

Kvitka

The Ukraine Girl Who Inspired a Nation

A short story by Réal Laplaine



Dedicated to the people of Ukraine



On the cusp of her nineteenth birthday, a big day for Kvitka, living in Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, a day when the man she loved would ask her the most important question of her life.

Childhood friends, she had loved him as her closest friend in the world, and every day since, as the years transformed them from children to teens, and now, adulthood, she had waited patiently, hopefully, dreamily, in fact, for the day he would ask for her hand – and if she had read all the signs right, the nuances of his body and language, she was certain that his latest message on her phone, to meet him for lunch at the Maxim Central Park, was his chosen time and place.

Her heart pounded so fast and hard that it echoed in her ears.

Riding her scooter from her home, she swung past the Kharkiv Zoo and University, and headed straight for the park. Finding Alexei there, where thousands strolled or partook of its amusement park, was not an effort at all. It was as if they were cloned, their minds and their senses working in tandem, two beings connected by a synergy, a Universal force, one she liked to think was love, but in fact, was even more quintessential.

Kvitka parked her scooter and started walking along the main path, her eyes taking in all the sights; the rides, the people, the fountains, and of course, where she expected to find Alexei, the cable car ride, one that stretched across the park with a birds-eye-view of the city itself.

A smile, as wide as could be, breached her face as Alexei stood from a nearby bench.

“You found me, as always.”

“I would find you in a crowd of millions.”

“I am sure of that,” he said as he wrapped his arms around her, and their lips pressed together.

“So,” he began as he took her hand and led her to first available cable car, “shall we?”

Once they were rolling above the park, Alexei turned to her, his eyes were deep with the love he felt, but his body was tense, and his lips quivered ever so slightly.

She tightened her grip on his hand. For her, the moment was the apex of years of dreaming, waiting, anticipating this very time and place. On the surface, she appeared calm, but inside, she could barely repress the shaking.

He smiled as his eyes drifted momentarily. "I rehearsed this a million times in my head, and now," he shrugged, "I can't remember any of it."

"I don't care how you say it, just that you do?" she lightly appealed.

Alexei drew a deep breath and exhaled. "You know what I want to say – you've always been able to second guess me."

"True, but this time, the words must come from you," she smiled, a perfect smile that accentuated her beautiful face, its soft creamy skin, chestnut eyes, and hair as golden as the sunflower, the symbol of their nation; in fact, her very name stood for *flower* in Ukrainian.

He touched a finger to her cheek. "Kvitka, my flower, will you marry me?"

Whatever façade she had carefully erected to endure the moment, vanished as quick as the ticking of a second hand on a clock. Tears filled her eyes and skidded down her cheeks as her lips quivered uncontrollably. She had no power to speak – as years of repressed excitement took hold. Her body and mind were consumed by the sense of elation. She finally nodded.

Their lips pressed together, the consummation of their solidarity, not only as lifelong friends, but as soul mates.

Alexei's phone buzzed, interrupting the moment.

He glanced at the screen, his aspect suddenly morphing from the happiest possible, to the grimmest of looks.

"What is it?"

He looked up at her. "The Russians – they have invaded us."



It had been three days since the invasion, during which time, Alexei had been called into immediate military service.

Before he reported, they had met, briefly, under a bridge near her home. Tears pooled in her eyes as she felt her very soul being pulled apart.

Alexei, already wearing his military uniform, pressed a warm hand to her cheek. His eyes were firm with the resolute duty that faced him, and an uncurrent of hate for the invaders that now fueled a passion to protect his country. "You must stay strong my little flower. We must push these bastards from our land."

Her cheeks trembled, "I know," she said as tears continued to stream from her eyes, "I just..."

Alexei placed a finger to her soft lips. "Say no more. We will meet again – it is our way." He smiled as he placed a kiss to her lips and then disappeared.

In the days since his disappearance, Kvitka stayed home, with her mother and two younger siblings. Her father had passed away a year before, a disease that had stolen his life well before his time.

Her mother tried to act like nothing bad would come of the invasion, trying desperately to console the fears of her two younger children, while Kvitka spent every waking hour watching news, staring at her phone, tracking the advance of the invaders. Occasionally they would hear gunfire in the distance, and the explosive concussion of bombs – but nothing came close to their small community.

“Kvitka,” her mother prodded her from the doorway of her room, where Kvitka sat on her bed, her eyes locked on the phone, “you must stop this. Staring at that thing will not change what is happening out there.”

Kvitka’s eyes slowly raised to meet her mother’s. She nodded. “You are right, maty,” she said as she slipped from her bed, gathered a backpack, and started filling it with articles of clothing and things.

“What are you doing?” demanded her mother.

“I’m going out there. I’m going to find Alexei.”

Her mother’s head rocked back and forth. “No, you are not. There are Russian soldiers out there, you can die.”

Kvitka looked up at her. “I would rather die than live in this world without him,” she firmly declared and resumed packing.

They continued to argue, even as Kvitka hugged her younger brother and sister, whispering words of solace in their ears, promising to return, and then finally, stepping up to her mother, who was now on the verge of tears. “I love you, maty, but I will do this, I must,” she said as she gripped her mother’s hands in hers and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I will return, take care of them,” she cast an eye at the two younger faces watching on.

The streets of Kharkiv were desolate. As if a once thriving city of over one and a half million people, appeared empty. In truth, it had been deserted, as tens of thousands had fled westward toward Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria, to avoid the prospects of living under Russian rule. And while she caught sight of prying eyes here and there, those who fearfully watched the streets from their homes and apartments, many were now dark and vacant abodes, and the streets were littered with the remnants of those who fled, leaving behind boxes, bags and artifacts, the signs of desperate flight for freedom from the oppressors now advancing into Ukraine.

Oddly, she felt no fear. As she walked the streets, heading toward the city center, toward, what she knew, was the scene of recent combat, she reminded herself that the man she loved more than anything, more than anyone, was out there fighting for her freedom – and that drove her, pushing her to vanquish any fears of her own.

As she pressed forward, she heard the shuddering booms of blasts in the distance, and the rising column of dark gray and black smoke. She knew nothing of war or weapons or the like – she had prepared herself for university, in fact, at the University of Kharkiv which now loomed in the distance, where she would learn the skills needed to enter the field of science and research – learning, she hoped, about new frontiers, new spectrums yet untouched.

As she turned a corner, the air was scorched by the sound of shots – a sharp sound that echoed off the buildings and cut into her ear, reminding her that men were at the other end of those bullets.

Her heart pounded harder, and a sense of desperation filled her as the uncontrollable thoughts about Alexei filled her head. *Was he okay? Would he survive? Would they ever see one another again?*

All the darkest of visions cascaded down on her like a storm falling from the sky.

She shook her head as if to vanquish them, waiting as the silence returned, and then she stepped out onto the street. Ahead, she saw several people, with young children trailing behind, running across road, and entering a vehicle. Within seconds they sped toward her. She watched their faces as they passed by, desperation and fear were etched on them, the sheer visceral look of terror.

She resumed her course, keeping her eye trained on the University building, a massive structure that stood like a monument in the city center, one of the oldest institutions in all eastern Europe.

More shots filled the air in the distance, but it did not dissuade her determination.

What fueled her was Alexei. She had to find him. She had to see him, to know that he was still alive, and to let him know that she was waiting for him to return.

Finally, arriving at the large square, her eyes momentarily feasted on the University. It was a symbol of national solidarity and permanence, the foundations of which were first laid in 1804, and which had survived the brutality of the Communist regime, the old USSR, and now stood as center of learning and freedom for the Ukraine nation.

Suddenly, the world shifted on her as an entire section of its façade exploded outward in a thousand pieces, as a Russian missile struck into it. A surrealistic horror filled her as she watched an entire wall crumble to the ground and as black smoke and flames suddenly spewed upward like the tongue of a bestial creature coming up from the underworld.

For the first time since the invasion, Kvitka felt the onus of war.

With a cautionary note, she turned and followed the street, her eyes peeled on the university to her right, wondering if another Russian missile would strike, but nothing came, only the silence of death, and the distant sound of fire trucks screaming toward the burning structure, as firefighters, relentless heroes, came to stop the inferno from destroying what remained.

More determined than ever, a combination, now, of her love for the man she sought, and a growing hatred for the invaders who blighted her beloved country, she hastened her pace. Gunfire ahead was the only compass she had, a cognitive feeling that somewhere, ahead, was Alexei. Just like she had found him in the park, and countless times before in crowded places, she would find him again.

Shots suddenly speared the air in front of her, their tracers visible in the light of day, reminding her of the lethality she was walking toward.

She stopped, her eyes carefully assessing the street ahead. No one was to be seen, still no soldiers, and certainly, no civilians, and yet, shots drew her forward.



The clatter of weapons had drawn Kvitka to a narrow street, and there, for the first time, she saw Ukrainian soldiers hunkered down behind a car, firing shots up the street at another group similarly hidden.

The explosive concussion of semi-automatic guns filled her ears with a painful discordance. She stood, transfixed behind a tree, watching as soldiers stood and fired and then ducked yet again for safety. Slugs tore into the car behind which they hid. As her eyes worked the scene, a surrealistic sense of dread came over her as she locked on one of the soldiers. Not that his uniform or anything about him stood out, but she was sure, beyond a doubt, that it was Alexei.

Adrenaline pumped into her system as her heart accelerated, and her breathing hastened. *What should she do*, she wondered? She wanted to see him, touch him, look into his eyes, but to step into the scene of a battle, one he was fighting, would be insane, so she waited, watching from behind that tree, when suddenly, and for no reason or provocation whatsoever, he turned to look directly at her.

Alexei, her heart skipped a beat as his name whispered past her lips.

For a moment, he seemed confused, and rightly so, why was she here, in the middle of a battle, and then, as if reconciling the irreconcilable, he smiled at her, raised a hand, and motioned her stay back, and then turned to fire on the Russians pounding their way ever closer.

Kvitka watched, both in abject horror and apprehension, as Alexei, poised on one knee, unleashed an assault at the Russians, when suddenly, his entire body shuddered and stood motionless, his gun falling to the ground as he wavered. Another shot struck him in the chest, spinning his body like a mere toy. Alexei collapsed into the pavement; his eyes trained on her as he hit the ground.

She screamed, a terrifying and relentless scream as she stepped from behind the tree and watched as another Ukrainian soldier took a bullet to the head and collapsed dead.

Kvitka ran, driven by pure adrenaline and something else, some unchartered power that compelled her to reach Alexei at any cost.

Skidding to her knees, she twisted his body, so he was facing the sky and held his head in her lap. His gaze was empty, devoid of life, as a small lake of red pooled around his body.

As she caressed his face, a coldness drew over her, as if all the warmth in her had suddenly been sucked away.

She did not care anymore. The one person she had dreamed of living her life with was now gone – taken from her by thieves in military garb.



As the last soldier succumbed to the Russian assault, his semi-automatic fell from his dead hand and skidded next to Kvitka, who sat still holding Alexei's head in her lap.

Four Russian soldiers encircled the car, their weapons aimed, first, at the dead soldiers, and then, they trained them on Kvitka. A chuckle emitted from one of them. "Просто девушка," he uttered to the others, *just a girl*.

Kvitka's gaze did not leave Alexei's face – his eyes remained skyward and empty, the same sense she now felt inside.

The Russians inspected the dead and then turned, paying her no further attention, as if she was merely a thing, and unimportant piece of local scenery.

Kvitka sighed as they walked away. She wanted to cry. She desperately wanted to scream in agony – but something else had taken hold. Something cold and hard.

Gently, she lowered his head to the ground and then closed his eyes. She leaned over and planted a kiss to his lips. "Ya tebe lyublyu."- *I love you*, she whispered, hoping that wherever he went, her words would follow.

As she stood, she watched the four soldiers retreating, slowing, as if they were savoring their victory with the sound of laughter between them.

There was no plan, no agenda, no thought except one – they had taken the life of the man she loved more than anyone. At her feet she saw the weapon for the first time. Bending down, she picked it up and felt its weight, the cold hard touch of metal, and the sense of false empowerment that came with it.

Prepared to face her own death, she stepped from behind the bullet-ridden vehicle and raised the weapon, heavy as it was, and placed a finger to the trigger.

"Privet!" she yelled in Russian. The soldiers turned and for a moment their minds did not connect with the scene their eyes revealed, as a young woman, stood there, not more than five meters away, with a weapon trained their way.

One of them, a cigarette dangling from his lip, chuckled as he pointed at her, but it was the last sound he would ever make as Kvitka pressed the trigger and sent all four men to their deaths before they could return fire.

As the concussion echoed off the buildings around her, Kvitka stood there, unmoving, in fact, feeling nothing at all at having just shot four Russian soldiers. With the weapon still in hand, she turned and knelt next to Alexei as a river of tears poured out from her very soul.



When her grief was spent, Kvitka looked up to see a small group of people standing nearby. A young man approached. “We saw what you did, you were brave.” Kvitka was silent for a time as her mind reconciled the moment. She turned away from Alexei too look up at the man. “It wasn’t bravery, it was something else.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter what it was, you fought back.” Kvitka stood and eyed the group, several women, and men in their twenties or early thirties. What sparked her next words would be the subject of discussions in the future. “It’s our home – we should fight back.” “How?” asked a woman. Kvitka nodded to the four bodies in the distance. “I killed them in seconds. You can do the same. Pick up their weapons.” The group gingerly approached the dead Russian soldiers and freed the weapons from their dead hands. Standing there, otherwise devoid of any plan or agenda, they looked to Kvitka.



In the weeks and months that followed, Kvitka’s freedom fighters, the KFF, as they came to be known, grew in number from a small ragtag group to thousands of organized civilians, people who fought with a passion that the Russian military could never match. The Freedom Fighters quickly gained notoriety within the Russian ranks, who, targeting Ukrainian soldiers, were not prepared for an organized assault from armed civilians in nearly every town and city – in fact, never expecting such resistance because Vladimir Putin had spun a fake story for them, that the Ukraine people were living under an oppressive Nazi regime, and to their dismay, the exact opposite was true.

As word got out throughout Ukraine and the world, Kvitka became a symbol for national freedom, democracy, and resistance – a movement, along with Ukraine’s valiant military, that would eventually force Russia to concede to the fact that Ukraine would never again exist under the Russian flag – and with that, they stepped back across the borders they had invaded.