Vika

It's not true that all people living in Ukrainian villages or towns that serve as district centers perceive themselves as occupying a higher social ladder than rural residents, while all city dwellers look down on both, and Kyiv residents indulge in patronizing and condescending attitudes toward the rest of the country's citizens. Of course not! It's likely that a minority of citizens directly ties their social status to their place of residence. Nevertheless, such feelings sometimes invisibly hover in the atmosphere of human relations, or, more accurately, did so before 2014, the year the fighting in Donbas began.

After February 2022, when the shadow of war spread beyond Donetsk and Luhansk, this perception vanished like water into sand. The fact is that a huge number of people who never expected to travel abroad, and whose only images of Prague or Paris were from films and books, unexpectedly found themselves in Prague, Paris, or other European cities after the winter of 2022. Many even went much further afield—to Australia or America—thus completely negating any, even unconscious, attempt to judge people by their place of residence. In other words, these displaced people didn't simply change their worldview; they experienced a profound shift in their perception of non-television reality when they immersed themselves in a foreign atmosphere. This revolution took place especially in the consciousness of the inhabitants of small, modest frontline Ukrainian villages, whose established, albeit war-torn, way of life was suddenly replaced by Western rhythms, just as legato is replaced by allegro in music.

The inner worlds of many people were turned upside down. The unfamiliar became familiar, and the impossible became possible. Throughout history, a change of power in a country has likely always led to changes in the lives of ordinary people; the metamorphosis of society translated into a metamorphosis of individual destinies.

However, not all those who changed their place of residence were delighted, despite the fact that their fates were decisively ravaged by war.

But let's fast forward from the winter of 2022 to the summer of 2026

Twenty-year-old Vika, petite in stature with flowing brown hair and kind eyes, was one of those who managed to cross the Ukrainian border during the war, though not because she was fleeing the country, but for an entirely different reason. The estimated flight time from Warsaw to Reykjavik is just over four hours. Of course, after takeoff, settling into a comfortable window seat, Vika, dressed in a pink blouse, a light red cardigan, and a long dark green skirt, gazed through the glass at the buildings receding in the distance, diminishing in size as the aircraft gained altitude. After a while, the houses and cars left beneath the plane's wing began to seem like toys to her, and then the clouds appeared. At first, they looked like funny little lambs, but their numbers grew, and, looming over one

another, they obscured the view of the ground below. It created the illusion that they weren't clouds at all, but an endless field covered in snowdrifts.

Before the flight, the girl had expected to gaze upon Polish, Swedish, and Norwegian landscapes from above, and perhaps even spot ships in the Baltic Sea or out in the ocean. But it wasn't to be, so Vika, tearing herself away from the window, leaned back in her soft seat and closed her eyes. Sleep quickly overcame her.

The girl grew up in a small village tucked away in the Donetsk region, nestled among coal mines. A trip with her parents to the Bakhmut district center was a special occasion for her, let alone a visit to the vast asphalt and concrete city of Donetsk. After her first encounter with the city, its central alleys forever remained imprinted on her memory—roses, roses. Yes, this city of mining glory was adorned with an incredible number of stunning roses, astonishing in their abundance of color and emphasizing with their charm that even in the hustle and bustle of the metropolis, it's important to remember the beautiful. Bright scarlet flowers coexisted alongside chaste whites and soft pinks, skillfully planted by the kind hands of local gardeners. "The City of a Million Roses"—that's how Donetsk was sometimes called.

For Vika, the war began not in 2022, but in 2014, when she was eight. A few weeks after the change of power in Kyiv—something the girl certainly didn't think about, and probably didn't know about, given her age—her childhood was invaded by the clanking of infantry fighting vehicles and tanks, the roar of army trucks transporting soldiers, and explosions outside the village, and later within it. New words entered the child's vocabulary: "grads," "mortars," "howitzers," "tanks." The incongruous black smoke from the explosions against the bright blue sky, reminiscent of ugly blots on a blank sheet of school drawing paper, eventually became familiar. Days and nights in the basement, the fear of going outside, where power had changed hands more than once as a result of fighting, fear mixed with hunger and thirst, forcing people to emerge from their shelters – all these filled the reality. The girl quickly learned to distinguish machine-gun fire from automatic weapons, and infantry fighting vehicles from armored personnel carriers, with identification markings that changed depending on who was in control of the village at the time.

Vika grew up a smart child, and one late evening, lying next to her mother on a wide mattress laid directly on the clay floor of the basement of their small one-story house, she quietly asked, looking into the eyes of the person closest to her, "Mom, why do I have such a childhood? Must it be like this? Really?"

The tired woman, without lifting her head from the pillow, closed her eyes, afraid Vika would notice that they had become wet. She didn't answer her daughter, thinking all the while, "If only she doesn't ask about Dad; if only she doesn't ask..."

But Vika had no intention of doing that. Being remarkably perceptive, she somehow felt that asking about Dad was forbidden. At least, not yet.

Mother did not want to tell Vika the details of her father’s death. One moonlit night, he had been wheeling a huge aluminum churn to fetch water from a well two streets away when a piece of shrapnel—from either a mortar round or an artillery shell—split his skull

open. Oksana did not know where the shrapnel had come from; at first, she did not even know what had happened to her husband. Men in military uniforms—exactly who they were was unclear—had hauled his body away in a truck to an unknown location; Oksana only learned of this the next day through her neighbors who lived near the well. Later, with the help of kind people, Vika's mother finally located her husband's body. The funeral in the frontline settlement was brief. Oksana would forever remember the look of bewilderment—or rather, astonishment rather than fear—in her daughter's eyes as she gazed at her dead father, unable to grasp the fact that he was gone.

Days spent surviving under fire compressed into weeks, and weeks into months. This went on until—from goodness knows where (perhaps from the heavens?)—some sort of tacit, invisible line emerged, separating the opposing sides. No, peace in the true sense of the word had not arrived, but the explosions had receded into the distance and become less frequent. Vika knew this for a fact.

Later, a few years later, when her wounded childhood immediately turned into adulthood because adolescence had been stolen by the war, there was a relocation to Kyiv from the frontline zone, searching for housing, dealing with the mundane concerns of daily life, and navigating university—where she struggled to find true friends (since the real ones had stayed back home in the Donbas or scattered across the globe). And then, suddenly, Sergei appeared.

Oh, Sergei! He was the very person Vika saw in her dream. To be precise, his somewhat elongated face didn't appear right away; first, against the steady drone of airplane engines, somber images from the start of the war in the Donbas in the summer of 2014 flashed through her mind like scenes from a documentary. Then, those images began to fade, replaced by a computer monitor displaying the face of the man who had become her friend. Why a monitor? Because Sergei—a tall, slender, twenty-two-year-old, fair-haired guy—had met Vika online. He had left the Donbas (the Donbas, too!) with his parents in the spring of 2022, back when he wasn't even eighteen yet. Smart and naturally industrious, he quickly found work in his new country—first as a construction laborer, then as a factory worker. The significantly higher Icelandic wages compared to Ukrainian ones—along with, of course, his parents' support—allowed him to feel financially secure.

Could he have crossed paths online with a girl from France, Italy, or Spain, for instance? Possibly, but the World Wide Web brought Sergei together with Vika, of all people. One word led to another, and a conversation began—one that gradually evolved into friendship. Or perhaps even love? Who knows? After all, the boundaries between love and infatuation, sincere attachment and physical desire, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a loved one, and the urge to prove oneself to them are often ambiguous and blurred. While the age-old truth that there is no formula for love runs through the entire history of humanity, a powerful, genuine emotion—not a cheap imitation—can still flare up unexpectedly, bursting into the lives of those who least expect it and transforming them beyond recognition.

Ah, that eternal question—how to distinguish the original from a brilliantly executed copy, or a fake—applies not only to paintings but to human relationships as well.

Let’s leave it to Sergei and Vika to sort this out, hoping they can manage without outside help. After all, the plane was carrying Vika from Poland to Iceland specifically for a meeting with Sergei; he had bought her tickets for both the train from Kyiv to Warsaw and the flight from Warsaw to Reykjavik.

Of course, the money Vika earned as a student—working as a babysitter for little ones during the hours she wasn't at university or sleeping—barely covered rent and groceries, the prices of which were constantly rising in Kyiv. Her mother, left without a husband, could offer her daughter little financial support. Consequently, Vika had never even dreamed she could afford a trip across Europe; yet, thanks to Sergei, she was able to do just that. She planned to spend three days in Iceland before returning to Kyiv.

Vika woke up upon hearing the flight attendant’s slightly agitated voice over the cabin speakers. She was speaking English. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian traveler’s command of the language was limited to school-level phrases like "My name is Vika" and "I like summer," along with a few other simple expressions. Yet, amidst the rapid stream of words pouring from the speakers, she managed to pick out the word "Scotland," which was repeated several times. She was able to translate that geographical name.

"Scotland?" she wondered, stretching with a childlike air and brushing a lock of hair from her eyes with a casual movement. "What does Scotland have to do with this?" she thought, glancing around helplessly.

Two men sitting behind her—both well into their thirties—had apparently also been dozing during the flight and woke up when they heard the flight attendant addressing the passengers.

"Hmm, we're landing in Scotland," one of them said in Russian, loud enough to be heard, clearly addressing the man next to him. "Can you believe it? I never planned on ending up in Scotland."

"You won't end up there, though," came the reply.

"Why not?"

"Scotland is part of Great Britain, and that’s not in the European Union. They won't let us off the plane without a visa."

Hearing a language she understood, Vika naively turned toward the speakers. One of the men—the one by the window—had a beard and mustache, while the other was clean-shaven; both were wearing jeans and light windbreakers.

Looking at them, both frightened and surprised by what she'd overheard, she naively said in Russian, "What do you mean, they won't let us out? What are we going to do on the plane?" She suddenly stopped short, blushing, and managed to say, "Oh, sorry. I didn't know who to ask. Are you from...?"

Apparently, the man had answered this question before, and, taking a deep breath, he said calmly, "Yes, from the country you're thinking of, but my friend and I haven't lived in Russia for many years. We moved to Iceland before the war."

"Before the war," his companion repeated loudly and slowly for some reason, looking closely at the girl but not going into detail, clearly confident that the stranger would understand what he was talking about. Then he shrugged and, smiling, stated, "As for the plane, the flight attendant explained to us that we have to wait. We'll wait for the weather to improve and then fly on, or maybe we'll just refuel and head back to Warsaw. No decision has been made yet. "

"Back? To Poland?" the girl said, confused, slowly and barely audibly.

"Well, yes, anything is possible."

"Thank you for translating from English," Vika said, thanking her and turning away.

She frantically tried to figure out what to do, and realizing there was nothing she could do to change the situation, she pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket and clutched it in her hands until the plane's landing gear touched down in Scotland.

Vika didn't know if her mobile phone would work outside the European Union, even though she had paid for roaming with a Ukrainian mobile operator. But to her delight, when she dialed the number of her best girlfriend, Polina, or Polinka, as she usually called her, she heard a ringing tone.

The girl was the same age as Vika. As children, the girls lived in the same village.

Fate had brought her to the Dutch city of Utrecht in March 2022 with her mother, younger brother, and sister.

Why was the first person the confused girl, who had unexpectedly found herself in Scotland, called was her friend? The open hearts of two young creatures, born in the same Donbas village, were drawn to each other like a flower reaches for the sun. The soul of Polinka, confidently overcoming the severe illness that had unexpectedly touched her with its dark wing, and yet not withdrawing into herself but trying to help others, and the soul of Vika, naive despite her age, strove to share the energy of kindness with each other. This desire was born in the friends' formative years, war-torn, and it was not hindered by the hundreds of kilometers separating the girls.

After haltingly explaining what had happened to her friend, who had been awakened by a late-night call, Vika received some sensible advice from the laconic Polinka: "Call Sergey as soon as the flight attendant tells the passengers whether you're continuing on or returning to Warsaw."

"Oh, yes! Sergey! Exactly! You're right. I should have told him, but I decided to talk to you right away."

"And you did the right thing. Everything will be fine. Don't worry!" Polinka said firmly, realizing Vika needed reassurance.

"Thank you... You know, hearing your voice immediately made me feel a little better."

After bidding her friend goodnight, Vika hung up.

Indeed, no one was allowed off the plane. The lights of a distant building, presumably the airport, were visible through the porthole.

As soon as the speakers in the cabin came back on and the attendant addressed the passengers, Vika turned back to the men sitting behind her, and the bearded man, catching her knowing glance, translated: "We're going back to Warsaw." "Thank you. Understood."

The girl immediately dialed Sergey's number, but it turned out that while at Reykjavik Airport, he already knew about the cancellation of his expected flight. What's more, he'd already booked Vika a hotel room in Warsaw so she could rest for a few hours after her unsuccessful flight. And, amazingly enough—at least to Vika, it seemed incredible—her friend bought her tickets for both the evening flight from Warsaw to Helsinki and the overnight flight from Finland to Iceland.

Thus, more than a day later, Vika finally reached Reykjavik and descended the steps, setting foot for the first time on the soil of an unknown northern country.

Yes! Of course! Then there were flowers, modest hugs, and heartfelt, lively, searching glances gliding over cups of fragrant and essential morning coffee. Seeing eyes through a gadget's screen and reading them in person are two different things.

Who knows whether the destinies of Sergei and Vika, both striving for a bright feeling, will merge into one shared destiny? At least, in those moments, they sincerely wanted to believe it themselves, having finally met in a country far from their homeland, a country they had only the vaguest idea about just five years ago.

Truly, God works in mysterious ways!