

First Shock

Tetyana

February 24, 2022

“Wake up, the war has begun! They’ve bombed Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa!”

My husband Yuriy’s voice woke me abruptly on February 24, 2022. And for months afterwards I didn’t feel that I had really woken up. I was stuck inside a nightmare. My mind kept reaching for the safe, secure life of yesterday.

For my daughter Anastasiya, the war began a few minutes earlier. Watching the news, her father was turning up the sound on the television, as if volume could bring clarity to what he was seeing. She stomped out of her bedroom.

“Dad, why is it so loud?”

“The war has started,” he said.

She paused, not really taking it in. Then, with the logic of someone still half asleep, she said what has become our family wartime catchphrase for whenever something happens that we can’t process: “Could you please just close the door next time?”

Our sons, Volodymyr and Stepan, came into the living room, drawn by the noise. We gathered there, still half asleep, hair uncombed, in pyjamas, barefoot. The television was blaring, but everyone was scrolling their phones, searching for something that would make sense of what was

happening. We watched in silence, too stunned to react, not yet afraid, just suspended in that moment, unable to decide whether we should run somewhere, hide, or do nothing at all.

I found myself at my laptop, typing in our company chat, “We shouldn’t go to the office today.” To my surprise, almost everyone had been getting ready for work, holding on to the familiar as the unknown closed in.

It felt as if a switch had been flipped and I had gone back in time into a war movie. Kyiv was bombed at 4 a.m. In my Soviet-era childhood, there was a song everyone knew. It began: “On June 22, at four o’clock in the morning, Kyiv was bombed, and we were told that the war had begun.” It marked the start of World War II for the Soviet Union and was repeated endlessly, as if four in the morning were the official hour at which wars start.

When missiles hit Kyiv at that same time decades later, it felt deliberate. Four in the morning is not just a moment on the clock; it is a historical trigger, a way of saying: “This is how war begins here.”

All five of us stood staring at the television. Ruined buildings, crowds of people trying to escape. Russian tanks in Ukrainian cities, bodies lying in the streets. How could this be real? My mind refused to accept the reality of what was happening, existing in a trance-like combination of sleepwalking and being a character in a movie. I couldn’t think clearly. Did that help or hinder my ability to adapt to the first shock?

The first phone call that morning was from Polina, my childhood friend, who now lives in Tel Aviv:

“Tetyana, if you need to leave the country, come here to me.”

Leave? I looked around, at our house and all our possessions, Audrey, our large dog in the yard, and our two cats – Simba and Iryska – asleep in the kitchen. And of course, the five of us. Where could we go? How would we get there? War hadn’t reached Lviv yet. Later, Olena, a shop assistant in our local store, told me how on that first day their family of five, with a large dog and two cats, tried to leave their house in Derhachi, a small city near Kharkiv. They quickly packed some things; they took one cat because the other had disappeared, terrified by the explosions; they opened packets of food and left water for their dog (there was no space in

the car for her); and they drove off, leaving the gates open. Olena looked back at her house and saw that her dog was crying, tears in her eyes.

When they reached the road, it was under heavy fire and shelling. Everywhere were cars destroyed, their neighbours killed. They returned home, and thankfully this story has a happier ending. A week later Olena brought her children to Lviv on an evacuation train. When she was lucky enough to find part of a house for rent where pets were allowed and you could keep a large dog in the yard, her husband brought them, and they were all reunited. Their house does not exist anymore, but they are all together.

This question of whether to leave, when and where to go stalked my mind for months. Messages started to pour in from all over the world, some from friends, some from acquaintances whom I had only met at conferences, and some from Facebook or LinkedIn friends who had never met me in person. They sent their addresses and phone numbers, invited us to come whenever we needed.

Months before the beginning of the full-scale war, the media had published a list of what to pack in your emergency suitcase:

- Waterproof copies of important documents
- Cash and credit cards
- Spare keys for your home (what use are these to people whose cities are occupied or houses destroyed?)
- A map, a compass, and a small radio with extra batteries
- Signalling devices (to signal to whom?)
- A first aid kit
- Extra clothing, a small tent, a sleeping bag
- Cooking tools, matches, a lighter, drinking water for 1–2 days, and canned food.

This emergency pack weighed over thirty kilograms, and I don't know anyone who actually took all of this when fleeing their home.

The memory of previous generations who had survived revolutions, wars, and famine also played on my mind. For many who lived through Soviet-era shortages, stockpiling essential items became a way of life, a

habit rooted in decades of uncertainty. When I cleared out my grandmother's house after she passed away, I found dozens of packets of salt, matches, soap, and vegetable oil. So, as I stocked up on flour and grains, I added all these items from Grandma's list, together with a huge range of spices to vary the same food every day.

That first day we each packed a suitcase in case we had to grab them and run. I worried that we would lose each other in the process. Scenes from wartime movies collided with the live images from roads and railway stations. The moving carpet of cars. The moving carpet of people. Train carriages packed so tightly that people were standing squashed together for twenty hours. A Facebook post by an industry colleague described how she nearly lost her five-year-old son at a railway station, how, in the crush of the crowd, her grip slipped from his hand, and strangers lifted him above their heads to bring him back to his mother.

We climbed up to the attic and pulled down five old cabin-size suitcases that had been languishing there for years. Dusty, neglected, one had a broken wheel, another a handle repaired years ago with tape that had already started to peel again. Now they were pressed into service. Documents went in first. Passports, birth certificates, our marriage certificate. A thin folder with property papers, insurance, a few contracts I suddenly believed might prove that our life had existed. I added a small envelope with photos: the boys as children. Anastasiya at five with a funny smile, one picture of all of us together that had always been my favourite.

Then practical things. Phone chargers. A power bank. Headphones. A small bag with jewellery, pieces I didn't even wear, but that could be sold if inflation rendered money worthless, as it had for my grandparents. I took all the cash we had and divided it between the suitcases. Medication, whatever I could find to hand. Toothbrushes. Toothpaste. A bar of soap, still wrapped in paper.

Choosing clothes was the strangest part. I packed for extremes. A thick sweater. A light dress. T-shirts. And almost all of them were things I had bought and never really worn. They were neither the familiar nor the comfortable ones. Nothing that carried the shape of my everyday life. Just random pieces, as if chosen by someone who didn't quite know me.

There were no combinations, no outfits, just fragments for all weathers and possible futures.

My colleague Hanna went from Kyiv to Germany with only a backpack full of Ukrainian books. She was on a mission to save Ukrainian culture in case everything was destroyed. So, she packed books, put on an old gardening sweater and sneakers and left. “I asked myself later,” she said, “Why, from a wardrobe of clothes, did I choose these? And I could not explain it to myself; it just felt wrong to wear anything else.” People started arriving in Lviv on evacuation trains in their pyjamas and slippers with nothing else. People without bags or suitcases also started to come to our house.

An hour later, Polina called again:

“I know that I just invited you to come and stay with us, but can my aunt, her daughter, and grandsons from Kyiv come and stay with you for a while?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, without a moment’s hesitation. Thousands and thousands of people were trying to flee to safety. Nobody knew where was safe, but Lviv, the city we live in, is far from the border with Russia, very close to the border with Poland, and suffered significantly less than many other cities in the first months.

Over five million people passed through our city, mostly women, children, and the elderly. Many came to the railway station, and immediately we set up a support system there. Owners of restaurants and shops brought food and water; people brought clothes, blankets, and medicines, and took home those who arrived. My daughter and her friends volunteered to help at the railway station, and it was the first time we all saw, not in social media but in reality, how war can change lives. In an instant, people went from living a comfortable, settled existence to wearing someone else’s shoes, eating donated food, and sleeping on the floor of a school gym. For some, it was so overwhelming that they fainted from hunger because they were too ashamed to ask for charity.

I don’t remember the names or faces of the endless stream of people who came to our house every day: relatives of friends, their neighbours, friends of their neighbours, somebody’s colleagues. People who desperately needed respite after twenty or thirty hours in huge traffic jams on the roads

or standing in packed trains. People like Olha, who spent days hiding in her bathtub, the safest place in her house, with no food, as the sound of shelling echoed around her. Or Anna, a woman whom my daughter just brought home from a railway station because she was too tired to explain where to find a place to sleep. This elegant woman in a designer coat and handbag, now crumpled and scuffed, spent nearly all the time in our house on the terrace. She could not get enough fresh winter air after spending a week in a small basement with fifty neighbours. She had been running errands when the shelling started, and while she hid in the shelter, her home was destroyed. I couldn't ask how they survived in that basement, trapped there by the shelling. I just remember her quiet breathing on the terrace, trying to find some strength for the next leg of her journey, a journey with no clear destination.

People arrived in shock; initially they could hardly talk and couldn't eat. There was somebody's son, a boy around ten years old, who sat silently, staring into space. I knew that his family had spent nearly two days on the train with no food and no sleep. I tried to tempt him with food, but he didn't respond. He didn't seem to hear me. Then I started to cook dinner for everyone when he was in the kitchen and emptied a bag of potatoes into the sink for peeling. Who could imagine that the sound of potatoes banging into a metal sink could be so terrifying? Traumatized by the sounds of shooting and explosions, the boy covered his head with his hands and tried to hide under the kitchen table.

One evening I was standing on the stairs of the second floor of our house watching the movement of our guests in the corridor on the first floor: an elderly lady with dementia, who came with her seventy-year-old daughter after endless hours of driving to Lviv, with many hours of driving ahead to cross the Polish border, disoriented and anxious; somebody's kids running and playing oblivious to the disruption of their lives; somebody's father touching the books in the bookcase and saying that he also had a good library, one that he had left ten years ago in the occupied city, and now he was having to leave his new home.

Many of these people had nowhere to go. They were simply moving away from their homes, from their lives, into uncertainty. And the thought returned repeatedly: we could be next. I remember thinking then: God,

the universe, or whoever writes these strange scripts for our lives, I will make beds, cook, and help for as long as it takes. Just please let us stay in our own home.

And yet another part of me was afraid to stay. When people arrived, silent at first from shock and exhaustion, and then began to speak, their stories poured out. You listened and felt it was safer to be numb; to pretend you were watching a movie, because otherwise their stories were unbearable.

Looking back, I see how carefully my mind protected me. The slow thinking, the sense of watching events from a distance, the feeling of cotton wool in the head – what I resisted at first was a form of self-protection. Social media showed me how common it was. People wrote about the same fog, the same inability to eat or drink, and the same bodies losing weight without effort, as if shock itself was doing the work. Months later, many of us wrote again: about the weight returning, sometimes doubled, settling in for longer than expected. Even our bodies seemed to follow a shared rhythm.

When something unbearable happened, when a maternity hospital was hit and a kindergarten destroyed, we froze together. First came numbness, then, slowly, hatred, and later came anger. The emotional weather changed in waves. There were months when life was lived intensely, almost recklessly. There were months of pure survival: how to work without electricity, how to keep going in the dark. And there were periods of exhaustion so heavy you could feel them in the streets, in voices, in posture.

What used to be a space for photos and casual updates turned into a network of immediate help. People posted lists of what they needed or what they could offer. Someone needed baby formula; someone else responded within minutes. A family was stuck at a train station; a volunteer found them within hours. Any group connected through social media became a working unit.

For years, my company had run a contest for young translators. From the first days of the invasion, its group chat transformed into a volunteer hub. University and school students organised translations of news so the world would know what was happening, translated documents for those leaving the country, and wrote letters to international organisations asking for aid. Everyone found something they could do.

Social media also became essential for information. Together with air-raid alert apps, it was how we understood what was happening. To know whether it was safe, where help was needed, or which areas to avoid, you had to keep scrolling. Humanity had probably never watched a war unfold in real time like this.

Everyone put the air alert app on their phone. It sends out loud, urgent signals telling people to go to shelters. The voice can be male, female, or even Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*, as Mark Hamill lent his voice to a mobile application. “Don’t be careless,” he says. “Your overconfidence is your weakness,” and when the alert is over you hear his support in: “May the Force be with you.” These apps became part of everyday life. You check your phone for messages, but also to see if it’s safe.

Doomscrolling became a universal addiction. You wake in the night and immediately check your phone, needing to know if something terrible has happened while you were asleep. It’s overwhelming but it feels like the only way to stay connected, to feel some illusion of control.

My wartime movie continued. In the first days of the war, thousands of men flooded military collection centres, determined to join the army. My husband was one of them. He volunteered even though he had a pre-existing medical condition and official disability status, so was exempt from military service. At the beginning of the war, if one family member was already serving in the army, other men from the same family weren’t usually mobilised. He said very casually to me that it was better this way, that he would go to protect our sons. I felt such a mix of emotions: pride, fear, helplessness, and disbelief, all stirred together. I watched him pack his bag, trying to work out what he needed for war. Clothes, gadgets, books, all the everyday stuff shrank in importance when life was reduced to the bare minimum. What fits in a backpack becomes your world, your survival.

It was hard not to beg him to stay, not to tell him that his presence at home was just as important. I knew I couldn’t. He wouldn’t stay even if I asked, and I wouldn’t forgive myself if I did. He aimed to defend Ukraine, and it was important for him, for me, and for our children. I followed him through the house, making notes about what and when things should be done year-round, how the heating system works, and where to buy wood

next summer. I also wrote a list of phone numbers of repairmen; a useless list because most of these men had also joined the army.

At the collection centre, the line stretched out of the door: men waiting to enlist, and their families saying goodbye. Wherever you looked, you could see determined faces of men and lost faces of women and children. Fathers knelt to hug their children, and promised to return, even though no one could make that promise now. You saw a mother's hands shaking as she made the sign of the cross over her twenty-year-old son. You saw a woman hugging and kissing her husband, seeing him off to war. You almost understood that this woman was you.

I could not cry there, because that would feel like we were saying farewell forever. Tears would make it real and would give shape to the fear I was trying to suppress. So, our children and I stood there and watched him as he walked away, each step imprinting every detail of this surreal moment in my mind.

Fear in Kindness

Marlon

February 24, 2022

“Get off your phones and get dressed!” Every morning, the same ritual. The first thing they do when they wake up is reach for their phones. My two sons, Raph and Norman, aged nine and twelve. Yet when I return to the bedroom, I find my husband and I doing the same, bent over our screens, catching up on the latest app notifications and whatever has happened in the world while we were asleep.

I notice I have missed a whole series of messages from last night about extravagant outfits, because Dutch carnival begins tomorrow. My gaze shifts to our costumes, already laid out carefully in the bedroom. My husband Paul will be wearing a homemade disco helmet. I have transformed an old construction helmet, decorated it vivid red, and crowned with a shiny, Dali-like lobster. For weeks I have carried the excitement in my stomach, the kind of bright, restless anticipation I knew as a child, when I would spend months dreaming up what to wear for carnival.

With a smile on my face, I switch to the news app, and it is as if all the confetti in my head sinks to the floor. The news of the invasion of Ukraine makes me sit down on the bed. I grab my husband’s arm. “Russia has invaded Ukraine!”

He’s getting out of bed as he replies: “This isn’t a surprise. This war began in 2014, when the Russians annexed Crimea and invaded the

Donbas and this was to be expected.” He follows global politics more closely than I do, and he begins one of his interesting morning lectures. But I hardly hear him. His words flow past me because there is room in my head for only one thought:

Tetyana. What about Tetyana? I text her: “How are you and your family?”

I immediately feel fear. And shame about that fear. You see a friend, someone you’ve known for nearly twenty years, who lives far away but with whom you’ve maintained a long-distance friendship, suddenly caught in a bizarre war film come to life. And you want to connect, to hold her close, but fear almost stops you. Fear of not knowing what you’re stepping into. How dark the forest really is. And whether you can even handle your own desire – to hold her, to be there for her – amidst all that suffering.

And then comes the shame. Because who am I, someone living in peace, to feel any fear at all? Or hesitation? And yet, I suspect this is exactly why many people pull away when something terrible happens to a friend. They retreat instead of leaning in. Because the fear feels overwhelming. Because they can’t handle the other person’s pain. Because what they can offer feels so desperately small and inadequate.

This time, I made a conscious choice to do the opposite. Maybe it was naïve overconfidence to think I could be of help from so far away. But maybe it was a deeper intuition or my heart moving instinctively towards her without overthinking it. There are moments that defy reason, when nothing holds you back and everything pushes you forward.

The deepest fear that arose in me was this: what if I connect with her, support her, hold her, and then lose her? What if the war tears her away, and I’m left helpless again, as I was once before? Years ago, a friend asked for my help, and I believed I could support him, nurture him, and make everything better. I put my heart and soul into rescuing him, tried everything, and still, he chose to leave this world. That loss devastated me. I had never felt so helpless, so defeated. And all those feelings of failure, fear of the unknown, shame that I didn’t make a difference – or even made it worse? – flashed before me when I wanted to be there for Tetyana. Since losing that dear friend years earlier, I have felt immense shame, guilt, and grief for not being able to help when I was so emotionally close to him.

But I also knew – rationally – that I shouldn't feel ashamed or guilty for losing someone I was trying to help. I am allowed to help now, especially now. So, before sending that first message to Tetyana, I chose, with fear still tucked under my arm, very consciously to say out loud to myself: I'm here.

I began to transform my questions in our conversations from *What can I do?* to *Who can I be for you?* And “being there” is easy to say, but for me, it meant listening without trying to fix anything. Just be there.

Tetyana is an incredibly strong woman, a powerful entrepreneur, and someone capable of carrying a lot. I decided simply to be a constant presence, someone who could listen between the lines and sense what was going on in her inner world.

And I hoped that anything that can be shared can also start to shift.

I often question my own motivations when it comes to helping others because I believe that any human connection is a two-way street. We never help just to help. There's always something else moving underneath.

For me? First, I wanted to turn my anger into something meaningful and positive. Overstimulated, I had been sitting at my laptop for days after the war broke out. The news battered me, and I felt powerless and couldn't get anything done. Angry ... no, furious. And beneath that fury was sorrow. Sorrow for the senseless loss of life, loss of civilisation. I wanted to channel that energy differently. Into something useful. And since writing is how I make sense of life, I picked up my pen and started writing to Tetyana.

My deepest sense of purpose comes from connecting with others – something we seem to have lost sight of in the Western world. The search for a meaningful life has been commercialised, not just in the instagrammable spiritual scene, but especially in business, where it becomes a moral performance. I keep imagining brilliant people crafting lofty purpose statements in boardrooms, then collapsing at home, unable to connect with their own grandmother or neighbours, who might be their real purpose, right there waiting in front of them. It's as if when purpose becomes personal, we dissociate, afraid that picking it up means making an emotional commitment and losing control of our carefully managed lives. We keep purpose boxed away in branding decks, because work-purpose won't cry or get angry or sit silently depressed across the table. But it also won't hold

you, or hug you, or teach you what it means to be there for someone in need. Maybe purpose simply means staying connected to the people you love, especially in times of trouble: your family, your friends, your work colleagues, your neighbours. And in my case, my friend in Ukraine.

In my years as a female leadership coach, I've come to see that holding up just one woman can change the world. When I help one of these gifted women, these warriors, stand taller, I strengthen an entire field. Each woman I coach carries a world within her. And the ones who seem to "have it all together" often carry the heaviest loads. Sometimes, almost unbearably so. And to me, Tetyana is one of those women. A woman of change, able to carry a lot.

Now, living in Lviv, in a relatively safe part of Ukraine, Tetyana finds herself the recipient of stories from women from all over the country – whether through her work in the translation business, as a fundraiser for a mental health programme, or just in her private local circle. And the more stories she hears, the stronger and more determined she seems to become.

I suspect that other women subconsciously feel that she can carry a lot. That she is able to receive all those stories, each emotionally charged, with generosity. And because she listens without probing, they don't fear being asked to recount more than they can bear. They feel a sense of control.

I asked her what it does to her, hearing all these stories, these experiences from these women.

"I feel like their ambassador," she said. "An ambassador for their vulnerable stories. And it feels like an essential task that I must do, but also one that comes naturally."

From the very beginning of the war, I've had the sense that my friend wants to advocate for the inner world of her people, to hear and feel it. Not only her own inner world, but also that of so many others.

How on earth can I help a friend in war? Well ... first of all: not by trying to fix anything. We all know the situation: you're pouring your heart out to a friend because things are tough, and before you know it, they start offering all sorts of advice to "solve" your problem. Don't go there. It's no different with a friend in a war zone.

Of course, I can't end the war for her. I can't help her get out of bed on cold winter mornings, or take away her exhaustion, or carry her

worries for her children. I can't take away her suffering. But the idea that she doesn't somehow need to be "fixed" is an important realisation. Personal suffering is terrible, but it has value in reminding us, with piercing clarity, of the difference between life and death.

During one of our early conversations, Tetyana sent me these words, telling me what she really needed:

"In our darkest moments, we don't need solutions or advice. What we yearn for is simply human connection, a quiet presence, and a gentle touch. These small gestures are the anchors that hold us steady when life feels like too much. Please don't try to fix me. Don't take on my pain or push away my shadows. Just sit beside me as I work through my own inner storms. Be the steady hand I can reach for as I find my way. My pain is mine to carry, my battles mine to face. But your presence reminds me I'm not alone in this vast, sometimes frightening world. It's a quiet reminder that I am worthy of love, even when I feel broken. So, in those dark hours when I lose my way, will you just be here? Not as a rescuer, but as a companion. Hold my hand until dawn arrives, helping me remember my strength. Your silent support is the most precious gift you can give. It's a love that helps me remember who I am, even when I forget."

– Author unknown (often misattributed
to Ernest Hemingway)

So, I decided to follow these words: just be there. Not as a rescuer, but as a companion of a road untravelled.

