

“Love-me-don’t-leave-me”

A mono-play

Written for Batumi International Festival of Monodrama 2022

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Translated into English by **Anna Halas**

Characters:

Katya – a flower shop attendant

Vitalik’s voice

Scene 1

Katya holds a list of orders in her hands, and at the same time talks on the mobile phone.

Katya (*on the phone*). Bonjour! C’est Catherina. (*loses a page in her notebook, interrupts herself, recalls something*) Je ... suis ... avoir ... fleurs ... (*in despair*) Appelle Natasha!... S’il vous plait... Merci. (*on the phone, relieved*). Natasha, is that you? French just doesn’t seem to stick with me!... The teacher told us to practice the language. Practicing... Natasha, how do you say “take the order” in French? No, it was different, I won’t remember your variant. It’s in my notebook somewhere... Wait... That’s it, I can’t find it... (*on the phone*). How are things going for you? We need flowers for the shop. Can you jot that down? Yeah, hang on, I’m trying to find that piece of paper

Katya looks for a piece of paper.

Katya (*on the phone*). How is the little one? At school? And how does he sleep? Uh-huh... Sing to him, Natasha... I know it’s hard but sing anyway. Do you think it’s easy for him? Who among you is the mother? So that’s it.

Katya finds a piece of paper.

Katya (*on the phone*). Yes, Natasha, put it down ... Amaryllis. Got it? Now one more - anemones. Next: gerberas, iris ... I’m not sure how to read (*creates diverse lip looks*) - œillets – let’s spell it - o-e- i, and then *lets*. How does it read? ... And what kind of flower is this, Natasha? ... Ah, a carnation? Yes, yes, put down the carnations - they are beautiful. Tell me, do you have pink ones? I don’t know, it just came to mind... Mother’s Day is approaching; we can create bouquets for it. It was the Mother of God who shed tears at Christ’s tomb, grieving her dear son. Instead of tears, pink carnations blossomed on her cheeks. That’s why we often choose carnations for funerals - we are all sons and daughters to someone.

Katya stops talking.

Katya (*on the phone*). No, Natasha, I’m not crying. Why cry? He’s doing well... I can feel it in my heart. We exchange thoughts, and I ask him, “How are you?” And he replies, “I’m okay, Mom!”... Continue writing, don’t get distracted – there’s a long list ahead. (*she dictates*) lys calla is kala, I know that. They are good for family wellbeing, you can take them to a wedding – for good luck of the family.

Next - *pivoines, protéas, ornithogalums* - I like these *ornithogalums*. Have you seen them? Small white ones, perfect for the bride's bouquet. Next - *tulipes, skimies, roses* ... What kind of roses do you have? Yes. Let's get 30 pieces of each type, if possible.

This isn't on the list, and the shop owner didn't mention it, but could you jot it down? Can you arrange for more poppies to be ordered? No red ones? Okay, send the white ones; there's nothing we can do about it. And sunflowers! I bought linen at the fabric shop; twisting it can create an authentic bouquet.

And you know what - just bring some soil, I want to plant a mallow! ... Yes, I know that they grow here, but I have my own, from the garden, a Ukrainian one. Could you bring it? I'll plant it at the entrance to the store, in the flowerbed. Let it bloom. I'll know it's mine, from our own soil. Someday I'll go home, and the mallows of a Ukrainian flower girl will remain here.

No, that's not all... Do you have marigolds in your greenhouse? The ones in the pots ... Send at least 10 pieces. Why do you think nobody is going to buy them? You can put them in a flower bed, and in pots, and they are useful ...

Natasha, aren't you aware of their usefulness? ... They're great for making tea, good for the stomach, and improve eyesight. Glasses are so expensive here! You can enjoy a cup of tea, gaze out the window, and there, right before your eyes, is the Eiffel Tower. No need to travel to Paris.

Katya (*giggles*). Natasha, can we send a batch of marigolds to Muscovites? ... They'll drink some tea, look out the window, and see that we don't have any Benderites? Maybe they'll see the light? All the greenhouses in Ukraine are at full capacity. Well, how many carnations do you need to grow? ... How many tears of the Mother of God ...

Katya is silent.

Katya (*on the phone*). No, Natasha, I'm not crying... I was just thinking. Who's delivering today? Valya?!...

Well, if it's Valya, then they'll bring it today. Valya drove two disabled people through Kharkiv in a passenger car, and now it's just a routine delivery. La Rochelle is not Kharkiv! ... How is her Tolik, by the way? No news? ... No need for her to worry... Perhaps they simply switched off the Internet and phones... Like in Kherson. But he is alive!... You must pray, Natasha. I have one simple prayer: "Lord, my God, love-me-don't-leave-me!" I don't know any other prayers.

I went to a nearby church, it was Catholic. The columns are adorned with hanging marble tablets. They're ancient, they've been there for ages. The plaques bear the single word "*merci*". I saw two dates: 1939 and 1944. Even with everything going on with the war and occupation, folks still found reasons to say thanks to God. Here I am, standing and pondering these signs, wondering what I should thank God for. (*laughs*). Thank God I'm not a Muscovite! Well, yes, we laugh to keep from crying.

Go to the church, Natasha. And go to the sea with the little one. Here we have the sea, or whatever it is, the ocean! Have you been there? Go ahead and allow the baby to run around. Give him a hug and encourage him to study well. Most importantly, let him learn French, he can translate for us. Oh, and could you pop into the pharmacy? Have you been there? What did they say?... Is there a haemostatic? Tell them to order more; we'll transport it by bus to Poland, and from there, it'll come to Ukraine. You know how crucial it is at the front... Yes, I know you understand; it's me...

That's right, Natasha, don't cry. Thank God, and don't let the bad get to you. Now, wait, how is it ... I remembered! Bonne journée! Yeah. And in our language, we say "hold on tight".

Katya switches off her phone, gathers flowers of various types, arranges them into a bouquet, and notices the audience in the hall.

Katya (*welcoming them*). Bonjour! (*points to the flowers*) Fleur, s'il vous plaît. Now I have a minute. Un minute!

Katya dashes to retrieve a cheat sheet containing the essential phrases, then hurries back with the notebook. Eager to read the phrases, she pauses midway and scrutinizes them closely.

Katya (*with caution, to the audience*) Are you one of ours? (*with excitement*) Ours? (*with surprise*) I didn't recognize you at first. Glory to Ukraine!

Are flowers what everyone wants? Please make a choice! I'm feeling a little... troubled today. Natasha's son isn't sleeping well, and Valya's Tolik has gone missing...

Where are you from? I see.

Have you been here long? I see.

I'm actually from Kyiv myself, and now, well, I'm selling flowers here.

I'm here temporarily.

We are all here temporarily.

Among my acquaintances, Natasha is here; she used to be the chief accountant in Mariupol, but now she works in a warehouse... She has a son... Oh, we can't help him ... During the day, everything seems calm, but at night... it's all tears. They used to have a cat, but it got scared by the shelling and ran off. They searched for it, but how do you find a cat in chaos? So they had to leave... and now he cries. He's such a good boy.

Then there's Valya. She used to be an interior designer in Kharkiv, but now she's delivering packages. Valya's husband is missing. They can't find him, but I reassure her that it's not her fault... I tell her not to cry.

As for me... What can I say? I started as a flower girl and I still am, in a way, without any major career changes. I became a florist back in Kyiv when my son was just a little boy. Now he's twenty years old, all grown up...

He has been off his cell phone for a week now.

He stayed in Kyiv, volunteering. He's not going to the war; he doesn't have any skills. He's a programmer or something - an IT guy. They promised to train him, but there's a waiting list. For now, so he's still volunteering to take out the animals.

Natasha's son often asks about my Vitalik. He says, "Auntie Katia, if your Vitalik rescues animals, maybe he can find my cat too? It's not far from Kyiv to Mariupol. Can you please tell him that my cat's name is Baton or Batosha? Ask him to call, and my cat will come running".

Well, I say, I'll pass it on, but I can't yet - because Vitalik's mobile phone is turned off.

Why is his phone switched off? Maybe he lost it somewhere... It happens, right?

I don't have any negative thoughts about him because who would? He rescues animals and takes care of them. It's a good deed he's doing, that's clear to everyone, both our people and theirs... These aren't weapons - cats and dogs... Right?

Katya suddenly stands up.

Katya. You're here for flowers, and I've got plenty to choose from. Take your pick! We've got fresh roses, hyacinths, and dahlias. The arrangement also includes tulips. Interested in yellow ones? They're my favourite, like rays of sunshine. When you gift a bouquet like this, it's like wishing someone a vibrant life.

Flowers can convey so much, sometimes even things you can't say aloud.

Katya giggles.

I once presented daffodils to a narcissist (*laughs*). He didn't get it. He was so thrilled! He said, "It's the first time a woman has ever given me flowers!" And I smiled so genuinely, looking at him and thinking, "You clueless fool." Yes, it happened. (*sighs*) Where is that "narcissist" now? God knows. He used to live somewhere in Obolon, and now... Wherever he is, let him be. Just being alive matters, right? And a narcissist isn't a Russian orc.

I forgot the flowers, sorry.

Maybe you're invited to a party?

Yellow tulips are perfect for parties... Pair them with blue chrysanthemums, and you've got our flag. I place such bouquets at the entrance, alongside handmade souvenirs we sell to fund haemostats for the frontline. This is how we raise awareness and support for Ukraine. Though people do remember, I can't complain, but... they don't fully grasp it.

I understand them. Even I, watching the news, hear the sounds.

Where is it, that damn sound, why does it sound so different through the camera? Maybe the camera fails to convey the horror when you're in a room and it's flying in, and you physically feel the ground tremble. On video, it's just a faint rumble, that's all, but it doesn't penetrate you, through your entire being. That's why they don't understand. If everything inside them died in an instant, they would understand many things. The cost of petrol would be the least of their worries. And if they don't feel it, how can you explain it in words? Especially since I don't know those words... "Je m'appelle Catherina." "Je suis ukrainienne." That's it...

It's nothing! Natasha's son is bright; he'll pick up the language and be able to translate. Then we'll all tell our stories... Now, I fight in this way: I make bouquets of yellow tulips and blue chrysanthemums - fighting for the integrity of our flag.

Do you know how I got hired by the shop owner? What a story! We arrived by bus, a whole busload of exhausted women and children, and when I got off, I turned my head and saw a flower shop. I started to cry. Fresh flowers, can you believe it? My legs carried me to the shop, I didn't know how.

I just stood there, captivated. After living in a basement, those colours felt like a pure fairy tale. I hadn't been there a minute when the owner came out and asked me something. I shrugged my shoulders - I don't speak the language.

I showed her the flag on my sweatshirt: while we were traveling, I made a ribbon for everyone, cutting and pinning the Ukrainian flag: a yellow stripe and a blue stripe.

The owner pointed to the flag and then to me and said, "Come in." I went in because I didn't know how to refuse - how do you say it in their language? So I went in.

And on the counter, right there, was an unfinished bouquet. And it looked like this... well, how to say... No, I'm not criticizing it, it's nice, but... It lacked shape. So I took one calla lily and placed it inside - and it was just one flower, but the composition changed! And I gave it to her.

She stood there, looked at the bouquet, then at me, and back at the bouquet, then at me again. She set the bouquet aside, hurried to the bus, talked to the interpreter, and came back to me. The interpreter said to me... (oh, such a rude person, but God will judge her) "This woman is offering you a job with her."

And she looked at me with displeasure.

Not the shop owner, the shop owner was standing there crying, I mean the interpreter! We had a fight... I asked her: speak Ukrainian! And she said to me: "I don't speak Ukrainian, I am from Russia, but I'm against the war. I still believe that the entire government is guilty, and the people are suffering. We need to stop the war. Ukrainians just need to stop shooting. And your people keep shooting, so you keep arriving here, and I am helping. I don't sleep for days and I get no gratitude."

Just stop shooting...

"Thank you very much," I said, "I'm thrilled! A special thanks for the president..."

I won't swear. The shop owner asked me not to swear, she said it makes the flowers wilt. Well, not really. She doesn't actually say it, she writes it through a translator. How can they wilt if I swear in Ukrainian? Do they understand the language?

Katya stands up.

I won't go on about it again; you're here for flowers.

Look, just present blue chrysanthemums. They're unique, and it's like saying, "You have an important place in my life." It's like a confession, but not just of love - more like affection.

If you want roses, you can have roses. There are powdery peony ones, miniature ones in pots... I really like the potted ones because they can be transplanted or kept on the windowsill. And those small tea roses, if you grind the petals with sugar, you'll get a delicious jam. Have you tried it? I used to eat that kind of jam as a child, made by my grandmother. But here, they don't eat it.

So what do you want? Roses? I'm not a big fan. For my wedding, I got so many roses I had to put them in the Jacuzzi because I didn't have enough vases. Yes, it was a big deal. I used to live in a mansion with a Jacuzzi, a housekeeper, and a cook, before I became a florist, before my so-called professional downfall, and before my son was born.

My life was full of everything but flowers. My ex never gave me flowers. He called them "a stupid broom." He's the real broom. First, we had a good life: I was at home, he was at work, then at the sauna, with friends, or hunting, and I was alone at home. It was lonely. Once I confronted him, and he hit me. The next morning, he brought me roses for the first time. After that, roses appeared often: red, large, with long stems. He even sent me 100 roses to the hospital after breaking my jaw.

I didn't accept them. I ran away from the hospital, moved in with a friend. He tried to persuade me to return at first, but then he found someone else. That's when I found out I was pregnant. He doesn't know about the son, and you won't tell him, right?

Listen, I've been thinking... Maybe you don't really want those roses? I have many other options here. How about these? (*reads*) We call them Asian buttercups. Buttercups are beautiful.

My grandmother had a forest near our house, and buttercups grew there. Simple, small, five-petaled flowers. She used to call them "*tolerate trouble*". I have no idea where she got that name.

She always said, "Be patient to *tolerate trouble*..."

My grandmother lived in Chasiv Yar, Donetsk region, and passed away in 2013. She endured a lot in her youth.

When the Germans came to Ukraine, my grandmother and my mother hid in the woods. They made a dugout and lived there. They ate whatever they found, making soup with hemp oil.

My grandmother told me she remembered the circle of oil in the soup: one big drop and smaller ones. She would collect the smaller ones with a spoon and pull them up to the big one, carefully not to lose a single drop. That drop of oil could mean another day of life. That's how they survived, one day at a time until victory.

Just like us.

We take it one day at a time – until the victory.

After World War II ended, my grandmother went to night school. She had only completed three grades. Then she started working at a brick factory, got married, built a house in Chasiv Yar, and had children – my mother and her brother. No one is there anymore. Everything was bombed by the Muscovites.

"Tolerate trouble" ... She knew something.

But I have nothing to tolerate; I'm fine. If only Vitalik's phone would turn on. When I left, we agreed to call each other at seven in the morning or seven in the evening. Maybe he forgot? You choose, and I'll be back.

Katya takes out a mobile phone, dials a number, and waits.

Katya. Disconnected... I've been without contact for eight days now. The girls say that if they had found a body, they would have reported it. So, he must be alive. I keep thinking about the landline: why did I disconnect it? How much was that subscription fee? I was trying to save money... I cut costs everywhere after the divorce because I left everything behind, even the Jacuzzi. And with a child, you know how it is... Eventually, I got a job, but the habit of saving stuck. Same with the phone... If I hadn't disconnected it, we could have talked...

You look around a bit, I'll be right back. Something caught my eye.

Katya goes deeper into the flowers, silently crying.

Scene 2

Katya brings out a vase of gerberas from the back.

Katya. Look what I found: a great choice for you, a win-win situation. We've got fresh gerberas in different varieties. Check these out: the cream ones are Veronica, the amaranth ones are Peter, and there are orange ones named Pluto, probably after the planet. We also have red ones called Romeo. We just haven't found a Juliet yet. It seems we only have Romeos. But they can be for anyone, it doesn't matter anymore; we're not in the Middle Ages. Though sometimes, listening to

those Neanderthals on the phone, I have my doubts. One of them calls his wife and says, “The guys in our unit are gonna rape everyone,” and she says, “Well, go ahead and rape someone too, but don’t tell me about it...” That’s their idea of love. I sometimes wonder if they ever give their women flowers. Or just stolen toilet bowls?

Katya sighs.

Katya. I didn’t plan to come here, but... My son went to rescue animals from Borodyanka and returned with three cats, five dogs, and Sonya.

When I stepped outside, there she was, frail, holding a Ficus. Just a simple Ficus in a pot. And it broke my heart.

Flowers have always held meaning for me, since I was a child. They carry messages, energy. And now here’s this Ficus in a pot. I used to have one. My mother gave it to me, saying if it ever bloomed, it would mean a new addition to the family. It never did bloom, but then I gave birth to my son. Now here’s Sonya, standing with a blossoming Ficus, and I can see she’s pregnant.

She’s dealing with kidney issues, not from the war, she says. She won’t tell me who hurt her like that, and I don’t push. Everyone has their own burdens now. Sharing it or not, it doesn’t make it easier. So we stay silent.

But damaged kidneys during pregnancy isn’t a good sign.

At least Sonya is only 18.

In a strange way, it’s fortunate she’s so young; things could’ve been worse. And I’m grateful my Vitalik found her in that basement. He’s a good boy.

I thought about staying in Kyiv, helping my son with body armor, helmets, boots, thermal gear – all the things you need for the army! The queues are long now, and when they conscript you into the army, you have to act fast – one day’s notice and you’re off! When he was small, I was packing his school bag: notebooks, pencils, erasers. Now, we’re gearing up our sons for war.

Then Sonia showed up. She stepped out of the car like that, right onto the street.

I noticed something trickling down her leg. Her belly was already big, so I thought her water had broken.

I hurried over, grabbed her hand, but then the air raid siren went off. We dashed to the neighbour’s basement – I was terrified. I mean, giving birth there? It’s filthy, no doctors, just salespeople all around. And I can’t take her home; we live in a private house, no basement, and the walls are so thin, one missile could fly through without stopping. In simple terms, it fails the third-wall principle.

So, off to the neighbour’s basement we went. I asked her when she was due.

“Next month,” she said. She confessed it wasn’t her water breaking – she had just... peed herself. She mentioned her kidney problems from being beaten. She didn’t say by whom or why. Maybe she’ll tell me later.

After the all-clear signal, she turned to me: “Could you take me to the hospital? I’m scared for the baby.” I looked at her, seeing her giving birth in a maternity ward amidst reports of horror from Chernihiv and Mariupol back then...

Poor child, I think. No parents now; there was a grandmother, but she didn't make it. The child's father, Sasha, joined the defence forces on day one of the war. He was killed in Borodyanka on that very day. I'll tell you more about this story later, if I remember. Oh! That's right! Forget-me-nots!

Look at these beautiful flowers I have here, and I haven't even mentioned them. Do you know what we call a forget-me-not? "Love-me-don't-leave-me." I love that name so much, I say it like a prayer: "Lord, my God, love me and don't leave me." Anyone who sees this flower will remember someone they loved. See how beautiful they are? Who do you think of when you see them?

I'm talking about my son. Before he was born, I had different loves, but when I first saw Vitalik, I realized I had never loved anyone before. You might think it's not real, that it's just a mother's love. But let me tell you, my son and I have such a bond that his phone has been off for eight days, and I'm not worried because I know he's alive. I talk to him, I ask him, "Son, how are you? and he says, "I'm good, Mom!"

Lord, my God, Love-me-don't-leave-me.

Sonya wanted to stay till the very end. It was all my idea. My Vitalik said, "Go, Mom, I'll manage on my own. It's even better for me. You're always on my back, nagging: "Son, pack your bags!": He was annoyed.

Now, I don't bug him anymore. I'm not sure if he's eating anything. I packed some noodles and canned food. Maybe he's had some, unless he's given it all to the cats. He's a good lad.

First, I thought of only going as far as Uzhhorod, but we barely made it onto that train. In Uzhhorod, they directed us to Budapest, where volunteers helped find us a place to stay. At the Budapest station, they said, "There are already so many Ukrainians here. Keep moving. Why stay? No seats, no lodging. Head to Paris, then take a bus to any town in France. It's better there. Sonichka can give birth there."

And so, here we are. I found a job as soon as we got off the bus. The city council gave us a vacant house for free, saying, "Make yourselves at home. It was abandoned anyway."

So, that's where we're living now.

Sonya can't come back now; she has to give birth first and then get her kidneys treated here. In our country, hospitals are struggling, medicines are scarce – it's easier here. I have no one to leave Sonya with, so I'm helping out, but I can't stop thinking about Vitalik. Last time I called him, I told him we arrived. mentioned heading to Dymarka. That's all I know.

Katya is silent.

Katya. I just keep going and going. This is why I dislike these meetings. We don't have time to meet and share our grief. I'm sorry, but I can't stop thinking - why isn't his phone on? But I'm not losing hope. If he didn't pick up in the evening, maybe he'll turn it on in the morning. Perhaps he's tired, went to bed early, and tomorrow he'll wake up and answer.

He'll definitely pick it up; we just have to wait. Oh, God, please love-me-don't-leave-me.

The phone rings - a mobile phone. Katya rushes over, checking the number.

Katya. Ukraine! It's a Ukrainian number! Hello, Vitalik? Vitalik! Can you hear me? Bad connection! Who is this? What's your name? Where's Vitalik? Where's my Vitalik?!

Katya keeps talking on the phone but her voice fades away. The mobile slips from her hands, and she struggles to stay steady.

Katya. We need to pray. I have to pray. (*whispers*) Lord, my God, love-me-don't-leave-me!

Scene 3

Katya collects flowers, arranging them into a large bouquet, and remains silent for a long time.

Katya (*to the audience*). He said he was a volunteer too. He said he found the car. Vitalik's car. His car was crushed by a tank. Only the SIM card was left in the car, and Vitalik... Let's have a moment of silence.

Katya counts down for one minute.

Katya. My only love is my son. I can list 60 affectionate nicknames for him: Vitasik, Vitalichik, Vitaly, Vityusya, Vitasha, Vitonichka, Vitashka, Vitunichka, Vitozavrik, Vitonyatko, Vitanyushka, Vitalyunchik, Lucik, Vitanchik, Lyusyatyko, Talyusyatyko, Talyusyunchik, Vitulik, Vitulichka, Litanyushka, Vitalik, Vitolyasko, Vitaly, Vitozaychik, Vitonya, Lyusiotavryk, Vityanchyk, Lyusionichka, Vityushka, Vitalienyatko, Vitalomchyk, Vitalitsar, Talitsomchik, Vitalisichonok, Vityushamryk, Vityozubchik, Vitolyalchik, Vityoshka, Vitoserdenko, Vitolasunchik, Vitalko, Vitasonko, Vitusik-agusik, Vitamik, Vaitalichka, Vitechka, Vitomasik, Vitozyabryk, Vityanochok, Vilenyatko, Vityushonok, Vitalisko, Talichek, Lisko, Vaitanichka, Vitayko, Liyozyabchik, Vitalyunchik, Vityarchik, Vitinka.

The total is sixty. Together they make one minute.

Katya finishes arranging the colorful bouquet and sets it down.

Katya. These flowers are for one of our customers. There's a French man who comes to our shop; he only buys colourful bouquets. I'm not sure how old he is, maybe seventy. He asks me to pick out each flower for him one at a time. He takes these flowers to his son's grave. He says his son's life was dull, so he brings colourful flowers to the grave. He didn't tell me this directly, he wrote it to me using Google Translate. When I found out, I didn't know what to say. He just looked at me, you know, with gratitude. Maybe he liked the bouquet, or maybe he was just thanking me for my silence. And now you're silent, and I thank you for that.

Katya pauses.

Katya. Do you know what I don't understand?

I still feel in my heart that he is alive. It's strange. And that volunteer tells me to go identify the body. Not the body, but what's left of it. He's somewhere near Dymarka. Somewhere near Dymarka, what's left of him. And I still feel in my heart that he is alive...

Maybe... Maybe he's not dead?

What if this guy made a mistake? Anyone could've been in his car: he could've given it to someone else, or it could've been stolen... The occupiers could've taken the car. The car had Kyiv license plates, so they could've run over the car with their own tank.

Could they?

But that man said he had an ID in his pocket.

Maybe they took the car and the uniform? My Vitalik was wearing a camouflage jacket. They took his jacket, took the car, and then the tank.

Could they?

No, I'll go tomorrow. I need to see the body. It's absolutely necessary, because if it's not him, they'll continue to look for the other mother of the murdered son. How long do we have to keep burying our sons?

I need to go there.

It's definitely not my Vitalik. I still talk to him in my mind, and he answers me. This conversation hasn't stopped; it hasn't been interrupted. I say to him, "Son, how are you?" and he says, "I'm fine, Mom!" So it wasn't him.

Because he's a good, kind boy who loves animals: cats and dogs. Cats and dogs aren't weapons; it's clear to everyone, both friends and enemies.

Why would anyone choose to run him down with a tank?

I need to go there.

They told me to come as soon as possible. I just don't know what to tell Sonya. She's going to give birth soon, so she can't worry. She's fine, she's in a clean room, she even took a Ficus with her. At first, they didn't allow it, but I persuaded them through Google Translate.

They looked at the ultrasound and said it's a boy. She hasn't decided on a name yet.

Maybe Vitalik.

If she goes into labour before I return, Valya or Natasha will help her.

And I'm going to leave.

I have to go.

Yes, I'll go tomorrow.

It might not be Vitalik, so I'll look for him in hospitals. He might be alive. And I'll find him, approach him quietly, smile, and say, "Son, how are you?" And he will answer me...

Vitalik's voice. Mom, I'm okay!

Katya. Where have you been, son?

Vitalik's voice. I'm right here.

Katya: I can hear you. Tell me honestly, are you eating properly?

Vitalik's voice. Yes, I'm eating.

Katya. That's good, son. I pray to God for you every minute. Just stay safe! Okay, I'll say it again: Lord, my God, love-me-don't-leave-me. I'm praying sincerely, so everything will be alright.

Okay.

It's good that we've talked.

Now I know you're definitely alive.

But call me anyway, remember our agreement: seven in the morning, seven in the evening. I'm going to Dymarka tomorrow. They say I have to go quickly.

I'll work for another hour, then I'll go to the cemetery with the man who buys flowers from us. I'll go with him, bring a bouquet and some pink carnations. They say those are the tears of the Mother of God, mourning her son.

But I'm not crying.

As long as I have you alive and well, I can talk to you from a distance and be happy.

I'll just come to tell them that it wasn't you.. Let them continue searching for the mother of the murdered son.

How long do we have to bury our sons? How much longer do we have to pray? Lord, my God, love-me-don't-leave-me.

The sound of a truck: flowers have arrived. The truck is being unloaded. Among the flowers, there are many pink carnations. The flowers fall like the tears of the Mother of God.

06.09.2022

Niort (France)