

# A Dictionary of Emotions in War Time

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Translated from the Russian by John Freedman

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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 Note that Russian friend Anna uses the outdated form of "the Ukraine" - a form used in Soviet times when Ukraine was perceived as a "territory," or "district," not an independent place.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 my apartment and shout:

"Matvei! Quick, run to the store, we need to buy food!"

"Auntie, we have tons of food. I bought potatoes, there's more than enough for two days."

"Don't you get it?! War has begun! What if the stores close for a week? Or a month?"

He can't imagine that. Nothing has ever happened in his twenty-one years that would have stopped him going to a store at 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 any walls without windows or doors! Even the bathroom has a window. The corridor has three doors, and one of those has glass in it.

What idiotic planning.

Maybe best to run to the basement? I go to Google again.

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

We have none of that in our basement.

I lie down on the sofa. Nothing's going to help me 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 what are you going to eat if they turn off the gas? You need something that doesn't have to be prepared. Cookies? They sold out long ago, there are none on store shelves. Dry out some bread maybe, but there's no bread either.

I look at the empty shelves in confusion. I've got to come home with something. Something we can eat sitting in a basement while bombs land on my apartment house.

## **Cleaning**

I hate dust, I really should vacuum the place. But what if the apartment is bombed? Then why the wasted the effort?

What if they evacuate us and we have to leave immediately? No point mopping the floors. Does one need to clean an apartment in war time? Does anyone know what the rules are on this?

## **Betrayal**

I didn't understand immediately what was going on. Why were my cultured friends from Russia mumbling their abstract phrases such as, "I oppose war," instead of saying, "My government is committing a crime. It has been seized by evil forces, I am in despair, and don't know what to do"?

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

I treated citizens of the Russian Federation like living people, but they turned out to be zombies.

What's most annoying is that my friends who quit communicating with Russians, and switched over to the Ukrainian language after 2014, turned out to be right. I wanted to be tolerant. I thought people were not to blame. 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 could anyone NOT support you?

Yelena. I do believe that not everyone in the Russian Federation is a zombie.

Anna. I have a couple of friends in **the** Ukraine, some have been very aggressive, some have quit writing altogether. My friend in Kiev saw some rocket out her window, and she unleashed an incredible tirade of aggressive accusations at me in a PM as if I were personally to blame for that.

Yelena. I understand her. When your home is being bombed, you feel hatred.

Anna. I myself would like to understand.

Yelena. There are many dead and wounded. Kharkov is destroyed. Kiev is constantly being bombed. Many of my friends are refugees now.

Anna. I couldn't have imagined something like this happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 consists of backwater towns. As I imagine it, grannies in chicken coops. So what's not working out there? Apple Pay? I'm going to go feed the chickens.

Yelena. It's like finding myself in a film about war, it's a nightmare. You go to bed and you fear your home will be bombed that night. There's nowhere to buy food or medicine. And when you write about all this, your Russian friends answer that it's fake news. What do you think, how do I feel?

Anna. The situation is complicated by the fact that I've had COVID for two weeks. I am constantly on different pills, wiped out entirely, and that makes it seem as though everything is a dream and I'll wake up any minute now. Such insane things can't possibly happen in dreams.

Yelena. I wish I could wake up too.

Anna. A blockade is coming upon us, too. It's informational for now, but an iron curtain is not far in the future. But I want to know the truth. I want to see it with open eyes, even if it frightens me. That's why I wrote you directly.

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

Anna. I'm afraid to watch Ukrainian channels, I can't stand so much pain and tears.

Yelena. Do you think we can stand it?

Anna. My husband received an official summons, he was very surprised. It said something like, "Just in case, you must be blah, blah, blah." He's like that, okay, he's strange.

Yelena. Your friends and relatives will kill our people and vice versa. Then you'll start to feel hatred.

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

Yelena. If Putin orders him to, he will.

## **Hatred**

When you hear the sound of a shell flying at your house, at first you feel fear, 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 rationally think about things.

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 are you, kid? As badass as ever?"

Now I write him every morning:

"How are you there today? Any shooting? Are you still alive?"

We had decided that each of us was on our own. No obligations, an open relationship. Now we discuss how we will live together when the war is over.

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

“The hell!,” I say. “I’ll lie on the couch and read all day. And every evening I’ll retell the stories of books to you.”

He wanted to come to Kherson on Women's Day, March 8. But the war began February 24, and now I have no idea whether we'll get together or not.

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 have 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 several 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 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 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 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. We're kind of outside of things, because everyone else is fighting while we are under occupation. This is the guilt of the soldier who has been taken prisoner.

## **Messages from Friends**

1

I've had no contact with 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.

2

Today I crawled home from the hunt with three loaves of bread and two packages of oatmeal. My sister, dad and aunt conducted a special operation on apples and brought

home a pack. There are no fruits. And I need vitamins. I stood in line as explosions went on around us. Fuck it. A kilometer from my house they're digging some kind of ditch. At the airport four kilometers away we hear explosions at night. I spend all day on the Internet, probably like everyone else. I'll give birth soon. The main thing is to have access to the maternity ward and medicines. People write every day from different cities and countries - come here. Oho! More noble madmen... We are under occupation, where am I going to go? I keep kicking myself for not leaving. Not for my sake, but for my future baby. I'm very pessimistic about the end of all this shit. That's life. One day at a time.

3

Day Twelve of the war - how are you doing? Everything is fine here, planes flying over, explosions, my legs are killing me from standing in lines for food and animal feed. We have enough to eat for another five days, then for a couple more days we will eat pickled cucumbers and drink fruit compote.

I'm exhausted. I try to read, but I really can't, especially when explosions keep distracting me from my book. I am counting on the army - I donated all my free money to them in order to hasten our victory.

## **Choices**

What you can die of during a war:

If a shell hits you, it rips you to pieces.

If a shell hits your apartment building, you can be crushed under the rubble.

When a shell hits, a building might catch fire. You might burn up or die of asphyxiation.

You might be shot in your car as you try to leave town.

You might die of hunger sitting in a shelter because you can't go out for provisions.

You might die of hunger because there's a blockade and no food is delivered to your town.

You might die of thirst if your water system is damaged and there is no water.

You might die of illness because medicines are not being delivered to your city.

## **Time**

As soon as war began we said:

“It will last a few days and then it will be over.”

Then:

“It will all be finished in three to four days.”

Then:

“We'll know what to expect in two weeks.”

Two weeks passed, and now I hear:

“This war was planned to last a month.”

For some reason I have bad premonitions.

## **Weather**

As I awoke this morning I heard thunder in my sleep. I thought, “It's going to rain.”

Then I came to fully and realized – those were shells exploding.

Kherson, *March 12, 2022*