DON'T WORRY, GRANDMA, THIS WAR WILL LAST FOREVER

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Nothing ever seemed to change in Donetsk over the thirty summers I went there to visit my family. Young mothers gossiped on park benches, couples strolled the flower-filled boulevards, students read in cafes. Through the world's ups and downs, the one-million person coal mining city in eastern Ukraine remained sleepy and safe.

Every year, as soon as I arrived at my grandmother's ninth floor flat, from which you could see the sun set over the slag heaps in the distance, my family resumed our annual routine like actors in a well-rehearsed play. In the mornings, Aunt Vita fried up her usual heap of zucchini latkes, which I shared with grandma as she questioned me about my American husband, my work in San Francisco, my mother. In the afternoons, I went on long walks with my cousin Anna. And in the evenings, to the smell of tea and freshly laundered linens, grandmother showed me photographs from her years as a professor of geology and told me stories about the war.

My week in Donetsk always closed with her teary goodbye. "This is probably the last time we see each other, my child," she'd whimper, pinning me to her sobbing chest.

She had been saying that since she turned seventy, two decades ago, so even though it was more and more likely, I stopped taking her seriously.

On my last visit to Donetsk, in August 2013, I wiped the tears off her pink cheeks and told her, "Don't worry, Grandma. We're not going to let you skip out on your big birthday. I'll be back next year, for your ninetieth."

We were planning a big family reunion. My father was going to fly in from Moscow, and my brother and I from California. We were going to drink my grandmother's favorite cherry brandy, eat honeycake, and tell jokes about Putin.

But then winter came, and suddenly Ukraine's president got ousted, Crimea was taken by Russia, and my family and their sleepy city got caught in a civil war they neither expected nor fully understood.

Things changed so quickly that no one, in or outside of Donetsk, knew who exactly was behind the separatist forces that proclaimed Donetsk an independent republic. If it was Donetsk's citizens that wanted to secede from Ukraine, then why didn't my family know any of them? If it was Putin trying to grab another piece of Ukraine to follow Crimea, what was he going to do with a useless coal mining region full of senior citizens? Perhaps it was the evil Americans who wanted to destabilize the region, as the Russian news sources often claimed.

While mass media theorized and politicians pointed fingers, half a million of Donetsk's residents left, and within a few months the city became a parade of dark windows, boarded up street fronts, and a roaming militia.

My cousin Anna watched the red, blue, and black flag of the new Donetsk People's Republic, designated by Ukraine as a terrorist organization, rise on the City Hall in front of her house. The next day, she packed her sons' things and fled to Kiev. Her brother Michael followed suit, closing his shop that sold model airplanes and tanks to hobbyists. Who has time for toys when there are real tanks on the streets?

The only people who stayed in Donetsk were those who couldn't leave. Like my grandmother. And like Aunt Vita and her husband who remained to take care of her.

It was clear there would be no more family reunion, but as the situation escalated, we kept in touch by Skype. For the first year, I called often to try to change their minds. They could follow the cousins to Kiev, I'd say. We could send more money. The war could get worse, and their apartment building could get hit, and then what? But grandmother's reply was always the stoic "Let 'em come and get me!" followed by the newest dirty poem she had made up about Putin, who, she firmly believed, had orchestrated the separatist war in her city.

WHO HAS TIME FOR TOYS WHEN THERE ARE REAL TANKS ON THE STREETS?

And then, I would remember that this woman had lived through much worse—from Ukraine's famine when as a little girl, she saw dead bodies strewn on the streets, to World War II, to decades in the Soviet Union. Perhaps, for her, the current civil war wasn't a good enough reason to leave Donetsk, where she had moved to teach geology in the 1950s.

"Ninety is not exactly the best age to relocate, my child," she'd say.

I knew she was sticking to her guns when even that Malaysian Airlines flight that got shot down forty miles from Donetsk didn't sway her.

But then she had a stroke.

Doctors came and said that before administering the medication, she would need to

get a CT scan to confirm that it was indeed a stroke. While not a difficult procedure, it couldn't exactly be done at home, so my aunt called the couple of still functioning city hospitals and learned that they no longer offered ambulance services.

Eventually, she found a private ambulance company that agreed to come, but only if the family found their own stretcher and only if someone could help them carry her out of the apartment. Somehow, by a miracle that my Americanized brain cannot comprehend, my grandmother got her CT scan, and the doctors came back to the apartment to administer medication.

Through all of this, my grandmother remained lucid. Funny even.

"I'm not going until Putin goes," she told me when I called.

But then I heard her voice weaken day by day until she just slept, unaware of where she was.

My father rushed from his home in Moscow, where he had lived since the 1970s. He took the train—by then the Donetsk International Airport, a gleaming thing of pride built for the 2012 Euro Cup, had been reduced to rubble.

Dad had been there for two weeks when I Skyped to check on them. It was a sunny Sunday morning in San Francisco and a late evening in Donetsk. Grandma was asleep, and the apartment was quiet. My dad was in the kitchen, heating up dinner in a small pan.

He said grandma was doing much better.

"But we'll need to hire a sitter and the medications are expens—"

Suddenly, a loud explosion sliced his sentence in half. His face didn't flinch, so I thought "Fireworks," forgetting the reality of where he was.

BOOM. I heard again, and it dawned on me that these weren't fireworks.

"Shelling," he said and looked at his watch. "Yep, nine p.m. That's when they usually start."

BOOM.

"They're shooting, and you don't seem worried!" I cried out, as if he was responsible for the daily shelling that hadn't ceased despite the dwindling headlines.

"They're far away, on the outskirts. It was pretty quiet here for the first week, but in the past few days it's intensified. Do you want to see?" he suddenly offered.

He took his laptop and brought me along, digitally, to the balcony where he pointed the screen out into the night sky. It was dark outside, and the computer made it seem even darker. I peered and spotted yellow lights on the horizon.

Suddenly, the lights flashed and the night sky ricocheted with a loud *BOOM*, bringing a far-flung war into my quiet Californian home.

It's a year later, and my brother and I are riding in the back of a white Hyundai with a crack in the windshield toward the border between the Russian Federation and Donetsk People's Republic, or DPR. The driver, Artem, doesn't say a word as he passes muddy Kamaz trucks and Soviet-made Ladas on the two-lane highway, ignoring the oncoming traffic. We try to fasten our seat belts but discover that the buckles have been removed.

"I guess we just pray," says my brother.

That's what I've been doing since this morning, when we landed in Rostov-on-Don, a southeastern Russian city two hundred kilometers from Donetsk that is now its closest airport. The taxi operator recommended we take one car to the border, walk across, and meet a second car on the side of the DPR. Otherwise, she said, you might get stuck in a car line for seven hours. Tomorrow is grandmother's ninety-second birthday, and I don't want to spend half of it in line.

As Artem speeds toward the border, I think about that other side. The side that keeps shooting and shelling in an attempt to carve itself from Ukraine. The side of the city-republic that drew itself on the map against the will of my family.

Or maybe Putin drew it. Two and a half years later, nobody really knows. And anyway, everyone's attention has moved on to the refugees marching across Europe. Who cares about Donetsk now? Even the neighboring Russians have largely forgotten about it, consumed with inflation and sanctions that took Parmesan off their shelves. Fucking Russians.

Though am I any better? I send money to my family, but is that enough? Have I done all I could have? Plus, I too have a Russian passport, so in a way am I not also responsible for this mess?

It begins to rain, but Artem doesn't slow down. He is eager to get his two thousand rubles. That's why he got this gig. You can't buy Parmesan with that, but you can certainly buy enough yellow Russian cheese for a month.

Underneath the gray skies, we speed past ominous, jet-black fields. At first, I can't figure out what they are. But then, I see—they're sunflowers. Thousands of them. Imagine how pretty they must have looked when they were still alive, cheery and yellow, following the daily course of the sun. And look at them now. Black-faced and drooping, flanking the road like dead troops.

Is that 9,160 of them? Because that's how many casualties the UN counted in its latest

report on eastern Ukraine.

Artem swerves right and stops at the border. We take our backpacks and walk past a line of idling, muddy cars toward the checkpoint. I'm clutching my red Russian passport in one hand and a plastic folder with birth certificates of my grandmother, my father, and me. Proving the lineage. Proving why I'm entering the DPR, a place that remains internationally unrecognized, even by Russia.

In a small brownish building, a crowd of plump middle-aged women wait by their duffle bags, stuffed to the brim with things for sale. Nervously, I approach Russia's passport control kiosk, but the silent lady officer inside just takes my passport, leafs through it and gives it back. No questions. No stamps.

We make our way toward DPR's side. It's gray, misty, and smells of diesel. We round a huge unmarked eighteen-wheeler and behind it come face to face with enormous English red letters, "duty free," painted on a one-story white building.

Inside *duty free* is an alternate universe of Lindt chocolates, Calvin Klein eau du toilette, Marlboro cigarettes, and Muzak. Everything is clean and orderly, as if we've been transported to an airport somewhere in Madrid or maybe Dubai.

Back outside, a dirt path leads us under an old road sign for Ukraine that swings in the wind and then past a large fox hole covered with camouflage netting.

I don't know what to expect from this self-proclaimed republic, so as we approach DPR's checkpoint, I prepare a moving speech about my grandmother's birthday, her stroke, and how I haven't seen her in three years...

But the young female officer with DPR flags on her epaulettes opens my passport, closes it, and hands it back. No questions. No stamps.

Is this even a border?

Inside the DPR, we're greeted by a big red, blue, and black flag with a double-headed eagle eerily similar to the one on the Russian flag. It declares Donetsk People's Republic in three languages: Russian, Ukrainian, and English (the last two, evidently, meant for citizens of countries who can't enter the DPR without a special permit).

On our right is a long line of cheap, old cars waiting to leave DPR. They will be here for seven hours like the taxi operator predicted.

On our left is a wooden booth in the middle of a field with a paper sign that reads "Toilet. 10 rubles." Inside, for those who dare, is a hole in the ground. Welcome to the Donetsk People's Republic, I think. Two and a half years and this is what you get—a shit hole. Literally.

We find a silver Passat and its owner, a bulky man named Yuri who will take us home

to Donetsk. Yuri tells us he's been driving people like us for three months but only on this side of the border.

"I need to get Russian insurance to make both sides of the trip," he explains as we drive past empty fields that look no different from the ones we just left back in Russia. "But it costs sixteen thousand rubles. For us here, that's a crazy price."

It's drizzling again. We pass an empty cement building with broken windows. It's hard to tell if that's from the war or from abandonment. We turn right toward a crumbling village where several babushki wrapped in shawls are selling grapes and tomatoes under the light rain. On the corner, perched on a granite podium meant for proud monuments, is a big white box truck with a Russian flag and huge red inscription: *Humanitarian aid from the Russian Federation.*

The truck sculpture makes a statement against the media and investigators from the West that accuse Russia of transporting weapons for DPR rebels under the guise of flour and canned peas.

As we leave the village and approach Donetsk, I realize DPR's public relations department must be partial to the Soviet-era aplomb. A giant poster over the road depicts three smiling women extending a bouquet of red roses and underneath them, in red, "Happy Miner's Day!"

The next poster has a soldier lifting an ecstatic child. Underneath, in block letters, "Happy Donbass Liberation Day!"

The faces, the fonts, the gestures, all of it stinks of Soviet propaganda posters that in the rest of the world have become ironic fridge magnets. But not here. Here, in DPR, they are dead serious.

We drive through the center of the city. DPR flags crown everything—drug stores, bus stops, closed kebab stands. There are people on the streets, but few of them are younger than fifty. Yuri turns into the familiar courtyard and drops us in front of our grandmother's apartment building. The gray concrete nine-story building, one of the tallest here, looks unchanged except for the black "Shelter" sign with an arrow near the entrance. Inside, it smells the same too—a little musty, a little forgotten.

We go up to the top floor and ring the doorbell. Aunt Vita opens. Her short black hair is all white. No time for hair dye. No point either. With grandma in constant need of assistance, she barely leaves the house.

The kitchen looks exactly as it always did—a small white table with a bread basket in the middle. Plants on the window sill. A pot of fresh cabbage rolls for my brother and me.

I walk through the hallway with the mustard-colored wallpaper that I know so well.

My grandmother's old geology books and rock collection are in the same spot as always, on the shelf behind the sliding glass. I turn left and open the door to the living room where a year ago I saw shelling on Skype.

This is grandmother's room now. She is in bed, which she never leaves. I kiss her on her smooth, pink cheek and explain who I am. She can barely see now and the stroke has muddled her once-brilliant professor mind, so it takes her a while to recognize me. But eventually, she makes sense of her American granddaughter sneaking into DPR and sits me down for the interview: where do you work now, what does your husband do, how is your mother? Though she has a hard time getting the words out, the interview is eerily similar to how things used to be. Before the stroke. Before DPR.

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It gets dark outside, and my brother and I decide to venture out. Donetsk is under martial law, so we only have an hour and a half before the eleven p.m. curfew. But we're curious. We want to see if there is still life out there.

My brother knows a couple of bars that have remained open in the center. We head to the one next to the Little Star Movie Theater, where we used to watch cartoons when we were kids.

There are few cars on the road and even fewer lit up windows. It feels like three a.m., not nine thirty p.m. We pass what used to be a chic clothing store that's now boarded up. Across the street, a huge new hotel towers above the shorter residential buildings. Its doors are barricaded, its windows dark.

We reach the bar. On the entrance door is a poster with a crossed-out machine gun. When the conflict began, pro-Russian rebels carried their guns into bars, stores, and buses. Then the locals began to grumble and put up signs like these.

We walk downstairs and enter a cozy bar with plush cushions and romantic lighting. It used to be a popular hangout for the film-making crowd, but now we're the only customers. The pale young waiter brings us cherry-infused vodka, and we ask him if they still host film events. He shakes his head.

"Not enough people," he says apologetically.

We pay—in Russian rubles—and head to the next bar, hoping to find more of a crowd. On the way, the city is quiet. We pass a cement fence where someone scribbled "Putin + people = order." Then, a former international bank branch with a turned-off ATM machine.

DPR has its own central bank now. It doesn't have its own currency or interest rates,

so the only thing you can do with it is put the money in and take it back out.

"Which is not unlike a mattress," Aunt Vita quipped earlier.

There is also a DPR-sanctioned post office with the same fate—the only people you can send letters to are those in the next neighborhood.

It's ten p.m. when we reach the second bar, hidden in the basement of a dark residential building. On the way, we've kept count of pedestrians. Six. In the dead center of the city.

When we walk in, the young female bartender is wiping the counter while her two friends smoke and wait.

"Sorry guys, we're closed," she says.

"Just one drink," says my brother. "We came all the way from Moscow."

"I can't, I'm sorry," she says. "We're not allowed to serve after ten."

"C'mon, do we look like police?" my brother insists.

She looks us over. Then smiles.

"Alright, one drink, but make it quick. I gotta get home before curfew."

She pours us a blue and white shot of something sweet and lemony and tells us about the events they host—poetry slam night, standup comedy, some concerts.

"We try to do something every week, but we can't always get a crowd," she explains as she puts away the bottles and packs her purse.

We get up to go.

"Next time, visit us earlier," she says as we walk out. "Everything is dead here by nine p.m."

It's ten thirty p.m. now, and the main throughway of Donetsk is completely empty. No people, no cars. We walk by a church with a tall golden spire, the opera theater, the university where grandmother once taught. They look the same as always. The empty streets are quiet, surreal, and safe. It's darker, yes, but not in a threatening kind of way. It's just a little sleepier than normal.

The sidewalk is flanked by manicured flower beds. The people here are obsessed with flowers. I remember how the city crew used to plant flowers in the shape of popular Soviet cartoon characters when I was a kid.

Warmed up by alcohol, we giggle a little and reminisce.

"I went to school with the guy that owns that last bar," my brother says. "He was a handsome guy, so the salesgirls would always give him free vodka bottles, and he'd pass them to us. I wonder if he'd recog—"

BOOM. An explosion covers my brother's last word. We freeze. I clutch his elbow.

BOOM.

"That sure didn't sound like a pipe fell, did it?" he says, holding my hand and forcing a smile. "C'mon, let's get you home."

We walk faster into the darkening night.

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The next morning, my brother, aunt, and I take a cab to the cemetery to visit Grandpa. As we drive, I wonder what he, a World War II veteran, would think of all this.

The cab takes us through the cemetery's gate, where Aunt Vita points out a piece of a missile stuck in the dirt. Last year, after many of the graves here were damaged in a shoot-out, everyone became outraged. Many who believed in DPR's anti-Ukrainian propaganda blamed "those heartless Ukrainian fascists." My aunt blamed "those pro-Russian DPR morons."

Yet no one knows who is shooting at whom. The Ukrainian news channel says one thing. The new DPR channel says the opposite. The Russian news supports the latter. Informational war divides the city, divides friends, divides families. If you want to avoid arguments, you have to avoid politics altogether. Instead, you simply say "they."

"*They* hit a nine-story apartment building near where we live," says the taxi driver on our way back. "Then, they started shelling the bazaar where my wife worked. I managed to get her in time, but a shell hit her friend at the next stall, and she was scorched on the spot. Afterward, we moved to a different neighborhood, but they seem to follow us around. Right after we moved, there was an explosion near our building, and in the morning, my car was covered by broken window glass from the apartment above."

Aunt Vita is used to hearing stories like this, so she makes a joke.

"Whatever you do, don't move near us."

He chuckles.

"Fair enough. Maybe I'm the cause of all this, eh?"

He turns the corner, and I see two burned one-story buildings on my left.

"What are those?" I ask.

"That's when they 'accidentally' hit two stores," my aunt explains.

"Yes, *they* always say it's accidental," chimes the driver.

Everyone feels things are about to get political and allegiances would have to be revealed, so the conversation halts there. Instead, we watch the streets in silence.

That evening, we celebrate grandmother's birthday. We tell jokes. We have cherry brandy and honeycake. And we hear no booms.

But the next morning, my uncle comes into the kitchen where my aunt and I are frying blintzes and asks if we heard the shelling the night before.

"What do you mean shelling? It was all quiet," I say, confused as the dough bubbles unattended on the pan.

"They were shooting a little, during the night. It was far away, so you must have slept through it," he says.

"How could I?"

"Happens all the time," says Aunt Vita. "At first, every time we heard that awful noise I thought my heart would explode. We were in such a panic that we even built a shelter in the backyard. But eventually, we just started sleeping through it."

I flip the blintz. Then, I hear her voice cracking behind me.

"That's the worst part—that we've gotten used to this," she says, tears in her eyes. "Everyone has. That's why I don't think I will live to see the end of this war."

"But you're only sixty-five, auntie," I rebut as cheerfully as I can muster. "Of course you will. You got another thirty years in you, just look at grandma."

It's a lie. When I called from California, I was certain this senseless civil war wouldn't drag on for long. But now, I see that this war has rooted itself in the crevices of homes and souls. Like pesky, daily mold, it has become a part of this place.

I remember when grandmother used to tell me stories about Kiev in World War II. I always asked her to explain how life could go on under occupation, and she'd tell me how gradually the shop signs changed to German, how you got used to seeing soldiers on the streets, how if you wanted to avoid them you'd find a new route to work. But no matter how many times she'd explain, I couldn't imagine it. How could you keep on walking, even if on a different route, when your city was no longer your city?

Now, I know. War changes things and it doesn't. People still live with it. They live *in it* somehow. They water the plants on the window sill. They make cabbage rolls. They learn not to share their opinions on the street. And they get used to the sound of the nightly shelling outside like they get used to everything else.