**I Dare To Be**

A play in three monologues

*by*

*Diana Balyko*

*(translated by John Farndon)*

*Dedicated to the deceased Belarusian artist Ales Pushkin, who was tortured in Grodno prison for his talent, inflexibility and courage to be.*

***From the author***

*If the exact words are not found, not spoken, not written down, if things are not called by their proper names, if emotions are not described, and events not scrupulously recorded, then reality will not be known, but instead reconstructed and replaced by propaganda clichés according to the phenomenon of “false memory”. All conversations in the kitchen or whispers in the bedroom vanish in the morning and all that is left is the false clichés of propaganda, which permit blatant lies, invention of non-existent events and the breaking cause-and-effect relationships. Finding the strength not to remain silent is the most important talent of a writer and a citizen.*

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*They say the reader tires of bad news,*

*He doesn’t want news about bombs, he doesn’t want a discussion with an expert...*

*So the conflicted reader*

*Posts cats and children.*

*They won't jail you for cats.*

*Or for a photo of flowers.*

*What do you do?*

*Grit your teeth, write, speak and film.*

*For the reader - call things by their proper names.*

*For the one who is silent, the explosion will not be called a 'clap', but an explosion.*

*And war - war, and prison - prison,*

*For someone who is not with us for many years...*

**Act I**

**Hall of Fame**

*Monologue by Belarusian extremist Valery Yukhnevich (name changed at the request of the hero)*

Can't we go up to the second floor? My knees are broken. The stairs are torture for me. And I wouldn't want to take off my sneakers. It's also rather difficult for me now. And putting them on again is a second problem. I crumbled into dust at the age of fifty-three. Or rather, I was scattered. Crushed. They broke me and tortured me.

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Do you know what a real civil war is?

It is when your own daughter renounces you, not because you're a drunkard or a rapist, not because you abandoned her in childhood or beat her mother, but because you are a fighter for the truth who wants a better life for her, for her grandchildren and for the whole country...

Yes, my eldest blocked me on social networks, won't answer calls, won't communicate. And I find out from my wife that, in my daughter’s opinion, I’m a fool, I got into trouble and ruined her CV. And she really needs a reliable CV for her career. She must be loyal to the regime, because she works in the 'Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus,' and there they value a flexible spine, humility and diligence. So it turns out that she has an Old Man, but no father... And it turns out that she and I have completely different ideas about happiness...

My wife stayed in Belarus. She's looking after the grandchildren. I already have 10 of them! I am a father of many children - five. The three grandchildren were born while I was in prison – and then I escaped from the concentration camp. So I've never even seen them. Here it is – my share*...* Oooowww, where can I put these knees? God, it really hurts... I hate it when a man cries. And I’m ashamed of my own tears... But the pain doesn’t ask politely for an invitation. She barges in according to her schedule. And no days off.

When I went to the protests, I kept thinking: “Here I am, standing in front of a gun, and there he is, behind a shield with a baton. Here I am, a car mechanic, and there he is, an investigator for particularly important matters. Here I am, an extremist father, and there she is, my little daughter... How can we, when one is victorious, build a new Belarus together? After all, we are all children of one land, more than nine million..."

And then, on death row, in the basement of torture, where they hung me like a swallow from the ceiling and beat my knees with iron rods until I lost consciousness, I realized that it was only us going to make a new country with them, but not them with us. They were going to kill us because they don’t know how to build at all...

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I went to Minsk for protests every weekend. We didn’t have the fire in our province. Protests quickly subsided locally. As I hurtled through Slutsk in my car, I honked “Long Live Belarus,” with a flag fluttering from the open window, and no one could stop me. This was my personal rally, my solo picket. I was probably expecting to be chased. But it never happened. In August and September of 2020, it still seemed that the police would go over to the side of the people, that they would remember the words of their oath: after all, they swore an oath to serve the Belarusian people, and not some moustachioed cockroach.

I was in the thick of things. They fired stun guns at our feet, shot rubber bullets, poured vile coloured slurry from water cannons, caught us, beat us with batons and dragged us into paddy wagons. But we still faced up to the shields, walked towards armoured personnel carriers and chanted: “This is our city!” I was euphoric. Lukashenka’s coffin was born aloft and he was buried at the church, and we beat the cop’s shields with bottles of mineral water... A glass halflitre bottle lying in the hand like a grenade. And I saw how the little green cockroaches ran away in horror when these bottles flew at them. I remember how at the obelisk the sky over Minsk was divided: a black cloud hanging over the riot police, and the sun shining above the protesters. And we took this as a sign from the Universe, as the approval of Nature herself, standing on our side - the side of goodness and justice.

In summer 2020, I felt 100 percent Belarusian for the first time. I used to be a son, husband, father, friend, auto mechanic... Well, in general, now I was also a Belarusian. A member of the Slutsky brigade. In those months we travelled through the historical memory of Belarus, restored crosses and abandoned memories, collected history passed down from 'ancestors to descendants'... But I felt Belarusian – strongly, sincerely, vividly – only during the protests. When people united in society and stood together in the common idea of freedom and the New Free Belarus. And I was with my people. As their son and as a rebel who tore off Karpenkov's shoulder strap, who smashed a window in the 'O'Petit' cafe with a club..

Oh my God, my knees... Damn! Well, where should I put them? They don’t let me forget for even a second these days...

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They came for me even before the elections. At work. They gave me a day campaigning for fair elections. Funny. But it's a fact. I served three days in the Slutsk temporary detention centre because I wanted democratic presidential elections to be held in Belarus. I was also friends with Sergei Tikhanovsky. Even for this alone I could be imprisoned in a country 'not up to the law.' But they decided to imprison me for something else – for an offensive comment in Odnoklassniki regarding Karpenkov, the head of the GUBOPiK. Article 369 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus.

They didn’t have much evidence, and I didn’t confess. I'd lost my phone and I don’t use social networks at all, and many people had access to this page...

The trial was scheduled to take place on 23rd March, 2022. I was at home under a stay-at-home order. I went to work, lived... But on 15th March they came for me. 12 thugs from GUBOPiK. At home. In my apartment Slutsk. They beat me, tied me up and promised I would confess to whatever they wanted. And I’ll get a long sentence. Because in my apartment they will 'find' weapons, drugs, and money... Like Tikhanovsky. 900 thousand dollars behind the sofa. Or like Babariko. Sofa full of money...

They put me in jail for 10 days. For petty hooliganism committed in Minsk and resisting the authorities. Does anything in my story bother you? They snatched me at home, in my apartment in Slutsk, and imprisoned me for petty hooliganism in Minsk, where I had never even been... But who cares when the country 'has no time for laws,' as the illegitimate president said?

They took me and began to beat out a confession. To the point of loss of consciousness, to coma. They'll beat you to the point of bleeding, but you won't have anything to wash yourself with. They kept us without water and without food. But the feeder hole opened regularly three times a day. I said:

- Give me some tea.

And the orderly said to me:

“Hold your palms up and I’ll pour on some boiling water,” and left.

There were no utensils in the cell. And when on the third day they brought the gruel into the cell, I could no longer hold the spoon with my hands, as my broken fingers were so swollen...

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The trial took place on 23rd March. Without me. I didn't show up for it. It was not possible. I was 'resting' at the time in the 'sanatorium' at Okrestsina.

They failed to get a confession out of me. But the court considered the fact that I did not appear in court to be sufficient evidence of guilt. And they changed my restraining order from stay-at-home to arrest. So, until the next trial, I could no longer be released. Over the next few months, I had six investigators, or rather interrogators: the 'handsome guys' went on beating me excitedly for a confession. Their methods of inquiry were quite medieval. They beat me with iron rods. Thank you for not being hot...

Fuck it! Where should I put my shoulder? It squeals all the time now when it rains... Oooohhh...

From March to May I said goodbye to life every day. And every night, because they beat me even at night. They put me up against the wall, naked, and beat me brutally. Four times I actually gave up my soul to God: I lost consciousness, and the cops were unable to bring me back to my senses. Then they called an ambulance and took me to hospital. The doctors brought me back from the other world and said:

– He needs hospitalization.

And the guards who brought me to the emergency hospital answered:

– No. This prisoner should not live. He attacked our commander. You just need to keep him going until the trial. And then death will seem like paradise to him.

And I had no reason not to believe them.

While the investigation lasted, I was transported from Slutsk to Okrestina, from Okrestina to Slutsk, from Slutsk, to Zhodino, from Zhodino again to Slutsk... And before each move I was given rotten food from parcels that were not delivered on time. During all these programs, I was only able to eat a pack of gingerbread cookies and a pack of cookies. I threw away the rest with tears...

But even in such inhuman conditions, I found an opportunity for humour and protest. The first thing that comes to the minds of the cops when detaining people is to take away a person’s glasses as well as his phone, laces and instep supports. My glasses were taken from me and they thought that I couldn’t see anything without them. But I'm a shooter. My eye is a diamond. And I wear glasses for solidity, a cool look and for safety. I’m a car mechanic, and I’ve been wearing glasses for twenty years now to prevent anything from getting into my eyes while working. So later, during the investigation, I kept refusing to sign the protocols, sabotaging them, saying that I couldn’t see anything, I couldn’t read it, I couldn’t trust the investigator to read the documents for me, and I wouldn’t sign anything without glasses.

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At the trial in May, I said that I was tortured.

The judge rolled his eyes melodramatically and asked ironically:

– Really? So why didn’t you get a forensic expert to film the beatings and add a medical examination to the case materials?

In response, with fingers swollen from the handcuffs, I slowly lifted my sweater and pulled down my pants. I didn't have any underwear on. I'd spent nearly all my time in prison naked. And only at the trial had they given me someone’s huge trousers and a sweater. I tied the pants with a piece of bandage, torn from the bandage that held my non-functional shoulder joint, which had been set by doctors. The right hand was inactive. But with my left hand I lifted the sweater and pulled down my pants. I was covered in bruises, purple-blue, and bruised. The judge’s face did not move a single muscle: two and a half years of chemotherapy under Article 369.

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I left the courtroom with a clear understanding that I needed to run anywhere, because a painful death awaited me in Belarus. We agreed on evacuation very quickly. Not a moment's doubt. After what I experienced, there was no longer a question of finding a better option. I was ready for anything. And I unconditionally trusted people whose names I didn’t even know. I had a backpack with me – documents and some money. I'm wearing a light chameleon jacket that can be worn on both sides (black on the face and red on the back), a baseball cap, and sunglasses. That's all.

I was taken from Slutsk to Minsk between the seats of a car. Then they transported me to Novopolotsk. From there to Polotsk. Then to some village. And I no longer understood what border I will cross, and what country I will end up in. And it didn’t matter anymore. Lithuania... Latvia... I waited for several days for my guides to come out of their drinking bout. Then they took me to a fence, built me a simple catapult from a board, and literally threw me over to Europe.

The first thing I said to the Lithuanian border guards when I surrendered:

* Guys, I want to eat. And live...

They took me to the outpost, fed me, then interrogated me. But after the Okrestinsky interrogations, it was like a small talk between intelligent people: no violence and fear.

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In Belarus I am identified as an extremist. I wear this title with pride. In my native Slutsk, my portrait is on the 'board of honour ' – those wanted by the police.

I want the cops to remember my face. And when I return to Belarus to repay my debts (and I always repay them), I want them to understand who is standing in front of them. I have many debts - both to the evil carrion, and to Karpenkov, and to the judge, and to the investigators... Debts must be repaid. For this reason, I now go to the shooting range to keep myself in shape. If only my legs didn’t give out... And there... Our people - we’ll be numbered...

**Act II**

**Who's on sugar?**

*The monologue of a mother of many children, Belarusian Elena Dedulya:*

How can you scare me? I'm a mother of many children. Keep the light on all night? As a mother it was like this pretty much all the time... Get up five or six times a night? Even more when the children were sick. You jump up, accurately determine the temperature of a feverish child with a single touch to the forehead, measure out the medicine in millilitres, give him food, calm him down, wait for the temperature to subside, change his clothes... And here? Give your name and article? Much simpler. And less responsibility.

I also have background in athletics. I'm sports master.

They decided to make a Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya out of me. They drove me out in the winter cold wearing only a tracksuit. My God, that's nothing to my old coach... I spent my entire childhood running in the cold in a tracksuit. So I gave my warm sweaters and jackets to the girls in the cell, we went for a walk in the prison yard, ran, kicked the ice with our boots, played snowballs, laughed and trained. First an hour. Then two. And sometimes it was three hours. It was interesting for the guards to watch us and wait for us to beg pitifully to go back to the cell. Well, not us. When there is a coach on the team, he won’t let anyone freeze, and getting into shape is always good. We laughed uncontrollably, which made the guards mad. They yelled at us, but we went on laughing.

– Come and join us. Life is so much fun!

I have four children of my own and five adopted children. So working with children, pacifying and re-educating them, instilling good habits and forming a healthy lifestyle is my whole life’s work.

I always got up exactly ten minutes before dawn, put on my makeup and greeted the morning in a good mood. And the morning came with a menacing extended bark:

– Get the fuck up!

"Good morning to you too,” I answered with a constant smile.

For a week, long-bark hovered, frowned, spat through his teeth, and then one day he timidly said, as if he was tasting the word for the first time:

– Good morning!

And it was a small victory. A small victory for our peaceful protest in prison... I continued to fight as best I could and understood the power of peaceful protest. I taught them a new language – humanity – the language of culture, peace, kindness: good morning, thank you, please, have a nice day, I wish you a pleasant weekend, get well, take care of yourself... And so every day - to the investigator, the judge, the guards, the cellmates, the orderly, longitudinal, balancer, even Doctor Death, who shouted:

– What medicine? This is not a sanatorium! You are not here for us to treat you. You are here to realize your worthlessness and guilt. And I am here to prevent you from dying prematurely. You are alive only because there is no order yet...

No, I wasn’t sick, neither during the investigation, nor at the trial, nor after, in the colony... In extreme situations, an athlete’s body mobilizes, gathers itself and spends resources correctly. I began to fall apart when I was free, when I saw how the democratic forces were living their beautiful social life, holding the Tutaka festival literally on the third day after the murder of the artist Ales Pushkin in prison, hugging, singing songs, posting happy photos... That’s all, of course, it was planned in advance, and people must continue to live, and no one wins with snot and tears, but only with fire in their eyes and a smile on their lips... But for some reason it knocked me down. For me it was a stab in the back... With a knife... Piercing unbearable pain... For another... As for a friend... Although we did not know each other personally...

In general, I am always very touched by the stories of others’ pain. That's why I became a foster mother. To help children left without parents.

I have a well-toned body and a strong psyche. It’s difficult to humiliate and trample me. Even during the trial I continued to protest. I loosened the sleeves of my red sweater and wove red threads into my grey hair. The result was white and red dreadlocks. I went to court like this. And to the question “Do you trust the court?” boldly answered “No.” This whole farce was funny to me. And I was not to blame for anything.

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Do you know why they took us? Oh, this was a high-profile case! "The Case of the Painted Straw Bales." Remember this?

We were detained on the night of 1st September in a field. We were acting like fearless idiots. We drove in two cars to Dzerzhinsk - eight people, no lookouts. We thought: well, who will be in a field in the middle of the night? Just nonsense. We had a blast painting hay bales with 'protest drawings'. We tried our best! The bales were wrapped in white film - an excellent canvas for protesting artists. We had cans of red and black paint with us. One red stripe – and already a red and white flag. Road sign "Stop cockroachs!" on the round side of the stack. 82 bales painted!

And then the OMON and SOBR officers tore towards us from an ambush. They seemed to have burst out of the ground like the living dead, with machine guns, and drones were flying above us like kites. Like a horror movie! They beat the guys near the bales, painted swastikas on their clothes with our own spray cans, and shouted obscenities at them. They trampled my hand underfoot... so that my hand was rammed into the ground. Thank God the soil was soft, and our Belarusian land saved me. All my life, I've had the feeling that someone invisible is carrying me in his arms across the abyss, whenever an abyss suddenly appears on the way.

Seven of us were detained. Yet there were eight of us on the protest. I still don’t know for sure: was the eighth our man and he managed to escape, or was there a provocateur and informer among us...

For the first ten days after our arrest, we were held in the temporary detention centre of the Dzerzhinsky District Department of Internal Affairs.

We were all kept apart. All outer clothing was taken away and submitted for examination. It was very cold in the temporary detention center. I sat alone for ten days. They took away all my clothes - I was left in golf shorts and thin nylon tights. For four days they did not provide mattresses, pillows, blankets – I slept on cold iron bunks. But, as an athlete, I know how to warm up: I did exercises from the first day.

On the eleventh day we were transferred to the Zhodino prison, where we remained until we were released.

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Political prisoners are not kept together. That would allow the luxury of human communication. So I ended up in a cell with ordinary women – non-payers of alimony, whose children were taken away by the state, and victims of domestic violence who had resisted their partners. Most often in everyday life, women grab a knife. How else can a fragile girl protect herself from a drunken thug? She stabs him to save herself from death and ends up in prison because there is no law on domestic violence in Belarus.

For a long time I raised children - social orphans, and then I found myself in a cell with those these children were taken away from.

Girls leave the orphanage absolutely defenceless and ignorant of life, looking for human warmth simply out of fear of the vast world – foolishly becoming pregnant by random men then left with children in their arms without education, housing or work. There are too many stories like this.

For many years I condemned these mothers, not realizing that they themselves were victims of a monstrous, inhuman system of coercion and suppression. Nobody helps women who find themselves in tough life circumstances – unemployment, illness. And instead of being given psychological help, benefits, work, social housing, or treatment for alcoholism, their children are simply taken away. This drives them into guilt and depression, which makes them want to drink themselves to death and commit suicide. And from the moment the child is taken away, the mother is obliged to pay to keep him in the terrible orphanage system, that is, to pay the state for stealing their child. Realizing this, I shook the women by the shoulders: “Girls, it’s not your fault! This is slavery! This state needs slaves!” Slaves-taxpayers and slaves for the reproduction of new taxpayers and servants of the highest echelons of power. And the girls timidly raised their tear-stained eyes to me and, perhaps for the first time, began to think of themselves as victims, and not as criminals.

In our country the principle of 'preserving the family' is not valued at all; the main thing is to punish and destroy. While women are in prison, debt for their child accumulates. They may be released, but they have a huge debt that cannot be paid off until the die. And they lower their heads and hands, saying, I’m so worthless, it’s right that I was punished. They are already better off in prison: they could eat and work there. Everything was decided for them. And they will not be able to give birth to new children... Female labour in garment factories. Nothing has changed since 1937! And this is terrifying to realize. Almost a hundred years of Soviet slavery. And this is after the abolition of serfdom...

We were all first-timers in the cell. We had absolutely no knowledge of prison rules and laws. I remember how confused we all were when the food hatch opened and the dispenser asked:  
  
– Who's on sugar duty?

There was a pause.

The dispenser shouted irritatedly:

– I’m asking for the last time: who's on sugar duty?

“Well, me,” I burst out, because I really didn’t want to go without sugar. So I became the head of the cell. Unexpectedly. Almost headgirl. You had to take the sugar and divide it fairly. And at once I found myself introducing the principles of justice and democracy into the cell. I taught girls to choose and not obey, to vote for their choices and not bury their heads in the sand, expecting me to decide everything for everyone.

What can you vote for in prison? Yes, for a walk at least! Does the camera go for a walk? Only two people could be left in the cell – the girl who was sick and the girl who looked after him. As the camera, I could have used my authority and forced everyone to go for a walk. But I simply gave the girls my warm clothes sent from home, and came up with outdoor games for them to play. I distributed all the packages because they were brought to me, but nothing came to the girls from the outside. We voted for everything: singing songs or solving crossword puzzles, giving each other massages or weaving dreadlocks...

This is how I explained to them the laws of democracy in everyday terms. To those who have always lived according to the laws of force.

No letters came for me. Not from family, not from friends, not from strangers. But we quickly learned to send little messages into neighbouring cells – both through the air, and in in the toilets...

The worst thing in prison for me was meeting with women in the 'Zeltzer case', who'd been convicted for their comments. They came to us in a packed eight-bed cell after 47 days of quarantine. This was such a relief for them. After all, in quarantine they slept two in a bunk, even on the second tier. They were not given letter or parcels, and packages were not accepted for them. The women spent quarantine in the same clothes in which they were detained... It was horrible to look at... And it was impossible to breathe... Only here, finally, could they change clothes. We received stacks of letters for them, read them and cried. It was heartbreaking to see them take out expired, rotting, stinking products from the parcels. But we shared ours with them.

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The investigation into our case lasted five months.

“The intention to disorganize road traffic by diverting the attention of vehicle drivers and switching their attention to the inscriptions they put on the packaging of hay bales”. That was what we were accused of. It took investigators almost six months to come up this nonsense.

At the trial, I said that I did not understand the accusation, since hay is also exhibited at harvest, but no one considers this a crime. And the bales were actually ruined by the law enforcement officers themselves, who for some reason split them open them in their rage.

Our actions were certified under Article 339 of the Criminal Code, Part 2 (malicious hooliganism by a group of persons). They gave us a year for this.

Well, thanks for that. I'm not offended. I went through my karmic lessons, gained the unique experience I needed to understand the system in which I worked as a foster mother. I now know what my place is in the new Belarus and what I need to do. I want to work on preserving the family at the state level, because this is the basis of a healthy society. If a boy wasn't raised in orphanage, but by his mother and respects her, he will not beat a pensioner with a baton. Such a boy will create a normal family and will never kick a pregnant woman in the stomach...

Do you know how the Rose Revolution happened in Georgia? There, women held their babies in their arms and sat on the roadway to breastfeed them. Not a single man dared to disperse the nursing mothers. Is this possible in Belarus? They'd kick them with boots!

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How could this punitive system get to me? But it could! My adopted daughter was taken from me. The rest of my adopted children have already grown up; all of them were adults at the time of their arrest. And one girl was still studying and living with us. So she was removed from the family. And my husband couldn’t do anything about it. This was a low blow. But the girl understood everything. She was already 16 years-old. Since childhood, she saw this life without embellishment. And now we have a wonderful relationship with her.

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I didn’t want to leave Belarus. But after my release, my husband, my adult children and I were simply dragged into interrogation by the police. And I realized that they wouldn’t let us live at home, they were preparing another criminal case. That's why they fled to Lithuania. But great things await us at home. And we are ready for them.

**Act III**

**Bastard**

*Monologue of political prisoner, Belarusian Piotr Yurevich (name changed at the request of the hero)*

– Animal. Scum. Fascist. Scumbag. You are to blame for everything! You will rot in a cesspool. You’ll have to do your best to avoid being shot – such thoughts flashed through my head when I read a report about the brave 'guardian of order and servant of the law' who, during interrogations, broke people’s fingers and crushed their joints into powder with an iron rod.

And in the comments under the article he briefly wrote: 'Bastard.' One word. I couldn’t keep silent, and I didn’t want to go to prison, subject to torture and humiliation. Mostly, I tried to be extremely correct. No swearing, no anger on display. I didn’t want the text to have footnotes. I was thinking ahead, keeping cool, about what they might provoke. I tried to protect myself. After all, our protest is peaceful. And we are not prostitutes and drug addicts, we are the salt of this earth, people. Normal.

Sometimes he used humour in his comments. He wrote: “With your pale face, I would look after myself and not press for this position”, “Perhaps you’d be better off going to a sanatorium than to this post?”, “What a handsome guy, though...”, “Enough for anyone”... And, of course, through the comments: “Long live Belarus!”, “Long live forever”, “We will not forget, we will not forgive”, “We believe, we can, we can”... Well, what would we do without this? It’s just like a spell, like a prayer you say every day...

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I never wanted to leave Belarus. Not at all. This is my land. I was born and raised here. The graves of my ancestors are here and you grow imperceptibly into this forever. I'm a native of Minsk. I studied in the city, fell in love, got married, gave birth to a son, opened a business – I sold men's classic clothing – shoes, suits, accessories and that's all... I bought an apartment here, built a house, grew a garden, dug a pond, put fish in it... It was not easy, but everything was... it was decided. And when it couldn’t be solved, we helped solve it. I have participated in all the protests of entrepreneurs since 2009. There was a kind of workable social contract between the people and the state. They didn’t interfere with our development too much, and we didn’t stop them from stealing.

And then, with Covid, and even earlier, it was becoming obvious that they were adding something to their water, some kind of nonsense, and their delusions of grandeur and absolute impunity were swelling. In short, they completely lost their limits.

And it was no longer possible to just look on. It was impossible to tolerate. I went to all the marches. Every Sunday. To pickets, district marches in the morning when the cops have a shift change. I left for the picket at 8 a.m. and was already at work by 9 a.m. And so on until spring. I never got caught. I run well. Wore a face mask. My grey jacket is nondescript. Push-button telephone. No show-off photos on social networks. I thought about safety all the time. About family. About business. I always thought it was stupid to expose yourself. Why dig against yourself? Why make the cops' job easier?

I couldn’t even imagine that they would take me. Who could do it? An investigator? A person who can't even find soup in the refrigerator? So how did it happen? I had everything clear – nicknames, passwords, two-factor authentication, digital security in all respects. They couldn't find a way in!

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They came with a search warrant at seven in the morning. In March '22. They confiscated my laptop, detained me... Everything was in a fog, it seemed like I was sleeping, and it was just a bad dream. I even pinched myself yet could not wake up.

­­– A bastard, you say? – the cop lisped. – You'll soon find out what a bastard is...

It turned out that the seasoned sadist, who crushes heads with a club during interrogations, has very fine mental organization. And he sued me for insult. I had called him a bastard somewhere on social networks, under an article about his 'exploits' back in 2020, just a bastard. I don’t know how many other epithets there were from other users, but somehow they figured me out.

And they came for me.

Article 369 of the Criminal Code. Insulting a government official via the Internet.

This 'vulnerable' person did not appear in court even via Skype. They just read out his claim to me.

I still couldn’t believe the seriousness of what was happening and joked at the trial that the bastard was a pagan: “But it seemed to me, your honour, that the methods that this representative of the authorities uses in the inquiry process are very pagan, and not Christian.”

I didn't even hire a lawyer. Well, what kind of defender do I need in this far-fetched case?

I thought that the treasury was completely empty and they just wanted to milk me. They say the entrepreneur will be fined. And I was ready to pay money for the right to express my opinion.

And the trial – a joke – lasted only 40 minutes. The judge announced the results of some kind of linguistic examination, which was allegedly carried out by some philologists – graduates in fucking philological sciences. Like – a bastard is a nasty, unworthy, unclean, nasty person. And all these epithets contain an insult to a representative of the authorities.

“Punished by a fine, or arrest, or restriction of freedom for a term of up to three years with a fine, or imprisonment for the same term with a fine,” the judge read out.

The prosecutor asked for two years of chemotherapy. And the judge slammed his gavel joyfully and approvingly.

It was out of the blue. Two years of home chemicals and a fine of 2,000 Belarusian rubles. He turned out to be an expensive bastard.

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Even after this absurd sentence, I didn’t want to leave. I was settled with my wife in a house just outside the Moscow Ring Road. I have a plot of 20 acres there, a pond with salmon, a swing, a barbecue, a trampoline, a house with a terrace. And I could go to work. Once a week I went to the cops to check in and said that I was on the path to correction.

That's how I lived. Exactly three months. Until the next episode, until the night kites broke into my house, broke everything in the house, confiscated my computer and dragged me away for interrogation again.

And there are already parts 369 and 364 of the 2nd Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus. Insult and threat of violence against an internal affairs officer. Based on the totality of the 'atrocities' – from six to nine years in prison.

I was tempted to comment again. I probably wanted to write the biblical expression 'every creature has a pair', but I couldn’t resist, my hand on the keyboard trembled and what happened was: “Each creature has a pair!”

I was already seasoned and understood that appealing to common sense, humour and humanity in court was useless, that I was wasting time, whatever. And I still have cheap comments on the Internet. Every week they could open an episode and start a new case.

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In Christianity, it is believed that a person has a soul from birth to death. And the body is the case that carries this immortal soul within itself. And they are together all the time.

But it seems to me that not every person has a soul.

The Buryats have a belief that really resonates with me. They believe that a person in a state of stress, illness, or internal discord can lose his soul. The soul can fly away from the body, and then a person walks hollow, empty, without a soul. There are people who are full, and there are people who are blanks. And this is very clearly visible in prison and in court, in any police department and temporary detention centre.

Did something happen to them as children? Didn't their parents love them? Were they bullied by their classmates? Are they orphans? They seem like robots. Cogs of the system. Empty eyes, empty heads, and instead of a heart: a fiery engine.

They are lost. Young people who have lost their souls. It would seem that a person is just beginning to live. He would fall in love, explore the world, ask questions, look at life with curiosity. But no. No curiosity. They have no questions. They only have pre-prepared answers. They are the arbiters of destinies. With a baton at 18 years old. Or with a robe at 22. And the prosecutor is almost a teenager. Without pity and shame... Absolutely without human feelings. Obedient, complacent machines.

And the feeling from the trial is almost icy. Nothing alive. Nothing human.

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Before the trial on the second episode, I was released to serve home detention on my own name under the guarantee of my wife and sister. I decided not to tempt fate and started looking for emergency evacuation options. I wrote to all sorts of initiatives. No one answered me for three weeks. My nerves were at their limit. My friends from the protest yard chat managed to find routes for me. I reached the Lithuanian border by myself and met the guide. At night he led me to a river that I had to cross. I swim well, so it didn’t scare me at all. I cheerfully stepped into the water and swam. But I soon got caught in barbed wire stretched under water. I cut myself badly, bled heavily, and I had to go back. I spent two days licking my wounds in Grodno. I contacted the conductor again. He led me to a hole in the fence, and I ended up on Lithuanian territory. I waited for the border guards patrolling the border and happily surrendered into their hands. I explained that I was fleeing persecution, showed documents about the criminal cases and an old driver’s license. I didn't have my passport with me. They took me to the police. I spent two days at the border outpost until Natalya Kolegova, the head of Dapamogi, came to pick me up and took me to the 'castle.'

The police started looking for me exactly a month after I crossed the Lithuanian border. They tortured my wife and sister, dragged them for interrogation, forced them to pay 300 for my escape... Now my wife is staying on in Belarus to manage our business. This gives me a livelihood while I resolve issues of integration into Lithuanian society...

No, I am not going to stay in Lithuania forever. This is just a short respite before the battle. Dictators do not go away without war, and we still have to fight for our freedom. I'm ready. And these are not empty words.

I dare to be! To be, to survive, to endure, to return to our land and crush the cockroach.

2023-2024

(c) Diana Balyko