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TRANSLATIONS

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Play

TEN KILOMETERS

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The play must be used only upon the author's approval

TEN KILOMETERS

One-act play

The 1st kilometer

Mariupol, spring 2022. A boy (12 years old, skinny, exhausted, his jacket is tattered, and his winter cap is askew) pulls a sled along the sea. A weighty object rests on the sled, wrapped up in a motley blanket, its identity is indiscernible so far. The sled skids in the wet sand, but the boy persists, doggedly dragging it onward.

BOY: My Dad used to be into calendars – you know, those big ones that people hang up on the wall. He would cross the days out and turn the pages when the month was up. My Mom said it was something he picked up from his childhood; his grandma had a thing for calendars and had covered her whole kitchen in them. That kitchen was my Dad's happy place, so he wanted to recreate some of that joy at our house. But we always had only one calendar, hanging in the most visible spot. My Mom called it a compromise. This year, our calendar has pictures of white tigers. My Dad has crossed off all of January and most of February, right up until the 24th. On the 24th, nobody crossed anything out anymore. Although they didn't immediately start bombing our city and at first it even seemed like nothing too terrible was going to happen. My Dad said that the russians wouldn't hurt regular folks like us. We were about as civilian as you could get – my Dad was a plumber, my Mom was a hairdresser, and I was just a school kid. Our German Shepherd dog, Ida, was probably the only member

of our family that had anything in common with the military from any war – due to her breed origin. That was a joke made by my Dad. And it was one of the last ones he ever told. On March 1, a Grad rocket launched by the russians flew into our apartment – straight into our kitchen. The only thing that made it out alive was the wall with the tiger calendar. My Dad's grandma sure knew something about luck.

The 2nd kilometer

The boy stops to catch his breath and plops down on the damp sand. There's space on the sled for him to sit, but no... he does not dare to get close to the precious cargo.

BOY: My Mom was the one who came up with the idea to get Ida. She used to have a German Shepherd once. But it did not live long – just for three years. The dog got a tick bite, couldn't move, suffered for a few months, and then passed away. My Mom was a school girl, in fifth grade, but she knew how awesome it was to have a best friend. Her folks didn't want any more pets. My Mom didn't want them either. But after she met my Dad and had me, her desire for having a dog was rekindled. They've even bought an apartment and 'jumped ship', as my mother put it, from the crappy rental places. Why not make the dream a reality? But my Dad opposed the idea: he had never had a cat or a dog before. He had this belief that animals belong in houses with yards. Why make them suffer in a small one-room apartment? But my Mom can be pretty persistent when she wants something. She talked about getting a dog for a year and kept bugging my Dad about it. It felt odd: it's probably me who should be asking for things like this, while my parents should object. But it was the opposite for us: my Mom was all about getting a dog, my Dad was against it, and I was stuck in the middle. But when, on the morning of the previous New Year's Day, my Dad asked my Mom and me to check out what was under the Christmas tree, I had a feeling that something amazing was about to happen. My Dad had a sparkle in his eyes. To tell you the truth, I had a hunch about what I gonna find under the Christmas tree before I even stepped foot into the kitchen where it was set up. A dog. A little shepherd, with brown and black fur, she-doggie, just like my Mom wanted. Ida – I came up with that name. My Mom allowed me to choose her a name – she said it's important to know that you have named someone. Back then, I didn't get what she meant, but I started to realize it as Ida was growing up and becoming more and more significant to me. This New Year's Day marked a whole year with Ida in our family. I gazed at her – a huge and solemn dog, nothing like the tiny, yapping puppy we've found under the

Christmas tree – and realized that Ida was the most exceptional gift I've ever received. My Dad wouldn't say it out loud, but I could tell he felt the same way. And when that Grad rocket came crashing into our kitchen, my Mom and I were in the room, while my Dad and Ida were in the kitchen. We crawled into the kitchen and there we saw my Dad shielding Ida with his own body.

The 3rd kilometer

The boy strolls along the coastline, with waves crashing into his boots and weighing them down even more. Each step takes an immense effort, but he grits his teeth, tightens his grip on the rope, and keeps pulling the sled forward.

BOY: My Mom, Ida, and I lived in the basement of our apartment block along with our neighbors and some people I had never seen before. It felt like we were all in it together, yet also alone in our struggles, everyone standing up for themselves. The russians bombarded Mariupol day and night, and it seemed like they never stopped, not even for a minute. One day, while I was waiting in the basement, my Mom and Ida went out to find some food, and the dog got a concussion. There was a bombing raid near them. That day, Ida became deaf, and my Mom had her arm broken. Ida was even fine as she had had a strong fear of explosions before that, but my Mom was unwell – her hand started rotting off, and we had nothing and no one to treat her. My Mom wouldn't let me go out alone, and we were completely out of food and water. The three of us had to split the last piece of bread we had left. My Mom didn't eat her slice, she hid it and gave it to Ida and me the next day. One day, when my Mom was asleep, I still sneaked out of the basement, with Ida staying behind to keep watch. I hadn't been out for two weeks until that day. And it was weird – the Central District was different from what I had dreamed about while sleeping in the basement. The place was destroyed, smoke filled the air, and dead bodies were scattered everywhere – some of them I knew, and some scared me too much to even look at. That day, I didn't find much: some bread covered in mold, some water from a muddy puddle, a ripped blanket, and then, like a miracle, a bag of lactose-free milk in a looted shop. I got back in the evening feeling relieved since that bag of milk was perfect for my lactose intolerant mom. And Mom... I saw my Mom lying in the same position as she was in the morning, with Ida sitting beside her, tears silently rolling down her face...

The 4th kilometer

BOY: People told me that Ida smelled like a dog, and many folks down in the basement turned their noses up at her. Although, I wouldn't say that other smells were any better. To me, Ida smelled like home, I could hug her and fall asleep. Most often, I had dreams about our apartment and our family. I recalled, how we celebrated the last New Year, my parents gave me a mobile phone, and I drew a picture for them. I started my art classes in December and I was doing pretty good. Even my teacher complimented my work. I still had an unfinished picture – Ida's portrait – at our place. I wanted to bring it to the school competition. Sometimes I dreamed about my classmates, my friends, and Oksanka. She was my deskmate this year, and that made me incredibly happy – she was an outstanding student! The life was amazing, really amazing. It's just sad that we can never go back to it. I wonder if Oksanka and my other friends are still alive...

The boy suddenly stops and listens closely, hearing a whistle in the distance. At first, the sound is faint and hard to hear, but it gradually grows louder and closer. The boy dives onto the sand, shuts his eyes, and shields his head with his hands. Somewhere beyond the shore, in the city, an explosion echoes through the air. Thick smoke engulfs everything, and the whistle persists – piercing through the ears from the inside.

The 5th kilometer

The boy scoops up some seawater, washes his face, takes a sip from his cupped hand, and immediately spits it out with a grimace of distaste. He walks back to the sled, glances at his hands which are injured from the rope, and lets out a sigh. Despite this, he picks up the rope and continues to pull the sled forward.

BOY: One day I woke up and heard some grumbling that my dog and I are two too many mouths. I wasn't mad, I got it – we've been under siege for a while now, and everyone's starving and frustrated. But then an old lady said: "We shouldn't be angry with each other, but with those damn goat-like russians! It was them who forced us into the basement like a bunch of rats. Those rascals took everything we had and called it 'liberation'. You can take that 'liberation' and stick it up your... you know what!" "They ain't gonna hear us, so what's the point?" someone replied. "They will hear," the old lady said far too confidently, and everyone got off me and Ida. And the next morning, the old lady didn't wake up. Her heart stopped beating. Two other guys and I buried the old lady in the yard, about five meters away from the entrance. It was tough 'cause the soil was near impossible to dig – either we were

too weak or the ground was frozen solid. Other folks were unwilling to help out – it was too risky since the shelling was still going on. Ida sat beside me, unperturbed. I suddenly realized that I wouldn't mind being deaf too – I was so sick of hearing all that noise. The explosions, people groaning and sobbing, and everyone's voices devoid of hope – it was all too much. One day I brought a lot of water – filled up a bucket from the heater boilers in the neighboring, more or less intact, apartment block. I didn't come up with that myself – I overheard some guys from a different basement talking about it. The folks in our basement started giving me compliments and stopped complaining about too many mouths. I always split my share of water with Ida. First, I would take a sip, and then she would finish the rest. After finishing her drink, Ida lay down in a corner, like she was conserving energy. She didn't even bark anymore. I felt the same way – minimizing my output, both physically and mentally. If we went out 'hunting' – that's what we called the search for water and food – with some of our neighbors, we all moved like zombies, taking slow steps, and sort of slouched over with hunched backs. It looked like we were in one of those apocalypse movies my Dad had been into. Black streets, black people. During one of our 'hunting' forays, I stumbled upon this sled in a looted store. It was new and shiny, with varnish coating over it. Everything in the store had been snatched away long ago, but I could take the sled. I sat on it and went sledding down the hill in the last snow.

The 6th kilometer

The boy pulls the sled along the seashore.

BOY: For the first time in a while, I woke up not to explosions, but to yelling. My fellow basement dwellers were having a fight. At first, I couldn't quite catch their words, but as I tuned in, I sprang to my feet and witnessed the scene. The dude who had been the quietest before had grabbed my Ida by the collar and was holding a knife against her throat. His hunger drove him insane, and he was set on killing my Ida and eating her. The others didn't let him do it, but they couldn't get hold of the knife either – the guy was waving it around and someone could get hurt. And Ida was silent and staring straight at me, as if saying goodbye. I rushed to the man and begged him to kill and eat me instead of hurting Ida. I was bawling my eyes out, down on my knees, prepared for anything. The guy just chucked the knife away, tossed Ida to the side, and left the basement. He never came back.

The 7th kilometer

The boy is standing on the breakwater, gazing thoughtfully out at the sea. The sled rests on the shore, its motley blanket flapping in the wind, almost exposing what's underneath it, but not quite fully.

BOY: Barefoot and wet, me and my Mom are weaving through the fountains at Theater Garden Square, while my Dad is standing off to the side, chuckling to himself. We are both drenched and spraying water like those fountains, but we don't mind it at all. It's too hot, and being wet feels even great. My Mom invites my Dad to come and join us, but he's acting all serious and says no, not today, he doesn't feel like. But we're ignoring his grumpy attitude and pulling him into the fountain. We're laughing out loud. How's the fountain looking these days? And the Drama Theater... Everyone in the basement couldn't stop talking about it... There were so many people hiding and I could have been there too. I heard that they wrote "KIDS" on every side of the theater's pavement, but the russian plane didn't give a damn – it dropped a bomb, made a go-around, and dropped another one. I remember my Dad telling me that they wouldn't bomb regular non-military folks. Now I know that the russians are actually targeting the non-military with their bombings. The streets were filled with dead bodies, and there was no more space left in our yard to bury them. And the russians didn't stop... In the basement, someone kept saying that they weren't gonna stop until they killed every last one of us. This is genocide. Back in the fall, when we were studying genocide at school, I remember thinking: "Thank goodness that's never gonna happen again." Well, it has happened again.

The 8th kilometer

BOY: In one of my forays, someone mentioned that one could flee from Mariupol to Berdiansk by car. Yeah, someone could flee by car, but me? I could walk 10 kilometers along the seashore, pass through the Komsomolskyi Beach and hit the freeway that leads to the Bilosarai Streamer. I didn't really have a plan, just a sense of direction – keep moving straight, straight, and straight ahead – and some ideas in case I run into the russians. I wasn't worried anymore about Ida attacking and barking. She had become so skinny and worn out that even if she tried, she wouldn't have the energy to rush at anyone. We walked while bombs exploded around and Grad rockets sliced through the sky just ahead of us. But we had a goal and we didn't quit. I had a strong feeling that if we didn't leave at that moment, we might never get another chance. I knew I would run into some russian roadblocks up ahead, and they would make me go through some filtering procedures. What is the 'filtering',

anyway? How can someone filter people? But I'll figure that out later. For now, my only goal is to get there. The beach, the freeway, Berdiansk. My ruined city no longer surprised me, neither did the corpses. It's freaky how one can get used to this kind of thing. And all I wanted at that moment was to keep moving forward. Not to look back. And Ida, on the contrary, was falling behind me, walking slower and slower, and...

The boy does not finish – the sled slams into a rock and flips over on its side. The load wrapped in the motley blanket falls out of the sled, and it becomes clear that this load was the lifeless body of a German Shepherd.

Fragment of a play.

If you want to read the full text - write to the author (iryna.feofanova@gmail.com)