

STEPPE

Written by

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Inspired by real events

EXT. STEPPE

The road goes across the burning fields, torn by the tank tracks. Heaps of unharvested wheat and hay burning. Tanks and trucks drive on the cracked asphalt, soldiers walking around the holes in the ground left by shelling and following the colon.

A house stands on the hill overlooking the road and the fields.

A woman, NATASHA, in her late forties, sits in the barn milking the exhausted dairy cow. She looks at the half empty bucket and pets the cow. Whispers and leaves with the bucket.

Natasha walks to the little house, past the little garden beds and burned down apple tree.

EXT. RIVERSIDE

Two boys, KOLYA, seventeen and DIMA, thirteen, wash their clothes in the river with a piece of soap. They put clothes in a basket, get undressed and wash themselves.

On the other bank of the river they notice two women in military uniform, getting undressed and bathing in the cold water of the river.

FEMALE SOLDIER 1  
(in the distance, barely  
heard)

Give me the soap. Don't be so  
fuckin greedy, they'll be bringing  
more with the next couple convoys.  
You know, "humanitarian aid".

FEMALE SOLDIER 2  
I hope they'll be bring the real  
aid this time. How am I supposed to  
shoot a man, if I can't stop myself  
from bleeding.

INT. NATASHA'S HOUSE

Natasha brings in the bucket and puts it on the table in the miniature kitchen and turns on the stove. Pours the milk in a pot and puts it on the stove. When the milk starts boiling she puts in the semolina and hides it back in the stash under the sink.

She watched the soldiers go east down the road while stirring the porridge.

Kolya and Dima run inside, wet, excited, hungry.

NATASHA  
Breakfast is almost ready.

She pours three dishes and serves them on the table. Boys are drying with old towels.

NATASHA (CONT'D)  
Did you wash everything?

Boys nod as they quaff the steaming porridge.

NATASHA (CONT'D)  
And yourselves?

KOLYA  
Yea, mom.

DIMA  
We saw women from the base bathing in the river.

KOLYA  
They didn't see us.

DIMA  
But we heard them talking.

KOLYA  
There will be a couple new trucks coming next couple of days. Humanitarian aid.

NATASHA  
Then we'll have to waste a whole day in a queue for stale bread again.

(beat)  
When I was milking Nastya, she is exhausted by the way, I don't how long she can take it ... so I watched soldiers marching, and tanks and trucks.. They are not stopping. The stupid lead the blind.

(lost in her thoughts and stopped eating)

She sighs.

KOLYA  
(finished eating)  
Are we gonna be studying today?

NATASHA  
(snaps out of it)  
Yeah, yeah, get the books and notebooks ready.

EXT. OUTSIDE VILLAGE STORE

As the sun rises the family loads themselves with baskets and bags and walks down to the burned down village with only a little clinic and a general store still operating.

When they arrive they see people gathering around the white truck and soldiers guarding the mob away from the truck.

People try to get the soldiers off the truck and their captain shoots his AK in the air. But it only angers the mob even more.

NATASHA  
(to her sons)  
Stay here.

She goes to the crowd and gets in front of them, between the soldiers, trigger happy, and the people.

NATASHA (CONT'D)  
(to the people)  
Stop it!

MAN FROM THE CROWD  
Go away Natalya, they are keeping  
thfood for themselves. They are  
robbing us! They took away all they  
could and now came to take the  
rest.

The captain, Kovalyov, steps up.

KOVALYOV  
We'll be giving out the supplies  
any minute. Keep calm or we'll  
shoot.

Natasha goes back to her boys as they open the truck. And start giving out blankets and clean towels. People silently take them and leave.

It comes to natasha's turn in the queue.

NATASHA  
No bread? No buckwheat? Rice?

She tries to look inside the truck.

SOLDIER  
We give out what the brought. No  
food this time.

NATASHA  
What's in those crates, then?

SOLDIER  
Take it or fuck off.

Kovalyov comes closer to her.

KOVALYOV  
Calm down, please.

NATASHA  
What's in the crates?

KOVALYOV  
None of you business. Take the blankets. Actually take two. One for yourself and one for them, it's big enough for two boys. And leave.

She grabs the pack with blankets and towels, gives it to the boy and they leave.

INT. NATASHA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

In the candlelight the three of them are all reading books.

A knock on the door echoes in the silence.

NATASHA  
(to the boys)  
Hide.  
(beat)  
I'm coming.

More knocking.

She opens the door. Three armed man are standing on her doorstep. The older one with more and bigger stars on his uniform says:

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
(while two younger soldiers storm inside and search the place)  
Colonel Melnichenko. By Prime minister's executive order I'm allowed to confiscate any property for the need of the Army.

NATASHA  
What the fuck, get away from here.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
Resistance is not advised. We are looking for tools, food and other supplies.

She tries to drag the young soldiers away from the kitchen, but fails. She grabs a knife and gets behind the colonel. She puts the blade against his throat.

NATASHA  
Leave me alone.

Soldiers leave the kitchen and point their AKs at her.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
No.no.no.

NATASHA  
Yeah, let em shoot. Put me out my misery.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
Lower your weapons, privates.

The follow the command.

NATASHA  
Go away. GO AWAY.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
You know I won't go empty handed.

She breathes heavily, holding that knife like a part of her hand, ready to pierce an artery or two.

NATASHA  
There are two pack of buckwheat in that drawer.  
(points at the kitchen)  
That's all I can give. I've sold our tools last week. The cow is dying.

The private took the packs of porridge, one of them open and spilled a third of the pack on the kitchen floor.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
That's not enough.

NATASHA  
Who are you gonna rob if we die of hunger?

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
Let's go, privates.

NATASHA  
Godspeed.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO  
(turns before leaving the house)  
He never knew the roads to this place. Pray all you want, there is no one on the other end.

Boys walk out of the bedroom. Desperately hug her.

DIMA  
Never, never do it again. Please.

EXT. BARN

Dima and Kolya go to the barn from the house searching for their mom, when a man calls them from outside the fallen wooden fence.

PRIEST  
Can you help sons?

KOLYA  
What do want, old man?

PRIEST  
Looking for Natalya Petrovna, is that some one you know?

DIMA  
That's...

KOLYA  
(interrupting)  
Maybe? What do you want of her?

PRIEST  
Is it your mom?

KOLYA  
You tell what you want or I let the dog loose.

PRIEST  
Are you two baptized in Christ, sons?

KOLYA  
If that is your purpose, the dog will run you across the river to the center of the village.

PRIEST  
I have an offer for her.

Natasha come from the barn.

NATASHA  
Who are you?

PRIEST  
O, Natalya? Nice to meet you at last. My name is Petr, I am a minister of St. Nicholas Church of Christ in forty kilometers from here. I have an offer for you.  
(MORE)

PRIEST (CONT'D)

We get a humanitarian convoy, just for the church - food, meat, bottled water, clean linens and everything for hygiene. We can share some of it if you give up your household for us and move in with the church.

NATASHA

Go fuck yourself.

PRIEST

I won't be coming here again.

NATASHA

You won't dare coming around my property or I'll shoot your lying ass. Get lost. Let's go boys.

She takes them inside the house and shows to get back to their lessons.

NATASHA (CONT'D)

You two better study. We didn't and look how it played out for everyone.

KOLYA

Mom?

NATASHA

Yea.

KOLYA

He said they have their own aid. With everything.

NATASHA

So what? We don't need them - we survived by ourselves this long and can do even longer.

KOLYA

We can

(pause)

Appropriate some of it.

NATASHA

Rob it?

KOLYA

You said it.

NATASHA

No.

KOLYA

Mom.



NATASHA

I said no.

KOLYA

It's for the church - no one will be guarding it. No one will know what happened.

CUT TO:

EXT. FIELDS OUTSIDE THE HOUSE

Natasha and Dima are grazing Nastya and watch how hard it is for the cow to stand. On the way home the cow stumbles and falls a couple times, and they have to help her to get back home.

INT. NATASHA'S HOUSE

In the dim candle light they are having supper. The portions are smaller the yesterday and incomparable to the day before yesterday.

NATASHA

Boys. I thought about it.

KOLYA

And?

NATASHA

It is now against the law to use such words, but we are what was once called proletariat. We have nothing to lose except for our shackles.

KOLYA

It comes on Wednesday night. On the road downhill.

NATASHA

But I will go alone.

KOLYA

No.

DIMA

Of course not.

KOLYA

Who will carry the crates?

DIMA

Who will stay on guard?

NATASHA  
I can carry the crates myself.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. HIGHWAY - MIDNIGHT

A fully loaded truck is piercing the tangible darkness with its headlights. Something lively is playing in the cabin and the driver is singing along.

A woman appears in the light and disappears immediately as he rushes by.

Breaks screech in the night and the tail lights color the road blood red.

Natasha walks to the truck.

DRIVER  
Hello there. Ain't it too cold for  
a midnight jog?

She gulps. Tries not to let the tears feel her eyes.

NATASHA  
Maybe you can warm me up.

DRIVER  
How much?

NATASHA  
I'd do it for food at this point.

DRIVER  
I've got a soldiers ration on me.  
Get inside.

He gives a hand and she jumps into the cabin. He immediately tries to kiss on her on the neck but she distances herself.

DRIVER (CONT'D)  
You're shy, I like it. Wouldn't  
expect it at your age, though.

He tries again. She pushes him off again.

NATASHA  
You gotta condom?

DRIVER  
Yeah, yeah, somewhere in here.  
Wifey wouldn't understand if I  
brought home something that gives  
her an itch in the pants.

NATASHA

Then put it on.

He moves to the passenger's side and starts searching the glove compartment. He finds the pack, tears it open, unzips his pants.

DRIVER

What are you waiting for?

Natasha goes under her dress and takes down her undies, while he tries to put on the condom.

In a quick motion she brings out a knife and strikes him in the artery with a sharpened bodkin. The fountain of blood paint the cabin red, covering her face and her dress. She strikes a couple more times, just to be sure.

Natasha escapes the truck, falls down on the cracked asphalt and cries. She throws up, but she pulls herself together, brings out a lighter, turns it to max and raises it over her head.

She puts it out and runs to the back of the truck. Opens it up. Crates. A lot of them. She jumps inside and lights her way with the lighter. Crates with no markings.

KOLYA

(a loud whisper)

Mom?

NATASHA

I'm here.

The boys appear outside the truck.

NATASHA (CONT'D)

You brought it?

Dima hands her a crowbar.

A sudden sound stops her. The approaching car cut the darkness for a second and then disappeared in it, passing by without stopping.

She opens the crate and sees AK covered with hay and polytene wrapping.

NATASHA (CONT'D)

Fuck.

(to the boys)

It's not food. Not humanitarian.

KOLYA

We still carry it home?

She lingers. Counting all the probabilities in her head. In the darkness it is easier to think.

NATASHA

Let's bring some of it home. Carry  
it to the side of the road first.

She took one crate herself and boys took one. Six crates in  
an hour. She was afraid her sons would get a hernia or  
something.

KOLYA

(sweaty and out of breath)  
Now what?

NATASHA

We burn the rest.

She brought a canister out of the bloody cabin and went for  
the gas tank of the truck. Got some and poured it everywhere  
in the truck.

And lit it with her lighter.

The truck burns steadily in the night.

INT. CELLAR

Natasha sits among the guns. Confused, exhausted.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE MILITARY BASE

Natasha stands alone at the gates of the military base.  
Machine gunners in the towers and soldiers by the gates look  
at her suspiciously. She turns away from and covers her face  
with shawl, she wears on her head. The wind is merciless in  
the steppe.

Cpt. KOVALYOV comes through the gates, lights a cigarette,  
shakes hands with the soldiers on duty and heads straight to  
Natasha.

KOVALYOV

Not very smart.

NATASHA

Not much of a choice, though.

KOVALYOV

What do you want?

NATASHA

Those, others, they want to take  
the household and Nastya. The land  
under it.

KOVALYOV

And?

NATASHA

I will give them to you. With the papers. With a cherry on top.

He takes a long drag and looks in the distance over the burned out fields.

KOVALYOV

Like what?

NATASHA

Like if you help me and my sons leave this place. Details afet that.

KOVALYOV

I don't wanna have to do anything with it.

He puts off the cigarette with his boot and heads back to the base.

NATASHA

I have a cellar full of AKs. And much more. When was the last time you had a supply line working fine here?

KOVALYOV

Where did you get it?

NATASHA

Does it matter?

KOVALYOV

Yes it does.

NATASHA

I found it in the fields.

He takes a pause and looks at her.

KOVALYOV

Bullshit.

NATASHA

I don't care. Melnichenko said they will take the house, and the hill by force.

KOVALYOV

I'll get the car, show me.

EXT. ROAD

In an old rusty military 4x4 they drive past the village and past the grey view of the steppe, with sounds of shelling and artillery in the distance.

EXT. NATASHA'S HOUSE

As the car approaches her house, Natasha notices soldiers and military hardware around her home. She looks at Kovalyov.

KOVALYOV

I don't know what's that about.

NATASHA

Shit. Shit.

She jumps out of the car, before it fully stops. Tries to run into the house, but a couple soldiers stop her. She screams, as they carry her to the house. She turns around to see Kovalyov turn around in his car and leave. Soldiers force her to her house.

INT. NATASHA'S HOUSE

More soldiers are going through their things, making a mess, and taking all that she hid - food, tools, documents, money (if they would ever need it again) - with them.

Her boys stood together, holding hands, as Melnichenko sat in armchair and talked to them, with a disgusting smug face.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO

Morning, Natalya Ivanovna. Didn't expect such an early visit. No one could say "I have called you together, gentlemen, to tell you an unpleasant piece of news. A Revizor is coming" Such a missed opportunity.

NATASHA

Please don't quote Gogol in my house, if you came here to strip us to the bone.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO

Actually, I haven't. We're stripping no one, this place belongs to the state by law, not. And with a cherry on top - some zealous fuck from a nearby church or something saw you robbing and burning governmental property. Literally last night.

NATASHA

You can't prove that.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO

I don't need you. With power given to me by Government I sentence you to death for sabotage and treason, and sentence must be executed immediately.

Dima runs to his mom and cries into her dress.

Kolya rushes to the Colonel but a soldier hits him on the back of his head with a butt of his AK.

COLONEL MELNICHENKO (CONT'D)

Yeah, about them - Nikolai and Dmitriy have been conscripted into the gallant ranks of the government's army to fight separatism to wash away their guilt for aiding you in your crime.

Natasha howls as they take her sons outside. Soldiers lead her out too.

EXT. NATASHA'S HOUSE

Boys cried as they were pushed into the back of the truck among the painfully familiar crates of arms they just carried home.

They hear their mother wailing, but it drowned in the sound of truck's engine and their own tears.

Her crying stopped.

Boys heard shots fired.

SMASH CUT TO  
BLACK