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Play A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War
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A Dictionary of Emotions in War Time

By Elena Astasyeva

Translated from the Russian by John Freedman

(3 доповненнями Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva)

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[Translator's note: I use Russian forms when the author engages Russians (Kiev), but I use Ukrainian forms when it's Ukrainians among themselves (Kyiv). Note that Russian friend Anna uses the outdated form of "the Ukraine" - a form used in Soviet times when Ukraine was perceived as a "territory," or "district," not an independent place. This usage is now highly offensive to Ukrainians, but some Russians still cling to it, don't get it.]

Panic

I fly into the apartment and shout:

“Matvei! Run to the store right away, we need to buy food!”

“Auntie Lena, we have tons of food. I bought potatoes, we’ve got more than enough for two days.”

“How do you not get it?! The war’s started! What if the stores close for a week? For a month?”

He can't imagine that. In his twenty-one years nothing has ever happened that would have stopped him going into a store any time he wanted to buy whatever he wanted.

Fear

We're being bombed. I hear the sound of shells outside the window. I Google what to do.

“Hide in your apartment between two windowless walls. No doors, no windows.”

I run around the apartment. I don't have walls without windows or doors! Even the bathroom has a window. The corridor has three doors, and one of those has glass. What idiotic planning.

Maybe it's better to run to the basement? I Google it again.

“Do not hide in basements under any circumstance if there is no water source, air conditioning and toilet.”

We have none of that in our basement.

I lie down on the sofa. Nothing's going to help anyway.

Hunger

You have to stand three hours in line to buy anything. But what do you buy?

Buy meat and freeze it? But if a shell strikes the electric grid, there will be no electricity and the meat will go bad.

Macaroni and grains? But if they turn off the gas, how are you going to eat them? You need something you don't have to cook. Cookies? They sold out long ago, there's nothing left on the shelves. You can dry out some bread maybe, but there's no bread either.

I look at the empty shelves in confusion. I've got to get something. Something to eat sitting in a basement while bombs land on my home.

Cleaning

Dust irritates me, I should vacuum. But what if they bomb the apartment? Why make the effort?

And what if they evacuate us and we have to leave immediately? I'll be washing the floor for nothing. Do you actually need to clean an apartment during a war? Does anyone know what the rules are on this?

Betrayal

I didn't understand right away what was happening. Why my cultured friends from Russia were mumbling abstractions like, "I oppose war," instead of saying, "My government is committing a crime, it has been seized by evil forces, I am in despair, but I don't know what to do."

Just three people wrote that to me. That's probably quite a few, given that every fourth inhabitant of Russia is, apparently, not only not against the war with Ukraine, but even happy about it.

I interacted with citizens of the Russian Federation as if they were living people, but they turned out to be zombies.

The worst thing is my acquaintances who stopped interacting with Russians and switched to Ukrainian in 2014 - they were right. I wanted to be tolerant, I thought it wasn't people's fault, it's all Putin. I didn't watch Russian TV, I didn't know what was happening there.

Exchanges with a Russian Girlfriend

Anna. How are you, Lena?

Yelena: Alive. The city is occupied, there's no way out.

Anna. You asked me to write who among us Russians support you? I don't understand, how anyone could NOT support you?

Yelena. I do believe that not everyone in Russian's a zombie.

Anna. I have several of friends in the Ukraine, some have become very aggressive, some have dropped me completely. My friend in Kiev saw a rocket out her window somewhere, and she unleashed such an incredible torrent of negativity and aggression, directly at me, in a direct message, as if I were personally to blame for everything.

Yelena. I understand her. When they bomb your house, you feel hatred.

Anna. I'd like to understand too.

Yelena. Lots of dead and wounded. Kharkov is destroyed. They're bombing Kiev nonstop. An awful lot of my friends are refugees already.

Anna. I couldn't have even imagined that something like this could happen in the 21st century.

Yelena. I'm afraid to go out of the house. Lines for bread are two hours long.

Anna. The sanctions against our country are laughable. Half of Russia is a backwater. I'm imagining these grannies in their chicken coops. What, what's not working? Apple Pay? I'm going to go feed the chickens.

Yelena. It's like finding myself in a film about war, and it's a nightmare. You go to bed, you're afraid they'll bomb your house during the night. There's nowhere to buy food and medicine. And when you write about all this, your friends in the Russia answer that it's fake news. What do you think, how do I feel?

Anna. The situation's complicated by the fact that I've had COVID for two weeks now. I'm constantly on different pills, I'm wiped out, and that also makes everything seem like a dream and I'll wake up any minute now, I can't possibly be dreaming such crazy things.

Yelena. How I wish could wake up.

Anna. We're being blockaded too. Informational for the moment, but it seems like the iron curtain's not too far off. But I want to know the truth. To look at things with open eyes, even if it's very scary. That's why I wrote to you directly.

Yelena. Did you see videos of the bombing of Kiev and Kharkov? That's all true, you need not doubt that.

Anna. I'm afraid to watch Ukrainian channels, I can't bear all this grief and tears.

Yelena. And how do we bear it?

Anna. My husband received his draft notice, he was very surprised. It said something like, "JUST IN CASE, you must blah, blah, blah." He's like: well okay, strange.

Yelena. Your friends and relatives will kill our people and vice versa. And then *you'll* feel hatred.

Anna. Don't worry, my husband couldn't even kill a cockroach.

Yelena. If Putin orders him to, then he could.

Hatred

When you hear the sound of a shell flying at your house, at first you feel fear, and then hatred. Hatred for whoever did it. For all of Russia, for all its inhabitants without exception.

When there is silence outside the window, your brain kicks in, and only then can you think rationally about anything.

Until you hear the sound of a shell outside your window, you will not understand what hatred is.

Love

I have a friend. Well, not so much a friend, the relationship is complicated. He lives near Kyiv, I live in Kherson. We rarely see each other.

He used to text me every morning:

“How you doing, babe? As fucking awesome as ever?”

Now I write him every morning:

“How are you there today? Any shooting? Are you still alive?”

Before, we agreed that each of us was on our own. No obligations, an open relationship. Now, we talk about how we'll live together when the war is over.

“You will work, and I will stay home and cook,” he jokes.

“You've gotta be kidding,” I say. “I'll lie on the couch and read all day. And in the evenings I'll rehash books for you.”

He wanted to come to Kherson on March 8, Women's Day. But the war began on February 24, and now it's not clear if we'll meet up.

I'm afraid one day he won't pick up the phone. The place where he is now is under heavy fire.

Exchanges with a Ukrainian Girlfriend

Marina. A woman was killed in the next house. I have no windows anymore. We're escaping now.

Yelena. Maybe someone will help us get out, too. But where?

Marina. I had no plans to leave until an hour ago. Now / everything has changed. I took almost nothing. The cat is howling. Lena, pack your suitcase. Don't repeat my mistakes.

Yelena. What city are you in now?

Marina. Rubezhny. Fifteen kilometers from Severodonetsk. Severodonetsk is being shelled heavily. My job is gone. Shells keep hitting our neighborhood. I've already written off our apartment building. How are you doing?

Yelena. We're under occupation. No food or medicine has arrived in the city since the war began. We're threatened with starvation if this continues. For now we're finishing up what we bought before the war. The city authority has not changed yet, the Ukrainian flag is still flying. But the mayor was ordered to forbid the residents to do a few things. Drive a car, go out after 8 pm, leave the city.

Marina. Here they have begun killing the leaders of the territorial defense. I have no job anymore. Shells keep hitting my block. I already said goodbye to our building. I want to leave. I don't know what to do with the cat. Basically, I'm totally confused. And it's not so easy to leave because of the shelling. But I'm scared as fuck. After a shell fell twenty meters from my house, I am still shaking.

Yelena. An entire family here was shot up in their car on their way out of city.

Marina. I want to escape, but my brain is overloaded.... Home, mom, the cat. To say nothing about the fact my boyfriend will be mobilized, that's obvious. He will stay here, he plans to join the territorial defense. Unfortunately, we aren't married. We put it off all summer, first we remodelled our apartment, then we travelled, then we were swamped with work. I didn't really want to get married officially, I thought, who needs it? But now... How will I look for him later, if I am not his wife? I only hope he survives. And what's the point of me staying here if all the men are being conscripted. Our apartment is unlikely to survive.

But what about our cat... Lena, I can't just leave him on the street...

Irritation

I read the posts of those who've managed to escape. They're in Europe now, safe, and I am very happy for them. I follow their stories: some in Poland, some in Moldova, and some even

in Sweden. I understand it's difficult for them abroad. But it irritates me for some reason. It's the desperation of being trapped.

Guilt

I feel guilty when I read about Kharkov and Mariupol. Because these cities are being bombed heavily. Our Kherson didn't suffer much: a shopping center, two apartment buildings, a few schools. And we're cut off because everyone else is fighting while we are under occupation. It's the guilt of the soldier who's been taken prisoner.

Messages from Friends

1

I've had no contact with my mother since the morning of March 2. She is in Mariupol. All communications are cut. It's war. All I could find out as of today: no one has had gas, electricity, or communications and food for a long time. Her apartment house was bombed. People cook porridge on a bonfire in the courtyard. I hope she is alive. I believe she is fine. I'm waiting. Waiting is very hard. I'm powerless, but I believe.

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