

FRONTIER

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JOURNEY
TO
THE BEYOND
MARIUPOL

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Prologue

10:17

Is it really that late?

I looked at my twenty-year-old Casio watch. It is already almost eight in the evening. But the hanging clock in the hall of the “Military Commandant’s Office of the “DPR””, in Volodarske town stubbornly showed “10:17” Through the semi-darkness, I realized that the second hand of the clock was not moving. Its battery was dead. To replace it, something was missing—a new battery, a responsible person or some common sense.

Before the invasion, this building was an administrative office. The name of a certain Larisa Dmytrivna glittered on the door leading from the hall. In peacetime, someone Larisa Dmytrivna by name issued certificates and advised visitors. Today, Sasha, the driver of the first bus, was being questioned (interrogated) behind her door. He and I traveled together in a mini convoy to bring humanitarian aid to the occupied territory near Mariupol, and from there to take those who needed it to Zaporizhzhia.

Thinking about the bags of food that lay in the buses, I remembered that I had not eaten anything since six in the morning, except for a few sips of water.

An officer of the commandant’s office came out from the other door who interrogated me.

“Can I take my lunch pack out of the car? I am really hungry”, I inquired him.

The officer made a sign to the armed guy who was sitting in the opposite corner of the hall and almost all the time kept his eyes on me:

“Lead him there, may he take it.”

Dusk was falling. Near the entrance, there stood a car of the National Guard of Ukraine: a latticed body and an almost completely broken windshield. Sasha’s bus was standing on the side path; mine was blocking it from behind. The packages with the humanitarian aid that we unloaded on the tiled sidewalk, were thrown back by someone. No ceremonies, just a pile on the aisle. My lunch pack was in a separate bag.

Well, less trouble.

Under the watchful eye of the soldier, I returned with the food to the hall. I sat down on the bench, and unwrapped a huge cheese sandwich. I chewed it with pleasure and drank water on top of it. The only minus were the crumbs. I pushed crumbs under the bench with my soles. Can't say that the floor was clean before me. Dust in the corners. Sand in places. Sand and dirt also covered the Ukrainian flag, which served as a mat for wiping feet. When the armed men scurrying back and forth stepped on the yellow-and-blue cloth, something stirred up inside of me.

"Keep calm."

The food and the dim lighting in the hall did their dirty work—lulled me to sleep. Not surprising. On this 45th day of full-scale war, I went to bed at three o'clock. Got up at six. Preparation. Seven hours on the road with constant stops at roadblocks. An unexpectedly long stop near Nikolske, which six years ago was Volodarske. Moving to the commandant's office. About an hour of checking humanitarian aid. One and a half hours of interrogation.

I leaned back against the wall, which was covered with the beige plastic side paneling typical of such establishments. I closed my eyes for a while. I felt my arms and legs relax. I surrendered myself to a doze that began to take hold of my brain.

Click! Light from the ceiling broke through the eyelids. I reluctantly opened my eyes. By the switch, there stood a man with a machine gun in olive camouflage with white bandages on his arm and leg. He looked straight at me in a way that you couldn't tell if he was joking or roasting his hatred on a slow fire.

"It's better with the light, isn't it? Because one can fall asleep forever."

And he went to another door.

Kind of "normal" hints.

A few minutes later, Sasha left "Larisa Dmytrivna's office". He winked at me barely perceptibly, went somewhere accompanied by a "DPR"ian and returned to the office. Maybe he took the documents?

In a few more minutes, Sasha opened the door again. Satisfied.

"Zhenya, start the engine, let's go."

They let go of us.

I glanced at the clock with a steady "10:17". I took the food pack, and went out into the dark courtyard of the commandant's office, and got on the bus. HUUUUH! Adventures, damn it.

It was necessary that I leave first. How do you not run into the fence being out of habit and even in the dark? Sasha went behind the van to secure my reverse, and I turned the key and pressed the start button. The old Sprinter

shuddered and gasped. Looking in the left mirror, I shifted into reverse gear and gently released the clutch. Suddenly, my eyes noticed some movement. Several armed men left the commandant's office and went straight to the bus.

Maybe we forgot something there?

One, full-figured guy, approached from my side; the other, slim and tall, from the passenger door. Faces became visible: a mixture of sincere surprise and anger.

"You... where are you going? What are you doing? Who let you go, huh?"

With each sentence, the tonality increased.

I stiffened. Sasha stiffened.

"Why did you sit behind the wheel? Do you hear, come on? Get out of there! Did you decide to escape?" The "commandants' officers" continued.

But, what is it?

Sasha was the first to wake up.

"Guys, that's what I said. You said us to drive out the van..."

"It was to you that we said to do it! And you", the tall interrogator looked at me, "you are staying."

Such a surprise!

"I understood, I'll just drive the bus out now so that Sasha can leave," I muttered.

My stomach and intestines were unpleasantly compressed. Oh, what an annoying feeling, like seconds before a parachute jump. What if they start suddenly shooting in the windshield as soon as I reach the gate?

I turned off the engine, climbed out of the driver's seat on unsteady legs.

"Sasha, you better go ahead and move it yourself; the key is in the lock."

Trying to walk as calmly as possible, I moved away from the bus, looking at the pieces of the windshield of the "requisitioned" National Guard car. Sasha moved my van to another track, and then drove his van outside the commandant's office.

I stayed in the yard with the four "DPR"ians. Their lower eyelids showed angry tension, their upper lips—desdain. One barely shook his head, as if saying "well, now you'll get it." Two of them had their hands on the machine guns.

It was twenty kilometers from here to Mariupol.

Chapter 1

I had been preparing for a trip to the occupied city of my childhood for several weeks—even from Kyiv. And my whole life led me to that.

Hello, I'm Zhenya. Thirty-three years old, editor, psychotherapist in training, former journalist.

I was born and grew up in the Left Bank (former Ordzhonikidze) district of Mariupol. I studied at school. I went to dances and martial arts—my tall stature, thinness and long legs suited me both there and there. In the summer, I rested on my native left-bank beach with a view of the slag mountain and the Azovstal Plant's pipes, as well as in the villages of the Azov sea coast—Melekine, Yuryivka, and Nova Yalta. Classic Mariupol childhood.

At the age of 17, the smoky city of half a million people became cramped for me. I moved to Donetsk to get higher education at the Polytechnic. After graduation, I stayed to work in the city. I used to go to my family once every few months, even though they were separated by a ridiculous 120 km.

In 2014, the “Russian Spring” fell on Donbas: the seizure of administrative institutions, the murders of pro-Ukrainian activists and fake referendums. For me, who had already been planning to move to Kyiv for several months, and had resigned in March 2014, there was no better reason than to finally get packed and leave. In May, I found a job in the capital and left Donetsk with the rest of my belongings, where I still didn't have my own home. I left symbolically—on the eve of the first clashes for the airport.

And the house... In the spring of 2014, Mariupol also swayed towards the “DPR”. But in Mariupol, in contrast to Donetsk and other cities, the instigators did not have such strength and support from the locals and from Russia, even taking into account the roadblocks and May clashes. On June 13, their feeble efforts were thwarted. After two months of incomprehensible “bedlam,” Ukraine returned to the city.

I calmed down and distracted myself from the Mariupol news. And in August, enemy military equipment approached my hometown from Novoazovsk. The experience of the Donetsk friends taught us that it is better

not to wait for shelling. Therefore, I took my mother to the capital just in case. Fortunately, the enemy never entered Mariupol. All that was enough for them was the treacherous shelling of the Skhidniy neighborhood in January 2015 and statements about the beginning of “liberation”. The small Motherland lived in tension for some time, and then began to blossom, despite the fact that the battles were fought only a few kilometers from its edge.

Marik remained my hometown, where I never wanted to return. But in 2020, during the Christmas weekend trip, I didn’t recognize him. In the summer of 2021, I came to the MRPL City Festival and could not help but admire the transport, parks and fences behind which new beauty was being built.

Relatives, classmates, and childhood friends still lived there. There lived places: a long descent to the sea, a shabby school, a green building of a kindergarten, a gray “Khrushchov-style” building. There lived memories of the alley from Victory Square, parties on the beach near the pier, grandmother’s fried potatoes with eggs. At the same time, the city of the past was gradually turning into the city of the future. As if in recent years, someone invisible moved a rusty lever and released time, which began to wash the streets from the dust of stiffness.

In the end, my mother also returned home: to put things in order in the apartment, to photograph the Veselka Park, to meet a peaceful old age. She just managed to install a new locker and TV set, established a not diverse, but pleasant life.

And then February 24, 2022 came.

The first days of the Russian invasion merged into a continuous one.

I am in Kyiv with my fiancée Nastya. With supplies of food and water, with an equipped shelter, with a gas burner and cylinders. With packed up backpacks. I am sure that the main blow will hit the capital.

My family is in Mariupol. Badly prepared, but with alarm bags. They are sure that nothing terrible will happen. For eight years, my Left Bank district got used to hearing explosions from the east. Even when the walls shook from the artillery duels, which had never happened before, my relatives cheerfully said that they were staying and would not go anywhere.

There is no point of moving to Kyiv. There is no one to go to in the west. Unless they started going to the shelter. None of us understood that this time the city was attacked not only from the east, but from all sides.

On the second of March, the connection with my Mariupol ones was lost at the same time. Before that, a text message arrived from my mother: “There is military equipment coming under our balcony.” And that’s it, silence.

I waited for a week or a week and a half. I convinced myself that the connection could be lost and restored—it already happened once. I bit because I myself was paranoid and did not prepare my parents for the invasion. I tried to work. I was busy volunteering in the capital.

Kyiv held on—the enemy was stopped within a few kilometers. In Mariupol, which was already surrounded and brutally defeated, things only got worse. There was no news from relatives and friends.

They had to be pulled out. At least, my mom. And also my father with his wife. And also my sister and her family. And more...

But how?

The broken connection meant that I could only go at random.

Logic and hope suggested that sooner or later humanitarian corridors would be opened from the city for the evacuation of civilians. And that's why I need to be closer to the beginning of these corridors in order to quickly go and pick up my people or at least wait for them from the evacuation buses.

Such a point was in Zaporizhzhia, through which, from the very beginning of the invasion, cars from the southeast were driven.

It is hard to say why I, who had settled firmly in Kyiv and did not have my own car, decided to go on my own. First, there was little hope for organized convoys. No matter how many buses you give, it is an unreal story to take several hundred thousand residents with bags out of the surrounded area. In addition, Mariupol's left bank is cut off from the center by the Kalmius River, and there are literally several bridges by which a car can cross it. If they haven't been blown up yet.

Secondly, the invasion broke the usual life in half, but poured arms and legs with the desire to act. I didn't have military service behind me and I didn't really want to take up arms. But in the vortex of sharp helplessness, I had to influence something. Therefore, in the first days, I distributed savings, then collected funds for insulation for defenders, then I got a job in a bakery to make bread for the victims. And now I wanted to drive.

Thirdly... Many things. Horror. Sadness. Anger. Love. In variable proportion.

Chapter 2

My fiancée's eyes turned red. It was not so easy to bring Nastya to tears, and here they ran in streams in one moment, repeating the contours of her blond hair.

We were sitting at the kitchen table. A “bonus” loaf of fresh bread smelled. I just got back from volunteering at a bakery. I had dinner, gained calories and spirit. Finally, I briefly spoke about my idea to visit his relatives.

And there she started crying.

“Nastya. Why are you crying?”

“I was expecting you to say that sooner or later. I was just ready... But still very scary.”

“Well, why should you? This is just an idea for now. Still nothing to drive.”

“There is nothing to drive! Is this the only reason?”

“Well...”

“And did you think what would happen if you died, and then your mother gets in touch? What will I tell her? What can I say to all of yours?”

“Nastya. You know that I am a chicken...”

“Zhenya, you aren't any chicken...”

“The real one. Because of fear I will not get anywhere in vain, but I will behave very carefully. Otherwise, what's the point? But if I don't even try, I'll finish myself. I'm already burning inside!”

“Do you promise?”

“What?”

“Do you promise to be careful?”

I looked at her inflamed eyes, at the wet napkin in her hands. I said seriously:

“I promise.”

It's easy to promise when you've never really been brave.

Nastya took a piece of fresh bread from the plate and inhaled the still warm aroma. She put it back—even during the invasion she limited herself to eating dough. The tears dried up.

“And how do you see it?”

“Not at all yet. What I understand is that first I need to get to Zaporizhzhia. And I’ll see better there. Everything changes thirty times every day. Or I may go to Mariupol from there. Or I sit and wait, in the hope that they will choose themselves.”

“Good. How long will you be there?”

“Well, how can I know...”

“How much? Just say.”

“If I’m lucky a week. If not, hell knows. I will look at the situation.”

“Zhenya. And if they don’t get in touch for a month? Or two?”

“And if they don’t get in touch at all? This is how you can reason endlessly. I want to get to Zaporizhzhia first. It is not yet a fact that I will find a car.”

My fiancée took the bread again. This time she took a big bite. Bad sign. At this moment, she hardly wanted me to succeed in finding a car.

But I did find it.

It was a thankless task in the first weeks of the invasion. People took their cars to the West; they gave them to the military or kept them in case of emergency—although where is it hotter? We didn’t have money for a new one. And among the old, I really didn’t want to come across a customs-cleared ruin, which after 500 km would crack on the track.

The search took several days—indescribably long in the conditions when shells are ripping around the capital, and the native city is without water, heat, light and communication.

I was fortunate to. Oleksiy, from whom I bought sleeping bags and mats for soldiers in the first days of the invasion, said in a mail that he was selling his station wagon because he needed money.

We met literally for half an hour, because Oleksiy was leaving the city. He just gave me the keys and the technical license. It was impossible to complete the sale—the services and registers did not work. There was never a time to look for a notary. We agreed that we will do everything later, and I will make the payment on installment.

Then I persuaded Nastya to go west. I had absolutely no idea what it would be like to go by myself and leave her and the cat in Kyiv, where rockets were flying and enemy equipment was burning all around. There was also a second mission—to find housing for relatives in a safe place, so that they would have somewhere to take them immediately after rescue, and not be thrown here and there by shelters.

Three days’ journey to the west. At the same time, we took an acquaintance to Vinnytsia and looked for housing, almost running into fraudsters three

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