

Ukraine: Stories of Occupation (Ethnographic Fiction)

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Liberation

The explosion rumbled, leaving the stillness even more haunting than the sound itself. It lingered until the air began to vibrate with the low, rhythmic growl of armored vehicles, tanks, and artillery. *They'll be gone soon*, I whispered to myself. *A day, maybe two*. War cannot happen in the twenty-first century.

But the war was moving closer with every minute. The sniper settled into the neighbor's attic and started pointing at me when I got out to feed the chickens. I stayed mostly inside, still hoping to keep the war away. After a few days, they came into our house. Wardrobes were wrenched open, and they searched drawers, pocketing some jewelry. In grandma's room, one soldier paused, his eyes catching the framed photo of my son in a military uniform of the Ukrainian Army on her bedside table. "Who is he?" he took the picture and turned towards me. I froze in fear my heart pounding. Grandma could hardly stand, yet she managed to pluck the picture from his hand with a sudden, desperate strength. "He is dead," she said. "Died a long time ago." She held the photo of Andriy to her chest, shielding him from the unwelcome eyes of the soldiers.

I opened the door and stepped outside. There was a soldier by the door, smoking. He looked like a child, with a gun hanging low to his knees.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"From a village near Ryazan," he mumbled.

"Why did you come here?"

"To liberate you," he did not hesitate.

"From what?" I wondered.

He did not say anything.

"It's a beautiful house. I'd love to live in a place like this," he uttered after a pause sounding friendly.

"There will never be anything like this house here if you come here and bring your people. It will become like your village near Ryazan."

We had to pack and leave. With each day relentless explosions were turning homes and streets into ruins. People started to disappear after *zachistka*¹. Grandma sat on her bed rocking with a frantic intensity and whispering her grievances to God:

"They came to liberate us from our land, our home, our language, our *vyshyvanka*². We will take it all with us. I will carry my house we built for many years, so I could live peacefully in my old age. We will take our Gerda the goat and pack her favorite cookies, and the dog Max who likes to chase crows and chickens. And the eleven chickens that wander in the yard and a rooster with its morning crowing. Well, there won't be eleven chickens left since the sniper from the neighbor's attic shot two of them when he got bored. Two cats, one, a friendly sort named Beibi, and the other, silly, fluffy, dark Diesel. Beibi likes to bring us mice as trophies for our praise. Diesel would stare at a hole in the rye field for hours until he, too, caught one. We will take with us the little hedgehog that comes to visit in the summer, and clattering storks on an oak tree. We will carry the oak tree with storks' nest and all the

¹ "Clean up" operation of the unwanted.

² Traditional Ukrainian embroidered clothing, a symbol of national identity and cultural heritage.

birds on it. And *kalyna* bushes bowing to the land with their branches full of red berries.³ We will take our dark land, everything grows here, everything. We will carry buckets of potatoes and carrots. There were so many this year. We will take the sour smell of borsht and softness of *syrnyky* and dumplings, the melting saltiness of *saló*, and the sweetness of honey cake.

I will also take a pillow on which I rest my head after a hard work-day, and the blanket I covered my children with when they would fall asleep. The smoke of my late husband's cigarettes that surrounded the house like *vyshyvanka* threads. I hated it then, but I won't leave it. The giggling of my children, the sound of a door being shut, and a cry for help after falling off the bicycle. And my Andriy's ball. I will collect his steps from every corner of the house, from the yard, and from the fields. Those running, jumping, walking, and escaping. Those steps that he left when he passed through the door the last time after being called to the Army. I will spool all roads he travelled on, to the school, college, to his friends, like a yarn ball. And the roads that wind to the fields and the forests.

And we will all line up in a procession carrying it all. It will be me, then my daughter Olena and her husband Volodymyr, then granddaughter Valia, then goat Gerda, dog Max, two orange cats, a rooster, nine chickens, a family of storks, a hedgehog, seven crows, and mice. I will walk with a lantern ahead of them, showing everybody the way."

We packed two bags with a laptop, photos, and some clothing. I left the door open, so they don't kick it out next time they come. The sniper fired again from the attic, and another chicken landed dead by my feet. Eight chickens. I stepped over it, pretending not to notice, walked to the barn and released the goat and the dog. *They want to liberate this land from us*, I thought. Grandma showed up by the door and leaned heavily on her cane: "I am not going."

I looked at her in disbelief.

"I need to plant potatoes soon. When Andriy returns home, I will make him potato dumplings." She picked up a piece of white chalk and scrawled a message on the door for a soldier from a village near Ryazan: "Liudy" ("People"). And a message for God: "Save us."

³ The bush *Kalyna* (*viburnum opulus*) is a major national symbol in Ukraine, appearing in traditional songs, embroidery, and folklore.