

Kvitka

The Ukraine Girl Who Inspired a Nation

A short story by Réal Laplaine

Dedicated to the brave people of Ukraine.

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On the cusp of her nineteenth birthday, a big day for Kvitka, living in Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, was the day when the man she loved would ask her the most important question of her life.

Childhood friends, she had loved him then, and every day since.

As the years passed, transforming them from children to teens, and now, adulthood, she had waited patiently, hopefully, dreamily, for the day he would ask for her hand – and if she had read all the signs right, the nuances of his body language and the subtleties of his language, she was certain that his latest message on her phone, to meet him for lunch at the Maxim Central Park, was his chosen time and place.

Her heart pounded so fast and hard that it echoed in her ears.

Riding her scooter from home, she swung past the Kharkiv Zoo and University, and headed straight for the park.

Finding Alexei there, where thousands strolled or partook in its amusement, was not an effort at all. It was as if they were cloned, their minds and their senses working in tandem, two beings connected by a synergy, a Universal force, one she liked to think was love, but in fact, was even more quintessential.

Kvitka parked her scooter and started walking along the main path, her senses absorbing it all, the sound of children's laughter, the music, the splash of water coursing in a nearby fountain, the warm touch of the sun and the gentle caress of the breeze.

Of course, she knew exactly where to find him, by the cable car ride, one of their favorite meeting spots, and one that stretched across the park with a birds-eye-view of the city itself.

A smile, as wide as could be, breached her face as Alexei stood up from a nearby bench.

"You found me."

"I could find you in a crowd of millions," she said.

"I am sure of that," he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips against hers.

"So," he began as he took her hand and led her to first available cable car, "shall we?"

Once they were rolling high above the park, Alexei turned to her, his eyes were deep with the love he felt, but his body was tense, and his lips quivered ever so slightly.

Her breathing came faster as her grip tightened on his hand.

For her, this very moment was the apex of years of dreaming, waiting, anticipating. On the surface, she appeared calm, but inside, she could barely repress her trembling.

He smiled as his eyes drifted momentarily.

"I rehearsed this a million times in my head, and now," he shrugged, "I can't remember any of it."

"I don't care how you say it, just that you do?" she lightly appealed.

Alexei drew a deep breath and exhaled.

"You know what I want to say – you've always been able to second guess me."

"True, but this time, the words must come from you," she smiled, a perfect smile that accentuated her beautiful face, its soft creamy skin, chestnut eyes, and

hair as golden as the sunflower, the symbol of their nation; in fact, her very name stood for *flower* in Ukrainian.

He touched a finger on her cheek.

“Kvitka, my flower, will you marry me?”

Whatever façade she had carefully erected to endure the moment, vanished as quickly as the ticking of a second hand on a clock.

Tears filled her eyes and skidded down her cheeks as her lips quivered uncontrollably. She had no power to speak – as years of repressed excitement took hold.

Their lips pressed together, the consummation of their solidarity, not only as lifelong friends, but as soul mates.

Alexei’s phone buzzed, interrupting the moment.

He glanced at the screen, his aspect suddenly morphing from the happiest possible, to the grimmest of looks.

“What is it?”

He looked up at her with dread.

“The Russians – they have invaded us.”



It had been weeks since the invasion, during which time Alexei had been called into immediate military service before they could consummate the marriage with an official ceremony.

Before he reported, they had met, briefly, under a bridge near her home.

Tears pooled in her eyes as she felt her very soul being wrenched apart.

Alexei, wearing his military uniform, handsome as always, pressed a warm hand to her cheek. His eyes were firm with the resolute duty that faced him, and an undercurrent of hate for the invaders that now fueled a passion to protect his country. “You must stay strong my little flower. We must push these bastards from our land.”

Her cheeks trembled, “I know,” she said as tears continued to stream from her eyes, “I just...”

Alexei placed a finger to her soft lips. “Say no more. We will meet again – it is our way.” He smiled as he placed a kiss to her lips and then disappeared.



In the weeks that followed, Kvitka stayed home, with her mother and two younger siblings. Her father had passed away a year before, a disease that had stolen his life well before his time.

Her mother tried to act like nothing bad would come of the invasion, trying desperately to console the fears of her two younger children, while Kvitka spent every waking hour watching news, staring at her phone, tracking the advance of the invaders.

Occasionally they would hear gunfire in the distance, and the explosive concussion of bombs – but nothing came close to their small community – not yet at least.

“Kvitka,” her mother prodded her from the doorway of her room, where Kvitka sat on her bed, her eyes locked on the phone, “you must stop this. Staring at that thing will not change what is happening out there.”

Kvitka’s eyes slowly rose to meet her mother’s.

“You are right, maty,” she said as she slipped from her bed, gathered a backpack, and started filling it with articles of clothing and things.

“What are you doing?” demanded her mother.

“I am going out there. I am going to find Alexei.”

Her mother’s head rocked back and forth with a look of consternation in her eyes.

“No, you are not. There are Russian soldiers out there, you could die.”

Kvitka looked up at her.

“I would rather die than live in this world without him,” she firmly declared and resumed packing.

They continued to argue, even as Kvitka hugged her younger brother and sister, whispering words of solace in their ears, promising to return, and then finally, stepping up to her mother, who by now was on the verge of tears.

“I love you, maty, but I will do this, I must,” she said as she gripped her mother’s hands in hers and pressed a kiss to her cheek.



The streets of Kharkiv were desolate.

A once thriving city of over one and a half million people, felt like a tomb.

In truth, it had been deserted, as hundreds of thousands had fled to avoid the prospects of living under Russian rule.

And while she caught sight of prying eyes here and there, those who fearfully watched the streets from their darkened apartments, most were now just desolate abodes, the empty legacy of those who had fled, leaving the streets littered with the signs of desperate flight for freedom from the oppressors now advancing on the city.

It was a dystopian scene, an empty feeling of abandonment, and yet, oddly, she felt no fear.

As she walked the streets, heading toward the city center, toward, what she knew was the scene of a recent conflict, she reminded herself that the man she loved more than anything, more than anyone, was out there fighting for her freedom – and that drove her, pushing her to vanquish her trepidation.

Pressing forward, she heard the shuddering booms of blasts in the distance, and the rising column of black smoke heralding yet another strike by the Russian invaders.

She knew nothing of war or weapons or the like – she had prepared herself for another life at the University of Kharkiv which now loomed in the distance, where she would learn the skills needed to enter the field of science and research – learning, she hoped, about new frontiers, new spectrums yet untouched.

As she turned a corner, the air was scorched by the sound of shots – a sharp pinging which echoed off the buildings and cut into her ear, reminding her that men were at the other end of those bullets.

Her heart pounded harder, and a sense of desperation filled her as the uncontrollable thoughts about Alexei filled her head.

Was he okay?

Would he survive?

Would they ever see one another again?

All the darkest of visions cascaded down on her like heavy rain falling from the sky.

Vanquishing the morbid thoughts, she waited as silence returned, and then stepped out onto the street.

Ahead, she saw several people, with young children trailing behind, running across the road, and entering a vehicle. As they sped by, she glimpsed their faces, etched with fear, the sheer visceral look of terror.

Resuming her course, she kept her eye trained on the University building ahead, a massive structure and monument in the city center, one of the oldest institutions in all of eastern Europe.

Finally, arriving at the large square, her eyes momentarily feasted on the University. It was a symbol of national solidarity and permanence, the foundations of which were first laid in 1804, and which had survived the brutality of the Communist regime, the old USSR, and now stood as center of learning and freedom for Ukraine nation.

A strange sound suddenly filled the air, one that was cutting and abrasive to her ear, and within seconds, a Russian missile impacted her beloved University, decimating an entire facade, sending a thousand fragments exploding outward with a thundering and brutal concussion that shook her to her very core.

A surrealistic and dystopian horror filled her as she watched an entire wall crumble to the ground and as black smoke and flames suddenly spewed upward like the tongue of a bestial creature coming up from the underworld.

For the first time since the invasion, Kvitka felt the onus of war.

Forcing her eyes from the debacle and repressing the urge to cry, she turned and ran further down the street, wondering if at any moment another Russian missile would strike, but nothing came, only the silence in the wake of senseless destruction and the distant sound of fire trucks approaching as firefighters, relentless heroes, came to stop the inferno from destroying what remained.

More determined than ever, a combination, now, of her love for the man she sought, and a growing hatred for the invaders who blighted her country, she hastened her pace.

Gunfire ahead was the only compass she had, a cognitive sense that somewhere, ahead, was Alexei. Just like she had found him in the park, and countless times before in crowded places, she would find him again.



The clatter of weapons had drawn Kvitka down a narrow street with vintage and aged buildings on each side, and there, for the first time, she saw Ukrainian soldiers hunkered down behind a car.

The explosive concussion of semi-automatic weapons filled her ears with a painful discordance.

Standing transfixed behind a tree, she watched as they took turns, stood, and fired and then ducked yet again for safety.

Slugs tore into the car behind which they hid – a fierce and brutal pounding, heralding the fate of any soldier who got in their way.

A surrealistic sense of dread came over her as she watched on.

Something about one of the soldiers caught her eye.

His stance, his bearing, the subtleties of his movements – and something else, a feeling.

Not that his uniform or anything about him stood out, but she was sure, beyond a doubt, that it was Alexei.

Adrenaline pumped into her system as her heart raced and her breathing hastened.

What should she do, she wondered?

She desperately wanted to see him, touch him, look into his eyes, but to step into the scene of a battle, one he was fighting to survive, would be insane, so she waited, watching from behind that tree, when suddenly, and for no reason or provocation whatsoever, he turned to look right at her – as if he knew by some other cognitive power within, that she was there.

Alexei! her heart skipped a beat as his name whispered past her lips.

For a moment, he seemed confused, and rightly so, *why was she here, in the middle of a battle*, and then, as if reconciling the irreconcilable, he smiled at her, raised a hand, and motioned her to stay back, and then turned to fire on the Russians pounding their way ever closer.

Kvitka watched, both in abject horror and apprehension, as Alexei, poised on one knee, unleashed an assault at the enemy, when suddenly, his entire body shuddered and stood transfixed, his gun falling to the ground as his hands clasped his chest. Another shot struck him, spinning his body like a top and sending him crashing onto the pavement; his eyes trained on her as he hit the ground.

She screamed, a terrifying shriek as she stepped from behind the tree and watched as yet another Ukrainian soldier took a bullet to the head and collapsed dead.

Kvitka ran, driven by pure adrenaline and something else, some unchartered power that compelled her to reach Alexei at any cost.

Skidding to her knees, she twisted his body, so he was facing the sky and held his head in her lap. His gaze was empty, devoid of life, as a small lake of red pooled around his body.

She caressed his hair as her tears skidded down her cheeks, falling on his face, as a coldness drew over her, as if all the warmth in her had suddenly been sucked away by the moment.

She did not care anymore about anything.

The one person she had dreamed of living her life with was now gone – taken from her by thieves in military garb.



As the last soldier succumbed to the Russian assault, his semi-automatic fell from his dead hand and skidded next to Kvitka, who sat still holding Alexei's head in her lap.

Four Russian soldiers encircled the car, their weapons aimed, first, at the dead Ukrainians, and then, they trained them on Kvitka.

A chuckle emitted from one of them.

“Просто девушка,” he uttered to the others, *just a girl*.

Kvitka's gaze did not leave Alexei's face.

The Russians inspected the dead and then turned, paying her no further attention, as if she were merely a thing, and unimportant piece of local scenery.

Overwhelmed with grief, she wanted to cry endlessly.

She desperately wanted to scream out in agony – but something else was taking hold inside. Something cold and hard, something visceral.

Gently, she lowered his head to the ground, closed his eyes with a lover's touch, and leaned over and planted a kiss to his lips.

“Ya tebe lyublyu.”- *I love you*, she whispered, hoping that wherever he went, her words would follow.

As she stood, she watched the four soldiers slowly retreating, as if they were savoring their victory with the sound of their coarse laughter echoing in her ears.

At her feet she saw the weapon for the first time.

Bending down, she picked it up, feeling the cold hard touch of metal and the splash of blood on its grip.

Kvitka stepped from behind the bullet-ridden vehicle and raised the weapon, heavy as it was, and placed a finger to the trigger.

“Privet!” she yelled in Russian.

The soldiers turned and for a moment their minds did not connect with the scene their eyes revealed, as a young woman, wearing civilian clothes, a woman with a gentle and innocent face, stood there, not more than five meters away, with a weapon trained their way.

One of them, a cigarette dangling from his lip, chuckled as he pointed at her, but it was the last sound he would ever make as Kvitka pressed the trigger and sent all four men to their deaths before they could return fire.



Dropping the weapon, she returned to Alexei.

Kneeling down next to him, her grief no less, but now submerged beneath something else, she whispered into his ear.

“I sent them to hell, my love, and more will follow.”

Hearing a sound, she clutched the weapon once again and turned to see a small group of people standing nearby.

A young man approached.

“We saw what you did, you were brave.”

She was silent for a time as her mind reconciled the moment.

“It wasn’t bravery, it was something else.”

He shrugged. *“Doesn’t matter what it was, you fought back.”*

Kvitka stood and eyed the group, several young women, and men, no older than herself.

“It’s our home – we must fight back.”

“But how?” asked a woman.

Kvitka nodded to the four bodies in the distance. *“Take their weapons and ammunition – all of it,”* she commanded.



In the months that followed, Kvitka's Freedom Fighters, the KFF, as they came to be known, grew in number from a small ragtag group to thousands of organized civilians, people who fought with a passion that the Russian military could never match as they were everywhere and nowhere – using the cities and towns which they knew better than anyone to hide their movements and to plan their assaults against the Russians.

The Freedom Fighters quickly gained notoriety within the Russian ranks, who, targeting Ukrainian soldiers, were not prepared for an organized assault from armed civilians in nearly every town and city – in fact, never expecting such resistance because Vladimir Putin had propagandized that the Ukraine people were living under an oppressive Nazi regime and would welcome their Russian brothers, and to their dismay, the exact opposite was true.

As word got out throughout Ukraine and the world, Kvitka became a symbol for national resistance – a movement, along with Ukraine's valiant military, that would eventually force Russia to concede to the fact that Ukraine would never again exist under the Russian flag – and with that, in time, the Russian forces would be forced to retreat back to Russia where they belonged.

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*When a vigilante group in Canada, calling themselves the **9th Divinity**, declares war on Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un (North Korea), world powers are shocked as they penetrate both the Kremlin and North Korean defenses, threatening to summarily end both dictatorships. Canada's top anti-terrorist team, headed by Keeno McCole, is called into play to rein in the group before the dictators resort to playing their ace cards, but things do not go as planned, and the crisis that mounts will test Keeno's team as they face their greatest challenge ever, stopping global nuclear war.*

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