: Ma, pack! Please!

LIUBA: Oleg, my son: I'm not going.

OLEG: At least once in your life, do what I say. At least once in your life!

LIUBA: I won't go.

OLEG: Ma... There is no time.

LIUBA: My cat is about to give birth. And who do I leave the chicken to?

OLEG: Give it to the neighbors. The cat and the chicken.

LIUBA: Who needs that cat?

OLEG: Take it and she can give birth in the car!

LIUBA: I said – I'm not going.

OLEG: Their tanks will be here any minute. You hear the rumbling? They're almost here!

LIUBA: What will happen to me? What would anyone want with me?

OLEG: I need you, Ma.

LIUBA: I read that they are only going to fire on military facilities. Demi... Demili... something like that...

OLEG: Demilitarization, denazification and other nonsense from the head of a completely sick old man. What news are you reading, Ma?

LIUBA: I read everything that is written on the Internet. You gave me that tablet yourself. I'm subscribed to everything. And Svitlana sends me all kinds of stuff from Voronezh. Just so you know, they don't tell everything on TV either.

OLEG: Who is this Svitlana from Voronezh?

LIUBA: Aunt Galia's mother-in-law. We met her daughter Tamara at a wedding. You don't remember?

OLEG: I don't even remember Aunt Galia.

LIUBA: Here, I'll show you a picture.

Liuba looks for photos of Aunt Galia in her tablet. Oleg can't stand it, takes the tablet away from her. Notices the news feed.

OLEG: Ma, why are you reading Russian news?

LIUBA: You need to know all sides.

OLEG: What sides? Not a word of truth, not a word. Worse than Soviet propaganda.

LIUBA: Oh, so how long did you live in the Soviet Union to remember what the propaganda was like?

OLEG: Enough to know.

LIUBA: Now he's going to tell me about the Soviet Union. A child. But people were well-read then!

OLEG: Ma, I don't understand. What do you mean? Do you want to go back there? If you want, I'll

take you to the border with Belarus.

LIUBA: Okay, take me.

OLEG: Oh, yeah, we could have walked there on foot ages ago... A hundred kilometers...

Oleg begins to collect Liuba's things himself.

OLEG: Where's your passport!?

LIUBA: Svitlana writes she was in Minsk a year ago. Everything is so neat and green there, the streets are clean.

OLEG: Of course, it's clean. Who cares about them? All the young people were sent to prison.

LIUBA (*continues as if not hearing*): And the sausage is good. Not like ours, nothing but chemicals.

OLEG: Oh, so I don't bring you good sausage?

LIUBA: You do. But you hardly ever visit. And what about Zlata? She could have come at least once in the summer.

OLEG: Okay, ask her why she doesn't come.

LIUBA: You know me, when I decide something, that's how it's going to be. I'm not going anywhere. This is my home. This is my parents' house. I'm the wrong age to go wandering around.

OLEG: What are you blathering about? You hear me? I'll bring you home immediately when the situation normalizes!

Oleg puts his mother's tablet in his bag, accidentally turning on music. Soviet pop music plays.

OLEG: That's all we needed.

LIUBA: What's wrong with it? It's my youth.

Shots and explosions are heard. Liuba and Oleg jump behind the couch.

OLEG: We need to hide between two load-bearing walls.

LIUBA: Where do I find those? Maybe we should run to the cellar?

OLEG: Stay put.

The explosions subside.

Oleg approaches the window and looks. Hides again.

OLEG: Tanks...

LIUBA: Whose?

OLEG: I can't tell.

LIUBA: Look at them all... My God.

OLEG: The letter Z.

LIUBA: Why did they write on there? It looks like something fascist.

OLEG: You'd know best. I don't read Russian news.

LIUBA: What did they come here for?

OLEG: To occupy us, ma.

Later...

Liuba prays in the corner. Oleg sits on sofa, looks at an old black and white portrait of a young man in a Soviet military uniform hanging on the wall.

OLEG: So, where did you come up with the idea of making borscht with mushrooms?

LIUBA: My great-grandmother used to do that.

OLEG: Oksana says she doesn't know how to make borscht with mushrooms. When I want that, I make it myself.

LIUBA: Does your Oksana know anything at all?

OLEG: They say they make borscht in the Poltava region only from chicken or goose broth.

LIUBA: Well, maybe they do.

OLEG: I've used champignons, it's not the same at all.

LIUBA: Well, you should come here to me. I'll give you normal mushrooms. But you just work and work. You never see life.

OLEG: I don't. What's it all for?

LIUBA: Don't be afraid. They won't reach Bucha. Nothing will happen to your renovations.

OLEG: Ma, quiet. I can't reach Oksana.

LIUBA: Always looking for reasons to panic. Everything will be fine. They will sit down at a table and talk it all over.

OLEG: Why didn't we go right away? Why didn't we go?

LIUBA: I already went once. In 1986. They said we would be back in three days. We never went. And they wouldn't let us take anything with us.

OLEG: Well, yes. You are the kind of person that would stay in Chernobyl if someone let you.

LIUBA: Maybe I would. No matter what you say, Pripyat was a beautiful city. The parks, cafes, the cinema. Young families all around. They visited each other. Yes, I was still young. It was

interesting. I remember I had this white pantsuit, and your father and I would go out. We'd walk in the park and everyone would look at me. He was so jealous it was scary. Things were good. I was even surprised things could be so good. There was nothing like it in the Soviet Union. And as soon as I thought how lucky we were, about a month later... disaster... catastrophe.

OLEG: All due to human negligence. I was sick for ages after that. Dad died young. What is all this nostalgia for?

LIUBA: I waited a long time. I believed someday we would go back. Can a person understand immediately when grief comes? I left my pantsuit there forever.

OLEG: Why are you saying all this, mom?

LIUBA: Because, son, one who has run once will never run again.

OLEG: I'm going out in the yard. I need some fresh air.

LIUBA: Don't go, Oleg. They're shooting!

OLEG: If you just sit there, you'll go crazy. Let them shoot already.

Oleg goes out.

LIUBA: Lord Almighty, protect us from our seen and unseen enemies. And forgive us... I forget... I forgot everything. Lord...

Later...

Oleg returns - his hands are covered in blood. Liuba runs to him.

LIUBA: What happened, son!?

OLEG: They fired at a car. Around the corner.

LIUBA: Oh, my God...Yours?!

OLEG: One filled with people, Ma!

LIUBA: Oh, my God. Alive?

OLEG (*shakes his head – no*): A man, a woman and two boys. Their dog ran away.

LIUBA: Oh, God...

Oleg approaches the sink, looks at his shaking hands. He speaks with utterly no emotion.

OLEG: Ma, wash my hands. I can't do it myself.

Liuba washes Oleg's hands.

Later...

LIUBA: What family was it? From the neighborhood?

OLEG: I don't know. Maybe from a neighboring village.

LIUBA: Where are they? Still in the car?

OLEG: Just lying there...

LIUBA: Maybe we should bury them, humanely... They won't bury them.

OLEG: They won't bury them, and they won't let us bury them.

LIUBA: How can that be, son?

OLEG: That's how it is, Ma. That's how it is...

Oleg sits on the sofa, looks at the portrait again.

OLEG: Ma, do you know when I was really happy? I was happy yesterday, and didn't know it. If someone had told me, I would not have believed it. But now I know. I was. I see everything differently now.

LIUBA: Who knew, son? They said there would be no war. That they're just trying to intimidate us. If I had known, I would have withdrawn my deposit. Because now all our money will disappear from our saving accounts again, like it did before...

Oleg continues looking at old photo of man in military uniform.

OLEG: Today I saw the portrait of grandfather Andriy in a different way. You know, he always seemed so mysterious to me. I remember trying to ask him about the war several times. I wondered if he had killed anyone. And if he had, how many? How did he do it, where? I wanted to hear about his brave deeds. Something heroic. Everyone said he was a hero. But he said nothing. Ever. He was silent.

LIUBA: Oh, he didn't like to talk about the war. He never even went to parades. And they used to invite him to Moscow.

OLEG: So, Moscow finally came to you with its parade.

LIUBA: Sorry. It's just habit makes me talk of Moscow.

OLEG: Do you remember how I took his medals to play with and lost them in the forest? You really let me have it. I was really afraid to tell him. And when I did confess, he wasn't angry at all. He just winked, like that, and said, "Well, fuck 'em." That really surprised me then. I thought

it must be because he loved me so much, and was sorry for me. Then today I looked at his photo in a completely different way. And I understood. That's really what he thought: "fuck 'em. Fuck all the wars in the world." (*Picks up a shovel.*) Warm up the borscht, Mom. It's going to be a restless night tonight.

RECIPE TWO. VEGETARIAN BORSCH

Iliia Leonidovych – 30

Lera – 17

A barn. Iliia makes a homemade bomb. He hears someone open the shed door. He is frightened and he covers all his materials with an old rag. Hides. Lera enters the shed, looks around for something. She finds an old stool and puts it in the middle of the barn. Takes a rope from her backpack, stands on the stool, and tries to tie it. Iliia warily comes out of his hiding place.

ILIIA: Lera?

Lera, frightened, jumps off the stool, and tries to run away. Iliia stops her.

ILIIA: It's me, it's me... Shhh.

LERA: Iliia Leonidovych, why are you here?

ILIIA: Shhh, I said... What are you doing?

LERA: None of your business.

Lera tries to hide the rope.

ILIIA: Fool. Have you thought about your grandmother?

LERA: I don't want to think about anyone. I'm tired!

ILIIA: It won't last forever, you know? Our men are almost...

LERA: I don't care where we are! We were abandoned, they just flat abandoned us all!

ILIIA: A little longer. We just have to wait.

LERA. Well, you wait and pray in a corner! I want to die! I want everything to end.

ILIIA: Lera, I also felt hopeless for the first few days.

LERA. It's not hopelessness, it's shit! This planet is done for! And you can go fuck yourself. Burn all your history books. They always teach you that war is terrible, that it's evil, but that didn't fucking help anyone. This world is full of shit and the people in it are moral freaks!

ILIIA: Please, keep your voice down...

LERA: We aren't at school. If I knew everything would end like this, I would never have gone at all.
Fucking school!

ILIIA: There are good things about it, too.

LERA: I don't know.

ILIIA: I saw your class rehearse its graduation concert.

LERA: Oh... Everybody's been waiting for that damn graduation. I even bought a dress. Really pretty. I went to Kyiv on the 20th, there were discounts at a shopping center. I was really looking forward to going. But what now? They'll probably bury me in it.

ILIIA: What color is it?

LERA: Emerald.

ILIIA: Nice color.

LERA: Yeah, I generally have good taste. You wanna see some photos?

ILIIA: Yeah, show me. So your phone still works?

LERA: Liokha gave me a charger.

ILIIA: What Liokha?

LERA: Who else? This one here... The commander...

ILIIA: Their commander?

LERA: It's a long story.

Shows a photo on the phone.

ILIIA: Nice...

LERA: I know. Would you dance with me if I asked you?

ILIIA: Well, why would you ask me? You have classmates, you can dance with them.

LERA: And you, you're very proper, aren't you?

ILIIA: I am what I am...

LERA: So the dress isn't so pretty?

ILIIA: It's the best dress I've seen in the seven years I've worked at the school.

LERA: I argued with the girls that I would ask you to dance and you would agree.

ILIIA: Wait until graduation and we'll find out.

LERA: The school was bombed.

ILIIA: Have you seen it yourself?

LERA: Grandma saw when she went by it. I try not to go there. And don't you go. They lock men in the cellar. Then they take them into the forest and that's the end of that. Although you're such

a wimp you might not be noticed.

ILIIA: Well, thank you.

LERA: You're welcome.

ILIIA: Yes, so what about the school?

LERA: A rocket hit where the gym is. There will definitely be no discotheque.

ILIIA: We'll have dancing on the street.

LERA: At first there were Buryats living there. They spent the night in the offices. Then they left after crapping on all the desks.

ILIIA: What?

LERA: Yeah... just for fun. All the windows were broken in our classroom. They raised money for them for five years, and in one moment they were all smashed out.

ILIIA: We'll repair everything. As long as people don't die.

LERA: Oh, they are dying. I saw one family trying to leave by car. Somehow they were let out of their own village, but they were shot up in ours. So there was this car on the road full of corpses. One night one of our people took the bodies out, and buried them somewhere in a garden. And you say – if only everyone survives. They won't. They will kill me and you. And your dog and my grandmother. I want it not to hurt, and I don't want them to mock me. But they will. They are already. I can't take it anymore. I can't stand it anymore! I don't want to! I can't!

ILIIA: Did they do something? Did something happen to you?

LERA: What did you think?!

ILIIA: Did they grope you!?

LERA: Yes, damn it! Yes! They groped me!

ILIIA: Lera... I'm so sorry.

LERA: Fuck your pity.

ILIIA: Listen, do you need to see a doctor!? To have a look.

LERA: There's no doctor here. They took her to another village to help one of their people. She still hasn't come back. It doesn't hurt that much. I was lucky. It was one of their people... Liokha. They were drinking and staring at me. I locked myself in the room, and he broke down the door. There were two others him. But he didn't let them come in after him. He said for now I would only be with him. He said he'd take me to Siberia after their victory. He showed me photos. I'm lying there in my bloody underwear, everything hurts, and he's showing me pictures of Siberia. All these lakes. My tears are flowing, and he says, "You should have said you'd never been with anyone. Why in the hell didn't you say?" As if that would have changed anything. Then those other two went for Lisa, who lives one house down.

ILIIA: Did you see her afterwards?

LERA: No... I didn't go out. It's better now not to go out at all. Last night, one of their assholes just started shooting all over the place. He was just spinning around and shooting. Our fence is full of holes now. And two days ago, they were running around with machine guns playing war games with each other. These guys were pretending to shoot each other. They stole all the alcohol in the store. They're always stark-raving drunk. I say to Liokha, "What are you after here?" He says, "We come in peace, take it easy." I say, then why the fuck did you kill so many normal people? Maybe half of them spoke Russian. Shouldn't that mean something to you?

ILIIA: What'd he say?

LERA: What could he say? The asshole said nothing. I ask, did you find your fascists?! He laughed. The bastard knew there were no fascists here, and never were. He knew. I can't bear to see those faces anymore, I can't live with them here.

ILIIA: It won't be forever.

LERA: Yes it will. What happened to me is forever. I won't be able to forget it, and I don't want to live with it. I'm not talking about the fact that no one will liberate us. So, are we going to have to take our exams in Russian? You they'll just shoot. Who needs a Ukrainian history teacher? Or you'll be forced to say that Lenin invented Ukraine. Can you do that!?

ILIIA: No.

LERA: See. I won't be able to either.

ILIIA: What do you say we go see Iryna Petrovna?

LERA: I'm outta here. The school psychologist was the last person I would go to even before this utter hell. Now even more so.

ILIIA: She's not a bad person.

LERA: Too proper. I don't want to share anything with people like that. You haven't even asked anything yet, but you already see they don't understand. Please. Can't you just leave me here?

ILIIA: Actually, I'm hiding here. This is my hiding place.

LERA: Then I'll find another shed.

ILIIA: Do that.

LERA. What an asshole you are. And you pretend to be nice. Why?

ILIIA: Well, probably because I'm such an asshole.

LERA: Well, probably. (*Picks up her rope and goes to the exit.*)

ILIIA: Lera! You know what? I have some whiskey. That you and your class gave me for New Year's.

LERA: I knew you'd have it for a hundred years.

ILIIA: Well, it's time finally has come. I opened it today.

LERA: And?

ILIIA: I just thought, can I pour you a drink for courage?

LERA: Huh... If only someone heard Iliia Leonidovych himself trying to get me drunk.

ILIIA: Life is full of surprises.

LERA: Well, I've kind of had enough.

ILIIA: I'm just asking.

LERA: Did I refuse? Pour what you have.

ILIIA (*pours*): What are we drinking to?

LERA: May I be silent on that?

They drink.

ILIIA: Are you kidding? Why did they shit on the desks? I don't understand.

LERA: What did you tell us in fifth grade about people? Homo sapiens? Rational man? And here these people come onto someone else's land killing and robbing? How rational is that? What's so "sapiens" about that?! Who preceded them?

ILIIA: Homo erectus. Upright man.

LERA: Did this upright man know anything besides walking upright?

ILIIA: He could kindle a fire and sharpen stones.

LERA: What the hell? They've been grilling kebabs in our yard for a week now. Freaks. Lighting a fire is the only thing that connects them to the word "man."

Lera takes the bottle of whiskey and drinks more. Iliia stops her. Takes the bottle away.

ILIIA: Hey... enough!

LERA: Don't be a wimp. It was my idea to give it to you.

ILIIA: We need to save some for later. (*Hides the bottle.*)

LERA: I'm hungry.

ILIIA: Well, that's good.

LERA: You have anything?

ILIIA: I have some borscht.

LERA: Borscht? Here?

ILIIA: In a thermos. Want some?

Iliia takes out a thermos.

LERA: Borscht with whiskey? Only you could come up with something like this.

ILIIA: It's vegetarian.

LERA: Vegetarian. That's even better.

ILIIA: What are you laughing at? It's very good.

LERA: All right, give me your borscht. I'll try it.

Iliia takes thermos from a hiding place. Lera opens it and drinks.

LERA: Our thermos was taken by those homo erectuses. Then they took our bedspreads and knives.

They wanted to take our phones, but I wouldn't give mine up. You know how long I saved up for that? So this Liokha said I could keep mine. At first I thought, why is he so kind to me? Then I realized...

ILIIA: You can't go back there. You can stay here. I'll bring you food. I'll tell your grandmother you're doing fine.

LERA: Thank you, but I have other plans. By the way, this is delicious. You can't even say there's nothing in it.

ILIIA: You add bell pepper and beans to vegetarian borscht. And let it simmer for a day.

LERA: Thank you. But whatever I may need, I definitely won't need a recipe for borscht anymore.

A rustle is heard.

Quiet, someone is coming. (*Hides.*)

Iliia begins to hide his tools and ammunition even even more deeply. Lera looks around cautiously.

LERA: All's clear. It's Aunt Liuba's cat. Pregnant. Poor kittens. What a crazy time to be born.

Lera notices that Iliia is hiding a homemade bomb.

LERA: Are you a partisan?

ILIIA: No.

LERA: Then what's that for?

ILIIA: I help a little.

LERA: So. A partisan.

ILIIA: Lera, don't say that. Please.

LERA: I know where they hide their ammunition, and where the biggest equipment is. It would be good to blow that up.

ILIIA: Can you show me?

LERA: I seem to have other plans.

ILIIA: Are you afraid?

LERA: I'm not afraid of anything anymore.

ILIIA: Will you show me?

LERA: I'll show you! Do you think this thing of yours will actually blow something up?

ILIIA: It should work.

LERA: Where did you learn to do that?

ILIIA: I watched it on YouTube. You can find everything these days. I was planning ahead, but it was just something that interested me. I couldn't have imagined they would actually reach us.

LERA: You're doing this alone?

ILIIA: There is Oleg, too. He'll go with us.

LERA: Who is that?

ILIIA: Liuba's son. He came to evacuate her, and got stuck here. His family is in Bucha.

LERA: How is it there now?

ILIIA: He hasn't been able to call his wife for two weeks. One night we went out into the field where reception is a bit better. I barely got him out of there back home.

LERA: What do you think, are the Russians already in Kyiv?

ILIIA: No. Not Kyiv. I have a good radio. Good reception. I listen to the news once a day.

LERA: So, you don't think they've abandoned us?

ILIIA: No, they haven't.

LERA: I'm so angry now. I didn't know I could hate so much.

ILIIA: No one knew.

LERA: Can I make one last request?

ILIIA: To me? As if I'm going to hang you.

LERA: Please...

ILIIA: Okay.

LERA: Shall we dance? As if we're at the prom.

ILIIA: I wouldn't dance with you at the prom.

LERA: Because you don't like me, or because you're a teacher?

ILIIA: Why do you twist it around like that?

LERA: Tell me!

ILIIA: Because I'm a teacher.

LERA: So you like me?

ILIIA: I didn't say that.

LERA: Then tell me!

ILIIA: Lera, I don't get it. What do you want!?

LERA: What do I want!? A normal graduation, that's what I want! I want to get drunk, kiss, throw up in the toilet, go home and sing some stupid song, scream at the top of my lungs, cry, write stupid text messages... A normal graduation! Not all this stuff!

ILIIA (*solemnly*): Valeriia Ovdienko, graduate of the eleventh grade, receives this certificate of honor upon completion of the eleventh grade. Onward to a bright future! Valeriia, congratulations! Applause!

LERA: I still have a little charge left on my phone. Shall I turn on some music?

ILIIA: They'll hear it.

LERA: Fuck 'em. I'll keep it quiet.

ILIIA: Okay.

LERA: Shall we dance?

ILIIA: Yes, we shall...

They dance a slow dance.

LERA: What are you thinking about?

ILIIA: I don't know. Nothing.

LERA: Tell me, though.

ILIIA: Maybe this is the first time I haven't thought anything.

LERA: Then ask me. Ask me what I'm thinking about?

ILIIA: What are you thinking about, Lera?

LERA: About the fact that I like to dance.

RECIPE THREE. CHERNIHIV BORSCH

Nadiia Yukhimivna – 85 years old

Tiapa – her dog

Early March

Tiapa sleeps on a rug near the door. Nadiia Yukhimivna enters the house, goes to the table, and

takes a dead turkey from a bag. She slowly begins to skin it. Tiapa wakes up, and carefully watches the process. He sometimes tries to help, but the old woman chases him away.

NADIYA: I think it's a good thing my Stepan Yakovych didn't live to see this. He still remembered that other war. He often dreamed he was running from a prison camp, running and running. But he couldn't escape. How good he didn't live to see this. My poor Stepan Yakovych. What would he have said to them? I can't imagine. He didn't know how to hold his tongue. They would have shot him immediately. Now, don't you bark, Tiapa. I've begged you not to do that. How can you do this to me in my old age? To have to beg because of a dog. You should die, Tiapa.

Nadiya Yurkivna always addresses Tiapa. Tiapa always addresses the audience.

TIAPA: Stepan Yakovych called me Hercules. The old man was smart. He worked in the library, read books, and solved crossword puzzles. Nadiya Yurkivna, his wife, is simpler. But she's a strong woman. She'll chop the wood herself, and paint the roof, and slaughter the piglet. After Yakovych's death, she just started calling me Tiapa. At first I didn't respond. I would just growl. Then she splashed me with water. That's how I got used to Tiapa. So, let it be Tiapa, if that's what he wants. Before, my name had just been Doggie. Tiapa, whatever it is, is a name. Don't think badly of her. She loves me. When the war began, I became sure of this.

NADIYA: You're lucky today, Tiapa. We got a good turkey. I waited for three hours for it to die. Lucky, very lucky.

TIAPA: We were really lucky. There is a turkey farm not far from us. But there is not enough food for all the turkeys. They die of hunger. So the villagers stand by the farm and wait for a turkey to die. When one falls, they give it to the first in line. The people themselves aren't eating dead turkeys yet. This is just for us dogs.

NADIYA: While I was waiting for a turkey for you, the neighbors also brought me some meat. And they shared their milk. Good people in our village. I thought that if grief were to come, they would eat each other alive. But they turned out to be good. I walk around the village and everyone asks if I need anything. I say no. Now everyone needs something. It's good there are still turkeys.

TIAPA: So far, anyway.

NADIYA: My father told us we survived that other war because he would catch moles. They ate moles. So when the turkeys run out, you'll be catching moles. For both me and you

TIAPA: I'd rather not live.

NADIYA: I wish real spring would come sooner rather than later. So that everything would bloom. Maybe it will be easier. During the Holodomor, my mother said they ate dandelions, burdocks, snowdrops, nettles, linden, acacia, sorrel, flax, quinoa... Anything that could be chewed. They collected greens, mashed them and made cakes. Or they'd steal seeds from the groundhogs' burrows, and make something out of that. When there's a famine like that, you'll go to any lengths. But this one was planned for us by the "Leader of Nations." Stalin... What did we do to him? As my late Stepan Yakovych said, Ukrainians are the kind of people who will survive under any conditions. As long as they didn't destroy us. But how much can we bear? How much is possible?

TYPA: I don't want to eat acacia.

NADIYA: They say it is best not to accept the humanitarian aid. Those who do don't return.

TIAPA: I felt the strangers coming from afar. I felt them for several days. I don't know how to explain it. The earth hummed. I lost my appetite for the first time in my life. I couldn't sleep properly. I couldn't even drink water. I wanted Nadiya Yurkivna to understand that there were strangers nearby. Although, I think humans sense everything quite well. They just don't know how to trust their own feelings. Some of them sensed that they had to leave. Our neighbors, the Bazhan family, the ones with a car, invited Yurkivna to go with them. They had just one extra seat. She refused.

NADIYA: Now I have to think about what to feed you. I should have gone with the Bazhans. But I refused. You may not have heard it, but I told them – I have Tiapa. Who will I leave him with? The dog is big, and dirty, and he has no muzzle. So Sasha Bazhan says, "Let him out of the yard, he won't run away – someone will feed him." I say, "I can't, Sasha. The late Stepan Yakovych loved this dog so much, he would never have abandoned him." What could Sasha do? He shrugged his shoulders and drove off. There was no time for persuasion. And I still wouldn't go with him.

TIAPA: So she stayed here with me, under the occupation. I don't know if it was because of me or because she was just afraid to go anywhere. At her age, the fear of the unknown is greater than other fears. Where are we going? For how long? Here, at least, you see and you know everything.

NADIYA: Then here they came. God damn them. On their shitty tanks. They drove into the village and drove in circles everywhere until they drowned two tanks in the swamp. They have Soviet maps. But our roads are new. Maybe they didn't know there were roads in the villages. So they drove around in circles. They didn't ask anyone, and no one showed them the way to Kyiv. That's how our people are. They also took down the road signs.

TIAPA: Then the occupiers began going house to house, looking for men and weapons. I had just

been untied. Nadiia Yukhimivna often unties me to let me run in the yard. They came in and... What was I supposed to do? What did they come here for? Yukhimivna didn't invite them. I began growling to get them out of here.

NADIIA: I had never seen Tiapka so angry! The old man said it true that this dog would protect us if necessary. He went to grab one by the leg, but they pushed him away. Then one of them aimed his machine gun to shoot. And he would have fired...

TIAPA: But Yukhimivna covered me with her body and started crying. She asked them to have mercy on me, not to kill me. Then the one I tried to bite wanted to shoot her. But the commander decided not to waste bullets and they left. They didn't kill us. For some reason. But Jack, who lives on another street, and his landlord were shot immediately. They just went in his yard and shot him. Maybe he barked too loud, or maybe the owner didn't look at them the right way. I don't know.

NADIIA: You know, Tiapa, what if that rocket was intended to land on the other side of the house, but landed on this side. We wouldn't be here anymore. Maybe someday we will rebuild the summer kitchen. You see, I pray every day for good reason.

TIAPA: Nadiia Yukhimivna is a good woman. Thank God she remained alive. As if God saw to it that only the summer kitchen was bombed. Couldn't her God see to it that she didn't have experience war in her old age? Let her believe what she wants if it's easier for her that way. As for me, I have a lot of questions for your God.

NADIA: And I pray for you, Tiapa. See? You're still alive.

TIAPA: Do you know other people who pray for their dogs? I'll tell you...

NADIIA: Tiapa, what are they up to out there? Are they shooting things up? If you don't bark I won't know.

TIAPA: Bow-wow.

NADIIA: They're quieter now. Probably having dinner. Did you see the dry rations they had? I feed you better. You wonder who they're fighting for.

TIAPA: We agreed on this: one "bow" means "yes." "Bow-wow" means "no". And "bow-wow-wow" means I'm hungry. These days I try not to ask too often. It's rather awkward.

NADIIA: You tell me when they are going to shoot, and I at least can put a kerchief over your eyes. So you won't be frightened.

TIAPA: Yukhimivna always had bad hearing, but she's almost completely deaf these days. Maybe that's good. At least she sleeps peacefully.

NADIIA: Hey, Tiapa, we need to put out the candles so that they don't shoot at us again.

TIAPA: We lost electricity on the third day. We light candles in the evening, but not for long. You can't have light in the windows. Otherwise, somebody will shoot at you.

Tiapa extinguishes the candles.

End of March

Nadia and Tiapa play cards. Shots are heard in the distance.

NADIIA: It's a good thing my Stepan Yakovych didn't live to see this. He still remembered that other war. He often dreamed of his father being killed before his very eyes. It's a good thing he didn't live to see this. My poor Stepan Yakovych.

TIAPA: Then it hit so hard that I peed myself.

NADIIA: It fell somewhere nearby. I'm deaf and I still heard it.

TIAPA: Firing into our garden again. This is already the fourth missile. A real strategic target. They de-Nazified the summer shower. For no reason whatever.

NADIA: He can shove that rocket up his ass. That bald lunatic fiend... When's he gonna croak!?

TIAPA: Good question. Sometimes a person is good, he does good things. He loves dogs, but all at once... some misfortune befalls him. And then there are the pieces of shit that nothing will take down. It's disgusting.

NADIA: Tiapa, shall I give you a kerchief this evening?

TIAPA: Good God, Granny. Give your kerchief a rest.

NADIIA: Maria puts a kerchief on her Danube whenever they shoot so that it's not so scary.

TIAPA: I'm very happy Granny Maria finds ways to entertain herself.

Nadia approaches Tiapa to tie a kerchief on his head.

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