

This is the fourth letter we received

Notes from Kyiv (posted Monday night, Kyiv time):

My kids call her Grandma Grace. She's not really their grandmother. Grandma Grace is a neighbor who serves in a role that is vital to the way this place works. If she, along with all the 'neighborhood grandmas' throughout this part of the world didn't exist, most of eastern Europe would probably crumble. They are the backbone, the memory, the fiber, and often the op-ed page of the neighborhood and thus, the nation. I would argue that until you have been properly chewed out by a Slavic grandmother for not wearing a hat on a cold day you remain an incomplete human being.

Our Grace has always got treats, but doesn't hand them out until you've finished the meat pastry she has for you. She typically bakes enough to feed Coxey's Army, as my old father used to say. Her laugh, her smile, her unfailingly generosity, and her voice that carries for blocks when required.

Grandma Grace knows books. She knows culture. She can recount a history of Kyiv that will bewitch you for hours. And something else you should know: smiling, treat-bearing, story-telling grandma Grace, now 71, also has a job. She's a scientist. She teaches mathematics and writes books on radio mathematics at the Ukrainian National Academy of Science Mathematics Institute.

This past August, when Ukraine was still deciding whether it could afford to give the Covid vaccine to foreigners, Grace hooked me up. The Mathematics Institute had been designated as "essential infrastructure" and was given an allotment of several hundred doses of Pfizer designated for Institute faculty, staff and their immediate families. Including me, as it turns out. Shortly after Grace christened me her newly minted nephew. I cherish the title.

I met this woman 14 years ago when I moved to Podil, a Kyiv neighborhood of such discrete charm that resistance is futile. It's a quarter built on a human scale (rare in places where the Soviet Union once called the shots), filled with Russian Empire architecture, set on the banks of the Dnieper, and home to Kontraktova Square and the cobblestone magic of St. Andrew's Descent. Podil is Kyiv's heart. It is theaters, art galleries, cafés, and hidden yards that recall a simpler, peaceful time. A district you can walk. On a bright May morning when the chestnuts are blooming and the neighborhood rings with the voices of young mothers calling after their little ones, you would fail to convince me that there is any place on earth better suited to human society than this thousand-year-old neighborhood.

And it is here, in the playground that fronts a building that sits perpendicular to mine, both structures going up during the reign of Nicholas II, that I can sit and talk with grandma Grace. Though not now.

Tonight, fit, rigorous Grace, lies in a hospital far from our neighborhood. In 2020, she and I contracted Covid about two days apart. I ended up in a hospital, Grace toughed it out at home. This fall, it hit her again. But then just as her recovery began to gather steam, lesser minds than Grace's decided that Europe needed another war. Grace's heart failed. Try as I might, I can only begin to grasp her grief at what can be lost when the gate is finally breached and the brute is inside.

Once upon a time, shortly after the Soviet Union fell apart, I read radio mathematics under a professor at Novosibirsk State University in Akademgorodok, Russia. In that, my first long exposure to the beating heart of the old USSR, I met men and women of such intellectual rigor, such dynamic life force and cultural refinement that I wondered how it is we could ever have counted these people as enemies.

The irony. Last night and this morning rockets scream down on Kyiv, Chernihiv, Zaporizhia, Kharkiv, Vasylkiv – Ukrainian cities most of you will likely never visit, and who could blame you? Still, tonight, I thought I'd tell you that if you should manage to visit one day, after you've hit the tourist spots, make sure you take a walk in a neighborhood. The places marked by squares and parks marshalled by grandmothers, tough as iron, meat pies hot and waiting. Be hungry.

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We can't visit Grace and we miss our friend. This morning, I talked to Danylo, her husband, a physicist of international reputation. He is a hard man, a man of hard opinions. He rarely asks questions; he makes assertions. When I asked after Grace, he managed "she's resting" and hung his head.

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Last night was another filled with sirens and blasts and blood-chilling silence between volleys. Let's just agree to put that sentence at the head of each of these updates until the bastards figure things out. There are victories to report, losses too, but you've got CNN (I pity you) for that.

Leaders – for lack of a better term – of these two nations are meeting in Belarus to talk. And I can't afford the energy it takes to care because—talks ongoing—the bombing hasn't stopped. Nothing will come of these meetings. Mockery, prevarication, and threats perhaps – the language of mediocrity. I don't care. I'm sick of pundits, sick of the bloodlust, sick of craven pronouncements of military strategists and the think-tank troglodytes posturing and sermonizing and tweeting from a million miles away. This is a family place, so I'll say it in Ukrainian: Шлях би їх трафив.

Nerves are bad. Our boys are scared. My wife is afraid to go for a walk around the block. I wish we had better news. Kyiv has just been hit - 6:30 p.m. - somewhere near the center. We pray for deliverance from the terror by night and the destruction by day. I pray for my friend to come home, sit in the park, and tell me how wrong I am about Brodsky's Christmas Cycle of Poems.

Peace from Kyiv

p.s. I would attach a picture of Grace, but these are insecure days. One day, when the orcs have gone home.