



From [Ruta by Kapranovy Brothers](#)

Translated from the Ukrainian by Hanna Leliv

The gun barrel jerked and spat out a bullet. It flew, slicing through the air and leaving emptiness behind. It seemed to squeeze the space, gradually transforming it into a solid transparent wall, and it was only that wall that Andriy could count on, as he simply couldn't catch up with the bullet. He ran after it, trying, again and again, to grab it, but that swift piece of metal was always one second ahead. Andriy's lungs felt the vacuum in the bullet's wake; he could not draw a single breath in this dry, prickly vacuum, but he strained every nerve and charged ahead hoping to stop the speeding bullet. Somewhere behind him, Sergeant Kozlov was laughing.

His laugh was so loud that the space in front of him suddenly broke into black cracks and then crumbled to dust together with the gray-haired cameraman's equipment and Ruta, the girl standing behind it. Andriy screamed, tearing his parched throat, but no sound came out, his pain and despair staying inside, in the depths of his subconscious.

At that point, he always woke up, exhausted and distressed. He stayed in bed for a while, staring at the wall. Over the past few years, his wife even stopped asking, "What was your dream about?" Either she had gotten used to that, or the fancy therapist she was seeing had explained to her the importance of giving your spouse some personal space and persuaded her to let her husband have at least some part of their bed at his disposal. Right now, though, Andriy's personal space spread out across their entire bedroom: on the eve of Epiphany, his wife had gone to visit her mother in Russia, in Kuban, and she'd been staying there for a month already, too afraid to return to revolutionary Kyiv with its barricades, smoke from burning car tires, and people wearing hard hats. From over there, it must have looked like the apocalypse, but people in Kyiv—living through yet another Maidan—quickly got used to minor inconveniences like Khreshchatyk, the main street in the city, being blocked off, Mariyinsky Park downtown teeming with drunk thugs, while the police deliberately stood at a distance. People learned new safety rules, discovered bypass routes, and even started to regulate traffic by themselves. What else could you do if all the police were sent to the government district to protect the state from its citizens.

Using the space in bed freed up by his wife, Andriy turned over onto his back and spread his arms wide apart. The high white ceiling before his eyes immediately brought him back to reality, while his splayed arms helped him take a deeper breath.

Anxious dreams usually came to him in the winter, seemingly tallying another year passed since 1991 when he, a young man wearing a Soviet soldier's uniform, had to obey orders and had no chance at influencing any important events. "But you had a chance, you did," a pesky voice of his other self screeched. "At least be honest with yourself." But Andriy usually cut that voice off by splashing some cold water onto his face and neck in the bathroom.

This time, too, the cold water got the job done—the pesky voice calmed down, his skin tightened up, his mind cleared. Slipping his bathrobe on, Andriy went into the kitchen where his daughter was making breakfast.

"Good morning, Ruta!" he said. His voice sounded cheerful but you can't fool your own daughter.

"Morning, dad. Why are you so pale?"

She pecked him on the cheek and pursed her lips involuntarily, his three-day stubble prickling her.

"It's alright. Just had a bad dream," he said.

"I told you that working two shifts—at your job and the Maidan—is too much. Come on, sit down. You don't take care of yourself."

Andriy had chosen the name for his daughter by himself, taking advantage of his wife being too tired after labor and staying home when he went to register the baby. At the registrar's office, when asked which name he'd like to give to the newborn, Andriy delivered a breathy reply: "Ruta." Then he got into an argument with his wife, as she'd dreamed of naming her daughter in honor of her mother, following the tradition of naming your first daughter after her grandmother. "If this tradition had existed for real, you'd have been given some old Ukrainian name, like Paraskeva or Teklia," he told his wife and she relented. After all, for Ukrainians, Ruta was not exactly an exotic name. Definitely better than those countless Svitlanas or Natalias that dominated not only people's passports but also the names of hair salons and cafés. Together with their last name—Ruta Lytvyn—it sounded just great. Of course, women often changed even the most beautiful last names when they got married, but there was still time until that would happen.

Andriy sat down to have breakfast and, moving a plate with an omelet closer, picked up his fork.

"Do you think I want to? I have to," he said, smiling.

"You could take a vacation," Ruta said. She cut two slices of bread and sat down at the empty end of the table. She must have already had breakfast.

"A vacation from work?" Andriy asked.

"You can't take a vacation from the Maidan, can you?" Ruta shrugged.

Ever since his daughter was just a baby, he'd been searching for a particular set of facial features—the features that would remind him of that other Ruta, the girl from the Vilnius television station whose portrait still hung on the wall in his office. But he never found any. How could he, anyway? His imagination had nothing to do with genes. His daughter had grown up to be the spitting image of her mother, which was quite logical and not bad at all, by the way—his wife was beautiful when she was younger. He wouldn't have married her otherwise, would he?

"Alright, I'll take a vacation," Andriy said. "But for how long? For a month? Two months? Three? How long will this drag on?" He nodded at the TV screen showing a muted broadcast from the Maidan: tents, barricades, flags, and people in hard hats scurrying around among all these decorations, creating the feeling of unreality and the deliberate touch of a theatrical performance.

Following her father's gesture, Ruta sighed.

"Look at yourself."

Andriy put down his fork.

"Ruta, dear, I love you very much. But it's not you speaking. Those are your mother's words."

She laughed.

"Well, Mom is speaking different words altogether now. She called me yesterday. Told me about insurgents from Lithuania fighting in Kyiv."

"Russian TV is absurd and ruthless," Andriy said, immediately diagnosing the disease.

Ruta was now almost the same age as he'd been when he was stationed in Lithuania. On her face, the confidence of a woman was slowly replacing a young girl's attractiveness. It's a hard time for any father—to watch his little daughter grow into an attractive woman. He can't help but feel jealous of her relationship with the entire world and that little girl with plump lips and chubby arms she was just yesterday. He feels an urgent need to protect her from the hostile, aggressive world but, at the same time, he realizes that she can deal with it much better than he can.

"By the way," Andriy said, chasing those unwanted thoughts away, "your mother is right. I did serve in the army in Lithuania. And now I'm here, in the Maidan. An insurgent—that's what I am, huh?" he laughed.

“You think it’s funny, but Mom keeps going on and on about people in the Maidan all being on drugs, telling me to run away and come stay with her. But what would I do in Russia? Get married. If you’re such a patriot, there’re lots of Ukrainians here, in Kuban, for you—that’s what she told me.”

“TV.” Andriy repeated his diagnosis.

Ruta quickly nodded.

“That’s what I told her, too. Turns out that Grandma watches TV all day long and then she tells Mom everything she’s seen.”

Well, what else would you think about Kyiv if you had no other sources of information except for ancient Soviet-turned-Russian television? His mother-in-law didn’t use the Internet, let alone speak with people who’d seen the Maidan protests with their own very eyes. There wasn’t anyone like that in Kuban. The Russian government was trying to frighten their people with the Ukrainian Maidan to avoid their own, that’s a fact, and they were using television as a substitute for reality.

“You know how Grandma is.” Ruta jerked her shoulder with a certain condescending, feminine air. Andriy noticed that.

“I don’t, thank God.” He shook his head. “Back in the day, when we lived together with your Grandma, she wasn’t like that.”

“What was she like then?” his daughter asked.

“Almost like your mother now,” Andriy said with a smile.

Ruta looked at him, jerking her shoulder again. “That’s directed at me this time,” Andriy thought.

“Dad,” his daughter said, raising her finger in a preachy manner, “psychologists say that you shouldn’t drag your children into marital conflicts. Don’t you know this?”

Sometimes, Ruta could be very prickly, and Andriy was a bit afraid of her at moments like that. Children always have the upper hand in domestic interactions as they need their parents less than their parents need them. So, they subconsciously blackmail their parents with the mere prospect of cutting off communication. Should anything go wrong, they can just step out of the room, leaving you struggling, like a fool, looking for a chance to reestablish contact. Any sudden movement, like raising your voice or forcefully exerting your authority, might tear the last paper-thin threads tying the family together. Ruta had already passed through the most critical period of the rebellious teenage years, but Andriy still exercised great caution around her, like a soldier during mine clearance classes. What else could you do? Raising a daughter is hard work. Any father could tell you that.

“Well, let them be. Or, rather, let us be,” Andriy said, pushing his empty plate away. “When are you going to the Maidan today?”

Ruta rose from her seat and, picking up the dishes, put them in the sink.

“Right now. They dropped off a lot of books at our library last night. I need to help sort them out.”

In the complicated system of the Maidan protest movement, Ruta had an awkward job—library manager. The Maidan library was an unfathomable phenomenon. On the one hand, it seemed logical. Most people were just loafing around, so they might as well read a book. On the other hand, have you ever heard about any revolutionaries organizing libraries? Let’s take that famous painting “Freedom on the Barricades” that the French used to print on francs. Would you believe in the militant spirit of the Parisians, had there been a library nerd depicted instead of a half-naked girl with a flag?

“Brought a lot of books,” Andriy mumbled. “That’s something I don’t understand about this revolution of ours. We’re singing songs. Reading books.”

Ruta pressed a button on the coffee machine and turned toward her father, resting her hip on the table. She had a striking figure, perhaps, even more striking than her mother had at her age. “That’s your daughter. Stop,” the pesky voice screeched in his head. But what could you do? You couldn’t ignore your daughter’s appearance, but you couldn’t evaluate it either. Oh, daughters!

“What’s wrong with books?” Ruta asked. She waited for the coffee machine to stop gurgling and pour espresso into a cup. Then, in one elegant gesture, she put the coffee down in front of her father. “You think it’s better to get drunk on the barricades?”

“No, it’s not,” Andriy said, giving a nod of appreciation for the coffee. “It’s just an abstract thought. I’m a sinner myself. Haven’t cast a single stone at the riot police. But I would never have thought that most protesters would be just like me.”

Ruta didn’t say anything. She silently left the kitchen, swaying her hips. Watching her, Andriy felt embarrassed again.

“They’re planning an offensive for tonight,” he called after her.

“A peaceful one,” Ruta called back from her room.

“I don’t believe in peaceful offensives,” Andriy said louder so that his words would reach his daughter for sure. Turning a deaf ear to their fathers’ words was a signature strategy employed by all children. “I don’t believe in peaceful offensives. It’s just not possible. A peaceful offensive is like wet fire.” Ruta didn’t say anything, so he raised his voice almost to a scream. “Stay at your library and don’t come out. That’s all I wanted to say.”

At that point, his daughter returned to the kitchen.

“And these words are not yours, Dad. They’re Mom’s.”

“Sometimes Mom says reasonable things, too,” Andriy said.

Ruta wore a warm jacket, just as you should in Kyiv in the winter, especially when going to the barricades. A bright yellow-red-green hat—the colors of the Lithuanian flag—was atop her head. This sight pricked Andriy right below the heart.

“Don’t worry about me. I already ate and I’m wearing a hat so I won’t get cold,” Ruta said, her smile a bit scornful after her father’s reaction.

“Very funny,” Andriy said. “Would you take that hat off, though?”

His daughter touched her head as if checking what her father was talking about.

“Why?” she asked, surprised. “It’s a cool hat.”

Andriy knitted his brows, showing that he was not joking.

“It’s too bright. Soldiers always shoot at something eye-catching. It’s easier to aim that way.”

“To aim? Don’t say that!” his daughter said dismissively.

“I know what I’m talking about,” Andriy said, his voice serious. “In Lithuania, I saw stuff like that with my own eyes. Do you remember that girl in Vilnius I told you about? The one that got shot.”

Ruta grimaced as she always did when things got tiresome.

“Of course, I do. You told this story so many—”

“And there’s more to it. Her hat looked exactly like yours. Yellow and green and red. Like the colors of the Lithuanian flag. Come on, take it off, out of harm’s way.”

Ruta stared at him as if his words made no sense to her or she ignored them deliberately. Andriy had to stand up. Taking a step forward, he took that bone of contention off his daughter’s head. Ruta took the hat back right away with a gentle, but firm movement.

“Don’t be such a bore, Dad. I won’t be on the frontline.”

“They’ve been shooting there, Ruta” Andriy said, looking into her eyes—trying to gain control over her with his stare, as parents always do with their children. But what worked with a seven-year-old did not with a twenty-something.

“Stray bullets don’t care who they hit,” he kept talking, ignoring his psychological fiasco. “Especially when the shooter doesn’t care either.”

He seemed to have gotten through to his daughter, finally, because she made a show of stuffing her hat into her jacket pocket.

“Alright. Deal,” she said slightly condescendingly as if talking to a child. “Love you.”

He kissed her on the cheek and made a sign of the cross over her back when she was leaving the kitchen. Then he sat down at the table and returned his attention to his coffee. He didn’t see his daughter pull her bright hat out of her pocket in front of the hallway mirror and put it back on. She brushed away her bangs that were peeking out from underneath her woolen hat and opened the front door.

“Bye!” she called to the kitchen.

“Bye-bye! Be careful!” Andriy called back.

He felt anxious every time she went to the Maidan. At the very beginning, when students had first gathered by the Independence Monument, she’d already been there. Sometimes, she would even stay in the Maidan overnight, ignoring her mother’s tantrums. But that night, when the police had dispersed the peaceful protesters, suddenly and brutally, injuring and mutilating dozens of people, Ruta had gone home literally one hour before it had all broken out. Looking at the photos of bloodied students and teachers on Facebook, Andriy had been too scared to imagine that his daughter could’ve been among them. She now worked at the library, of course; it was not the same as risking a police baton on your back or throwing Molotov cocktails at the riot police by the government building. Actually, girls didn’t do this. They took coffee and sandwiches to the frontline; that was as far as they got. Thank God he had a daughter. If he had a son, he would have rushed straight to the frontline. But it was a girl, so she was sorting books at the Ukrainian House, warm and safe inside four walls. Boys were different, though. They could take care of themselves. You wouldn’t worry as much about a boy.

“Well-well, this is not you speaking, to be sure. That’s your wife,” the voice sneered in his head. Damn it!