

CHRISTMAS 2022

My dear ones, you'll never know how much I miss you all, but I am also so very grateful you are not here with me. As you can tell by this letter, I am safe; healthy and as happy as one can be under these circumstances. Right now, on this Holy Evening, it's quiet here in Kyiv. A true Silent Night after so many nights of soul-shattering despair. It was noisier a few hours ago, and we'll be spending another holiday underground. It's not so bad; the tunnels are large and bright, when the power works, and with so many friends down here, it does feel a little like a celebration. It is cold, though; the wind blasts through the tunnels as though it was sent by Putin to nip at our resolve. Zopha.

I just spoke with Galyna and Oleksander, the morticians from next door, and they send their love. I'm sorry to write that they lost Panas, their 20-year old son, three month now defending the city. It was hard, of course, and they are quieter, more cautious than they used to be. Remember how we used to celebrate Christmas with them? Lucky we never got raided. But changed though they are, they haven't given up; they've restructured their home and their business into hospice units, with their hearse becoming a mobile hospital.

And did you hear, cousin Ruslana and her husband, Andriy, had a baby? Olga, they named her, after Olga of Kyiv. We could truly use a savior like St Olga right now. Maybe her little Olga some day will fit the bill.

No, that's not true; we don't need a savior. No matter what you hear or what you see, the tide has turned. We won't give up. We'll never give up. This will be over before Olga's first birthday. And I think Putin is starting to realize it. That givno, that dermo...there is nothing he can do to defeat us. Threaten nuclear? Khuylo doesn't realize that we, like these tunnels, can withstand even that.

I wish you could see this. Iryna, you know, Ostap the butcher's 9 year old daughter, she's stood on a milk carton and has started the song. A voice like a bell singing Eternal God Born Tonight. Others are joining in. I hope my tears don't too much mar my ink.

I know the miles between us are long and the hours are different, but I can feel you joining in song. Down here we can't see the first star, as you can, but we bathe our faces, hands and legs in cold water, as do you. Who knows, maybe it's cloudy where you are!! Then we whisper 'Be as healthy as this water is.' Luckily, Kseniya the baker was wise enough to pocket a dollop of honey before she came down. So now we can anoint each other with it and exclaim 'May you have sweetness and many good things in life and in the new year.' Wouldn't it be nice if our honeys came from the same hive? Let's pretend, shall we?

It is a few hours later. We've just finished our meal. Suffice to say, we couldn't honor each disciple this year. Nowhere near 12 items for the meal. Funny, it made the few taste even better. We did have varenyky, so important to assure next year's abundance, some very stale fish strips, and pickled mushrooms. We said what's being said all too often these days, "I've had worse".

I don't know how my dear, sweet, wonderful husband got a hold of some pampushka, but Oleksiy did. Not many, but enough. Enough for a sweet nibble for all; enough for a sweet smile from all.

I'm sure by now Baba is pounding her cane on the floor, demanding, 'But what about the extra place setting???'

Tell her worry not. A place for those we've lost; more important than ever now. It

wasn't a plate and a glass and utensils. A dirty kerchief, a broken cup and a bent shiv served in their place. Our newly fallen comrades didn't seem to complain much.

I must go. It's time for the Vertep. Of course, it's not a traditional one. To tell this nativity story, we don't have the usual puppets; we only have us. So, the directors, our children, have recruited their elders to be the marionettes. I play one of the three kings, and my broom-bristle mustache keeps making me sneeze. I'm more seventh dwarf than third Magi!

So, though I know you will worry, fear not. We maintain. We survive. We've already won; we're just waiting for the other side to realize. For the Vertep, we made our Christmas star out of loose coquina from the tunnel walls with a glue of flour and water. Deep within this tomb, it burns bright.

Good night, my sweet loves, and may 2023 mark a better future for us all. Peace.
Nikolina

P.S. If I die, tell Putin I'll be waiting for him in the next life.