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Snapshots Sent Home: From Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine—A Memoir by JT Blatty

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Excerpt:

I watch Valkyrie from the backseat of the camouflaged vehicle we're riding in, my knees pressed against a Soviet-era rifle, wooden stock and barrel, that's stuffed into the back of Sergei's seat. ... I'm on a high, lost in translation with a Russian and a Ukrainian, neither of whom speak two cents of English. ... Valkyrie keeps switching the music; she never lets a song end. She passes a bottle of Stella back to me for another sip. ... Earlier, at a gas station restaurant, she ripped her unit's Velcro patch from her shoulder sleeve and stuffed it into her pocket, a blatant and conscious decision that she's going to drink and break the rules tonight.

Sergei, Valkyrie's driver and comrade, keeps singing her real name, "Yuuuuuuliya," half scolding and half in adoration, a "What are you doing now, crazy one?" type of voice, as she switches to yet another song. I laugh and look at Dylan; he turns to me, smiling, because she's wild, angry, full of fire. She hides the beer at her feet as we slow down at another checkpoint to exit Toretsk, the frontline town where her unit is based, the city center home to a war-destroyed, former town hall less than two kilometers from the front line. We drive through, slow down and brake again as we curve around a series of ditches and craters created by the war's mortars and artillery shelling. As we pick up speed again, she jacks the music back up, finds another song on her phone, lights another cigarette, and shakes her long hair loose. The headlights of a car driving in the opposite direction briefly accent the wavy amber of what looks more like the mane of a lion in the night.

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