

WE CAN'T BE KILLED



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I know now exactly how it is. When the soul hurts. When you're and your relatives are alive and healthy, thank God, but your soul hurts. When your house is still standing, but everything inside you cracked. And you are crying minute, so you can't stop, but then you can't cry even if you want. When one day you are not afraid of anything, and the other you are trembling with fear. And your soul hurts all the time.

ALMOST EVERY DAY SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR, I TRIED TO REMIND MYSELF WHO I WERE. I'VE BEEN TELLING MYSELF: LOOK, LOOK BACK, REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE.

Remember how tremendously strong women of your kind were. Look, I've been telling myself. Look at them, they are all standing behind you, they survived both the Germans and the Soviets, they survived a continuous meat grinder, and they survived. Their children survived. The women were baking their pies. They were sewing embroidered pillows with small crosses. And survived. They lived to a very old age, in each of their wrinkles they carried their experience, and their pain, and their fear, and their faith, and their hope, and love.

Look, I've been telling myself. In the moment you feel pain, there is strength source somewhere nearby to heal yourself and just as much to share strength to share with others, because

when you give, it does not mean that you will not have enough. It just means that together we become even stronger. That's why when I cry today I'm comforted. And tomorrow I will comfort someone. I will comfort as much as necessary.

Look, I tell myself almost every day. Where fear tears your apart, there is somewhere peaceful, quiet, calm force that keeps you from falling every day. That force sings to you "Gray kitten, white kitten", "Oh, verse, my, verse", "Oh, red viburnum in the meadow" (Interpreter's note: these are Ukrainian folk and rebel songs) in a barely audible voice. That voice is quiet at first, then gets a little stronger, and with that voice you join the chorus to sing loudly "Our enemies will perish like dew in the sun", "We were born at a great hour, from the fires of war and the flames of fire!". This is sung in a battle, sung in the home front in order to keep one's spirit up.

Look, I'm telling myself. Where the pain hurts you with thousands needles, there is joy nearby, joy caused by ended rain and blooming green leaves, washed away smoke, soot, and fatigue, and laughter of children heard again. Or joy felt by someone falling in love or planting the seedlings in the ground, someone bearing child under her heart, and someone praying in Ukrainian ...

Look, I repeat to myself, where there is anger and hatred, there is Love nearby, inside one's soul. I remember how my fraternal great-grandfather was shot when he was 32 because he was in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. I remember brother of my great-grandmother Marynka, who was also a servicemen of

the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA), and was sentenced to 10 years of correctional Russian labor camp somewhere in the wilderness of Siberia. He died two years later in the camp. I remember my maternal grandfather's brother, who was forbidden to talk about in the family. Only recently, with the help of a genealogist, I have been able to find out the truth. The son of Andrew and Maria, call sign Buzko, served in the UIA, "Avengers" hut since 1945. He was shot when he was only 21.

What did they all fight for?

For independent Ukraine.

Why were they shot and destroyed?

For being Ukrainians and professing anti-Soviet ideas.

How is it to realize in 2022 that they want to kill you again just because you are Ukrainian and want to live in an independent Ukraine? These are not the thoughts I was ever morally prepared for in today's world. You can't even repeat it quickly without staggering at a psychotherapist session. You have to learn to live with it.

HOW IS IT WHEN THEY TRY TO TELL YOU DO NOT EXIST?

When they want to take away your self-identification, conquer you, intimidate you into renouncing yourself. How can you prepare yourself for this? We must now learn to live with it.

On the 40th day of my stay in Kyiv, I felt such fear that I have never felt before. This fear whispered to me: run away! Run! Hide! Escape! Because you will be killed. Demolished! I drowned in tears, felt thousands of knots inside. And yes, I wanted

to hide in a place where no one finds me, where it is quiet and peaceful, where one can exhale and finally stop being afraid.

But at some point I realized that there is no such place in the world. Wherever I am, wherever I go in search of safety, this cannot be found. This is something primal and important that was taken away from me personally. And wherever you run, you can't run away from yourself. You will not deny yourself. You have to learn to live with it.

So I repeat to myself these days: remember who you are. You are not alone. There are women of steel behind you, and brave men who were not afraid to face death. And you got to stand strong. Because you are not alone. Because there are so many of us. Those who love Ukraine with all their hearts in spite of everything.

In early May, I drove out of Kyiv in my old car for the first time in many months. Together with my parents and daughter we went to the west of Ukraine, where our relatives are buried, whose graves we have not visited for two years due to lockdown and quarantine. I was driving on the Zhytomyr highway and saw destroyed, burned houses, funnels in the asphalt, heaps of scrap metal, which not so long ago were military vehicles that came to enforce peace. I was driving and could hardly breathe.

I knew that in addition to visiting the grave of my grandmother Iadzia (and great-grandmother Marynka), I also really wanted to visit my grandmother's old house. Ever since I started researching my

family tree a year ago, I promised myself that I would go there, to the village, to the old house where my grandmother lived. That house was calling me, drew me like a magnet. I knew that there were no treasures or gold coins hidden under the plinth, but I was sure that somewhere in the depths of the house there was something special for me. And I was sure I would find him.

I remembered walking down the path as a child, scraping my shoes against a metal scraper standing on the doorstep, climbing stairs, unlocking a metal latch, and stepping into my grandmother's house. My memory has preserved everything: the smell of the porch, the dark corridor with a patterned path, another door with a metal latch. You press on it, the door opens and there, leaning her back on high pile of embroidered pillows, my grandmother sat on the bed by the window and read or knitted socks or embroidered.

I wanted to feel her house and her invisible presence again.

I CLIMBED THE STAIRS, CROSSED THE PORCH AND DARK CORRIDOR AND FELT NOTHING.

My grandmother's house was empty. No familiar smells from childhood. No bed with a huge pile of embroidered pillows. I walked slowly around the room. Whitewashed walls lined with paneling. During the renovation many things were thrown away or put in a fire. An old, faded in the sun closet and an embroidered picture on the wall remained. I saw black background and colored flowers that

grandma embroidered. I touched with my fingers the place where once lived a strong woman who became my grandmother. And did not feel her. I wondered how it was possible. Do we live, fill the space with ourselves, and then die, leaving behind an empty, abandoned house? Like a snail's house. How is this possible? And why did I come here so late after everything was lost, burned, taken out? Why did I come here in the first place?

In the kitchen I saw an old sideboard, painted white. It had three small square drawers. I opened the first one. Nothing except for numerous metal lids. I carefully opened the second one. My heart froze. The whole bottom was lined with buttons. Large and small, with two holes and one, beads, metal spools, dark buttons and shiny, beautiful and ordinary. Instantly tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't stop them. Those were Baba Iadia's buttons. She used to collect, cut and sew them, hide them in a drawer. I finally found something very personal. I found my treasure. In an instant, the most ordinary buttons turned into something very valuable. I took a few in my hand and hid them in my pocket. There, in the next drawer, I found three rusty metal cake tins: heart, half moon, star. I also took them and a skein of turquoise threads. And an old, dim key on the pendant. I don't know what it opens, but I took it anyway.

That day, for the first time in years, I also went up to the attic of my grandmother's house. I walked on the clay floor, bowing my head under the beams. I found beautiful glass goblets in an old chest. I found torn towel, embroidered and decorated

with my grandmother's hands. I found old pictures, a small glass Christmas toy in the shape of a cone, Grandma's sketches for embroidery and a broken pencil. I carefully collected all this, swept the dust, cobwebs, small debris with my palm. And I hid it in one of the old suitcases, which rusty clasps don't function anymore, but which was compact and roomy to hold all my treasures. I took the embroidered picture with bright flowers on a black background and a little grandmother's photo that fit in the palm of my hand with me. My granny was young and smiling on the photo. Each time I touched my grandmother's buttons in the pocket, I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

"Why are you taking all this?" my mother asked me.

"To remember." — I answered, — "These are my little treasures, pieces of the past. Things that have a story. I will show them to my daughter. Someday I will show them to my grandchildren. And I will tell them about the people who once lived on this earth before us."

I also cried at my grandmother's grave. I told her in my mind: "You had the right to be happy!" I told her: "You've been through so much. How strong you were! I feel this power in myself now." I looked at the dates of her birth and death on the monument, imagined her difficult life. She was born at the beginning of the Second World War. She grew up without a father. Granny became a widow at the age of thirty, when her eldest son, my father, was only six, her middle son was four, and she was pregnant with the youngest. She raised her sons herself. She was cheerful

and unbreakable. I stood by my grandmother's grave and promised her something. And I promised something to myself. I promised her to be happy. For myself and her. I thanked her for the temperament, passion and steadfastness I inherited. And then I left.

My life was waiting for me. In the middle of a war that has no end. In the midst of sirens, and alarms, and rockets that fly into homes and take someone's life. I returned to Kyiv, being calm, feeling love. I felt behind me all strong women and men who had survived atrocities and wars, executions and exile, pain and fear. They survived. They survived to give me a chance to live.

So I'm just alive now. I know when this war is over, I will take a deep breath, exhale with gratitude, I will weep for a long time, for those who died under fire, for the destroyed cities, and lost lives. And then I will wipe my tears. And I will rebuild everything brick by brick again. Because I can. I will rebuild everything together with each of you. We will continue to stand together, side by side.

And even if now we, Ukrainians, are scattered all over the world, with a hole instead of a heart, leaving our houses and apartments like an empty snail's hut, we are still alive. Our love and memory of what is important and valuable to us keep us going. We carry in our pockets our keys, buttons, shells, coins, coffee beans, old photos, our little Ukraine. We live.

And he who thinks we can be killed is so wrong.

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