THE IRON

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Translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

In May of 2022, Inga came to love an iron.

The iron moves left, transforming something wrinkled and shapeless into something warm and even.

"If only life could be like this," says Inga. And she looks at the iron. The iron calms her. Inga irons.

Surprisingly, she even irons jeans.

"I iron everything, even jeans," she repeats, like an echo, "but you can't iron out life."

And so the conversation has very quickly come full circle. And we go silent.

The iron breathes steam, moving as it smooths someone's wrinkled things.

Inga says:

"Of course I'm lucky: I have a job, a place to live, nobody pries, I don't owe anybody anything. I'm like a character in a spy movie: it's as if somebody brought me here, gave me a cover so here I am, ending up with a clean slate instead of my past life, and in a place where nobody knows a thing about me. And I can say anything at all about myself to anybody at all. And now I can tell you, too…"

The iron moves from left to right, breathing steam, and stops. Inga's looking at me.

I look at Inga's hands, which are holding the iron: they have bulging blue veins and a musician's long fingers, and there's a wedding band on her ring finger. Inga has dark blue eyes in the middle of a pale, elongated face framed by wavy platinum hair with grayed roots.

Inga's forty-two. I could have said that Inga's very pretty but to say that, she would have needed to smile, at least at the corners of her lips. Inga's not smiling; she's looking at me. The iron's exhaling steam. And Inga finishes her sentence:

"But I don't want to tell anything. When you tell, you live it all over again. It's like ripping a bandage off an open wound, taking the flesh. It's very painful."

The iron's moving from right to left. I say I'll probably go and it's too bad we planned to do this, I'm sorry. Inga looks up and sets the iron on end.

"No, sit for a while. I did promise. I'll tell you. And then I won't talk about it ever again. Not with anybody. I'll start my life all over again later. That's what I've decided. But right now I'll finish ironing."

I sit back down.

"I'd dreamt all this before," says Inga, "dreams about war have tormented me since I was a child. I thought it was because of our childhood, remember how inspiring the movies about war were, and the heroes in books and textbooks – we were all just wild about military heroism. For some reason I remember really well about a lieutenant with a very tender surname, Romashkin, hurling himself and a grenade under a German tank and dying. Remember that movie?"

I nod. It's *Take Him Alive*, the scariest TV movie of my childhood. Inga and I are about the same age. We were born in the same country, the USSR, which no longer exists, and now everything's different for us. But the books and movies from our childhood really were more or less the same.

She says:

“I dreamt about Stalingrad a lot when I was a kid. In details I didn’t know when I was awake: streets, their names, destroyed houses. I dreamt that I was supposed to run, carrying a child, to the corner of two streets whose names I remembered well. In my dream I knew that I had to run on the uneven side of the street and that there’d be a command center in the basement of a bread store and they’d save us.

“But I never made it all the way to the command center in that recurring dream, I’d miss by literally a few steps: I’d turn the wrong way, go to the wrong building. An explosion would boom and I’d lose the child.

“I’ve probably woken up a thousand times in my life in a cold sweat because it turned out there wasn’t any child in my arms, because we hadn’t been able to run the whole way. And it was this horror I could never get over: I didn’t save my child and I’m alive but the child isn’t.

“And when that actually happened, I felt nothing. It was as if I knew that would happen. Do you understand what I’m saying? Because nobody understands.

“I can’t explain to anybody what I’m feeling. I feel nothing.”

Inga keeps looking at the iron. And she doesn’t look at me. It’s most likely easier for her to tell all this to the iron. But that’s hard, too.

She takes a few steps, from one corner of the tiny utility room to another. She sits on the edge of a clothes hamper and asks if she should start over. She’s instinctively putting off the scariest moment for later, starting all over again, time after time. From when there wasn’t yet a war.

“We lived in a residential area, it was my husband’s house, I didn’t like it very much there, I kept wanting to live (as I put it) in a normal building. But he loved it. He liked that it was

his house, the whole house was his, it wasn't a 'hive,' as he said. He liked that we had our own land and we were always planting something, we had a kitchen garden.

"The main thing that reconciled me with that house is that my husband did what I asked: he put the kitchen sink in front of a window. When I washed the dishes, I saw the yard and the street. I even imagined what was out there, beyond the house and trees: the sea. I love the sea.

"Not everything's tied to the sea in Mariupol, so it's not like usual seaside cities. We have factories, businesses, another life.

"But it was like I didn't notice that. I'm not sure how to put it but I had something for the sea… An addiction? Yes, an addiction. It was important to me that we had the sea in our city and that in the evenings we could go to the beach as a family. I drew the sea all the time, too. I'm a graphic designer by occupation but I drew at home for my own enjoyment: sea, sea, sea. My husband says, won't you ever draw one of us? I always answer that I'll draw you after I've learned how to draw the sea well. That was our personal joke.

"I'm from near Kharkiv. Ever since I moved to Mariupol, I've told myself every day, 'Inga, your dreams came true, you're on the sea.' There's a sea here, too. Have you been?"

No, I haven't. "Here" is Costa del Sol, the most popular coastline in tourist-oriented Spain. It's May now and the water's still cool but there's already lots of tourists. They're having fun, getting tans, and swimming a little. Inga hasn't seen that. She doesn't go to the sea. She hardly leaves the house at all.

The villa where we met is on the luxurious outskirts of the resort town of Fuengirola. Inga was hired for work and a woman she doesn't know took her in at her home; she doesn't seem to need a housekeeper much: neither the woman nor her husband have been at the villa even once since Inga started living here. The woman who owns the villa found Inga through

social media, where people who wanted to take in refugees left their contact information. Volunteer coordinators matched them up. That's how Inga got a job and her own room: she cleans, launders, and irons. Even jeans. And she tells stories. Not to me but to an iron. That's easier.

"On the twenty-fourth, you couldn't really hear the explosions where we lived. I found out about everything from social media. I couldn't believe it: how could it be a war? What war? The twenty-first century and war? We were obviously living on a powder keg but you get used to that. And there was the sense that what was sometimes blowing up was someplace else, that another war couldn't happen. And that no war could possibly touch us: we're peaceable people. Our house didn't have a basement, just a small cellar, but you couldn't even turn around in there. And so my son and I had to move in with my husband's relatives, that's what he told us to do. My husband's in the military. And I hadn't seen him since February 17. He only called. He'd usually say, 'hi-bye, everything's fine, kiss on the nose, be there soon. Or not soon.'

"But this time he called and said to go to his mother's. There's a basement there, you'll sit it out. Even though there was constant booming, everybody was still sure it wouldn't be for long, maybe two days, well, three, well, a week, max. Then my husband asked me to give the phone to Petya, that's our son. I don't know what they talked about. Their relationship has always been their own thing. Then Petya gave the phone back to me. And my husband told me what we should bring with us: flashlight, warm things, pillow, canned food, and water. Petya and I ended up with a bag and a backpack. My Petya's skinny, thin as a pin. He put on that backpack and I teared up and said: give it to me, son, I'll take it. But he said no, I'm a man, father told me I'm in charge while he's not here.

"And then I wondered what that means, while he's not here, how long he won't be here, when this will all even end. And it was at that moment that I had a sort of déjà vu. I immediately realized everything in advance, that we wouldn't make it, that this is the end. And I recalled what my husband said at the end of our conversation, no, it was what he asked me, if I knew how much he loves me. He'd never been a fan of all that mushiness. I was surprised and said, 'I know. And I love you, too, Olezha.'

"But I said it in kind of a hurry. It seemed like feelings weren't my biggest concern at the time.

"We went outside. It was cold. The city was already wrecked all over, buildings were on fire, there was black smoke coming from them, it smelled like burning, and you could hardly see the sky. There was booming in the distance but you could hear shooting closer. You couldn't tell who it was or where it was coming from, though. It's just that everybody was shooting from all over. I can't convey the feeling to you: I'm standing in the middle of that hell with my son and it's like I'm suddenly seeing us from a distance. There's a child who's ten years old, he's my musician, he played in a violin competition, he's a soloist in the chorus, he reads books instead of spending his time with a phone, like other kids do…

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to talk about that. It's just that right then I felt like I couldn't protect him if something happened."

She's holding on to the iron like it's a handrail on a bus. She's not ironing, she's just holding on.

Let's shut it off, I say, it's hot.

And she says not to, I'm going to iron, to calm myself.

The iron calms her.

"We didn't go to the bomb shelter right away. My mother-in-law had a theory that it's safer to stay in a building and sleep in a hallway on that, you know, stair landing. And we slept. The flashlight really came in handy, and the pillows, too, and everything we brought with us. None of it was unnecessary, my husband's a smart guy. We lay on the stair landing; Petya and I were nestled up together. I had a song about breathing in my head, do you know it?

I wake up in a cold sweat
I wake up with a nightmare in my head
It's like our house is water, it's the sea
The only ones left alive are you and me
And there's miles of water overhead
Whales' tails pound at it, things are wet
We don't have oxygen for two
I'm lying in the dark
Listening to our breathing
I listen to our breathing
I never thought before that you and I
Shared the same breathing
Breathing

"Petya slept well, he even got used to it over time and didn't wake up from the racket. But I slept in fits and starts, for an hour, hour and a half. And I had my dream about Stalingrad all the time. But it came in bits and pieces, flashbacks, so when I woke up I was always confused about what was a dream and what was real.

"That morning, I woke up because my son's looking at me, 'Ma, you're beautiful.' That was the fifth or sixth day of life on the stair landing. We hardly washed and didn't change our clothes at all. All the other people – I saw this – their faces looked like they were sprinkled with

dirt, they were gray, and their eyes were desperate, like they were bulging. And here's 'beautiful.'

"I don't remember how I answered because suddenly it started booming all around. Fear paralyzes you in moments like those, it completely possesses you. You don't control yourself, it controls you. I think heroes in war movies who cover someone with their chests or throw themselves at the enemy with a grenade are people who can shut off their fear. I'm not like that. I was afraid all the time of tripping and not being able to protect Petya when the time comes. I'm sorry, I'm saying the wrong thing again."

The iron's moving from left to right. She takes a breath.

"So anyway that morning soldiers ran into the entryway and started shouting that there's going to be a battle, everybody had to go down to the shelter. And they shot in the air. And only then did Petya and I go down to the basement.

"It turned out there were already lots of people there, many of them with children. My father-in-law was kind of in charge: he led food preparation, shifts for cleaning, and shifts for water expeditions. Those water expeditions were the scariest and most dangerous.

"At that time, they'd already totally shut down the electricity in the city: power and all the heating. The water main was broken, there was no water.

"And so the guys, our men, went to the ice rink in small groups – the ice had started thawing there and they collected that melted water in jerrycans and bottles. And brought it to us. We boiled the water and cooked kasha in it. Well, it wasn't really kasha: three spoons of rice in a pot, so there was a dab of something for the kids' dishes.

"At first the adults ate thin soup made out of canned meat. And later… And later, you don't need to know, we ate all kinds of things. I probably won't ever eat any more meat now.

“In those first days, once I’d finally gotten my head together, I thought I could basically eat nothing at all. Why should I eat if I don’t want to live? Why, really, was I alive? What for, for whose sake? But nature did its thing. You can’t not eat. You could not get up or not talk. But that doesn’t work: there’s people around, they somehow pull you out of that drowsy state. I realized then that life is instinct: when the moment comes, you’ll eat and drink.

“I couldn’t kill myself with hunger. I ended up being pretty weak for killing myself. And God didn’t take me. I wondered all the time what was wrong with me. Why didn’t He take me, why had He left me here to suffer? I’m sorry, I’m talking about the wrong thing again.”

I ask if she wants to go smoke. She shakes her head no. Wipes her hands on the sides of her dress. Sighs. Looks around the room as if she’s searching for something but not finding it. Takes the iron and irons someone’s T-shirt that’s already been ironed several times. You can’t tell if it’s a man’s T-shirt or a woman’s.

Then she says, “There’s only a little left, I’ll tell all the rest fast.”

I don’t answer. She’s saying that to herself. I’m not here: it’s just her, the iron, and her recollections.

“A day or two later, the soldiers found out people had been going to the ice rink for water. They started shooting at them. Why? I don’t know, don’t ask me. Why had they come anyway? Why had all this started? If all those ‘whys’ were combined, there’d be an answer to your ‘why.’ There’s no reason why! It’s because they can. Because if you have a weapon, then you shoot with it.”

I ask her:

“What soldiers were they?”

She doesn’t understand the question:

"Meaning?"

"AFU, Azov, DPR, Russian, what kind of soldiers were they?"

Her answer was staggering:

"It doesn't matter to me. I don't know what kind of soldiers they were. I didn't see them. What does that change anyway? Some people said their helmets were wound in blue, meaning they were ours. Others said they had white armbands – that means DPR. I don't know, I didn't see them myself. You have to understand, it doesn't really matter who's shooting in that situation: everybody's shooting. And you're like a rabbit because no matter who's shooting, he's shooting at you."

I would run into this more than once later, that civilians who've ended up in the hell of combat zones don't distinguish who's shooting at them. They call everyone who's shooting "soldiers" without clarifying whose soldiers they were. I had to ask more questions each time.

Only the soldiers they came across on the way out of combat zones stuck in their minds. Everyone I spoke with described them in detail. Apparently any soldier presents a threat when a civilian feels acute fear and an inability to defend themself. It appears that's how things were in Mariupol.

I attempt to discuss my hunch with Inga but she waves me off. "I don't know. I haven't thought about that. It's just, see, if your soldiers hadn't come, then ours wouldn't have taken up arms. You're the ones that came. It's because of you that all this started. And the rest doesn't matter. We're really talking about the wrong thing."

She keeps silent. She returns to what she'd been talking about, to what my clarifying questions distracted her from. She remembers and starts at the point where she'd stopped.

“I just wanted to say that one day my father-in-law didn’t come back after he went with the guys for water. None of those three did. We still don’t know where his body is or how and who buried him. In those days it was pretty much impossible to find a dead person, identify them, and bury them. I can even say that wasn’t a top priority.

“What was important? That there was no more water at all. Or heat and electricity. And now the wives of the other men wouldn’t let them go to the rink anymore for water. We started draining water out of air conditioners and boilers. We went around the building in little groups, drained, and, again, boiled that water.

“We didn’t leave the basement anymore. Because an armored personnel carrier was driving around the perimeter and keeping watch on where there was any kind of motion. And then the shelling started again.

“Our remaining men crept out into the city in little groups to find out what was going on and who was now in power where, because things weren’t the same in each part of town, everything was changing all the time. But finding out about humanitarian corridors was the most important thing for us. But no corridors were being opened. The men came back with nothing. They just whispered about how many corpses were on the street: some shot in cars, some in line for humanitarian aid, and some with water, like my father-in-law.

“I remember how this one woman in the basement was wailing, ‘How many cartridges do they have, that they just shoot and shoot. And they’ll never run out and we’re going to sit here forever and that’s how we’ll die, without ever seeing the world.’ And everybody started crying.

“It was really awful in the basement: cold and scary. People’s strength ran out quickly. The children started getting sick from the dampness, everybody coughing. Petya, too. He’s always been a little weak, my boy, frail.

"But he and I had a good spot in the basement, that's what I thought. We were settled right by the exit so fresh air came in there. I'd tuck the blanket in for him, with our pillow right close by, and I'd say, 'breathe, breathe, the fresh air will cure everything, my son.' And he'd hug me, 'Mamochka, just don't you worry.'

"I wanted to rock him in my arms like he was little, that was my impulse. But he didn't let me. And I whispered in his ear all the time, talking about our happiest memories: rides at the amusement park, the time he fell off his bike and Papa and I both blew on his knee, how he sang 'Ave Maria' in the school chorus but I was crying and forgot to record it on my phone, how we played Spot It! and his father tricked us and we caught him and made him cock-a-doodle-doo under the table… I'm sorry, that's probably not important.

"Anyway, on March 19 our men came back from the city and said some people are leaving basements and going down to the sea, there's allegedly some safe place there, and there'll be an evacuation from there. A lot of us start to get ready to go. I say, 'Petya, why don't we go, too, we can't sit in the basement anymore.'

"He agreed. We thought we'd go with the first group and leave tomorrow. We started getting ready.

"It was a restless night. I hardly slept. I was checking our things the whole time and shielding Petya. And suddenly, at about five in the morning, there was quite a crash: a shell hit one of the apartments in the building and everything started burning. The man whose apartment it was ran upstairs with his buddy and started tossing all kinds of possessions out the window, probably trying to save things. Then the military came and asked why they were trying to save their stuff – they should save lives instead. But they were our military, they were speaking

Ukrainian, that was obvious. And they helped put out the fire: they brought sand and used a fire extinguisher, too, they had one with them.

"The men came back to the basement. It got light out. Petya had already woken up by then. We had a bite to eat and somebody said it's time. They started gathering us at the exit. I remember how one woman made the sign of the cross over us and looked me straight in the eye. And then, suddenly, right at that moment, there was a very loud explosion. A bomb had fallen right on the front steps of the part of the building where our basement was. And everything caught fire. There was very caustic smoke because the plastic canopy over the front steps had started melting. Somebody shouted, 'Wet a rag and hold it to your mouth so you don't suffocate!' But then there was another explosion outside and a terrible crash: our building had started to collapse. Can you imagine what it's like when a twelve-story building's collapsing? It's very loud, it's scary. People started forcing their way to the exit: it felt like there was heat from an oven coming in but they shoved the children out even so and crawled out themselves.

"And I remember Petya and me forcing our way out, too. And we make our way outside through all that burning and run, run behind everybody else, down to the sea. And the shelling just intensifies. The building's burning, it's hot, and there's shooting from all over. If that's not hell, you tell me what hell looks like. Petya and I ran and reached the school, the one in our residential part of town. We stopped by a wall, by the entrance to the bread store. It flashed in my head that I'd already seen this, that this already happened to me. Right then, Petya says, 'Ma, I left my backpack there.' And just then our twelve-story building collapsed.

"Something flew into the school, too. There was a horrible crash, it was like I'd been scalded. And I couldn't feel my arm from the shoulder down anymore. It was probably at that

moment that my hand let Petya's hand go. Probably then. But I don't remember. You have to understand that I don't remember anything after that.

"It seemed like I was calling him but maybe I wasn't, maybe that was only in my delirium.

"Do you understand what that's like, you can't remember how you lost your own little son, the only one you have? All I remember is I'm very hot and there's pain in my abdomen, I can't breathe and can't do anything: I'm losing my child, I don't know where he is. What could I do? What had I not done? What had I done, what had we all done wrong, so you're like this to us?"

She's pressing her wrist against the hot iron. The iron sputters and I don't initially realize what's happening. It smells like burned flesh. She's burned but doesn't take her hand away from the iron. I tear it out of her hands.

And she keeps repeating, What did we do to you? Why are you like this to us? I hate, I hate you, I don't want to live anymore. I don't have anyone left.

I stroke Inga's hair, embrace her. We bandage her arm. I notice signs of other iron burns on her wrists.

We go to the kitchen. Drink ice water.

And she tells me that someone picked her up, with a wound in her abdomen, and brought her to Berdyansk, that doctors – a man and a woman – treated her in a regional hospital for a week and a half. That the guy was later shot but she doesn't know who did it or why. And she, still not walking, was sent to Warsaw via the humanitarian corridor and from there to Madrid, to a big, white, cool hospital.

"I asked everybody, where's my son, where's Petya. I described him. But nobody said anything to me. They all nodded at me and said he'd definitely turn up. And that I shouldn't worry, I had to gather my strength. It's just nobody said why.

"In Madrid an interpreter came to see me in my room. She said she worked in the hospital but not in this department. She said she's a volunteer and apologized for speaking Russian.

"You know, for some reason everything came pouring out of me, down on her. I started crying, I asked her to leave. I couldn't listen to anything more about either the war or volunteers. I just wanted to have a phone so I could call my husband to say Petya was gone and I was the one who hadn't kept him safe.

"That volunteer gave me a phone later. A brand-new iPhone, oh, how I would have dreamt of that before. But for some reason I just looked at the box for a few hours and couldn't touch it. I was sitting on the bed – I was able to get up by then – and realized now I'll put the phone on and it will tell me for real that Petya's gone.

"And that's what happened. I found one woman who was in our Mariupol group who saw Petya being carried to their bomb shelter. But she said he was already dead. She said he wasn't breathing. She also said he had a headwound, meaning he died fast. You know, I think all the time: Did I let go of his hand before he died or after? That's important to me. It's so scary to die alone if you're a little boy."

Inga's sitting, rocking on the chair. There are photographs in her phone, downloaded from the Odnoklassniki[1] social network, they have the watermarks on them. The photographs show a boy in black pants and a white shirt, standing in front of a school chorus with his mouth open.

[1] "Odnoklassniki" (Russian) means "Classmates."

In another is the same boy, a little younger, sitting on a pony and waving.

In a third he's on the shoulders of a light-eyed man with a short haircut; they're both laughing.

"Oleg died in the battles for Mariupol, that's what his unit responded to me. They should be sending me documents; his commander still has some of his personal things. There's also government money for me.

"I don't know where he died or if there's a grave. I don't know where my father-in-law is, I can't find my mother-in-law, I'm searching all our public social media pages but so far there's no answer. My girlfriends, the ones I've been able to find, have told me they've seen that my mother-in-law apparently put up a photo of me and my son, that she's looking for us. But I can't find that post. The girls say, though, that my mother-in-law left for Russia and has been searching for us from there. I don't know if that's true, but I don't want it to be.

"I'm estranged from my parents, I can't expect any support from anywhere. They moved to Orenburg back in 2008 and they've lapped up the propaganda. On the 24th, Mama wrote to me, 'Take care of yourself and Petya, it'll be over soon!' And she put a smiley at the end, can you imagine?

"For some reason right now it's especially repulsive that I speak and think in Russian. But I don't know Ukrainian, can you imagine? I've lived this long and don't know it. I want to learn it now. I will learn it. I don't want to speak the language of the people who killed everyone I loved, the ones who destroyed everything we had.

"Did you know they're now inviting all Mariupol residents back to the city to live under the new authorities? How is it they imagine I'm going to walk down the streets where the body of my child, my husband, and his father lie? Who do you have to be to agree to that?"

She drinks water, taking big swallows for a long time. Chews her fingernail. Drinks again.

I ask her, What can I do for you?

I don't need anything, she says. At all. You know, hatred is the only thing I can even somehow feel. And nothing more. It's like I don't exist. But I exist: I walk, I move, I iron. I just don't understand the reason for it. Can you explain that to me?

I can't.

I ask if I should give her contact information for a psychologist.

She says that the woman from the hospital sometimes stops by; they talk, that's enough.

Do you believe in fate, she asks me

I don't know how to answer. I do but don't believe in it.

In all this time, she tells me, I haven't had the dream about Stalingrad even once. And I don't dream of my husband. Or my son. There were just a couple times that I dreamt that a boy's singing, so, so delicately, mournfully, in a chorus, and I'm trying to discern his face and can't.

We'll embrace when we part. She'll say, thank you, I feel better for getting that out of my system. I'm thinking that won't last long but I don't say anything. There's a car waiting for me around the corner from the villa where she lives: it belongs to the same woman who owns the villa. She's my childhood friend. She and Inga have never met; they communicate through volunteers. The owner's Russian and she says she's ashamed to show her face to Inga.