

Lines of Conscience

By Christopher J Minchin

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Published by Malibu Publications 2025

To Ukraine: Your courage in the face of brutal oppression inspires us all. May your fight for liberty prevail.

Taras Shevchenko sat on the grassy hill with his back against the rough bark of an oak tree. The sun hung low and cast long shadows across the slopes. Insects buzzed in the warm afternoon air. His old shotgun lay untouched beside him. He had not come here to hunt and he was not even looking for game. He just needed distance from the truck maintenance depot, the grind and noise of the workshop, and the constant idle chatter of his fellow workers.

"Another broken axle, Taras? This damn truck is falling apart!" Kolya had shouted earlier that morning, his voice sounding over the noise of tools. Taras had just grunted, ready for the work. He took these mechanical jobs in Ivanava whenever he could

to supplement his meagre wages as a farmhand, but the noise of the city always made him crave the silence of the hills.

Tilting his head back, he watched the high branches of the oak move. For a moment, the world was still. Then, as always when he found himself here, thoughts of Svetlana returned. They had been on this hill together years ago. She was eighteen then, bright and free. They had walked here laughing with her hand warm in his. They ended up under this same tree and it did not take long before they were lost in each other. He remembered the moment clearly with her astride him and her body moving slowly over him while they both were breathless. The world closed in around them. It was not perfect, not like a movie, but it was theirs, real and simple. Her eyes stayed on his, full of something he did not quite get then but never forgot.

Afterwards, they lay there with fast hearts and relaxed limbs. It had been messy and rushed, but he could not forget it. It was her first time. For Taras, there had been other girls, but none had left a mark like Svetlana. That one moment had stuck with him, bright and clear, until now.

Life had moved on, but he wanted to hold onto that feeling forever. He had spent most of his twenty six years in Rudsk, Belarus, a small village just north of the Ukrainian border. At eighteen, he was called up for the army and served fifteen months in truck

maintenance. After returning home, his relationship with Svetlana grew. She was nineteen when their first daughter was born and he was twenty four. Now they had two girls. Taras worked as a farmhand who did not earn much and he was always looking for ways to get more.

"We need more than dreams, Taras," Svetlana had said just last night, her voice firm as she tucked their youngest into bed. "The girls need shoes for winter. New ones."

Rudsk was a small village of around six hundred people. Its life was farming with a few small businesses. Seven kilometres to the north lay Ivanava, a larger town where Taras sometimes picked up extra work when snow blocked the farmlands.

As he sat beneath the old oak, his thoughts turned to his daughters. Progress in Belarus was held back by constant corruption and it was a hard struggle to get ahead. The more he thought about their future, the deeper his sadness grew. No matter how he tried, he felt stuck for good.

As Taras stood to return home, his gaze caught something unusual along a distant side road. At first, it looked like just a few trucks, but as he watched, the size of the operation became clear. Long lines of tanks and armoured vehicles rumbled past. They were joined by trucks packed with troops and all were

heading toward the old abandoned brick factory. The huge number of vehicles and the presence of medical units suggested something more than a routine drill. This was not just unusual. It felt important. As he watched, a knot of worry tightened in his stomach. This felt far beyond normal movements.

On his walk home, the image of the military convoy played over in the mind of Taras. The huge amount of it and the medical units meant it was not a standard drill. He recalled his fifteen months of service. He knew what a standard exercise looked like and this was not it. His time in the army had taught him how the military valued information and he realised that for a man with a camera and a pair of binoculars, this might be the only way to buy those winter shoes.

Could news like this be worth something to someone outside Belarus? The thought was fleeting at first, but the more he thought it over, the more the idea of its worth began to take hold. This was not just interesting. It was valuable. Maybe this was the chance he had been waiting for and a way to finally make a difference for his girls.

He thought of telling Svetlana and involving her in this growing and possibly dangerous plan. For a moment, the idea of having someone to talk to was very tempting. But the risks weighed on him. Her fear, her potential anger, and the hidden danger it would put her in if anything went wrong were too

much. This secret, he decided, was his alone. For now, he would keep it from her.

He reasoned that embassies, especially the British, would have people looking for news. Kyiv made the most sense. But the journey was costly and far beyond his means. In the meantime, he began watching. The military base near Ivanava was growing quickly. From hidden spots, he noted vehicle types and troop numbers and even the building of more permanent sheds. His second hand Canon camera clicked often. His old army binoculars, a souvenir he had quietly kept, were needed for his watching.

After a week, an idea came to him: email. The government digital watching was strong, but VPNs were the answer. Though they were officially blocked, his friends could help.

"Hey, Ivan," Taras said casually to his friend the next day. "Do you still have that fast internet? Could you download a utility programme for me?"

Ivan narrowed his eyes and his brow wrinkled slightly. "What kind of programme? Another one of your crazy ideas, Taras?"

Taras just shrugged while trying to keep his face neutral. "Nothing like that. Just for work. I will buy you a beer."

He hoped his friend would not ask for details. Ivan seemed to accept it, though he was not sure.

That night, while Svetlana and the girls slept, he switched on the computer. Slowly and carefully, he installed the VPN. A blocked news site loaded. It was slow but working. Then he set up a new Gmail account. Twenty minutes later, it was done.

The next night, he found the email address for the UK embassy in Kyiv. He stared at the screen before deciding on the title. "Urgent information for Ukraine Military," he typed. His fingers hovered over the keyboard. What should he say? He needed to sound like he was telling the truth and not like a liar. He decided to be plain. He typed slowly and chose each word with care.

He wrote that he lived in Belarus near the border with Ukraine and had seen an unusual and growing military build up. He described the types of vehicles and noted the presence of mobile medical units. He said that this looked like more than a drill and that Ukraine might be the target.

He did not ask for money. Not yet. He simply explained that he had information and more details if they were interested. He attached a single photograph that showed just enough to back up his claims. He included the Gmail address he had made the night before. Taras re read the message. It was short and factual. He hoped that would be enough.

With a final breath, he clicked "Send."

Now, all he could do was wait and see if anything came of it. He shut down the computer. The faint hum of the cooling fan faded into silence as he tiptoed into their bedroom. He quietly undressed and slid into bed next to Svetlana. Her soft breathing sounded gently in their small bedroom. Sleep did not come easily with his mind still racing at the thought of his daring plan.

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