

A Fan of War

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(translated by John Farndon)

Characters:

YASYA – a Ukrainian living in the United Kingdom

JEAB-PIERRE – her French lover with a British passport

MAMA LYUDA– a Ukrainian living in Ukraine. She lives in a village that is constantly being shelled by Russians.

HENA – MAMA LYUDA's neighbour.

Intro

YASYA to the audience...

...and he didn't call me back. In Ukraine, I probably wouldn't care. Because there, men decide who to call and who not to. And you just sit and occasionally check if your connection is working. Because of the shelling, it can get lost at the most crucial Muments - after the first date, for example. But this isn't Ukraine; here you can buy coffee with banana milk at a cornershop run by Arabs in East and West Molesey. Here, women can text a man and ask: "Hey, dude, how's it going?"

"Fine."

Fine, and that's it. Maybe "I see" would suit better. Because that's the most popular conversation killer.

"I'm fine too," I write.

Silence.

Well, alright. Should I ask? I ask.

"Did you miss me?"

"Why should I miss you? We've only met once..."

"But we have been texting for three months."

Damn, no one has seen mein this country yet in that synthetic VICTORIA'S SECRET set, where the bra and panties are the same colour. But he has. With the 'Paris' filter, of course, but still... does it count? It counts.

"Sorry, I'm working."

"Will we see each other in the evening?"

We will not see each other in the evening; he has two new projects 'dropped in' from San Francisco. Ahead there is a week of sleepless nights... Thank you, thank you, Mum. You are always right on time.

Scene 1

YASYA to the audience...

Mum lives in Malobilozirka. It's a no-name town in the Zaporizhia region, where the only attraction is a flowerbed with roses near the bus station. There are still Crimean varieties growing there, which Uncle Henya brought back from a trip in 2012. He used to go there every autumn before the occupation. He only missed 2013 because a young woman twenty

years younger than him from the cultural centre took a liking to him. Henya had to divorce his wife and marry her... And this in the middle of the Indian summer... What a pity.

But the roses are still there. And they smell like dental fillings, just as they did before Malobilozirka was mentioned in The Guardian. Nothing interesting for a foreign audience... Our neighbour was killed in his own home at night, along with his family. When we were kids, I used to play in the abandoned places with his daughters. Masha and Sasha... Few people call their children that now... It's trendy to give them names like 'Mirabella' and 'Arabella,' Kamaliya's children. The singer. I don't know what she sings.

Mum is 71 this year, just for context. She is still beautiful, but when men approach her, she says, "I'm a widow." Which is true, by the way. Dad passed away five years ago.

Heart. Not war. Drank. Hed idn't try to de-occupy Crimea.

Since then, Mum has been living alone in a seven-room house overlooking the market square. There, you could buy warm milk straight from the cow just after it was delivered on Sundays at 7 AM. And sometimes you still can.

Mum receives a pension of 3100 hryvnias... (that's about 60 pounds), and she pays 4700 for the house. Because she heats everything. Even the basement. Because she has a subsidy. Last month, the UN sent an additional 130 hryvnias in aid. Mum bought a cabbage. She pickled it for the winter. Because who knows what will happen... Always nice to have something tasty.

I've lived in Molesey for two years.

Mum has lived in Malobilozirka for 69 years and 2 months. Before 23rd February, I told her I was going to leave, and she was planning to shoot anyone who came through the door... With Dad's hunting rifle. The sight is a bit off, but that's okay, if it's not just one person, it hits another...

"Sweetheart, do you remember Grandma's red necklace and feather scarf? I took them to the basement... If something terrible happens, I want you to bury me in this. The dress doesn't matter. Father loved them all."

"Mum, I have a date."

Yes, yes, among all the beautiful Brits with their babble (*mimics*)... accent, I chose an inconspicuous, very skinny Frenchman. And an ex-alcoholic at that. Although he swears he has been drinking only Peroni zero for 8 years. And when he feels weak, he attends a therapy group. Can you imagine, everyone stands up and says: "I am an anonymous alcoholic..."

(On stage, YASYA with JEAN-PIERRE)

JEAN-PIERRE Who's texting you?

YASYA Mum. The S-300s have gone into position.

JEAN-PIERRE. What is that?

YASYA. It's a type of weapon... Well, I don't know... Just a second...

(Googles 'S-300' image and shows)

JEAN-PIERRE. Something... Soviet...

YASYA. Maybe, I don't remember, I was 4 years old then.

JEAN-PIERRE *(playfully strokes YASYA's knee)*. So, were you a pioneer-communist?

YASYA Oh, no. They took kids in at 8 years old. I didn't make it. And communism wasn't really a must-have for everyone in Ukraine. We are more like anarchists.

JEAN-PIERRE *(even more playfully)* Pioneer-anarchist...

YASYA. I told you, no.

YASYA *to the audience*. But who cares... Because this is a French kiss from a Frenchman... Something like... interesting... with the taste of Grandma's strawberry jam. Because he chews gum... And smells like Paloma Picasso. A bit out of fashion for his 42. But there you go. In Ukraine men very rarely paid so much attention to my neck... And it turns out, it's pleasant. My neck smells like strawberries.

[TYPE]

"Sweetheart, talk to me. I'm in the summer kitchen behind two walls."

"I can't right now. What happened?"

"I feel a bit uneasy. I feel like something terrible is going to happen."

"Go to the basement. I'll call you back in an hour."

YASYA *to JEAN-PIERRE*.

Can you go a bit lower? To the right, to the right... Right here, thank you.

YASYA *to the audience*...

The French not only know where the clitoris is, they can find two for you right away...

JEAN-PIERRE. Do you like it?

YASYA. Very much.

JEAN-PIERRE. You seem very dry. Are you sure you like it?

YASYA. Pay no attention, that's how my antidepressants work. With them, sex feels like being in a spacesuit. You have to stroke me for a long time before I feel anything.

JEAN-PIERRE. Why do you take them?

YASYA. Because war is an unnatural condition for anyone. Without pills, it's hard for me... to see all this.

JEAN-PIERRE. But you're not there. And you don't see all this... Can we stop talking about the war at least during sex?

YASYA. Then stop asking.

(The phone rings)

YASYA *to the audience...*

How many points out of 10 do you think I'll get as a bad daughter if I don't pick up the phone? 10? 8? 3?

YASYA *(picks up the phone)* Yes, Mum, go ahead.

MAMA LYUDA May they all die, those bastards! I curse them all, and their children, and grandchildren!

YASYA. I agree. I hate them too.

JEAN-PIERRE. How do you say 'I hate; in Ukrainian?

YASYA *to the audience.*

Jean-Pierre loves to take Ukrainian words out of context. We even have a rule – I learn one French word a day, and he learns one Ukrainian word.

Today mine is - strawberry. La fraise. His is –Slava Ukraini.

JEAN-PIERRE. Slava Ukraini.

YASYA. Heroyam slava!

JEAN-PIERRE. I won't remember that much...

YASYA. Why did you stop? Kiss me. Kiss me.

JEAN-PIERRE. Are you sure? Because your veins are bulging on your neck.

YASYA. Yes, damn it, I'm sure.

Scene 2

(Now JEAN-PIERRE's phone rings)

JEAN-PIERRE: Oh, it's my Mum. What a coincidence.

YASYA: Say hi to her.

(JEAN-PIERRE goes to talk on the phone in the next room)

YASYA *to the audience*

His Mum is 65. She was born a feminist and will die a feminist... I don't know, it's kind of like her basic settings. When there's no need to be liberated, because no one ever 'oppressed' her.

My Mum can't stand stories about his Mum. She says if she had our dad, she wouldn't have time to paint naked people (she's a nude artist) or get Botox between her brows (she wants to look younger).

YASYA: Your mother-in-law says hi.

MUM LYUDA: Tell her that S-300s are flying our way.

YASYA: She doesn't know what that is.

MAMA LYUDA Then tell her.

YASYA: Why? She didn't ask?

MAMA LYUDA They keep injecting their faces, and then their IQ is like that of a guppy.

YASYA: Well, Ukrainian women do it more often than French women.

MAMA LYUDA Why do we need that? We are beautiful as it is. Oh, God. Did you hear?

YASYA: No. What's up?

MAMA LYUDA One more time. Now did you hear?

YASYA No.

MAMA LYUDA One more time. One more time. One more... It seems quiet. I'll go check on the shed.

YASYA Just sit still. The air raid alert hasn't been lifted yet.

MAMA LYUDA The shed is still in one piece. But there's some black smoke. Looks like it hit 'Nasty Halia.' They were the only ones in town selling delicious dumplings with soft cheese. Do you want me to take a photo?

YASYA: Sure.

(JEAN-PIERRE comes back in)

JEAN-PIERRE: Mum says it's windy in Cannes today. She and Jules are going salsa dancing. Nice.

MAMA LYUDA Daughter, we've got the all-clear. I'm off to feed the chickens.

YASYA: Okay. Good night!

MAMA LYUDA Good night to you. I shouldn't expect anything good.

JEAN-PIERRE: So... Where were we? Right here.

YASYA: God, my neck again... But you know what... Sometimes during an orgasm, I see dead people. Is that nothing?

Scene 3

YASYA *to the audience...*

And he asked me not to talk about torture, captivity, airstrikes, and the S-300. And then he said... "I understand that you can't keep everything inside. So we can talk about it a little..."

YASYA Okay, we had this summer kitchen, like a whole house for the Russians... a summer house. Her grandfather built it. At 2:00 PM, we picked strawberries in the garden, at 2:30 PM we watched "Chip and Dale," at 3:00 PM duck stories, at 3:30 PM – "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," at 4:30 PM – "Gilmore Girls." Sasha made us coffee because the main characters always drank coffee, and they also ate something tasty. When I watched this series, I was constantly snacking. Strawberries, boiled chicken, the brine left from the tomatoes... By the way, I didn't drink coffee. Because back then, they only sold '3 in 1' in kiosks. With caramel. And something else. With dry milk.

Mum says that almost no one came to bury Masha and Sasha. The young ones left, and the old ones were afraid of airstrikes, like in the Storm. There, half the village at once... cough... and that's it. Because they were gathered in one place – to commemorate a local soldier... How is that? Better inhumanely, but alive, than humanely, but (crossed herself)... God forbid, God forbid.

JEAN-PIERRE. You need to think about this less.

YASYA. How? Tell me how?

JEAN-PIERRE. Just don't think. You'll thank me for this later.

YASYA. I can thank you now... Thank you... thank you... thank you. *(kisses him)*

JEAN-PIERRE. I'll never be able to date anyone other than a Ukrainian now... By the way, my friend has a girlfriend from Poltava – he's so happy with her... She cooks him... borscht.

YASYA. I don't know how to make borscht.

JEAN-PIERRE. Aren't your women supposed to cook for their men?

YASYA. I stopped doing that in Britain. Now I do everything like a British woman. If I want, I drink whiskey with cola; if I want, I lie in the bushes in a short skirt; if I want, I listen to "I can buy myself flowers."

JEAN-PIERRE. In France, women don't buy flowers for themselves.

YASYA *(reading something on her phone)*. We're not in France.

JEAN-PIERRE. We're not in Ukraine either. Stop reading Telegram channels.

[TYPE]

YASYA *to the audience* A message from Mum comes in – The Occupiers struck Kharkiv again. The Occupiers struck Mykolaiv again. The Occupiers struck Odesa again.

"Mum, don't read all this."

"I want to stay informed!"

"Informed about where and who they are killing? Then you should also check the news from Israel."

"You won't understand because you're not here."

"What's so hard to understand? You can't influence anything, you're just getting anxious."

"What a nice attitude – just don't get anxious. Very convenient. And your problems are no longer mine."

"I didn't say that, I always watch the news about Malobilozirka."

(Mum doesn't respond)

«And I am following our mayor in Instagram...»

(Mum doesn't respond)

"And the sound on Telegram is turned on, so I won't miss anything important."

(Mum doesn't respond)

Scene 4

YASYA *to the audience.*

After lunch, Uncle Hena called out of the blue and asked how things were, and then asked why I didn't come to Masha and Sasha's funeral. I said it was dangerous, that Malobilozirka was being shelled with no warnings. That is, the shelling first, then the sirens. Uncle Hena was surprised, saying that it's like that everywhere now, "we've gotten used to it." He just forgot that we are all those who didn't come to the funeral. Those who didn't show up.

HENA. They were beautiful girls. They could have given birth to beautiful Ukrainians. Healthy, nurtured, raised on village milk.

YASYA. So, it's a pity they died because there's no one to give birth?

HENA. It's a pity, a pity. But it's nothing. Soon all women will start giving birth to two. Or three.

YASYA. And who will feed them, Churchill and Zelensky?

HENA. God gave us bunnies, He will give meadows.

YASYA. Personally, I'm not planning to give birth. Just because the state needs it.

HENA. Then you will have to pay a fine...

YASYA. Mum, I hear you there.

(MAMA LYUDA is sitting next to HENA, listening to how he talks to YASYA)

MAMA LYUDA. I'm not talking to you.

YASYA. I'm sorry... What do I have to do for you to call me again?

MAMA LYUDA. Promise me you'll come to my funeral.

YASYA. I don't even want to talk about that.

MAMA LYUDA. What are you, a child?

YASYA. Okay, I promise.

MAMA LYUDA. What do you promise?

YASYA ... that I'll come to your funeral, even if Russia drops a nuclear bomb or a dirty bomb.

MAMA LYUDA. And you'll find Grandma's scarf and necklace?

YASYA. Which scarf?

MAMA LYUDA. I wrote to you about that... I just knew it flew in one ear and out the other...

YASYA. If you wrote, then it flew into my eye.

(A siren sounds in the receiver)

MAMA LYUDA. Hena, do you have a basement? Just two walls? One with a drywall? Well, okay, let's go...

(JEAN-PIERRE enters)

JEAN-PIERRE. I ordered a Chinese takeaway...

YASYA. Not spicy?

JEAN-PIERRE. Spicy.

YASYA. Without fish? Because I can't stand it...

JEAN-PIERRE. With fish.

YASYA. Fine, then you owe me two French kisses...

JEAN-PIERRE. How is Mama Lyuda doing?

YASYA. She's sitting with Uncle behind two walls because of the S-300 threat.

JEAN-PIERRE. We agreed... You know I don't like war and violence.

YASYA. And I, damn it, am just such a fan. Give me two.

JEAN-PIERRE. I don't like it when you frown... Well, let's not fight. Come on, smile.

YASYA. You know, Jean-Pierre, it seems I can't do that... It's hard for me not to talk about this... starting with the letter 'w.'

Even more. I want to. To talk, talk, until the tears flow, and then to cry myself into a limp rag. To drink wine – and go to sleep.

JEAN-PIERRE. Then please, do it without me. Because I don't drink. And tomorrow I have to wake up early – a very important business meeting. There's only time to think about the third world war at weekends.

YASYA. Will you call me?

JEAN-PIERRE. Yes I will.

YASYA *to the audience.*

...And he didn't call me back. In Ukraine, I would probably let it go. Because there, men decide who to call and who not to. But here I have a vibrator, I have red Jammy Red Roo. One bottle means only three glasses. After that, I'm not even drunk. I fantasize about sex in a hayloft, in a taxi, in an underpass... And then I, Masha, and Sasha dance in the warm village rain... And our bare feet sink ankle-deep in puddles...

The END