

Dreams of Freedom

by Natalie Heimdal

This was the beginning of a new era. An era of peace and prosperity. The Great War had just ended. It was a war like no other. I'm talking about the Russo-Ukrainian feud. This one had tension from before I was born. I'm sixteen now so it's tension from about seventy years before. It all started at the end of World War Two, specifically when Russia started to disagree. My country was occupied during that war so we didn't get much of a say in what happened. When the war ended my family continued life as normal. Of course there were some differences, like they rationed food a little more and were a little weary about travelling to strange places. Other than that my family had lived a pretty calm life. We've enjoyed it too. That all changed in 2013. I'm going to tell you a story of how my family survived the horrors war tends to provide.

I lived in Kyiv in western Ukraine. My family consisted of three brothers and one sister. My youngest sibling is Izabella; she was one. Ivan and Ben are twins and were three. After them came me. I was five or six and my name is Nina; it means dreamer and that is exactly what I am. I like to dream that everybody is capable of sharing and being kind. My older brother Nick doesn't think like that. He was eight and thought he was a grown-up. My parents are Alice and Artem Malnyk.

The seven of us lived comfortably in a six story apartment complex. My siblings and I went to school and all of that. I met my best friend, Natasha, at school. We did everything together. When I had my sixth birthday she was in attendance and that had to be my favourite birthday. Ivan led me into our living room with a blindfold on so I couldn't see anything. I sat down on the couch and a heavy box was put onto my lap. My blindfold was removed and the box wiggled. What an odd present, I remember thinking. It was wrapped in glittery, mauve paper with holes in the lid. A baby blue

ribbon was stuck to the top of it. I placed the sticky bow onto Ivan's forehead. The toddler thought that that was the silliest thing ever. Carefully, I took off the lid and out bounced a puppy. He had silky, caramel coloured fur and rippled, giant, droopy ears. I believe my mother said something about a cocker spaniel. It didn't matter what breed or colour my dog was, as long as he was mine.

I named my pooch Eiffel after the Eiffel Tower. I had once heard a story about France and I'd wanted to see the tower since. My brothers and sister'd love playing with Eiffel but never took him out for walks. He would only ever go out for walks with me because I knew his favourite places to go. We often frequented the fountain near our house as he loved to chase away the pigeons. Secretly, I am no fan of those birds. People have no idea how many diseases those beasts can have.

One day I was out for a walk with Natasha and Eiffel when I noticed a poster that hadn't been there the day before. *Protest Against New Decisions In Government*. It was printed on bright blue paper so it stood out against the snow and grey bricks. Natasha hadn't noticed the poster so I tried to pretend I hadn't either. But with my curious mind always focused on something, that was virtually impossible. I hadn't seen any new changes lately. Sometimes my relatives would come over and when they thought we were asleep, I heard whispers about some place called Russia. I knew where Russia was from school. We had a map of Ukraine and the surrounding countries. Russia was a giant place next to our small-ish country. Any country seemed dwarfed next to them.

A couple of weeks later a march happened. I had been sitting and reading in the room I shared with Iza, when Ben came barreling into the space.

"Come on Nina! Mr. Television Man is saying something," urged my small brother. He acted as if something significant was happening. I jogged to the kitchen where my

family was situated. They all sat huddled around the living room, on the edge of their seats. Iza didn't know what was happening.

"Throngs of students march against the Pro-Russian policy. They are protesting peacefully, I personally hope that they manage to change something," came a man's voice out of the colourful screen. His face showed a display of hopefulness with no sign of stress. Suspense filled the air and optimism was plastered over my father's face. As a six year old, I didn't really comprehend why people would want to protest against a Pro-Russian policy or even what a Pro-Russian Policy was. Later I learned that it meant that more things were favourable to Russia than the other places.

"Police are starting to arrive it seems. They are not as peaceful. Be careful if you are going out later, don't look too much like a student," forewarned the newsman. This was the start to a not so-normal life for me and my family.

After the incidents following the march, my family was careful when around the police. They were putting people who had marched against the new policy in jail. Almost all of my relatives were supporting the side of the protesters. Of course we couldn't say that in public but we all felt it.

A couple months later I heard something about part of Ukraine leaving to go and join Russia. Mother had heard two women in the park talking about it. Apparently the one lady had heard it from her cousin who had heard it from his friend who had heard it from her classmate. Sure, it was a lengthy list of people who could have altered the news, but it was quickly confirmed by Mother checking her phone when she got home. An article claimed that unmarked Russian military trucks had come into some southern parts of Ukraine and proclaimed it theirs. What a strange world this was. Was I really living through a world where people forgot how to share and know when to just leave people alone? It seemed so. I had learned how to do that in school in my early

years. Six year old me frowned upon whoever thought of taking someone else's toy, let alone village.

Over time things cooled down and we settled back into our usual schedule. Iza started walking and toppling everything over in arms reach. The twins began attending pre-school. Nick kept on doing his thing and I explored the world of reading just a little bit more. Reading was a way for me to leave my energetic, mixed up world. Even if it was only for a few minutes. The books I read; *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Alice in Wonderland*, were my favourite. My school had a gigantic library with endless shelves of books upon books. That place was my shelter from the outside world. There was a little nook in the corner of the library where no one ever went. Inside of the room was a little, blue velvet bench. I even engraved my name on the wooden bottom part of the bench. That was my favourite place in the world.

Natasha and I did well in school. She didn't have the passion for reading that I did, but compared to some of the other kids in our class she was a master. I credit our accomplishments in our school work to the fact that Nick used to leave his school work laying around the house. Natasha and I would try to figure something out every once in a while. I dare say we even got rather good at some things. We still learned lots in school though. My best subject was mathematics. I had lots of friends at school. Natasha was my best one though. Milly and Alekzandra were our other two friends but we didn't do too many things together out of school.

The years went by and my siblings and I grew older. It was now February 2022 and we were busy dealing with our second year covid-19. Everyone I knew was done with this virus and just wanted to move on from it. I was still a little weary about going back to our former way of life. School still went on in person. We had to wear masks but we could still have fun. One day when we were in class an announcement came over the loudspeakers.

“Can I have everybody’s attention please. This is your principal and I need you all to go home right now,” crackled the woman on the other end. My teacher sported a severely confuddled look. But either way he had to let his boss have the final word. The man ushered us through the doorway and followed himself. We were led through the hallways and out to the street. It was a cold day with clouds and breezes. Natasha fought through the piles of our classmates to stand next to me. Kids all around us were looking at their phones and shouting to each other. I couldn’t make out complete sentences, but I gathered it had something to do with an invasion and Russia. I slowly put two and two together and whipped out my own phone. There were warnings posted all over the internet. Putin has begun his invasion, Keep non-perishable foods in your cellars, Go home. What was this? Was this real? Why?

“Go home immediately, do not make any un-needed detours!” howled the principal. The people who had been watching their phones bolted off in various directions. Natasha and I ran off in the same direction with our minds filled with confusion and panic. We were just two kids who had been yelled at to run home and fill our basements with food like wintering squirrels. I arrived at my home first and Natasha kept on running.

I expected everybody would already be there but I only found my father. He led me into the basement under our apartments where all the tenants kept the stuff they didn’t have space for in their rooms. Iza and Mother were there. About twenty others were there too but I didn’t take much notice of them. I stumbled over to my sister and mother and sat down. The floor was damp and cool. It smelled of years of garden and neglect. Nick used to trick the twins and I that the cellar was haunted. A moment later Father ran down the stairs leading the twins. I inhaled a breath of relief. They spotted us and beelined straight for us. Father came over too. The only person that was missing was Nick. My brother came down to us a couple seconds later with a look of

exhaustion. His school was the one farthest away. The seven of us sat in a brew of befuddlement and shock.

This morning happened exactly like any other; I woke up after pressing snooze on my clock three times, walked to school with Natasha, and then sat through four teachers droning on about whatever subject those unlucky people were caught teaching. After that is when it went wrong. I tried to check my phone to look at the headlines once more but there was no signal. It was then that I realised that people all around me had sleeping bags, pillows, and blankets around them. Were they planning on staying overnight in this cavern?

“Mom, are we going to stay overnight here too?” I asked Mother, my voice drenched with concern and worry. I will admit to believing those stories about down in the cellar from Nick. My mother and father shared an apologetic gaze.

“I’m afraid that we are going to spend a lot of time here if all the news is true,” she whispered. It was still loud enough for Ivan and Ben to hear and look at each other with tears in their eyes. They were used to being able to laugh and play outside in the sun. Now they were supposed to be stuck in a dark and musty room. Iza looked at Mother with a look of betrayal. She acted as if she wanted her country to be invaded so her youngest daughter couldn’t spend all her time with her friends, school, and outside. At that moment Iza got booted down to my least favourite sibling. The least favourite sibling recipient was often changed so no one was it for long. It was just then that I realised that someone was missing.

“Does anyone know where Eiffel is?” I inquired. You may have thought that a dog wasn’t important in such a time of stress but my dog was extremely important to me, which is why I was so appalled at myself for forgetting him. Everyone but Iza shrugged.

“Where is Eiffel?” I urged.

My small sister hesitated for a moment before answering. "The dog is his kennel. I put him there before we came down here. I thought we were only coming down for a couple of minutes," mumbled Iza. Full of frustration I stood up and ran for the doorway. Father tried standing up to stop me, but he had Ivan on his lap. In the end it was Nick who caught me. I tried to shake him off but he held on tight. Who was my brother to try and stop me from saving my dog; a dog who was a sitting duck at the moment. I tried my best to get Nick off but he would not let go. He then started leading me back toward the rest of my family but a foot tripped him. I took that as my chance and sped off toward the exit.

When I got to the top of the stairs I stopped to catch my breath out of view from downstairs. I still had three more flights to go. The next three flights and the running I had done to get to my house from school made me realise that I should probably do a little more running. When I reached our door I swung it open and stepped in. Next to me was my parents' room and next to that was Nick's. Across from Nick's bedroom was the twin's room. Eiffel's kennel was inside there. I raced into Ivan and Ben's room. My dog was yapping away, waiting for someone to hear her pleas for help. I let him out and grabbed a toy for him. Somehow I made it down the stairs with Eiffel in hand and didn't trip.

I gingerly waded through the heaps of people in the basement. When I arrived at my family's corner. Nick evil eyed me as I sat down. I ignored him as best as I could. Believe me when I say that that was hard. Ivan crawled over and hugged me. Sure he was nine now but he could still worry about my safety and I, his.

"That was a very stupid thing you just did," started Father. "You could have gotten hurt or-," his lecture was cut short because it was just then that the bombs started dropping.

That night was one of the most nerve-racking ones I can remember. My family cowered in the corner all night. When morning came some people thought it would be safe to go outside. I had just awoken when I heard Father yelling at some people trying to open the door going outside.

“Are you crazy? There’s bound to be some chemicals in the dust out there!” shrieked Father. My great-grandfather had told us all about his life in world war two. There were unlimited amounts of stories he could tell us. One or two were about going out into the residue of bombs and getting sick. Father had been terrified about war ever since hearing his first story. This was his own war story.

We spent most of the day stuffed up inside of the cellar organising. The beds were in perfect rows within a half an hour. The food was stuffed into a corner and arranged into food groups within an hour. The extra junk from the tenants was shoved over to the side within the hour and a half after. Then after three separate quarles in between my family, we were done sorting.

“I think we can send someone outside to check about the residue. Any volunteers?” asked Father. Since all hands immediately went down he was obliged to go out there. He carefully climbed the stairs and peeked out, then he disappeared. The collective breath of the basement was held. Would we be okay to go outside now? Seconds later Father’s head poked back in.

“Will the children stay inside, the rest can come out,” he beckoned. Nick started to get up and follow the surge of other people shuffling out. Mother caught him and turned him around. Ivan, Iza and I made faces at him, Ben on the other side is a people pleaser so he tried his best to keep a straight face. As the last of the adults flowed through, some of the first ones came back conversing in low tones and shaking their heads. What was out there. I decided to wait until Nick went off to talk to some man to sneak up to the stairs and try to see what was going on. Too many people

were loitering just out of the door for my to see much, but I could hear lots of commotion and smoke rising out from some of the buildings.

“And what do you think you’re doing,” came a voice behind me. I whipped around and saw my most annoying brother standing, waiting for my excuse for sneaking over to watch when my superior, him, was denied the privilege. I thought that my tactic from earlier would suffice but it did not. When Nick realised that I was trying to ignore him, he went and tried to grab an adult. I grabbed his rough wrist and looked at him in his icy, blue eyes. I then let go and walked away.

In the weeks following the bombings school went online and we spent nights upon nights stuck in the cellar. The mysterious plumes of smoke I had seen were from Putin’s missiles hitting buildings in our city. Soldiers also started arriving in our city. Why did some leader of a vast and powerful country want to take over our country? And why did he want to do that by bombing our Ukraine? Some things I may never understand.

Natasha’s parents didn’t want her to leave the house with all this going on so we would often message and call. It was Natasha who told me that Aleksandra’s house had been hit in one of the bombings. I hadn’t really heard from Milly or Aleksandra since the last day of inperson school, but they had still been my friends. Another day she sent me a link and of course, I tapped it. The website was about a humane organisation’s plan to get Ukrainians out of Ukraine. At first I didn’t understand. As I read her message finally dawned on me; she wanted to evacuate Ukraine. I had a thought, maybe my family should too.

I went into the living room where Father was and approached him with the idea.

“Hey Dad, Natasha sent me a link about a humane organisation and their plan to evacuate Ukrainians out of here as there’s just so many bombings and fires here

now,” I explained. He took several moments to mull it over and then pronounced his verdict.

“I can see where you are coming from but I just don’t think so,” his answer was extremely disappointing. How could he say he knew where I was coming from but immediately turn me down. I may have been discouraged but I was not giving up.

“Our building could be the next one hit or the one after that,” I tried. Father just shook his head. I then realised that he was not going to budge and that I should accept defeat. Instead I drew a deep breath and walked away.

If you thought that I was about to take my advice and accept that I lost that one, you were sadly mistaken. I was busy going over Father’s head. Whenever I had a point to prove, I usually went to make a presentation. It worked four out of ten times. First I rounded up all my siblings except Nick. I decided that I would talk to him privately. The little meeting of the younger siblings took place in the twins room. If Nick was about to eavesdrop, he would be in perfect view of Mother who had recently sat down in the living room. She had a strict no sneaking policy. I sat down at Ben's desk next to the door, with Iza on the floor next to me. Ben sat on his bed, which was the one pushed up against the opposite wall. Ivan sat on his bed which was the one pushed up against the window. The meeting was ready to begin.

“I have called you all together for one reason, I want to move,” I explained. Now that I look back, I see that it may not have been the smartest way to approach them. The faces around me turned bewildered.

“Just to clear things up, I would like to move out of Ukraine.” The little voices around me started to protest but I quickly squashed their rebellion.

“I want to move because of the bombings. Natasha sent me a link describing a way to evacuate Ukraine and stay safe,” I continued. Slowly, oh so very slowly, I think

that they started seeing my point of view: stay here and run the risk of bombs and fires or move away and stay safe.

“If we are going to do anything, how about we take a vote?” suggested Ben. I agreed that that was probably the best thing to do.

“Everyone who agrees that we can’t stay here much longer raise their right hand,” commanded Ben. Everyone but Iza raised their hand. I looked at her for an explanation. My sister just looked away.

“I don’t think I can leave our home. How can you even think of abandoning our house, friends, and what about school?” Iza demanded. It was just now that I saw the irony of what was about to come out of my mouth.

“I understand that you don’t want to leave our home, but home is where we all are,” I tried to get my message across without sounding too much like a cliché. Iza saw that she was outnumbered and kept quiet.

“The next order of business would be what country,” Ivan piped up. At first I was going to say that I wanted France, but then realised that that might be a little too close to Russia for comfort. All of a sudden Iza jumped up and ran away. He stared at the empty doorway mildly shocked. Our sister returned as quickly as she had left, only this time she was holding something. Iza tiptoed across the room and spread out her parcel on the floor. It was a world map.

The four of us huddled around the piece of paper and picked out possible countries. We decided that if we were going to get Nick or our parents on board, they would need to have a say in the country. After five minutes of scouring the paper we picked out New Zealand and Iceland. Another contestant was Canada. Canada was a good country. New Zealand was about as far away from Russia as you could get and Iceland was pretty safe and there were no immediate surrounding countries. As we figured we had a good list we prepared to start our lecture.

I was going to start our presentation with the points. Iza was to wait just outside of Ben and Ivan's door until she heard me say something about which countries. After that the twins were going to bring out the map and show our parents.

Our lecture went according to plan, mostly. My plan did not include Nick standing there appalled, as if we had gone over his head. Afterwards, Mother clapped and started speaking.

"I do think that we should at least consider evacuating, every day there are mounting dangers," she confessed. Father could see clearly as the day that he had been outvoted.

"I do agree that we may as well explore the option of evacuation" he shrugged. Nick just turned and sulked back into his room. We were going to move.

A couple of weeks passed with more bombings and then you could see the humane workers arrive. They swarmed the city like ants trying to help birds. One day Mother came into the kitchen when we were eating breakfast.

"I applied for visas to New Zealand a while ago. I also applied for Iceland and both New Zealand and Iceland have turned us down. Canada on the other hand will let us move in!" she squealed delightedly. Silence descended on the room like a thick blanket of shock. Was this really going to happen?

"We leave tomorrow so start packing the bare minimum. We can buy clothes in Canada so don't bother with too many of those. Well, what are you waiting for? Go pack!" instructed Mother. My suitcase was filled with my precious books, my phone, pictures, and my favourite blanket. It was made out of wool and had a striped red and white pattern. For some reason it reminded me of bacon.

That last night we spent in Ukraine was a sorrowful one. Would we ever see our home again? What had I told Iza? Home is where we are. Home can be in Canada or Ukraine. I was grateful about getting one more night there. It also turned out that

Natasha was coming to Canada. What luck that was. It turns out that her parents had been influenced by my parents' decision. I also was fairly sure that Milly's family was trying to emigrate too. They weren't going to Canada, but America. I had heard that America was a good place to live. Sleep must have tunnelled its way into my brain because I don't remember anything else from that night.

The next morning we stood in the entrance of the apartment building and got ready to sneak out. It was seven o'one in the morning so technically we were allowed outside. The Russian soldiers had imposed a curfew restricting movement outside of the house between eight o'clock at night until seven o'clock in the morning. The jitters of moving rippled through my body as I shook them out. We were really leaving. We climbed into a van and drove away from the only home I had ever known.

The vehicle steered through what very little traffic there was and left us plenty of time to stir in our own fears about going to a new place to live forever. We stopped in front of a grove of gnarled looking trees. The van driver gave us time to get out and then sped off. Mother motioned for us to walk just a little farther. We did so and I have never been more nervous about a thirty second walk in my life. The miniature forest came out on a river bank. Even though we lived relatively close to the Dnieper, I had never really seen it as I had then. I saw it now as a challenge. We hopped into a small motor boat and loaded all our possessions onto it. Mother took out her phone and looked for a map to double check our route. It showed that we would be going up stream and then cross over to Belarus. We slowly got the motor started and we were on our way.

The ride was very uneventful so I slept most of the way. I was not accustomed to getting up this early after online schooling had started. When I awoke it was to the noise of engines. I groggily sat up and looked around. Where were we? We were docking on a rickety, old, dock next to a farmhouse. It appeared as if we were in a

small village on the river. A man hobbled out to meet us. He spoke with a lilt that kind of reminded me of the soldiers at home. The man sported worn out, blue overalls and had shaggy, grey, hair matted down on his forehead.

“If you will be so kind as to follow me,” he grumbled. The stranger led us behind his house and halfway through a field where he unveiled his small aeroplane to us. Father climbed in first and then Nick, Iza followed behind them. Ben was holding Eiffel and hopped right in, but Ivan was slightly cautious about it. I hauled him in and then helped Mother in. Then I climbed in myself.

I mainly watched a movie on my phone and looked out the window. There was no more excitement in the air than the water. Father and the farmer made meaningless small talk the entire time. Everyone else looked out the window. At one point I got airsick so I rushed to the back of the plane and took care of that. When we landed I was the first out of the plane and rushed behind the first bush I saw and threw up my breakfast. It was then when I realised that I had puked on a Canadian bush.