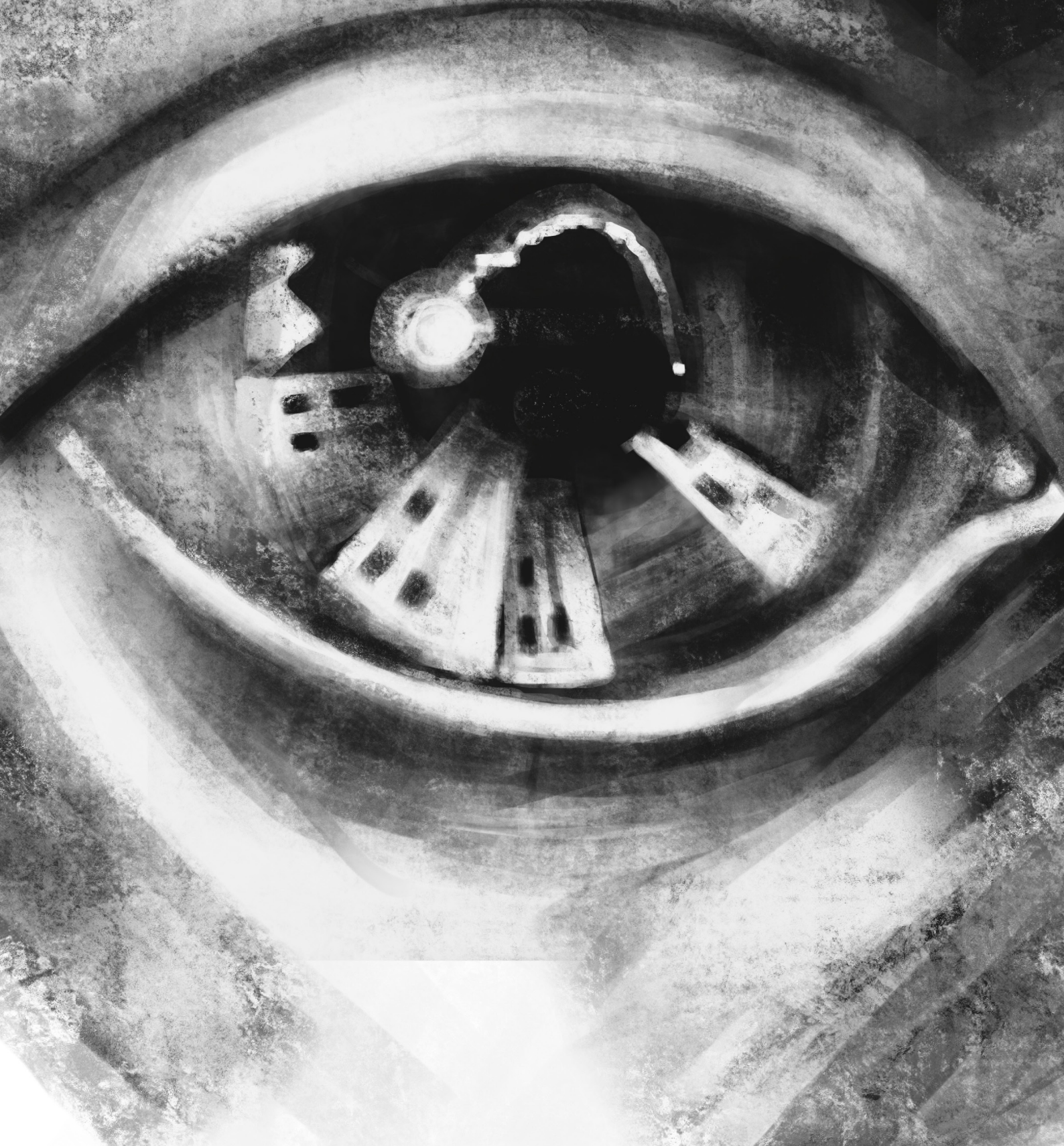


**I LOVE YOU,
MOM**



Masha texts that she hasn't heard from her brother for two weeks, he's in Mariupol.

Olga calls, crying somewhere alone in the middle of Warsaw: «I want to go back home, to my son».

Lena buried her daughter, the same age as mine — a bomb attack.

Grisha can't sign up for the territorial defense, he is in line, he had a stroke.

Yura, the cab driver, goes to Dnipro for medicine again, he texts: «Get the lists ready»

Dasha is picking up abandoned animals all over Odesa.

Natashka has gathered building materials to fix the windows in Kharkiv, which were blown out by the blast wave.

Mstislav has made a short film from a hospital, where the doctor unwraps a tiny roll with the body of a newborn girl...

Three weeks after the day the war started. Morning.

Morning. I know, all of my friends are scrolling through the news feeds right now looking for the same information. Tags: Mariupol, theater, people. All have one hope — may they all survive.

It's morning. It's —10 C outside and I don't have any warm clothes, but one thought warms me — that the Russian beasts will die in the trenches because of the cold.

MORNING. I SMOKE HALF A CIGARETTE PACK BEFORE CALLING MY MOTHER IN KHARKIV. IT BEEPS — THEY ARE ALIVE.

One tiny piece of bright news. Zhenka went skiing in the Carpathians before the war, she returned on the evening of the 23rd and in the morning she had to pick up from a cynologist her dog Fenka, a funny ginger fellow, a dogue de Bordeaux. A beloved pet of our dog playground, until he goes around everyone with his drooling kisses, he will not calm down. Zhenka had been trying in vain for three weeks to call the cynologist, and to be honest, had already given up calling, abandoned in despair. And today this guy sent her a video of happy Fenka walking by the sea in Tallinn. He carried them away, can you imagine?! The dogs. Both his own and other people's.

You can't beat this country. You can take away our life, our home, our dreams, our hope. You can break our hearts, you can torture our souls. But you can't take away the most important human value: freedom.

I want to tell you about the war, about my hometown Kharkiv, which is now more and more often called Stalingrad. Most likely, you will read this article in your own, native language. I want to say that I am writing it in Russian. Today it is already a shame, here in Ukraine, to speak and write in Russian. But I don't speak literature Ukrainian yet. Yes, shamefully, but that is how it historically turned out..

I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian, born and raised in Kharkiv. My name is Anna, I am 48 years old. And I will be honest with you.

I promise not to dramatize, embellish, escalate or get hysterical.

My morning of February 24 began like that of millions of Ukrainians. With the loud firing of cannons outside my window. The windows were shaking, and far away we could see smoke and a scarlet glow. There was no doubt — a war had broken out. These sounds did not sound like a thunderstorm at all.

Yes, for months, weeks, and even days, everyone was talking about it. And about the Russian troops being pulled to the borders (you could even see it on Google maps), and about the diplomats leaving Ukraine. But we, the people, could not believe that a direct invasion in the country was really possible.

And no one could believe it. From a baker to a billionaire. From Kharkiv to Lviv. From old people to teenagers.

We were joking at the markets about machine guns that should be installed instead of doormen in the entrances, we were calling friends from the military we knew in light anxiety with questions, we were hypothesizing about «Kremlin games,» we even packed documents in one bag, just in case. But. We still didn't believe it.

We were living an ordinary life. My daughter was about to go to a cool PR course in Kyiv, and I was supposed to get her the tickets

on February 24. That morning, I had an appointment with the ophthalmologist for a checkup, on the way I planned to stop for bird food (I have a scarlet-tailed Jaco), buy my doberman a new collar, and after work stop at my mom's, she asked for tangerines, dad likes them a lot...

But in the morning, our lives changed. Changed forever.

That morning, out of inertia, as usual, I went for a walk with the dog. We always go out early, at half past five. I love the deserted morning city, the dawn, the fresh air, the birds singing.

The roads were already as busy as if it was a rush hour. People with luggage were pacing and running out of houses, people were getting in their cars, children were crying. There was a lot of noise and shine all around, not in the yards, but somewhere outside the city, so it seemed.

It was an absolutely cinematic scene. A dream. All I could think inside my head was that it couldn't be like that, it just couldn't be so.

It could.

I pulled Hector into the car and we drove to an abandoned park, we always walk there, it's symbolically called Victory Park, by the way.

We wandered around the park in confusion, the dog was crouching at my feet from each blast like a baby. A huge, threatening doberman.

Grenades? Tank rounds? Air bombs? I am a peaceful person, far from military tactics, I did not understand, what it was. And, more importantly, what to do. Walk? Fall?

I thought the first ones to run were panickers. We should come home, turn on the news, and figure out what is going on. The news, by the way, have not been turned off in any Ukrainian home since then. Well, wherever there still is a signal.

PHARMACIES, GROCERY STORES, CIGARETTE KIOSKS DID NOT OPEN THAT MORNING. AND THE FEW THAT WERE OPEN HAD HUGE LINES. **THOSE WERE THE FIRST HOURS OF THE WAR.**

Today they have become whole, no one understands what day of the week it is, what date, what month. It seems like an eternity has passed. We measure time by curfews, and happiness by minutes of silence. And by short messenger replies from loved ones: «Alive».

The first night was terrible, it seemed so at the time. Rather, it was spent in confusion, trying to gather information, to make a plan. But a huge amount of information, sometimes contradictory, was pouring out of all the «windows». Someone wrote: «run for cover», another one: «don't panic», the third one: «go», the fourth: «stay».

Tell me, does anyone in a peaceful time in a peaceful country know where their bomb shelter is?!

No one knew. It turned out that basements in apartment buildings were most often locked, and unnecessary things were piled inside — old baby carriages, fishing rods, building materials, canned food.

I live (I do not want and will not write in the past tense - «lived») on the 15th floor, it is a high-rise building on Saltovka, the very area of Kharkiv, which, I am sure, is often shown on your television today.

It's funny, but I still haven't paid the loan for this apartment. It was so close. For twenty years I worked, often at two or three jobs, so that my daughter and I could live there. In this beautiful, new house.

When the sirens went off, I couldn't go down to the basement. Well, where to go with such a huge dog! He's very kind, but I can't go down there with him - there are kids, little doggies, cats there. There's too much fear even without a doberman.

We stayed home with the animals, hiding from the bombings in the bathroom. On the fifteenth floor you can not only hear but also see the missiles flying. I can't pass on these feelings to you in any literary way, no offense, but I'll tell you how it is - it's a feeling of horror to the point of vomiting.

When the first missile landed in our yard, I took my daughter to the nearby neighborhood, where my relatives have a private house with a basement. They stayed in this tiny, cold basement with three families for five days until the light and heating was cut off.

For all those days none of my friends could eat or sleep. We greedily watched the news and hoped that this hell would end soon.

Here I want to tell people from all over the world: THANK YOU. You have no idea how your rallies with the Ukrainian flags that were shown to us were motivating for us. There was a feeling that we are not alone, that the whole world is with us.

I confess, this feeling was constantly changing. Fear, despair, faith in the victory. Pride for our fearless fighters, joy that the enemy is running out of patience and ammunition. Then again, helplessness and despair. The feeling that we have been abandoned. And again faith. In waves.

All these days I ran to my parents, literally in the nearby yard. They are old, both of them are 80 years old, my father is bedridden — he has one leg. I tried to get them some bread, some medicine and to calm them down. Mom was crying, begging me to run, and my father was saying, «We're strong, we'll beat them all». Yes, Dad.

Perhaps these simple things — walking my dog, calling my daughter, calming my parents, getting bread, even under bombing raids - somehow kept me from going crazy.

In the mornings and evenings we exchanged pictures of destroyed Kharkiv. It was unbearable to look at the ruins of the school you went to, the kindergarten your child went to. Hospitals, birth centers. There was a feeling that the enemy was not shooting «at random out of anger», as many wrote, but accurately and specifically at the sore points.

Your city is your life, memories, warm stories, symbols. There, on Pushkinskaya Street, in the park where the fire gapes today, you had your first date, you kissed the shy boy who gave you the first rose of your life. And in this picture of the ruined house — there is a cozy apartment in which you and your friends had literature evenings. There was an apartment.

«We will rebuild everything» — we repeat today like a mantra, the most important thing is that people survive. But every day this belief melts like the snow in March. My personal list of close friends has already included dozens of dead and injured.

I TOOK MY DAUGHTER FROM THE COLD BASEMENT. **A LIVING DAUGHTER.**

In the first days there was some confidence that if we could get the Russians, who had been fooled for years with propaganda about mythical «fascism», «secret laboratories» and «crucified boys», to the TRUTH, millions of them would come out on the streets of their cities and stop insane Putin.

We wrote them letters, called them, tried to talk to them. But in vain.

I wrote a letter to my cousin Alexei. To Novosibirsk. But no one answered me. Thousands, or rather hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians could have written such letters. There are too many family ties between us.

«Hi, Lesha. It's me, your funny little sister from Kharkiv. Remember when you and your mom used to come to visit us and we used to walk in Gorky Park? The adults wouldn't let us have a second ball of cotton candy, and we hid behind the lilac bushes near the ferris wheel, eating just one for two of us.

I remember. And the sticky hands from the cotton candy, and the crazy smell of lilacs.

Today it smells like smoke in Kharkiv. And Gorky Park is absolutely empty, children now live in bomb shelters.

Lesha, we haven't spoken since 2014, since I became the «junta». Ever since you took the «boy crucified in Slavyansk» as an axiom. I tried to explain that this is impossible.

That if this had happened in any European country (a child was crucified on a square full of people! Just think about it!), there would have been photos and videos, film crews would have come from all over the world, and every ombudsman in the world would have spoken out.

But the Russian correspondent simply interviewed the «witness» of the crucifixion, shook her head, and went off to film more stories. Who cares if three-year-old boys are crucified in Ukraine?

Lesha can you hear me? A person with a little bit of critical thinking can't «swallow» such things, you understand me? They won't even watch a channel with such hellish bullshit. But you do. You do. You watch it for eight years, now.

You know, during these years, my daughter, your niece, graduated from a Russian-speaking school in Kharkiv and a Ukrainian-

speaking university in Lviv. She listened to half of the lectures in English. Sometimes I would walk into her room, quickly pull out her headphones and ask, «What language are you watching this movie in?» And she blinks confused. It's funny.

Russian, Ukrainian, English - it makes no difference to them. Languages for them, twenty-year-old Ukrainians, are a handy way to communicate, not a subject of political speculation. Isn't that great? Tell me.

Just fifty hours ago, my daughter was about to go to Kyiv for an awesome, cool PR course. Now she's sitting in a basement. Every half an hour we text each other «how are you?» and make sure to say «I love you.» You love your daughter too, don't you, Lesha?

On Monday, I bought a ton of screenwriting books, 14 of them, come to think of it! It's a real treasure, lying on my desk right now. I can't read them yet. I can only smell them. Do you like the smell of books, Lesha? I love it.

You know, I've been dreaming about writing scripts for a long time, and now I've finally made up my mind. I came up with a story for a teen series, it's about a fake virtual life on social networks. The producer really liked the idea. Today we were supposed to have a «pitching» (that's what the film industry calls the presentation of a new film).

But now I'm sealing the windows. With a cross. There are constant reports of bomb attacks. I have to tell you, Lesha, I'm really scared. Very much. Outside the window the volleys of cannons are thundering. Many of my friends have passed into a stage of cold hatred, a fair thirst for revenge. And I'm stuck in fear, ashamed.

Well, you know me, I could never even kill a cockroach, it's «also alive». You and Lenka always laughed at me.

Lesha, yesterday I foolishly went with the dog to a forest, I wanted to, I don't know, take a breath of air or something. Coniferous forest is my place of strength. The shooting started, I fell in the snow and tried to cover the dog with myself, he was twisting, thought we were playing.

I hope my mom doesn't find out about this incident. Those three minutes in the snow, I thought about my daughter and my parents and how I would never get to write you a letter.

We made it out. And I want to tell you, Lesha. I'm sure that very soon you, you, all of you will have an awakening.

Your insane president will be finished off by his own people, that's obvious. First of all, palace coups are in your blood, as the only sure way to change the course of history. And secondly, some of your oligarchs, who lost their assets due to the sanctions, will simply go from fear of being thrown into the dungeons of the NKVD to a desire for revenge for their cash.

And then sane people will come to your broadcasts. I don't know, Makarevich or Akhedzhakova. And finally, «on TV» they will tell the truth.

I think you'll cry, Lesha. From the horror of what you all have done. But it will be too late. The Russian flag is already a stigma, the world already hates you, all of you.

Okay, I have to run. There are again reports of approaching bombings. It's thundering very close to my house. I'll at least go out to the elevator shaft, they say it's safer there. The doberman is just resisting, he doesn't want to go.

Lesha, if a rocket flies through my window, I want you to know that you killed me. You killed your funny little sister from Kharkiv, with whom you were hiding behind lilac bushes and eating cotton candy. Just one for two of us.»

This «plan» did not work. Our Russian relatives, living in an endless stream of lies from their TVs, did not hear us.

I managed to stay in Kharkiv for ten days. The bombers finally broke me. That horrible, escalating whistle in the night sky, the infernal machines throwing death at random.

The blows to neighboring doorways, fires, destroyed houses, destinies, lives, dogs and cats rushing in the streets, children crying from basements and a human foot that landed in a yard.

I admire those who are fearless. I gave up. No longer could I watch my frightened, twenty-pound thinner daughter curl up in a corner from every loud sound.

It was unbearable.

Never, never, not even to my nemesis, would I wish to choose between a child and parents.

This is my personal hell, a purgatory that will always be with me now. On earth and in heaven, in war and in peace.

A future film about this war must include an episode from an ordinary apartment in a residential neighborhood of Kharkiv, where a mother and her daughter howl under the rumble of explosions, muffling the air-raid sirens. One on her knees, with a crushed cry: «I'm sorry,» the other hunching over, with a quiet groan: «survive.»

We drove 200 kilometers for 15 hours, I drove constantly crying, I could not stop. On the highway, someone's tire exploded, there was a loud bang, and children in cars with Kharkiv license plates screamed in fear. It was terrifying.

I managed to save a child, a dog, a bird. A soul can never be saved. This black hole won't close, even if it ends well tomorrow.

I left my parents behind. In Kharkiv-Stalingrad. Leaving my father and mother, who are 80 years old. I left my city.

I brought them food and medicine for several months ahead under the bombardments and I call them, and try not to cry. It doesn't work.

My daughter is already smiling and breathing evenly.

And me too.

I stopped answering on messengers for a while, everyone was asking me «how are you? Are you alive?» And I couldn't find the courage to answer. I thought I was dead.

Today we are in Dnipro, it's still quiet here. Only two rockets flew in. I didn't even twitch.

I don't want to go far from Kharkiv. From mom and dad.

People gave us shelter here, and I don't know how I can thank them for that.

The doberman stopped shaking and for the first time in two weeks fell asleep not in my arms (a 45 kilogram pile of meat), but on the floor, on a carpet. And Kiryusha said her first words after the explosions on February 24: «Hello, give me a peanut.» As if she was not a bird from «Stalingrad».

And by eight in the morning we had a whole list of medicines to find, buy, and deliver to Kharkiv. This is something unusual, something that volunteers are unlikely to bring, such as liquid for contact lenses.

Don't you know how important it is! I lost my glasses in a bomb attack and lived like a mole until kind people gave me some glasses. Dioptres are not mine, but I can still sit in front of the computer and write.

I turned on the news again and opened Facebook.

My friend Masha, a great journalist, writes that her parents stayed in Mariupol, that's where the bomb was thrown on the maternity hospital. It's where people still can't be taken out of the rubble from the constant shooting. It's where there is no light, no water, no heating, no communication. It's where people are starving to death.

My friend Lara, a talented producer, writes from Bucha. It's where there are almost no whole houses left, it's where the occupiers don't let the corpses be taken off the

streets and block the «green corridor» for days, people are sitting in cold buses - old people and children.

Lara writes.

«Boys with Yesenin's forget-me-not eyes drive their tanks through our yards. They take away phones, cars, and take hostages. Other boys, the sons of those who burned the children in Beslan, rape and kill people. The only way to survive is to pretend you don't exist. As twilight falls, we switch to whispering. Lanterns are a taboo. The slightest flash of light on the ceiling and you'll get a «visit». We sit quietly in the basement and listen the sounds outside.

— *Mama, is someone coming to the house?*

— *Sleep, honey, it's just a bomb attack.»*

It's just a bomb attack...

As I was finishing this piece, I learned that Lara and her son made it out of there. I thank God for that.

We will never be the same. The world has changed, divided into before and after February 24th. But it will be better, I swear to you, I believe it.

My Kharkiv friends are spread all over Europe. Dnipro, Poltava, Uman, Ternopil, Poznan, Gdansk, Warsaw, Dresden, Bratislava, Vancouver, Chicago.

People, we are eternally grateful for your shelter! I understand how difficult it is to share your bread and roof with strangers. I understand how difficult it is to knowingly take losses in business and give up any contracts with Russia.

But it's the right thing to do. And it's not only about humanity, not only about empathy. The world today, together with Ukrainians, is confronting the empire of evil, excuse my pathos, but that's how it is. If the madman and his criminal regime are not stopped, war will come to every home, to every family. A brutal, senseless war.

P.S. Every morning for half an hour I get ready to call my mom's number.

— Don't cry, my daughter, we're fine, your father and I are playing cards, don't cry, we seem to have a little less bombing in our neighborhood today, and it's snowing, can you imagine!

I love you, Mom

Anna Gin,

journalist

Ukraine, Kharkiv — Ukraine. Dnipro