

ESCAPING A WAR DOESN'T ALWAYS BRING PEACE



SEVEN MILLION SUNFLOWERS

Malcolm Duffy

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ONE



MY ROOM IS no longer my room.

I try to blink it back to the way it was. But that doesn't work. My bed should be underneath me. It's not. It's upright against the door. My wardrobe is flat on the ground. My desk upside down, its legs in the air. My guitar lies in the corner, its neck broken. My stuff is everywhere it shouldn't be.

I'm on the floor.

Hurting.

I scream.

Or try to.

My mouth opens wide, but the sound is too small. Defeated by the noise in my ears.

Is this a dream?

But what sort of dream leaves you in such pain?

I look down. My nightdress is torn. Arms and legs covered in dirt.

What's happened?

Cold air blows against my back.

I turn.

My eyes and mouth reach maximum width.

The outside is here. *In* my room.

The wall has gone. Through the space comes thick black smoke, stinging my eyes, clogging my throat. Sense something else. The floor is no longer flat; it's tilting down, towards the city below. Ignoring the pain in my stomach, I scramble over the broken remains of my room and reach the far wall. Its firmness makes me feel safe. For a moment.

What if the floor goes next?

I scream again as my bed topples like a giant domino. It slides slowly across the floor, as if drifting on a river above a waterfall, before disappearing over the edge into the blackness. I push myself further into the wall. I want the bricks to become hands. I want them to hold me.

The smoke grows thicker.

I feel sick, but somehow keep it down.

Need to keep movement to a minimum.

Even breathing seems dangerous.

A single heartbeat could dislodge me.

The smallest cough could carry me off.

The slope is getting steeper.

I shout. 'Tato.'

The name is muffled, distant – as if someone else has made the noise.

‘Tato,’ I scream.

But don’t know if my dad’s here. Perhaps the hole has taken him and Mama. And everyone else.

Please, someone save me.

I close my eyes and send a prayer to any god who’s out there.

‘Kateryno.’

Did someone say my name?

‘Kateryno. Metelyk.’ That’s his nickname for me.

‘Tato.’

The door inches open, pushing the rubble like a bulldozer, sending broken concrete and wood tumbling down the slope and over the edge. Cautiously, he eases through the gap, into my room. I barely recognise him, his face blackened by the remnants of our building. He bends and scoops me up, holding me tight in his arms, kissing me over and over.

‘Kateryno, Kateryno, Kateryno.’

He puts me down.

I have to warn him.

But it’s too late.

We both fall.

The floor has shifted. Our home is a ship, on top of a breaking wave. Feel myself sliding through the smoke towards the space. To the city. To the darkness.

Tato snatches my arm. I look back. He's grabbed the doorframe.

'Hold tight,' he shouts.

A trainer skitters past me, followed by a schoolbook, my make-up bag, Pinhvin, the stuffed toy Babusya gave me when I was little. A second later, they're gone, to join the rest of my room, eight floors below.

Grip Tato's arm as hard as I can. I know he'll never let go of that doorframe. But what if it falls too?

'Keep strong, Kateryno.'

Can you keep what you haven't got?

My nails dig into his arms.

Tato versus gravity.

It's a battle he'll never win. We can't stay like this forever.

A tear slides through the dust on my cheek and finds my mouth. It tastes warm. It tastes of life.

I don't want to die.

I so don't want to die.

Rescuers will be on their way. They must be on their way. They will have seen the hole, the smoke. But what if there are more rooms like mine? Too many rooms. Which will they go to first?

'Climb up,' shouts Tato.

The floor tilts further. The angle steeper. It's becoming a wall. Takes every scrap of strength to hold on. And then, through the whining in my ears, I hear them.

Voices.

Feel myself moving. Up. Hands grasp, pulling me through the door, into what was once our hall. I see more blackened faces, illuminated by the light of phones. How did they get in? Did Mama leave the front door open? Maybe there are more holes in the building and they climbed through.

Tato picks me up and holds me close.

It hurts. But sometimes hurt is worth it.

‘Where’s Mama?’

‘She’s okay.’

‘Marko?’

‘With a friend.’

I forgot. The explosion has scrambled everything.

Still gripping me in his arms, Tato carries me along the darkened corridor as though I’m a child. Despite being camouflaged with dust and dirt and grime, I recognise the faces of neighbours. Urgency in their voices. Fear in their eyes.

Tato carries me out of the front door, away from the smoke and the room that has gone. We stumble through what’s left of our building. It seems all the forces of nature – volcano, earthquake, tsunami, hurricane – have come together to prove how strong they are, and how weak our building is. Water pours down steps from burst pipes. Flames light the gaps where there were once walls. Black smoke seeps under doors. Concrete

and debris fill the hallway. The air is thick with shouts and screaming. There must be more homes like ours. Pummelled beyond recognition. Lives rearranged.

Tato ignores the lift and heads for the stairs. The space is crammed full of people. Most trying to get out. A few trying to go up. I pity them, as they climb towards the dust and flames and smoke and floors that won't hold them. Tato doesn't pause, his breathing heavy and fast. His grip hurts my stomach. I cry, but my cry is swallowed by the vortex of raised voices. A few times he stumbles, but manages to keep his balance. We reach a door, which Tato kicks open. The temperature tells me we're outside. There's a different sort of chaos here. People running, crying, fire engines racing, sirens wailing, car alarms screaming. Tato carries me a few metres into the street before putting me down. The earth feels good against my bare feet.

He bends over, sucking in huge mouthfuls of air.

'You okay?' he groans.

Alive will do right now.

'Yeah,' I say.

A figure runs through the crowds. Opening her arms wide, she gathers us both in her embrace.

'Mama.'

We survived.

For now.

When we can hug no more, Mama bends to look at me.

‘Kateryno, you’re bleeding.’

Thought the dampness was sweat. The pieces of glass she picks from my face and hair tell me otherwise. I’m wearing what’s left of my window.

‘What’s this?’

There’s blood on the front of my nightdress. Where the pain is.

‘We need to get you to hospital.’

‘I’m all right, Mama.’

A missile streaks overhead.

It’s so fast there’s no time to react.

Watch as it disappears into the distance. Where is it heading? Who will it hit?

I stare at the mess around us. ‘Will there be school today?’

‘No, Kateryno, there’ll be no school today.’

She holds me again. When her hug ends, I turn to look at what used to be our apartment block – a gigantic burning wound where people once lived. I count the storeys. The fire is three floors below my bedroom. Now a deadroom.

I walk towards a pile of rubble lying in the street.

‘Not too close, Kateryno.’

Burning embers float in the air.

I stop.

In the glow from emergency-vehicle lights I see her – Pinhvin, my old toy, lying in the dirt.

‘Leave her, Kateryno.’

I look back. Mama and Tato, both holding each other, sobbing.

Never seen Tato cry before.

But then, there’s never been a day like this before.

Thursday 24 February 2022. The day the Russians came.