



Ruslan Borta

WHAT I BOUGHT BEFORE THE WAR

A Novel



Kyiv

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The timespan of this novel, *What I Bought Before the War*, essentially covers just three days: 24th February 2022, the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the previous day and the day after¹.

Four 30-year-old men, Romko, Victor, Artem and Stanislav, all grew up in Nizhyn, a modest-sized city 120km north-east of Kyiv, and were school classmates. They have since gone their separate ways, but the outbreak of war chances to bring all of them back to Nizhyn, which becomes the focal point of the action in the novel.

Each of the four friends offers his own account of his experience of one or more of the relevant February days, moving from the widespread disbelief – or subconscious denial – that Ukraine is on the brink of a comprehensive invasion, through their acceptance of and response to the fact. Each of them does his best to track what is happening in the various places about which he has reason to be particularly concerned – they include Irpin, Hostomel, Chernihiv and Kharkiv – and of course in Nizhyn, where the Russians surprise with an attack of little apparent strategic logic.

Through the four protagonists' backstories, we also learn much of the lived experience of young Ukrainians during the first three decades of their country's independence. Specifically, we learn what made the generation now resisting the invasion with such vigour and tenacity. From the two who served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the eight-year war in Donbas, what we learn includes something specifically about that too.

The story unrolls as it proceeds: many questions arising in the reader's mind not being answered until later, sometimes much later. One query that gradually assumes prominence in the course of the penultimate contribution, from Stanislav, becomes a significant mystery, one that partially endures even as the reader closes the book.

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¹ The opening section, 'ROMKO' is 18th February. That was the date on which the pro-Russian politician Nestor Shufrych was assaulted on a live TV show seen by Romko

* * * 1 * * *

ROMKO

Romko: Hello, Yulchik.

Yulchik: Hi, sweetheart.

Romko: Sorry to be so late, the roads are covered with snow. I barely made it. Are you dashing straight out?

Yulchik: Yes, I am. I have to be there at seven. Remember?

Romko: I remember. How could I forget? It's just the state of the roads... I stopped at the market and bought meat.

Yulchik smiled, as she always did when she saw a 'chicken heads' sticker on a chicken fillet.

Yulchik: You bought 'heads' again?

Romko: Yes, why not? Have you seen the prices? I don't earn enough to buy meat at meat prices.

Yulchik: Romko, you'll get caught one day.

Romko: I won't get caught... never have been yet. I'm taking care of the family budget.

Yulchik: O.K., I'm late. I'm off. I left some borscht in the fridge. Warm it up, and don't forget to give some to Maksym. Kisses...

Maksym is our son. He is nine years old.

Borscht in the fridge seemed like the only good news I had heard all day. And who but my wife would offer me such warm words?

I came home from work as hungry and as angry as a dog, and here was the freshly-made borscht. I love my wife's borscht, only she makes it so tasty. If only she had stayed to serve it for me... It's not that I'm lazy or my hands grow from the wrong place, it's just that it's so much tastier from her hands than from mine.

But I have to warm it myself, and feed our son. So much the better if he's hungry; otherwise, I will have to coax him to eat.

My wife works in a pharmacy; today on a night shift.

We have worked out a schedule, so that always one of us is at home and our son does not have to be taken to grandma and grandpa. I come home, change my clothes, and Yulchik leaves for her shift.

I said hello to the young one. I didn't ask about homework. I knew that Yulchik would have made sure everything was as it should be before she left.

I carried my shopping bags into the kitchen. I bought a lot today. I went to two different supermarkets to buy the chicken fillets with the price tag that says 'chicken heads'.

Well, you have to do something when the price of meat is as it is. Yulchik, of course, does not approve,

so I always do it when she is not around. And in various supermarkets, where I am not a regular customer.

I take the chicken meat, label it as chicken heads, and checkout on a self-service till. That way, five kilograms of meat costs less than 100 *hryvnias*. I have to feed my family, but the prices and my salary don't match-up. I don't think the businessmen behind the supermarkets will suffer much.

I sort the meat into portions and package it for the freezer. Now the freezer is full and we have enough chicken for a couple of weeks. By then, at the beginning of March, Yulchik will have her salary.

I work in the State Emergency Service Department, DSNS for short. It is a unique place. After your shift ends, they may ask you to complete some paper or help someone else.

"Romko, have you already gone home?"

"Romko, please take this to the boss."

"Romko, where is the plan that was supposed to be in this folder?"

"Is it in that folder?"

"And where is the folder?"

"On the table? But it is not on the table. Romko, please find that folder."

"And did you gather that information? Do it again, please."

“Have you gone home yet? Take ten minutes and finish the task, and then go.”

And Romko does it. Romko is sleepy, he didn't sleep half the night, but Romko is like a good soul, or a management horse, he will do everything, help with anything, and instead of collecting his money and going home at nine o'clock, Romko is still doing some bullshit until eleven o'clock.

In general, if not one thing, then another.

And then I'll go to some supermarket in Kyiv. I don't do tricks with chicken heads in my native Nizhyn. Nizhyn is a small city where everyone knows everyone, but in Kyiv no one knows anyone. I have never met anyone I know in a Kyiv supermarket.

Yulchik goes to work by minibus. Many times, I have told her to get a driving license. I say, “It's a five-minute drive to your work.” But she doesn't want to: she says that driving a car is not for her.

Perhaps she is right. Cooking is her thing. She cooks as if God has kissed her hands. To be honest, I too can cook, but I don't feel I own the kitchen. Yulchik has everything in its place: the kitchen is hers.

They say we will soon have a war. People like to talk about all kinds of horrors. Sometimes they scare everyone with a deadly virus; then with an economic crisis; and now everyone is suddenly talking about war.

I could do without any of that.

They say that Russian troops have gathered near the border; their equipment has been brought from far away; and some exercises are going on.

But, as a simple working man, I don't believe in war. Muscovites, of course, are a wild people. They constantly stick their noses in. They can't be trusted, not since they occupied Crimea.

To be honest, I used to live from pay-check to pay-check, and I still do. Nothing has changed, except that the road to Kyiv has deteriorated shockingly. I never saw such a road there in all my 30 years.

In other matters, everything is as it was. It may be someone has started to live better, and someone worse, but definitely not me.

At every turn, everyone mumbles about that war. They say that Russia is going to attack us. Have the Muscovites lost their brains? Did the news not reach them that no one here is waiting for them with flowers? There was some fun on Facebook at one time – that we would meet them with carnations and peonies.

Who would do that?

All the talk about war has already got to me. Wherever you look, whichever shop you might go into, everyone is buzzing about it. 'There will be...,' and 'There won't be...' 'But they say it will happen...'

And others say it won't

The borscht is ready. I pour some for myself and some for Maksym. We eat. It feels good.

Maybe I was angry because of hunger? I haven't eaten anything since this morning.

I still need to see what to cook for Maksym in the morning. The refrigerator is empty.

"Maksym, would you like me to buy some sausages for breakfast?"

"Yes, please."

That's good. I put on a jacket and check how much money I have. Not a lot, and it's only one week since I last received my salary. We have to somehow get through to Yulchik's next pay-day.

Prices are very high for everything now.

I go down to the street.

Where do other people get their money from? Take my downstairs neighbour. He was my classmate at school; now he has a furniture business in Kyiv. Two years ago, he did a 'European' renovation in his apartment, but then moved out. So why did he do the repairs? No one knows. Maybe he wants to sell the apartment, but I have not seen any advertisement.

Once, I asked him how much it would cost to put a wardrobe in our bedroom. He said 10,000 *hryvnias*. That's almost my whole salary, damn it. Where do people get such money?

But they will never tell. He will not tell even the person he sat beside at school. Money corrupts people; I know that for sure. I am totally certain of that.

That's how it is, life.

At the store I buy sausages – for myself, Maksym and Yulchik. She will be hungry when she comes home from work.

I also buy two bottles of strong beer, and croutons with sour cream. Even though I've been at work all day, I'm not sleepy; not yet. I'll drink beer, watch TV, and then I'll sleep.

I only drink strong beer. I can't stand light beer. Beer should relax you after hard work. Light beer only makes you run to the toilet.

I return home. It is already nine o'clock. Time goes so fast; Maksym is already in bed. I think of asking if he and Yulchik prepared his backpack for school. But let him sleep: I will ask tomorrow.

I try not to interfere in matters concerning school: Yulchik does everything. It's different now from the way it was when I was there.

I don't understand this on-line school. You sit and look at a screen. Is that really school? A proper school is when you sit at a desk, put up your hand, or sit in silent fear because you don't know the answer. Distance learning isn't so serious.

If I had studied like that, I would definitely be doing some kind of menial work now.

I take beer and crackers and sit on the couch in front of the TV. Oh no, a political talk show. That means more talk about the war. I'd better check if Maksym

is asleep, because I can never watch political programs without shouting obscenities.

If those politicians had a salary like mine, and worked as hard as I do to earn that miserable penny, there would be a lot less nonsense on these TV programmes.

Oh my! Shufrych is getting thumped!¹

This is already interesting – a must see!

The world is saying that there will be a war in Ukraine, and in Ukraine, live on TV, a pro-Russian People's Deputy of the Verkhovna Rada is punched in the face!

Surely, if there is a real threat of war, we should be preparing for it. Isn't that how it's done?

The troops should be supplemented; equipment moved closer to the borders. Cellars should be checked, instructions and training given to civilians.

But what's the reality? Shufrych's face is broken.

Everyone will have fun now. Shufrych will be the meme of the month. I must check Facebook; the first ones may already be there.

What war?

¹ Nestor Shufrych (1966-), a member of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (parliament). On 18th February 2022, during a panel show on live television, Shufrych was physically assaulted and put into a headlock by a journalist after he refused to condemn Vladimir Putin's actions in Donbas and Crimea.

No. I am not one of those who believe and trust politicians. I am a simple worker, who works, doesn't lie. I have a family to feed.

Ah, Yulchik calls.

"How are you, Yulchik? Yes, I already had dinner. Delicious as always. Impeccable. I'm sitting, watching *Freedom of Speech*, or something like that, and Shufrych got thumped in the face. I think you will soon see it in memes. You know our people. There is no happier people in the world... But I think there will be no war.

"There will be no war, Yulchik. Otherwise, we would have seen some kind of equipment on the move... We would have prepared in some way... And here is Shufrych being punched in the face. O.K, let's keep calm and see what happens next. Yes.... Right... I love you, Yulchik. I bought sausages for the morning. O.K.... I love you."

Will there be a war?

No, I cannot believe it.

But what if there is a war?

Yesterday, at work, I saw the head of department. He didn't look at all concerned. He has no worries; he was working as usual.

Everyone is working as usual. Would a country that is approaching war do that?

If there is war, then what? Whatever will be, will be, and there is nothing I can do to change that. It doesn't depend on me.

We, in the administration, have a special safe for this eventuality. My boss says that everything is written there – the entire algorithm of actions for the management assistant on duty. So, as there is an algorithm, I, accordingly, should be calm.

If he wasn't my boss, I would have told him everything I thought about that safe and him personally, because I probably know more than he does about that safe.

A year-and-a-half ago, the Chief of Staff and an inspector opened the safe, checked something, searched, and found many problems and shortcomings. But the safe was afterwards re-sealed, and no one opened it again.

Honestly, because I kept a careful watch. I wondered if it would be opened again, and every shift I checked to see if anything had been changed. And what do you think? The seal, with my mark, remained as it was. Except for me, no one opened that safe.

With us, everyone works reluctantly: everyone walks and does nothing.

We have a saying, still Soviet: 'If you ask a lot of questions, you will not grow in your career.' That's how everyone works, no questions asked.

And me? I do the same, because I get paid, and I need the money.

I finished a bottle of beer; opened another; took a sip and yawned.

Eh, my life.

So, I'm a pessimist?

No, I'm a realist. As I see, so I say.

I don't know if it's right or not, but I've been straight since I was a child.

Even to a craftwork teacher at school I once said: "Serhiy Anatoliyovych, what a mess you've got into with your hammers."

"What did you say?" he asked, meaning to intimidate me.

"We make hammers in the workshop here, and then you sell them in the market."

Can you guess what happened next? All the other classes continued to make hammers in their 'work' lessons, but my class instead learned to work with wood.

That's right. That's the only way to get the truth in all this shit. If you want the truth, come up and ask directly.

All the troubles in our country are because of those who lick the bosses' backsides.

You look for help somewhere, and all you get is: "Wait, I'm busy."

I'm tired of it all. And now, at every turn, everyone talks about the war.

Maybe we are preparing for war, but I don't see it. Maybe, in the algorithm in the safe, everything is written down: 'If war comes, the first thing politicians should do is punch Shufrych's face.'

That could be, I haven't seen the algorithm. I have only seen a broken face.

I yawn again. I'm getting tired. If I knew that Shufrych would be hit again, I would not go to bed: it would keep me from sleeping. But I think there will be no more fighting tonight.

If Murayev's face had been smashed, that would have been good.²

I have to go to sleep. Tomorrow will be another day. I have to go to my parents' house. Dad says something is blowing out his bedroom window. He needs a little help. And Maksym needs to be put in front of the computer in the morning. Drat it! The main thing is not to oversleep, because after a day like today I shall sleep like a dead man.

² Yevheniy Murayev (1976-), a former member of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (parliament), allegedly Moscow's choice of President for Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion, i.e., head of a puppet government forcibly installed.

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VICTOR

I wish I hadn't woken up today. At least, that's what I thought when I opened my eyes this morning. But then I heard the news, and my body somehow got out of bed.

When I heard it, it was as if I was struck by lightning, and my battery, which had become depleted from boredom with life, recharged a little.

If Marichka hadn't turned on the TV first thing in the morning, I would probably have lain in bed, dozing, watching colourful dreams, right through to the evening. And in the evening Marichka would have prepared dinner, fed me, and – as she does – fed me so well that, next morning, I couldn't pull myself together.

But, somehow, you have to pull yourself together.

Not even somehow, but quickly, right now, because the country is in danger. I don't know for sure if it's true, but that's what our President said today.

And he finally signed the decree on general mobilization.

Finally! I've been waiting for that decree for a month. I've already called my colleagues, and I've contacted the personnel officer of the unit.