

## The Desire for Blossoms of Hope:

Her name was Anastasiya. She was Mama's friend. She possessed a smile so beautiful that when others looked at her, they were transported to evoke true sunshine, and she was smiling whenever she could. Her eyes were gifted with a calming hope. I looked into her eyes when I clinged to feel that hope. Anastasiya would wear her loose chocolate stained hair in a single braid at the back, and wrapped it in a kohkum scarf, and when I requested for her to do my hair in a similar way so that we could be matching, she would thoughtfully do so, and wrapped my hair in the very best of her scarves. The ones with the intricate patterns, rich in the inextricable connection to creativity with our culture, that she only savoured to wear on special days. Each time she plaited my hair, she would remind me that Mama used to wear her hair just like what she was doing for me, when she too was a little girl. Anastasiya would wear bright colours each day. She would teach me about how colours mirror feelings, and to complement this she would epitomise to me the wonders presented in the blue and yellow vyshyvankas that she wore. Blue and yellow were her favourite colours, she told me. The blue symbolises the skies encompassing us, and how the sky translates peace for what it has in store for us today through its luxury of deep colour, and the yellow symbolises the seemingly endless fields of wheat, a true treasure handed to us by the lovely lands which we condone our gratitude for. Anastasiya would adopt the sunshine that she possessed within her on her travels to inland Bucha. I would ask Anastasiya, "Kudy ty desh", and each time she would hold my hand and squeeze it tightly within hers, and her response would be just as calm as when I had asked her the previous day, "Osoblyve mistse, de ya pratsyuyu." Her smile made me believe her, and I kept her words. Sometimes Anastasiya wouldn't look directly into my eyes when she answered, however, which was something I did not understand but didn't have it in me to question, so I would leave it for my own recreational contemplation.

Anastasiya would traverse to me through her meticulous consideration when crafting words together the true art of storytelling, where she would describe to me the wonderful journeys that she would make on each day while I stayed at home. I wanted to grow up and be just like her. There was the day that Anastasiya had found a baby piglet on the street, and as soon as she had seen it before her, had picked it up and wrapped it loosely in a handkerchief she had neatly folded in her sweater pocket, which she then took to an

animal rescue place, and then promised to me that they would take great care of it as she had reviewed them caring for the piglet for the entirety of that day. There was the day that Anastasiya had spent her morning consumed by her love for dandelions, and so acted on the spontaneity of her heart by making the day's plans dedicated to the collection of these dandelions, placing each delicately in her woven basket, attuning to nature enveloping her. She had found a little green reserve, secluded from the busy outside, where she found many dandelions sitting and ready to be picked within the overgrown grass. There was also the day that Anastasiya had brought home a yabluchnyk, a homemade tea cake interlaced with apple and honey, which formulated a sweetness that reminded me of when we would bake together, Anastasiya, Mama, and I, on the evenings when Papa would arrive back home from his week absent at work. Papa would wear green and black clothing, and I would often tell him to wear brighter clothes just like Anastasiya. Sometimes this made him upset, but I didn't understand why.

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I didn't understand why. Why Anastasiya wouldn't share her stories with me anymore. I didn't understand why. Why Anastasiya wouldn't wear her bright-coloured clothing anymore, and why when I looked into her closet, the bright clothing had left without a trace. I didn't understand why. Why Anastasiya wouldn't smile and look into my eyes anymore when I asked her where her journey would lead her for the storytelling she owed me for the day, or why I sometimes found myself thinking whether those stories were really true or not. Why she and Mama would leave me for extended amounts of time without the provision of reasoning. Why Papa didn't come home last weekend, and why I have been told not to hope for his arriving for an unchecked time. Why I haven't seen Mama smile for a profound time, even when I recite jokes to her that used to always make her laugh herself silly. Why Mama argues with Anastasiya. I don't like the sound of arguing very much. I don't understand why these school holidays have endured this long, and why Anastasiya has told me that these holidays will be much longer than normal, but I am not allowed to go outside or visit my friends for play. Or why there are strange siren sounds outside my window, and why each time it seems like the sirens are coming closer and closer. Or why my heart skips a beat when I feel the floor

below me move sometimes. I don't understand why Anastasiya, Mama, and I don't leave the basement anymore.

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She slowly walks. One foot placed in front of the other. Small steps. It was necessary that she relearn how to walk, it was something that had become foreign to her following the prolonged hours she had spent within the encased confinements of Anastasiya's basement.

It was a dark place, the basement. With its wood-panelled walls stripped bare of the ornamentations that used to call it home, its black-taped windows still possessing the hope of waiting for a single stream of light to work its way through, and its low ceiling of which bestowed any of the contents of the basement with a suffocation to their hope. Its contents, consequently, were not supported to be legitimate for a conscious being, with the space being so small that it neglected any movement. It would, however, have to make do. That was, however, the issue. Anastasiya promised me that we would always have sunshine to guide us. Anastasiya promised Mama that we would always be safe. Anastasiya promised Papa that she would always look after us, and that everything would be okay.

Anastasiya was to pick Mama and I up in her van from outside our basement on her way back from work. She took this van out everyday. She took this route to get to her work everyday. We were to leave Bucha.

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Dearest Hope,

You failed Anastasiya. You failed Mama. You failed me. It is only now that I am bestowed with a complete understanding to piece together what was truly taking place on March 5th, 2023 and the devastations that were unfolding just outside of the windows of my own home in Bucha. I am disappointed in you, Hope.

When Anastasiya came to pick up my Mama and I, when we were on our way in her vehicle to locate a safe

place outside of our home, Anastasiya took us through a street so common to her everyday travels, Yablunska Street. It was here that as we turned to intersect this street, a troupe of armed Russian soldiers ran up from behind a house, ran onto the street, quickly opened fire, and our van burst into thriving flames.

You have robbed me, Hope, of my consciousness, but you cannot rob me of the Hope that still prevails within the blue skies and yellow wheat fields of Ukraine. We will not stoop so low as to the extent of losing our capability to trust in what we dream for as a better future. Hope will remember our beautiful traditions which will be kept close and illuminated like a light within our souls. Hope will formulate the forgiveness of what has been left in our strength to subvert into forgiveness of what has happened to us. Hope will promise a future where sunshine is restored to the dark monstrosities of conflicted minds, and where this sunshine will blossom within the hearts of each and every living person irrespective of differences which seem to divide us from sanity. Hope, I still believe in you.

Anna Mishchenko, 14 years old