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I'm in Kyiv, and it is terrifying

Russia has invaded Ukraine. Nika Melkozerova shares her perspective from Kyiv

On Thursday, I woke up at dawn to the sound of blasts. I jumped out of bed, puzzled. Maybe it was a dream? But then I heard another loud blast, and then another one. Kyiv was shaking. I reached for my phone and read that President Vladimir Putin of Russia had ordered his army to attack Ukraine. They had started bombarding us.

My internet went down, and I felt fear crawling in my guts. I had never felt this way before. It was as if someone, maybe Mr Putin himself, had grabbed my heart and squeezed it. This feeling has stayed with me: It is my new permanent condition.

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It's not that the Russian invasion came as a surprise, exactly. We've been expecting it, in some form, for weeks, even months. Mr Putin's moves earlier this week — recognising the independence of two regions in eastern Ukraine and sending in troops to both — made plain that war was coming. To Mr Putin, as he explained in his crazed speech on Monday, Ukraine is not a sovereign state and has no right to exist. It is to be folded up, by force, into Russia's control.

The tanks and troops pouring into the country are intended to make Mr Putin's fantasy a reality. But we in Ukraine know otherwise. Some 43 per cent of Ukrainians, according to a recent poll, are ready to fight the Russians — and more than 100,000 have already joined defence units across the country. We will fight, as our foreign minister said on Wednesday, for every inch of our land. Proud citizens of one of Eastern Europe's democracies, we refuse to be ruled by military diktat.

Mr Putin claims that he is a liberator, and that Ukraine will profit from the invasion. But even my 76-year-old granny, a typical Soviet babushka who still misses the Soviet Union and its 'stability', thinks he has gone

mad.

I called her early on Thursday morning, while most of Kyiv was still sleeping. She sounded puzzled but was fully awake. Another sign of strangeness: A sleepyhead, she usually wakes up well after 10 a.m. ‘Save yourself, your husband and your dog’; she told me. ‘I will stay in my apartment. If a Russian missile hits my apartment, well, so be it. I had a long life. I would rather die in my perfectly decorated flat than in some dirty basement’.

I tried to urge her to pack her belongings and documents, but she refused. ‘I would rather cook some soup’, she said with sad laughter, and ended the call. This was devastating: My granny is everything to me, all the family I have left, and our lives are entwined. Though I’m not planning to leave the city, I want to be prepared if things get very bad. The thought of leaving my grandmother behind is almost too much to bear. To ward off despair, I took my dog, Hans, for a walk. Not even a Russian attack will stop Hans’s need for exercise.

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As I stepped onto the street, I saw people everywhere. In the densely populated part of north Kyiv where I live, that’s not that unusual. But the atmosphere was peculiar. Neighbours were hurriedly loading their cars with belongings, while others were standing in lines for the grocery store and cash machine. People were moving fast: Some had huge backpacks and looked like they were going camping. Nobody smiled.

A woman, clearly anguished, stopped me. I recognised her: She was a neighbour and a fellow dog owner. ‘Can you please tell me what to do?’ she asked me. ‘I don’t know what to do.’ My terrier and her boxer started nervously barking at each other. Despite constant warnings from the media and the government that the Kremlin — which built up around 190,000 troops in and near Ukraine since October — was poised to invade, she had not believed Mr Putin would dare to do it. She hadn’t checked if there was a bomb shelter nearby, she hadn’t stored any food.

I explained to her, as simply as I could, how to prepare for the invasion. Shelters would be hard to get to with a pet, but she should pack an emergency kit with documents and food. If there’s an airstrike, she should hide in a corridor or the bathroom of her apartment. She seemed to take the information in her stride. ‘Well, at least we will get to know each other’, she said. ‘We dog lovers should stick together’.

As I continued my walk, I saw people in all kinds of moods around me. Some of them were arguing while they waited their turn at the gas station. People were driving manically, and cars whizzed through the streets. Whenever there was a loud sound, people looked to the skies, fearing a Russian fighter jet. A young mother stood near her black Jeep, holding her daughter with one hand and talking on the phone. 'Yes, mom, we are leaving. We are leaving!' she screamed.

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I hurried home and went online, my internet thankfully restored. Russian troops, I read, had breached Ukrainian borders from Crimea and seized several border towns. Russian tanks had come close to Kharkiv, our second largest city. In a town right next to Kyiv, Russian helicopters attacked the local airport. And Russian forces captured Chernobyl, north of the capital. In the first hours of defending the country, more than 40 Ukrainian soldiers were killed and dozens were wounded.

Their sacrifice was true to our country. In this dreadful time, its fortitude, resourcefulness and spirit of resistance will shine through. Ukraine is ours, no matter what Mr Putin says. I'm 31, born in the year Ukraine became independent: My adult life has been lived in the shadow cast by Russian aggression. First Mr Putin annexed Crimea, then he fomented the war in the Donbas that has killed more than 14,000 people. Now the battle for Ukraine has come to a climax.

But it's about more than Ukraine. It's a contest between democracy and autocracy, freedom and dictatorship, whose implications will scatter across the world. It's not our fight alone. So please don't leave us alone to fight it.

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