



Ukrainian Drama
TRANSLATIONS

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Play IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH
Original name / B 3EMJII
translated

Translator JOHN FREEDMAN WITH NATALIA BRATUS

Language of English
translation

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This translation retains the author's unorthodox format, including centered text, that mixes identified speech, unidentified speech, descriptions and "stage directions" into a single, flowing narrative.

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Voices:
Liuba, Dima's wife
Aunt Sveta and her grandson Bogdan
Lena and her two children - Lena and the Child
A Chubby Family - mom, dad, their two young sons
Young woman
Nervous woman
Woman
School Principal
People in the bomb shelter - voices

A siren. My children and I go down into the bomb shelter. The man from territorial defense points the way:

“To the left with small children, without children - to the right.”

LENA. Why?

“There is a deeper basement for children.”

LENA. Okay, thank you.

Women with children go into a deeper basement. Adults go into a specially equipped bomb shelter with benches.

My children and I descend a ragged metal ladder. There are women here with bags on wheels. Strange, I think, hiding under the ground. The earth takes us in. I recall the words of a woman, a veteran, a spy in World War II: "The earth protects us when things are bad or frightening, Lena. Cling to the earth." We descend into the earth's bowels. I hide my children in it. We are looking for a place to sit, we look around.

WOMAN. Shut up. Listen, we're in a bomb shelter, quit weeping and wailing. Sit quietly. Don't whine. Look at all the people here. I don't know now what to do with you. Shush, now! Go to sleep, I said!

LENA. Are these free?

"What?"

LENA. The chairs, are they taken?

“No, take what you want.

Why are you howling again! Where are you going? It's dirty there! Hey, I told you, sit in your stroller. Your clothes are clean. I just put them on you today. Dad, where are you going? Say something to her."

"What can I say? And what can you do? You don't even want to calm down your child. I'll spank you now! Sleep, I said. Sit still."

"She's going to fall out!" Rock her yourself! Go ahead! You think this is easy? Where are you going! Lie down, I said!!!

When troops were stationed on the borders, I did not believe a full-scale war would begin. That is, I hoped it would not begin. In my opinion, February 22, 2022 and February 23, 22 were the dangerous days. The former because it was a mirrored astronomical date, the second because it was Soviet Soldier Day. When I went to bed on the evening of the 23rd, I breathed a sigh of relief - "The war didn't start, ooof, Putin bluffing the West again." About 2 o'clock in the morning I woke up because a sewing needle was stuck in my side. I got up, sleepy, pulled it out of the sofa. Sure enough, a needle, it's sticking out of an arm cover. "What is that doing in a child's bed?"

At about 7 a.m., I leaped up in fright: the wall between our apartment and the neighbor's was shaking. Explosions could be heard in the distance. "Training exercises? Why didn't we hear this before, then? Why today? What happened?"

I ask my neighbor. "Lena, war has begun."

NERVOUS WOMAN. Is this your child? (*She asks in Russian.*) He touched my baby bottle...

“Why you are shouting at him, I don't understand, tell me...”

“He touched it with his dirty hands. This is for a baby...”

“Quit yelling at him ... How could he do that? How could you do that?”

“He touched it with his dirty hands, it's a bottle for a baby. Why are you grabbing other people's things?”

“I repeat: speak to me, don't yell at my child.”

“Do you hear what I'm saying, I ask (*she continues to speak in Russian*)? Don't touch!”

“Say that to me!”

“Go fuck yourself!”

“You go fuck yourself!”

Her husband smiles a guilty smile and holds a little girl in pink. The girl is two or three months old.

Ukrainian soldiers recently told a Russian warship “to go fuck itself.” Everyone is nervous. Children are crying. An air raid alarm sounds. People stream into the basement of the school.

CHILD. Mom, I just wanted to look.

LENA. Don't touch other people's things! Right, Liuba?

LIUBA. Come here to us, we're a little higher.

LENA. Is it okay that we won't be in a deeper basement? What if it really does cave in?

CHILD. Mom, Mom, I want to go see Bogdan. He has a bunch of cool cars.

LENA. Phew... It's stuffy in here. These transmitters and pipes...

LIUBA. It's the school's boiler room. Mother and I set up here especially for the children. It won't get cold here at night.

CHILD. Mom, it's like a space station!

LENA. Okay then, I'll bring my things. Will you have room to sit?

LIUBA. Bogdan can sleep here, Sviatik and Myron over here.

LENA. Your mom, isn't she on chemotherapy now?

AUNT SVETA. Oh, no, Lenochka, it's all right, everything is fine.

LENA. The sirens went off today in the middle of the night, how do you sleep?

AUNT SVETA. We get a little sleep, it's nothing.

LIUBA. Where is Dima with the suitcases?

LENA. What are they saying? An air raid or tanks?

“It seems they're coming from Kherson, they want to surround us.”

LENA. Where do you read that? Can I subscribe? In Telegram?

“Here, Vitaly Kim. He's chairman of the Mykolaiv regional administration, he describes everything happening in Mykolaiv.”

LIUBA. Tanks are headed for Mykolaiv... Bogdan, here, have some cheese. Dima, what are you doing with that bag? What do you see in there?

An entire shelf is occupied by the Chubby Family: Husband, wife and two sons — Stiopa and Anton. [*They speak in Russian*]

FATHER. Why do you keep poking your mother, can't you see she's busy? She's reading. I'm busy too. Either sit here or lie down - like Stiopa.

Why are you so jumpy all the time? I told you, sit down

CHILD 1. It hurts, Daddy.

FATHER. I said, don't whine. Now, shut up. Sit! Sit down. Would you sit down!!

CHILD 1. It hurts, Daddy!!!

FATHER. Shush! Shush, I told you!!!

(*The boy cries*)

Once and for all, would you sit down!?

LENA. I don't like men like that!

AUNT SVETA. They want their children to sit at attention, while they hang out on their telephones.

LIUBA. He made himself at home — they took over all the children's places, and now when children come, there's nowhere for them to lie.

AUNT SVETA. The grown-ups all squeeze in, and you can be damned! What do you do with people like that!

FATHER AND MOTHER (*simultaneously*). Your youngest child is about to fall. He constantly cries, here, have a banana...

CHILD. Mom, take it. I want a banana... Oh, you have sandwiches too — can I have a sandwich? I'm hungry.

MOTHER. Here, have a banana.

LENA. No thank you. He doesn't want it anymore.

FATHER. Take one for your youngest, maybe he won't cry so much.

LENA. He can't sleep. He wanders around bumping into walls, like a zombie. The air raid alarms scare him. Thank you...

LIUBA. Would he like a sandwich?

LENA. I wanted to go to the store — but I never made it — I heard a siren, grabbed Myron in his sleep, a sleeping bag, and I ran.

AUNT SVETA. Here's some sausage, bread, cheese and yogurt for the children, some cream cheese.

DIMA. I have a pot of boiling water.

LIUBA. Dima, where have you been? Can't you help me with the baby? What did you bring? We have hot water. I thought at least here he would help me, but no, he's

out running around and smoking with the guys...

AUNT SVETA. Here, Sviatik, have a sandwich. Don't you want one? What else will you eat? Aren't you breast-feeding now?

LENA. We brought nothing with us... I wasn't prepared... I never made it to the store... All the grocery stores and shops were closed.

CHILD. I'm hungry. Can I have a sandwich?

LENA. Listen, shhh, we didn't bring anything.

LIUBA. No, no, enough of that, have some, Sviatik.

CHILD. Oh, cool, that's good!

AUNT SVETA. Lena, have something else, maybe — you're breast feeding.

LENA. I don't eat bread, it's all right, thank you so much, all right, I'll have some bread with this cheese, Myron doesn't want anything...

LENA. More people coming in now, tanks are firing — oh, there was a good pop.

CHILD. Mom, Mom — sirens, I'm afraid.

AUNT SVETA. More people coming in... there are no more chairs left. There are a lot of people today.

CHILD. What does the siren-sound do? Ooo-ooo... Mom, does it want to kill us?

LENA. No, son, the siren warns us about danger - ooo-ooo — then people run for basements and bomb shelters. See? Here they come running.

CHILD. So the siren-sound helps us. Then who wants to kill us?

LENA. Putin and the Russians are bombing our cities, they want to kill us.

CHILD. I understand. They must be dinosaurs. Mom, I am afraid.

LENA. Dinosaurs died out a long time ago.

CHILD. Then who wants to kill us?

LENA. Evil people, son.

CHILD. Who are these Russians?

LENA. They are people from a neighboring country that hate us.

CHILD. Why?

LENA. Because we are free, son.

CHILD. What's that?

LENA. Well, we have our own opinion, our own land, and we love and defend it.

CHILD. What if a bomb falls on us?

LENA. Don't be afraid, we are underground and we are safe.

CHILD. In a hole in the ground?

LENA. Yes.

CHILD. And it protects us?

LENA. It covers us like this (*spreads hands over Child's head*).

CHILD. Mommy, I don't want to die.

LENA. No, no, you will live a long and happy life.

CHILD. And no Russians will kill me?

LENA. No, son, they won't kill you, our soldiers are fighting them.

CHILD. Those ones with wings?

LENA. Remember when Daddy's friends came to visit — Myron, Kid and Oleh?

CHILD. They brought me a Kinder Surprise and a mechanical toy bear.

LENA. Vitaly, Ihor and the doctor from Poltava.

CHILD. And Daddy?

LENA. And Daddy...

CHILD. My Daddy is fighting those dragons?

LENA. That's right, son. Your Daddy is fighting them. He won't let those soldiers kill us and take away everything we have.

CHILD. My toys, my books, my computer.

LENA. Our home, our way of life, our language and who we are.

CHILD. But who are we, Mommy?

LENA. Ukrainians.

CHILD. Ah, we're Ukraine!

“We are Ukraine! We are Ukraine!” (*Runs around and shouts to all.*)

LENA. Everyone is going to hate me here.

MOTHER. Anton, come now, sit. Tell your father now, what do you want? Come here. He's allowed to, you're not.

Sit here. Next to Stiopa.

LENA. The boy is bothering everyone. He's throwing a tantrum.

LIUBA. That angry old guy is shouting, “Who's child is that?!”

“We are Ukraine! We are Ukraine!”

Shelling in all cities. Ukraine has gone underground. Maybe the earth will protect us. I heard from a priest that prayers underground have especial power, so monks dug underground caves to pray in. I don't know how to pray properly, so I just make up prayers in my own words to block out the fear.

LIUBA. Bogdan, Bogdan, at least eat something, sweetheart. Here's an apple, a cookie, you haven't eaten all day. Mom, what am I supposed to do with him!

LENA. The little tyke just clings to me. So much stress, so many people, my teeth chatter. My chest hurts.

AUNT SVETA. The two of them are sprinkling sand on someone.

LIUBA. I'll go get them.

MOTHER. Talk to him, I can't calm him down.

FATHER. Come here, I said. How long will you keep this up?

CHILD 1. Daddy, don't... (*Father whacks him on the shoulder and shakes him. The boy cries.*) I want to go with him!

Sit down, I said. And sit there.

FATHER. Look, Stiopa is sitting and playing (*Mother immediately hugs Stiopa and strokes him on the head.*)

MOTHER. Stiopa, Stiopushka, everything is all right...

CHILD 1. Mom...

MOTHER. Sit down, Anton.

AUNT SVETA. I waited so long for chemotherapy... it was possible to pay immediately, but a single sitting costs 40 thousand grivens, and you have to go through many... if you want to receive free treatment, you have to wait — and I waited forever. I just went in to do an IV - and the war started. I only have one T-shirt with me.

LENA. Good God, this child is a devil. Stop it! Put that back. What are you putting in your mouth?!

Knives, nails, they're all dirty. (*He throws a piece of metal in the corner, people are startled, silence, ringing silence, broken by a distant explosion*).

Ka-boom!!!

“Be silent if you can, everyone's nerves are frayed!”

“A man is ill.”

“Call an ambulance.”

AUNT SVETA. Whoever thought this would come about!

“I didn't believe war would come until the very end.”

“I think it will end tomorrow.”

“Oh, they say it's going to be a long time.”

“But there can't be a real war in our times, like there was with the Germans.”

“This war is already underway.”

“What does he care about anybody? He's sick in the head.”

“I always thought Russia had a good president.”

“They're bombing Kharkiv, bombing Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Mariupol... battles are raging in Kherson, tanks are approaching Kyiv — all at the same time.”

“And they lie and lie and lie.”

“They said they're going to catch Nazis, but they keep dropping bombs on the heads of peaceful people.”

“What did we do wrong? Why such a disaster on our heads? What did we do?”

“I had a premonition about this war. I told my sister: Don't remodel your apartment, but she insisted. So what happens now?”

“They had just put in such beautiful new roads. Now they're tearing them all to shreds.”

“We should have invested in our army, our neighbor has gone mad.”

“Knock it off with the politics!” says a man who can't take it anymore. He spits in disgust and moves to another corner of the shelter.

AUNT SVETA. Listen - air raid alarm again...

LENA. Don'tt be afraid, son, we're with people here, look at all the people hiding here from the war.

CHILD. Mom, I'm scared.

LIUBA. Here comes the school principal, what could she want?

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL. I ask all of you to turn off geolocaters on your phones, if

they are turned on, and in Viber... yes, that's right,
the VPN, right here.

Okay, you have a peer-to-peer connection. Fine.
We don't want them tracking where crowds are gathered.

AUNT SVETA. What a mother-in-law I had! Her husband's brother came to her once and started getting up on his high horse - she didn't bat an eyelash and gave him a good whack between the eyes. Showered him with blows with whatever she could get her hands on. He fell and cracked his head, and started bleeding and everybody says, what have you done, you killed him! He lay there for a good, long time. He couldn't get up, and everyone thought he was dead. "What of it," my mother-in-law says. "They can put me in jail, but I'm going to stand up for myself." Great mother-in-law, I learned a lot from her.

Now, Liuba's mother-in-law nothing like that. Cunning, lying, never helps with anything, and always makes it out as if everything's Liuba's fault.

Voices fill the space of the bombshelter:

"Putin is a cornered rat now. He's going to bite hard."

"I'm terribly afraid of a nuclear strike."

"All his rockets have long been aimed at Europe and America, that's why they won't come help us."

"They're afraid themselves."

"How my husband loved me. I can't tell you all the gifts he showered on me. Then somehow I found out he had another woman. Naturally, I met with her - she was very young and beautiful. Smoky black hair, and dark eyes. I talked to her. It was a calm, but firm conversation. After that she disappeared. Obviously, I got no more gifts, and the passion was gone. We began to live simply and calmly."

"They say there are going to be air strikes. We need to sit tight."

"Maybe there won't be?"

"What will they stop at? He's already broken everything! Children are dead, churches destroyed."

"They can fuck off, for all I care."

"That's for sure, only we're going to have to run them out, they won't go on their own."

"We ought to move closer to that wall over there, this one is on the street side, and it will collapse quickly. That other one should hold out. (*People move to the stronger wall.*)

"How about letting the women and children go first? Hey!"

MOTHER AND FATHER. Take your child, he'll fall off the stairs.

LENA. And where do I put him?

AUNT SVETA. He won't sit still.

MOTHER AND FATHER. Ours sit still. See there? He fell, and he's crying.

Quit jumping around! Sit still! Listen here! Sit still, Anton!
CHILD 1. It hurts, Daddy. Mommy! Mommy!

AUNT SVETA (*quietly, restrained*). They say Putin is like that because no one cared about him. His mother was a prostitute, and left him to someone else's aunt, and she didn't care about him either. And that's how he grew up. Dull, damaged, clumsy, miserable. He was a no-count who gave everyone a hard time. His nickname was "mole."

He came to power in ragged pants.

Nobody wants a kid like that, you know, and that's how they grow up. You don't have to kiss their ass, but you do have to love them.

“They say this is only the beginning.
We'll sit here until tomorrow morning, if not longer.”

“Those sounds...”

“What do you expect? It's war!”

“Oh, God. Oh, God!”

“In Sumy they came right into a bomb shelter and wanted to take everyone hostage.”

“Are you kidding?”

“But the territorial defense pushed them back.”

“Do you think they'll come ...

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