

The Road out of Ukraine

“We must leave, Symona, (see-moh-nah) now. The Russians are in our backyard.”

Larysa (Lah-ris-ha) heard her mother sobbing, no words, just heart-breaking crying. Her parents must have waited until Larysa and her brother were in bed to have the talk. Usually she would be asleep for a good hour, but all evening she knew something bad was happening and couldn't sleep.

At school that day, a lot of kids sat at their desk, arms folded, face pale. Phones stayed tucked away in pockets or backpacks. Between classes, teachers stood around in little groups, whispering, glancing at students from time to time. She didn't have any homework but couldn't be happy about that oversight. Who knew if they'd even have classes any longer.

Her father broke the silence in the living room. “There's no time for tears. We've got to pack up tonight. We'll tell Larysa and Vitaliy (vee-TAH-leeey) in the morning. You pack a suitcase for yourself, maybe go into their room later, with a flashlight, and pack clothes for them.”

“Larysa is twelve, she will want to pack her own bag. Oh, my babies. Where will we go, how will they have a life?”

“We will take it one day at a time, one moment at a time.”

More sobbing. Larysa held her breath. What would happen to her? To her little brother, her mother, cousins, father, aunts, uncles, friends? She pulled her blanket up to her neck and shivered. Her father would have to stay behind, just like most of the men in Ukraine.

“Stepan (ste-pahn), you won't be with us, you can't help us.” More crying. That had to be the saddest sound in the world. Larysa's throat tightened and a moment later her cheeks were wet. Should she go into the living room and try to comfort her mother? How could she be a help when she didn't know what to say?

The light under her door grew dim. Her father must have turned off a light. She could just barely hear him talking. He must be close to her mother, maybe hugging her, holding her tight. Why did Russia attack them? They hadn't done anything. Why had God let this happen to her family? There were families all over Ukraine in the same situation. For weeks everyone talked about the Russian army not wanting to fight any more wars, how poor Russia was even though they talked like a bunch of bullies.

Her father's phone rang its silly song. Who would be calling so late? He spoke too softly to understand. Could there be someone calling to help? Or maybe calling for help. Her grandparents had no way out if they didn't come along. Her mother's parents lived in Germany with her aunt and uncle so they'd all be fine.

Larysa rolled over. The wind picked up and leafless trees were frantically waving back and forth outside her window. That was how she felt. But trees had roots and soon she

wouldn't have any. 11:37 shined in the dark from her alarm clock. Might as well shut that off. There'd be no school or if there was, she and her brother wouldn't be going. She hopped out of bed and turned it off. She got a chill from the cold floor. Better get back in bed. Or should she pack? Larysa ran a finger over a nesting doll her grandmother had given her for her seventh birthday. She didn't play with them but why leave them there for someone to blow up or burn? Should she pack before it was official that they were leaving? Why wait? She grabbed her backpack and pulled out the books and a notebook. She stacked them on her desk.

From the living room her father's voice rang out "Oh, that's wonderful. Yes, yes, they'll be ready."

What was going on? Did they have a ride out of Ukraine? With whom? If only she could whip open her door and announce she'd heard they were fleeing their home and going somewhere, going soon. Should she pack for warm weather or scarves and sweaters?

Larysa tiptoed toward her bedroom door. The floor was so cold, she pulled one foot up so it could warm up a bit. After a minute she'd raise the other. Meanwhile, why were there no voices? Did her parents know she was eavesdropping?

"That was pastor, he's got his van filled with fuel and someone from the Lutheran Church in Romania will meet you and the kids at the border."

"Stepan, it's a miracle. If only you could come."

"There is no way I can leave the country. But the three of you should be safe in Romania by the start of next week. For now, that is enough good news."

Larysa dropped her raised foot and crouched down. It was really happening. They were going to be leaving, going to Romania. Her father would stay, stay by himself, maybe become a soldier and fight for his country, fight for his life. Larysa wrapped her arms around her lower legs and rested her head on her knees. Socks and shoes, she needed warm stuff. Romania had a lot of mountains. Late February would be cold there for at least a few more months.

"Start packing Symona. Then you'll be done by the time we tell the kids and you can focus on helping them."

"I wish I could go to the grocery store and get some food for the trip. What should I take? We'll get thirsty. There are a million things to do and so little time."

"But you and the kids have a way out of here. Thank God for that."

His phone rang again. Larysa held her breath so she could hear better. She let out a sigh and took a deep breath when her father stopped speaking. It must be her father's parents. Would they be able to come along?

It was impossible to tell what her grandparents and father had decided. Her mother and father stopped talking as they started going through things in their little apartment. They couldn't leave their grandparents behind. If young people had a hard time during a war, older people would have it even worse. Larysa's grandmother had diabetes and arthritis and her grandfather had high blood pressure. What if they ran out of their medications? What if they couldn't get enough food? It was late February, the worst time to be out of food. They couldn't even plant a garden for a couple months let alone have vegetables from it.

Larysa made her fists into balls. She wanted to scream. Her grandparents were the kindest people she knew. When she was little, she spent summers with them in their little home in a village just outside the city. Her grandmother taught her how to sew, how to play the piano, and how to make all kinds of desserts. They always had a big garden and her grandfather patiently showed her how to start all kinds of plants from seeds in little yogurt containers. They always had a watermelon patch and her grandfather would carve the green-striped fruit into all kinds of designs after her cut out all the sweet red flesh.

Her mother got up to make something in the kitchen. Larysa heard her father make a call. It sounded like he was talking to his parents. Her dad talked the foods he would bring to their house and what they would do if the bombing got too close. Her father would take care of them. Well, he would if he didn't get drafted into the army. But what would happen if their village was bombed?

Larysa put a palm on her forehead. She'd whispered a prayer but she really wanted to scream. It was all so unfair. Why hadn't God stopped the Russians?

Suddenly, she felt very tired. She crawled into her bed but laid with her eyes open for a long time.

A soft knock on the door pulled Larysa out of a bad dream. It didn't take long to remember the invasion and the plan to leave. Which was worse, the war or her dream about floating around completely alone in the Black Sea on a ship without a motor and sails?

"Sweetheart, you need to get up," Larysa's mother said as she opened the door. Her mother started to explain the decisions made but Larysa interrupted her to tell her that she'd heard it all the night before. She sat up in bed and the February chill seemed to sweep into the room. She rubbed each upper arm with the opposite hand. Where would they sleep that night?

Vitaliy stretched and swung his feet out of his bed. He smiled and looked at their mother. In an instant his grin disappeared. "Mama, what's wrong?"

"We have to leave, honey. Pick out three things you want to take with you."

Her brother seemed to freeze into a statue. He didn't move until their mother went and sat next to him on his bed. She stroked his back and kissed the top of his head. Vitaliy's lower lip trembled. Their mother pulled him close to her side, tears running down her face.

“I don’t want to go. This is our home. They can’t make us leave, mama.”

“Pray to God we can return some day. For now, it is too dangerous to stay.” Her mother wrapped her arms around Vitaliy after he dropped his head and chest down onto his upper legs.

Where was God in all this? Larysa swung her legs out of bed and rubbed her eyes with her palms, catching a few more tears. Her brother sobbed and her mother stroked his back.

They finally got down to the business of packing. For the first five minutes, every item Larysa picked up left her perplexed. How could she know it she needed something since she didn’t know exactly where they were going? In the end, she threw a couple sweaters in her little suitcase, plus a couple books she wanted to read, her cell phone, toothbrush, a necklace from her grandmother, her phone charger, a few pairs of pants, a scarf and mittens. Should she bring her diary? No, she wouldn’t want to remember any of this nightmare. At the last minute she threw it in her backpack.

The van from their church came to pick them up. Her father went on and on about how grateful they were for the ride. There were probably a lot of people that couldn’t get out of the country, or had to wait for a bus or train. They might be held up for days, some of them with little kids. Where was God in all of this?

It should have taken half a day to get to the border with Romania but the roads were clogged with vehicles of every type, even tanks. Sometimes they had to turn around and find another road because the driver heard that Russian soldiers were sighted on the road ahead.

For three days they traveled. Babies cried and mothers tried to hush them. The windows fogged up and kids drew pictures on them with their cold, white little fingers. They got out at one small village to eat and use the bathroom. It was so good to be out of the van. But when they were down the road, Vitaliy realized he’d left his teddy bear behind and cried for an hour after the driver said they couldn’t go back, they had to just keep driving.

Larysa’s mother had packed cabbage rolls and sandwiches, bottles of water and a few candy bars. Those were all gone by the time they reached the border.

Day three they crossed the border in the early morning. Larysa was so sleepy, leaving Ukraine and crossing into Romania seemed like a dream. The bright lights of Customs and Immigration burned her eyes and they had to stand in the cold, everyone huddled together for a good hour.

Just before they were moved indoors, the sun lit the sky with orange and red and yellow. A young guy with a scarf around his neck ran up to their group and said “Welcome” in Ukrainian. But then he turned and spoke to an officer in a language Larysa figured was Romanian. Must be the helper their pastor told them about.

The Romanian guy directed them to a big bus then hopped in and rode with them to a big hotel not too far from the border. At the hotel, they were led to a big room where two older ladies with rosy cheeks and big smiles were filling bowls with soup and placing them around a table. Baskets with bread and plates with cheese slices dotted the table.

After everyone had eaten, their Romanian helper tipped his head to the side and pointed a finger toward another room. He went in the other direction while the Ukrainian refugee group, all huddled and weary, filed into another room. Several other older women were there, talking quickly in Romanian. They were holding out bags of what they soon discovered to be food and other necessities. Every family or single person got one of the sacks of supplies. Larysa claimed one for her family. On the top was a packet of sandwich cookies and a couple packs of peanuts. How kind of the ladies.

When they were done claiming their gifts, the Romanian angel-man walked in, now without a cap or scarf. He had loads of dark hair that stood up like a thick forest and soft, chocolate brown eyes that looked so kind. In his arms were six or seven brand new teddy bears. The small number of children in their group gathered around him and he handed out the toys, his smile growing bigger every time he gave one to a child.

Vitaliy got his new little friend and hugged it so hard, Larysa thought the stuffing would burst out through the seams. Without thinking, Larysa hugged the bag they'd just been given. She let out a tear and a sigh. Here was God, even amid all the sorrow and unknowns and anger and loss. God had been in Ukraine and he was here in Romania, handing out bags of nuts and cookies, ladling out soup, baking bread in the middle of the night, and handing out brand new teddy bears to frightened little kids.