

Daryna says good-bye to a little Friend

Daryna finished folding another shirt, then wiped the tears off her face. She didn't want to go to America, no matter how much they tried to make it sound like the most perfect place in the world. Not if it meant leaving her guinea pig, Max, in L'viv.

She had to carry out the plan she devised when her parents told her that she and her mother and brother were moving and that there were "absolutely no guinea pigs permitted on the airplane." Didn't they understand that this was so unfair to her?

One more pair of pants and one more book. There, now she was all set. That night, after everyone else was asleep, she would move Max to the little cage her brother Sergiy made for travel. The cage would go in her mother's shopping cart with wheels and canvas sides.

Her small, pink suitcase had wheels so she didn't need to carry anything. As soon as midnight came, she could pull the shopping cart and her suitcase through the front door of their apartment, move them one by one down the stairs, and leave for her grandmother's deserted little house just outside L'viv, Ukraine. Her granny lived in a nursing home now and they hadn't sold her house. Daryna found the key a couple days earlier. And she knew the way there so well, she could probably find it with her eyes closed.

That evening, after supper, Daryna grabbed a few cabbage rolls and pieces of bread after she brought the serving dishes into the kitchen. There, now she'd have food for the next day. Her grandmother had left food in the cupboards in case the family decided to spend a weekend there. Her granny always prepared lots of preserves like canned peaches, pickles and green beans in vinegar. Not her favorite foods but it would keep her stomach full. Daryna checked that all out the last time her family went there.

"Don't forget to wash the pans on the stove," her mother called out from the living room. "There's a big pan with more cabbage rolls in the oven. Put those cabbage rolls in a leftover container and put that in the refrigerator.

Good, more cabbage rolls she could take with her. Daryna put a few cabbage rolls in a piece of tin foil and slipped it in her pocket. They were so warm and smelled so good. Oh, better put those in her suitcase right away.

"Sweetheart, could you bring me a cup of coffee?" her father called out from the living area.

"In a moment, Papa." Daryna put the foil packet with cabbage rolls on the counter and got her father some coffee. She pulled a few cookies out of a package and put them on the saucer where she'd set the cup of coffee. They would think she was happy if she was extra nice, and never suspect that she was up to something.

"Mama, would you like coffee and some cookies too?" she asked as she handed her father the saucer and cup.

“No, I don’t want to weigh down the plane when we take off next week. I’ll have extra cookies when we get to Chicago. It sounds like Nadia and Davyd’s family there have a very nice bakery.”

Chicago, next week. All those words made her stomach turn.

“Mama, will we ever come back to L’viv to visit, after the war is over?” Daryna’s brother Sergiy asked. He looked up from his phone then was back to texting a moment later.

“I hope so, but the tickets cost a lot. So, not too often. But for a while, there will be war here, or at least the possibility.”

“You will probably be pretty busy for some time,” Daryna’s father added. “You all have to learn English, and you and your brother will be in school.”

“I’ve had three years of English and I know lots of words and phrases. Do I have to go to the English language school too?” Sergiy asked.

Her father dunked a cookie in his coffee then took a bite. “We’ll see after they talk with you and your mother.”

English, another word Daryna didn’t want to hear or think about. Why couldn’t they speak Ukrainian in America?”

Daryna returned to the kitchen to wash the dishes. When her brother came in to dry them, he held up each piece of silverware and every dish and told her what the word for it was in English. He made her repeat each one after him. She did but after each word made a fist in the dishwasher and vowed, *I’m never saying that English word again.*

She hoped the English lesson was finished when she’d washed everything, but Sergiy moved on to tell her the word for chair, table, light, stove, sink, and anything else that caught his eye. The clock struck 8 o’clock and the clock gong sounded. Four more hours of staying awake. Then all those hours of walking.

Her mother used to tell her not to have a cola in the evening or it would keep her awake. As soon as her brother finished drying dishes and left the kitchen, Daryna poured herself a big glass of cola. She drained the glass then went into her room to study.

A little while later, her mother came in with a snack and kissed the top of her head. “I’m so proud of you, honey. I know this move is hard for you. But I’ll be with you and your brother in Chicago and we will help each other. You’ll make new friends. Maybe after we’re settled, you can get a new guinea pig. You’ll see, you’ll be okay.” Another kiss on the top of her head.

Maybe she shouldn’t run away. Her mother would be very upset, very sad. And when she got lonely, her mother, father, and brother would be far away in America. Who would she visit with and who would help her?

But her parents knew she always had trouble making friends. She tried to be nice to people, to share things, to help other kids with their science homework. But she was shy. When the other kids were choosing teammates, she would always be overlooked until the end. It was very disappointing. No one was mean to her they just didn’t seem to notice her. But Max

always squeaked when he saw her. When she held him, he sometimes made a rumbling sound and his body sort of vibrated. He wouldn't take a treat from anyone but her. She might be able to get another guinea pig in Chicago, but it wouldn't be the same. It was impossible to replace Max. No, she didn't want another guinea pig.

Daryna closed her book and picked up Max. She sat on her bed and gently smoothed the fur on top of his head. His eyes got a film over them. Was he crying. "Oh Max, you just know, don't you? You don't want to go to my cousin's house either, do you?" Daryna kissed the top of his head. "I think you need a piece of carrot, don't you?" She put him back in his cage and broke a piece of carrot from the carrot stick her mother had included in her snack. He took it from her and enthusiastically nibbled away at it.

Back at her desk chair, Daryna opened her book again but tears dripped down her cheek so she closed it. If Max went to her cousin, he'd never get carrot pieces or kale or anything else. Probably just hay and pellets. That would be like just bread and cheese for the rest of your life. Almost like being a prisoner. She had to take him to her grandmother's house. It was the only way she could be sure he'd be okay.

What would happen when she didn't show up for school the next day? They'd probably call her parents and they would go look for her. She'd have to hide in her granny's basement the next afternoon. She could put Max's cage under the steps. Better take his bottle for drinking out of his cage. He often banged it against the cage when the water didn't come out quick enough. Better give him extra pellets and carrots so he wouldn't squeak or squawk.

When the clock bonged out that it was 9 o'clock, Daryna's eyelids felt like they had weights on them. How would she stay awake another three hours? Maybe if she took a little nap and had some more cola. But an hour after the extra cola, she was even more tired. When she closed her eyes for a few minutes, her head dropped onto her desk. Her mother came in and when she saw Daryna asleep on her desk, insisted she go to bed.

Please God, help me wake up at midnight so I can leave. You know I love my guinea pig and have to take care of him. If I'm doing something bad, please forgive me, God.

The clock made its usual sound at midnight and Daryna woke up. But a minute later, her eyelids were so heavy, she let them fall. She'd leave at 1 o'clock instead. She heard the bong at 1 o'clock and got up and dressed. She tiptoed into the kitchen and quietly pulled more carrots out of the refrigerator and dropped them into a plastic bag.

Back in her room, Daryna slipped a sweater over her shirt. She lifted Max into his travel cage then lifted it into the shopping cart. After wrapping his food in a cloth bag, she set it on top of his cage. She rolled the shopping cart out to the entryway then got her suitcase. She slowly opened the front door and moved her things out onto the landing. Just as she planned, she moved her things down the steps, one at a time. When she got out onto the street, she couldn't believe how dark it was. Why didn't she think to bring a flashlight? It was going to be a long, long walk to her granny's place.

Five blocks later, she was tired and stopped at a park to sit on a bench. She pulled a carrot out of the plastic bag and broke off a piece for Max. She could hear him crunching from a meter away. Would he give her away when she hid him at her granny's? She moved two meters away and then three. He sure was loud. Maybe she'd just give him pellets then. She packed a whole sack of hay and pellets.

Daryna slowly stood and stretched. Back on the road. She trudged another block, then another. It took a lot of effort just to keep her eyes open. Was it possible to sleep while she walked? When she found another bench, she'd set down for a little while. Daryna yawned then jumped when a headlight came from behind her. She froze.

The light stopped moving and she heard a car door open then close. *Dear God, please keep me safe. Jesus, help me and Max.*

"What are you doing out at night, little lady?"

Daryna turned around and saw a policeman standing with his hands on his hips. "Where is your home, little one?"

There was no way she could run, not if she was going to take Max and her suitcase with her. She needed both. Better just give up. But then she'd have to give up for good because her family would know her plan and never give her another chance to run away.

She told the policeman her address and soon they were at her family's apartment. Her mother and father apologized to the policeman many times. But they didn't seem angry with her. When she explained why she ran away, her mother cried and kissed the top of her head again. She put Max back in his regular cage and gave him another piece of carrot.

Her brother got up and when he heard what happened said "You're goofy, the goofiest sister in the whole world. Where were you going to live? Who was going to get you food and clothes and keep Granny's place warm and safe? Goofy girl."

Her father said "You are very fortunate a policeman was the one who saw you first. Thanks to Jesus you are okay."

Her mother moaned at that thought. "Your cousin Ludmilla will take care of Max, just like we planned."

"But she already has a guinea pig. Max will never be her favorite."

"She may grow to love Max too," her father answered. Parents love all their children.

"And Max will have a friend," her mother added.

"That's true. I always wanted him to have a guinea pig friend."

"That is exactly what we want for you, Daryna. New friends, new school, new opportunities."

"But not a new mother, or father, or brother," Sergiy added. "Because you've already got the best."

"Best, but goofy too," Daryna added as she slipped off her sweater. Max was chewing on a stick of hay. "Ludmilla can send me pictures and tell me how Max is doing. And I can pray

for Max too.” She slipped him another piece of carrot and headed to her room. “Good night best mother, best father, best goofy brother.”

Daryna put Max back in his cage then sat on her bed just looking at Max. She hated leaving her home, her guinea pig, her father. There was nothing good about war.

She cried a little bit then changed into her pajamas. She could finally let her eyelids close and go to sleep. She shut off the light next to her bed. “Dear Jesus, please help Max. Make Ludmilla love him. And take good care of my daddy. I’m glad you don’t need to sleep. Good night, Jesus.”