

# Black Cherry

DARIA ROSE

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Dnipro, Ukraine

Lilia

“Baby girl, time for breakfast!”

Mom’s OCD about making me eat every four hours. When I come down to the kitchen, she’s rubbing a grease stain off her blue Atlanta ‘96 tracksuit. “Now our poor yellow trident is gray from the oil.” The dining table greets me with four eggs, bread with butter, sautéed spinach, and *Functional Training Anatomy* from her Olympic days. I must read two pages with breakfast.

Our team didn’t qualify for Tokyo, so mom wants us at peak performance for Paris. She gives up on the stains and hands me a printout. I know what it is without looking at it. The last thing I need is another lecture on vertical pull exercises during the warmup. I beat her to it, “I’ll give it to the coach.”

Despite mother’s insistence, the coach refuses to train every girl on the team to perform fifteen pull-ups. I would do twenty myself to avoid another confrontation between the coach and my mother. I grab my duffel bag, pull my Adidas sweats on, drop the printout in the dumpster outside our house, off to practice.

Since March, the rowing team dwindled from twelve to four. Our class lost three students each week. Then teachers started to disappear too. The physicist Arkadiy Anatolievich had to teach math. Next, the principal Larisa Illivna canceled “non-essential” classes, like computer science. Alfisa Mikolaivna became a software engineer in Warsaw. By the end of April the three remaining teachers taught math, Ukrainian, and domestic labor, where the girls sewed and the boys sawed. School disbanded at the beginning of May, four weeks ahead of schedule. I still attended the rowing practice daily, 6 am sharp. Our coach Mikhail Afanasiyevich said he’d rather die in an air-raid than leave Dnipro.

What did we train for? The Ukrainian leagues dissolved. To attend the European championship we'd have to travel through Lviv, which was too risky for a field trip. No teacher would take responsibility for twenty girls at the border, where we'd wait in line for weeks with thousands of others leaving the country. I've seen it on Telegram: moms holding up two toddlers each, kids wrapped in ten layers of jackets mid-summer to save space in the carry-on suitcases, crates with wailing cats and howling dogs, grim Polish border guards in yellow vests. It's not a place you'd want to be.

I pass by my school. The windows are boarded up. The soccer field outside turned into a nesting ground for some large birds, gray and ugly-looking. They shriek louder than Doja Cat in my AirPods. Teachers promised us a real graduation next year. When I can't sleep at night, I dream of the principal handing me a diploma in a sweaty orange-walled auditorium. As I walk the stage, mom applauds and beams with pride. I couldn't care less about the piece of paper. The ceremony would mean that everything had fallen back into place in the world. I'd already spent half of high school stuck at home, Zooming in for classes or suffocating under a mask. Mom didn't let me hang out with friends for two years. They'll report it in the news, she said, if the senator's daughter breaks official protocol. At least she let me continue rowing. Coach Mikhail Afanasievich had said he'd rather die from covid than stop the daily practice.

Now I feel like a brat complaining about covid. I'd attend Zoom classes forever if things could return to normal.

Was there ever a "normal" in our corner of the world? First came the Soviet Union, which, as my grandparents recounted, spanned the best time of their lives. (Mom thinks they're just old and senile.) Dad said that *perestroika* was really dangerous. Mafia ran everything, and stores sold no food. Mom asked dad, "Why would you tell her about this?" After that, I'm not sure. Maybe that's when things were "normal"? I was too young to know. When I was in second grade my mother brought me to the demonstrations. That was the first time I understood what a "country" meant: Ukraine, which is us, Russia, which is them, and that mom was upset that they tried telling us what to do. Someone shouted, the crowd roared, then a large boom, and mom put me under her armpit like a handbag and ran. It was 2014. Then my mother joined the parliament. Things were definitely not "normal" by then.

I turn the corner and walk into the gymnasium through the basement. They first closed the main entrance in February for glass repairs, providing the principal with a perfect pretext to keep it permanently closed without announcing the real, sadder reason.

When I return from practice, mother is standing by the window in my room. “Lilia, dear. We need to talk about leaving.”

I throw my duffel bag down, shoulders sore. Mikhail Afanasievich took mom’s advice—I suspect she called him—and at practice we competed for the most pull-ups. I posted the clip of my victory (17) on TikTok. It’s going viral. I scroll through the list of my new followers (+541) and mumble: “Leaving where? You said your job wouldn’t let you? And grandpa is too weak?” I scoop the chocolate whey powder and shake the bottle with my bruised right arm.

Mother’s eyes water, like an aerosol can. She wipes the tears with the back of her hand, “You leaving, Lilia. They let eighteen-year-olds leave without a guardian. The border is so crowded, nobody will recognize you as my daughter. We’ll ask Uncle Vanya in Warsaw to take you in for a while.” How can we have this conversation now? School just ended. I planned to sleep in and catch up with friends who still stuck around.

“Vanya is not even my real uncle! He’s just your friend. I won’t go without you. They might not let me back in. And grandpa ... No, I won’t go. Also, I’m tired from practice. Let’s not talk about this now.” Mother still sobs. I hate seeing her like this. What did I do wrong? She never used to cry, before this year. The first female parliament member from Dnipro. An Olympic champion. Two-time! Until this year I’d only seen my father cry, when grandma died from covid. Not mother. Now she cries all the time. Every day she returns from work sadder than before. Is she still my mother?

She wants us to separate. What kind of mother does that? Of course I’ll stay where my parents are. I crack open the window. The moon is hung by a string, like a 15kg plate rolled into a corner.

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I fold my training gear and three pairs of Nikes into the duffel bag that I take to practice. What else do you bring when you’re fleeing the war? Mother managed to secure train tickets through someone at work. The trip normally takes a day. In recent months it

has extended to anywhere from four days to three weeks. They had to reroute the rails through the south to avoid coming close to Kyiv. The bombings make the trains stop every few hours. I'm scared. I don't want to go. I hope that mom or dad join me last minute. I know it's impossible. If mother is caught at the border it amounts to treason. They would throw her in jail, remove her from her position, revoke the medals. Dad won't leave without her. I still hope.

Grandpa is worse every week. I won't go while he's still with us. Most of my classmates have already departed; our family is the exception. Some packed up for their second homes in Europe as soon as the war broke. Many deserted to Poland, where their parents found new jobs. I FaceTimed my friend Masha who now lives in Krakow. She said they call the city Little Kyiv. She already met a new boyfriend from Vinnytsia. But she also has to live in a one-bedroom apartment with her mom, dad, and brother Artem, who is kind of annoying. In Dnipro their red-brick house had a gate and a jacuzzi. Her parents nag her to find a job, which sucks. Masha wants to learn Polish but she hasn't started yet. She hopes they'll come back home soon.

Other people from my school moved to their grandparents' houses in the countryside. They think it's safer outside the city. I asked my mom if we could live in grandpa's garden for the summer. We could pick strawberries and pluck plums from the tree. When I brought it up, mom cried and retreated to her room. Is she still my mother?

Thirty minutes later, mom knocks on my bedroom door again: "Lilia, my baby, we need to talk." I know it's about tomorrow, but I don't want to think about it. When she opens the door, the Timothée Chalamet poster falls off. Mom wouldn't let me fasten it with real nails, only duct tape. Before I can respond, mother sits on the edge of my bed where I'm lounging in my Aviator Nation sweats. My friend Oksana mailed them to me from California for my birthday. Her father works at the parliament too. Mom said that they paid a lot of money to leave on a "work trip" in early March of 2022. She still posts selfies from her runs along the Santa Monica boardwalk.

Mom fights back tears. I can tell by the clench in her jaw. I pretend to read something on my phone until she calms down. It's better for both of us if she doesn't cry. "Lilia, I'll write everything down for you, but you still need to listen. You'll board the train to Lviv.

It might take days, maybe weeks, depending on where they bomb. In Lviv you'll find the bus to the Polish border, where you'll see thousands of people attempting to cross. But you won't get lost. Everyone will be heading the same way..." I'm suddenly tired. Wish mom didn't lecture me so much. I pull the shag throw over my head. No way I'm leaving alone, it won't happen. She goes on, "...don't listen to anyone. If you're lost, ask mothers with young children for help. Don't talk to men. Do not talk to *any* men. If somebody promises a faster way to cross the border, don't engage. Wear a hat and sunglasses. You can't let anyone see that you're a beautiful young girl, alone. Or that you're my daughter. Are you listening? Lilia, this is really important." She unpeels me from the blanket.

I pretend to be annoyed and put my phone down, "Yes, yes, mom. I know. I'm not an idiot."

Mother draws in a deep breath, "Okay. You'll update me every few hours. Even if you are stuck on the train for days without moving. Lilia, I need to know where you are. You understand?" I can't let myself cry either. I still can't fathom that I'm leaving. It won't happen. Tomorrow will be a normal day. I'll watch some reels, maybe tidy my room, post my outfit on TikTok, talk to friends. A normal day.

Just for now, I play along: "Yes, okay. I will."

Mom takes another deep breath, "In case the cell service stops working: once you pass the border with Poland they'll place you in a hotel in Zamość. Uncle Vanya will drive from Warsaw to pick you up. You must not accept a ride from anyone else. People will offer to put you up in a nicer hotel. Just stay inside until Uncle Vanya arrives. The volunteers will provide you with food. Keep me updated at every step, I need to feel like I'm there with you."

A weight presses down on my chest, like I'm sleepy, "Yes, mom. I'm not ten years old. I've gone on many trips without you."

Mom grabs the collar of my sweater, "Lilia, this is not a rowing competition. Your coach won't be there. I wish you took this more seriously." I wish she didn't yell. If she's freaking out then I should definitely freak out too. One of us has to remain calm for the other, and I'd rather not shoulder that weight.

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Mom and dad will drive me to the train station. I hear the 3 AM alarm blare in their bedroom. They went to bed at nine to attempt to feel rested for the drive. I decided it was easier to stay awake. My parents sit on my rolling suitcase while I crouch down on my duffel bag. It's good luck to sit on your luggage before a trip. Except my parents aren't actually leaving, so I'm not sure how that works. Dad sips his thick black coffee. Mom throws on a hoodie and covers her head with a hat and sunglasses. I laugh, "Nobody will recognize you in the middle of the night."

Father smiles, "Sunglasses at three in the morning surely won't make you more suspicious."

Mother takes them off and taps her eyes, "It's to cover the puffiness. Not for disguise." We let it go. Too painful to see. I hope that when I leave she will feel a little less sad. That's my main motive for doing it.

I also secretly hope that she'll miss me too much and ask me to return. Her friends in the government found a way to leave, but she has too much integrity for that. "Reputation is everything in my line of work, Lilia." I'm not sure if she means sports or politics. They seem pretty similar anyway. I hope that I'll qualify for the Olympics too. I need to win, like mother did. Count me out on politics though. Too upsetting. I'd rather travel, live in New York, and have a million TikTok followers.

We climb into the SUV, and mom sits in the back with me. She hugs me so hard that my shoulder is sore. Her shirt is damp from crying. I'm slightly not there. Like I'm half-asleep.

My mind flashes to the TikTok dance I watched last night. Ksyusha, who I usually learn dance routines with, moved to Warsaw. I keep wanting to text her but can't find the right words. I try to remember the arm movements and rehearse them from the back seat. Mom takes my hand, "Lilia, are you okay? What is happening?"

I wave helicopter hands, "Oh, nothing, just trying to remember a dance."

Mom continues to stare at me. A few seconds later she bursts into laughter. Finally, I cheered her up.

As she laughs, she starts crying. Loud, heavy sobs. I'm not here. I'm watching the scene from outside the car, like a large bird that races the SUV in its flight, peeks into the

window. Mom squeezes my shoulders. I can't exhale. It doesn't matter. I'm already gone, so I don't need to breathe.

Mom hands me my pink Lululemon sweatshirt. It feels bulkier than it should be. "I sewed Euros into the lining. It's only so you can get to Poland. Once you meet Uncle Vanya he'll give you more money. Don't spend it unless it's an emergency. Don't tell anybody you have this. Lilia, do you hear me?"

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For the past three days we've been stuck at three hundred kilometers away from Lviv. The train can't move because they've been bombing the railroad. My friends have bombarded me with TikTok links and Instagram stories. They ask why I haven't posted in a week. I've only responded to my mom. In seventy-two hours the texts have progressively shrunk from: "I'm doing ok. Still under Lviv. Ate the bublik you baked," to three hours ago: "under lviv."

Somehow the words don't come. They stayed at home. In our SUV. On my bed. The words didn't board the train. They didn't try to fall asleep on the bottom bunk under the scratchy green-checkered blanket, while the engine whir-r-r-s on and off. Other people's words flow across the invisible lines of the electric current. They touch me but bounce back, hitting a cube of transparent glass. There's nothing there. My words are sealed tightly shut, a thousand kilometers away.

Red hand towels with gilded tassels hang on the hook by the door. I pour boiling water for tea. The train's quiver swirls the porcelain cup into a mini-tornado. We traveled the same route two years ago to visit mom's aunt in Rivne. Feels odd to take a luxury train to flee from the war. My legs ache with restlessness. I hadn't missed a week of practice since I broke my wrist when I was thirteen. Even during covid I rowed at the lake every day. My body doesn't know how to stay still. If I'm not moving it means I'm not there. My shoulders bear the weight of an invisible two-hundred-pound barbell, as if bracing for a deep squat. But the drop doesn't come, and the weight disappears. Gasp. Mom is so far away.

I grasp for a word that would reach her across the tracks. The mental distance narrows, but the words stretch further away from her. I crack the window and stick my nose out. It smells like diesel and dead fowl. I ate all the food that mom packed in takeout containers.

Only a few bags of nuts and dried fruit left. Three times a day I buy baked goods from grandmothers who knock on my window. They live in the village where we're stopped. They yell out, "pirogi, pirogi, pirogi," like a piercing wail of a seagull in pain.

I'll buy something out of pity. I eat. It's mostly fried dough with a hint of leek and potato. We're the ones trapped on a train, who knows where, for who knows how long. The grandmothers return home after they sell out the pirogi. Who should pity whom?

The greasy dough makes me sleepy. I doze off in my bed halfway through Chapter 30 of *Anna Karenina*. She's on a train too. No point to slog through last summer's reading list. Mother secured me a coupé, so at least I have some privacy. Closer to Kyiv, a mother with two kids joins me in the cabin. I have the bottom bunk facing the front of the train. Above me lies the woman's son, probably seven or eight years old. The mother rests on the lower bunk across from me, and a little girl, maybe five, sleeps above her. Three tickets for a coupé—she must be the wife of someone important. I don't know because we haven't spoken. Last night the mom waved at me and gestured toward their cherry juice. I drank a cup. Over the past four days they hardly said ten words to each other. Only, "Slava, eat," and "Ulya, time for bed." The quietest children I have ever met. They just practice letters and numbers on their iPads or nap. Maybe their mother gave them something to keep them asleep all day (wish I had some too), or she frightened them to death before they got on. Maybe something else did. No shortage of terrors here.

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At the border solo travelers are guided to a separate line. At first I hesitate to separate from the mother and the two children, but soon realize that we have no choice. Ulya waves her rooster lollipop at me from the family line. Only three other women with camping backpacks stand in front of me. When it's my turn the blond man hands me a piece of paper with a stamp on it without asking a single question. It says something in Polish. I flip it over to English. I'm hereby granted temporary asylum in the European Union due to the urgent circumstances of the war. The war. The war. I need to call mom. I don't want to think about mom not being here.

I text her. "got the documents. they're taking us to the hotel."



Ten seconds later mom responds, “thank god.” Then, a flurry of heart emojis. Then, “i love you. everything will be ok stay at the hotel until uncle vanya arrives tomorrow”

I know she needs to reassure herself more than me. My body sleeps at home. Soon I’ll wake up in my own bed. Mom will steam buckwheat *kasha* in the kitchen. Dad will be watching the morning news until I join them for breakfast. He’ll switch off the TV; my mother will put on her brave face. Normal day. I will pour a glass of orange juice and retreat to my bedroom, squandering the time I could have spent with them.

Thirty minutes of a bumpy bus ride later we arrive at Hostel Starówka. The Red Cross staff hands us the keys and bags with food. I’m worried they’ll make us share rooms. As I open the door, the wood bumps against the edge of a twin bed with beige bedsheets. I guess not. I hope not. Do they make people sleep on the floor? The shades are drawn, and an acid-yellow glow from the bathroom spills into a two-meter strip of light between the door and the bed frame. I throw my bags on the bed. Let’s see the food bag. I haven’t felt hunger since leaving home, but as an athlete I know I should force myself to eat. Guess I’m likely stressed. And sleep-deprived. Half-viscid chicken soup jiggles in a plastic container. A metal tray encases something sludgy like mashed potatoes, a chicken cutlet, and a vegetable stew that smells of dill and yogurt. In a gilded wrapper glints a package with a half-crushed Napoleon. I lick the custard and set aside the rest. I lie down on the floor. The bathroom light brushes my feet. It’s nice to be alone. In the past three days I’ve seen thousands of people. I text mom, “at the hotel. going to 😴.”

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When his blue Prius pulls over outside Hostel Starówka, Uncle Vanya resembles a young man, someone I could be friends with. His Air Force 1’s and a black crew neck feel out of place in the mid-July heat. His disheveled hair and dark sunglasses make him look both younger and older than I remember. As if he partied ten nights in a row. Doubt that’s what happened. More likely the opposite: he slept too little and worked too much.

I last saw him during a New Year’s party at our house. He brought his new girlfriend, the founder of a popular brand of fisherman sandals made of sustainable leather. Anita smelled expensive and wore a beige cashmere tunic three sizes too big. Vanya and Auntie Bohdana divorced five years ago when their son Alik and I attended seventh grade. Alik

seemed thrilled by the divorce. Until then he kept falling asleep in class because their shouting matches kept him awake at night. He'd been begging them to separate since he was five.

Uncle Vanya left in February, among the first. For months mom mumbled, "Vanya knew." and later, "Should have listened to Vanya." When he departed, he invited us to join him. Something about it felt odd—he wanted mom and me to come, but what about dad? As if Uncle Vanya had asked something mom wasn't willing to grant. Mom didn't believe that the war would break so soon or at all. Government officials could still leave on a "vacation" abroad, though mom thinks that the highest echelons concealed how much they knew from the rest of the cabinet. The border guards couldn't prevent people from traveling, or it would have triggered a chaotic exodus. You can't seal the borders unless you openly admit that Russia's campaign is imminent. When mom told dad about another *chinovnik's* kids vanishing from school mid-year, she looked at me and cried. Now that I'm gone, I hope she cries less.

"Look who it is, Her Majesty Lilia herself." Uncle Vanya is ever the joker. I pick up my duffel and suitcase from the curb and approach his Prius. The rear seats are replaced by a mattress that stretches from the edge of the front into the trunk. I hesitate to place my bags there. Uncle Vanya preempts my question, "Oh, just put your stuff on the bed, don't worry about it." I pile the duffel atop the suitcase, unsure if I'm anxious that my belongings could stain the bed or vice versa. I seatbelt in the front seat. Vanya reaches over me to lock my door, "I borrowed the car from a guy I work with. Think he might live in it too. Just ignore that. Crazy things happening these days. Have you eaten?"

I point to the bag of food they provided. Since checking in yesterday I only ate half the soup and still had the chicken and questionable veggies. The Red Cross staff served hot porridge this morning, but I didn't go because I wanted to enjoy my last hours alone. I'm worried that I'll spend all of my time with Uncle Vanya. Although I already regret skipping breakfast.

It hits me. How long is this drive to Warsaw? Where will I live? In a car too? I'm in Poland with this man with a week-old stubble, like he's the one who sleeps in the trunk. I should be thrilled to reunite with my classmates who moved to Warsaw, but right now

I can't feel anything. Mom and dad are in Dnipro. Will they find a way to join me? And if they do, would grandpa have to die first? Mom said she wouldn't leave him even if politicians were free to cross the border.

An hour later we stop for gas at a small grocery store. A grandma cracks sunflower seeds on the stoop. When I step inside, she says something in Polish, which I take to mean, "Holler if you want to buy something." The store sells toiletries and cosmetics in single-use packages. A lot of refugees must come through. Four aisles filled with fruit juices, flavors I'd never seen before—black cherry, black velvet gooseberry, black currant. By the cash register I spot neat rows of pastries that I want to believe were baked by the smiling babushka. I grab a roll of fried dough stuffed with cottage cheese and one of the black-something juices. As I hand her five Euros from my wallet, I think of the stacks of cash in my sweatshirt on the back seat of Uncle Vanya's car. He could just drive off.

On the road again. The car unwinds the fields into a swerving ribbon of green. Geometrically perfect barns frame a single oak tree, like a counting book illustration. If I squint, the tiny black birds disappear from the sky. I hadn't spent much time in Poland. Whenever we had a Schengen we traveled to Paris or Venice, or at least Vienna or Prague. Three years ago Mikhail Afanasievich drove us to Poznan for a competition, but we only left the hotel to row on the Warta. I must have gone through Zamość, the border town I passed through yesterday, when I took a bus tour across Europe in seventh grade, but I don't recall stopping anywhere in Poland. Poland is not a place to stop. It's the kind of Eastern European country that you know exists but don't feel the need to visit. That is, until over a million Ukrainians had moved in this year. But even then, those with enough money see it as a stepping stone to more prosperous parts of Europe. My stern pair partner moved to Paris with her parents, where she posts selfies savoring croissants on white porcelain saucers, as her lilac ballet flats flash under the wrought iron table.

Mom has won the Olympics and serves as a member of the parliament, and dad works as a civil rights lawyer. How come we lived in a two-bedroom in Dnipro all these years without secret backup houses in Europe?

"...just moved to London. I expect your mother told you?" Uncle Vanya's voice unspins my thought spiral.

I roll up my window to hear him better, “Sorry? No, I haven’t talked to mom, only told her I crossed into Poland. She said you would know what to do.”

Uncle Vanya turns to look at me. It feels dangerous while he’s driving. “I said, Alik, my son. He just found a job in London, so you can take his room. Do you know if your mom found you something to do?” A cold shiver crawls up the back of my head. Was mom supposed to find me a job? Wouldn’t that be up to me? We hadn’t talked about it. What about the secret money she gave me? Does Uncle Vanya know about it?

I decide not to mention it. He is there to help but not to rely on. As soon as *I* find me a job—having never worked a day in my life—I’ll rent my own apartment. And my classmates with their fancy Paris lofts, I’ll show them. My Instagram photo will caption, “all a bad bitch need is money 🗑️😏💰💰💰” I don’t need any aunts or uncles or even moms or grandpas.

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I watch the moment hover still in the air, seven feet above the ground, wings astride. From the height, the blue Prius floats along the highway, Uncle Vanya and the girl shelter inside. I see her, who left her family and hometown, eighteen years old, with a stack of money sewn into the seam of her sweatshirt in a duffel bag. Her family stayed far away when a place called home turned into a warzone. It’s a terrifying thrill to glide in the air. When she needs help, where will it come from? To cross the border alone takes two weeks. The bird yearns for a familial flock. Will Warsaw be a rest stop on a greater migratory journey? Will the bird build a new nest? All I know is that the gull-girl soars on her own now. For the first time, no one will come to the rescue. □