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Theater of war

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Kyiv-Kharkiv, Ukraine

*Dedicated to my daughter, Anastasia
Baby, you are Cosmos*

1. Kyiv.

2. Kharkiv.

3. Lviv.

4. Odesa.

5. Mariupol. Sumy. Okhtyrka. Zhytomyr.

1. Dnipro.

2. Bucha. Izium. Kherson. Kupiansk.

3. Melitopol. Volnovaha. Shchastia. Bakhmut. Donetsk. Lysychansk. Kramatorsk.

4. Crimea.

5. Vinnytsia. Chernihiv. Kremenchuk. Mukachevo. Zaporizhzhia. Irpin. Hostomel. Boiarka. Borodianka. Bila Tserkva. Kryvyi Rih. Chernihiv. Mykolaiv. Poltava. Chuhuiv.

1. I am 41, I live in Chuhuiv. I used to live in Chuhuiv, in any case, I used to have a normal life – until February 24, 2022. I'm a mom to two kids, the wife of my beloved husband whom I met when I was 16 and he was 19. My dad's got diabetes, and I'm pretty involved in our community, in my own little way. Chuhuiv is a small town near Kharkiv. Before the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine, it had a population of about 30,000. It's notable because it's been a military town since the beginning of its history, and it still is. Chuhuiv is also known as the birthplace of the artist Repin, where he began his creative journey. The town has an airfield and a significant military presence. It was one of the places that came under fire early in the morning, at 4:45. This is the town where, during the full-scale invasion by Russia, the first child died in this confrontation, at this stage of the conflict. Now I live with my family in Uzhhorod, in Transcarpathia. We're doing very well there, warmly welcomed by the hospitable locals. I even joined the immigrant theater, despite never having acted before. Surprisingly, I successfully auditioned in the summer and now I'm part of the production of "King Lear", playing Cordelia, Lear's youngest daughter. The theme we focused on in the production was the search for love. We even performed this show at the famous and impressive Uzhhorod Castle on Kapitulna Street. Our theater has only five actors, four of whom are women. We also perform "Waiting for Godot", where I play Lucky. In one scene, my character dances, and I perform Swan Lake. It's very symbolic for me, as it was always shown on Soviet television when another leader died or when the USSR finally collapsed.

2. Books and films about the war always have the same problem: everything in them sounds pretentious and fake, no matter how hard the author tries to portray its realities truthfully and even if he really had military experience. To a reader outside of such a context, everything described in the text might seem majestic, exciting, and deep. However, those at the epicenter of war have no need to read this and don't want the added worry. The explanation for this phenomenon is quite simple: during military operations, a person's altered state of consciousness is activated, which doesn't fit into the coordinates of ordinary life. Everything becomes very different, not normal. That's why in the end, nearly every cultural depiction of war tends to be hyperbolic and artificially dramatic – it's something that's hard to grasp unless you've experienced it firsthand, in those conditions. War simply can't be truthfully described; it's fundamentally unreal. That's why most people with relevant experience prefer to remain silent about war. It's an experience that cannot be fully expressed with the semantic tools available to humanity. This play will likely be no exception, as even the best writers and artists of all time have fallen into this trap. It seems unavoidable; no matter how you document it, the result is either a dry chronicle or whimsical pathos. If something can be said about war with absolute certainty, it's this: there is nothing majestic about it. War is simple, primitive, and provokes the most basic instincts. There is no holy war, only people who might become saints during it. However, this doesn't change its essence – war is pure, concentrated evil. That's all.

1. I wanted to act in the theater to experience new emotions and relieve myself psychologically. Before the war, my husband and I worked making medical equipment. We typically worked late into the night and went to bed late. On the eve of February 24, I had a strong feeling that the invasion would occur. I'm not sure why I thought so, but I was convinced it would happen. Most of the people around me didn't believe it. It's really hard to imagine, even when you live in a military town just 20 kilometers from the border with Russia, especially considering we've already been at war in Donbas for 8 years. My husband and I watched many programs and videos on YouTube, constantly keeping up with the news at the end of February. Numerous experts expressed their opinions, some offering reassurance while others issued warnings. This went on for days and weeks, panic spreading and making me feel very anxious. Of course, some people were more resilient to such prospects, like my husband. On February 23, he went to bed earlier than me. I stayed up late, watching videos and trying to understand what was going to happen. Our younger son was also sleeping, and our elder son had come home for a couple of days for a programming competition. While I was watching, he sat with headphones on, writing code. At 2 o'clock in the morning, I came across a video where our president addressed the Russians. He said that he had called the Kremlin, but no one had answered him. He insisted that no one needed the war, making efforts to persuade. I was worried about that video, I felt like waking up my husband to show it to him, but decided to let him rest. What's surprising is that, afterward, no matter who I told about the video, no one else seemed to have seen it. It was as if it had never been there. I eventually dozed off myself, despite the tension in the air. At 4 in the morning, my elder son woke me up to tell me that he had finished the program and it was great. After that he continued working again. I sat in the silence and felt that it was about to begin. The silence enveloped me, and to say that I was scared is to say nothing. I didn't move or do anything. There was only me and silence, a lull before something that was about to happen. At around 4:50, I watched a video of Putin announcing a special military operation to denazify and demilitarize Ukraine. At the same time, explosions began. They were incredibly loud. I realized that we were all about to die, and there was simply nowhere to run and no reason to. But we didn't die. My younger son woke up and asked, "Is this war?" The elder, still wearing his headphones, didn't even hear the explosions; he only noticed our reactions. For a while, it was as if we didn't exist. Then, we looked out the window. It was dawn, and we saw people running in the street with bundles and bags.

2. War is the most fascinating cinematic and literary attraction, an eternal theme for art all over the world. Let's be honest with each other – it is, in fact, the main motif of mass culture. Despite being consistently hated, criticized, and condemned by the authors of such works, we've seen many beautiful and exciting descriptions of wars on the pages of books. "War and Peace," "Gone with the Wind," novels by Remarque and Hemingway, Shakespeare's plays, and even the Bible are just a few examples. Have you ever wondered how many of these scenes didn't deter humanity from

resolving armed conflicts but actually inspired them? It's impossible not to write and condemn war, as it's the most effective meat grinder we experience as human beings. However, every mention of it only feeds into it and contributes to its longevity. Describing war, even for the sake of criticizing it, is like a snake devouring itself.

3. That's why Kurt Vonnegut, in his anti-war book 'Slaughterhouse-Five,' depicts an episode where a female acquaintance of his gets angry with him for intending to write the novel. Despite direct criticism, there is an element of glorification of war in any such book, which, paradoxically, can stimulate the outbreak of new wars. The writer resolved this personal conflict in a specific way: he decided to call the book "The Children's Crusade" to convey the maximum absurdity of the events. He described, in whatever way he could, the unbelievable madness of war. Saying that it is madness and tragedy falls short; the truth is that it is essentially madness and tragedy.

1. Everyone says war is horrible, everyone says it's absurd. Yet, secretly, subconsciously, they admire its beauty: in books, on cinema or TV screens, in the paintings of masters. But there is no beauty. It's not about lofty words or thrilling emotions, meanings. Its essence, often depicted with incredible pathos, actually lies in the absence of any pathos. Everything is very simple and trivial, like mass murders and the torture of children. Everything is very simple, everything is trivial.

4. Once upon a time there was a small country that considered itself insignificant, nothing in the heart of Europe. It saw itself either a borderland, or simply an unfortunate place at the crossroads of powerful civilizations. Yet, this country ended up becoming everything. It is this country that, by determining its own destiny, will also shape the fate of the world...

5. March 18, 2014. A few weeks before, the Euromaidan protests culminated in bloody confrontations, leading to the escape of the dictator Yanukovich to Russia. Following this, Russia invaded the Ukrainian Crimea and, in violation of international law, announced an illegal referendum on the annexation of the peninsula to its territory. Many Ukrainian military personnel and law enforcement officers, who had lived for decades under the illusion of fraternal unity with Russia, switched sides and betrayed their oath. A smaller number of Ukrainian security forces began to leave for the mainland, for continental Ukraine. The whole world was shocked and, as it had become mainstream to say, "deeply concerned". In the middle of the 21st century in the center of Europe, a nuclear country was taking a bite out of its neighbor, exploiting the revolution within it, a revolution it had itself provoked. On the night of March 18th, I had a dream: two people are sitting in a spacious, cheap cafe, waiting for their order. They are a mother, under fifty years old, and her son, about twenty. The cafe is dark and poorly lit, with everything, including the people, their wrinkles, and pores, looking as if burnt with dust, not fresh, and not clean. The café is furnished with old Soviet furniture, featuring many round tables and simple metal chairs. Recent events in the country, such as revolution or war, have led to a sharp increase in food prices and shortages of most products. The mother and son are travelers who have been on the road for many days, evident from their tired appearance. Despite this, they have treated themselves to a meal here, ordering two teas and patiently waiting. In the adjacent side room, separated by a thin white wooden door, there appears to be a VIP area, as loud laughter from several drunken men and the smell of delicious food emanate from there. Finally, one of them emerges and loudly places an order:

– Bring me roasted duck!

The waitress, her voice tired and raspy, responds without stepping away from the nearby hall,

– We're out.

A few somber guests in the main hall, where the mother and son sit, glance up in surprise at the man who dared to ask for the impossible. His gaze, bold and reminiscent of a seasoned bandit, meets theirs, causing them to quickly avert their eyes. The mother and son decide to move to the next hall, identical to the first one, its exact replica.

The son puts his worn backpack on the broken Soviet-style tile and is surprised to discover another woman in his mother's place.

– Who are you? – he asks.

– I am your mother – she answers, – but I am already twenty years older.

She really looks much older. Her short haircut, done at home with kitchen scissors, frames a face that isn't conventionally beautiful but bears the clear imprint of years of hard work, sleepless nights, and a difficult, often half-starved life. Despite this, her kind eyes shine with a special beauty. She sips her tea and delicately eats her fried fish with a knife and fork. The son, looking at her with a mixture of horror and recognition, notices the familiar features he shares with his mother.

– And what will happen when I die? – asks the son.

– You will not die – the mother answers.

At that moment, another bandit emerges from the side room. He has a funny mustache and wears a felt hat. In a nonchalant tone, he places his order:

– Bring me Venetian duck! – he exclaims clapping his hands above his head, as if about to dance. The other visitors don't even raise their heads. From the adjacent hall, one of many identical ones arranged in a chain, the waitress responds:

– We don't have any!

Like his colleague before him, he returns to his drinking buddies empty-handed, yet exuding an air of triumph.

The son suddenly gets into an argument with several middle-aged, very drunk women. They are dressed in short dresses, mostly in dark shades, similar to everything else in the cafe, except perhaps for a swamp-green hood of the man with the mustache. The son is trying to find out where his tea is, which he ordered more than half an hour ago. As he gets up, he accidentally steps on his dirty backpack and, as the ladies think, on their belongings too. The argument escalates quickly. The mother and her son hastily gather their things to leave. The interior is dimly lit by daylight filtering through huge lattice windows, giving the impression of a gym.

4. Since the end of 2021, Western intelligence, primarily American and British, have been warning Ukraine about the high probability of a full-scale offensive by Russia. Despite the Anti-Terrorist Operation and the ongoing war with Russia in Donbas for almost 8 years, Ukrainian society is still not morally prepared for an escalation of the conflict. There are internal contradictions within the country, in the last parliamentary elections the people gave as much as second place to an openly pro-Russian party, and the new president went to the elections 2 years before with the proposal to "look Putin in the eye" and "negotiate somewhere in the middle". The Ukrainian authorities are also not happy with the warnings of Western partners. The president and his entourage reassure the people through a series of videos, saying that a full-scale war will most likely not happen, everyone should continue to work and in no case panic, so that the economy does not suffer because of it. In one of the videos, the president guarantees peace and that in the spring, on the May holidays, all Ukrainians will not fight, but grill barbecue. Everything will be fine.

5. May 18, 2014, marked the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict in Donbas. In addition to Crimea, Russia also occupied two Ukrainian regions: Luhansk and Donetsk. During the armed confrontation in Odesa, which was part of the same Russian aggression, more than 40 people died in a fire. In the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, illegal referendums similar to the Crimean one took place, where the population, under the threat of Russian assault rifles, voted for supposed secession from Ukraine and, in fact, approved integration with Russia. I stroll past a street market and spot a tray of fish. A young man is selling huge catfish, still alive and so massive that my fist could easily fit into their mouths. Their whiskers resemble thick telegraph wires. As I pick up one of the catfish, it feels heavy in my hands and gazes at me with its staring black eyes, gasping for air greedily. It seems, I feel its pain. All I want is to release it into a nearby body of water. I wonder where I could find a river or pond nearby and how many fish my wallet could afford. Money is tight, and I haven't planned on buying anything. What should I do? The catfish struggles in my hands, its tail slapping against my palm. The seller, a young guy, doesn't look at me. He's hunched over the cutting table, focused on his work, but I sense he can feel my interest in his product. He's a skilled salesman, a savvy psychologist – he waits for me to finalize the purchase, but doesn't rush. He knows it's inevitable. I inquire about calming the catfish down, and without a word, he swiftly cuts off its tail with a cleaver, instantly ending its life. The fire of life in its eyes, extinguished by

pain, fades away. The salesman calmly resumes his work. I stand there, holding the lifeless catfish, trying to understand what this seemingly decent young man is saying to me now. Something like: Shall I wrap it in paper or cellophane? That's probably it. I place the catfish carcass on the counter, eyeing the next one. I have enough money for two. I'll save the second, though I'm unsure where to leave the first one. But I won't eat it, not for anything. I inquire about the next catfish, and the young man promptly cuts off its tail. I now hold two dead fish and a tail in my hands, yet I taste herring in my mouth.

4. The historical narrative regarding Ukraine's integration into the "great russian world" dates back to the Pereyaslav Council in 1654. During this council, the renowned Cossack commander Bohdan Khmelnytsky promoted the idea of unifying the Cossack Ukrainian state with the muscovite kingdom. This proposal arose from Khmelnytsky's concerns about losing the ongoing war with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a conflict in which the Cossacks had previously been quite successful. Today, nearly every Ukrainian is aware that the text of the Pereyaslav agreement has never been seen or preserved since that time. One can only guess what it was about, if it indeed ever existed, but muscovy soon divided Ukraine with the same Poland and started the so-called "three-hundred-year friendship of fraternal Slavic peoples." The fraternal great russian people began to drain all life-giving resources from the "Little russian" – that is, Ukrainian – land, starting with essential agrarian resources and ending with human potential. Gogol, Repin, Korolev, Malevich, Bortnyansky, Berezovsky, Vertov, Dovzhenko – these are just a few names of brilliant sons of Ukraine who somehow became claimed as part of the great russian heritage. In 1775, the russian Empress catherine II conducted a special operation in Ukraine to eliminate the Cossacks and introduced serfdom for the peasants. These peasants were heavily taxed and placed under the control of arbitrary landlords. Those who disobeyed were either turned into corpses or forced into military service for terms reaching up to 25 years. Ukrainians, who during the time of the Cossacks became accustomed to democratic foundations of the civil system, began a centuries-long struggle for freedom and rights. For almost all this time, russia in its various forms – be it the empire, the soviet union, or the modern so-called federation – has used all possible repressive measures against Ukrainians. The Ukrainian language, songs, and culture were repeatedly banned, Ukrainian religious figures were destroyed, and the peasantry and middle class were driven into oppressive economic conditions. Ukrainians were often used as cannon fodder in endless russian wars, or at best, as middle-ranking officers. For three centuries, everything Ukrainian has been branded as low-quality, inferior, and devalued in every possible way – whether through ridicule or outright erasure from the face of the earth. According to some estimates, the Ukrainian language alone was banned 134 times. In the 20th century, Ukraine became the main theater of war in two world wars, with russia actively participating. Additionally, the moscow repressive leadership organized the Holodomor – a mass genocide through artificial famine. More Ukrainians died in the Holodomor and other stalinist repressions than in the bloodiest battles of World War II – millions perished. In the 1920s and 1930s, the harsh "stalinist purges" took place, during which the flower of the Ukrainian nation, the artistic and scientific intelligentsia, was destroyed: either physically through murders, as in the case of the Executed Renaissance, or through conditions that forced mass emigration from their homeland. During World War II, due to inept russian military leadership, Ukraine suffered terrible losses. For example, Kharkiv changed hands three times between the soviets and the fascists, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers dying in battles for it alone. In 1941, to stop the wehrmacht forces, the stalinist leadership ordered the blowing up of the DniproHES dam, a colossal hydroelectric plant on the Dnieper River. Because of this, a huge number of Ukrainian civilians and soviet citizens, whom no one planned to evacuate, died – estimates range from 20,000 to 120,000 people. There is evidence that after the flooding, eyewitnesses saw dead people, residents of towns and villages downstream, stuck in trees in unnatural positions. In 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded as a result of a failed ambitious experiment, which moscow always liked to conduct in various fields: from agriculture and the military-industrial complex to methods of mass extermination. Yet in 2022, moscow's troops fired tanks at the Zaporizhzhia NPP, the largest in Europe, and temporarily occupied Chernobyl, storing prohibited weapons there in violation of all international norms and common sense. They stole our grain,

provoking global hunger. They deported our people, relocating tens and hundreds of thousands to siberia and the depressed regions of the Far East. This war started neither in 2022, nor in 2014. It began at least three centuries ago and has been ongoing, covertly or overtly, ever since. And almost all this time, the advantage was on moscow's side. They were so successful that even during our independence, our entire leadership danced to their tune, spoke their language, and instilled it in us, Ukrainians, who were happy to consume it. Our entire society was steeped in corruption and self-doubt – doubting both our capabilities and our very existence. The memory of who we are, our culture, and the fact that we are more than just *salo* [pork fat], funny long mustaches, and kitsch trousers, was taken from us. We were brought to our knees, forced to surrender our history to the invaders and admit that we never existed. Kyivan Rus and Kyiv – the mother of Slavic cities – suddenly were not our roots. For some reason, russia became the heir of Kyivan Rus. russia, which yesterday was just the swamps of moscow – where nothing existed except the pubic lice of the late Middle Ages. This was at a time when Kyivan Rus was one of the most powerful states in Europe. Right now, today, they are killing our children, as they have done for centuries. They are torturing and raping 10-month-old babies in basements in front of their mothers, killing a child who is just two days old, firing rockets at maternity hospitals, and reducing a person who once survived three nazi concentration camps to a pile of charred bones in their own apartment. "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." – The Book of Ephesians 6:11 "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. You will tread on the lion and the adder; you will trample underfoot. 'Because he holds fast to me in love,' says the Lord, 'I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life, I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.'" – Psalms of David, Psalm 90.

1. In this story there shall be no russians. Instead, we shall witness the aftermath of their deeds. To be precise, not russians, but 'katsaps,' a term derived from the Arabic word for 'butcher.' And even more precisely, not merely 'katsaps,' but 'rashists' – a foul, unwashed horde, cruel deviants who, in the 21st century, unleashed a bloody conflict in the heart of Europe, mimicking the madness of the Third Reich with its fascist tyranny and machinery of death. Our forebears stand behind us, all those whom they destroyed, violated, and defiled. Those who endured centuries of humiliation, oppression, and harm, robbed of culture, progress, economic prosperity, and self-respect. Now, our ancestors stand with us, empowering and sustaining us. It is through our actions that they will seek retribution against all the scoundrels who, for more than 300 years, have performed their sinister rites in the name of satan on these blood-soaked lands. The diabolical liturgy, the insane orgy came to its logical end. The climax is upon us, with dawn soon to break along with the hangover from a long feast. Our ancestors are here with us; we hear their voices within us. They are proud of us and anticipate retribution. They envy our generation for being granted such a historic opportunity. They assure us that there is no fear there; everything will be fine. The true fear lies here, in living under oppression, under these monstrous beings devoid of humanity. Everything will indeed be fine. From time immemorial to this day, all the forces, all the energies flow in our veins to sever russia from ourselves once and for all. They are with us, behind us, within us.

3. At the end of January, in an interview with a reputable foreign publication, the President of Ukraine acknowledges the possibility of Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city, being occupied. Despite this, the government urges people to remain calm and carry on with their work, assuring that all necessary measures for the country's defense are in place. US intelligence, President Biden, the CIA, and the global media all indicate that russia is preparing for a full-scale invasion. Various dates for the alleged invasion have been suggested. russian troops have been stationed at the Ukrainian borders for several months, with estimates ranging from 150,000 to 200,000 in total. Numerous videos online show convoys of heavy military equipment being moved towards the borders. russia denies all accusations, dismissing them as absurd and stating that they are only conducting military exercises with Belarus. Western European and American countries are taking unprecedented measures to support Ukraine's defense, including the shipment of weapons such as Javelin, NLAW, and Bayraktar. However, this may still not be enough to counter the vast amount of

military equipment amassed on the borders, which has been accumulating among russians since the soviet era. The Pope is praying for Ukraine, and Kyiv is being visited continuously by almost all world leaders, who are providing assistance. russia categorically denies any intention of attacking. The quasi-republics of DPR and LPR, considered to be puppets of putin, claim that Ukraine is the aggressor and request moscow's support. In response, moscow announces another referendum for them, aimed at resolving the "challenging" situation of these young republics.

2. Transnational trade brands are preparing to cease operations in Ukraine, and international airlines are gradually announcing the complete cancellation of flights over its territory. Embassies of various countries are evacuating from Kyiv to Lviv, or even out of Ukraine entirely, while the country's wealthiest individuals – oligarchs – are hurriedly leaving. The president condemns these actions as unworthy, but we, as Ukrainians, refuse to give up and are determined not to surrender alive. Across the country, citizens are flocking to buy weapons, and in major cities, emergency military education and training in tactical medicine are being organized for all who are interested. russia's top military and political leadership once again denies allegations of preparing for aggression, emphasizing that this is a provocation by Western countries. A video is shown, depicting a solitary bombed-out hut in a field – supposedly a border point that Ukraine shelled, according to russia's claim. russians are outraged and demand an explanation for this unprecedented incident. DPR and LPR are evacuating residents by bus to russia. The empire is desperately seeking a casus belli, but each time it presents flimsy fakes that are not to be taken seriously.

3. Leading military analysts from NATO countries are unequivocally confident in the inevitability of an invasion. According to their assessment, Ukraine is facing defeat in this major conflict, with its ability to withstand the onslaught of russia and Belarus estimated at only 72 hours.

4. The exchange rate of the Ukrainian hryvnia is plummeting. Western allies are publishing maps directly from kremlin desks detailing attack plans. putin has signed a decree to mobilize russians from the reserve. Several countries, including the United States, are urging their citizens to leave Ukraine immediately. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is once again in Kyiv, delivering weapons and warning the kremlin about the inevitable consequences of an attack. The Winter Olympic Games in Beijing are concluding, and the world is holding its breath, anticipating a potential strike from moscow in the near future. putin has recognized the results of the pseudo-referendum in the LPR and DPR, granting them independence within the borders of the regions they actually control, which amounts to a third of their claimed territory. Consequently, an attack on Ukraine is declared to defend these territories. putin has obtained "permission" from the russian parliament to deploy the regular army in Donbas. The Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, has declared a state of emergency. Volunteers are lining up in long queues outside military headquarters across Ukraine. It has been reported that russia has purchased over 40,000 body bags.

5. Home chat of one of the buildings in the center of Kyiv.

– Well, what's up?

– Nothing, they say, nothing's gonna happen.

– Who says?

– We have some acquaintances; in the Security Service of Ukraine, and the military. Kinda, katsaps will rattle their weapons and that's the end.

– I agree, putin is a melt. He'll never do it! It's all a bluff.

– It's impossible.

– But I don't agree, it's all bullshit... putler's sick, who knows what he'll come up with?

– Do you think everything there depends only on him? He's not alone; there are generals too. So what, they'll fire on our capital? In the 21st century? Is that even possible? We have air defense and all that. I mean...

– NATO will tear him to pieces after such a thing, Biden said.

– It hardly will... russia has a shit-ton of missiles and nuclear weapons! They will pour it on us and no one will come to help. Everyone is just talking. And they took their consulates and embassies away, flew the coop. If russia comes, we'll be done for.

– The president said, we won't lie down in coffins!

– Yeah, yeah, lol.

– Well, I don't know, my kum is armed to the teeth, he had only a traumatic weapon, and now he has also bought a rifle, and he says there is something else – but he doesn't say what exactly. Katsaps will be fucking dead!

– My Yulka works in the DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION, and they received a directive from the KYIV CITY ADMINISTRATION: leave the city IMMEDIATELY and take the children with you. Immediately. It's said that Zelensky has already taken his children away, along with all our top officials. Coincidence? I don't think so.

1. One might have thought about the impending war, the children, and security – but I had a lot of work in those days. A hell of a lot. The situation, of course, stressed me out. Very much. Some people didn't bother and just lived their lives. But I was stressed. On February 21 or 22, I had the opportunity to be alone for a couple of hours between work and home, so I decided to take a walk. As I walked, I thought, what kind of war? How is this even possible? Bullshit! There's a lot to get on with, and the children need to be raised first, then set on their feet. And everyone feels the same. Salaries are low, officials steal – who would seriously spend time on this? Nonsense! Maybe somewhere in Syria or somewhere else – but here, it's only in Donbas and that's it. Well, Donbas has never been peaceful, not even before the Anti-Terrorist Operation. "You're from Donbas" basically meant: "You're a bandit." Or you know bandits. Or you're a miner. It's a gloomy industrial region with very complicated, depressed people. But let's analyze the situation. A vile impression, putin essentially gave us an ultimatum, saying he would restore Novorossiia's borders within the regions. That means there will be an offensive from Donbas. That's true. All the other troops in different directions are, of course, blackmail and psychological pressure to divert attention. He's not stupid. It's a bluff. No one will just give up to him, and how is he going to take over a country of 40 million with an army of 200,000? Our officials are corrupt and only think about themselves, so don't expect anything from them. There Dimka says that at the city council meeting yesterday, even the measly 250,000 wasn't allocated for the Territorial Defence Forces, and the ruling party failed to vote. That's the funniest thing. They say, 'It's not that obvious,' but who's to say that there will be an attack for sure? And in general, we should figure out who the real aggressor is here... We have the Territorial Defence, but no uniforms, no proper weapons, and not even a place for them. For now, there are more urgent problems, so we're building roads.

5. I too went for a walk the day before, on the 23rd or 22nd. I wanted to clear my head and organize my thoughts. Many people made memes about Ukrainians snapping up all the gun shops, leaving no place to buy weapons. I might not mind it, but it's expensive and requires a lot of paperwork. Permits, certificates from doctors to prove you're mentally stable. You should get a safe, damn. How can you manage all that? People joke about the seeds, saying, "dear katsaps, if you invade us, fill your pockets with sunflower seeds because you'll end up in the ground, and sunflower fields will grow from you. You'll become oil." But, in reality, war is a terrible thing. No one will trust anyone. I've seen many people close their Facebook and other social media accounts. What if the occupiers come? What if your neighbor remembers some grudge from years ago and tells the russians that you're in the "Right Sector"? It could happen. I mean, we definitely won't trust each other for a while, that's for sure. War reveals new sides of people. It leaves a nasty impression, very nasty. Everything is heading towards war, everything is dragging on, and the red haired dwarf is dithering, deciding whether to attack or not. We live in limbo. Our president says to live as usual, but it's all psychological pressure. You don't want to work, eat, or be happy. You pack "emergency bags" for yourself and your children and think only about them. When are we going to live normally? There used to be a big country, the soviet union. They destroyed it, and now everything is wrong. We thought, okay, let's build now free Mother Ukraine. But even that isn't working out! Everything's wrong. With corrupt officials and presidents who only think about their own pockets, what can be

built? It's a nasty feeling being in limbo. Troops, ultimatums, threats, embassies leaving, planes stopping. Everything is pointing to the war, but it wouldn't start. First, there was supposed to be an offensive on the 16th, then on the 22nd. Now it's February 23, the day of the soviet army, and still no attack. Maybe it won't happen after all? I don't want war. But if it's going to happen, let it begin already! This state of uncertainty is unbearable. One of my acquaintances said the other day that if they came in quietly, changed the flags, and we continued living as we did before, it wouldn't be so bad. He's not very bright, but you know the situation – when someone gets on your case, looks for any excuse to attack you and makes you out to be the aggressor. You're just a regular person, and a big bully mocks you. It's a sticky, nasty, disgusting feeling. This must be what the Poles and half of Europe neighboring hitler felt before World War II. It seems that even when the bombs start flying, it might be easier to cope because at least then things will be clear and straightforward. Everyone craves clarity and simplicity. I saw girls in military uniforms walking in a line along the winter embankment, probably from the military department. The leader girl was ahead, and the others kept up. But suddenly, the leader started giggling and waved the flag like a cheerleader. They all giggled. Girls are girls, even in the military. They aren't men, and they look cool in uniform, but it's still strange. This must be what happens during wartime.

1. And there's one more strange thing – when I went for a walk then, I took pictures of some landscapes. I had never paid attention to them before. It turns out there are some beautiful places in my area, like a stream.

5. And so did I, by the way.

2. Me too.

4. Yes, and then I shared the pictures with someone after it had already started. It turns out almost everyone did that. It was as if I instinctively knew it was the last glimpse of a peaceful world. I wanted to capture it, even if just on a bad phone camera, and to save it. To keep a piece of it.

2. The sun was so red then. The snow was on the ground, and the sun was setting, turning from red to purple. It was incredibly beautiful. Incredibly.

1. And in the evening, I went to bed and thought, exhaling with relief. Phew, the 23rd is over, their troops' day. Now they're all probably drinking, celebrating some beautiful or symbolic date, as putler likes. They didn't attack. Just another bluff for the West. The war is off. Everything will be fine...

3. I had another strange experience. I own an apartment in Northern Saltivka. Sometime around February 20, every evening, I heard loud explosions in the area, like fireworks. But there were no lights accompanying them. I didn't notice this right away. I remember coming home from work in the evening – around 7-8 o'clock – and hearing these explosions or loud cracks. "Strange," I thought. I'm not sure, but I think fireworks were already prohibited at that time. Yet, here they were! It was stressful in general, with the war and your district just tens of kilometers away, and the uncertainty of whether there would be a full-scale attack. I thought maybe some idiot was celebrating something and shooting fireworks at the neighbors for joy. But the next evening, it happened again, around the same time. It was super strange. When it happened for the third evening in a row, I was about to put on my jacket and go out to see what was going on. But the loud crashes continued for a couple of minutes each time, and I didn't have enough time to get dressed, get out of the driveway, turn the corner, and look around. A real sense of fear began to grow in me. I didn't know how to interpret it. With the possibility of a russian invasion looming, everyone was talking about it. You had to drive to them for half an hour on a direct route, or more precisely, they were just half an hour's drive from you. As a man of draft age, I understood perfectly well that in the event of the occupation of Kharkiv, I would either be forced to fight in their army or be killed – just

like what happened to the men in Donetsk and Luhansk. All of this seemed more than strange and incredibly stressful.

4. So what happened then?

3. The next day, I decided to take a walk around that time, sort of like patrolling, to see where those fireworks were coming from and why they were so loud.

1. Didn't you think that it was that it was our air defense conducting training exercises?

3. I don't know, I didn't think about all this and I was out of it until then. I was on my way to a friend's house, but I ended up walking in circles on the streets, trying to figure out where the fireworks were coming from and who was having so much fun for several days in a row, always at the same time. And then it hit me. The sound was booming, louder than fireworks usually are, but it sounded exactly like they. Moreover, I didn't see anyone else noticing, and I started to wonder if I was losing my mind. It had been like this for several days then; someone might at least have complained to the police. Very suspicious.

1. And I had a similar experience with a video at 2 am, which for some reason no one else saw later...

3. It was all very unsettling, to be honest. I took a video of the clear, dark sky, and the sounds of loud fireworks were clearly audible. Maybe someone was trying to make everyone panic. Or maybe it was just for me... But the next day, I called the police. They took note of it, but there was no way to call them while it was happening, as it only lasted for a couple of minutes. I was hesitant to tell anyone because I didn't trust anyone anymore, but I started doing that. Can you know what some of your friends or neighbours will remind you of if the russians really come? Maybe the ex... I called the police and the Security Service of Ukraine in the afternoon. I even raised my voice a little because I was completely scared as to why this was happening from evening to evening. They seemed somewhat skeptical and didn't even ask for my name or what I did. They just grumbled that it was noted and hung up. By the way, I made the call on the morning of February 23.

2. On the evening of the 23rd, did those explosions happen again – after your calls?

3. No.

5. My dream on the night of August 3, 2016. I go down to the metro, most likely the "University" station. I ride the escalator down, thinking about something. Everything seems OK. As I stroll along the platform, I hear the loud complaints of frustrated passengers due to a significant train delay. It is surprising, considering it is the middle of the day, rush hour. Glancing at the schedule, I see that it indeed shows that the train is more than 10 minutes late. Suddenly, an elderly woman appears from a hidden area at the edge of the station. She has a strikingly familiar look, reminiscent of a caretaker from my university or some other woman I knew. She embodies the archetype of a lively, carefree, yet somewhat eccentric old lady. She is wearing a long, warm, possibly woolen, white sweater with sequins, nearly reaching her heels, and house slippers. Her attire is peculiar, resembling a hospital uniform, indicating she is a station worker. Despite the risk of falling onto the tracks, she loudly expresses her indignation, running along the platform and peering into the tunnel at a sharp angle. Her vocal protestations imply a promise to uncover the truth and perhaps punish the responsible party. Or so we hope. The train has eventually arrived, and I feel a sense of relief. However, another odd occurrence takes place. A voice over the intercom warns of impending danger, but as usual, no one pays attention. Passengers scramble to position themselves at the platform's edge, eager to board first. Realizing I need to act, I prepare to run when suddenly, as the train pulls in, the platform plunges into darkness, twice as dark as normal. Through the windows of the train, I see that all the passengers are wearing black masks on their faces, resembling muzzles, swimming masks, or gas

masks, with some even sporting sharp-nosed plague doctor masks. It seems to me that the passengers have been taken hostage. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the masks are of two different types and configurations. Some passengers sit slouched and sad, while others are tense, possibly hiding automatic weapons behind their backs. As the doors open and masked people pour onto the platform, I rush to run away. Many of the people waiting on the platform also start running, not waiting to find out what's going on. However, not everyone manages to escape – I notice that with each step, fewer and fewer people are running alongside me. Only a handful of us reach the escalator. There is likely safety ahead, but special service units are descending to meet us, weapons at the ready. I'm not sure they aren't working with those who were in the carriages – in fact, I'm pretty certain they are. They appeared too quickly and act too confidently and calmly. I manage to get away from them and break free into the light, escaping from a place where I would be reduced to a powerless object of threats and violence. My racing heart pounds as I return to reality.

1. Dnipro. 4:45 a.m. I woke up to explosions. There's no mistaking that sound. I heard it in 2014, back when we were fighting in the ATO. I knew, I felt, that something was going to happen – so 10 days before, I had sent my daughter to Germany, almost forced her to stay with friends. I got home late the night before; I had been at training. When the city got hit, I realized – damn, I didn't get any sleep. After a couple of hours, my comrades and I geared up and headed to the military commissariat.

2. Chuhuiv, Kharkiv region, before dawn. Explosions. At first, I thought it was our military training. I didn't believe there would be an offensive – I have military experience, five years as a cadet and five years as an officer. I'm a lawyer, a Captain of Justice. But when the weapon warehouses started blowing up, I knew it wasn't training. My wife woke up and said, "It's war." I said, "I see." I decided to take the family to the village. When we got there, we saw a column of enemy vehicles, about 80 units, coming our way. The first tank had "Yakutia" written on it. Then there was an explosion on the bridge, breaking the dam. Our way back was cut off. We suddenly found ourselves under occupation.

3. Lviv, morning. Explosions. I woke up to my phone being red-hot from all the calls from relatives. Just a couple of days before, I had come home from another city where I was staging a play – the premiere was supposed to be held soon. My wife woke up and said, "It has begun." I felt a mix of passion and hatred boiling in me. I thought it would be over in a few days. Within hours, our entire apartment building was almost empty; everyone was rushing to leave. I told my wife she had to go abroad with the child, to Poland – there were no other options. She didn't agree at first, but then, crying, she did. I said, "I'm going to the army. As soon as I get you out. I've already decided everything."

4. I came to Kyiv to study on February 22nd. I was very worried about whether there would be a war. My neighbor friend from Mariupol had been through it since 2014, and she reassured me that nothing would happen. She said if there were a war, the Internet would already be bad and the connection would drop. That calmed me down. She didn't hear the explosions; she woke up from phone calls. My mother from Enerhodar called and said it had started. I thought it was a bad joke. She came to her senses and started gathering herself. A few hours later, I was rushing home – as it turned out, heading straight into the occupation.

5. Donetsk. The city has been under Russian occupation for 8 years. Recently, my daughter and I have been living in Kharkiv, trying to start a new life. I guess you could call me a "solo mom." On January 27, I came to visit my parents in Donetsk for a few weeks. I saw how the local authorities spread panic about an alleged Ukrainian offensive and how people were being taken en masse to Rostov. As always, we treated these statements critically. On the 24th, early in the morning, a teenager from Kharkiv who attends my art studio called me. He asked how to identify an explosion, as he thought he heard something. I reassured him that such a thing wasn't possible there and Googled the news. I immediately started sobbing: Kharkiv was being bombed. Kharkiv was being

wiped off the face of the earth. A local friend who had stayed the night with me woke up and asked what was happening. I told her the war had begun. She responded, "The war has been going on for a long time. That's what they need, bitches. Let them suffer. We've been bombed for 8 years."

1. Krasnokutsk, Kharkiv Region. I have four children, a wife, parents, and a household. We heard explosions even before dawn, coming from Okhtyrka and Trostianets. Okhtyrka is 40 kilometers away, and Trostianets is even further. I jumped out onto the porch, and my wife and I saw that the sky was glowing. Flashes lit up the night like it was day. My wife is a Russian citizen, but she's ethnically Ukrainian. Soon after, we saw men and tanks, BMDs, IFVs and other military equipment driving through. It was a terrifying, powerful military column. Our troops were driving through, and it was both scary and awe-inspiring. I felt like crying. Huge guys with machine guns and fox fur hats sat on top of the vehicles, almost naked despite the winter. They looked cool and courageous, like terminators – just mountains of muscle with an animal gleam in their eyes. It was the 93rd Brigade, "Kholodny Yar," flying by as if on safari, ready to give the Russians hell.

2. A friend and I were working late into the night, finishing up a project. We made some tea and celebrated its completion. We decided nothing would happen because "it's not logical." We thought, "What the hell is he going to do here? The little dwarf has no chance." I got home late and soon woke up to explosions. I went online – silence. The media were silent. What was going on? How soon would the Russians be at our door? Did anyone else hear this? Finally, after several agonizing minutes, a friend posted on Facebook: "IT HAS BEGUN." The media started quoting Putin and his declaration of war against us. I took a deep breath. It had started. With a flashlight in my teeth, I packed that emergency backpack everyone had been urging us to prepare for weeks, though many refused to believe it was necessary. I went to the shower, understanding that this might very well be the last time I'd ever do so. Stepping over the threshold into the frosty street, I knew the house was now the past. They would be here soon.

3. My husband and I are soldiers in the "Freedom" battalion, but before the full-scale invasion, we were actors. The day before, we met with the soldiers who were the subjects of a documentary performance we were creating. On February 23rd, we spent the entire day in a restaurant with the legendary commander Kuzyk and his men. My husband was supposed to play Kuzyk on stage, so he eagerly absorbed every word of the warrior to faithfully convey his experience. We stayed until late at night, and the warriors told us that when it starts, it will affect everyone, and we will all have to join the fight one way or another. By 2 a.m., we had a meeting with Kuzyk and the "Karpatska Sich" in a civilian capacity. A couple of hours later, we saw them fully in uniform, dispersing to their positions. My husband said, "I'm going as a volunteer." I replied, "You're not going anywhere, only over my dead body." He retorted, "Fuck off." I said, "Then both of us are going, you and me."

4. Poltava. Before dawn, my stepson from Azerbaijan called, which was unexpected and strange. He said we needed to urgently take his sisters, my daughters, out of the city because the war had started. I googled it. Neither my husband nor I panicked. We discussed what to do. My husband said, "We should stay calm." We decided to stay in the city. This is our home. I don't regret that decision; I consider it the right one. Our daughters stayed with us as well. My husband was right about staying, but soon after, we broke up.

5. Kaunas, Lithuania. I have always liked Ukrainians; they are such nice people. Many refugees have arrived in Lithuania, complaining about the pervasive corruption at home. I heard about the war on the radio on the morning of the 24th, and for a long time, I couldn't come to my senses. I couldn't believe such a thing was possible – in the middle of Europe, in our time. The biggest war in the world since World War II. And between whom? Two seemingly fraternal peoples, allies in world wars, Slavs... It was a shock. For about a week, I couldn't think or do anything normally. It felt like a terrible dream. I kept thinking, "I have to wake up." Later, analyzing my state, I realized there was a huge fear because Kaunas is also very close to Russia. We are obviously next in line if Ukraine does not stand up against this horror. And I have three daughters. My mind was clouded by

fear; I didn't know how to live, how to work. But already on February 25, I organized events in support of Ukraine and immediately threw myself into humanitarian volunteering, almost automatically.

1. So, the day before, I was at a training session for Gestalt psychology. These sessions were held in three-day blocks. The next one was planned for the 25th. To give some context, back in 2013, I was on Maidan. When I went there, my mother had a stroke, and after the Maidan ended in victory, she died. I used to travel a lot, went kayaking, and climbed mountains. I lived intensely. Before the Maidan, my life had already been very intense. Before the full-scale war, I was practicing a lot. I have skills in medical assistance and paramedicine. I also had classes with a supervision group at the end of February. I have experience in theater acting too. I was invited to a post-documentary play about Donbas, where I essentially played myself, even though I'm not an actor. It was a way to get rid of complexes and some traumas. I'm an officer, from the military department, and I served in the Anti-Terrorist Operation. We were surrounded at Savur-Mohyla and managed to crawl out through forest strips and fields at a snail's pace, but we got out. I saw Ilovaisk and what happened there. In the winter from the 14th to the 15th, I was near Hnutovo and Mariupol without any rotation, part of the 131st separate reconnaissance. Some say this is a new type of war. It's the same war as the Anti-Terrorist Operation, but its scale is really different.

2. I live on the 14th floor in Oleksiivka district, but the day before everything started, I went to my parents' place in Derhachi. We were all a bit scared, so my parents insisted I stay with them for a few days in their village. On the morning of the 24th, my sister woke me up. "It started. It started." We mostly stayed at home. Honestly, we were under occupation for two weeks and didn't even know it because we didn't go anywhere. Military vehicles whizzed by on the streets, but we only went out to the garden and saw our neighbors. Doing anything else felt inappropriate. We have surveillance cameras at our house, and my dad is an IT expert, so he's good with technology. We collected information about where the weaponry was moving and sent it to a Telegram bot created by the Ukrainian military. They could take it from there. Tanks were constantly rolling down the street. Several shells landed in our yard, and the neighbor's house was hit, burning the roof. It felt like 1941, not 2022 – a strange, whimsical, and evil mixture.

3. My wife, child, and I went to the Lviv railway station. We had checked out some bomb shelters beforehand, but the authorities hadn't properly prepared them. There were no maps showing their locations, and in some places, the local leaders even hid the locations from citizens, calling it a military secret. Most of the shelters were just dusty, dark basements with homeless people, only one exit, and no proper fortifications. They wouldn't withstand any blows. With the first hit, the building's debris would bury you. If you managed to survive that, the pipes and other infrastructure in the basement would burst from the explosion, and you'd be boiled alive in hot water. So, we decided to head to the station. There was a train to Przemyśl. The station was packed. Far too many people.

4. The railway station was a madhouse, packed with people and chaos everywhere. You've probably seen those photos on social media from the Kharkiv railway station. It was terrifying. On the morning of 24.02, it seemed like everything stopped. Then, evacuation trains started heading west to Lviv and further into Europe. I didn't believe in the war either, but that morning, our district was one of the first to get hit. Enemy planes, fighters, and bombers flew so low over our roofs that it was terrifying. The roar was deafening and incredibly creepy. Our neighbors' houses were burning, and we constantly ran to hide in the cellar. But it's hard to rush anywhere when you have two bedridden people in the house – my mother and my husband's mother. Our main goal was to evacuate our daughter. She didn't want to go, but eventually, volunteers picked her up and took her to the station. We had about 20 minutes to decide and gather her things, but we managed, and she got out safely. The station was swarming with people, so chaotic and panicked that the soldiers had to fire blanks into the air just to bring the crowd to their senses.

3. On the platforms and near the train, there was pure chaos. Fear gripped everyone. The crowd was frantic. I managed to push my wife and son into the train car, but I immediately realized I couldn't get in myself. I was pressed against the carriage by the surging mass of people. Since I couldn't get in, I jumped on the footboard and started helping others get inside. By doing this, I created enough space for myself to get out. A lot of men were trying to flee abroad, taking advantage of the fact that Europeans were letting people in without passports or documents. But then the train driver came out and announced he wouldn't go anywhere until all healthy men of draft age left the train. He pointed at one particularly insistent guy and said, "You're a disgrace – get out." I went home thinking that, even though I had no military experience, I had to find a way to fight. Otherwise, I'd never forgive myself, and my wife understood that.

5. "It's your choice even though I don't want. But it's your choice," I told him, and we decided our child is the most important thing. I took on this responsibility, traveled to a foreign country to become a refugee, not really knowing what would happen to us tomorrow. You can spend hours or even days at a railway station with your kids, waiting for a train and your turn. You're holding onto what you grabbed while fleeing your home – the most precious things: some essentials, some food, carriers with pets. That's all. What will happen when the food runs out and the kids start crying? How do diabetics who need to eat on schedule survive? It's all part of the fog of war. When you finally get into the carriage, you're already exhausted. You have to fall on the floor because there's nowhere to sit. If it's the vestibule, it's the vestibule; if you have to stand, you stand. The train travels through the night without lights. You don't know the stops or even the final destination. It makes unexpected stops in the middle of fields or rushes past central stations. No phones, no geolocation – God forbid you turn on the internet or lights. Everyone on the train is quiet, even the kids. Everyone's scared. Kids being kids, they get tired and demand cartoons or food. Or they want to run around, but there's no space because everything's crammed with bags and clothes. Everyone has just the essentials, but the carriage is packed. People sit with their legs bent, someone quietly crying. One child calms down just as another starts sobbing at the far end of the carriage. People share what they have – some chips, an apple. The conductor pours some hot water into a plastic cup. Not much. It's a journey into a new, brighter life. An escape from bombs and death. A confrontation with a fraternal people so angry with us and the whole world because, for some reason, no one loves it.

4. Relatives from russia called, saying, "Don't make it up, none of that is happening. It's all fake news created by American special forces in Poland. It's all video montages." Your sister, brother, father, mother – all living in ryazan, moscow, st. Petersburg, yekaterinburg – say this. You respond, "How exactly do you imagine this? I am your son, daughter, brother, sister, nephew, mother. Do you think I'm lying to you? If you listen during our conversation, you'll hear the explosions." They reply, "There's none of that. You're being deceived, we know for sure. This is a big deception, the truth will be revealed to you later. Our troops have come to save you from enemies. Besides, it's your own fault this happened. We were just defending ourselves, that's why we attacked."

2. And you are shooting at yourselves. Your nazis are shelling your schools, kindergartens, and residential areas. We're trying to save you from them. We're not fighting regular troops; we've already destroyed your aviation and anti-aircraft defenses. Your army has joined our side. All that's left are small groups of drug-addict nationalists committing these acts of terror, supported by the cunning Anglo-Saxons who have decided to attack russia, which wishes harm to no one and will not claim Ukrainian territories. This isn't annexation. We don't want to take over your cities and villages, even though we declare them ours. This is a special military operation, not a war. They're different things. Don't confuse them.

1. russian regular troops fired at the *Neutron Source* nuclear facility in Kharkiv. Damaging this system could pose a radiation threat of unknown magnitude. They also occupied the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, infamous for the disaster 35 years ago, and shelled it, holding its personnel

hostage. Additionally, the Russian army captured, shelled, and is keeping heavy equipment on the territory of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which is the largest in Europe.

5. Everything will end very soon, in 2–3 days at the most. That's what my husband was told in the theater when he wanted to volunteer for the front. No need to go anywhere, rehearse, let's continue. This was said by the director of the Russian National Theater in the center of Kyiv. According to rumors, the director's son has business ties to Russia. When things got tough, the director ran to his son. He has been sitting in that chair for an eternity. My husband and I joined the "Freedom" Battalion and became soldiers. He wanted to leave that damned theater before, but I persuaded him not to do it – we need to be able to supervise such institutions, there must be someone adequate, someone of our people. It is very important to see who and what they are doing there. Now, my husband is a fighter, a commander, an officer, very cool – although before that, he had never held a weapon in his hands. As he lay in the hospital with an injury, he gave up to 20 interviews every day.

2. Walking down the street on the morning of February 24, I thought about my daughter. She's 5 years old, my sunshine, living with her mother. Her mother, my ex – we've been apart for a long time, thank God. When we broke up, everything started looking up for me. The relationship was destructive. When she realized it, she started making it harder for me to see my own child. She hid our daughter, moved around, changed addresses, and turned the kindergarten staff against me. My daughter spent half the summer with her grandmother, who wouldn't let me talk to her, even on the phone, for a minute. No explanations. I was guilty – but of what? Who knows, but I was terribly guilty. Everyone was mad at me – everyone except my daughter. That's when I realized what my fault was. I needed to make a profit: regularly, submissively, stably, without unnecessary questions. Turning a blind eye to everything, working as a powerless, silent ATM. So in effect, I would pay for brief encounters with my own child. Then I thought, is this a decent way to raise my daughter? The decision was clear: go to court, seek fines for her mother, and use every means necessary to see my child. Regularly, I always made sure it was beneficial for her – her character, outlook, and mood. When your child doesn't want to communicate with you, no court decision can force it. And she won't want to if you're absent from her life for months and years, waiting to be forgiven for something you didn't even do: I didn't drink alcohol, I didn't fight, I didn't cheat. I just wanted to raise my daughter decently. But someone saw a perfect business plan in this. Our laws make it easy to do this to you. We met recently, and I picked her up from kindergarten. When the teacher behaved badly, I made sure she got reprimanded from above. And when she didn't play along with the games my ex imposed on her and was just doing her job, I gave her Austrian candies from Vienna, which she loved. Not corruption, just gratitude. So, we're walking together, and my daughter says to me, "I want to stay with you for the weekend." Okay, I think, but how do I make this happen? I'll have to negotiate with her mother, but we don't talk; we're in the middle of a legal war. But I can't refuse my child if she asks. She needs it. So, as her father, I promised her I'd figure out how to make it happen. Then she got scarlet fever, and we didn't see each other for a couple of weeks. Then the war started. I promised I'd take her for the weekend, and she'd be safe with me. But she was with her mother in the city, where the shelling had already begun. Her mother ignored all the signs of how serious the situation was. It was pointless to try and convince her; she wouldn't have listened just because it was me saying it. She would have denied reality just to resist me. Now, my child is in the city under heavy fire. Step by step, I'm walking on a beautiful morning, snow crunching underfoot, thinking: What shall I do? There's only one answer: go and fight. They didn't take me into the Territorial Defense, and the queues at the military offices stretched for days. There are more volunteers than the state can arm. But if you really want to, you can always find a way to help take down the enemy. For the country, for my child, for myself. I gave my word – I'll keep it. We'll see each other, and she'll stay with me for the weekend. The war won't stop that. An interesting question: Will I be able to kill those Russians? Hypothetically? There's no doubt. I love you, my little one.

1. My mom, son, and I live near Kharkiv, in a place called Mala Rohan. The russians came on the first day of the invasion or the second day; it's hard to remember now. The ironic thing is that I always considered myself russian too. I have a russian surname and roots, and I always loved pushkin and yesenin. I identified myself with the russian people. And then they came, people like me, to liberate us. The morning started horribly, with the walls shaking from the explosions. The three of us rushed into the cellar in the dark. We stayed there as the russes quickly advanced, stopped nearby, and started shelling Kharkiv with everything they had: BM-21 Grads, BM-27 Uragans, and others. On the first day, I still had cell service. Out of fear, I called my ex-husband, Rostyk's father. He lived nearby and might have had the ability and desire to rescue us. He didn't pick up the phone for a long time. When he finally did, he couldn't figure out who he was talking to. Apparently, he didn't have my number saved, and he didn't recognize my voice. I said, "Ivan, for God's sake, we're in terrible danger here. They're shelling us nonstop. Where are you? It's an apocalypse here, do something!" And he just said one thing: "Don't ever call this number again." And then he hung up.

2. It just so happened that on the eve of the full-scale invasion, I was running on empty. I had two cars but not a drop of gas. I remember getting a lift from this guy, seemed like an ordinary guy, but he turned out to be in the military. He was heading to the hospital for some kind of injury.

– So, – I ask, – what's going on now?

– War, – he says. – It's clear as day.

– Okay, and how are your comrades?

– They're ready to tear them up. Just waiting for the signal. I can't wait either.

But I didn't believe it would actually happen. First of all, I talk to a lot of people and have connections. Everyone said, "Nothing will happen, calm down." Secondly, shitfire, my business wasn't just growing; it was skyrocketing. I had sold my services ten months in advance. I was in the tourism business, selling trips around the country and abroad. Hell, I even hired new employees the day before. No matter what, I didn't cancel interviews, I recruited staff, and I expanded. My wife, kids, and I lived in Irpin, and my father was in Hostomel. When it all started, the immediate question was how to leave since we had no fuel. We lived on the 11th floor of a large elite complex with 1,000 apartments. It was dangerous to stay there. On the last bit of gas, I rushed to Kyiv at dawn as soon as the explosions thundered in Hostomel, where, on the very first day, they destroyed the world's largest airplane, the "Mriya." Finding gas was tough. The whole city was trying to leave, and the queues at ATMs, banks, and gas stations were incredible. There wasn't any panic, but everyone was in a hurry, trying to escape from the metropolis and head west. It took me four hours to drive home – a distance of less than 20 kilometers. We decided to hide with friends, but helicopters were flying overhead all day. We didn't feel any safer in the village of my friends either; they were in shock themselves. So, by evening, we returned to Irpin. While there were still threats, our 13-story building had already started organizing life in the basement. I must have made a lot of dumb decisions; I was in a daze, shocked by the events. In the basement, life was like a huge commune for those who didn't run away. And it turned out to be one of the best times of my life. Suddenly all social barriers disappeared, and people became equal and friendly, like one big family. Everyone brought their belongings down: food, water, sleeping bags, sausages, mattresses, toys for kids. We organized shifts, babysat each other's children, and everything was shared. It was unbelievable – this community united in total distress and fear. We spent two nights like this until our 12-year-old daughter had a hysterical fit, insisting we leave immediately. She saved us. My 9-year-old son, who initially stuttered, almost stopped talking. We packed into our small Audi A3, which had enough gas for 300 kilometers, with my parents and the essentials. We left quietly at night, two days after the war started, racing to the European border. My daughter definitely saved us. Our neighbors, who were debating whether to leave, eventually did. But they were leaving a couple of days later, in a convoy marked with signs saying "People" and "Children." They were hit by artillery and died. I learned about it later when I was with my family in Germany.

3. The first day is etched in my memory, almost every hour. It was sunny, the weather was clear, and it was a weekday, but the city was completely empty. Not a soul anywhere. Well, except for the queues, mostly at gas stations and banks. You're not sure where to go or what to do. Just the day before, I was talking with a friend, and we agreed that nothing would happen. Then, in the morning, I received an SMS from him with just two words: "Fuck, dude." We needed to meet and figure out what to do next. I drove through the shocked, but not yet frightened, city to meet him. It's hard not to be nervous when, for the first time in your life, you're being fired at by missiles from a neighboring state whose troops are now advancing with columns of heavy equipment through the streets of your childhood, youth, and everyday life. What have we done to deserve this treatment? And, of course, we're all nazis, Ukrainian fascists, and drug addicts. We eat children and hate russia. All 40 million of us. My friend is sitting across from me, holding himself together. Better than me, even though I look calm. He pulls out a bottle of cognac from the cupboard and asks, "Will you join me?" It's 8 or 9 in the morning. No, I won't. It's time to use our heads. Actually, I didn't drink alcohol for a very long time after that. But at that moment, it seemed like the most absurd thing one could do – to drink. He pours himself a glass, gulps it down in one go. Meanwhile, my brother from Western Ukraine calls me. "Drop everything and come to us," he says. I'm silent. "How are things?" he asks. I say, "Things are bad here." My friend disagrees and shouts louder than me, "Everything's fine with us! Everything's normal." My brother asks, "Will you come?" And then something strange awakens in me, something I didn't even know was there. "No," I say, "I won't come. This is my city, my streets. I've walked these streets with girls, drank beer here, studied and worked here, fell in love and fought, went crazy and rejoiced. Damn it, I'm not leaving. Because if everyone leaves, then who will stay? Are we just going to give it up to the newcomers? I don't see any reason for that." My friend nods approvingly, "That's right. We're staying." We stand our ground, even though we have no idea what to do or how to be useful. How to fight. We walk through the empty streets, entering the subway which still functions as transport but will soon serve exclusively as a bomb shelter. Frightened people, mostly foreigners, keep arriving. The morning shelling targeted military facilities in the city. The occupiers are currently avoiding civilian houses, hoping for the loyalty of the local population. "Well, civilians aren't being fired upon...yet," my comrade observes, cynically but fairly given the circumstances. We part ways as he has an old mother at home, and I have enough madness in my head to try to do something in this situation. I didn't serve in the army, I don't have a weapon, and I'm not registered as a volunteer anywhere...yet. I have an idea of where to go, but getting there is another challenge. He leaves, and I wonder, can I trust him? Will he give away my location if he's captured? Can anyone be trusted nowadays? Should I disclose where I'm going and why? What if I disappear without a trace, and no one knows where to look? A loud thunder interrupts my thoughts – the sound of a tank battle on the outskirts of the city. The city is empty; it's daytime, sunny, frosty, and quiet. I check the news; they're asking for blood donations at collection points for wounded soldiers. They're already there. The war has only been going on for a few hours. They're reporting that some young conscripts managed to repel several enemy attacks and even burnt a few russian tanks. Why the fuck are 18-year-olds doing this? I have a rare blood type, IV, so I rush to the blood donation center. On the way from the subway, some fringe guy stops me to ask for directions. He looks extremely suspicious. Should I trust him? I give him vague directions; something about him doesn't feel right. Empty streets and this guy is wandering around, looking for a hospital and can't find it on Google Maps? Something's off. At the hospital where they're taking blood donations, I'm struck for the first time by the chaos of war: an incredibly long and chaotic queue of people that spills out of the building, winding up the stairs to some office on the second or third floor. Everyone's eyes are burning with determination, and for the first time in my life, in this typically russian-speaking city, I don't hear a single word except Ukrainian. But to say people's eyes are burning is an understatement. Everyone is quiet but excited, firm but on edge. I am not just among people; I'm among citizens who showed up in a difficult moment to make their contribution. These people will fight, and with them, we won't lose. I realized that right then. Someone whispered that there was some info about a potential airstrike on the hospital. No one even flinched. It is hot, chaotic, and crowded. Everyone needs to give blood, to give themselves. Cheap, pretentious, rude words. They can't capture a moment like this, like trying to carve an intricate, delicate sculpture out of stone with an axe. Words feel outdated, inadequate.

Maybe there were words in Russian around me, but I didn't hear them. The greatness of a simple moment: hundreds of people in a terrible queue, pushing to get into one office. Ukrainians becoming Ukrainians. I walk to the subway as the explosions from the ring road get louder. It seems like an air raid siren is wailing – they weren't so common back then. There's talk of imminent airstrikes on the district and the city. I walk faster to the metro station, where a lot of people are gathered at the entrance, smoking and looking at the sky. Loud explosions, like thunder, grow closer, and everyone rushes into the underground passage. No one pushes. I'm exhausted, having barely slept the night before. These half days have been hard. I go down to the platform, and it's packed. There are a lot of foreign students, and for some reason, I feel especially sorry for them. They came to get an education, and now they're caught in a war that wasn't theirs. Yet it could still become theirs, because the Kremlin bastard is potentially capable of using nuclear weapons and turning everything into World War III. The platform is crowded with people, children, dogs, and elderly folks. Most have suitcases, and there's a general sense of agitation and noise. Everyone looks suspiciously at each other's bags, wary of any suspicious package or backpack. We're dealing with terrorist enemies here, and while the people are on high alert, there are no cops in sight to check anything. Suddenly, a man shouts, "Everyone turn off geolocation! Immediately – turn off geolocation on all phones! We can be tracked and identified as a mass gathering by the enemy. The subway can withstand airstrikes, but if they target us, it won't be good." People frantically poke at their phones, and so do I. Then, leaning against a cold railing, sitting on the icy tile, I watch a funny, big shaggy dog seem to dance in front of me. Despite the noise and chaos around, I fall asleep. I need the rest, as I still don't know where or how I'll spend the night.

4. Crimea. I live in one of its cities, but I won't say where until the peninsula is liberated. I've always lived here because it's my parents' house, and it's everything to me, so it's hard to leave it. I speak Russian in everyday life, but I consider myself a Ukrainian patriot. I don't even have a Russian passport, which is rare for a Crimean now. This often leaves law enforcement officers or certain employees in a stupor when I present my Ukrainian passport. Whether it's at the police station or a municipal office, they never know what to do with me. Theoretically, this isn't prohibited, even under Russia's absurd and Orwellian legislation, but in practice, it's an incredible case. When I found out about the invasion on the morning of the 24th – whether from friends or the news – I sobbed all day. And then another week. Damn, I'm 35 years old, a grown man. Nothing made sense, and everything felt like a fog. Logically, it was clear war was coming, but I held on to the hope that it was just another big bluff by that bloodthirsty dwarf. To make it more surreal, at night, under my windows, vehicles would drive to the front, and sometimes they'd return from the meat grinder during the day. This absurd spectacle – like everything in this twisted system – made it clear. You hear the news, friends tell you it's started, but the war truly hits home when you see your first burnt-out APC or "Tiger" that has returned from the front. Why did they bring it back? Just a pile of scrap metal. People died in it and because of it. It's fucked up. Once, I was sitting in a café, and a Chechen soldier came up to me. Out of the blue, he asked how much he should "throw sticks" at a girl. I stuttered, and he laughed, saying he just wanted to talk but didn't know how to start a conversation. Weird wonders. Another time, I saw an officer drinking beer. I gave him some of my grandmother's books – fuck a duck! – by Marshal Zhukov, I think. There he was, drinking beer. And then, not long after, I saw him on the "Horiushko" Telegram channel as the 200th – dead. What am I trying to say? I'm not sure. There's a struggle. Crimea is part of Ukraine, but it has its own world, its own laws, its own reality. Some people don't understand anything because they've been thoroughly brainwashed – if they even exist. Others understand everything but stay silent. People in Crimea have always been kind of bitter. Crimean Tatars, in my opinion, cooperate with the occupiers as often as Crimean Ukrainians or Russians. There are Tatar officials in the occupation government, and there are Tatar policemen too. How can I fight? I support Ukrainians online. I've closed all my social media accounts and now make informative posts about the local behind-the-scenes situation. I'm not brave enough to seek out the underground resistance, but I know it exists somewhere. Despite everything, I never got a Russian passport during all these years, even though it was nearly impossible NOT TO. There were only four cities on the entire peninsula where you could apply for one, and I found out about them, ironically, while in mainland Ukraine. I had to go, then return,

then go again, queue – and they closed right in front of me that day because they only accepted 10 visitors a day. The deadline to submit a refusal for a russian passport was also very limited. Some people even camped overnight at the passport office to ensure they could submit their application and avoid getting a passport. They were ready to turn their lives into bureaucratic hell for this. There were about 2,500 of us who refused, out of 2 million Crimeans. What else? Once, I wore a T-shirt with the abbreviation PTN PNH [meaning, 'putin, fuck you'] to work. They called me into management and scolded me, asking if I was completely out of my mind. I pretended to be clueless and said I had no idea what those letters meant. But the director was furious, convinced that if we weren't imprisoned for this, we'd be killed. They made me go home and change. The next day, I wore a T-shirt with the Ukrainian trident. Very soon after, I was fired for some formal reason. But that was before the full-scale invasion. Now, the realities are completely different.

2. It was getting dark on the first day of the war. I continued making my way through the city from the outskirts to the center. There were few people and little traffic, and loud bangs were coming from the ring road in a steady rhythm – it didn't even feel like explosions, more like Zeus himself was raging. I caught myself thinking that soon we, the civilians, would learn to distinguish by sound and sight the different projectiles and weapons killing us, just like the residents of Donbas. The subway had stopped, so I had to walk across a 150-meter-long bridge over a deep ravine. This was one of the bravest things I've ever done – to quickly cross that bridge, suppressing my fear of heights and the shock of artillery strikes nearby. Just a few hours ago, I was a boring civilian. Now, I was turning into one big EAR, hyper-aware of every sound. When I reached the other side, I still had about an hour to reach my final destination. I spent the entire time diving under the concrete awnings of khrushchev-era buildings, which I knew wouldn't provide much shelter if the shelling started. I checked the appropriate website and saw there was a trolleybus running to the center. It wasn't frequent, but one should be coming soon. I actually waited alone in one of the usually busiest spots of the metropolis. The trolleybus appeared, and I jumped in. The doors immediately closed, and the driver floored it. That day, public transport had some characteristic features: the lights in the cabin were off, the fare was free, and the driver raced from stop to stop, only opening the doors if there was a passenger. Inside, it was just me and a few students from India or Pakistan. They were in a frenzy, clutching suitcases and backpacks. I could only guess how and where they planned to leave the city, which was already half-surrounded by hostile forces. I felt sorry for these foreigners. They lived in their own informational and social bubble, not following the news, studying medicine, and enjoying life in a relatively modern country–until now. This wasn't their war. At least, not yet. The driver turned on some russian chanson, and I fought the urge to tell him off. What more does it take for you to stop listening to prison ballads and torturing your passengers with it? It's even against the law. I crossed the city's largest square during what should have been the evening rush hour. It was completely dark and deserted, with an eerie Pripyat-like aura. A few flights up the stairs, and I was sitting at a colleague's house, drinking tea – probably for the first time that cold day. She offered me condensed milk, and we smoked and cracked stupid jokes about the absurdity of it all. None of it felt real. We're trying to figure out where to spend the night. My friend is alone in her big house in the city center, on the top floor, with only one light on – hers. She refuses to go to any shelter, saying that if a strike hits, it hits. She has a good reason: an old, frail, nearly dead but hefty dog that's too difficult to drag around. We agree that if things get really bad, she'll dive into the basement where there's a shelter. I head back to the subway. I want to experience this, like a masochist or just a creative person who records every step as an important impression. I know I won't be spending the night there tomorrow, so I have to see and try it tonight. In the subway, the second wave of emotion hit me: seeing mothers with babies, old people with their grown children, all settling down for the night on the cold platform. They stretched out on mattresses or curled up against the walls, mostly sitting. Since then, I've harbored a deep desire for retribution against those who provoked this situation. Even though no one among us had been injured or killed yet, just seeing children, including infants, and very old people spending the night on cold tiles was an unacceptable line these scoundrels had crossed. They will be cursed, and justice will be served. With such blatant cruelty, there's no doubt in my mind that these perpetrators aren't human – they're monsters who have intentionally caused this despair and forced the civilian

population to seek refuge like this. All this is happening to us just because we are who we are – Ukrainians, Europeans, human beings. While walking to the subway, I saw a huge cross near the hospital, inscribed in a circle on the asphalt with white spray paint. Quite a sight. I also encountered a strange couple asking for a drink and the location of the main train station. "Ok, give me your documents." "Oh, we don't have them, hee-hee, ha-ha," they said, with a glint of anger in their eyes. They weren't drunk, and maybe they were secretly dangerous. "Then show me your 'DIIA,' for fuck's sake." "Oh, young man, you're a bit of a fool. We're just locals who've forgotten where the train station is." Passing by a glamorous shopping center, I saw another group of sketchy characters nearby, with that same evil glint in their eyes. They had walkie-talkies and were reporting something, inspecting the shopping center. An important strategic object, perhaps. A car stopped nearby, and inside were two Chechens. "Young man," they asked, "where is the main factory of the city?" What the fuck? I started writing down their license plate number, but they sped off, disappearing into the evening darkness of an empty city. What the hell is going on? In those days, you'd constantly run into these types—middle-aged misfits asking about the city's main infrastructure. Locals would always say they never had documents or didn't want to show them. And then there were those purple and pink flashlights popping up in windows everywhere. People started saying on Facebook that they were beacons for Russian aviation, helping fighter jets target their strikes. It sounded crazy, but these beacons were showing up everywhere, almost overnight, on neighbors' windows or on strategically important government buildings. And a lot of those buildings did end up getting shelled. What could I do? I called the police and reported everything I saw, just like hundreds or thousands of others did. Eventually, the cops stopped responding because they were overwhelmed, but they were all over the city checking out the flashlights, marking white crosses near hospitals, and searching for this strange woman who supposedly lived in the center but didn't know where the Polytechnic University was, which she suddenly needed to find. In the subway, I was lucky enough not to spend the night on the platform. I sat on the floor of the car at first, and when one of my neighbors left, I quickly claimed a small spot on the seat. It wasn't much, but it was a better rest. Late at night, a grandmother across from me, who was with her 40-year-old son, had a breakdown.

– Listen, – she suddenly tells him, – but we're in the subway right now!

– I know, Mom.

– So why are we here, son? Let's go home.

– We can't, Mother.

– Why can't we?

– There's shelling upstairs.

– What shelling? What happened?

– War, Mom. The war began.

– Oh... so why are we in the carriage? It will move soon! Let's go out.

– I won't go, Mom. It's here on purpose so we and others can spend the night.

– Got it. Badly. But listen... why are we in the subway? Let's go home!

And so it went, round and round, for half an hour, maybe an hour – I lost track. Out of desperation, he threatened to either kick her out or hit her several times. She almost started wailing a few times. It might have looked creepy and grotesque, but in the heavy, tense atmosphere, her panic spread easily. If he hadn't calmed her down, the wild, frenzied crowd would have thrown her out. I'm sure of it. She clearly wasn't well, and tolerating her was nearly impossible despite understanding the situation. It was very difficult. She finally dozed off early in the morning, just as other women and men around her age started waking up. The night was ending, and the curfew was about to lift. The saying "a far cry from the ass" was fitting – these elderly folks began whispering to each other, saying they saw on TV the day before that the Russians weren't responsible for the shelling. They claimed that our cities and villages were actually being shelled by our own forces, that Nazism was rampant in our army, and the Russians had come to save us. Of course, they conveniently forgot that there were no shellings before the Russians arrived, but those were just minor details. Their hypothesis seemed neat and logically consistent to them. I felt like I'd had a full overdose of post-Soviet philosophical thought that night. I rubbed my eyes bit by bit and started preparing to leave. Later, eyewitnesses who lived in the subway for months would tell stories about the orks'

bombardment being so powerful that the carriages inside the metro swayed like grass. Outside, it was a gray, indistinct morning. The great war had been raging for a little more than a day. As I walked through the streets, I saw military personnel and a few heavily armored vehicles. A woman around 40–45 years old approached me, asking for the location of another strategic site in the city. Out of habit, I asked her for documents, which made her quickly disappear in an unknown direction. This time, I didn't bother calling the police. Instead, I went up to a soldier, who was bundled up in tactical gear, and told him about the woman. I warned him that she might be scouting for artillery targeting. "But we know," he replied with a crooked, awkward smile. "She's been following us for the second day now. Just walking and walking."

3. My husband and I have been fighters in the "Freedom" battalion since the full-scale invasion began. Of course, he doesn't let me go to the front, so while he's in Severodonetsk or elsewhere, I handle staff work in the capital. I always want to see him, but when I visit, he drives me away, saying a woman has no place on the front lines. I understand why – the conditions are not just difficult and dangerous but extreme. They sleep and live in the ground and underground, barely taking off their clothes for months. It's especially tough for women due to hygiene needs. At first, he had no combat experience and stood at checkpoints in Obolon during the attack on Kyiv. Later, he was in the Brovary direction and became a platoon commander. Armed only with assault rifles and Molotov cocktails (which we called Banderiv smoothies since the start of the war), they managed to stop enemy tanks. After 2-3 weeks in Brovary, he decided to go to Irpin in March. Once, my husband didn't contact me for five days, and I thought I was going to lose my mind. On the sixth day, he finally called from an unknown number, saying just two words: that the enemy was tracking calls, but he was alive and well. That's it, bye. They had to take positions and came under mortar fire. My husband ordered his men to go down to the basement, and just a few minutes later, a projectile hit the building they were in. The building burned to the ground, but all the fighters survived, with only two wounded. In Irpin, he said Russian subversive and reconnaissance groups were constantly scurrying around. When Irpin, Bucha, and the nearby areas were liberated, he saw such terrible things that he didn't allow his own fighters to enter certain premises to avoid undermining their morale. For example, in one of the basements in Irpin, the enemy had tortured 19 people to death and even hanged a small child. After Kyiv region was cleared, the focus shifted to Donbas. I insisted he couldn't go without my say-so, and he asked why. Since 2014, many volunteers have ended up in prison because they were called to defend the homeland, but the authorities didn't recognize them as legal armed groups and imprisoned them later. My husband went to the battalion commander and asked what to do next. The commander replied that he was working on getting their unit integrated into the National Guard. The combat team needed quality officers, and despite my husband's background as a former actor, they had other plans and expectations for him. However, their commanders are fiercely protective of their soldiers, even if it means going against the general staff. They don't care, and their soldiers worship them like gods. They ended up in Rubizhne, and from there, he told me it was terrible – nothing like Irpin or Kyiv region. They held their positions for two weeks, and then they were surrounded because the army brigade behind them suddenly withdrew. So, his platoon ended up with an ork "beha" shooting 360 degrees around the rear – quite a situation. With no one to manage the fire situation, he, as the company commander, had 142 people under his command. Despite never having been in the army or attended a military department, he received the rank of junior lieutenant because a non-officer cannot be considered a commander. On June 13, he was injured and suffered several contusions. He was in rough shape – his whole body hurt, his head hurt, and he even slept with his eyes open. One night, he jumped out of bed, ran into the child's room, and shouted that there was a Russian somewhere, that he was dangerous. By morning, he didn't remember anything. After such trials, it's understandable if any woman would reconsider her relationship. I go to him wherever I can, when he allows me. Because if you don't see it for yourself, your imagination runs wild with incredibly terrible things, and at least if you see it, you have some understanding of the problem. He's now in Bakhmut and says it's much worse there than it was in Severodonetsk; he says the situations can't be compared. Trenches, dirt, cold, winter, and swamp – Severodonetsk at least had some walls for protection. Orks, those cursed scumbags, are evil from some infernal power. They use their own,

and sometimes our prisoners, as human shields, as cannon fodder. They're the first to be sent in, without weapons, told to shut up, take cover, and shoot. They don't care about anyone; it's their traditional tactic of using cannon fodder, much like the soviets did in World War II, legendary, one might say. Among them are convicts recruited by "Wagner" units, but they're not given weapons. They're used as meat shields and some sort of moles. At night, these former prisoners and repeat offenders dig tunnels with shovels, never surfacing. Suddenly, they can find themselves in the rear of our soldiers. Armed thugs also penetrate our lines through these tunnels; it's an ongoing problem. The convicts are basically used as bait, thrown somewhere so our soldiers kill them – this is how russians understand Ukrainian positions. They spare none of their own fighters at all. They have a procedure called "*Smoothie* operation." In territories they retreat from, our forces occasionally find barrels with acid. russians use these barrels to dissolve the bodies of their soldiers – dead and wounded – to avoid paying compensation to their relatives and to hide the number of losses. During retreats, they don't take equipment, for example, they don't try to hold or evacuate the wounded, including their own officers. Instead, they dissolve the bodies of their wounded comrades. Today it's you, tomorrow it's me. Where are these butchers and where are the principles, the moral principles, of the 21st century? The 3rd millennium, the new era – what a mess. Of course, they also have blocking units – units that stand behind the front lines and shoot their own soldiers if they try to retreat. This is also a muscovite tactic, refined over the ages. For any disobedience, the Wagnerians beat their own terribly; they can even kill them, using a sledgehammer to the head. There was one prisoner who said he volunteered because he was brainwashed by big billboards advertising "Wagner" in russia. When he got into the meat grinder in Ukraine, he realized how wrong he was. In our troops, everything is completely different. When someone dies, it's a terrible loss and a moral blow for their army brothers. Therefore, my husband often acts as a psychologist for the boys. He goes with them to battle positions, even if he's not obligated to, because this is the only way to inspire desperate courage, and it's needed. If you're the commander, you should be with your own. Secondly, when there's a loss, a group of people goes to the relatives – it's a commander, a psychologist, and a doctor, no less. They report what happened and provide all possible support. It's always a difficult conversation, of course. If the missing person's body isn't found, the relatives sound the alarm, search for him, and try to confirm by all means whether their relative is alive or not. It's a very complicated process, but our troops don't lose optimism. They hold on because they are our "kitties." If the commander is normal, then everything is usually normal for such fighters. They flew along the route in this convoy, getting fired at from all sides with various weapons. They even raised a rotorcraft in the air and attacked civilians from above. Why? Just because they can, because they're russian. Along the way, there are roadblocks and filtration camps where anything can go wrong. They strip people, check for tattoos, any visible or invisible connections with nationalist groups, interrogate them, and wiretap phones. Everything from correspondence in messengers to contact lists and photo galleries is important, and anything can become a reason for your destruction. My sister had a screensaver on her smartphone desktop – a picture of my husband in a military uniform. She realized this only when a russian soldier took the device from her hands. Her life could have ended there, instantly. But her courage saved her – when asked about the screensaver, she brazenly replied that she didn't know, and the picture was probably pulled from the internet by automatic update. Her self-confidence convinced them, and they let her pass. Although she could have been caught in a lie. I also know a couple from Mariupol, a man, and a woman, both a little over 60 years old, who lived and worked at a factory. When the conflict started, they could have immediately left the city, having experienced the ATO and knowing what the "russian world" meant. Nothing held them back except their house and their whole life there. But they decided to stay, enduring several months of terrible bombardment. The reason? An old dog that they couldn't leave behind because he was already a member of their family. He wouldn't have survived the trip or the filtration camps, and leaving him to fend for himself was not an option for them. Their kids split, their relatives scattered – all abroad or in other, safer cities out west. And yet, this elderly couple just stayed there until May 2022, enduring air strikes, bombs, and all sorts of artillery fire. They held out until their dog passed away peacefully. Those civilians, they're real heroes in my book.

1. We were holed up in the cellar – me, my mother, and my little boy – for 2.5 weeks. Our neighborhood has been under occupation since day one, and it's from here that they're shelling Saltivka and half of Kharkiv. Those idiots really thought they could take the city in a day. By the next day, they had already run out of their overdue dry rations and were scavenging food from locals, from our neighbors. Marauders, thieves, and rapists. In our school, dozens of children and their mothers were hiding in the basement. These assholes went in there and raped women – in front of the children. I used to consider myself a russian woman, but now I want them all to die. When you go out, you have to wear a white ribbon – it's a must. If you don't, they'll kill you. They might even kill you for wearing it, just like that – but without it, they'll definitely kill you. The way that man was killed in Bucha, it seems like it was a well-aimed shot from a tank. Just because, for no reason at all. And, of course, they claim they're not fascists, but we are! Electricity, communication, heating – all vanished in an instant. Sometimes people were even buried in the sandpits of children's playgrounds. To get water for my son, Rostyk, and my mother, I'd run to the neighboring yard to the old well. I'd turn the handle, collect water, then run back, down, and jump into the cellar. Every time, a heavy blow would scrape my hands, the oak cap would hit me on the head. Rockets flew overhead day and night, explosions rocked the neighborhood and neighboring houses. Every morning, my son would wake up and ask, "Is the war over yet? When will we go to the park? Will you buy me a Kinder Surprise? I'll behave quietly and obediently, but will you buy me a Kinder?" To warm up that ice-cold water for them, I'd put bottles of it on my body. They even fired at humanitarian aid and didn't let it through, so there was no food at all. Once, a neighbor brought us two small juices, a semi-stale loaf, and a chocolate bar. That was it. We barely had any way to contact anyone – I tried my best, ran to find a network, and begged someone to help us get out. It was incredibly tough; even the volunteers I knew who were working in Kharkiv refused to come for us, saying it was too dangerous. Eventually, other friends raised the alarm about us, and miraculously, a brave man agreed to come for us. He navigated through russian roadblocks and reached the three of us. With him, we slowly made our way back, the car adorned with white ribbons, our hands visible. There were document checks, russian muzzles – all of it. Our savior kept reassuring us: "Everything will be fine, we're leaving now, no problem, I'll get you out. Everything will be fine, don't worry, everything will be fine..." He smiled, but you could see the fear in his eyes. We passed all the borders and sniper nests, ending up in another part of the country with relatives. But for some reason, they thought we'd been at a resort, and now we were just tourists coming for their food. A stranger risked everything for us, and our relatives made a fuss. "You were waiting for russia, wanted it," they say. They're real Ukrainians, just 40 kilometers from the Polish border. Of course, they're good guys and patriots – provoking us to leave. We ended up in the EU: my mother, my son, and me. I work, they treat me well here. There are russians here, and locals who aren't so nice. It's a mixed bag. But I work, we live – not just survive. We're safe. I have nightmares almost every night, sometimes they're just torturous scenes my subconscious conjures up. I've become much tougher, more aware of my boundaries. Recently, my son Rostyk was in the hospital. We had to take an "ambulance" because he had severe stomach pain and convulsions. It turned out to be neurological – six months later, the stress he experienced at that time showed its effects. But not a day goes by without me following the news from home: Ukraine, my Kharkiv... I have many friends here, and many Ukrainians have left. We wait, we believe. If the war ends tomorrow, we'll be home the day after. No other choice. Although our house, my house, is gone now. It was hit by an explosion just after we left, along with the cellar. If we'd stayed even a bit longer, we'd be gone too. It's like something from a movie. Some incredible guardian angel saved us. It seems unreal, but it happened. Our relatives turned away from us. That's how it goes. Instead of our home, there's now a 6-meter-deep ditch. My mother still wants to go back and plant tomatoes and potatoes there. My interest in my russian roots has vanished. Their language, when I have to use it now, disgusts me. I'll never want to read pushkin or yesenin. Their swearing is vile. The way they speak to their mothers with dirty words – it's normal for them and their mothers. A great nation with a great culture! We've all heard that intercepted call where the pervert's wife allows and even jokes about him raping Ukrainian women. They got what they wanted. I've been de-nazified, demilitarized, and "liberated."

5. The main priority was getting our daughter out. When she left, my husband and I breathed a sigh of relief. But we couldn't leave ourselves – both our mothers were sick and bedridden. At first, my daughter and I, and then just me, would sometimes run to hide in the cellar. But eventually, I stopped. There was no point – the cellar isn't deep enough to protect us from a direct hit. We were open to leaving the area because it's not far from Mala Rohan, where the occupiers were stationed and where artillery fire was constant. We felt like we could be next in line for occupation. It's only a couple of kilometers away. But it's not easy to leave when you have elderly parents. Some young people said their older parents wouldn't leave despite the shelling. They were threatened and blackmailed, but they refused to go. Many older people actually welcomed the "russian world," even with missiles landing nearby. They were eager for a return to a soviet union 2.0. But others felt, "My home is my fortress." I know a young colleague who, along with her husband, decided firmly in the first days that they wouldn't leave. It was a matter of principle for them. "This is my home, my city – I'm not going anywhere." But this family didn't even bother with the basement – those things are often useless for hiding. You'd just roast when the heating's on, or catch a cold from the damp. To keep their child from freaking out, they covered him with a blanket, shielding him from the explosions outside. Hey, russians, imagine comforting your child with a blanket over their eyes, protecting them from shrapnel and respiratory damage. Would you like that? Then why bring it to our land? And you're not nazis? It's terrifying when the air raids start, when those FAB-500 bombs hit the city. russian planes, dark and ominous, doing as they please. They showered the city with bombs, terrifying fighter jets buzzing so loud the windows rattled. Then they started dropping loitering munitions on houses with parachutes. They hit residential areas of our million-strong city with MLRS, S-300s (which are supposed to be anti-aircraft systems, not civilian-killers), and self-propelled guns from Mala Rohan. And then there's the russians' special touch – small groups of bandits driving around with a mortar on the roof. So, at night, they'd pick streets and houses at random, chucking grenades or firing mortars, and then skulking off into the darkness like the criminals and cowards they are. Sounds like something out of a horror movie, right? Or maybe a post-apocalyptic nightmare? Nope, just another day in one of Ukraine's big cities in the spring of 2022, right in the heart of Europe, in the 21st century. This is what russian "brotherly love" looks like for their "younger brother." When food got scarce, people started working together with their neighbors. You've got flour, I've got oil and sugar – let's make it work. We survived. We even managed to get some humanitarian aid from volunteers, although each trip they made to our dangerous area was a risk to their lives. They didn't even have to ask to come help us; their conscience led the way. As a government worker, I was asked to help distribute humanitarian aid, too. But the area I'd have to go to was an industrial zone, full of factories being mercilessly shelled by the enemy. It was even riskier than our area, so I declined. The final straw was when several factories near us started exploding. A meat factory, a milk factory, a tobacco factory... the glow from the fires was so bright it looked like daytime at night. And that stench of burnt plastic? Unforgettable. The volunteers who took our daughter earlier gave us time until the morning to pack. We lived without electricity for 2 months while still at home. In the evening and at night, you need to be as discreet as possible. So, we packed our necessities with flashlights in our teeth, quietly, quickly, all night. My husband, our bedridden mothers, and I were taken to Poltava at 7 a.m. And then, we found ourselves even further. In the spring, Poltava became a powerful humanitarian hub, with a sea of migrants flocking there and many volunteers working at the front. Some emigrants also joined the volunteer movement. There, we met a group of students traveling by bus—there were 18 of them. The russian killers rained heavy fire from assault rifles and grenade launchers on that bus. Only 7 boys and 1 girl survived; the remaining 11 girls were killed by the russians. One student recounted: he was lying wounded when two buryats approached him. One said to the other to finish him off. The other replied, why bother, he'll die anyway. He'll suffer more this way. As you can see, that student boy survived.

2. I'm a volunteer in Poltava. My husband, children, and I stayed in the city, which was relatively safe (as safe as it gets in a country at war), and I immediately started helping out. It's something I've always wanted to do – it's fulfilling to bring some joy and support to people. I even told my daughters (the youngest is only 5 years old) that when they grow up, they should join me in helping

others. My husband wasn't on board with this idea, and it led to arguments, so I had to leave. That's life, especially during a war – it tests families' resilience. My first action was to spend all 20,000 on my card on medicine and take it to the hospital. I actually gave the 20,000, and the money arrived later – but we had to find a way to live, and we have daughters to take care of! After that, it became almost an automatic response to the events around me. A friend who had been volunteering since the start of the ATO in 2014 got me involved. She's just as passionate as I am, if not more, but her temperament is even fierier. She told me that many wounded boys were brought to the regional hospital, so I gathered medicine for them. The regional hospitals, in any city, are breeding grounds for corruption, and I say this as a doctor. Conflicts soon arose because the head doctor was involved in shady dealings and wanted all aid to go through him. I asked, why should I buy those drugs that are supposed to be readily available? And if I'm using my own money, how can I be sure it'll actually reach the injured? I've never handled other people's money or been involved in anything like this before. They started harassing me with many questions and eventually banned me from entering the medical facility altogether, under some absurd pretext. I wonder what exactly they didn't like? After that, I just started finding out what someone needed, then I'd find who could provide it, and I'd contact them directly. I made sure that neither money nor medicines went through anyone else's hands – not even mine, especially not through corrupt officials in the medical field. That's how things are here. I also got my interns to volunteer; I have six of them. I wasn't at work for a month because I was running around doing what I could to help. When the issue of how to feed our daughters became a point of contention with my husband, I went to my boss and asked to come back, explaining what I'd been doing. He had no issues with it; he said, "I understand." At work, if soldiers or refugees come to us, my interns and I do everything we can for them for free. There are statistics that show only about 20% of people think about their neighbors; everyone else is only interested in themselves. I want that 20% to grow. I do my part for that. Overall, it seems like the existence of volunteering shows a weakness in the state. We have amazing people who move mountains. But it should really be the state's job to provide essential services for the military, hospitals, and displaced persons. It's great that there's volunteering, but at the same time, it's kind of... not right.

4. I'm a volunteer and coordinator for the local branch of the scout organization. It's a really old group, over 110 years old, and it's had its share of problems with authorities, especially back in the soviet days. But it survived the ussr. When you're big, old, and have branches in lots of countries, you're influential. Let me tell you about a case I know. There was a woman in Sumy who was bedridden. She was a drug addict, had AIDS, hepatitis, and limb paralysis. A real tough situation. She soiled herself, screamed in pain, and was clearly not very sane or in a good state of mind. She was also terribly lonely. She couldn't take care of herself, and with the war starting, she was all alone in the middle of it. We arranged for her to be taken to a geriatric home in Poltava, where they were willing to accept her. There was a man with a stretcher and a companion who had the courage to rescue her from all that trouble. The only catch was that we needed approval from the Poltava regional administration. Just a simple signal that they were okay with it. All right. But that's where the fairy tale ends. We called the Poltava administration, but no one answered. We tried again and again, but still no luck. Finally, closer to lunchtime, someone picked up and apologized for not being available earlier, saying there was an air alarm, even though it had ended an hour ago. Okay, let's go with that. We explained the situation, how the woman was constantly in danger and needed to be evacuated. They listened carefully and then said they needed to get approval from higher-ups and asked us to call back in an hour. So, we called back in an hour – no answer. Because, you know, it was lunchtime. And it's already Friday, with the weekend coming up, when the regional council doesn't work, because, well, war is war, but lunch is sacred. So, the poor woman had to wait for two more days in hunger, cold, and danger. The officials couldn't even say one word: yes. The volunteer who's supposed to transport this woman writes to you. He needs to plan his route for tomorrow, but he's going crazy because he needs an answer – should he pick her up or not? His friend won't help anymore, with the shelling and all. This woman is calling you, crying her heart out. Begging and praying to God to save her. You call the higher-ups again. No answer. You try again. Still no answer. Again and again. Finally, they pick up! It's the same official, same tone as

before lunch: "We need to agree, call back in an hour." (I don't give a damn!) You wait. The volunteer-driver has sworn never to work with you again. His plans for tomorrow are ruined. His friend has already backed out. Now he has to find someone else to help carry the drug addict on a stretcher out of the high-rise building, where the elevator doesn't work, and the area is being bombarded with cluster shells. Satisfied and calm Poltava, represented by its civil service, is still deciding whether to act or not. You keep calling. No one picks up! You call everyone you can, complaining about these idiots, but they've already finished their official work hours! The end. Agree with the volunteer to pick her up, and then decide on the next steps on the spot. Dealing with her bundle of diseases, her erratic behavior, and constant need for care will weigh heavily on our conscience if she perishes in the bombings while the bureaucrats twiddle their thumbs. She's called you countless times, sobbing, screaming, and crying. A really intense situation. But then, at 8 o'clock in the evening, the same official calls you from his personal number, the one you've been pestering all day. He says (brace yourself!): "I apologize, but we haven't reached a decision yet. We NEED TO AGREE WITH THE MANAGEMENT. We need a little more time." But it's already Friday evening – so it's a no-go until Monday. You say: "Do you realize this is a matter of life and death for a helpless person? Yes, she's an addict, but she's still human. What's the problem with giving the green light, especially when the geriatric facility is on board and has the capacity to take her?" The state official responds: "I understand. I'm really sorry for her." I promise, we'll sort out this issue on Monday, they say before hanging up. What can you say? Why are we, as an organization, such a headache for officials? Because we have many members, because we're potentially influential. They don't like that; they want all decisions to go exclusively through them – and we all know how they can be. When the offensive began, I wasn't emotionally prepared. I was shocked, even though I knew it would come to this from the beginning of the Anti-Terrorist Operation, because the russians only know how to push, strike, and press at any cost. We've taken our students and children abroad, where they're attending classes and summer camps. My social circle is just as active and fanatical as I am. The work has been non-stop. On the second day of the war, a woman rushed in, flashed some ID so quickly no one could read it. She said, "Do you know who I am? I don't have much time, but I have 100,000 hryvnias. Maybe more. Tell me what you need. I'll save up and give it to you. Here's my business card, I'm waiting. No time, gotta go, decide and call." Then there's the janitor from the neighboring condo, Grandma Nadia, an alcoholic – she worked for two months without taking a single penny of her salary. Both payments were given to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. We started focusing mainly on the military, as many funds weren't allowed to do this according to their documents. They had to stop these tasks. I remember that on February 25, we spent 130,000 on medicines, buying up all the pharmacies in the city – medicines like hemostatic drugs, etc. The next day, there was nothing left to buy. We cleared out everything, and the needs were just beginning. We were collecting 100,000 or more per day. We made camouflage nets, tested hundreds of medical tourniquets. The good ones weren't being sold at all then, and the bad ones couldn't be used; they were dangerous. I remember, you'd find them, buy them at a high price, take them to the soldiers – and they wouldn't even understand what it was. It took about 2 months to work out the processes according to protocols of tactical medicine: identifying needs, procurement, supply, and effective application. We had to establish these processes; we were all learning on the go. We weren't ready at the very beginning, not at all. Every mistake you make could cost someone's life, maybe many lives. It's a terrible responsibility. I worked constantly, living on my laptop. I'd lock myself in the toilet to hide from my family that I was working again, doing certain tasks, making phone calls. To physical and mental exhaustion. My husband is in IT, so I didn't have to worry about money; he was looking after the kids at that time. It was an unreal help. I couldn't help but do all this, but I did – as much as I could and even a little more. I remember my mother bringing me food and sometimes placing the bowl directly on the laptop. She'd say, "Until you eat, I'm not going anywhere. I'll stand over you. Eat." I have incredible gratitude for my relatives. I understand – not everyone has such support. So I tried to do what I could. I hope some of it helped someone. Someone who was less fortunate.

1. A volunteer from Kharkiv. February 22 is the anniversary of the explosions near the Palace of Sports in 2015. Back then, during the Unity March, terrorists committed a crime. I was almost at the epicenter, but I managed to stay safe. Danya Didyk, a minor, and three others died. Every year, we

honor their memory. On 22.02.22, I met my friend there, and we discussed what might happen next. She completely rejected the idea of a full-scale war, didn't believe it would happen. Now she's serving in the National Guard of Ukraine. I've been a volunteer since around 2015. There was this euphemism "Carry water to ATO." That's when the war in Donbas started in 2014, and it turned out our army was poorly equipped and lacking. People pitched in on the go, a volunteer movement emerged and became significant. As the state took over some functions of providing for the troops, the movement entered a slower phase. Some brought water because there was nothing else to do, not always out of real need. I didn't want to just go through the motions, so I left the movement. But when even old ladies knit socks, weave nets, and make preserves for the troops, there's something special about it. Our pensioners were thriving because they were needed, and we could support the boys on the front line. My second dive into volunteering kicked off on February 24, with explosions echoing in Kharkiv. My husband, our neighbors, our two dogs, and a cat quickly packed up, but our cottage wasn't winter-ready. We had to keep moving, but where to? We headed to Poltava, but our car broke down. We kept in constant touch with those who had already left successfully. With shelling intensifying and enemies gradually surrounding Kharkiv, all refugees were heading west, causing roads to be jam-packed. We had to figure out logistics. It was best to avoid main roads. We found places to stay through the Prykhystok website. This led us to the city of O., where we were supposed to stay at the fire station overnight, but they were full. Instead, we were offered a stay at the hospital, which we gladly accepted. It turned out to be a new mental hospital, and we would be sleeping on gurneys under a large glass dome. It looked nice, but it was potentially very unsafe in wartime. We asked if it was safe, and the staff said it was, but nearby was a military airfield. So, real bombs could hit us, and that glass dome would turn us into minced meat in half a second. But you could sleep. Then we made our way to Khmelnytskyi, a journey that took us over 7 hours in traffic. It was impossible to sleep during this time because we were moving extremely slowly, but we were moving nonetheless. It was tough. In Khmelnytskyi, the local business elite organized a hub of incredible level in their major sports club, where they welcomed streams of immigrants, and volunteers worked tirelessly with us. The people of Khmelnytskyi brought clothes for all of us, there were so many donations. We were gently but firmly involved in various tasks because sitting idle in such circumstances is the worst thing psychologically. You think about your home, that it might not be there anymore, about a life that will probably never be the same. Then we reached Lviv, found a good apartment, and finally got some sleep. My mother and husband's sister were sent to Poland. Mom was reluctant; she had never been abroad in her life. But once there, within a month, she founded and headed a company for the production of camouflage nets and now sends them to us. That's us, Ukrainians. Through acquaintances, my husband and I got a coveted job for the greater good of society. Our task was to drive cars from the border to the center of Ukraine, and from there, the next driver took them eastward. I was the driver in our case. My husband, an introverted photographer who doesn't drive, unexpectedly turned out to be a great communicator and manager. He handled all further adventures that came our way, finding a common language with everyone even in the most difficult circumstances. Under intense pressure, people can often reveal hidden talents and qualities within themselves. For example, we drove together in a brand new "Niva," sometimes spending the night on the floor of a service station, living a kind of nomadic life. It was early March, and I was driving this "Niva" across the country, but the wipers didn't work, the headlights wouldn't switch, and we were on summer tires. Heavy snow began to fall, accompanied by frost, turning the road into an ice rink. It was evening, already dark, and we were sliding on this ice. Every wrong move of the steering wheel could have been fatal (the "Niva" doesn't have power steering and shakes all over). Oncoming cars were honking at us, yelling to turn off our high beams. But they wouldn't turn off! We had to pass roadblocks as quickly as possible because curfew was approaching. We were flying... and then we crashed into a Cherokee. We were thrown into a snowdrift, miraculously surviving. We faced financial trouble because we turned the Cherokee into scrap metal, and all our savings had to go to cover the losses of the other driver, even though it wasn't enough. Thankfully, everyone in the accident was unharmed except my husband, who hit his head on the windshield and passed out. Even approximately. We wrecked the car, we were broke, but we were alive. And at that moment, the value system seemed to work differently, not as usual. Especially when, following someone's advice, I took a route through the northern

regions instead of the central ones to avoid traffic jams. Chernihiv, Kyiv, and Sumy regions – there were orks there even then, mercilessly attacking small and large settlements. So we, who had escaped the horrors of Kharkiv, found ourselves again near the combat zone, just 20 km from the enemy's positions. And what is 20 kilometers in modern warfare? It's like being right there. Within shooting distance, almost anything can happen, while the russians were hitting everything in sight as chaotically and frenziedly as possible. In the Zhytomyr region, we were taken in by a local church organization, where we had to pray every day for shelter and food, and then they sang songs in russian to the guitar. After 2 days, we found someone who would take us further. It was a bus that had just arrived from Bucha, evacuating people. Actually, there were three buses going there – but they were shelled. One bus burned down, and the driver died in it; the other was captured. Only this one escaped. In addition, a group of elderly women from Bucha was with us, and these women, who had miraculously escaped hell, laughed, sang, joked, and told silly stories. They are indomitable – our old ladies, like our people. In those days, there was an amazing, incredible feeling of general friendship and unity. Despite all the hardships and trash that the enemy produced, we did not give up; on the contrary, we became closer, helped each other, and wanted to help. Ukrainians, whose national sport is fighting plus internal quarrels, had never been so united before. Of course, not everyone shared this mood, but I accurately covered most of them. Once we broke the curfew – because I wasn't speeding on slippery roads during wartime – and we were checked by National Guardsmen at the checkpoint for 2 hours. They emptied all our belongings into the snow, and we were carrying clothes for the military. The idiots were tearing open cardboard boxes, throwing socks and sweaters into the dirt. They were looking for something there.

– We can ring up the folks we're dropping off to. Let them buzz your commanders – keeping it all out in the open. We're not hiding anything, my husband says.

But no, they keep on searching. The crazy thing is, they don't find anything dodgy! And if they can hassle some poor sod for not having a residence permit, you can bet they will. Sometimes in the volunteer scene, they say you might get a call from a random number, asking if you've got a car for sale. It's a test. If you say something that might raise an eyebrow, expect a bit of a show. You're driving east in another car and see streams of refugees, loads of them, heading west. Behind you, tons of trucks full of aid and maybe something more exciting are rushing towards the wounded, bloody east. Military gear is moving both ways, depending on the mission, and there are loads of accidents on these roads because it's all in the dark, everyone's eager to get moving, and there's a curfew. The roads are littered with dead animals, everything's flying around, and it's all a bit spooky. Nobody's sticking to their lanes at all.

The country is at war. At first, we were afraid to take on such tasks; it's not easy. Even when I escaped the turmoil in Kharkiv, I almost fell into shock in Western Ukraine – who could have known. But in practice, it works like this: you're doing something or carrying something, and you think, damn, maybe I can't handle it. But there are so many tasks and challenges, there's absolutely no time for reflection. You're in the moment, just trying to keep up. Being one of the drops, an infinitely small part of a huge raging river, you strike a blow to the enemy. You give those russian bastards hell, because it's curtains for them!

2. My wife and son are in Poland, and here I am, knocking on the doors of military recruitment centers and territorial defense offices. I have no combat experience, no military service, no training. They said, "Sure, you can join the queue. Wait for about six months, no sooner." They promised to call back the next day for more details, but nothing. It seems they just collected numbers, made promises, and didn't follow through. There are so many volunteers, maybe that's why. It's strange – back then, they could've just grabbed someone off the street and drafted them. They weren't ready to send people into battle. They could've ignored motivated fighters with ATO experience for months. Why? I was inexperienced, but I was as motivated as could be. No one called me back. I did humanitarian volunteering for about 3 days, helping a colleague from Odesa, a mother with a child, settle down in Lviv. Then I saw online that a new territorial defense brigade was forming, so I went there. They said, "Come tomorrow morning in military uniform." That's how I became a soldier. The Territorial Defense Forces are supposed to support the main troops of the Armed Forces. We don't have heavy weapons, at most, grenade launchers. And that's if they've managed to

scrounge up anything. We're light and mobile, assigned to combat brigades, tasked with infiltrating enemy positions and holding them until the regular army moves in. The aviation's up there, and we've got to fight it. For that, we need MANPADS, but they give us AGS. But we make do. We sneak along the forest edges, where the jackasses have settled. Of course, you might miss someone. But at the same time, you don't even see them. Whoever's there, whatever's there – you take them out from a distance. If it were up close, it'd probably be much harder psychologically. There are dark sides to war – if we don't consider that war is darkness from the get-go. There's a particular kind of evil: idiotic commanders who don't care about their own. You're sitting near Bakhmut for over a month. Bread and stew, stew and bread. That's all. You and your comrades are being hit with cluster bombs, phosphorus, tanks, mortars, and you're supposed to conserve ammunition. I sneezed twice – that's it. To some commanders, not all, but some – you're just another statistic. They'll mow you down and get fresh meat for themselves. He might order you to carry out a task that should be done by a mechanized brigade, with tanks and artillery. But you're light infantry, ground defense, support. We've got a problem: a shortage of artillery shells. And the second problem: moron commanders who don't take responsibility for themselves, and sadly, they're not rare. Though not the norm. We're enacting a law for stricter punishments for military personnel for disciplinary violations, etc. But then, will these violators be dealt with as they are in NATO – where every case, every alleged unworthy act of a soldier is thoroughly investigated, with details and circumstances laid out? I have doubts. And if it were so, that would be a normal practice. The first time I was at the frontline – "zero" – we were tasked with covering a 2 or 3-kilometer section, which we did in 2-3 hours, crawling, stealthily. Almost in the open, like sitting ducks. Before us, this sector was hammered for a couple of hours. As we passed through, I was with the same green newbies as myself – rookies, rookies. If we use old soviet terms. But those fucking definitions don't work now, because we – rookies – did make it through that area without flinching or running away. It was pure hell, truly terrifying, but from that, a bond, a very strong camaraderie, was born between us. Very strong. When you go through hell with someone you barely know, you become more than brothers. I got a concussion. We held our ground, but it was getting hammered by two "Grad" MRL cassettes, because artillery works in squares covering specific surface areas. In the evening, we were moved to another position, where we had to dig in the dark. Our work was constantly interrupted by those fucking "Grad" rockets. The thing with them is, if you're above ground level, your chances of survival are slim; you have to dig in to have any chance. They started shelling us again, and the rockets were landing too close. Several times it hit too close; I radioed in "4.5.0", meaning everything was okay, but immediately felt nausea, a strong headache, and felt like I was drunk. There were three of us, and one of my brothers-in-arms experienced similar effects. They asked if we needed evacuation. If we had both agreed, only one of us would have stayed behind. We couldn't leave him. I asked the other soldier with a concussion if he wanted to leave – he refused, and so did I, of course. We stayed, and despite our pretty bad condition, we held that position for another day. As soon as I had the chance, I fell asleep and slept for a long time. I was treated for several days, but my concussion was never officially recorded; they labeled it as cerebrostronic syndrome. That's the standard response they give everyone, because concussions for the guys on the front line are a dime a dozen, and they really mess you up, accumulating over time. With each new injury, you become more and more different from who you used to be. I don't know if my mind will ever go back to normal, I really don't. I have panic attacks, constant headaches. Not long ago, I was in Lviv, granted a 5-day leave, and my wife came with the baby to visit. It was the first time since that moment at the station – the first day of the full-scale war. Of course, I really wanted to be with them, but... I was so worried about how I'd be received. Would my mind be clear, would I behave normally? Because for some, they don't come back from war; it's a one-way street, even after you're back home. You wonder, "Am I really in control, or is there still a war inside me?" You go to a café and, seeing your army uniform, they serve you coffee on the house. You walk the streets, feeling apathetic because everyone sees through you, they don't see you as a person. If you're made to feel like you're a burden, unwanted, or out of place, it's tough. Like you're a character from a different movie. I get that after the war, we're all going to need serious support and help. As a society, we'll need loads of highly skilled and awesome psychologists to help us adjust to a new life. What else can I say? If someone tells you pigs can't fight, don't buy it. They can. They've got soldiers who

study, analyze mistakes, and get better. They're well-equipped, normally pumped up by their fascist-imperialist propaganda. And sure, there are some "chmobs" and convicts among them, but nobody there sees them as human; they're just used as cannon fodder. If the russians are against us, apart from their aviation, the worst thing is a tank. When they shoot from an AGS or "Grad," you hear the shell being launched and you've got just a few seconds to hide. But at least you have those seconds. If a tank fires, the shell travels at over 360 meters per second, faster than the speed of sound at 320. So you never know when it's going to hit. Sometimes, they hunt you day and night, bombarding your positions for hours on end – you can't even step out of cover to take a leak. That's why our guys say that if they get hold of a tank driver or an artilleryman – sure, the Geneva Convention says no torture, we're a civilized society – but we'll give them a beating until they're black and blue, those racist bastards. After all, we're not like them. It's true, we're not crazy, bitter animals. What sets us apart, us Ukrainians, is that when we're in certain conditions, we always try to improve them. The russians don't care about that. They just want to wallow in filth, like a pig in the dung – that's from the Bible. For example, we set up a position in a safe spot – they didn't target it because it wasn't convenient for them. So, my sworn brothers and I quickly organized a table, some homemade chairs, covered the table with newspaper, hung up a net – and it was beautiful! We seized the minimal opportunity to make our conditions more civilized. That's one of my personal traits – the desire to improve things as much as I can. Some commanders think I'm a problem because I ask questions, take care of my guys, can be confrontational, and never back down. I don't dance to anyone's tune; that's my reputation. I'm the commander of the unit, with 5 soldiers under my command. I keep a notebook with the contacts of all my comrades' relatives. It's in case any of them die, so I can contact their families. I made a promise to myself that I would never open or use that book. So far, I've kept that promise. Haven't opened it yet.

3. It seems to me that the main difference between good and evil is that evil strikes first. Usually, it's a sneaky move, and good has to react and "strike back." Both sides use force, claiming they're the light of truth and their attack is justified. But evil thrives on deceit and treachery, while good is open and sincere. That's why, when good gets hit, it needs time to recover emotionally before it can defend itself. Meanwhile, the aggressor has been plotting and preparing for a long time, and good is too naive to see it coming. This is just my personal hypothesis, and it might not be entirely correct. I don't want to go back to the front. I joined the army on the first day, but now I don't want to come back. You'd have to be mad to want that. This reaction is pretty normal, considering everything that's happening there. It's self-preservation kicking in. The only thing that makes you fight is the camaraderie, the feeling of being shoulder to shoulder with your mates, sharing victories, and seeing them become incredibly important to you. Only russian brutes could revel in the chaos, the weapon rattling, the scorched earth, and children's tears. Even so, I still go back to my brothers-in-arms. No matter how tough it gets, we're together. It was my choice to join the army back then, despite having no military training. Khmelnytskyi wasn't hit on February 24, but rockets struck three weeks later, after a lot had already happened elsewhere. I joined the Territorial Defense Forces without any problems; they accepted everyone who wanted to join. There was even a guy with a glass eye – they took him too. The first night, we slept on the school floor. They gave us weapons and uniforms, and we had to patrol the city. But after a month and a half, they packed us off to the front – "zero" or the forefront. This really pissed us off because we had no experience and didn't sign up for that. Our combat training consisted of firing just 21 rounds, and that was it. The command loved to have a go at us. They told us we were going to the north, where Kyiv and Chernihiv regions had already been cleared of russians. "You're Territorial Defense, you're support," they said. But in reality, they were sending us east – straight into the thick of it. And we were on the front line. Yet they kept insisting it was the second or even third line. I don't want anyone to think I'm scared. I'm not. It's just that a soldier's morale is crucial in war. If you're constantly being lied to and thrown, untrained, into the worst parts of the front like cannon fodder – I don't get how that helps anyone. Except our enemies, of course. How are we any different from them then? This all happens at the platoon or company level. When you and your mates call them out, they act clueless, saying it's all a mix-up from HQ. Eventually, I transferred to another unit. And surprise, surprise – none of that nonsense here. It all comes down to leadership, as we've seen, to specific commanders. We've got no problems with motivation. I actually picked up a weapon,

even though I'm a pretty mild-mannered guy, because I felt it was my duty to the motherland. It just felt right, and I couldn't do otherwise. Sure, it was terrifying – my mum sobbed, and my girlfriend was angry. But it was my decision, and that's how it is, even if it was against my nature. It was the right thing to do, so I did it. But as one of my mates said, "I'm fed up with living in historical times." I know a bloke who was coming back from Lviv to Zaporizhzhia. He was on a train when the war broke out, so he got off at the first station – Khmelnytskyi – and joined the army right there. A life-changing decision made in minutes. On the front line, I met some incredible people I'd never have met otherwise, since we all live in our own social and informational bubbles. There are jewelers, businessmen, prosecutors, and actors. One guy was a tractor driver, but he's super modern, has an expensive car, and is skilled with tech – not your typical farmer. He just loves tractors. Another guy is a handyman, a jack of all trades. When he found out I run a theatre in normal life, he started asking for a job after the war.

– I'll be your stage fitter, he says. – I'll be creative and the best scene fitter ever. We'll put on a performance with a huge cardboard russian warship, and you'll come out with it. Then I'll come out from the other side with an organ, just like the one the russian ship's heading for.

There's another dude, a middle-aged man from Slobozhanshchyna. He's the craziest nationalist and the truest Banderite you can imagine. Next to him, lads from Western Ukraine feel embarrassed and almost like muscovites, tolerant of russians. "I'll drink their blood. I'll tear out their liver with my teeth. I'll wash myself with the katsaps' blood," he tells us. "Damn it, I'll cut off their ears and hang them on a wire, make myself a beautiful necklace...".

For the first four months, no one touched alcohol, not even a thought about it. But everyone was smoking like chimneys due to the stress. I started smoking even though I'd never smoked before. Now, there's a bit of trouble with discipline – but only with those who had issues even before the war. The fact is, war doesn't change anyone. It can reveal your true nature or hide it temporarily due to stress, but it doesn't change you. We had one bloke who loved his "firewater." He'd find it, somehow, even in a field under fire – a miracle, really. He annoyed everyone with his drunkenness, so the captain complained, and counterintelligence came to have a word with him. A few days later, he came back a changed man, not a drop of alcohol in him. To be honest, I think it's temporary. War hasn't changed anyone I've seen. We had three commanders appointed by just pointing a finger. This is the Territorial Defense – all volunteers, hardly anyone with military knowledge. If Ukrainians didn't have the blood of Cossacks, true warriors, if we weren't defending our own land, if we couldn't organize ourselves, the Territorial Defense wouldn't exist. But the opposite is true. People without experience gain it through sheer motivation and perform real feats. So, three commanders got their positions because they had some organizational experience. Two of them were healthy, handsome, cool blokes. The third was thin, pale, and as dumb as a donkey. His subordinates made fun of him because he was so incompetent that practically every decision he made could have been a death sentence for the fighters. Now, fast forward six months. What do you think happened next? The first two: one resigned due to illness, and the other transferred to headquarters. The third one, like the foolish youngest son in a fairy tale, became an amazing commander. He learned a lot and is genuinely respected by the soldiers. He worked hard, studied, analyzed his mistakes, and endured ridicule, but he improved himself. From what I've personally seen, the coolest in the war are often the things you never expect. The dark horses. Not always, but if a person has the motivation, they work on themselves, overcome obstacles, and become a top-notch fighter capable of making effective decisions for themselves and their subordinates. That third brother, the fool, according to all the laws of fairy tales, became a platoon commander, and then a company commander. That's right. Overall, our problems, besides some dodgy leadership, are our less-than-ideal training and equipment. But that's also linked to the leadership issues. In April, they took us near Izium – us, the light infantry and support – to one of the hottest spots on the front at the time. One of the most dangerous places on the planet. We cleared out several villages in the district, then got loaded onto a bus at night for the journey. There were 150 of us on a bus meant for 50 people, so everyone rode standing up, fully armed, in bulletproof vests weighing several kilos – along with all our gear, helmets, and personal weapons. Everyone's very polite to each other, I suspect because of the presence of machine guns and 120 rounds of ammo each. So, there are no fights at all. When it comes to machine guns, there's no backing down, and no one's ready for that

kind of confrontation. Our journey lasted 8 hours, with the lights off, weaving through forests. We nearly had several accidents. At dawn, we arrived in a village just in time for Easter. We finally got off the bus, and the first thing I saw was a beautiful temple with bells ringing. Houses all around were burned, looking like something out of World War II. The katsaps had just left. In the middle of all the destruction was a church. The sun was rising, it was Easter, the bells were ringing loudly, and we were finally off that bus that nearly killed us. I said, "What a sight!" They told me not to relax too much, as the church belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate. The priests were ringing the bells to signal the Russians that Ukrainian fighters had entered the village. Then we were given a can of stew, crackers, and 100 grams of alcohol each. Before the trip, we had stood in dampness and water for days. As I later understood, the alcohol was both a treat for the holiday and a preventive measure to keep us from catching colds. It was the only time during the entire war that I saw alcohol being allowed and even offered from above. I didn't drink; I refused. I felt something was going to happen, and I needed to keep my wits about me. Sure enough, after half an hour, we were taken further to our position. Everything was just burning along the Sloviansk–Izium highway. It was the summer contact line, and we stopped there. It's unbelievable when you're in positions for 5 or 6 days with fire coming from both sides – from the katsaps and from ours. It's crucial for understanding yourself as a person: being on guard while all your sworn brothers are sleeping, and your partner is dozing off. About 30 people and their lives depend on you – will you fall asleep too, tired, at night, in absolute silence? Will I be able to open fire if the orks start advancing? I asked myself that then. During all the months of my service in the war, I didn't kill anyone or even see the enemy once, not even on the front. That's modern warfare for you. There was a recent incident in Khmelnytskyi. I was walking down a civilian street and made a small mistake at the crosswalk because I was in a hurry. The police decided to fine me and issued a ticket. I mentioned that I was from the military and showed them my military card. They looked at each other and murmured, "Why didn't you tell us, mate? We would have let you off for that violation. But we've already started, so sorry." I thought to myself: why should I be allowed to break the rules just because I'm military? I'm the same citizen as everyone else. There shouldn't be any grounds for forgiving someone for a violation just because of their status. I didn't like that idea at all. So, of course, I paid the fine.

4. Prague. Theatre. It was my then-husband's birthday on February 24th. He's an actor and was rehearsing a play. We learned in the morning what had happened in Ukraine. We wondered if it was possible to celebrate something personal at a time like this. Or perhaps, more than ever, personal moments were important. Should we think about others? How should we behave at all? By devoting time and thought to these small, sweet rituals, we remain compassionate and empathetic. Do we have the right to continue indulging in our happy little things? We watched the Ukrainians closely. We talked many times and tried to imagine what people in our country felt and experienced in 1968 during the Soviet invasion. We spoke and declared that nothing like that should ever be allowed to happen again. It simply couldn't be allowed. This isn't just a return to the feelings of the Cold War – it's a return to the feelings of a world war, a war in Europe, where we once again have to use words like "genocide." I couldn't imagine that we could still find ourselves in a Europe ravaged by the tanks of a convulsing empire led by insane and bloody murderers. Even though I didn't know all the details about the situation in Ukraine at the time, we all sensed that the influence of pro-Russian disinformation was growing, even in our country. Our president, commander-in-chief, and his entourage were under this influence for years, shamelessly receiving personal financial benefits. For years, they sold not just our country, but also the entire European idea, to selfish, ruthless, and cannibalistic interests. And we knew it. We watched them lead us to ruin. We didn't follow them blindly – no, we defended ourselves as best we could, but we fought with the weapons of dialogue and culture. We didn't realize the grave danger posed by callous hearts who only want to destroy our world. I felt a deep shame that, partly due to my own conformity and desire for a quiet, comfortable life, people just 800 kilometers from Prague had to resort to real weapons to protect their lives, their homes, and their beliefs – beliefs that we promised to share and build upon together. My biggest fear was that Europe might collapse again. That it would make half-hearted decisions, hesitate, argue, and think only of its own interests. That Europe will lack the courage, as

it has many times in history. It seems that the human race, in its inventive cruelty, cannot be re-educated. Everything seemed so normal. The Prague sun was shining on the cobblestones. As I walked down the main street from Wenceslas Square – the site of all the famous Czech national holidays, on my way to our theater – I suddenly heard excited voices in a foreign language. I realized that I couldn't distinguish Russian from Ukrainian. So, I made a clear decision to start learning Ukrainian. Almost immediately, we began implementing all the forms of help and support we could offer at the theater. We started, of course, in great confusion, unprepared for the situation, just instinctively wanting to do something, anything, that was possible. It was heartbreaking knowing we couldn't help everyone. My colleague, a radical left-wing playwright, was terrified of the threat of nuclear war. Even my friends tried to downplay the situation, saying it wasn't our war. That we should focus on our own people first. My sister, who's married to a Serb, told me not to call our father. She said we had opposing opinions and that I didn't understand that everything wasn't black and white. I told her that the killing of women and children is as black and white as it gets – there are no shades of grey in that. She mentioned that nobody cared about the bombing of Serbian children either. That hit me. The deep-seated contradiction that has been growing for years, not just in society but also within families, now forces us to make decisions we've been avoiding. We can no longer ignore the painful truth that we stand on different sides, and there may be no going back. The pain that unites Ukrainians, making them truly heroic, also exposes the selfishness that points to a tragic abyss in our European countries. But I also saw the incredible strength and determination of our citizens to help refugees, their selfless efforts to lend a hand. Even those who hesitated had to look inside themselves, talk to their conscience, and clarify when they could no longer avoid taking a stand. They did so without losing dignity or self-respect. It's this innate desire not to bow before bloody attackers that pushes people to fight. There's only one way forward – to fight. That's all I can say.

5. In Kaunas, we've been organizing many events for Ukrainians, taking in refugees and helping them find housing, work, and some peace of mind. We know it's just a drop in the ocean compared to what they've lost. We see in their eyes a desperate desire to go back home, no matter what. Back to their bombed-out cities and villages, where in peacetime they used to travel joyfully to Europe and beyond in search of a better life. Now, in their time of need, they only want to return home, for the most part. We raise funds, buy food, and even drones for the Ukrainian military, sending them over. We also send aid to Mariupol and other towns. When I talk to them, they seem lost, shocked. I ask how they are, what they feel, what they want. Their answer: "I don't know. I don't know how I feel. I'm here, but it feels like I'm not. It's horrifying." They're searching for ways to get back to Ukraine; they don't like anything here. They feel like nobody here. And we know who's to blame, no matter how much Russia tries to play the victim. We know who the Russians are. There are few of them in Kaunas, but many in Vilnius. Over there, they do their crazy actions like the Immortal Regiment, walking with carnations, howling. It's clear how this will end. It should be obvious to our authorities. I've been to Ukraine twice. The first time was with my disabled friend; we won a trip to the Eurovision Song Contest held in Kyiv in 2017. We were hesitant to go, but we were so exhausted that we decided to take the risk. That trip allowed me to discover the beauty of the city and the country, and I met some wonderful people. Later that year, I took my daughter to Odesa, to the sea. One of the strongest impressions was the presence of many Russians there. You could immediately recognize them by their accent and behavior. Once, a Russian man standing and smoking touched my youngest daughter with his cigarette. Instead of apologizing, he started yelling at us and almost tried to attack me. When everything started on February 24th, I felt like I was in a fog. But despite all the Soviet and post-Soviet narratives and propaganda, I never had a shadow of a doubt about who was guilty, who the aggressor was.

1. Dream on April 19, 2017. I'm strolling down a street in some unknown city, and I hear people's cries. They're chanting loudly, demanding "Give me meat!" over and over again. They want this product to be freely available at fair prices. I join the crowd and find myself at a market square with many stalls, a sort of impromptu bazaar. The Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, is nearby. The crowd is mostly young, chanting and raising their fists. Their chants start to sound like cries of

someone in intense pain, almost like an exorcism. It's a cacophony of roaring, howling, and crying, all blending together in a disturbing ecstasy. Suddenly, law enforcement in black uniforms and helmets appear. They start picking out activists from the crowd, lifting them up one by one, and forcibly putting them into their vehicles. Those taken away show no resistance, almost as if they're boldly facing what awaits them. Feeling the tension rise, I decide to move along the edge of the crowd. I come across a stage where elderly artists are performing. They seem ashamed, their songs are dull and hopelessly outdated. During the long pauses between songs, they seem to shrink and squirm, clearly suffering from shyness and other complexes that artists shouldn't have. Their costumes are garish, covered in rhinestones or other sparkles, representing the epitome of bad taste and kitsch. Here, there's a strong sense of longing for times long past, when everything seemed brighter and clearer. Some are trying hard to impose this view on the younger generation, diminishing their perspective and right to exist freely. There's also a cozy, but stifling atmosphere, like a place where you can hide away from the world's complexities, but it smells like a swamp, stagnant and suffocating. As I look around, I realize we're no longer outdoors but in a building, a dimly lit and smoky hall. It feels like a state palace of workers' solidarity, or maybe an old oven. Suddenly, the stagehand starts messing with the lights to make the artist look his best. He finds what seems like the perfect palette, but everything ends up in a dull grey-green-blue cold shade. The artist is confused and embarrassed, unsure how to please the audience. He's fidgeting and clearly wishes he could just disappear off the stage, but he can't. All of a sudden, there are only about fifteen people left in the audience, and even they are slowly trickling out. The ones who stay are old, unattractive, and psychologically broken, with no spark in their eyes. The old man on stage has no enthusiasm either, he's full of insecurities and tries to crack jokes. But his jokes are terrible, not funny at all, just showing that he's a total loser.

2. So, why did I make the move back to Donetsk from Kharkiv? Well, there's really only one good reason for a woman with a child who's trying to start fresh: a relationship. I won't get into the nitty-gritty details, but let's just say I had some hopes for this relationship if I was willing to go back to the occupied territory, to the ridiculous DPR, especially when the specter of a very real war was looming large. Of course, we hoped it wouldn't come to that. We didn't believe it would. But who were we kidding? The people in Donetsk, those who've been there since 2014, have been thoroughly brainwashed. Their tolerance for Russia is unbelievable, even when it's clear that Russia's actions are anything but friendly. In February, when Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine, the mildest response I heard from the locals was, "Well, it's not all black and white."

– They've been bombing us for 8 years...

– But really, their "visits" happened about once a year, mostly on the outskirts of the city where the DPR troops were shuffling, or around the airport or Pisky, in the suburbs of Donetsk.

– It doesn't matter, they've been bombing us for 8 years, we won't forget, we won't forgive!

Tram tickets with the Z symbol. Some zombie-like processions. "Evacuation" of Donetsk residents to Rostov. Every 2–3 hours, I'd send the same question to my friends in Kharkiv: how are you? Are you okay? There were nerves and arguments with relatives. My father is in Kyiv, which is under shelling. My mother lives in Simferopol and loves Russia very much.

– You should leave with your daughter, – she tells me, – it's dangerous in Donetsk.

– I know, – I respond, – but where and how do I go? Alone, without support.

– To Russia, of course, go to Russia. If you don't go to Russia, it'll be the biggest mistake of your life, I'm telling you.

My grandmother keeps drilling into me: "Europe is decaying. Gays are everywhere. Soon they'll all freeze without Russian gas. We won't forget, we won't forgive. We'll bomb Warsaw and Berlin, and everyone will starve without Mother Russia. Kiev in three days, bomb, bomb, bomb." I sob quietly while sitting on the bus. I try not to show to others that I support Ukraine because I'm fully responsible for my little daughter. I lift my head and see columns of soldiers and their equipment, all heading to kill my friends. They bombed kindergartens, maternity wards, churches, nuclear power plants, residential areas of cities and villages. May 11 is a big holiday in the DPR, Republic Day. The day before, I broke up with my boyfriend, argued with all my relatives, including my own mother, and left just in time for this "unbelievable" holiday. Now, my daughter and I are in one of

the Baltic countries. I was a displaced person or a refugee during the ATO. I became one again when the full-scale invasion began. I really don't want this for the third time, and I don't wish the same fate for other countries, except for Ukraine. I will probably never return to my Donetsk, which is my hometown and which I love very much. Maybe I'll come back when it's all over. But my Donetsk is gone and will never be the same.

3. Kyiv started getting shelled. My parents called from Enerhodar, asking me to come back quickly, to hide. On the very first day, a classmate and I escaped from Kyiv with her parents, and after a few hours, we were in Dnipro. I spent the night with them there, and the next day I continued my journey home. None of us are military strategists, so we thought this was the right move. Turns out, it was the opposite. While Kyiv wasn't captured, they soon arrived in our Zaporizhzhia region. I drove and saw many of our soldiers, convoys of equipment. I was calm, thinking the huge nuclear power plant in Enerhodar would be protected. But in early March, the Russian army reached the city, with only one road leading to it, which we blocked. They had about 100 pieces of equipment. They started shooting from tanks and eventually entered the city. Local residents, who had never been particularly pro-Ukrainian, began rallying in incredible numbers with flags and symbols of Ukraine, with molotov cocktails and anti-tank defenses. But none of this helped – the Russians stubbornly pretended they were liberating someone and that we were happy to see them. People bought everything in bulk: matches, salt, flour, groceries, cereals, sugar, canned goods, everything. The Russians banned imports, for an unknown purpose, but they didn't allow any trade or humanitarian aid. It seemed like they wanted the city to starve, I don't know. They approached the nuclear power plant and started shooting at a building nearby. There was a rumor about a traitor who made a deal with them, telling them how to shoot to not destroy the power plant but to make their blackmail work. They started shooting, the shift chief was yelling at them over the loudspeaker to stop, and our soldiers herded civilians into the bunker and decided to stand their ground, to defend to the last. There were far fewer Ukrainian fighters. Then the scientists and workers of the nuclear plant asked the soldiers not to fight near the NPP. It would risk a colossal tragedy, so they couldn't allow it. "We understand all the risks – but the Russians do not," the scientists said. "Just look at them." Fighting there was impossible. Problems began with supplies, with the availability of medicines in pharmacies. Everything started running out in the city. The only way out of this situation – since the neighboring villages were also occupied and the Russians forbade them to trade freely, despite having many farmers – was to bring goods here. They couldn't sell their harvest to Ukraine outside the local occupation, but somehow they managed to agree on selling grain to Enerhodar – for a symbolic amount, as there was almost no grain left in the city, but cash was scarce. Due to the complex system of roadblocks, with many risks and bureaucratic hurdles, some products did arrive in the city. Approximately once every two months, Russia also let through humanitarian aid – purely for nuclear plant workers and their families. For the Russians, it was important that the nuclear plant worked, but they didn't care about everyone else. Similarly, we ended up with some drugs and medicines which were distributed to all in Enerhodar who needed them, through a kind of barter system. There were also underground volunteers who helped out – they even collected donations for the Armed Forces, for drones. Of course, the Russians began actively searching for them, for obvious reasons. There was an underground system for transporting necessary goods between the population – public transport drivers cleverly hid parcels and delivered them like postmen. These humanitarian shipments, of course, weren't legal according to the occupation laws. Legally, the only option was to suffer. The partisans contacted and still communicate with the "big land" and pass on the coordinates of exactly where the Russian army is located, but it is, of course, on the territory of the nuclear power plant as well. And nothing can hit there by definition. Orks roam the city, checking phones; when they announced a referendum for joining Russia, they came to houses and terrorized people. Speaking Ukrainian is forbidden, mobile communications are tapped, and there are Russian posters everywhere like "Moscow is a hero city!" But the most interesting thing is that they don't even hang their own tricolors as banners, but... Soviet red flags. For some reason. All this, in fact, is like a wild nuclear mental hospital, not an ideology. In the end, I stayed there for 2 months. While it was still somewhat safe to leave, my parents sent me away. You have to go and study, live. My father works at the NPP – so he won't be released, and my mother doesn't want to

leave him alone. I drove through this system of roadblocks, getting shaken and checked. Now I call my parents constantly, we keep in touch. It's good that they're okay. We can't talk about anything too urgent or important. They're being listened to, and they might have very serious problems.

4. I believe that every Ukrainian man, if not every day, then every other day, has thought and will think about whether he should go and personally pick up a weapon. And that's normal. Every decent man, I mean, not those spineless jerks who fled to Monaco in their fancy cars, bought with money stolen from us. When this is all over, they'll come back and lie that our big victory is their merit. And I think that we will deal with them harshly, without sentimentality. And if we're serious – without the strongest possible anti-corruption war, we simply can't survive, even if we defeat whore russia. Sooner or later, this slut will return, and to prevent that, we have to be strong. They sold everything we had, dismantled the army, and handed it over for scrap metal. They signed some papers in Budapest, and we got nothing from it. Well, except for the war, of course. In short, here's the deal: there will be a second war, against the oligarchy and the corrupt scumbags. And don't even think otherwise, you maggots. They betrayed us and screwed us over – with our money. We had resources and we should have used them so that our children wouldn't be killed. It's just that someone converted these opportunities into Maybachs and Monacos for decades, that's all. So why am I geared up for war? I have four children, a wife, and parents, but not a day goes by that I don't think about whether to go and really start thinning out the russian population with my own hands. That's just how it is in the current war – even if you're hundreds of kilometers from the front, you're still vulnerable, and this rear won't protect you from russian missiles. And when you live in Krasnokutsk, which is 60 kilometers from the front, what kind of rear and what kind of normal civilian life can we talk about here? We also have a lot of gas fields in the region, so you're literally sitting on a powder keg. Once, idiots started shooting at us from a rocket launcher while I was just collecting firewood – then it started whistling so much that I thought a new gas field had opened up. I thought I was a goner. And half the village too. It was insanely loud! I became a volunteer on the very first day. This is our land, we're not going anywhere. We're staying here as a family and we'll defend ourselves as best we can – that's the agreement I made with my wife, and I've kept my word ever since. I'm a peaceful warrior, always have been. I've always fought for something good and alive to happen here. Not for corruption. At first, I did try to join the TRO, but they told me, "Don't mess around with this, you have 4 kids and no experience. You don't need that." So, together with my friends, we organized water and food for the soldiers. We brought clothes from the western regions, from places like the Rivne region. We set up our mini-TRO: built roadblocks, patrolled, guarded the perimeter of the settlement. My best man, he has several cars. I called him on the 25th and said, "Where are you?" He said, "I'm planning to leave Kharkiv and head west." I told him, "Don't make off, come and patrol with us, especially in your Mitsubishi Pajero Sport." He joined us and patrolled with us. On March 1st, we were in the city and heard how the Kharkiv Regional State Administration was getting messed up – it was a fucking blast. So I said, "Brother, go!" We weren't far from there, it was intense. We raised money for a thermal imager for the guys, brought medicines from Rivne. My wife is a saint, she found us some grants. With many children plus the war, my family had some budget, you know? Because a father can't be both a hunter and a protector at the same time. We were looking for sleeping bags, I remember, there was always such a problem. Together with the same cousin in the Opel Milano, we brought sweets to our soldiers, even kids baked them. Everyone united, everyone wanted to make their contribution. All this took us several months, there was no time to think about anything else. Not on time. Then it got a little easier. But what will happen tomorrow? As a father of 4 children, I have absolutely no idea. We are dealing with those fucking degenerative kremlin psychopaths. We're all just together, defending our land. I think it should be this way. No one is deciding for us here, we're determining how we should live ourselves, and that stupid bitch from the kremlin has never understood this for centuries! I think it's cool to take part in such historical events, and also involve your little ones. We are together, we are strength. And what about the russians at this time? They howl about us having biolaboratories, "external management," and they bribe the wives of mobilized russians who died here, don't they? Mobs. An interesting detail I noticed: our soldiers don't like to say "Bye" or "Goodbye" to each

other. It's better if he waves his hand and leaves. The word "Farewell" is generally prohibited. Because we value each other.

1. Was it or wasn't it? I don't know at all. So, yeah. Since I was a teenager, I wanted to become an officer, but it didn't work out. I didn't study at the military department, didn't become an officer. I don't even know why I wanted to. Simply, if suddenly there is a war, I thought to myself – so as not to be purely cannon fodder or a brainless executor. It seemed to me that I was capable of thinking. Not bad at all. Even in difficult conditions. Well, I tested it in practice. It all started and I ended up in a volunteer group. We helped the military. They killed russians, and we were their arms, legs, and backs. The commander, the big boss, told us to go there and there, bring "BK" – ammunition. And men are such a thing that when they are afraid – and in war, shit, it's scary – they become gambling boys. So, 6 people could cope with that task... so twice as many of us went. Because everyone wanted to. Because the commander said so. We drove half the city in the back of a truck, without a roof, in the damp February cold. We were like canned food in an iron tin, it was scary to death. The city was systematically shelled by the bastards – mostly at night, and russians also fired at civilian quarters and from time to time broke through wherever they could in small groups. This is not counting those bastards who were waiting here in advance to start acting as saboteurs synchronously with the regular troops of russia – the so-called "canned food". We smoked and bragged to each other about who knows what about the war, like, you can't shave before the war because you'll happen to drive like that with the top open, and in the cold February wind, a draft walks a lot across your smooth cheeks, that's unnecessary. We drove, civilians looked at us, the driver honked at them, and they threw up their fists as a sign of greeting. They thought that we were going on some important business, but we ourselves did not clearly understand where and why we were going. Because, apparently, none of us knew what the "BK" was. We arrived. It was a military unit, moreover, in the area where I lived for several years, I walked past it a million times. A few soldiers with machine guns were standing near the gate, they were obviously nervous. The russians tried to break into the city – and would immediately come to them. And even before that, obviously, they could expect a rocket at any moment – or more than one. The first thing we saw: huge barrels in which the fighters were burning some documentation in piles. So, they were leaving the base, and they were not going to leave anything, including weapons. Well, we came just for it. Our and their commanders agreed on this. We began to approach the checkpoint – and they immediately did not like this large crowd of unknown persons. Instead of 2 or 3 soldiers, there were suddenly 5 or 6, all with assault rifles. Our chief, who was the only one with a weapon, began to explain who we were and why we were there, he took out the documents. He was a cool guy, he fought in the ATO, he was intellectually not a genius, but a real warrior with the experience of real combat encounters. He had an earring in his ear and a specific look – it seems to me that only those who killed have this. You can't call him a fool or a coward. Together with him, we were calm, we were only loaders – a brainless herd that could not even leave in normal numbers, so now there was a question of how to put everything we needed into the transport – because there were too many of us. But this is already looking ahead. In fact, the military did not like us, it was clear right away. To our surprise, they told us that they had not been given any information about our possible arrival. Our ATO officer began to contact the commanders but they did not get in touch, did not answer. The military frowned. It became hot. We had one fighter, all others were without weapons. There were only five of them here with assault rifles, and on the territory of the base there were much more. You can't fight with your own people during the war... But what should we fight with – bare hands? But at the gate, right here, there were more of us, even without weapons. And that already stressed them out. It became clear that until they understood who we were – we would not be able to go away. And our management had sent us on a mission... and put dick. Then it became known why this happened – just at that time, no less, and no more, than the mayor of the city himself came to our base there. The management rushed to give him all possible attention and they really did not care about us. So we couldn't get in touch, the local military were freaking out, nervous and also started checking with their superiors. It became very, very tense, nervous. The chief warrior at the gate, their commander finally said:

– Stand where you stand. I will now ask ours again whether you should have come. If not, we will find out who you are.

He chatted on the walkie-talkie, quite calmly – but we were not calm. Something didn't go according to plan. I began to regret going on this assignment. We were in the middle of the city, there was an enemy attack there – and our own people suspected us of something. Damn shit. Why did they have several Kalashnikovs against our empty hands, what threat were we to them? The chief at the checkpoint ended the conversation, grunted into the radio that he understood. His subordinates watched him intently, catching his every move. For some reason, they were all the most tense of us, although we were the ones without weapons.

– I asked, – he quickly removed the Kalash from the fuse and pulled the shutter, – they don't know anything about you. And now face into the snow.

– But we are friendlies, men... – one of ours, but that soldier was no longer joking:

– With your faces in the snow, I said, motherfuckers!

We all landed on our stomachs in the dirty, cold snow. Our own soldiers, 5 or 6 men, aimed at our heads. It wasn't a childish game, their loaded weapons were actually aimed at my head and I was in some infinitesimal fraction of a second from death – if one of them lost their nerve. We were in the middle of the city, where there were battles on the outskirts, sounds of artillery were heard, and we were suspected of being SRG or something like that. Passers-by walking down the street suddenly started giggling at us and took out their phones to take videos for stories. The soldiers rushed to them, held the perimeter, one of them left us at gunpoint. On the real front sight of a real loaded Kalashnikov, ready to fire. Martial law, who would then figure out who we were and why it had happened. Everything was being resolved then. The soldiers quickly checked the phones and documents of those civilians and drove them away. It was obvious how scary the military were. What about me at that time? I didn't care, I was not even afraid. It was too late to be afraid. Life was almost gone. I just tried not to breathe, so as not to provoke the frightened armed guy. Apparently, they were not going to kill us – because it was impossible to hide a few people like that, if they killed us in the middle of the street. Our driver ran away and that only worsened our position in the eyes of the fighters, they treated us even more hostile then. Our chief – gently, slowly, but allowed himself to be disarmed and knelt down. All our documents were not believed. And I only thought about one thing: fuck your mother. We were about to be killed – by our friendlies. During the war with the fucking enemy, when we, a group of volunteers, wanted to help the troops destroy Russia. And there was the payback. And then there would be some misinformation that I was actually a traitor, and my death was justified by the fact that I was a traitor. Shit, they always said that initiative is punished in the army. It was impossible to go anywhere, if I got out of that by some miracle – then never again. Damn it, I wouldn't lift a finger to help anyone else in this war, I'd sink to the bottom somewhere and I would quietly wait for everything. Only thus and no other way. The military thought everything over, but while they were deciding, one idiot from among our "loaders" next to me started shaking his hand out of nerves. I was one step closer to death.

– Stop doing it.

He hiccupped and shook, a psycho unbalanced. On the contrary, I became cold and apathetic out of fear, but I was thinking hard. His movements could cause fire on himself and on me – and there we could all be died. Hypothetically. Because some people, damn it, can't handle things with their right hand.

– Hell, I said – don't jerk your fucking hand! – I hissed to him, he was 15 centimeters from me, lying and eating snow mixed with dog shit.

– But who are you to me? – the fool snarled, but he didn't jerk his hand anymore. So, he still controlled her. One of the soldiers stood over me like a mountain. We were walking on a knife edge. He ordered me to get up, I got up. Then he allowed me to get the documents – with one hand. It looked like some kind of bullshit, cheap old action movies. Apparently, someone seen too much them as a child, and now they were holding me at gunpoint. Only there I was in my own district, where now he, the defender of my country, was aiming at my forehead – because I wanted to help him overthrow the occupier. And somehow such schedules were not funny at all. It was not so scary to die, as it was disgusting – with the glory of what I was not. He opened my passport, I told him all my data from there by heart, he also saw the journalist's card. That somehow cheered them all up.

They also approached some random guy from our band and did the same thing to him. Identification of the person. And at that time, after 20 minutes of lying face down in the mud, they even allowed me to stand, although my knees were shaking a bit. That boy also passed the exam brilliantly and their ice towards us began to melt. We once again explained what had happened, laid out the whole situation on the shelves. They looked at us like idiots (quite deservedly so, by and large) and immediately asked, who the leader was? Our disarmed fighter was obviously in no hurry to be one. But that idiot who was shaking his hand next to me wanted leadership, it flashed in his eyes. I realized that if that happened, we could be to become the 200th within 5 minutes.

– I'm the boss, – I said. The jerk was offended, but did not argue. All others were not opposed. I wouldn't need it for nothing, however I was saving my life, unfortunately – in the literal sense of the word. And I was also saving my honor, because I didn't want my mother to find out in a couple of days that her son turned out to be a collaborator who tried with several unknown people, with whom he had nothing in common, no connections, to storm the military part... barehanded. The soldiers treated me to a cigarette and everyone else who wanted to have another smoke, too. One of them went through all of ours and groped everyone and checked their documents. One of the boys was found with a package of hemp. Well, – I thought – now it's definitely over for us. Again. But no, the military got angry and just besieged him with hard abuse. They forced him to pour hemp under his feet and trample it in the dirt, and to solemnly promise that he would never use it again. The soldier who gave me a cigarette told a joke. He even apologized, saying, 'guys, we have no malice against you. It's just times like this, so sorry'. So I risked going all in: try to please the military with my own joke. If they liked it – great, but if not – well, devil knows, he could be buried face down in the ground again. Life at that moment did not particularly belong to us.

– What is the difference between katsap and onion? – I asked. That military man was frowning, he didn't like something anymore. I felt colder between my ribs.

– What exactly?

– When you cut an onion – you cry, – I said. The guy froze. The moment of truth. And then he started to laugh distinctly. Yes, he liked me. So now I was unlikely to be killed. That was already progress. Apparently, they never received a signal from ours. Our driver ran away like a bitch. Our security guard could not contact anyone for the next car to arrive. They didn't want to kill us anymore, but they also didn't want to let us go. So what was going to happen next? A fool who was trembling hand – just like in naive children's literature – turned out to be a foolish boaster. So he began to boast that he could call at least the commander-in-chief if necessary. He knew everyone and everyone respected him. And I stood and thought, 'fuck, the attitude towards us is so-so. He will get everyone now that we will lie down again. But what will save us this time?' We called someone somewhere and in the end, yes, our bodyguard received information that the car would be there. They let us into the territory of the base without it, because we had been at the entrance for half an hour, and it attracted too much attention. And I realized that entering there was like a gate to hell. Anything could go wrong. And if we were held at gunpoint in the middle of the street in front of the people, how would it be on the territory of the military base, under the thunder of artillery nearby, when there was a war? We were wet and dirty, we were walking somewhere to warehouses. A fool like a child wanted to be in charge. I lead a column of guys, because I felt calmer that way. At least I could control the situation, although I had no idea what people did in such a status. On the way, another military border stopped us and asked for the password. The military man, with whom we smoked and to whom I told a joke, did not know the password. Shit. We would now lie face down in the snow again. Now those guys, who were sitting in a special concrete shelter, were straining. He, our guide, who almost killed us 15 minutes ago, whispered to us: do whatever they say. Whatever, guys. And he himself was a step towards them. The barrels of the machine guns were raised. They were also afraid, we were a bunch of unknown bodies for them, and there were 2–3 of them there. Shit, army guys were part of the same military base – but they were divided into groups and did not recognize each other! Now he was almost in our role, almost. He chirps sweetly at them until they finally accepted that we were not strangers. But fuck your mother, I thought. I was eager to live until the evening. We moved on. Warehouses. We were waiting for the truck. It was not there. They didn't answer us again – ours bosses. Damn! The fool was doing something again and now I was trying to call whoever I needed, because I had to shut the fool up by the belt.

He was the only one who went around and incited the boys against me, never in my life had a rivalry been so indifferent to me – and never in my life had it been so live–important. Because I had not yet seen anything adequate from the boy. I finally got through, we spoke with my commander. We were waiting. The military told me to line up my boys and come to them. We lined up. Not knowing how to do it, I did it. They stood in a line above the curb, they had to be clearly visible, me and our defender with a weapon, as well as three military men, were smoking and waiting for the truck. It had been gone for a very, very long time; I called my commander from our base again. He said he did what he could. The attitude towards us was noticeably colder – and the fool was whispering something to the boys. None of them were hardy soldiers; they were tired of standing still, wet in the cold. A tense situation was saved by "the incoming strike". Somewhere very close. We all rushed to a shelter behind a special concrete wall, of which there were several here. rusnia were fighting somewhere near there. We were in the middle of a military unit where everyone was at a loss due to the expectation of bombardment. By the way, blows would really take place there, but a few days later. We were psychologically stressing those soldiers, at the same time we were enemies of the russians, and we were not a group, but just a band of guys who got together to foolishly be killed by friendlies, because we didn't have enough sense not to look like stupid thugs. And one more incoming strike. And another one. All the vigilance about us dissipated in the common trouble, together with the cadre military, we crouched behind the concrete partitions time after time. However, against something more serious – they could not save us. In the end, a miracle happened – our transport pulled into the territory. A school bus, completely private, not military equipment at all. We were going to carry a shitload of weapons on that, and it was the only thing that made sense to me that day. They opened warehouses, we loaded boxes with kalashnikovs and cartridges, I coordinated the process without any particular desire for myself – because once I started to be a leader, I could not suddenly stop being one. It didn't work like that, everyone was looking at me and waiting for it. In a stressful situation, I positioned myself in a certain way. Someone showed the best endurance, earned trust in himself. Now all but one fool were like your pawns. And in that situation, they needed it, not even you. I had to think and give instructions, they loaded and waited for my decisions. The driver, who came to replace the coward, got everything and winked mischievously at me. Katsaps again and again poured their projectiles somewhere very close. Every time we, like a bunch of sparrows, flew away and fell behind some wall, holding our heads in our hands. However, the problem was that those were the walls of military warehouses and we could see for ourselves – there were enough items for secondary detonation there. We endlessly wanted to run away from there, we cursed everything. In thoughts. But that was impossible. Someone noticed – there was strange activity in the windows opposite. It turned out that there were houses with windows overlooking military warehouses – but civilians lived there. Fuck, ingeniously! And an unknown person in one of the windows was constantly touching the curtain and even seemed to be chatting on the phone. We could see it from there. Eyes were big in fear. Well, fuck, fuck. The army guys were speeding us up, but at the last minute they decided to add a few more of those crates of weapons. All the same, it would soon burn or be captured by the enemy. No one said it, but everyone felt the mood. It was necessary to make the most of what was available, and about the pieces of legal documents – they would find out later how much bureaucratic experience they had! We filled a half–bus with boxes of BK as much as we could fit. It didn't look like a school bus at all, because from the windows you could see not the heads of the schoolchildren, but characteristic green wooden boxes. In the conditions of war, that could mean only one thing – and that's how it really was. We somehow got on the bus. I was so scared that I wanted to go back on foot, but not on a bus – after everything that had happened. We were shepherded through the window of house by unknown persons, for a long time, that's for sure. And now we were just easy prey. We only had one guard with a loaded machine gun, so we still had half a city to go. Uploaded. I screamed suddenly:

– Glory to Ukraine!

My guys respond:

– Glory to the heroes!

Someone adds:

– Glory to the nation!

All of us, loudly:

– Death to our enemies!

Another voice chimes in:

– Ukraine!..

And once more, all together:

– is above all!

Then I interject:

– putin..!

It leads to general laughter and a resounding chorus:

– ...is a dickhead!

Our skilled driver navigated the bus past all the checkpoints with care. The chants inside the bus lifted our spirits incredibly. I finally understood their purpose – they're like sacred words, our own passwords. We bid farewell to our new friends, with whom we shared smokes, sought shelter from explosions, and who could have easily ended our lives, damn it. The internal security forces, who were ready to target us just moments ago, now looked at our bus with approval as we transported some of the weapons destined for the cause. I raised my hand in a clenched fist. They, these soldiers, did the same in return. We were on our way. The guys at the burning barrels waved and destroyed documents, creating columns of flame and smoke. It was an incredibly intense, dramatic, powerful scene. We were like a snowball, rolling on. There was thunder in the distance. War. They smiled at us, I raised my fist again and got the same response. My boys waved back. Finally, we were on our way out. The driver hit the gas, and we speeded through the almost empty city streets like a swallow. There was nobody around, just the sounds of war, thunder, and the evening. We were alive. For then we looked around in all directions, checking all the cars that might be following us, and it was not funny, even though it might have looked like a clownish spy chase. There were very few cars on the road, but each one seemed suspicious. My heart was pounding out of my chest. I imagine someone firing a mortar at us from the bushes. There probably wouldn't be any pain, just a sudden end. No one would ever know where I went. It would all be over in an instant. We raced through the city under the still quite sunny sky until we reached our base at the end of the mission. At the checkpoint, in our yard, we disembarked. Someone said "unload," but we told him to go to hell. We'd been through such an initiation that nothing else could compare. The tough guy who accompanied us gave me a pat on the back, and we hugged for the first time.

– This has been quite the adventure, – I remarked.

– That's a load of crap. I wasn't stressed at all. But in the ATO, when you're under artillery fire, it's terrifying.

I didn't believe him. We were all scared stiff. But the mission was accomplished; we brought back even more than required. Now we were a group of tired, hungry boars still buzzing on adrenaline. Two things stuck out in my mind at that moment. Firstly, everyone except our group couldn't care less about us, whether we were heroes or not. Half the people at the base by then knew the story, but it was just another detail in a hectic and exciting day. Secondly, I headed to where they were serving food. My boys stopped me right away, like, what's the plan now? We were all in our twenties and thirties, some even in their forties. A little desperate adventure had made me a leader for them, a role I didn't appoint myself to, and no one else did either. It was both funny and touching. All I wanted was for us to survive, complete the mission, and especially not die in disgrace – because of our own stupidity. That would've been the worst, leaving behind questions about who I really was, or worse, if we were seen as saboteurs.

– What's the plan? – they asked. This could have been the triumph of a lifetime for that fool; half a dozen of his newly appointed subordinates were staring at him in awe. He was a commander, amidst war, with all the romance and coolness, and all the ensuing crap. I figured I should just go grab some food.

– Guys, I have no clue what we should do. I'm going to eat. Good luck to you all too!

In the days that followed, they followed me a bit longer, respectfully nodding their heads – as if something heavy was weighing on them. When we met again, they shook my hand firmly and warmly. It felt completely out of place. Shit happens. And of course, it's very unifying. I knew

nothing about what to do or how to lead, yet I felt a deep respect for them, and I believe it was mutual.

5. Chernihiv. I work in a local theater. When the shelling started – right on the 24th – we don't have a subway here. We invited people to take shelter in the basement of the theater, where there's a recording studio. We showed movies, organized some volunteer activities. With no signals from the theater management, who seemed to have disappeared, we had to fend for ourselves. Only after the city was retaken by the Armed Forces did the management of our institution resurface, saying they were here all along. But let's start from the beginning. During the night, the orcs shelled the city heavily; it was a nightmare. Even in daylight, the danger was great, so to avoid risking everyone, only one person at a time was allowed to run from the basement to the store, rotating like that. It was a delicate balance. My main role during the active battles around Chernihiv was evacuating people from the city. The katsaps semi-surrounded us from the surrounding villages, blocking most directions. There was only one road open – the one through Kulykivka and Poliana to Kyiv. The russians halted at Yagidne, almost reaching the city on the first day, taking local residents as prisoners and shelling the city from there. Driving was risky; they targeted anything that moved. Plus, the traffic jams in Kyiv could last for hours, making it a prime target. Fuel was a major concern. As a driver and courier for all tasks, I transported people, clothes, power banks, medicines, and even flashlights. Sometimes I could get fuel from the military, but it was a hit-or-miss situation. Gasoline was like a rare currency, and the army fighters had priority access. Driving around, you'd see piles of Molotov cocktails, made everywhere at that time, as the military couldn't use them all. If the street was being shelled or if soldiers were running, you'd stop and dive under the car (though it's not diesel, damn it), covering your head with your hands. With no other shelters nearby, you'd find yourself near the bridge, hoping for the best. You're driving, figuring out the action plan on the fly, shuttling civilians to the bridge and back. They'll be taken by boat from there to Kyiv, which is no walk in the park either. You start bringing food from the crossing to the city, brought in from the surrounding villages by the locals. In those days, Ukraine turned into one big, mind-boggling anthill. Everyone pitched in, giving their all. The scum remained scum, unchanged, while the good folks helped out however they could, following the idea of universal goodwill. The russians should have understood, and some did – they're no match for us. That's their vertical system, where every collective farm needs orders from the kremlin. If they're told to go and die for the tsar, they should go, right? That's not us. Here in Ukraine, there's freedom and room for self-expression. We might bicker, but we'll find common ground. And the ground will burn under the feet of any occupier. But they don't believe in this simple fact. Oh well, as long as you come here with sunflower seeds in your pockets, we'll figure the rest out.

1. I'm a blogger with a growing YouTube channel, considering myself a warrior on the information front for a few years now. I found out about the full-scale invasion while I was abroad. I was in shock for days, calling everyone I knew. Turns out, 90% of them were already involved in something: transporting cars from Europe, making camouflage nets, organizing humanitarian aid deliveries. My wife, who's Czech, and I agreed with the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help with regular transfers for Ukrainian refugees. Mostly, they are women with children, some of whom jumped off evacuation trains in February cold wearing slippers, with a child under their arm, not knowing what to do next. We did what we could to assist them. Additionally, our friends and we organized charity concerts in Prague. There are several stories from my experience. One example is the "vasyl" criminals. These are Ukrainians who have lived in the Czech Republic or elsewhere for a long time. They prey on people who lack money and understanding of border processes, promising them jobs and accommodation. They might take these women to Prague, but then demand money for completing supposedly necessary documents that are actually free. Or, even worse, they're forced into sex slavery. It's not hard to imagine that these scammers thrive in such chaos, seeing it as a golden opportunity. My wife and I, along with concerned citizens of Uzhgorod, also confronted these "vasyls" and explained to them why their actions were despicable. I can't say I know of any cases of violence against these fraudsters, nor have I seen or heard of any. Another interesting thing is that while our Ukrainian authorities were promising us barbecues instead of war,

these naive Europeans, as friends told us, had been quietly but purposefully inspecting bomb shelters in their cities since last fall. Their swift organization of aid to Ukraine, when the refugee wave hit, showed that they were prepared in advance. They knew, and so did ours. But they were really ready, and when the time came to supply millions of tons of humanitarian aid, they delivered for us. There are Ukrainian families in Europe where the parents moved there to earn money, say, 10 years ago and stayed. They still identify as Ukrainians, even if their children might not speak Ukrainian. There are many such families. I know some personally, and I've seen that when trouble comes, they also roll up their sleeves. They've collected and donated significant funds, saved up for generators and Starlink internet. Traveling abroad, even just to work picking strawberries in Finland, is incredibly enlightening. You see how the world lives and what we should aspire to, instead of the disgusting soviet–russian world. However, the Western world has much to learn from our people, especially now. I have an acquaintance who, along with his family, spent two weeks under occupation in Dergachy, in the Kharkiv region, without even realizing it. The orcs hit a local orphanage with cluster shells, so this acquaintance, along with a woman and children, lived in the basement for several days without leaving. They only communicated the location of enemy equipment to the Armed Forces. He's an IT expert, working for an American company. During a Zoom call, while the enemy was attacking the local railway station near his house, the Americans asked, "Are you okay?" And he replied, "Everything's just wonderful. I'm ready."

2. Now I'm in cool forces. I've got experience from the ATO. Where? Right in the thick of it, where things are really messy. Let's talk facts. The bastards know how to fight, they learn and adapt. Anyone who says otherwise is, to put it mildly, not an expert. They've got more tech, but also more bureaucracy and corruption. And we've got all that too. Just less of it. So, there's a kind of balance. I read this book a while back, about the Donetsk airport. It's a well-known book by a well-known journalist. Not very smart, in my opinion. It portrays the russians in a caricature, without giving credit to their military skills, but they've got them, no matter how much we like to think otherwise. They've got all sorts of men: trained soldiers, convicts, and scumbags – basically just cannon fodder. What they can't do is improvise or take initiative, whereas we're like jazz musicians, improvising on the spot. They need instructions from moscow for every move they make. And when things go off-script, they're left floundering. Good commanders give us this feeling: there's this mix of fighting spirit and fear that burns inside you, especially during shelling. Overall, our morale is pretty high – I'll stress, as long as there are competent commanders on the ground who know what they're doing. And they won't just let any of their boys go to waste like that. Unlike the russians, they're not capable of it. We trained for 8 years, built an army on a European and world level. We've got it now. The volunteers have been incredible, taking on a huge burden when the state fell short. I remember in 2015, some of the rear services were so useless that when planning to provide for their own soldiers, they immediately factored in support from volunteers. It was pure parasitism. We had everything, damn it, to support the army solely through the efforts of the military-political leadership, to have our own missile troops. Where is all that? Many people will have to answer some serious questions. Like now – to those russians, because they "came here to study" or "got lost" or "didn't know where their commanders were sending them." They're insolent bastards. They knew everything – I can say this as a combat officer for many years – their cover story was clearly planned. It was a game for them to come here, to kill Ukrainians, to destroy orphanages. What about the generals originally from Ukraine – who still have close relatives here? Or the aviation pilots who bombed the cities where their mothers live? There's the famous case with Kremenchuk, Chuhiv. But we'll defeat them, and we'll do it soon. How soon? I think sometime before summer. It's simple: I want to go to the sea, so there's no time to waste. Because of these scumbags, I missed the 2022 season. The sea is my favorite place.

3. I'm with my family – my wife and kids – on the occupied territory. We're in a village beyond the Pechenihiy, across the Siverskyi Donetsk River. The dam and the bridges over it are destroyed. I have a background as a pro-Ukrainian activist, so I'm somewhat known locally. In short, everything is bad. The armed forces started attacking the occupiers, and they retreated a bit from our village. The equipment they left behind was immediately grabbed by the locals. This war has many such

oddities: from russian drone hit by a canned jar to Ukrainian farmers or gypsies taking armored vehicles from the valiant "second world army." After 10 days of occupation, we took a decisive step. On March 5, we walked from the village to Chuhuiv, carrying our children – the bridges were destroyed to the extent that vehicles couldn't pass, but it was possible to walk. In Chuhuiv at that time, there was neither a TRO, nor a military commander, nor local government. All of this somehow existed in theory, but not in practice. But the city was being bombed daily, houses were destroyed, and civilians were killed. Food, medicine – all of it was gone. I posted on Facebook that I was looking for support and help, and I called and involved everyone I knew: friends, acquaintances, and acquaintances of acquaintances. By March 12, the first trucks with humanitarian aid arrived, and we organized volunteers and a warehouse to distribute the aid. The local government didn't lift a finger to help us. It was nonexistent here. We consistently reported on our activities on social media, but we also noticed that the war often turned into a beautiful picture on Facebook. That's all it was. We didn't do it for recognition; we did our job honestly. We helped thousands of local residents, most of whom didn't even say "Thank you." Some even had complaints, and some – despite the bombs, rockets, rocket launchers, and devastation – still stubbornly believed and waited for the russian army. The power of propaganda is incredible. Even when bombs are falling on their homes, some people refuse to see the truth. But there are those who see clearly and stand up against the occupiers. Lately, they've been cracking down hard on collaborators, giving them hefty sentences. As a lawyer and patriot, this inspires me. Change is needed. As a volunteer group, we worked closely with the military for months, supplying them with everything they needed. I've seen the transformation of the Ukrainian army, and it's impressive. If only we could rid ourselves of soviet era bureaucracy and incompetent commanders. Some of these leaders are so bad that soldiers would rather run than follow orders. That says a lot. We worked as a tight-knit family team until the situation in the city improved, and the occupiers retreated. Then our efforts weren't as crucial. That's just how life goes. But it's a bit disheartening that we haven't received any official recognition for our work. It's as if our efforts have gone unnoticed.

4. We left Chuhuiv and ended up in Uzhhorod. For five months, we camped out in a gym, the whole gang: me, my husband, our two sons, and my old dad, who's in a wheelchair. Sleeping on the hard floor wasn't the comfiest, and we'd often wake up to the sound of volleyball practice starting up. I reckon the coach wasn't too pleased with our presence, but what could we do? My father needs fresh air, so a regular apartment just wouldn't cut it. We scoured Uzhhorod for suitable digs, but nothing fit the bill, so we roughed it in the gym. With no kitchen, breakfast was interrupted by flying volleyballs, but we made do. This went on from March to summer's end, but as the weather cooled, we knew we couldn't tough it out any longer. Sending Dad to Germany was a tough decision, but it was the right one. He's now in a lovely, safe city, getting three square meals a day, and enjoying walks in the fresh air, all while receiving excellent care. But despite all this comfort, he's still homesick and insists he'll return. I can't see how that's possible, at least not until winter's end. As for me, I'm juggling waitressing with part-time theatre gigs to keep myself sane. The hubby's busy fixing stuff, often working late into the night due to the power outages. The boys have found their groove with clubs and activities here. Life in Transcarpathia has been great; the locals are fantastic. It's just Dad's constant complaints that dampen our spirits. His stubbornness has always been a challenge. And looming over it all is the uncertainty of tomorrow, a constant reminder of the war we left behind.

5. Something outside the military context, but much more important. You and I are walking on a sunny day, and you're already very tired. We have been on a tour of the film studio, with many children and their parents, lots of impressions, and, without exaggeration, kilometers covered through pavilions and corridors. You're exhausted. We head straight to the transport, and on the way, we pass by a kids' playground. You take a short stroll there in your beautiful dress. We spot a toy – a character from a cartoon you like. You ask me if you can play with it. Of course, you can. A swing, a merry-go-round, a little sandbox, and someone else's toy. We need to leave, but you're reluctant to part with the toy. I explain that we can't take it; it belongs to another child who will come looking for it and be upset not to find it. But you know the rules, we never take what isn't

ours. However, you're tired, a bit stubborn, and enchanted by the cartoon character. You want to take the toy home. I firmly say no and suggest we go. You resist. I try to gently take the toy from your hands and guide you away, but you're too fixated, and a conflict brews between us. I pause and say, "Nastia, if you don't come with me now, then fine, stay here alone." It's a standoff. You, being just as stubborn, reply, "Fine, I'll stay." It's a battle of wills. I take a few steps to the side and wait. You pretend not to notice, deliberately playing in the sand. Your brows are furrowed, eyes full of anger. You understand perfectly well that you'll have to say goodbye to the toy, and taking it is not your style at all. But you can't back down. However, I'm not interested in forcing you or breaking your spirit. I want you to agree on your own – since you can't, let's go. This is fundamental; it's about your upbringing. You're wonderful, but we're not going to start doing wrong things, that's final. I'll repeat myself, taking a few more steps. She didn't budge. Ignoring me. I check the time; it's time for us to leave. Hanging around when you should be heading home and resting is just wasting time. It's not about having a stroll and having fun; you're bored at the playground – but the standoff continues. Will I give in to the momentary whim of a young child, or will we both stay within the boundaries of moral norms? I wait. Frowning, silence. You don't come to me or even look my way. A rare, damn, occurrence. This goes on for 5 or 10 minutes. I can't take it anymore; I walk towards you. I know, as soon as I pick you up, we'll leave the toy behind, likely not without a struggle. We'll make a quick exit, probably with some tears and emotions from you. I approach, pick you up, ready to wrestle the toy from your grip. But you hand it over calmly, your brows still furrowed. I lift you up, and we leave. The toy stays. You stay silent. I know – you just battled your own "I WANT." Good job, little one, well done. It's not easy at times. I give you a gentle hug, so you're not upset with me, to make it easier for you emotionally. You hug me back tightly, wrapping your arms around my neck and head, holding me close. Silent. No words. My little one just weathered a storm inside her – and emerged victorious. My incredibly beautiful girl, my little miracle.

2. What is Ukraine? It's the Maidan. It's a universe of battles and families. It's Cossacks, fighters, and beautiful souls. It's jokes and drums. It's fire, wine, tears, and sabers. It's paintings and the mystical Svarga. It's the art of Pysanky and the sight of viburnum in the morning dew. It's a nation with a bleeding heart, always fearing hunger, and having to think ten times before singing a song in their own language. It's the sound of the panpipe, or sopilka, echoing through the air. It's a lord in a bear fur coat, puffing on a pipe at the head of a lavish table, his eyes shining with pride. It's Kutia, chumaky, and hay. It's the enchanting melody of "Shchedryk" – the carol of the bells. It's the sight of infinitely beautiful girls bathing and washing their shirts in the river. It's a song that flows through the forest. It's the spirit of Sich, of war, and of children hiding underground from bombs. It's Skoryk's "Melody" echoing in a bomb shelter. It's fire, songs, and prayers. It's the dream of "Mriya" and the fight for freedom. It's the saints looking mournfully from smoky icons. It's the rawness of sex and the sustenance of rye. It's fire, songs, dancing, and prayers. It's the majesty of the mountains and the flow of the Dniro. It's a society of free and wild souls.

4. War doesn't change anyone. A boy becomes a man and FINALLY gets to be himself.

2. The eyes are taped up, the windows too. But what's gold worth when bombs are going off? Death treats us all the same, doesn't take bribes. We've forgotten ourselves for centuries, but we'll die to rise again. A nation is born, freedom is born, new meanings are born.

4. If you're gonna fight, go all the way. Some local fucking idiot tyrant, Donbas. It's like a crazy autocracy jerking off on soviet leftovers. Nepotism, corruption, evil, and the mafia. It's the great war, the third world war. The whole world looks down on us, but also admires us. That's the way it is.

5. Chornobaivka. Theater director stealing from a shopkeeper during martial law. Zaluzhnyi – every 200th russian knows him. Memes, songs, electronic music. Torture houses, child murders, shelling.

They steal toilets and panties, poop where they sleep. Rescue services, dry meal kits with five-pointed stars. Close the sky over Ukraine! Freedom or death.

3. Volunteers. Ceramic rooster from Borodianka.

1. Azovstal, torture, captivity, poisoned pies. Heroes don't die. Two months later, still can't believe it's real. Attacks on peaceful corridors. No cult of personality. Bridges from Crimea that didn't blow up. 2–3 weeks and it'll all be over. Barbecue. The ceiling and walls shake from the blasts. Dirty, hungry people. Mariupol Theater. If not now, when? If not us, who? When and who, if not us now?

4. Ever wondered what it's like to take a life? Can we really call nazis with biolabs human? Masks off. Watching "Fate of a Man," he's cursing, and it kind of eases our minds – I close my eyes, it's like I'm in moscow, craving a beer 'til I'm dizzy. "And Quiet Flows the Don": battles for leningrad, soldiers here have a resort nearby, they drink, have fun with local women, and sleep as much as they want. Their commander doesn't care, they mock him, saying, "Are you a writer or a commander?" Shake the entire red army front, you won't find 20 sober men. Lermontov said: they won't understand the heavy moans, they'll attack in a crowd, tear everything apart, pour poison over young thighs.

3. "Mom, they live so well here. Mom, they have internet and roads in the villages." "Son, beat the fascist bastard." "Husband, rape Ukrainian women!" No one gave them the right to live well.

2. Welcome to Konotop, where every woman is a witch. Tomorrow, you won't have anything standing upright.

1. This is Kherson. This is Kharkiv. This is Mariupol. This is Dnipro.

5. Ukraine is like an anthill without a single leader. Leaders are born from the people. A people molded by hardships and God. In Kharkiv Ecopark, animals are being evacuated under fire, but the russians kill them along with the volunteers. Volunteers dying, one, two, three, four, five, six – all to save animals. Cougars, chimpanzees, deer – all dead. White tigers, panthers, jaguars with their offsprings. Animals whose hearts were torn by explosions. Fear. Hatred.

2. Decommunization. Denazification.

4. No one gave you the right to live well. Aswabadim! [We'll free you!] We can repeat. Ukraine was invented by vladimir ilyich lenin. They're to blame themselves. Am I a trembling creature or do I have rights?

3. russians don't really do protests. And why does Poland even exist? Let's take Kyiv in three days!

1. The pensioners are holding out for the russian world. There's this old lady who refuses to leave her bomb-ridden area. A volunteer goes to her regularly to bring food, telling her she can leave, but she won't. "You bring that aid here, regularly," she insists. "He's risking his life for you every time. Maybe you'll leave"? – "But I have to water my flowers here. So let him go, and that's that."

5. Half the country was in jail, the other half was snitching on each other. KGB, everything gray and musty. Cold, prison camps. Just a vile aesthetic. soviet citizens. Homo sovietikus, the communist party, and lenin looking surprisingly youthful! Women with thick calves, men in thick trousers. Gold teeth, hair messed up from chemicals, dirty T-shirts on bodies sagging from alcohol. Spit, stench, cobwebs, and gloom. Someone playing the accordion nearby. Gray, rectangular buildings everywhere. arbat, red square, and the spasskaya tower. The party said it, the komsomol echoed: yes, for the enemy, for stalin, the enemy of the people, the commander-father spits and screams, "Fuck your mother, shoot!" I remember a moment of wonder. Shortages, shit, defloration.

Kulaks. A Russian, a Ukrainian, and a Chukchi end up on an island... hilarious! Collective farms, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," our steam engine speeding ahead. Sausage for 2.20. Everyone feared the Soviet Union, yet we lived pretty well. "Satan," we'll make it hot for them! Shchi, vodka. What a nasty thing is your jellied fish. A blue kerchief, a blue kerchief... Need to get eggs and toilet paper. Standing in lines. CPSU Central Committee aucp of the USSR. Oh, my uncle, if only I knew,... Ah, Harlequin, Harlequin!.. Not everything's so black and white!.. Kings can do anything... Beat America, catch up, and surpass!.. The Day of Victory, like an ember in the fire, seemed so distant...

2. Catch up and overtake – in five years! The celebration of the peaceful socialist revolution!

4. Socialist realism is the only true artistic direction of art, demanding from the artist a truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. The truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic depiction of reality must be combined with the task of ideological transformation and education in the spirit of socialism. This is based on the three principles of socialist realism: nationality, ideology, and concreteness, as bequeathed to the Soviet people by Comrade Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin).

3. Hey, Vova, a boy from Kyiv, you'll get your rockets. The young ones gotta respect their elders, 'cause the old folks know best. The older generation is everything to us. It's all about worshipping old age, death, decay, weakness, and sacrifice. We're stuck in this system with no way out. There's no moral compass, just the leader's will, the king. And it's gotta be immoral, 'cause that's all this people want. It's a barbaric ideology of awfulness and straight-up primitiveness.

4. The church of Satan. The devil of the ruling Communist Party, the demon of oligarchic corruption. Satan's been singing his own praises in Red Square for centuries, reveling in his own black mass.

5. Immigrants in Lviv, housing prices have skyrocketed. These immigrants are well-fed, but here they're begging, asking for as much as 2,000 hryvnias. They're the first in line to go to the military camp. Let them go to the front, damn it. They've just arrived. Men aren't allowed to travel abroad. Humanitarian aid.

2. War means crime disappears from the country. Everything becomes clear, just black and white. It's when the army used to be something kids avoided in video games, but now they're risking their lives for everyone's freedom. Crazy, right? It's when people say 'I didn't send them there.' It's when you tell your kids not to watch TV so they don't get dumb, but then you end up watching and feeling dumb yourself. It's when one Red Dwarf tried to copy Hitler, the worst of the worst, and even in this, he turned out to be a failure. It's when we didn't want peace because we weren't ready for war. It's when the sound of air raid sirens becomes almost normal, and eventually, you even get used to explosions around the city. It's crazy how we adapt.

1. Is it a sin to kill? Scripture says yes, no ifs, ands, or buts. But is it a sin to defend your land, your women, and children, even if it means shedding the blood of invaders? Here, as the director plays "Plyve kacha" [a Ukrainian folk song], the guns let off a volley. We witness a scene from a nativity play, where a warrior who died defending Azovstal is on his way to purgatory. He did some sinful things, but heaven has the final say on his soul. There, he meets other souls like his, and after a brief stay, they ascend to heaven. Angels sing carols to them, wash them with milk, cradle them to sleep, and pray with them for Ukraine.

3. We don't do drama – not in our actions, not in our nicknames, not even in our jokes. It's what sets us apart from them. We keep it simple. Our humor is as dark and grim as it gets, and 'Glory to Ukraine' is like a sacred mantra to us. It's not just words; it's deep pain, honor, a symbol, a creed. We don't have lofty, complex goals for our missions. Our mission is simple: protect our land and our children. Glory to the heroes! We don't even know who those famous heroes are. No one in

their right mind would want to be called a hero. They'd just say, 'Who, me? A hero?' The more deserving of honor a person is, the more they'll reject that label, maybe even curse you out for suggesting it – they just don't want the attention. It's like an anthill. Everyone pitches in, everyone helps each other out. There's no one face of the war, no permanent, untouchable heroes. A hero could be a soldier with a rifle, or a little girl with her teddy bear. A hero could be an old lady in Kherson waving the Ukrainian flag.

– Yes, honey, I've just gone out to see my neighbor, Mr. Vova for a couple of hours. We need to talk about some things.' 'Listen, we might have to stay at his place overnight, and you'll be picked up soon. You'll go on a trip with mom and brother. I'm sorry if I can't see you off.

He laughs awkwardly, because he's lying to his child. Because he's not at the neighbor's, but holding an assault rifle. Because he went off to fight, and we've been just told: 'Don't let anyone know where you are, what you're doing. Keep your family details off your phone'.

– Glory to Ukraine!

– Glory to heroes!

We're sleeping fully dressed, shoes on, on the floor against the walls, with just the bare essentials. You don't need much in war. The first day was a shock, but by the second, it's like, Okay, I'm in a war now, this is the new normal. There are steps on the stairs. One, two, three. Even though it'll take a couple more months to really sink in. No thoughts about careers, money, summer plans, vacations, buying property, or romance. Just survival. Just trying not to die in this mess, but to do something useful for our homeland. If we have to leave, we're taking as many unwelcome guests with us as possible. It's that simple. Step by step. It's almost impossible to sleep or eat. Everyone's running on adrenaline, checking their phones, catching up on the news whenever they can. Sharing memes for a laugh. We smoke a lot. There's a bit of panic – the dorks have taken Kherson and are advancing towards Chernihiv, Kyiv, and from the other side, towards Kryvyi Rih. We smoke. There are heaps of half-smoked cigarettes. We only have about 2 hours of sleep a day, even though we could probably have more. But there's no despair, no giving up. We've got earrings in our ears, tattoos with Slavic and Scandinavian symbols and runes. Wooden crates from fast food joints, ration packs, army boots, thick walls, narrow corridors, carpets on the stairs, strong coffee – you figure out how to be useful right now. There's a strong sense of purpose among us – we're fighters ready to kill. It could be in 5 minutes, it could be in 5 hours. We don't know, nobody does. We're in full readiness, sitting together, weapons, uniforms, body armor, loaded magazines. We're awake, but not fully conscious. It's like a heavy darkness is above us, calm but eerie, our eyes half-closed but burning with intensity. Deep down, we're aware of everything around us. It's almost overwhelming to be near them for too long

– Time to get up, let's go.

War is the toughest gig out there. Everything you've learned in life will be put to the test – your skills, your survival depends on them, and yeah, a bit of luck too. Also, the lives of your loved ones. Your physical fitness, your mental strength – bravery, not bitterness, your smarts and resourcefulness, your ability to talk your way out of a tough spot with people in the same boat. You've gotta follow orders, but also stand your ground when needed. Endurance, staying up for long stretches, eating what you can, grabbing rest whenever possible, dealing with psychological blows, always keeping your cool, using fear as motivation – for yourself; digging trenches, shoveling sandbags for hours on end, chatting briefly with journalists, then getting back to work, solving logistics problems you never thought you'd face, and then cleaning up because we're not slob. It's like a lottery. Will you make it through the night? Will all your limbs be intact for another day? Will you still respect yourself as a person and a man? That's war. There are songs about red viburnum, cigarettes, and a whole lot of cursing. Sadly, it's the new normal – officially. Explosions rock the ground. Civilians keep bringing boxes of Molotov cocktails towards us, we've got a strategic stockpile, surrounded by them like a powder keg. The russian-speaking city is fueled by hatred towards the russians, with dozens and hundreds of citizens pushing and shoving with boxes and bags of Molotov cocktails, food, money, and weapons. We'll meet you, dorks from every window. What did you expect, sons of bitches? The ground will burn under your feet, you'll beg for mercy, you bastards. Across the street, there are maybe two dozen, maybe even fifty men. They want to join us, but we don't have the resources or weapons for everyone. No. We can't take

everyone, no experience. One says, 'I walked 30 kilometers from the suburbs, under fire. Take me, don't be a jerk.' No. We can't take them all. 'Go home, please stay in the shelters, we're trying to protect you.' Hell. No. They stand there for hours, like stone statues, hiding under a flimsy roof. Explosions in the city, it's dangerous to cross the road where they stand. They won't go home, not now, not tomorrow. There's a request from a building: medicine. Women and children are inside. We have a nurse – small, red-haired, smart. I run to her. 'Here, these medicines, please.' It's necessary. 'I can't,' she says, 'this is what we need most, and we have so little of it. I can't give it. Sorry.' What can we do? We can't ignore these people, not give them anything at all... What can we give them?

– Alright. Here's some painkillers for your headache. There's a sedative and heart medication. And some candy.

You pull out a bag of nice, expensive candies, who knows where you got them. The commander at the checkpoint asks,

– What's that? You explain, and he nods in approval. Your commander might only be a year older than you, or even younger. He looks like a hipster from yesterday. But now, he's doing things that make you willing to give your life for him without a second thought. You don't even know his name, just his call sign. He won't let you take that package to the building across the street because it's too dangerous. He goes there himself. "Fuck it. I'd give my life for this fool with red hair!" You're discovering who you really are. You might not like it, but you might also be pleasantly surprised. It's like being in a theater, on stage, in the palm of your hand. You break free, you confront your fears. The most secret parts of the human soul come out. No one is changing here, everyone is just revealing themselves. – I didn't come here for training before, – I tell them. – Damn it. – Now, it's the most important training for us. In life, – he answers. Thin, intense eyes and shoulders – that's the commander. Shelter, orcs are firing! Explosion after explosion, it's terrifying. The fear of being alone is serious. But being afraid together with others in a group is different. Courage is a type of fear. That's why you go to the riskiest place, where everyone is the same, where it's safe at the same time. Ukrainian, alive – like a green blade of grass sprouting between stones. The police stop on the street and treat the townspeople with pizza, while the local oligarch treats them with sausage. Prague, London, and Vienna are no longer interesting to me, I don't care. Paris, Budapest, New York, Venice – sorry. I'm interested in Berdiansk, Skadovsk, Melitopol, Mariupol, Kherson, Kyiv, Lviv, Uzhhorod, Odesa, Kerch. Road signs: to the right – go away, to the left – go away, back and forward also – go away. Suitcase, train station, russia. Mobile crematoriums. Eyes covered with tape, he pees in his pants. Literally.

– Please, guys, spare me, – he pleads. The most important thing is not life, but dignity. Why live without dignity?

– You're scum, you piece of shit, – I say as I hit him on the head. I feel a rush of pleasure, but immediately question myself. Am I sinking to the level of an animal? This guy is a looter, caught red-handed looting shops and vandalizing cars while people are hiding from shelling. Some people react poorly to stress, but some are just scum. I couldn't stand to look at the bottles of alcohol, what a disgraceful sight, utterly pointless. We take him to the basement. He can't explain who he is or how he ended up here. His story doesn't make sense. He's clearly lying, maybe he's a russian saboteur. His pockets are full of candy bars and cigarettes, but no documents. He claims he was walking with a dog. Under fire? There's no sign of any dog.

– Crush his hand. Smash it with a butt, – one of the commanders orders before leaving. – Please, spare me... Don't do it, guys, – the man pleads, crying. "Who the hell are you?" The man who had been carrying a package of sweets and medicine for the children enters. Who are you? It's not a simple or short conversation with scum. We decide to let him go. He's obviously not very bright. If he understood the consequences, he wouldn't be looting anymore. The looters are brought in, stripped naked, their hands and eyes wrapped in tape, and paraded past the boys amid shouts of shame, mockery, and demands to repeat: "Palianytsa" [looter]. Their bodies are marked with a marker – "looter." We release them into the city at night, despite the shelling and curfew. Let them wander. I ate someone's chocolate that was here, in this building – so am I also a looter now? Politeness, incredible. Everyone appreciates everyone. Everyone is valuable. I'm starting to understand the spiritual and archaic significance of warriors' tattoos, piercings, and beards. I'm

starting to feel why it's so important now, why it's so damn important. We're sitting at the checkpoint at night, and for the first time in my life, I have an assault rifle in my hands. The camera shows someone approaching. If there's a breach, I have 30 cartridges. 1 second of fire. Do I run? Hide under the table? Will they kill? My heart stops. The thunder of MLRS, artillery, and other explosions in the city center. Night. Urgent – group departure for a mission. Urgent! We're in the car, heading to the checkpoint, and we get stuck in the mud. We rush to push the car. One, two, three – push. The car roars, explosions draw closer, more and more people join the effort, but the car remains stuck. Meanwhile, russian forces are breaking into the city and heading towards us. We can't send any more fighters, the wheels spin, it's a traffic jam at the checkpoint, and it feels like the end for us. The whole car is roaring and screeching. One, two, three – push! Roaring, spinning, dirt flying everywhere like a centrifuge. Boom, boom, boom – it's their shells, those bastards' shells. My heart isn't beating, the lantern light is blinding me. This is a Picasso painting, a Rembrandt canvas. This is Karl Brullov. This is the brotherhood and camaraderie of Remarque. It's bullshit because every anti-war phrase, picture, association glorifies war, makes it romantic. It's bullshit – they're stealing your life, your youth in the streets, and you can't push a car with soldiers ready to kill. You just lie here, in a second, in two, from the impact. One, two, three – push!

– Here, have a tasty one, – the commander says, handing you a chocolate-flavoured whitefish. Periwinkle, his call sign, has been riding you all day, sending you here and there, making you fill out a log at the checkpoint right after you finished scrubbing the floor lined with landmines you were too scared to touch. You look over at the guy you slept next to last night – beard, tattoos, chains with crosses – and you start to understand why he needs it. He winks at you. Everything's fine. Weapons, brotherhood, you'd give anything for these bastards. Hauling stuff to the checkpoint, no time for a smoke, chugging energy drinks, watching them in their armour. A skinny girl carries more than she can handle, you think, maybe you shouldn't, love, it's hard – but she just gives you a quick, "fuck off." In the window opposite, the curtains keep changing. You see binoculars. "Periwinkle, there's someone with binoculars." I get on the radio and report that there's probably a sniper in the building. We keep going, we don't stop. The ones who can actually do something, who have seen death, are the simplest, the most polite, the most unreal. They are demigods, polite. Everyone for everyone. The guy hiding from work, avoiding getting his arse kicked, sits in a room all day, chatting to some girl, promising he'll get parole, a flat, honours, and a good pension. "We'll tear these bastards apart, we'll fuck them up! It won't last long, 2–3 weeks at most," says the guy hiding in the room, my neighbour. I don't know what to think, no one thinks about him, no one notices him, everyone lives their lives. Let him live his, fight, russian prick. Azerbaijani fighters come in, with weapons, experience, and tough-guy personas. They're hard as nails.

– Take notes on what you're seeing. You're a journalist! You can't make video, but jot down notes, then you'll write a book. Your memoirs will be published. People will read your text.

But I don't want to write it down. It's just not possible. My child is sitting somewhere underground, in the subway. Her mother didn't get her out of the city in time. Now her neighborhood is getting hit hard, the city's almost surrounded. It's getting too dangerous to leave. I've never felt life so intensely before, writing it down would be distorting, making it false, sharing what won't be understood, and I don't even understand it myself. Creativity is like a self-indulgence, but here, it's just real life. Steps, boots, coffee, cigarettes, weapons. I'm so scared that I can't even put it into words – but there's no time for that. I told myself I had three days, but here I am living through the fourth, man, it's unbelievable. In the morning, I go to the toilet, the guys are smoking. My shoes are caked in mud, I brush my teeth and clean my shoes. The fighters look at me in surprise, thinking someone's cigarette is about to drop from their mouth. I say, well, we're not pigs. Dying isn't the same as having dirty shoes. We're not like them. – You're right, – says one old man, – we push them out from such and such a place, then they mess up the area around the perimeter in the restrooms. They don't do it inside the toilet – but for some reason, around the perimeter. Really disgusting. They say the russians were like this in World War II as well. Some bastards, some wild herd. russians. They have russian traditions, whatever that means. A disgraceful abomination. Everyone laughs, but it's truly disgusting. Shameful. They say we're under attack. Everything's happening here. Tanks, helicopters, infantry. Preparation, positions, weapons, bomb shelter. You see, that's all. My end. Very likely. I haven't talked to my daughter, I couldn't bring myself to. Not all this time. I leave her

a voicemail, listen to hear if my voice sounds cheery. It sounds absurdly cheerful. Sweetheart, everything will be fine, see you soon. Everything will be. One of the seniors shows at least how to handle a weapon, how to work around the corner on the stairs. This should have been practiced at bases for months. But now, it's reality, so we have a few minutes. And the bet: all-in. Everyone listens carefully, full attention, trust, and respect. An incredible sense of unity. There's some money left on the bank card, so I try to transfer it to the Armed Forces. Why? The function on my smartphone is buggy. I call the call center operator, and she helps me. Her voice is polite and direct, as if everything is normal. Clear and polite, a good girl, Khrystyna. I can hear explosions in the background on her end. Yes, she sounds a little sad. But – polite and firm. I feel ashamed, very ashamed. Out of the corner of my eye, I see one of the soldiers casually take a step towards me, with a weapon in his hands. He has a question, who am I calling? I don't hide it, he listens for a few seconds, then quietly retreats. Nothing happens. We weren't attacked then. I breathe out. It happened later. Impact, silent explosion, darkness of soot and smoke, flight down, fall. They pull you from under the rubble, you can't move. Crazy pain. You curse the one dragging you, promise to find him later and finish him, but he says: my brother, be patient, please. In reality, you're grateful to him, of course. You're in the infirmary, our building has no roof anymore. Panic, everyone is in position. Defense is being prepared in chaos, screams, and among the wounded. The nurse, red-haired and smart, is overwhelmed, dealing with everyone. Her assistant looks at me, and I don't like his reaction. I must look shattered. I just can't imagine what. He looks, and says, brother, do you want to smoke? Numerous fractures. That's the diagnosis. They're taking me and other wounded to the hospital. It's scary there. The building is under fire all the time. They operate on my hand under anesthesia. I won't be walking for another 1.5–2 months. It's just the beginning, the war – and here I am, immobile. They feed me with a spoon. I've lost my documents. I urinate in a bedpan, the whole corridor is filled with moans of pain, fractures. Official statistics say 15–18 townspeople were injured today. But the doctor tells me that 65 citizens arrived here today alone. Torn bellies, torsos torn open, missing arms and legs. It's war. Civilians, all of them. The shelling is intense. When it gets too strong, the doctors retreat to the basement, and we, the wounded, are in a terrible panic. We're dragged into the corridor like a chain, demanding and receiving assistance. A young paramedic stays with us, he doesn't give up. He doesn't walk down the corridor in the semi-darkness to hide from us like the others. He stays, while we endure, the unlucky injured. The others all leave us coldly, but he stays with us.

– Take it easy, – he tells us. – If we're fucked, well, we're fucked.

A person will always find a way to remain human – or they simply don't want to. He tapes the windows criss-cross. Rip-rip. Rocket noise – damn it, damn it, damn it! It flies past, landing nearby. Why does the kremlin pedophile-marasmatist decide it's so necessary here? What do we need all this for? Slutty russian bitch. – Be patient, – the orderly tells us. – I'm with you. Rest. – It's semi-dark. A dry crack of a Kalash gun somewhere outside the windows. A report on the walkie-talkie: the enemy has been destroyed. The SRG tried to capture us, and we're lying here, not even suitable for captivity. We eat three times a day, but the hospital gets shelled frequently – projectiles hit near the kitchen, so sometimes there's nothing to feed us. Nurses are crying, depressed, rude, and hysterical. Through the darkness of the corridor, the figure of a collected and polite doctor – there are already two, three of them. Their uniforms are ironed, without defects. All around, chaos, thunder, and despair. The doctor is impeccable. "How are you? How are you feeling?" Everyone is asked in turn. I try to sleep more and be patient. Basically, I have no other choice. But I want it to be MY choice in this situation. The chaplain arrives. All night, the whole city is shelled from artillery, volley fire systems, and our walls sometimes really shake. "I'll be with you until dawn," he laughs. You don't like him, but you respect him in any way. Explosions. The cops were given the command to evacuate from Kharkiv to Dnipro and save themselves. Information. You'll find out later that a policewoman disobeyed and went to the Teroborona [territorial defence]; she was injured – she'll tell you later. The whistling of a rocket flying at you is tight, low, and nightmarish. It's the end, there's a moment to think about it – and if you're alive, there's euphoria and an adrenaline rush. Two days ago, the bastards attacked our base, and my friend suddenly changed from his military uniform to civilian clothes, looking very sad. Why? He sat down and breathed in and out, as if saying goodbye. What was it? Or the roar of the plane, everyone fell to the ground at

once, immediately into the basement. One woman had a panic attack. Her daughter left on an errand just 2 minutes before the plane noise took off. What if it's an enemy bomber? Have you ever had to stop a person from having a panic attack as a group, but none of you are doctors, there is no water, no medicine, and you are all in the dark of the basement? Humanitarian aid is brought from all countries. People call and ask for food. Volunteers, risking their lives, deliver everything. But there is little food, and there are thousands in line. But it was taken, according to information, so where is it? Everything is under the control of the authorities, and suddenly there is a scandal that a lot of things are sold in supermarkets. I do not know. Kherson, Khersonchik, you are loved – you were liberated, and tears of happiness flow, the esoteric ball of love. Ukrainians around the lights are circling with joyful songs. Oh, there is red viburnum in the meadow, Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the Armed Forces! Heroes, courage, partisans, incredible people. Flags in glass jars. Kherson, dear. Evacuation. I'm being taken away. My hand jumped out of my shoulder again, fucking injury, and after 5 days of horror in the hospital, they won't take me any further... The doctor looks me in the eyes, and we understand what we are talking about. No time, fucking crazy horror. He hits my injured shoulder strongly, without painkiller, several times, and I choke and hit his assistant on the lower back. The hand is in place, they tie it to my chest. God, how hard! He looks me in the eye. We are like father and son, with love. All set. We are going in an ambulance, evacuation, humanitarian corridor. Finally, I can call my daughter, where is she and what is wrong with her? I call my ex's number–she pretends she doesn't understand who she's talking to. She hangs up. They want to break me psychologically, to impose guilt – even in these conditions. That's all for me to "get it". I must "feel", yeah. Yeah. War does not change anyone; it only really reveals people. I won't see my own daughter for another 4.5 months, but I will recover, get back on my feet, find her, we will survive and go for a walk. I promised her, and I will do it. Love like crazy. Don't forgive fucking actions. A human will always find a way to remain a human – or he simply doesn't want to. The one who sees strength in us, being worthless, tries to break us. They can hit civilian areas with heavy artillery fire, and they may hide your only child from you for months. Never allow more wars. Yet, not a single anti-war text was able to stop it; it is unlikely to slow it down. Not a single statement about the war is true. I don't care. Ukraine, don't make this mistake yourself, never. Don't be like them, don't become the aggressor. Not "we can repeat", not something else, any other options – but NEVER AGAIN. Full stop.