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SUNDAY, BALBOA PARK

ON A HOT August afternoon, a small group of Ukrainian refugees gather beneath a tent in San Diego's Balboa Park near the El Cid Campeador statue. The hum of city traffic is barely audible through the gray trees. Sunlight filters through their bare branches, creating crooked patterns on the ground. Pigeons peck at crumbs, their jagged shadows stretching and shrinking around a trash can. Wisps of clouds fade against the sun-paled sky. An elderly man with a bushy head of white hair trudges across the curled, brown grass carrying a microphone and a microphone stand. He positions the stand under the tent, inserts the microphone, and searches for an extension cord. He finds it coiled behind two large speakers. Members of a three-piece band collect two guitars and a keyboard from a van and shout hello! to the old man.

Oksana Mushchenko arranges posters around the tent: *Stand with Ukraine*, one reads; *Freedom Is Not Free*, declares another; *Thank you USA for Standing with Ukraine*, proclaims a third. She then places enlarged, mounted photographs of bomb damage in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol between the posters. Families strolling on a brick walk pause by a stone bench decorated with faded American and Ukrainian flags. They consider her display but show more interest in vendors hawking T-shirts and knickknacks.

Glory to Ukraine! the old man loudly calls into the microphone. His polo shirt rises up over his stomach as he pumps a fist in the air. A few onlookers respond, mimicking his words if not his exuberance, while others observe with silent curiosity. He runs a hand through his hair and bows his head as if to gather strength.

Glory to the heroes fighting Russia! he shouts again, his voice strained. Glory to the heroes who fight Russia!

More people filter past. Young women in scoop-neck tank tops and bare-chested young men on skateboards weave among them. Oksana stands with her husband, Anatolii, a tall man with a lined, solemn face. He is sixty-one, twenty years older than Oksana and hard of hearing. She smiles up at him and cleans her glasses with a corner of her blouse. She notices a woman with a child pause at a photograph of a Kharkiv monument covered with sandbags. Its caption reads, *Day 32 of the war*

defending freedom. The woman lingers, touching the photo as if her fingertips could elicit its meaning. I lived in Kharkiv, Oksana wants to tell her. I still have family there. But she remains quiet, suspecting the woman's idle curiosity does not indicate real interest. Would she even know where Kharkiv is? Could she pronounce it, or would she have as much trouble as Oksana has with the names of some California cities?

On the other side of the tent, Ruslan Pisliakov stands and watches the old man relinquish the microphone to the band. One of the guitarists performs a sound check. Ruslan folds his arms across his broad chest, winces at the static blasting from a worn speaker, feels the heat on his head, and shifts to get under the tent. He and his family abandoned their apartment in Kharkiv when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. He is forty-one and never thought he would be a refugee. He grew up in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine where the Russian language was widely spoken. Two days after the war started he told his wife, Viktoriia, and their seven-year-old twins, daughter Nastya and son Serhii, that they should speak only Ukrainian. It embarrasses Ruslan when people ask him if he's Russian. Why do you think that? he asks. They tell him they don't understand the difference between Russia and Ukraine. Okay, fine, Ruslan says. Understand this. I'm Ukrainian. That's the difference, okay?

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD IVAN Chaban moves away from the stage and the crackling, popping speakers to the shade of a tree. Forehead beaded with perspiration. Almost six feet tall. Sunlight glints off his titanium left leg. He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. As a child, he suffered from exotropia, better known as walleye. Surgeons corrected the malady, and he has worn glasses since. His father blamed his mother for Ivan's poor vision. He punched, slapped, and kicked her. When she could no longer tolerate his abuse, she moved out with Ivan and his four siblings, two boys and two girls, and stayed with her mother. Five years later, when Ivan was nine, she married again. Her second husband beat him but never touched his mother.

Ivan feels much older than his peers and has little to say to them. They're kind of dumb, especially boys. They talk about weird things. Girls, always girls, and every other word they say is an f-word. Parties, alcohol, girls, and f-words, that's it. Ivan is learning to surf. His prosthetic leg has not held him back. Perhaps surfers will become his friends. He never really hung out with anyone as a child. He grew up in a village

of about one hundred fifty families in the Sumy Oblast region of northeastern Ukraine. No paved roads. The nearest school was almost fifty miles away. He and his family washed their clothes by hand and hung them outside to dry. In the winter, the wet clothes froze, so Ivan would bring them inside to thaw and then put them outside again, repeating the process until they dried. Sometimes he hung them in the kitchen above the stove to dry faster.

In his youth, farmers hired him to watch their dairy cows for ten dollars a day. He would wake up at six in the morning and help milk the cows. At eight o'clock, he would take them out to pasture. The tall green grass slapped his knees, and his boots and pants would get soaked with dew. On sunny days he could smell the sweet aromas of flowers and the musky odor of the cows. When it rained, he stood huddled with the animals, wet and miserable.

One afternoon a cow ran away. Ivan waded across a river and walked one mile through a farm field to find her. A cow is worth about $500. It took Ivan's family six months to earn that much money.

The cows would graze for around three and a half hours in the morning, then Ivan took them in to be milked again. At two o'clock, he walked them out again. The farmers milked them a third time when he returned with the cows in the evening.

He was sixteen when the war started. A day before the invasion, he heard a radio announcer say Russian troops had gathered on the border. Ivan wasn't worried. If Russia planned to attack Ukraine, they wouldn't wait at the border, he reasoned, they'd just do it. He doubted they would enter his village. It was small and too far from any major city to matter.

The next morning, he woke up before sunrise to the sound of bombs exploding miles away. Then a neighbor called and told him what he already sensed: the Russians had invaded. He heard helicopters and jets overhead and the noise of tank columns in the distance. Every TV station covered the start of the war, even channels that normally played music. Then stations were bombed, and the internet was cut off, so no one knew what was happening. People tried to leave but came back. Too dangerous.

The Russians allowed minimal humanitarian aid to enter the village: small bags of rice, wheat, flour, sugar, salt, macaroni, and sunflower oil. Ivan's mother used water, salt, and potatoes for soup, mixing in macaroni or rice to stretch it, but it was never enough.

OKSANA LISTENs to the band play the Ukrainian national anthem. A small girl grips the microphone in both hands and sings: The glory and freedom of Ukraine has not yet perished / Luck will still smile on us brother Ukrainians / Our enemies will die, as the dew does in the sunshine, / And we, too, brothers, we'll live happily in our land.

Oksana wonders how the musicians can play in the heat. In Ukraine it gets hot but not like San Diego. She used to teach physics in Brovary, a city of about 110,000, near Kyiv, and on warm days she would conduct her classes outside. She loved teaching, had dreamed of being a teacher since she was a child. No reason, just something she always wanted to do. She also had worked in city government, passing residents' concerns to the appropriate officials. That too was a dream job. Working on behalf of the community, why not?

She enjoyed living in Brovary. It took just ten minutes to reach Kyiv. Her two boys, six-year-old Mark and fifteen-year-old Mykhrilo, could walk to school in ten minutes. Brovary had distinctly modern and traditional neighborhoods. In the older section, families lived in simple, one-story houses, many of them more than a hundred years old. Young people preferred to live in ten-story apartment buildings in the newer, more developed part of town.

Oksana can't teach in San Diego. Her years of experience and education don't meet the requirements of the California Department of Education. At forty-one, she is starting over. She now works part-time as a camp counselor. In Ukraine, her family was not poor. Anatolii worked as a professional photographer. His assignments took him to Europe and southeast Asia. They made money and spent money.

Anatolii and Mykhailo were both born on February 14, and every year the family observed their birthdays by taking a vacation. Italy, Egypt, Sri Lanka—whatever struck their fancy. Three weeks before the war began, they had decided to fly to the country of Georgia because it was convenient and close to Ukraine. Before they left, many Kyiv politicians had begun speaking about a possible Russian invasion, but most people, including Oksana and Anatolii, didn't believe it. Russians and Ukrainians had fought in both world wars. How many more wars could there be? Anatolii said. We can't believe everything we hear. We want to go to Georgia, let's go and we'll see what happens.

WHEN THE GIRL finishes singing, Ruslan joins the faint applause. He enjoys being among Ukrainians, speaking his language and singing his

country's songs. He was surprised how many Ukrainians live in San Diego, more than two thousand by some counts. His sister, Daryna, moved to California in 2018 with her husband. Their parents followed in 2020 to help her when she became pregnant. They had planned to stay two months, but then the COVID-19 pandemic began. Afraid to travel, they extended their visas until Daryna helped them apply for green cards.

San Diego delights and disappoints Ruslan. He loves being able to go out again at night with his family without worrying about curfew, but he hates being downtown. The number of homeless people upsets him. So many bodies on the sidewalk. What happened to them?

Daryna met Ruslan and his family at San Diego International Airport when they arrived in July 2022, five months after the war started. She and her husband had always dreamed of living in the U.S., and their dream came true. Ruslan, however, never had that dream. Daryna was delighted when she saw him walk up the jetway, but he did not share in her joy. He never wanted to leave Ukraine. He still can't grasp just how quickly his life unraveled. He often thinks back to his childhood when everything seemed so settled.

His father worked in a coal mine and earned good money, but it was a hard, dirty job. He took Ruslan to the mine one afternoon. Ruslan descended into a dank hole and did not like being unable to stand or see without a light. Okay, he told his father. I see how it is. This is not for me. He wanted to build cars. He enjoyed tinkering with engines and transmissions. His grandfather owned a Renault, and he let Ruslan drive it.

He met Viktoriia in 2002 at the National Technical University in Kharkiv where he studied mechanical engineering. Viktoriia's father worked in Iran building power plants and hired him after he and Viktoriia married. Ruslan liked the Iranian people. They always wanted to help. When his car broke down one afternoon, a crowd converged to offer assistance. But he didn't like the government and its fundamentalist ideology. Men could not wear shorts or short-sleeve shirts. Women had to cover their entire bodies and their heads and faces.

After ten years, Ruslan and Viktoriia returned to Kharkiv, and Ruslan accepted a job at a power plant. In 2014, deadly clashes between protesters and government forces in Kyiv culminated in the ousting of the president in what became known as the Maidan Revolution. Then Russia invaded the Donbas region and Crimea. It was a difficult time. Dust gathered on bare grocery store shelves. The price of fuel increased.

Ruslan decided to switch careers to earn more money. He became a quality assurance engineer for a software company.

He knew nothing about Russian troops on the Ukrainian border before the 2022 war started. He never followed the news because it depressed him. What will you do if Russia attacks? his friends asked him. What are you talking about? Ruslan replied. I'll live my life. Just as always.

Daryna called from San Diego. Don't start, he told her. There won't be a war. You don't think so? she asked. Okay. Ju st fill your car with gas. Just in case. To calm her, he agreed. He thought everyone had lost their minds.

When the war began, Viktoriia woke him up at four in the morning. The Russians have come, she told him. What has? he wondered. Come back to bed. Get some sleep. Come with me, she said. Holding his hand, she led him into the living room. Ruslan saw flashes and heard explosions. The gray winter sky shook. He knew Ukraine had a military base near Kharkiv. Maybe it was some kind of practice.

His supervisor telephoned and told him he had made the company's underground parking garage available as a shelter for employees and their families. You'll be safe there, he said. This is really happening, Ruslan told Viktoriia. Yes, she said. They packed food, blankets, toys, soap, and toothbrushes and got in their car. Gray slush covered the streets; the snowy sidewalks held the footprints of frantic people running from neighbor to neighbor. What is happening? they cried. Ruslan had filled the gas tank only a few days earlier. He offered a silent prayer of thanks to Daryna.

About one hundred people had already collected in the garage by the time Ruslan and his family drove up. Mattresses filled parking slots. Damp air, dim interior. People huddled together. Weary, confused, scared. How long will we be here? Ruslan wondered.

The government imposed a thirteen-hour curfew, from five o'clock in the afternoon to six o'clock in the morning. On the fourth day of the war, a rumor started that if anyone went out at night they would be shot, but one man ignored the restrictions to walk his poodle. What are you doing? Ruslan asked him. You're breaking curfew. Well, the man said, I have a dog. He has to go out. I was a soldier in Afghanistan. I'm not scared. Oh, okay, Ruslan said.

Ruslan tried to work in his office three floors above the garage but couldn't concentrate. One morning he heard an explosion two blocks

away. He ran downstairs to his family. It was so loud, Serhii told him, that it felt like his eardrums had burst. He stood beneath support beams thinking he would be safer there. A seven-year-old should not have to think this way, Ruslan thought. Serhii worried when his father returned to his office. What if there was another explosion and he was unable to come down? Ruslan tried to assure him. I have to work, so we can have food, he said. When his children weren't scared, they were bored. They would watch their cloudy breath rise into the rafters and pretend they were smoking, or they would play chess. Nastya counted air vent slats. About 10,900. Something like that, she told Serhii.

Ruslan followed the news on his phone. Ukrainian soldiers had stopped the advancing Russian troops, but he remained worried. After ten days, he decided to take his family to his uncle's house west of Kharkiv to put distance between themselves and the Russian advance.

MORE PEOPLE descend on Balboa Park as the afternoon heats up. Ivan watches them stop at vendors selling gyros and remembers how hungry he was in the first month of the war. Eight weeks after the invasion, a rumor started that Buryn, a city near his village and occupied by Russian troops, had food. A neighbor had driven there and came back with rice, beef, and bread.

Ivan's stepfather decided that he, Ivan, and Ivan's mother should go to Buryn. They had no transportation and would have to walk, about a three- to four-hour trek. On Sunday, April 17, at seven o'clock in the morning, they started out through a forest in bitter cold. Snow and brown leaves clung to the bottom of their boots. One hour into their walk, Ivan noticed the shimmer of a wire stretched between two trees. Round metal disks lay exposed at the trunks. Ivan stopped. His hands shook. Don't move, he told his stepfather and mother. Mines. Let's go another way, his stepfather said. Bad idea, Ivan said. It will be the same everywhere. But his stepfather insisted, and Ivan knew he would beat him if he argued. They walked, slowly tapping at the ground with sticks and adding time to their journey. After another hour, they emerged on a road at a Russian checkpoint. One soldier, his voice muffled by a scarf, said, How did you get here? There are mines everywhere. How did you stay alive? Another soldier told them, We will save Ukraine. We will take over your government and everything will be great.

The soldiers advised them to stay off the road to avoid tank columns. But mines had been deployed on the side of the road. It will be difficult,

they admitted.

Ivan and his parents reached Buryn about noon. They bought salt, sugar, flour, yeast, and rice, then rested. When they were ready to walk back, Ivan's stepfather suggested they take a different route. It would be longer but would avoid the forest.

A column of Russian soldiers, tanks, and other military vehicles approached from behind them. Walking behind his parents, Ivan stepped to the shoulder of the road. He heard the column get closer and closer. The ground jumped and vibrated. Ivan stopped and looked back just as something struck his right leg and tossed him spinning to the ground. He didn't move. He couldn't feel his leg. He felt cold. He took deep breaths. Snow clogged his nose. The column continued without pause. His mother and stepfather also lay near the side of the road. His mother raised her head. *Ivan, your leg*, she said. She crawled to him and tied a tourniquet above his knee with the strap from her purse. Ivan didn't feel any pain, but he saw his leg had been crushed, and he began to panic and tremble. He screamed for help. He had never used the f-word, but in that moment he did, shouting it like an old drunk.

A jeep carrying Russian military doctors stopped. They adjusted his tourniquet and administered an injection of pain medication. I don't hurt, Ivan said. You are in shock. If you fall asleep or pass out you will die, one of the doctors told him. He called an ambulance. When it arrived, paramedics put Ivan's mother and stepfather onto litters. A second ambulance picked up Ivan. He hummed the Ukrainian anthem to stay awake. A paramedic sang with him.

At the hospital in Buryn a doctor prepared Ivan for surgery. A nurse tied his arms down to prevent convulsions when the doctor cut the bone. Someone brought a blanket. *You have a cool tattoo*, he told the anesthesiologist. She laughed. She stuck a needle in his left arm. He felt as if he was floating underwater.

Give me a saw, a doctor said.

IN GEORGIA, Oksana and her family listened to news about Ukraine. Commentators suspected Ukraine might find itself in a situation similar to where Georgia found itself in 2008, when Russia invaded and occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Oksana began to worry. Sometimes, she told her children, we need to know the history of other countries to understand what can happen to our own. She and Anatolii decided to postpone their return to Ukraine.

The morning the war started, Oksana woke up early in their hotel and read messages on her phone. Multiple texts from friends told her the Russians had invaded. Oksana called her parents in Kharkiv. How are you? Be safe. Get in a basement, she urged her. Oksana, Anatolii, and their children joined other Ukrainians in Georgia and collected medicine, clothes, and food to send back home.

Two weeks later, they left for Bulgaria to stay with the godfather of Oksana's son, Mark. In the capital, Sofia, they attended rallies in support of Ukraine near the Russian consulate until the foreign ministry asked Russia to close its diplomatic mission. A small win. However, Oksana and Anatolii felt uneasy. They did not want to return to Ukraine and put their children at risk. Neither did they want to stay in Bulgaria or the Baltic countries close to Russia. They had friends in California who offered to sponsor them. Oksana and Anatolii applied for humanitarian parole online and were approved.

In March, they flew to Mexico City and took a bus to Tijuana and the U.S. border.

AS THE DAY progresses, lines of cars with short-tempered drivers congest the roads into Balboa Park. The band plays, Nich yaka misyachna, "What a Moonlit Night," a Ukrainian love song. When they finish, the keyboard player shouts, Support Ukraine! Ruslan and a few scattered voices cheer.

After they left Kharkiv, Ruslan and his family spent two nights with his uncle in the city of Dnipro. Two days later they drove farther west to the cities of Uman and Chernivtsi. Just as Ruslan was about to run out of gas outside of Uman, a gas station attendant filled his tank without charge. Stay safe, he said. A farmer offered him milk. Just take it, please, he insisted. A woman gave them chicken and potatoes. Good luck, she said.

Ruslan rented an apartment in Chernivtsi. Prices had skyrocketed. The landlord charged them $1,000 a month—$700 more than they had paid in Kharkiv. A school across the street had been turned into a shelter. People washed their laundry and cooked meals in the playground. Sirens warned of missile attacks. Serhii and Nastya spent days hiding in the bathroom. Ruslan continued to work remotely.

They stayed in Chernivtsi for five months before Ruslan decided they should move to the safety of the United States. Daryna told him she could sponsor them. Viktoriia wept over the decision. Her parents remained in Kharkiv. They were both sixty-nine years old. It would be

hard to start a new life at our age, they told her. You go. We'll stay. It is better this way. Will I see you again? Viktoriia asked. It's impossible to say, her mother replied.

In San Diego, Ruslan found a job as an IT engineer. He works from an office until seven at night, five days a week. Serhii and Nastya attend Nipaquay Elementary School just five minutes from their one-bedroom apartment. Ruslan and Viktoriia sleep in the living room, the children in the bedroom. A map of Ukraine hangs on the living room wall.

Viktoriia calls her parents daily. They tell her they are well. They have grown accustomed to the bombing. Some mornings after Serhii and Nastya get up, they ask for their mother. Ruslan tells them: she is in the bedroom crying.

At night, Serhii dreams of bombs falling; Nastya dreams of hiding in the bathroom. Ruslan never remembers his dreams, but he wakes up thinking of Ukraine. He is constantly on his phone hoping to hear good news.

IVAN OVERHEARS a tour guide explain the history of Balboa Park to a group of tourists. A woman notices Ivan. What happened? she asks him. Ukraine, he says. Oh, she responds and walks away. He looks at his leg. He tries to be positive. I'm different. I'm special. Little things make him happy: I will have only one sock to wash now.

When he woke up from surgery, his mother was sitting by his bed in a wheelchair.

What happened? he asked.

A Russian tank hit us, she said.

She told him she was bruised but otherwise unhurt. Her back ached and it hurt to walk. Ivan asked about his stepfather. He died, she said. After a moment Ivan said, he can no longer beat me. His mother looked away.

A few days later, his stump started feeling very heavy and hot. It throbbed with what felt like electric currents. His body shook and he could not sleep. His brain, a doctor told him, did not understand he was missing part of his body and wanted to connect with the absent limb. We call this phantom pain, he said. Ivan imagined his amputated leg was red and the rest of his body was blue. He told himself, the red part is gone. In this way, he thought, he would convince his brain the leg had been removed. Within a week the pain stopped, and he learned to use crutches.

When he slept, he felt suspended between past and present. You will open your eyes, and all of this will be over, a voice told him in his

dreams. You will be home. One night, he woke up to use the bathroom and forgot he had only one leg. He tried to stand and fell. His stump hurt, but he hadn't broken the skin. He lay on the floor weeping. After he got back to sleep, he heard the noise of tank engines in his dreams. He jolted awake, gasping for breath. The phantom pain returned, and he shouted and rolled around. Doctors gave him pain medication. He inserted earplugs and played iTunes to drown out his dreams.

He stayed in the hospital until the end of June 2022 when he was sent to a rehabilitation center. By then his mother had returned home to look after his siblings. She also had to organize the funeral for their stepfather. She tried to visit Ivan once a week. Sometimes she took a bus. Sometimes a friend drove her. She stayed only for a few minutes at a time. Ivan held her responsible for the cruelty of his stepfather and had little to say to her.

The Ukrainian Embassy in Washington, D.C.; the San Diego–based House of Ukraine; and the Right to Walk Foundation partnered to bring Ivan and other injured Ukrainians to San Diego to be fitted with prosthetic limbs. Hospital staff drove him to Warsaw for the flight to California. On the way he looked out the window, watching for tanks.

THE BAND PLAYS its final folk song, I Shumyt, I Hude, "Who Will Take Me Home?" Fog inches into the city, hinting of cooler air. Ruslan does not live far from the park. He has no regrets. He knows Viktoriia misses her family, but when he sees Serhii and Nastya smiling he knows he made the right decision to leave Ukraine. Serhii and Nastya will enter the third grade in the fall. The school principal told Ruslan: your kids speak English like they were born here. Yes, Ruslan said. But they speak Ukrainian at home.

Oksana and Anatolii leave the park. They enjoyed the music. A little loud and out of tune but nice. Here in California, Oksana knows her family is safe. But poor. She has known dark times before. When Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, life became very difficult. Ukraine was not a strong country, and many problems came with freedom. The economy collapsed. Her mother and father worked but weren't paid for months. After 2000, life got better. Oksana was just eight at that time and doesn't remember too much other than the worried expressions on the faces of her parents. Despite the problems, she recalls everyone celebrating their freedom. She and Anatolii celebrate theirs here. Two years have passed since they fled

Ukraine. They must reinvent themselves and become new people and learn new systems for health care, housing, and employment. It will take more time.

Ivan watches the musicians pack up their instruments. The boys he knows at school want to play guitars and be rock stars. Parties, alcohol, girls, guitars, and f-words. They don't ask him about Ukraine. That's fine. He doesn't like to talk about it. Between his stepfather's beatings and the war, he has few good memories. He calls home but not often. He has nothing to say to his mother and siblings. They are there, and he is here. His mother did not object when he told her he wanted to remain in California. He lives with a legal guardian, although he can look for his own apartment now that he is eighteen. He speaks English but not to his satisfaction. He studies at school with other immigrants. What kind of words are you having trouble with today? they ask one another.

He often thinks about the military vehicle that struck him and his parents. He doubts it was a tank. A tank would have crushed him. Whatever it was, it took his leg but spared the rest of him. If he had not been hit, he would still be in Ukraine and in the army. He might even be dead, killed in combat.

When he was in the fourth grade, his class had an opportunity to visit the United States, but his mother refused to let him go. She feared he would not want to return. Furious, Ivan yelled at her, I would give one of my legs to go there!

Now here he is in California without his right leg. He survived. He has his life. He got his wish.