By Brussels Time

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The giant windmills on the horizon were rotating steadily, and here and there, lights flickered in the port. Seagulls screamed. A pair of wild ducks, currently in their mating season, flew just past the window.

"The universal injustice—that even ducks have a partner, and here I am, like a fool, sitting in the darkness of a stranger's home, in a foreign city of a foreign country," Olga thought. "If only Oleg would get in touch..."

War destroys not only cities and walls, and kills not only flesh. It burns dreams and hopes, leaving behind the ashes of helplessness.

"There was a snow-white bird

There was a snow-white bird

Perched on a thorny branch. Dindon-deine

Perched on a thorny branch. Dindon-don..." came the sweetest voice in the world from the next room—six-year-old Nastunya. A chill ran down Olga's spine. Nastunya was increasingly asking for "water" instead of "водичка," and was replacing more Ukrainian words with Dutch ones.

It would have suited to go and hug her, ask her about school or kindergarten, read a book—so that the child could hear Ukrainian somewhere at least. Instead, Olga sat motionless on the couch, berating herself for it. Here in Ghent, it wasn't so easy to get these books. So, during rare moments when someone sent her something from Ukraine or when she could exchange a new book with acquaintances, she was indescribably delighted, and she and Nastunya read it over and over many times, repeating every word such that the child would remember it and absorb it, like sand in the desert absorbs water.

However, in the past few weeks, they had hardly been reading. In the morning, Olga would take Nastunya to kindergarten, then go to her Dutch classes, followed by meetings with one assistant, then another, or with a coach, or a mentor, or to renew some documents—and so it went on endlessly. After school, they would go to the supermarket to buy semi-prepared food, the packaging of which was strewn all over the kitchen. Olga did not have the strength to clean it up, let alone cook something herself or wash the dishes. She wondered what the social services would say about it.

So now, Olga sat on the couch, mindlessly scrolling through TikTok. A dense gray fog in her head seemed to have obscured this reality, where nothing brought her joy anymore. Neither the ducks, screeching and flying past the windows in their mating games, nor her daughter's song, nor the historic cityscape visible from her window could touch her heart. Her legs would not obey her, her arms did not perceive impulses, and every muscle ached and throbbed. She had never experienced such total helplessness before. She wanted to shrink to the size of the tiniest particle or dissolve into this moist dark air, or step out onto the balcony and soar into the unknown.

Suddenly it turned out that soul pain was not a metaphor. And if we consider that the human soul is hidden in the heart, or somewhere deep opposite the spine—where wings would grow if humans had them—then it hurt precisely there. It ached as if someone had thrust a fire-heated ax between Olga's ribs and was occasionally twisting it. What could be an anesthetic for such inhuman torture? Only love, perhaps.

"Don't you understand that they'll take away your allowance?" Sergey, the volunteer assigned to her by the municipality, hissed nastily through the phone, supposedly to make things easier by communicating in a "native" language. Olga did not hear any native language, but regularly heard disdain and insults directed at her for daring to bring her child from the "wrong" part of Ukraine.

"Are they even bombing you there in Lviv, that you came here?" Sergey always found something to criticize.

He was from Kyiv, but had fled to Belgium as a refugee back in 2014 because his wife was registered in Donetsk. Olga didn’t know what to answer. Because Lviv, of course, was not Kharkiv or Kherson, but the last time the bomb hit right next to their kindergarten. The windows were shattered, the roof was torn off, the walls were scarred. Her husband had already been on duty for three years, fighting in places like Kharkiv and Kherson, not waiting for the enemy to reach Lviv. If not for him, maybe she wouldn't have gone anywhere. He insisted. In 2015, he fought in Donbas and saw what the occupiers could do on captured lands. He wanted to be at peace for her and their child. Olga also wanted to be at peace for him and their child, and for them both to be near, living their boring life.

The woman didn't plan to live on social benefits forever, but she thought she would have some time to settle in, adapt, and find herself in a familiar sphere of employment. And after all, she hadn't come to Belgium forever, she only wanted to wait out the war, and it wasn’t her fault that this damned war wouldn't end. She lived from one plus sign on the phone screen to the next, and barely managed to contain two realities—one virtual yet more real to her than anything else, and the other plastic and fake. It was as if she lived there, but also not. She couldn’t understand if she had the right to live when that virtual reality from the smartphone screen was so painfully present. Sometimes she got lost, wondering which of the realities she was in. Was she really even there, or just a colorful hologram, a creation of some hellish AI?

Olga often imagined in detail how, after the news of the war's end, the first thing she would do would be to buy tickets home—taking the nearest available option. She would pack the essentials, give away everything that remained, gather the child, and they would go home. Later Olga would return to settle all the paperwork, close accounts, and resign from work. Later she would return. First, she would fly home on wings to regain her strength, to feel alive again. But until then, the phone screen wouldn’t light up with that cherished plus sign.

Social assistance, by Ukrainian standards, was quite substantial, but in Belgium, it was not so much. Moreover, as long as you were registered with social services, renting an apartment was almost impossible. And once you found one, you clung to it as if it were a winning lottery ticket, no matter how much mold covered the walls or how many mice you caught in the fall. Olga did not want to end up on the streets with her child. Returning to Lviv now was also not possible. Uprooting the child from a more or less comfortable spot and forcing her to undergo another adaptation process, when nothing was clear yet, was not an option. And most importantly, Oleg was categorically against it. And if you looked at everything rationally, it was entirely understandable why.

However, in such moments as now, Olga was ready to sell her soul to the devil just to be there—among her own. And let it be whatever it may.

"Go out on the balcony," the voice in Olga's head sounded so uncompromising that despite her physical weakness, she couldn't resist it.

Just yesterday, Olga was looking for summer shoes, and now her arms below the t-shirt sleeves were covered with goosebumps, her teeth almost chattering. Her friend from Switzerland was sending her photos of snow-covered tulips.

"Well, that's okay," Olga thought. "At least I can feel the outlines of my body again."

There were more lights on the horizon, and the familiar aroma of fries wafted in the air.

"I wonder what happens to people after death?" thought Olga. If I die right now, will I be tormented by guilt?

It seemed to Olga that if she had guarantees of a guilt-free afterlife, she wouldn't hesitate for a moment; this moment felt so unbearable. She could do it right now. Just climb over the railing, close her eyes, and let the pain go, defeat it forever.

Nastunya? She has her dad. Certainly. He's just not responding right now, and she, Olga, is tired of waiting for these plus signs. He will certainly be released if he becomes the sole guardian of his daughter—a great plan. But, yes. Her death would be a huge trauma for Nastya. Just jump now... The child will play for a while, then notice her mother's absence, start to panic, look for her everywhere, come out onto the balcony... Wonder if by then, someone will have noticed that she fell? Would someone have found her bloodied body by then, called the cops? Would they immediately understand from which balcony she fell? Would they guess to check the apartment? What would they tell Nastunya? Would they unlock her phone, call her relatives, friends, Oleg?

– No, she couldn't have done it on purpose. Calm, smiling woman, always pleasant. The child is well taken care of, cheerful. No, she definitely couldn't have done it herself, – the neighbor from the seventieth apartment would testify.

– She really loved her daughter, was actively involved with her. The child is progressing well with the program, knowing Dutch well, though she recently joined the class; it has to be some horrible coincidence, – Nastya's teacher Linsey would lament.

What if she doesn’t die but just gets injured?

"Unlikely," she concluded out loud, assessing the height while leaning over the railing, – "Just let go of the hands and lean a little more..." Olga almost let go of her hands.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

"Plus. Returned from assignment two minutes ago by Brussels time..." Ending with a heart-eyed emoji.

Olga exhaled, a tear rolled down her cheek, though she smiled a wide grin, dimples showing.

"Finally. Love you," she wrote back. Her heart was pounding, a warm wave rose in her chest so much that the goosebumps were no longer visible.

"Mom, what are you doing here? Why are you crying and... smiling?" Nastunya stood in the doorway, looking at Olga with her huge green Oleg-like eyes.

"From happiness, darling. Dad writes that he loves you very much. Let’s go read a book. And then mama will make an appointment with the doctor," Olga added in her thoughts.