

Excerpt from *For Want of a Fir Tree: Ukraine Undone*

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You're collateral damage, Artyom. Nothing more, nothing less. No one wanted your death, but you died anyway. You must be asking yourself why. You were just the right age for "whys." So I'm going to explain it to you, I'm going to explain why on January 18, 2015, at 8:10 in the morning, on 5 Ilinskaya Street in Donetsk, your life could have been cut short after four years, four months, and fourteen days, by an error in the trajectory of a Grad rocket, without it altering in the least the course of the war. But I'm warning you right away: none of my explanations will be able to silence the tireless outflow of your whys. Nothing that I recount will carry enough meaning to satisfy your simple childhood logic. There is no "because," no historical, political, or military argument, no virtuous feeling of moral superiority on the part of this war's protagonists, the protagonists of any war, that can justify, even in part, the usurpation of your right to life. You were innocent and you are so still. They were all guilty and they remain so. All those who have reached the age of reason and who continue despite everything to celebrate death, to promote hate, to promulgate what is false, to arm weapons and hope for anything else but the unconditional termination of combat.

It's to you, Tyoma, that I want to relate what I've seen, learned, and felt in Ukraine, parading my naive, childlike whys before the annihilation of man by man. You won't understand everything, of course. The absurd is a concept that one can only begin to grasp at the age of eight or nine. But at least you won't try to justify the unjustifiable in the name of an ideal or a flag, to view all the complexities as a simple Machiavellian plan on the part of the enemy. You will perhaps understand that a sequence of events can be logical without for all that being planned by anyone in particular; that your country was able to drift from peace into war in the space of a few months through an absurd set of circumstances that on one side and the other, blinded by a thousand and one petty considerations, no one was able to defuse. You will see that war is a trap into which human nature can easily allow itself to fall.

It goes without saying that you didn't deserve to die. You at least deserve to know what led to your death.

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