

## Davyd's World turned upside down

"We've got ten minutes until Sunday School starts, just enough time to race you downstairs, through the basement and back up here." Sergiy threw that challenge to ten-year-old Davyd, his arms crossed and tie loosened. The old Ukrainian church building in the western part of the country was always so cold. They needed a race to get warmer. Perfect excuse if one of the adults asked why they were racing. "Are you ready?"

"No way, you're one year older than me, I get a five second head start," Davyd said as he looked around to see if his parents were around. The coast was clear so he nodded to Sergiy and took off down the stairs. But then it got a little tricky sprinting through the basement. Someone had stacked empty boxes between tables, on the tables and on a counter top where they set out bakery on holidays. It would be hard to walk, let alone run between the tables.

Sergiy's voice came booming from the bottom of the stairs. Here was his chance to throw the race. He laughed as he knocked a few boxes off a nearby table to totally obstruct the path and dashed to the other side of the basement.

"What did you do, you sewer rat?" Sergiy called to him.

Davyd laughed so hard it made his climb up the stairs almost impossible. When he got to the entryway of the church, huffing and puffing, his sister stood, hands on hips, wearing her worst-ever scowl.

"What are doing Davyd? And what will Mom and Dad say about it?"

Davyd took a few seconds to catch his breath then told her "They will say it is good to exercise. Makes big muscles."

"Davyd, you are the biggest sewer rat in all of L'viv. No, all of Ukraine," Sergiy shouted when he got to the top of the stairs." He leaned against a wall, breathing hard. A minute later, he smiled and looked at Davyd's sister "Nadia, you had better get some big balls of cheese at the store this week to feed your brother the sewer rat, and maybe some rat poison too."

Nadia rolled her eyes. "Don't be late for Sunday School, either of you rodents."

Davyd imitated a rat by showing his teeth and making little biting movements. Sergiy did the same then broke into such a hard laughing spell he doubled over.

The boys headed to the room where they had Sunday School, making more rat biting movements, and almost running into Davyd's father and one of the men that sang in the choir. But Davyd's father said nothing. That was weird. Only something very serious could keep his father from correcting him.

"What's with your dad?" Sergiy asked.

"The war is usually the answer to those questions."

Sergiy whipped off his tie. "Same thing with my dad."

"I almost want things to go back to the way they were, even if I sure got in trouble a lot." Davyd pulled out a chair and sat down. "A couple days ago, my dad was talking on his cell and he didn't say anything when I spilled a glass a milk on the table where Nadia was doing her homework. She yelled so loud they could have heard her in Hungary. My dad didn't even look at me. Weird, really weird."

Sergiy sat next to his friend, set an elbow on the table and set his chin on his upturned hand. "I know my dad is worried Russia moving into this area. I wonder if they'll have to go into the army. I think my dad wants to fight for Ukraine, but he wants to be with us."

"I think both are dads are too old for the army."

"No, they're not," Sergiy said and raised his head. "They even want guys in their forties and fifties."

"I think my dad has to stay and work at his bakery. An army marches on its stomach," Davyd said, then stood and marched around the Sunday School room. He almost ran into their teacher when she walked into the room, hands full with a box filled with some sort of costume.

A few minutes later, all the seats were filled and Sergiy read the story in Genesis about Joseph and his brothers meeting in Egypt after years of separation. Davyd liked that story, dreaming for a minute what it would be like to be his older sister's boss. But a minute later, he pictured his father in a uniform, standing by their apartment door, ready to go off to war. Their lives could become hard in many ways.

On the way home, his dad didn't say much and his mother didn't even ask him about Sunday School. When Davyd asked his father if he could be forced to join the army or if he could refuse, his sister poked him in the arm and put a finger over her sealed lips. Davyd's heart started pounding.

"What did you ask?" his father said when he stopped at a red traffic light.

"Oh nothing. Are we going to Grandma's place for lunch today?"

"No, we have a meeting of sorts. Just lunch at home then me and your mother will go out."

Davyd saw his parents exchange glances. His mother's eyebrows were close together and she frowned, just like when he'd really done something terrible. Should he ask what the meeting was about? His sister would probably poke him in the arm again.

All that week there were more hushed phone calls, a few more meetings and more serious looks between his parents. This was turning into a great mystery. He got so desperate to find out what was happening, he even asked his sister one evening when they were alone.

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good. I saw Mom kneeling by her bed praying yesterday.”

“Shouldn’t we ask them?”

“No, they’ll tell us eventually. You know how parents try to solve problems before they tell their kids about stuff. We should pray too.”

“How do we pray when we don’t know what is wrong?”

“Then just ask God to help Mom and Dad. And maybe pray too for God to protect all Ukrainians. So many are fighting already, thousands have left for Europe or other places. But don’t forget, God is over Russia.”

That Sunday, there were even more adults in the hallways of church after the service. Most of them were talking softly so Davyd couldn’t hear what they were saying. They all looked so serious. After Bible Study and Sunday School, Davyd’s father asked him to follow him to the church basement. Why would he want him to do that?

“Grab a couple of these boxes and carry them to our car?”

“What are the boxes for, Dad?”

“We’ll talk at home.”

Davyd lifted two boxes from the table and when he got to the doorway, Sergiy rounded the corner.

“Hey sewer rat, did you find out what the boxes are for?” Sergiy asked.

“No clue. Guess they’ll tell us when we get home.”

“Call me when you find out. My parents aren’t telling us anything.”

Davyd climbed the stairs, trying not to drop the boxes when a little kid squeezed by him on her way to the basement. A chill went up his spine when he reached the top of the stairs and saw others holding boxes. *Dear God, please don’t let my dad go to war. We need him with us. And please keep all Ukrainians safe. I’m sorry, God, that I haven’t been praying more for the soldiers and the others.*

Sergiy’s sister, Daryna, was sitting on the steps of the church. The wind was strong and she didn’t have a coat on. Davyd thought about dropping one of the boxes on her head but when he noticed she was shivering, he decided he’d better be nice instead.

“Don’t let the wind carry you away, little girl.”

“I’m not little!”

“But the wind is big and strong. It could even carry away a medium-sized girl.”

Daryna crossed her arms and stuck out her chin.

Wow, if a nine-year-old girl was serious, something big was brewing.

After a silent ride home in the car, Davyd's family quietly walked up the three flights of stairs to their apartment, each of them carrying two boxes.

They stacked the boxes in their living room. Davyd's father sat on the couch next to Davyd's mother, then Davyd and his sister Nadia sat down, almost at the same instant. Davyd felt like his guts had turned into gelatin. His heart pounded and his mouth dried up in a moment.

"You both probably know something has been going on. We couldn't say anything for a little while," Davyd's father said then leaned forward. "We have decided that you children will move to America with your mother.

"Really?" Nadia asked, leaning forward too. "When are we leaving?"

"We don't know right now. We have paperwork to arrange. You Uncle and Aunt in Chicago in the state called Illinois, have agreed to sponsor us. Your mother will work in their bakery. We need to start packing so we are ready. You three will have to learn English."

"But we have been studying English in school for two years," Nadia offered.

"Yes," her mother answered, "but now we have to know it very well. We will study, study, study and try to speak only English at home. But at school, when you are with your friends, not a word about the move."

"Can I tell Sergiy?" Davyd asked.

"Yes, but wait," his father told him. "Sergiy and Darya are also going to move to America with their mother. But they haven't told them yet. Sergiy's mother is an accountant so it may be hard for her to find work until she knows English."

"They are going to Chicago too?"

"Yes, not too far from where you'll stay. Sergiy's mother has a cousin that lives there."

"Are there other families we know that are moving?" Nadia asked.

"Yes, there's four families from the church. All of us have agreed to settle in the same neighborhood where there are a lot of Ukrainian immigrants. There is a Lutheran church in the general area, so you will have church like we do here, but it's in a big building. Your uncle told me too about the stores, also in gigantic buildings with lots of windows. You'll all have to work hard but your future will be better in America, or at least safer."

Davyd had his doubts about things being better. They'd always lived in L'viv and they had everything they needed. They didn't need to leave Ukraine. Big churches and big stores

weren't that big a deal. Davyd got up "To get something to drink," he said, but really, he just wanted to be alone and think about everything. The life they had in Ukraine had been good. Living in Chicago might be a good thing for Nadia, but to Davyd, it seemed like the whole world had been turned upside down.