

Unbuild your shell

February 21, 2022. No, Putin won't start a war. It's ridiculous. He's talking complete nonsense; how can anyone still believe him?

February 22, 2022. Putin confirmed the ratification of the agreements between Russia and the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). “What did he mean? Do you understand?” – “No, I don't understand. He's spouting nonsense—it's obvious to everyone! But it seems things are very, very bad.”

February 24, 2022. Tears, outrage, disbelief. The whole evening and night spent at the computer, endlessly scrolling through news channels, messaging friends. What is happening?

Troops have crossed the border. The first explosion in Kharkiv. The first casualty numbers.

Should we leave? Right now?

“We bought you tickets for next week, leave the country!”

No, I hadn't graduated from my college yet, Mom won't find a job. No, we don't want to be dependent on relatives. I'm a girl, I won't be drafted. As long as we live here in St. Petersburg, we are not in any immediate danger. The war is very far away.

March 2022: Protests. Armed forces dispersing demonstrations of peaceful residents with “NO WAR” signs. “No war”—the phrase is now classified as discrediting the Russian army — up to 15 years in prison. Arrests. Trials. Constant scrolling through the news.

Bucha — a small town near Kyiv, where 450 people — mostly civilians, kids and women — were murdered within less than a month. *Bucha*. The word that gives chills. That word is drenched in blood and tears. Photographs with blurry squares over mutilated bodies.

Lies from the TV and government-controlled channels: “Western fabrications, fakes, a provocation”.

Arguments with friends and classmates at college. Phrases from them: “It's not that simple,” “If we hadn't struck first, they would have attacked us,” “Don't call it a war!”.

That was the first time I heard my mother say, “Don't talk about this with others, be careful at college, keep your opinion on this to yourself.” “We will get through this. We were silent throughout the Soviet Union, and we can be silent now too.”

And I was silent. It is so shameful—to be silent. A feeling of powerlessness, the impossibility of being able to change the situation in any way.

3 years and almost 8 months. Three years that felt like an eternity.

Endless lies, disguising the real facts from the front. Lies and displays of loyalty to the authorities in every position and every profession.

Danger and deceit in every action of the government. Distrust for everything the authorities say. A panicked fear of the police, the OMON riot police, of men with assault rifles. Posters about contract army service—huge salary numbers. Military themes in schools and kindergartens, military parades.

The destruction of books by “foreign agents”—people who speak out against the war. On social media, you can't repost anything—they are controlled by the authorities.

Fewer and fewer friends and acquaintances left in the country; everyone is leaving.

The impossibility of traveling abroad, US-visa refusals. My grandfather's death in the USA: we only could watch his funeral on a recording.

3 years and almost 8 months of silent acceptance. How do you survive it? There is only one way—to build yourself a shell. This shell is thick and doesn't let anything dangerous in from the outside. You only let in those you can talk to, those who understand you.

My final year of college, all my applications to universities in Europe were rejected; my college diploma wasn't evaluated.

Then, suddenly, an email: “Congratulations on your acceptance to the University of Delaware, Liubov!” I can't believe it. I'm speechless. Calls to my mom and relatives, congratulations. I will have a new life, a completely different one, in a different country with different people. What will it be like? How will I live there? Moving, packing my things, saying goodbye to friends.

And now I've been here for two months. A completely different culture. People speak with different intonations. A constant feeling of misunderstanding situations, even though my English is perfectly fine.

Here, everyone smiles, they say the formal, but kind, “Good morning, how are you doing?”. Once I met my groupmate on the street, she asked me, “Are you feeling alright? You look very stressed and concerned”. But on the contrary, that day I felt relaxed and even joyful. I had a good day in class and was walking to my yoga lesson, looking forward to it. At that point I realized it was just my face, a repulsive expression always ready for a defense.

Everyone asks me the standard question, “Where are you from?” For some reason, I find myself answering with an apologetic tone. Why? To whom? For what? For being born there? But my answer not only doesn't surprise anyone, no one reacts in the way I thought they might. Everyone expresses genuine interest and concern, asking questions that have nothing to do with politics. My defensiveness, my readiness to protect myself, turned out to be completely unnecessary.

I've become aware that I think in a completely different way: I've developed armor, a defense mechanism. I am closed off to everything new; I am afraid of so many things. After a while, I understood—there is no trust in me. That simple, unconditional trust in people. It seems to me that trust is a very important factor in human relationships within a society; it's directly linked to fear and being closed off. And also, to respect. Respect for oneself and for other people.

I think I am stuck in my shell. I cherish and respect my shell; it helped me so much during these years. At the same time, I clearly understand that it is a psychological defense mechanism of shutting down, of becoming closed off to protect myself from an unbearable external reality I was in. The trauma doesn't end at the border; it travels with you. But now that I see it so clearly and understand it so fully, I am going to try to change it.

It begins with small acts of conscious vulnerability: holding a smile for a second longer, forcing my shoulders to drop when I talk to my peers, answering 'I'm from Russia' and telling about my past and the culture I lived in without shame and an immediate sense of apology. It will be the hardest work I have ever done— not building a fortress, but patiently, brick by brick, taking it down. This is how I will unbuild my shell.