

BATTLE FOR UKRAINE

Emotional baggage

Celebrated Croatian journalist **SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ** writes an exclusive essay on what a refugee should pack in their suitcase and how they must be prepared to learn a whole new language

YOU ARE LEAVING tomorrow; the time of deliberation has passed. Yesterday in the early morning hours, a house in the neighbourhood was bombed, and the smoke is still rising. An unknown, disturbing stench overwhelms you as soon as you open a window.

Now you are sitting in your darkened living room, with electricity long gone, looking at the suitcase gaping open on the floor. In Ukraine you call it *tryvozhna valizka*, an alarm suitcase, a suitcase of anxiety - a kind of suitcase of fear.

Slightly panicked, you throw in a warm pullover; you might need it, a neighbour told you, so you put it in and replace your favourite dress. Why would a refugee need a fancy dress? You ask yourself and throw it out. What to take with you? People tell you to take this and not forget that. Suddenly they all are experts on what it means to flee. But even if you could put in all you needed, from books and warm clothes to food →

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→ and medicine, how would you carry such a heavy burden?

“Put on a solid pair of walking shoes,” your grandma, your beloved *babusya*, would say. “You will surely walk a lot. My dear, *moya lyuba*,” she would tell you. “Leave that bulky *valizka* here; there is nothing in it that can protect you from the war.”

If only she were with you now. But her bones are at the cemetery, and it has not been hit yet. The Russian soldiers are targeting live Ukrainians for now, but soon the turn will come for the dead, too. Because the dead represent the memory of the living, they too have to be annihilated. “Don’t ask what kind of people could kill the elderly, small children and their mothers - people kill people, we are doing it to each other. Now Russians kill us but believe me; we’ll be killing them too.” You know that her view of human nature was dark. But you also know that you can’t command the dead to shut up; they tell you how to remember them. If you would angrily retort: this is not the time to compare, we are defending ourselves, *babusya* would simply wave her hand as if to say: I’ve seen it all; I know what the people are capable of.

“But they kill even cats!” You tell her, as perhaps the final argument against Russian soldiers. You found your Luna wounded in front of the door, and she died in your hands. Why? Animals are not enemies. You passed a dead shepherd dog on the way back from fetching the water; someone loved that dog as you loved Luna. You’ve stayed so long here because you could not imagine leaving her. It was while digging a shallow grave in the flower bed that you became certain that you wanted to leave all this behind. Strange, you think now, in the darkness lit by the single candle, how odd that what really scared you - the fact that soldiers had no mercy, even for animals - was what finally scared you away.

If only *Babusya* could help you now, as she used to do when you were a

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child. In your mind, you can see her face leaning over to kiss your forehead; you can feel her warm hands, you can almost feel her presence. “Well, don’t be sad, you can take your *valizka* with you. But not the one on the floor, not the one you used to take on vacation to Crimea. No, open another one, the one in your mind, the one for the images and memories, for the smell of spring and memory of a certain touch. That is the *valizka* you will need more as it can be filled by all you hold dear, everything you are. That invisible luggage will become your survival kit.

“And now, *moya lyuba*, before you leave, it is time to pick up the candle and have a good look around,” she would say, directing you to the kitchen, with its neatly washed dishes and clean tablecloth. “Did you set it up for your return?” I did that out of habit, you would explain to her, and she would understand; she was the one who taught you to clean after yourself. In the living room, she would notice something that no one else would. The absence of photos, one of herself and your mother, the other of the entire family, usually proudly exposed on the dresser, under the clock. You took the pictures out of frames so that they will keep you company along the way. You apologetically say, in a weak voice; some of the pictures I have hidden in a safe place until I return. “Yes, I know every refugee believes that leaving home is only temporary; otherwise, how would they bear to leave?”

You hadn’t intended to leave, even when shelling was getting closer, even when all the other neighbours from the apartment building had left, as if you believed the war would not touch you. How to desert the place where you and your parents worked hard to earn for

every single thing, from the big flat screen TV set to the fine new carpet? Lovely presents you got for your birthday, old inherited teacups, that fine coat you saved for, the small things that made you happy. Leaving home to save your life was unimaginable, for what is life without everything that makes it home?

You can almost feel *Babusya* reading your mind as you touch the cushions on the bed, the reading lamp and a new, unread book waiting for you to open. “Try to take the moments with you. Remember how you fell from a bicycle the first time you rode and hurt your knee but stubbornly climbed on again? Or buying a pair of red dancing shoes for your graduation?”

Other moments you won’t be able to forget, even if you wish you could: the one when you spotted the first human corpse. It was only yesterday, you remember in amazement. As you walked into your street, someone was lying on the pavement in front of number five. As you approached, as you had to pass by, you saw the old school janitor, who never let you into the school even if you were only a minute late. Lying there in his pyjamas, he looked as if he was asleep. But who would choose to sleep on the pavement on a chilly spring morning? Even from where you stood, you could see that his eyes were open, and there was some smeared blood on his right temple. You suddenly felt trapped. You stopped and screamed into the space, not hoping for an answer: why? Why? But the answer came in a familiar voice: “Don’t go around asking why; you are not a child anymore!”

Life is not things; it is the memory of those things, the only way to keep them with you. Now you understand why your mental *tryvozhna valizka* is more important than the one on the floor. The

one that you would uselessly drag, pull or carry around, hugging it and never letting go, until you get so tired that you’d want to abandon it, throwing it into the first water that would be deep enough to swallow it.

The other *valizka*, on the other hand, is the one that will always remain, the one you take home or wherever you go when the war ends, and it will; every war does. That one is heavy in a different way. What else is inside, apart from the fear, images from the past and your memories of the precious moments? Everything that you learned since the war started: the sound of the air raid siren, the word “shelter”, the damp smell of the cellars, the scent of fresh blood that reminds you of iron. Also, lessons that you have yet to learn. You’ll discover that your home is not yours because the others have the power to take it from you. You’ll realise that for the same reason your life is not your own. You’ll learn to be afraid, and that fear is good. You’ll learn to choose sides as well as to be pushed to the side you did not choose; you might even need to know how to hate. “Hatred” is something one easily learns in such a situation. It is the most terrible lesson in survival; you’ll most certainly learn the word “survival” and its meaning. One can survive anywhere, something you’ll learn while walking in a long line towards some border or a safe place. That word, besides many other previous unknowns, will be the main word in your *valizka*. A “safe place” is another important notion; it seems only yesterday you believed any place you felt good was safe. And the word luck will get a new definition; while you sit on the wet soil somewhere in the woods, covered by a tarp under fat drops of cold rainfall, you’ll suddenly

realise your luck. You’ll experience the birth of a whole new dictionary born out of the war. You should carefully take those newly born words and keep them in your *valizka*, which is becoming more and more precious the further you go.

“I am telling you, it was a good idea to toss a photo of your house into your backpack. And you ask me why, again? Haven’t you yet learned that war doesn’t allow asking stupid questions? It’s because you are homeless now, a refugee. I see, *lyuba*, that you disagree, fiddling with the house key in your pocket as if it proves something. You probably don’t, but I remember an old newspaper photo - many years after the war in Bosnia ended. Every Saturday in Berlin, near Wittemberg, one could see the same scene: women, many women, standing silently, each holding a photo, closeups of their houses, of homes they once had until the others appropriated them. Or shelled them, burned them. The women held the photos as the only proof, as the document that they, too, lived a different life just like the rest of us. That’s what I am saying. I remember how it hit me, the idea that an image of the house could be the proof of belonging to ordinary people. Such a photo, not a house key, became an essential identity document, just like an ID card.

“You are that kind of a refugee now, do you understand?”

It is a new word as well, but after a week, you will realise that this single word sums up what you are to others. It will take time to see yourself as a refugee because the picture it evokes is usually quite different. A big mass of people, women with headscarves, young men, children, walking or waiting, sitting on the ground

or crouching under the open sky somewhere at the Hungarian border, expecting a transport to Germany, their skin darker than yours. Surely you remember the picture of a dead Syrian refugee boy lying on a beach in Turkey; it sent a shudder down your spine. Soon you will learn that your Ukrainian nationality and the pale skin colour will decide your destiny, as his nationality and skin colour did his.

Once you are safe and taken care of in a new country, you will experience a strange feeling; a confusing mixture of gratitude to your benefactors and a kind of a shame at the same time. That is because it is not easy to receive charity. You are in need, and to be needy is humiliating. Charity is perhaps the heaviest of burdens.

“Trust me; you are not alone. My bones will stay here, but I will live on in your *valizka*. But here is one last thing I must warn you about before letting you go. You might see a few dead people along the way and start to think you know death because you can feel the cold sweat of fear. That is not what I mean. You need to do better, recognise the mortal danger, its icy breath just behind you, without seeing its face. This skill, not things you took from home, will save your life. Learn it fast, *moya lyuba*...” *Babusya’s* voice is fading.

Now you can see the pale light of dawn breaking. The sign for you to leave.

Leave the heavy suitcase of fear, leave it there, open on the floor.

Don’t cry.

Smile as you close the door, you are no longer burdened by fears, but strengthened by what you carry inside, and nobody can take from you.

You are as set as any refugee could ever be. ❄

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51 (02) : 48/51 | DOI : 10.1177/0306422022110760

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