
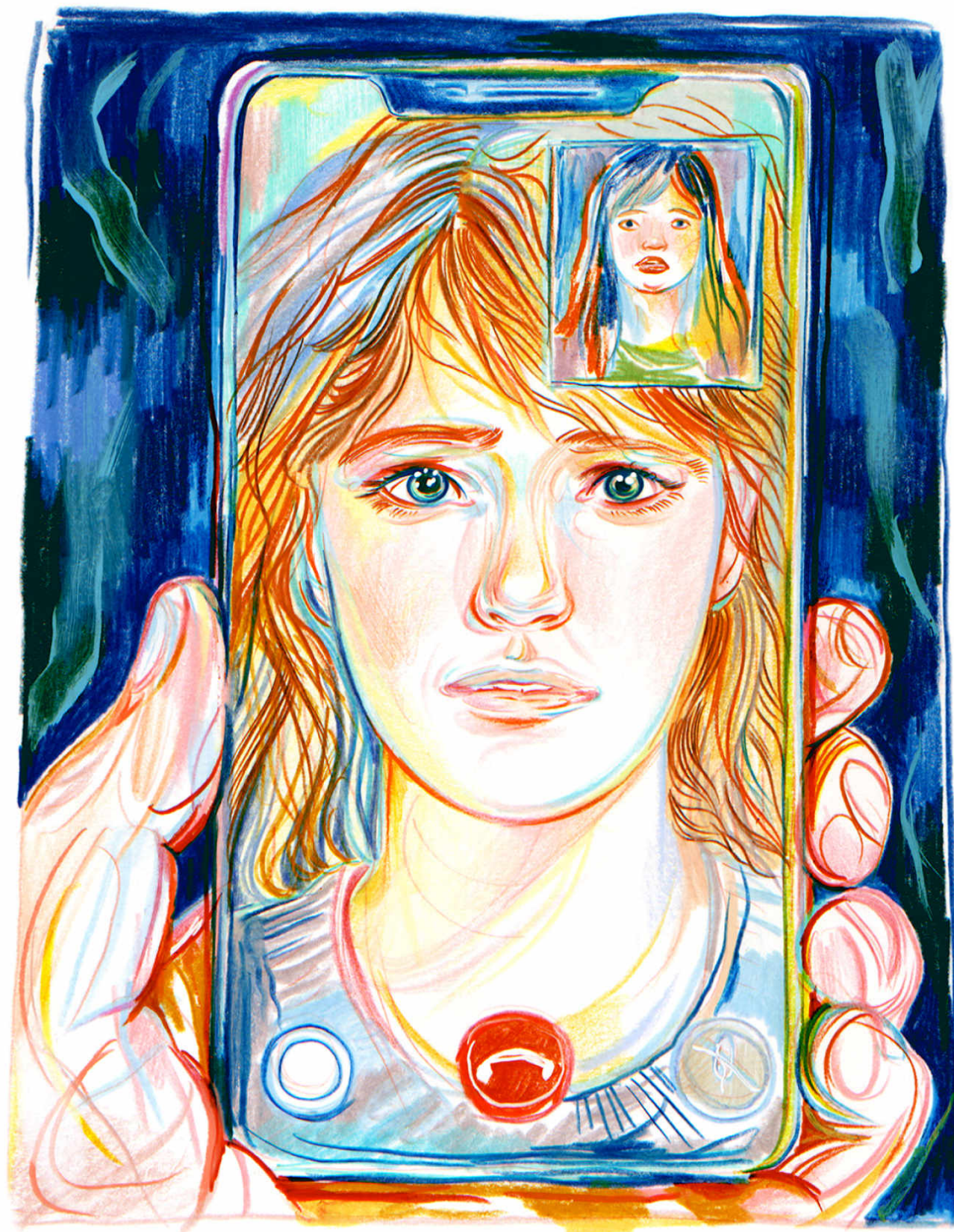


'We want to go into a deep sleep and wake up when Ukraine has won the war': The diary of two sisters separated by the war in Ukraine

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Aline Zalko for M Le magazine du Monde ALINE ZALKO POUR « M LE MAGAZINE DU MONDE »

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Olga and Sasha are Ukrainian sisters. Olga, 34, is a wine merchant in Paris, where she has been living for seven years. 32-year-old Sasha lives in Kyiv. Since the beginning of the war, she has been living with her mother, her partner, their dog and a friend, to the rhythm of the sirens and the Russian army's bombs, in the underground parking lot of a building that serves as their shelter. The two sisters have agreed to keep a diary for M. In Kyiv, Sasha tries to project herself into the future; in France, Olga has a hard time accepting her family's choice to stay in Ukraine and feels that the French are not sufficiently concerned by the conflict.

Tuesday, March 22

Olga: This morning I had a long discussion with my grandmother again. Sometimes, when I'm really not well, she comforts me, even though she is the one who is in the middle of a war! She is incredible. She tells me important things about me, my family, where I come from. I think I need that for the future. Tonight, as dark thoughts lurk in my head, I start to pray. I have never been a churchgoer, but now I pray every day.

Sasha: The days have become so monotonous. I wake up late, do things around the house, watch the news. I go to bed very late, when there are no more sirens. I am upset by this feeling of a lasting war. The hatred against Russia is growing exponentially. How will we free ourselves from all this hatred? Will we all have to go to therapy for years after the war? We will have to work on our consciences for a long time. I have started two novels, but I can't really focus. On the other hand, I am reading a book on the history of Ukraine, which makes me feel better.

1. 'This morning, on my phone screen, I saw the terrified eyes of my little sister': The diary of two sisters separated by the war in Ukraine

Wednesday, March 23

Olga: I'm writing on the subway on my way to the store. For the umpteenth time, I think about the plan: to join my family and take my grandmother and my aunt to the South, to my grandmother's sister's house. It's quiet there – well, for now – and it's not far from the European border. Then I would go back to Kyiv to be with my family.

It's completely absurd, but I feel like I would have much more control over the situation, that I could do more than them, as if I had more power than my relatives there. And at the same time, I tell myself that it would be selfish to leave. By staying in France, I am offering them an escape route and support. I know that. Nevertheless, if I didn't have anyone, if I didn't have my partner, Yanis, in France, I would have already left. I imagine that if I tell my family about this project, they will say no; that's for sure. But I am already starting to think about a date to fly to Poland.

Sasha: We had curfew all day. So I did some housekeeping and then nothing. Oh yes! I took a few steps in the yard. Without any physical activity, we get tired faster. We are already tired when we wake up. It is unbearable. In fact, we want to go into a deep sleep and wake up when Ukraine has won the war.

My iPhone shows me pictures from March 23, 2021. One year ago today, Y. and I went to Kyiv's "beach". That's what they call the banks of the Vyshgorod reservoir, a kind of artificial lake. There is fighting happening there now. I remember that morning I had taken my Italian class with my friend A., who is now a refugee in Italy with her daughter. I lived in the city center, worked out, had a job. Now I'm following Instagram accounts of therapists, nutritionists and sports coaches. They give us advice on how to take care of our mental and physical health during a war.

2. 'We see what Russia is capable of: killing civilians, killing a nation': The diary of two sisters separated by war

Thursday, March 24

Olga: Thousands of lives have been ruined. All those dreams destroyed. When will it end? When will they leave? How many parents, how many children will they have killed before that? Some people say, "It's normal, it's war. Killing is always a part of war." No, it's not normal. It's not normal to shoot at buses with "children" written on them. It's not normal to bomb a theater that has "children" painted in giant letters in Russian around it. When do humans become inhumane?

Rules of war exist. They were signed in Geneva, they are called a convention. But the Russian soldiers do not know about them. Oleksiy Arestovych, the Ukrainian President's adviser, says in his speeches that it is forbidden to mistreat and kill Russian soldiers outside the battlefield, that the Geneva Convention must be followed. We abide by the rules when we wage war because we are not barbarians. This confirms that russia (I have decided to write "russia" in lower case from now on) has stopped in the Middle Ages. Ukraine is fighting against the savagery and violence of the Middle Ages.

Sasha: They say that the conflict started a month ago, but February has 28 days. So this is only day 28, isn't it? Viktor and I don't talk to each other anymore. We had a fight and we don't want to make up. It's hard, but it's true that I don't feel any love, tenderness or sympathy. It's the price of war, it seems. I have dark thoughts when I go to bed, but I try to chase them away. I don't want to tell them. Sometimes, I imagine the worst.

3. 'We are stronger than we could have ever imagined': The diary of two sisters separated by the war in Ukraine

Friday, March 25

Olga: It's quiet now in Kyiv, but this can shatter at any time. I have started to insist that they come here. I don't care if I annoy them. There's no point in staying there, not sleeping, going back and forth between the basement and the apartment six times a night. I don't want them to be stuck there. Of course it is important to stay for the motherland, Ukraine. But I see that my mother is exhausted. Someone else can bake apple cakes. If I take my grandmother and my aunt with me, my mother and Sasha will follow me. I told Sasha that I was coming. She didn't say anything. She didn't yell at me. She usually yells at me. I will keep on insisting every day.

Sasha: Y. and I went to the supermarket as usual and restocked. We can still find many things on the shelves. In Kyiv, all the logistics are very well organized. The difference is that the products are packed in big quantities. We buy a lot of butter for Mom's cakes. She has already made about 50 cakes this month, it is her routine. She cooks the apples, makes the pastry. Every day, non-stop. It's hard, but compared to other things... End of April is my birthday. Not this year, of course, but in a year I will organize a trip to France, to Olga's house. I love to party with my sister in Paris or in Kyiv. Next year, it will be at her place.

4. 'Getting used to never having your heart in the right place is awful': The diary of two sisters separated by the war in Ukraine

Saturday, March 26

Olga: Yesterday I had a drink with a friend. I knew that the day before, Mom and Sasha had had a glass of wine at home. It made me feel less guilty. I feel guilty all the time. I can laugh, go out, go shopping. I feel guilty for not saying or doing things; for not buying my grandmother a washing machine. I had to do that last summer. Today I went to a florist and bought a bunch of tulips. Mom and Sasha and I used to send each other lots of pictures, flowers, pretty things. I sent them a picture of this bouquet. I know they can't afford it. I felt so bad about it.

"I went to the rally at Place de la République today. A friend of mine had made some éclairs in the colors of the Ukrainian flag. We gave half of them to the stand that collects funds and medicines in the square. They sold everything." Olga

Sasha: This morning we woke up to the sound of guns: it was the territorial defense training next door. We got used to it. I made breakfast – oatmeal with Brie cheese. I don't cook much, my mom does that. She makes more "constructive" things: soups, dishes with meat. These days, we are okay, we eat, we have a good appetite. We drink a lot of coffee.

After breakfast, Y. and I decided to go for a drive, to get out a little while. We saw the destroyed buildings in the city center (where the factory of Artem and the TV tower were bombed). It is staggering to see all those destroyed walls, all those broken windows. We went to Podil to have a coffee in a well-known cafeteria in the neighborhood. I met some friends: they are all trying to work, to help.

Sunday, March 27

Olga: I thought back to before the war. I was sure that it would break out. For a month, every day, I tried to talk about it with my mother. She would say to me: "Stop it, everything will be fine. I know Putin, he just wants to flex his muscles in the Donbas." I had a feeling that this would happen. Maybe because in France a lot of people thought he was going to attack. Even when I was in Ukraine, in January, I felt that it was very tense.

I went to the rally at Place de la République today. A friend of mine had made some éclairs in the colors of the Ukrainian flag. We gave half of them to the stand that collects funds and medicines in the square. They sold everything. And we met three Ukrainian women who were looking for housing. I got some leads. We offered them the éclairs and they were very happy!

I talked to Mom about my plan. She said she was ready to go and take my grandmother and aunt.

Sasha: Y.'s sister came to visit us. She has a café in Kyiv. We had a nice time with her and her daughter. We went for a walk and we had dinner together. She had brought a bottle of good wine. In the evening, when the sirens wailed, we were ready to go down with Mom. We stayed a while; she had her coat on, I had my backpack. But eventually, the night became quiet. We didn't go to the parking lot. We watched a movie.

We understand that the Russian strategy is changing. They are focusing on the Southeast, where the city of Mariupol was destroyed like Aleppo in Syria. 160,000 people are still trapped there. There is so much bombing there, so much violence. It is a tragedy that concerns everyone, Russia and the democratic world, but it is still the Ukrainian tragedy. We live in mourning.

Monday, March 28

Olga: I'm feeling a little sick today. I allow myself to stay in bed all day. I'm watching an interview with a russian author I used to admire. He is clearly anti-Putin. As is the journalist, by the way.

But I find in their speeches this idea that "russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, we are the same, we live the same, etc." That is over. Ukraine is building a new country. A country detached from their dying imperialism. A new country of free, brave, respectful and homeland-loving people. Ukrainians know that they are guided by "European" values and they have already proved it. I learned that my mother has now decided not to leave after all. Yesterday she fully agreed with me. I can't take it anymore.

Sasha: Today we were busy all day with humanitarian aid arriving from Poland and Germany. We store it in the parking lot. We put away tons of blankets, hundreds of kilos of clothes for children and adults. Trucks come to pick them up twice a week to take them to the

East or to refugees from other cities. The day passes quickly when you are doing physical work and that feels good. In one of the boxes we came across a small note from a German family. It read, "We are with you," with a big heart, signed "N Family". We are always very moved when we find a message. We all get together, type it into Google and wait for the translation.

Elisa Mignot