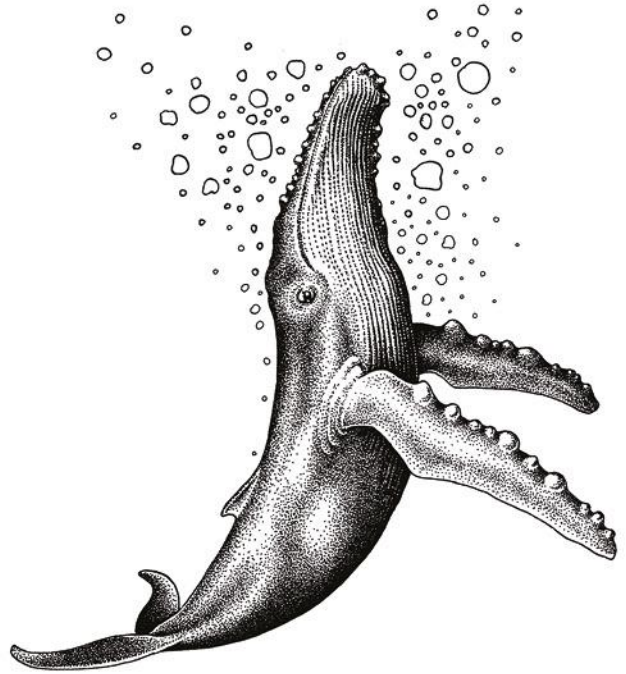


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THE BLACK SEA WHALE SONG

JUST BEFORE A STRETCHED MEMORY snaps with the past like a rubber band, at the same place where an echo becomes a whisper, beneath the ringing cacophony of Achaen and Trojan swords clashing in the tumultuous war over Helen of Troy along the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, an island arose from the waters of the Black Sea — a sea the ancient Greeks regarded as “inhospitable.” The island was called *Lewke*, the Greek word for white. Today this island is known as *Zmiinyi* or Snake Island.

According to legend, the island was created by the sea nymph Thetis. After 17 days of mourning for her son Achilles, who had died in battle at the gates of Troy after Paris targeted an arrow at the only vulnerable spot on his body — his heel, the grief-stricken Thetis raised a snow-white rocky island from the depths of the sea. It was to become the last refuge for her only and beloved child.

Later, a stone temple in honour of Achilles was built on the island. Greek ships

would invariably pay homage to memories there when traversing the waters from the metropolis to their colonies on the Northern Black Sea coast or vice versa, when returning home. Over time, the ancient Greeks became more familiar with these lands, now the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Having explored the shores, inlets, and harbours, their unease transformed into admiration, and they now saw the Black Sea as “hospitable,” designating it as peaceful and safe for many years to come (albeit, with a few exceptions).

At the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Snake Island quickly became a symbol of national resistance. The commander of a Russian battleship threatened 13 Ukrainian border guards stationed there with death and destruction if they did not surrender. They flatly refused, with a reply that would rally a nation: “Russian warship, go fuck yourself!” Those guardians of Snake Island became talismans of Ukrainian tenacity, proving to everyone, no

trouble is so great as to coerce the loss of belief in yourself.

Today, pundits, politicians, and other purveyors of doom have worn out the meaning of an “existential crisis,” making surviving one, unfairly pedestrian. Bereft of solutions to life’s questions, and having themselves launched salvos of troubles, from inflation to healthcare, all products of failed leadership, egos become deliberately inflated casting dark shadows on common sense solutions to treatable symptoms of a complicated life. It is no surprise that in this ecology, suicide emerges as an option, especially when popular culture sanitises the pressure to surrender rather than champion resistance.

Whether or not to take up arms against yourself, to capitulate to life’s challenges, is not a new question, having been pondered, poetically, by William Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep...*

But how does a country, a people, or a nation answer his question when faced with another genocide? Turns out, questions posed by poets are often answered by soldiers: the Guardians of Snake Island in the Black Sea have become beacons, showing us how to sail through a sea of troubles.

The same coast where Greek, and later Roman, Byzantine, Genoese, Ottoman, and many other ships have long been docked, is regularly shelled by Russia’s military. The Russian Federation’s Ministry of Defence threatens to attack any foreign ships entering its waters. Anti-ship mines are surfing its waves instead of Ukrainian and foreign vacationers.

Ukraine, however, is not surrendering: archaeologists of the future exploring the bottom of the Black Sea will

discover several artefacts from the turbulent Ukrainian present, at least one of which will be a Russian missile cruiser, the Kremlin’s flagship *Moskva*, resting on the seabed near Snake Island since 14 April 2022.

Ukrainians surprised the Western world by resisting the first days of Russia’s full-scale invasion, despite the fact everyone was betting on a lightning-speed victory for Russia, considered the second greatest army in the world (although most sympathised with the underdog). Experts (many without expertise) in capitals such as Berlin, London, and Washington, DC, even hoped for a quick decapitation of Kyiv’s leadership. Ukraine continues to astonish the West because Ukrainians will not supplicate to Putin. Kyiv’s leadership has embraced a principled position to not trade sovereign lands or individual agency in exchange for an ersatz peace from a street thug, a dictator who dreams of reviving the Russian Empire.

Ukrainians, like the Black Sea whale, did not exist for the international community. Hidden under the dark and stormy layers of propaganda and disinformation, often disguised as literature, Ukrainians have spent more than a century holding their breath, ascending from the depths of the sea to the surface, to finally exhale and assert their true name. Ukraine’s national consolidation is its strongest weapon, and it will break the bonds of the Russian Empire’s cultural appropriation which branded Ukrainians as “Little Russians” or “Soviets,” a prison moniker forced on Ukrainians by the Soviet Union.

Western journalists were amazed to see Ukrainians as distinct, even cool. In an interview with the BBC in March 2023, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba replied, “Historically, Ukraine was unfavourably under-appreciated. And I regret it took bloodshed and a devastating war for the world to realise how cool we are. And we were always cool. But it just took you too much time to realise that.” Indeed,



we were cool, before 24 February 2022, or February–March 2014, or 24 August 1991. But Western perceptions of Ukraine were framed by Moscow — the centre of a LARP empire — whose leaders excelled at cosplaying a powerful political force, when in reality, it was simply a Potemkin village.

It's OK to admit you have been living under a misapprehension. There's been a lot of flotsam polluting the waters of a good faith conversation between Kyiv and its western partners in London, Brussels, Washington, and other capitals.

Military cooperation between Kyiv, London, Brussels, and Washington shouldn't be a fountain of anxiety (except maybe in Moscow, and that's not a bad thing). Weapons in Ukrainian hands are not for suicide, but for self-defence; not in order to avoid the "sea of troubles," but to prepare and plan for the challenges posed by an aggressive neighbour; to stop them here, between two worlds, on the barricade between two civilisations: one where the rule of law reigns, and the other where abject violence and brute force set the agenda.

To help clear and navigate the waters, we decided to launch *The Black Sea Whale*.

The Black Sea Whale is a new publication, with lyrics from a long-forgotten whale song emanating from the raging waters of the hospitable sea ebbing and

flowing over the temporarily Russian-occupied Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula and Ukraine's sovereign Snake Island. Carried on the current for thousands of kilometres, this song can be heard around the world connecting the past, present, and future of Ukraine and its people with Western civilisation, which we have been a part of since ancient times.

The stories in *The Black Sea Whale* (a "thirdly" publication, as opposed to a quarterly) are a second chance for the world: not just to listen, but to hear the sincere and true voice of Ukrainians, and to discover authentic Ukraine and its polyphony. They are about the prosaic and the extraordinary, about who we were, who we are, and who we can be. Some stories resemble reality so vividly, they are hard to believe, while others are so outlandish, they strike you as being true. Sometimes they are ironically comedic, at other times heart-wrenchingly sad, but always self-critical and reflect the lessons we have learnt throughout life. You might find echoes of your own life in the specifics of Ukraine, in this bespoke publication for the English-speaking world, because the challenges we face are universal be they in Kyiv or London or where you might be reading this.

These are stories we would want to read ourselves.

In her story in the inaugural issue of *The Black Sea Whale*, Marichka Melnyk comes to the conclusion: "Good enemies don't exist, and neither do innocent traitors," after living under Russian occupation in her village outside Kyiv for 34 days. Witnessing the behaviour of her fellow villagers and their attitudes toward the Russian occupiers, she poses a difficult question: Is there a place for traitors in post-victory Ukraine? In her answer, she draws parallels with the policy toward collaborators in the post-WWII de-occupied Netherlands.

"I work as much as I'm paid," "It's not in my job description," "I won't get

a bonus anyway,” “Can’t anyone else do it?” Consider yourself lucky if these verbal parasites haven’t poisoned your daily professional life. When most of the ship’s crew is beset with demotivation, relying on a successful voyage is foolish and fraught with consequence. Viktoriia Antonenko introduces you to the world of Soviet values, preserved like museum relics scattered throughout all spheres of life.

As soon as Russian troops occupied Chernobyl in February 2022, an ominous cloud of fear drifted over Ukraine once again. After the nuclear power plant accident in 1986, Ukrainians routinely blamed Chernobyl for all their troubles. Although Russia’s occupation of Ukraine’s Donbas replaced it as the focus of all of Ukraine’s ills in 2014, the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation continues to cause dread. Mary Mycio (1959–2022) reveals the heroes, real and imaginary, thanks to whom alienation is eventually replaced by rebirth. And she is not afraid to expose the real culprit behind both catastrophes.

Ukraine is not the only country stuck in a toxic relationship with Russia. The almost maniacal fascination with the “great” Russian culture and “mystical” Russian nature, including an unhealthy obsession with Russia as a vital partner at the expense of other global relationships, is a national characteristic of Germans, regardless of political party preference. Sergej Sumlenny reveals the origins of Berlin’s deep-seated infatuation with Moscow and how it has been affected by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The desperate act of self-immolation in Kaunas by the hippie Romas Kalanta in the spring of 1972 became a litmus test for Lithuanians who still remembered living in an independent state and perceived the Soviets as occupiers. The collective memory of the Baltic nations turned out to be stronger than that of Ukrainians. Oleksii Dubrov shows us how Lithuania weaves the threads of history into a portrait

of their rebirth even if the yarn may be frayed.

Cartographers have been mapping the environment to bring about a better understanding of the world we live in for centuries. Janusz Bugajski, senior fellow at *The Jamestown Foundation*, analyses the fragile foundations of the Russian Federation and uncovers new opportunities waiting for the colonised, non-Russian captive nations following the inevitable transformation of Russia from Empire to State.

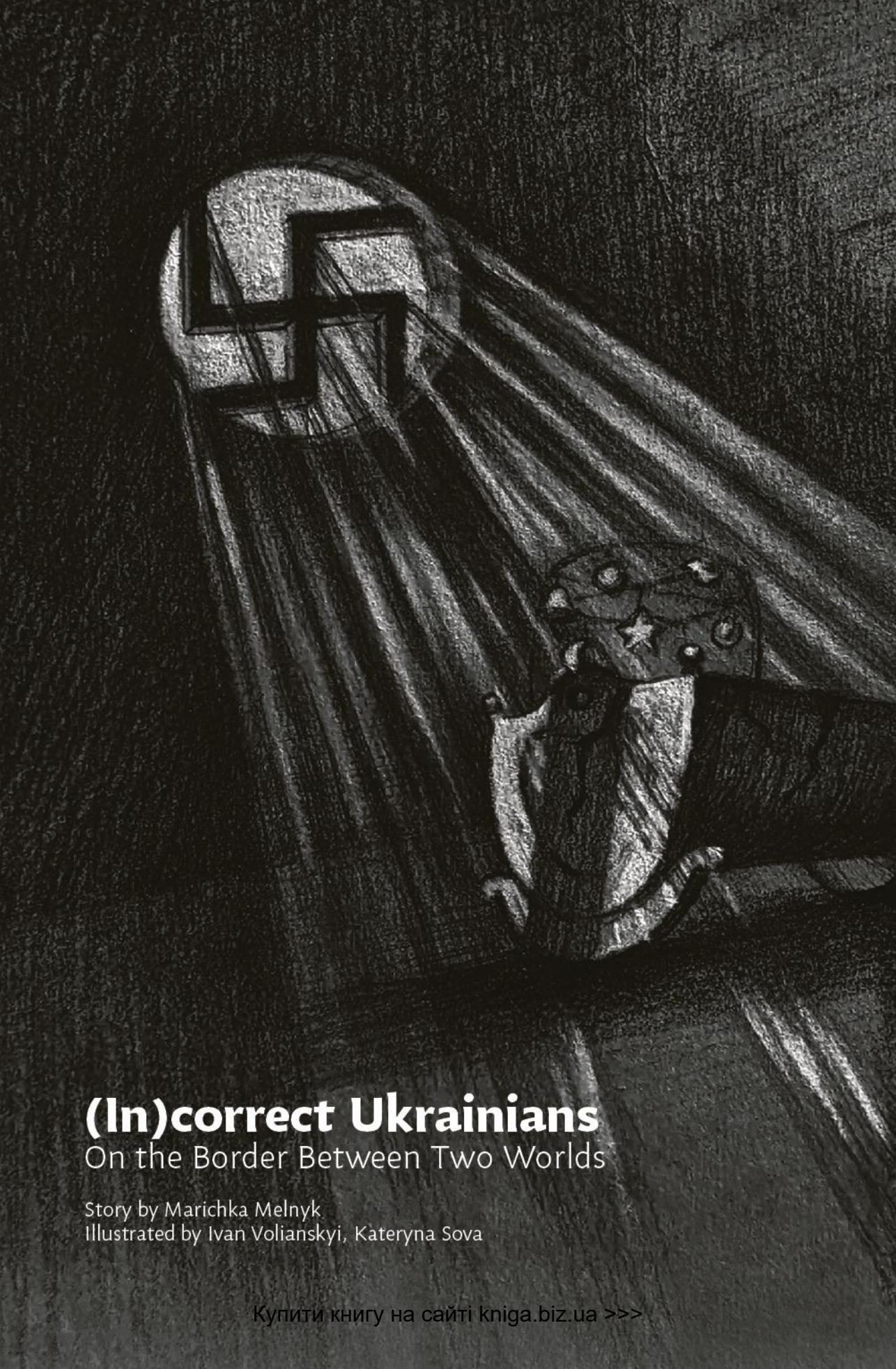
“I woke up that day to the sound of explosions and the whistling of missiles as they flew by my window and crashed into the centre of Moscow.” Is there safety in any of the five zones of occupation into which the city of Moscow is divided in 2049? Oleksii Dubrov’s story gives us a glimpse into the future, where a Ukrainian orphan discovers a secret as Russians struggle with imperial debris between the Ural Mountains and the Far East.

Thank you for sharing an interest in Ukrainians and their creative contributions in this, the inaugural issue of *The Black Sea Whale*.

Enjoy the song and keep reading.

The Editors
The Black Sea Whale





(In)correct Ukrainians

On the Border Between Two Worlds

Story by Marichka Melnyk

Illustrated by Ivan Volianskyi, Kateryna Sova

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THE FIRST RUSSIAN SOLDIERS invaded my village north of Kyiv at dawn on 25 February 2022. I was awakened at around 5.00am by a crescendo of rumbling engines and the clatter of rattling windows. The fold-out sofa bed I was lying on began vibrating. Soon, it felt as if the whole house was shaking. Surreptitiously peering out the front window from behind the curtains, I watched as a slow-moving but constant, seemingly endless, convoy passed by our house, made up of armoured personnel carriers, tanks, self-propelled artillery, Grad rocket launchers, fuel trucks, tractor trailers, amphibious rigs, vehicles carrying radio jamming equipment – and a sea of trucks carrying soldiers. All the vehicles were emblazoned with the letter “V” in white paint.

I was paralysed by the sight. My brain was unable to piece together a sentence and my fingers stumbled over the letters on the keyboard of my phone. I sent a message about the movement of enemy vehicles through our village to the Facebook page of the ground forces of Ukraine’s army. I must have typed those sorry 14 words at a rate of about one word per minute, and then I spent half an hour waiting for a reply (don’t ask me why I thought someone would actually reply).

One could only guess what path the Russian soldiers had taken on their way to our village, but their next destination was obvious. My parents’ house, from which, barely breathing, I watched this terrifying scene, is on route PO2, the road which leads directly to Kyiv. On any normal day, it takes just under an hour to reach the capital.

The procession of Russian vehicles went on for two and a half hours. They didn’t hang around for long, but left behind the first (and, unfortunately, not the last) bullet-ridden car – a white 1998 Opel Corsa that had carelessly driven towards them. The man behind the wheel and the woman in the front seat were killed. They were

shot 200m from my home. After 30 seconds of machine-gun fire, followed by the deafening grind of crushing metal and the sound of shattering glass, the Russian invasion force moved on.

The subsequent convoys driving through the village had fewer vehicles. At first, they just passed through, but after a while, they started stopping: sometimes to wait for those lagging behind, other times to set up a field kitchen. But mainly they stopped alongside people's houses to take cover from the shelling by the Ukrainian military, which had formed a buffer zone to stop the enemy from entering the capital.

We couldn't see all of this, but we heard it.

By we, I mean my mum, my dad, and myself. And also my brother, Andriy, and his wife, my sister and her husband, Oleh, and my two nieces and one nephew. They came to the village immediately after Russia fired missiles at our military airports and depots on 24 February, thinking it would be safer to ride out the war here rather than in Kyiv.

"Riding out the war," we quickly became sensitive to the faintest vibrations and could predict the approach of enemy convoys before they appeared on the horizon. When the Russian military was in the village, we spent our time lying on the floor of our veranda (the room in my parents' house furthest from the street) or hiding in the cellar. On the first day the Russians came into the village, we carried two wooden pallets, old mattresses, pillows, blankets, candles, matches, a 19-litre sized bottle of drinking water (the kind you'd find in an office on top of a water cooler), and a small shovel down to the cellar.

We chose our hiding spot depending on the proximity and intensity of shooting.

Every minute spent in expectation of danger seemed like an eternity, with no beginning or end. Every onset of

darkness dredged up all our inner fears, with visions of the countless unpleasant scenarios awaiting us if Ukraine fell. Every sunrise brought the hope all of this was just a nightmare, and we would wake up to no war. But our hopes were futile.

The electricity and phone service in our village were cut off on the morning of the third day of the Russian invasion, and along with them the opportunity to help our defenders by giving them information about the enemy's movements. The only remaining option was to "help" the Russians find their way around. Armed with a crowbar, my brother Andriy and brother-in-law Oleh went to remove road signs. Their first expedition went off without a hitch, but the next one...

In the late afternoon of 28 February 2022, another horde, barrelling down both lanes of the two-lane highway, turned off the main road and took up positions in our village. Soldiers with guns broke into almost every second house, brazenly telling the owners, "We're moving in!" They parked their vehicles in the local park and turned the school and community centre into a command post and military hospital. By nightfall, there were checkpoints on all the streets, regardless of whether they were main roads or small lanes. Machine gun fire rang out from time to time.

We were under occupation.

Andriy and Oleh started heading back from their "secret mission" around dusk. They were no more than 150m away from home when an armoured personnel carrier and a military jeep stopped on Bila Street, which they needed to cross to get home. Half a dozen soldiers poured out of the vehicles to greet them.

There was no doubt to whom these soldiers had sworn allegiance. Wearing uniforms covered in as many orange and black ribbons as fleas found on an unwashed dog, the language they spoke gave them away – the tone, rhythm, tempo, and accent weren't the same as "our" Russian.



My brother and brother-in-law dropped the crowbar and tried to hide behind a nearby fence, albeit unsuccessfully. They were caught and searched, forced to strip to the waist. The soldiers checked them for “Nazi” tattoos and marks or bruises on their skin from the kickback of a gun or a bulletproof vest and looked for traces of gunpowder on their hands. They held them at gunpoint while they looked through the call logs, messages, and photos on their phones. Having found nothing incriminating, they let Andriy and Oleh go.

Before letting them go, though, one of the occupiers, an ethnic Buryat, said arrogantly, “We’re here to bring order,” savouring each word. “Go and tell everyone!”

“Never. Never again in my life will I utter a single word in Russian. And I won’t respond to it either,” my brother summed up when he got home and recounted his experience.

Andriy is the oldest of the three of us. He’s three years older than my sister and nine years older than me. He was the first to leave our village to study at one of the universities in Kyiv. I rarely think about the age difference, but it did have a major impact on certain things. Kyiv in 1998, when my brother moved there, and Kyiv in 2007, when I followed suit, were two very different cities linguistically. He had zero chance of not speaking Russian.

The whole family gathered on the veranda where, since the invasion, we began spending our evenings together.

The door was locked, the windows tightly covered with sheets, and a candle on the table flickered, casting shifting shadows on the walls. The rest of the house was completely dark. Everyone was fully dressed, to be ready to run to the cellar, and had their emergency “go bag” by their side.

Andriy sat on the chair next to me and I could feel his whole body shaking.

His fear was contagious, infecting everyone in the room. We all knew his encounter with the Russian “order-restorers” could have ended very differently. There was a deep silence. My imagination was filled with gory images that turned my stomach. I felt like I was sitting on a bed of nails.

“All my colleagues speak Ukrainian,” I said to break the oppressive silence, taking a sip of tea from a coffee cup decorated with a Mochy Mantoo sticker.

“Most of the people where I work are Russian speakers, but they switch to Ukrainian with me,” my sister observed from the ottoman where she sat rocking her three-year-old daughter. “Although the change happened only recently, after the Maidan.”

“Hardly anyone in my office speaks Ukrainian, maybe two or three people,” my brother chimed in. “But from now on, they can go to hell with their Russian!”

“After all, if war isn’t reason enough to stop speaking Russian, then I don’t know what is,” I added. I was truly happy with Andriy’s decision, but I knew it was wrong to attribute it to the war. The war

was in its ninth year, and he chose to speak his native language only when coming face to face with it.

Despite my attempts at conversation, silence again filled the room. But at least now the silence sounded Ukrainian.

“IS YOUR WATER OK?” OUR neighbour asked my mother as she peered over the garden fence the following morning. A stranger was standing next to our neighbour. My brother and I stood off to the side, listening to the conversation from our porch.

The neighbour's name is Lesia. She lives one house over from us and is relatively new to our street, so I don't know much about her. Lesia is from the Poltava region, under 40, twice married, twice divorced, and has two children. Those are the only facts I know about her – the rest are rumors. Supposedly, her first husband is in the militia of the ORDLO (the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts). The second husband, with whom she's still living, is also a real winner. As soon as the first shots rang out, he took his biological son, the younger of Lesia's children, and went to stay at his parents' house deeper in the village, leaving Lesia behind with the older son.

“Are you kidding? You need electricity to pump water from the drilled well and the water from our dug well is rusty. I can't remember the last time we cleaned it... You don't have anywhere to get water?” my mother asked, concerned.

“I do! I'm staying at Serhiy's place,” Lesia nodded at the man standing next to her, who turned out to be the neighbour on the other side of our garden. “He took me and Vitaliy in because everything we have is electric. It's so cold in our house our teeth won't stop chattering. He at least has a wood-burning stove...”

“What were you celebrating all night, almost till dawn?” my mother asked. “The whole house was lit up and it was really noisy and disturbing.”

“Well, the Russians came to the house last night. First, they checked every nook and cranny in the place,