

Natalia Blok

## Skin Deep

*Translated by Keren Klimovsky*

My son brought a slip of paper from school today, and asked me to fill it in.

It had two entries. One for signature and another one my name. "I, first name last name, have examined my child and did not find anything suspicious on his/her body." I asked my son what was I supposed to find. He shrugged.

Then the same slip of paper was brought back from school by my two younger daughters. They said the teachers were afraid of an epidemic, and that the history teacher called in sick. My son added he hopes she won't get better till the end of the school year, but that actually she's pregnant and gone for good on maternity leave. All kinds of things seem to be constantly happening to this history teacher. First, she and her mom came here from some kind of war zone city. I mean, she came first, and her mom came later, cause the mom couldn't leave her apartment. The usual, you know.

She decided to leave only when everything was bombed to pulp, and she discovered she was the only one left in her building. But by then it was too late to leave, and it turned out that those who evacuate people from war zones charge money for it. Getting the mom out of there required paying for it. So, this teacher announced to the school about her trying to raise some money, a fair of sorts was arranged, the money was collected, and the teacher's mom was evacuated together with her two dogs, two cats and her favorite hookah. And she kept telling about it to the kids. Instead of teaching history. My daughters told me that veterans came in to talk to the children about war, and then the teacher took the lead and started describing what kind of apartment she used to have, what kind of car she used to have, what kind of... And then she declared history no longer exists as a subject. Cause history is rewritten every five years, and whatever she's been teaching is bullshit, and that she wants to go back and keep on breeding Italian greyhounds. So, it seems to me the school's only keeping her for pity's sake.

Nothing surprising about her getting sick.

I told my daughters to undress. I asked them: what it is I should be looking for? Lice? I've read that when a war goes on for a long time, you can get lice. It's stress related. They usually live under the hairy layer of the head, and when a person is really stressed, the skin on her head gets thin, and the lice find their way out, and that's it – they just come out. But if you put medications on your head, they go right back in. Otherwise they'd drop dead.

And bedbugs – another token of war times. Thank God We've got no bedbugs. Never had them. Even when we left, even with all of those trains – we've never seen any bedbugs. As for lice, I've only had them once – in my childhood. Back then everyone who went to pioneer summer camps got lice. That happened because the kids were taken from their homes, so they were under a lot of stress.

Bedbugs are a Russian thing actually. In our country I haven't seen a single bedbug. But I remember this time I went to Moscow and stayed at a hotel. I turned the mattress upside down and saw a bunch of them. I grabbed my bag and ran straight to my friend's house. Let

them keep their stinking hotel to themselves. We ended up pouring boiled water over the bag. Because of the bedbugs.

So, I've searched the kids for lice. Their hair was clean. I looked at their skin – it had goosebumps, my girls were freezing. I felt so sorry for them, and I told them to hurry and get their clothes back on. On their paper I wrote that that they've been examined, and that they're fine.

I wrote the same on my son's paper slip.

Then I went on facebook to learn what this new epidemic is about.

Facebook was low-key. Your everyday feed, same old stuff: another grant for immigrants, another round of good people collecting money for tactical gloves, another theater show about the war, and an East Express festival in the liberated territories. Meanwhile, a theater director is writing about transgenders. So, nothing whatsoever about any epidemic. There was a funny news piece about a city on the other side whose mayor (a fake one, of course) discusses current events with an Italian investor. Disclosure: the investor is yet another fake – he came here as a contract soldier in the beginning of the war, and now he's just sitting there, pretending to be an investor. That's hilarious obviously: who would invest in a war zone?

I liked the photo of this pseudo-investor, it was kind of weird. He was sitting there in his underwear holding a machine-gun, covered in tattoos head to toe. Like an image from a porn movie. I mean, I don't watch porn that often, but there's lots of macho guys like him in those films.

Oh well, nothing about the epidemic on facebook. I took a picture of the paper slips brought by my kids and posted it. Maybe somebody knows something.

In the evening I took a bath. I've got a big mirror in my bathroom, and I usually look at it as I get undressed. I admire myself, cause I don't see myself naked that often, no, really. I looked real pretty in the mirror. Not the same as I was at 16, but still! The breasts are not quite the same, the nipples are not as spiky as they used to be, the belly is no longer flat, but I've still got a more than desirable waste-to-hip ratio. I noticed a yellowish bruise on my hip. I rubbed it and thought I must have bumped into the corner of a table.

I put youtube on and started doing asanas, just like the two Australian girls taught me. Then I went to the store and bought some hand cream, meat, bread, milk and cabbage. I decided to send my son to get the potatoes once he's back from school. The bruise on my hip was strangely aching. I bought an anti-bruise balm at the pharmacy and started rubbing it into the spot. There was another spot spreading out right next to the first one – a greenish spot. I really can't recall when could I have gotten it – maybe in the morning when I was still drowsy?

The kids came back from school and said their afternoon lessons were canceled, the school was on quarantine because of the epidemic.

They didn't know what kind of epidemic it was, but my son said it must be something very contagious, so he doesn't plan on leaving the house and intends to spend the entire epidemic online. The girls went to the kitchen to make some food.

Suddenly my neighbor called me on my cellphone. A neighbor from the other house, from the zone. She told me my ex was complaining to everyone, saying what a bitch I am for tricking the children and taking them out of there secretly. If not for that, he'd join the home guard with our son, and now he's alone and sick, and the home guard won't take him in, cause he's too old.

Well, he's been repeating this refrain for 3 years already, nothing new. The neighbor from my former life said that it was actually quite all right: the shootings are far away, they're not aiming at them, they're aiming away from them, at us probably, and they get some humanitarian aid, and life is livable, there's mobile communication, and the retirement pension is being paid... She asked me to take out her Ukrainian pension with the card she gave me when I left and hand the money to her sister. I asked her not to give out my number and my whereabouts to my ex.

Though actually they don't really know where I am, since when we left I didn't know it myself. I hardly even had any things with me other than IDs, money (several years' savings), kids clothes and my laptop. My son didn't even want to leave by the way, he believed it when his daddy kept going about Ukraine being evil, and about how we should hold on to Russia, cause their salaries are higher. We hardly even knew Ukrainian, so that was when we learned it. I mean, the school here is in Ukrainian.

I asked the neighbor if they have an epidemic. She said they've got other things to worry about: they've hardly got any medicine in the pharmacies, that's why all of them are healthy.

I decided to watch some TV. The same old series were on, as well as some talk shows about how to lose weight and about how to make food. In the news they were showing how many Ukrainians were killed in the war, how many were wounded, something about protests in Russia, something about an airplane, about new anti-abortion laws, about gas prices rising and about the promises of visa free regime. In a nutshell, everything was calm, everything was its good, old self. In the very end they've mentioned Ukrainian schools closing for quarantine, but they didn't say why. I figured it was another seasonal flue.

My facebook friends did not seem to know anything. They were outraged by the medical note from school. One guy wrote that his kids are also at home.

The bruise on my hip hurt, and another one appeared right next to it, a brown colored one.

I took a picture of my leg with my phone and put it into google's "search by image". Google came up with tanks, soldiers wearing uniform and stuff like that. In the morning the pain in my leg grew stronger, and I went to the local day clinic.

I wasn't sure who should I go to – a dermatologist, a surgeon, a gematologist, so I signed up to see a primary care specialist.

They were quite a few people in line, so I started scrolling my facebook feed, while absentmindedly rubbing my leg.

Someone commented my post about the school note, saying this was a virus, and that it was called KCS. I didn't know what it meant. I tend to think they come up with those viruses every year to sell more pills and vaccines.

The doctor examined me, listened to my lungs, looked into my throat, took my blood

pressure. When she examined the bruises on my leg, she wore gloves. Then she asked me to sit and told me I have KCS. I asked: "What the hell is KCS? I don't even have a cough. If I have bruises on my leg, there's must be something wrong with my blood." But the doctor started writing lengthy paragraphs in my health record, then she looked up at me and said that KCS means Khaki Colored Skin. I'm in constant stress because of the war, so my skin turns khaki. This is an epidemic, and it's highly contagious, so I should be admitted to the hospital.

I didn't get anything. I was sitting there looking at her as if she were bunkers. Khaki? War? We ran away from war three years ago, we left it behind us. The war is *over there*, and even over there it's not all over the place. Why should I be stressed?

I signed a waiver from hospitalization. If I go to the hospital, who would take of the kids? And I kind of thought it silly to lie in the hospital because of three spots on your leg. And I thought everything she told me was just as silly. How can a war become a virus that shows through your skin and hurts? War is out there, in the east, it's a business, it's death, it's sweat and blood, but the kids and I are over here, and we're safe.

Once at home, I checked facebook for news. One of my friends wrote that Sergey Burlakov died at the frontline exactly one year ago, and that today is his death anniversary. I believe it's a guy I used to know, we went to the same school. I even had a crush on him, he was hot. Then, many years later, we found each other on facebook, and it turned out he's got two kids and a good life. I didn't want it to be him, so I scrolled my feed down as fast as possible. The pain in my leg grew even stronger. Another spot started showing, this time it was sand colored.

I googled: how to cure Khaki Colored Skin? Only a few articles matched that inquiry, but it seemed like it really was an epidemic, and that the ministry of health recommends rest, rest and rest again.

I thought: yeah right, no rest for the wicked. While the kids are quarantined, I gotta do some spring cleaning, I gotta buy shoes for my youngest daughter, and I gotta take my son to the dentist and get his tooth filled.

I wrote a new facebook post about finding out stuff, about the KCS epidemic, but I thought it best to skip writing I was diagnosed with it. Just in case.

Within a week everyone was talking about KCS. Facebook was boiling over, stars gave interviews on every possible TV talk show, the politicians said the same old things about doing everything possible and assured us scientists were already working on a vaccine. I was examining the children for spots every day, including the oldest one. The kids were healthy. My condition, however, was only getting worse: the spot was growing larger, it spread up to my knee, it looked like a khaki colored trouser, and it ached. I kept putting anti-bruise lotion on it, but it wasn't helping.

I kept on thinking: why did I get sick? Was it because I'm a former military woman? But I did my service at the border during peaceful times. And it mainly involved dog training. I did run away from war, yes, but I've hardly even seen it. We weren't even really bombed, the small town next to us was bombed, but not ours.

How to cure Khaki Colored Skin? Advice kept coming from all directions. I was advised to drink blood purifying herbs, to take calming baths, to go to massages, to listen to classical

music, to meditate, to leave for another war-deprived country, to put lotions on my spots, to enjoy pretty views, to watch comedies and to have regular intake of vitamin C.

In another week a fleshmob #HOWTOCUREWAR went viral in the social media. People posted pictures of their spots, and it turned out almost everyone I know had KCS. I took a picture of my leg too: the spot reached my ankle and hurt badly. I kept taking pain killers before going to bed: they made the pain number, and then I could get some sleep.

The kids felt very sorry for me. My daughter kept asking whether I was dying. But I didn't know the answer, nobody in the entire world knew the answer to this question: how does the epidemic end?

That evening we all gathered together to watch the news, which were still pretty casual. The first channel covered the fighting, the story of a successful businessman who came from over there and built a business in Kiev, the epidemic. They talked about the fleshmob #HOWTOCUREWAR, and then my youngest, Olechka, jumped up and screamed off the top of her lungs: "What do you mean how? You cure war with peace!"

I couldn't fall asleep till dawn, and I kept thinking about her words. It does really make sense: the only way to cure war is with peace. If war is the reason for the disease, you need to cure the war, cause Khaki Colored Skin is merely a symptom.

But how? My son said that we should kill Putin. That's a good idea, no doubt, but how would we kill him? Especially since there are rumors about him having many doubles, and other ones about him being dead for quite a while. So how would that be helpful? In the morning the kids and I decided that I simply need to stop listening to anything about the war or reading anything about the war, I shouldn't even be talking or thinking about the war.

Well, on the other hand, do I even think about it? I think about what I should do to make the pain in my leg go away or about what I should make for breakfast, about still not being done with spring cleaning and about my son getting his passport but not yet showing up at the military recruiting station, even though he's about to turn 17, and about the fact that if the war isn't over by the time he turns 18, he'd be forced to go there. Stop. Here. Here you go – I just thought about the war. But of course. Thoughts are material, they tend to attract the object of the thought. All right, that's why I need to switch over and think about something pleasant. A meditation. Something that fills my soul with peace. OK, so what's in there now – war? God, yes, why does it have to be so hard.

I turned to facebook hoping to distract myself. The fleshmob wave subsided: people need to post something other than their khaki colored bodies, stuff like kitties, mems, funny videos. Especially since doctors recommend laughing. I decided to monitor my feed thoroughly for the people who can remind me my country's at war and make their posts invisible to me.

OK, here's a friend writing about making an eco-settlement. Nothing about war. Oh no, right below that she writes the purpose of this settlement is rehabilitation for fighters and veterans. All right, let's get rid of her posts.

Next. My ex boyfriend's wife posts a cake recipe. That's not about war, is it? But they ran away with kids from *over there*, from the captured city, and I can't help remembering that when I read whatever it is they post. So let's remove them from my zone of attention.

Yup, here are my feminist friends posting against domestic violence. Well, I can leave that.

Nope, I can't. Cause next they write about military people's post-traumatic syndrom, which increases violence. Damn.

All right, now what? A good post about coffee. The guy who made it used to post pictures of coffee from the war zone for a year. And his wife used to post pictures of their kids waiting for dad. Well, that's not really about the war. Or is it? Let's remove him to be on the safe side.

OK, so all journalists need to go. That's a guarantee of daily news about war, disease, etc. Same goes for politicians.

Who do I have left? Hm, friends from Russia – they also fall into disgrace: I mean, the war's with Russia.

Oh, artsy people, the artsy people are still here. Exhibitions, films. Wait a second, when you look closely at their posts, it turns out the films are about war, the exhibitions and the theater shows are also about war.

How come I never noticed that? Everything is soaked, poisoned with war. The posts that are seemingly about other stuff – they're still about war. It is war that is showing through the spots. It wore into my body.

After facebook was cleansed, it became boring, coming down to wax hair removal and anti-wrinkle cream commercials.

I changed my status to "You can cure War with Peace" and turned my computer off.

Well, I guess there's no point in turning the TV on, that's for sure.