

## **Vasilisa oder Vasi: One Story of the Ukrainian Refugee**

She was fourteen when it all started. Plans were cancelling themselves one by one. Past peaceful life suddenly ceased making any sense. За що, warum, why, pourquoi? She asked herself this question hundreds of times later, and the answer could not find her wherever she was, thousands of kilometres away from the place she used to call home.

...She could smell tension in the air. It was a regular day of ordinary February. The bus took her to the city quay that was quite empty on the sunny weekend. River looked her straight in the eyes, as calm as always. Seagulls delivered their usual news to everyone across the shore near the dam. “Vasya!” her best friend met her with a usual smile and hug, but the anxiety was there. They talked about something unimportant before she found the courage to confess. “I am going to Israel with my mom soon. She’ll have a business trip”, Vasilisa said. They both knew it was a lie.

Everyone feared the invasion those days. People discussed it in their kitchens, scrolled their social media feeds with heated debates, and listened to TV news or old-fashioned radio. When Vasilisa went to the barbershop, even her hairdresser talked about the possible beginning of the war the whole time she was getting her haircut. All the signs clearly indicated that having a backup plan was necessary.

The sun's rays scratched the skin, not giving any warmth. They were going in circles through the streets of the so-familiar district in their home city. “I want to celebrate my eighteenth birthday on a yacht”, her friend shared plans for summer. She tried to stay optimistic and banish gloomy thoughts. It all seemed useless to Vasilisa. “If the war won’t start by that time”, she gave a moody remark. She was right. It was the last time they saw each other in person for a long time. Drastic changes and

tragedies were approaching their country, and two girls staying on the quay in the middle of the ordinary February could not fix anything.

In less than a week, the invasion began. Explosions appeared all across the country. Panic spread like a wildfire. All the flights were cancelled, and their tickets to Israel were useless. Vasilisa felt like she had become more mature in just a day. She and her family met the war in Lviv. She, her mother, grandmother and Bella, a cute brown badger dog, tried to fit in the small one-bedroom apartment, nothing like their spacious three-bedroom flat back in the southeast. She tried to occupy herself at least somehow. She bought thirteen packs of quick noodles, the biggest pack of crab chips she could find and tried to stay sane while watching some movie. She still was a teenager, after all. The western part of the country was relatively safe, but no one could predict what would happen next. They couldn't stay in Lviv for long.

After discussions and news tracking, they hurriedly packed the humble part of their things that they could take with them and went off into the unknown. The road to Poland was long and exhausting. The car line on the way to the border seemed endless. She looked out the window and whimpered. She couldn't leave the car in case the line would start moving. Someone got impatient and shot with a gun. She instinctively ducked in the backseat. Another car with the label "children" passed them. She wasn't a child anymore, and now she felt it as sharply as never before.

Lublin was a complete fog. She and the whole world were a fog for her because Ukraine drowned in the orange and red colours of fire and blood every single day since the damned or doomed February the 24th. She walked the dog – and didn't see the architecture around her. It didn't matter. She almost didn't go anywhere. Their family tried to go to a museum, but she couldn't concentrate on the exhibits.

Usually, she loved museums, but all her hobbies and interests seemed to mean nothing in this fog of the war just across the border of the country where she escaped.

She felt lost and guilty, and nothing could possibly fix it, except for time and perhaps some psychologist. Later, the brightest detail she recalled from that one month in Lublin was a strawberry jam bought in “Żabka”, which meant “frog”, a regular Polish grocery store with a bright green label at the front. They tried to figure out where to go next. The choice was between Austria and Germany where they had some friends who could host them for some time. Austria won, and her mother went there first to manage everything before coming back for Vasya, her grandmother and their beloved Bella.

Innsbruck became their new shelter. She had to go to the local school soon after their arrival. The road to the school took her one hour on the train one way. It was going through the villages and picturesque mountain hills. After school, she had to wait for the train for a long time. Her rare companions on the station were village inhabitants with their cows. Every time she felt lonely or bored, she called her friend. What would she do without technology? She imagined herself writing long letters describing mountain hills covered in snow and their small room in the hotel where their family had to stay. She nervously smiled. The calls were much better.

A new school routine was unusual. Every day there were a couple of social hours to talk to classmates. Her German simply wasn't good enough for this. She felt separated. How was she supposed to socialize? For the first two weeks, she just listened. Listening was easy. Talking was difficult. Writing was the worst. She was dyslexic and predictably made mistakes even in her native language. She had to

read slowly, gathering letters into words, words into sentences, and sentences into chunks of new information.

Before the war, Vasilisa studied at home at her own pace and came to school mostly to write tests. Now she had to come to class six times per week, sit there and, at first, at least pretend that she understood something. However, she was a good language learner and gradually adjusted to the new routine. The lessons were interesting. The teachers were nice to her. Her new classmates seemed extremely immature. “They act as if they were nine, not fourteen or fifteen”, she often complained. Her name became a problem, too. It was difficult to pronounce, so she had to get herself a nickname. “Va-asi,” someone loudly called. In Ukrainian, it was a plural for her nickname. “Now there are two of me,” Vasya chuckled, “apparently, I've got a personality split”.

When she stayed alone, she treasured memories of her past life, picking them like beads in the palm of her hand. They lived close to the center of the city, in its historical heart. Their apartment was located in a five-storey house in the socialist classicism style. Every day she turned into the arch from the busy avenue to enter the quiet courtyard, dialled familiar numbers on the buzzer and quickly climbed the stairs to the very top of the building. Bella always met her at the door, joyful and enthusiastic. The interior was performed mostly in white and beige colours. It was noticeable from the first glance that the creative type of family lived there. The unusual paintings, some of them drawn by Vasilisa herself, clung to the walls. The piano stood in one corner and the cello in the other.

They often invited guests, especially for holidays. The friends of their family came over with presents and smiles, and the celebration began. The apartment was filled with conversations, laughs and smells of great festive meals that the three of them

cooked together. They sang songs, put on mini-performances and clinked glasses. Vasya always loved this warm atmosphere where there was no place for worry, fight or grief.

Then Vasya closed her eyes and pictured her room. It was cozy, with the sliding wardrobe, large sofa, wooden desk and a rocking chair bought in the antique store. She decorated the central wall with all the possible posters, pictures and drawings. Her soul demanded self-expression. Her home smelled like her mother's perfume. Her mother worked a lot and often moved from one business trip to another. It made their moments together even more special. They talked about life, about her father who died when she was six, about art and modern shows. They always had what to talk about, being serious or simply joking around. When her mother was in the city, she took her to business meetings in the restaurants. Vasya knew how to distinguish a good restaurant from a bad one. She also knew that life was complicated, and sometimes the quality of the dining place didn't matter as much.

What mattered in her new temporary Austrian reality was news back from home. She tried to stay away from videos and images, but she couldn't allow herself to escape the basic facts. When *it* happened, she got to know almost immediately. People called her mother one by one. A couple of friends texted Vasilisa herself. "How are you?". She wasn't well. She turned off her phone and simply lay in her bed staring at the ceiling. There was a massive attack on the city center of her district. The historical building in front of their house was split into two overnight. It was close, extremely close, and she couldn't make herself stop imagining what would be if a missile took a slightly different direction.

Only one window was shattered in their apartment because someone poorly taped it over. Still, she recalled how she stood on the bus station in front of that now-

damaged building, passed it on her way from the music school, or simply saw it outside her window, and felt strangely numb. Was it the building or was she damaged? Was it her friend's apartment, who lived a couple of blocks from her, being destroyed during that horrible night, or her memories of their time together? "It is unfair," Vasilisa thought. She waited for tears, but they didn't come.

In her recent past, music always healed her. Vasya could recall her childhood grief of her father's loss and put it into the minor notes of the piece. She could think of the happy moments with her loved ones, and flawlessly play optimistic etudes. The absence of music made her upset. In Ukraine, she studied at the music school, played three instruments and participated in the folk music orchestra. She used to be the first domra in that orchestra. All of this was missing in Innsbruck. She took her domra, a Slavic folk string instrument, with her. It was an old instrument, with a shabby instrument's body. It was easy to tell from its look that it went through a lot, almost like her. They matched.

Strangely, she couldn't force herself to play it. Too many memories tied her with this instrument, a property of music school. Vasilisa recalled long hours spent on the rehearsals. She could almost hear the applause during their performances. She bonded with other members of the orchestra. They even had their own rituals and inner jokes. Music meant a lot to her. Vasya wanted to become a musician and go to the music college after the ninth grade. Now it was impossible. Life demanded backup plans again and again.

But life wasn't so bad, after all. They had some school tours. One of them was to Eisenstadt. The most exciting place for her was Schloss Esterházy. They touched on this royal family's history during the music literature lessons. Haydn, his "Farewell Symphony", classical music and the Classical period... She looked at the

castle's interior and exhibits and recalled those lessons where they talked about composers, and listened to their music pieces and endless stories from their lives. Those were warm memories that connected her with the place she called home in the distance. The home was unsafe now despite its core essence of safety, soothingness and comfort. Her nostalgic thoughts were disrupted. It was the security who found her. She misunderstood the closing time (German numbers were never easy), and the group almost left without her. She joked later that it would be nice to stay and live in Esterházy's Schloss. It sounded like a perfect life.

One time she and her mother went to the refugee camp to donate some of their clothing. It was a simple two-storey building with many small rooms and no doors. There they met other Ukrainians. A memorable detail for her was that some of those Ukrainians had iPhones, an equivalent of "wealth" in Ukraine for many people. For her, having an iPhone herself, to meeting such people in the refugee camp was an indicator of wrongness. People ran from the war, not from poverty. Back home, those refugees had everything: apartments, cars, nice jobs... And, suddenly, it all didn't matter. It was scary, she thought to herself and shivered. Everything could change in a moment. Everything was fragile. She had to be grateful for what she had. Vasilisa felt like she didn't have any right to complain, but she was just a teenager. What could she do? She couldn't help those people. She couldn't stop the war.

After three months flew by, there was a strange feeling that, after all, she liked this place. Mountains and cows felt comforting enough. She got a friend, a local girl whose parents hosted them. They went to school together. And school was good enough, too. But she knew: if she stayed, there would not be much further ahead waiting for her. What kind of perspectives would their family have here, with her and her mother not knowing the language? How would her mother find a job? No,

there was no way that Austria would become her home from home. Before the war, they planned to move to the US. Her mother was going to marry an American. Vasya couldn't tell anyone, even her best friend. It was their family secret, just in case plans wouldn't work out that way. And they didn't.

Anyway, sooner or later, she had to leave Austria and begin a new life overseas. That life was, indeed, brand-new and unusual, but not perfect in the overmath. Their family moved to a small town in America. It started and ended with the same vowel as Austria, and it was perhaps the only thing that these two countries had in common. At least that was how Vasya perceived it. Her new story was full of sun, palm trees, tornados and classmates' bullying. Her language struggles added to the long list of descriptions, together with the long study hours, little crocodiles in the pool and the beach in the half-an-hour drive from the house. Vasilisa's story got better over time, after one year in the false American dream. That was a whole different story which would be told by someone else, but not me.

Word count 2,530