It Takes a Village

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

My grandfather fought in the Great Patriotic War – what is referred to in the West as World War 2. He was a hero, although he said that they all were. The Soviet Union lost 8,668,400 soldiers in that war, which was 10 times more than all the western allies combined. But when you add civilian casualties the total people from our nation who died was over 27 million – 12% of the population.

My father fought in the war in Afghanistan. My grandfather saw him leave and shook his hand. My grandmother said that he wept after he had gone. It was supposed to be a quick operation – putting down some primitive people. It took 10 years. 14,500 Soviet soldiers were killed. 54,000 were injured, including my father.

I was born in the Soviet Union in the month of March 1990 when it still comprised all the states that fought in the Great Patriotic War, but by the end of that month it was falling apart. People said that the war in Afghanistan played a part, but we all understand that it was the economic failure of communism that was the root cause. Wars just suck out the last of what is left.

You would think that politicians would learn the lessons of history, but then many leaders think only of themselves.

My younger brother Valentin was born in Russia, an independent state within the Commonwealth of Independent States, but in the same village that I was. It is a typical rural village like many such places all over the world. It is like rural towns in the USA, or like those villages that I have seen destroyed in Ukraine. There were some Soviet era administration building and small accommodation blocks, but otherwise small houses on parcels of land, and a church – Russian Orthodox.

Communism sought to eliminate religion, but it never succeeded in my village. People were strong in their faith and I was brought up as a Christian. But when Putin came to power he used the church as an instrument of suppression and control.

I say when he came to power, but in reality I have known nobody else. He became president in the year 2000 but he was running the country before that, with the buffoon Boris Yeltsin sitting in the throne. It seemed like he came from nowhere, but he said all the right things and he was elected under a democratic system. He told us that Russia was a great world power, and we believed him.

When I went to school Russia was a democracy and we learned all about that. I had one teacher in particular, who made an impact on me, and others in our village. She spoke about how democracy was the only proper system for a free people, and how Russia could join the West and share in the wealth created by free markets and destroy forever the shadow of the Iron Curtain that held us back. That would mean an end to the threat of war.

“Russia has suffered enough war,” she said. “We should never go to war again. None of you should go to war. Promise me that you will not.”

We promised her. I remember it well. I looked around and saw the others in my class say it. I kept that promise.

I left the village to study in Moscow and then I went on to study in the west, so I saw all that happened in Russia with open eyes. It was not like that for my village and for so many villages throughout Russia.

When I was studying in Moscow in 2011 I was among the thousands who protested that December when it became clear that Putin was prepared to rig elections and overturn the constitution to remain in power beyond the maximum term allowed. What was also clear by then was that Putin had almost complete control of the media, and he also used church pulpits to send out his message. That message was that Russian culture was superior to all others and that Western culture was decadent and depraved. Russia should hold onto its status as great power. In that year Russia was not even in the top ten of the world’s economies.

He was a steamroller and it seemed like nothing could stop him. I was glad to leave and continue my studies in Great Britain and the USA. Three years later Putin annexed Crimea, and was almost certainly planning the invasion of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics.

My father became ill in 2021 and I returned to Russia and my village. I found there that I was among a handful of people who had some idea of what was going on. The Russian economy was not strong. We relied entirely on natural resources. The considerable brain power of the nation was being applied to personal wealth rather than developing technology.

I found that I could do my own work from my village as long as I had an internet connections, and I could support my mother in caring for my father, so I stayed.

Over a period of time I did my best to inform people of the truth about Putin and how he was destroying Russia’s ability to become a modern western economy. The younger people were open to my ideas. I was well liked so nobody reported my activities, but many warned me that it wold get me into serious trouble.

“The fact that you are saying that means that the freedoms that we once rejoiced in are now lost,” I would say. People could not disagree.

“But if Putin’s methods are authoritarian, he has a plan for this nation,” they might have replied. “He will make Russia great again. Then we will all be proud.”

Then Putin invaded Ukraine. It seemed so odd that he should do this. I remember that when I was younger the boys in my village would talk about going to Ukraine to meet pretty girls, because Ukrainian girls were prettier than Russian girls. Everybody seemed to have a cousin living in that country, or a relative married to a Ukrainian. The countries were separate and different but close in so many ways. Why would we attack a friend?

I don’t think anybody believed the “Nazi” label. We all knew that Putin hated Zelensky. He considered that he had the right to appoint the leader of Ukraine as he had done in the past, and if serious opposition emerged then he could poison them as he did Viktor Yushchenko. Then here was a comedian who walked in and stole the election with a huge popular vote – we could all see how furious Putin was.

Still, the whole “Special Military Operation” was about telling the people that this was not a war. A few regular contracted career soldiers would move in and take over the country within a week. But we all know that was not what happened.

For a start there were not enough real soldiers so new recruits we sent “on a training exercise near to the border” and ended up in the front lines. It was only a matter of time before Putin and his Ministers had to admit that people had died. The Ukrainians were fighting back. He needed more soldiers. He called for “A Partial Mobilization”.

250,000 men left Russia to avoid being drafted.

It seemed that ethnic Russians would be spared. There were enough other ethnic groups to supply the soldiers – there were the Chechens, and the Kazakhs, and the Tatars. The recruiters went to these places first – perhaps you can guess why. These people were more expendable than people like Putin.

The closest city to my village was Kirov, but this ethnic Russian village was not in the Kirov Oblast (District) it was in the Komi Republic, and independent state within Russia. The Komi people have their own culture and language and even their own script. They are proud and capable, but they were not Russian, so the recruiters came.

We knew when they were set to arrive. The Military Commissariat in Kirov asked for an office in the administrative building, and for information on all the qualifying residents – men of fighting age between 18 and 35 years old. That included me, and it included my younger brother Valentin. My mother was very anxious. That is why she suggested that we do something that seemed crazy.

My mother had run a beauty salon in my village for many years. She was close to 60 years old but people said that she looked less than 40. She was an example of how good a woman should look. She was successful and by 2022 she had 2 younger woman working for her, one of whom had given up their own salon to work with my mother. She had the only place in town.

“I will tell the recruiters that there has been a mistake,” she said. “I will tell them that I have 2 daughters not 2 sons, and I will have my daughters there in front of them.”

“Who will you get to pretend to be us?” I laughed.

“No, you don’t understand. It will be you and Valentin. I will dress you as women, and show you how to behave. They will take some men from the village, but they will not take my boys. I will do anything to keep you out of this war.”

I could see that she was serious, but the idea seemed to be ridiculous. Anyway, she must have spoken about it with her assistants because one of them volunteered her boyfriend to do the same thing, and before we knew it we had 7 men including my brother and me, ready to carry out this bizarre plan.

I ended up sitting down with all of us together and discussing our chances. There were some men for whom it was obvious that they could never pretend to be female, but for the 7 of us it seemed at least possible. I think that we felt that even if we did not pass as women the recruiters would not want us in the army if we were obviously effeminate.

“But we don’t want to break the law against homosexual behavior,” said one of them. “Even if we avoid fighting, I don’t want that.”

“Who said that you are homosexual,” I said. “if you are attracted to women and you are a transvestite male, then you have not broken that law.”

The other options were that we resist and get sent anyway, or run away and that was now looking impossible. My mother’s idea looked weirdly acceptable.

“I am not turning you boys into transvestites,” she said. “I only know how to present as a woman, so that is what I will be helping you to do. Do you understand? This is not a game. This is as serious as a bullet in the head, and all about avoiding that.”

Her approach was simple. We were not going to dress up to go on show before the recruiters. We were going to become women – daughters to our mothers, living in our home as women and never relaxing into male mode not for a second, until danger had passed.

I never knew anything about hair extensions, breast forms and shapewear – why would I? All of this stuff and real stripping of the hair from a male body, makes it impossible to take off the female costume. My mother even insisted that all of us should wear and special undergarment at all times to ensure that we could only piss sitting down. We were to live in a female form in order to be only that.

I don’t think that any of us felt that it was going to be a long period. The recruiters would pass through our town and do what they had to do. Some of our men would be taken away, but not the 7 of us.

They say that it takes a village to raise a child, and it took our village to raise 7 new girls. There were some supporters of Putin among us, but we were a tight community so nobody would tell. I think many felt that just a short distance away in Kirov Oblast the recruiters were not active, so why in Komi? Let others be mobilized. Go to Dagestan. Leave our boys alone.

We went for our first outing as a group. We walked around the village and we went shopping at the few clothing boutiques that we had, and the cosmetics store. We were ready to pick one another up on small details, but so too were the villagers. Some of the men of the village even played around with cat calls, asking us to wiggle our bottoms. But we had been warned – “stay ladylike at all times”.

Mothers were good too. They would only refer to their sons now daughters using the female pronoun and our female names. I was Anna and “my sister” was Valentina. Valentina was by far the best looking of all of us, but I was not too bad either, despite my age or perhaps because of it.

The other 5 were still “passable”, so we were ready for the Commissariat to arrive.

In the meantime, it was like we got used to living as women. I had been busy with caring for my father and had not been out much, but suddenly I had new friends and when we were not working, we were all together, talking and practising or voices, arranging one another’s hair and talking constantly about new discoveries in being women.

The men of the town had treated us differently, and one of the new girls who worked at the agriculture supply shop said that she was selling more stuff than ever.

“Sex sells,” she said. “They know who I am and what I am, but they still come around and flirt with me. I tell them they have to buy something, so they do. My boss is very pleased with me. He is asking if I might stay this way after the recruiters pass through.”

It seemed crazy, but some of the others nodded. Valentina blushed. I had no idea what was going on with her, but it turned out that she had a secret.

Even I seemed to have acquired an admirer. Mikhail was only a couple of years older than me and he was a neighbor. He had served in the army before and was facing a call up, but he said that he did not condemn me for doing what I could to avoid one.

“They call this war a meat grinder,” he said. “We don’t get all the news, but we know that people are dying. Our population is 3 times that of Ukraine but it seems that we lose 3 to every one of theirs. This can go on until we wipe one another out.

Mikhail had watched my transformation and he was fascinated by it, as it seemed to me. He told me – “I cannot believe that there was not a woman inside you all along that has made this possible.”

I have to say that these words confused me. I just giggled, but instead of denying it, I just started to wonder if there might be some truth in that.

“If I go, can I stay in touch with you?” he asked. “I have nobody, and it would be nice to have somebody I can text or write to.”

Who could refuse it?

Finally, the recruiters came. They sent out call up letters to each household with qualifying people, and that meant 2 letters to our household. We all went down to the recruiting office with mothers and supporters, and there was great confusion while the recruiters looked at the young women who stepped forward. As the oldest of them I spoke for everybody.

“The record keeping for our village is very poor. As you can see there are a number of young women in this town who are recorded as being male. Judge for yourself. I am sure there are many women who would be happy to serve our country, but as volunteers. The Partial Mobilization does not apply to us.”

Some boys were lined up and measured for uniforms. Some looked very afraid. Mikhail had his name called, but he showed no fear. He looked at me. I went over to him and embraced him in front of everybody.

It seemed like the other girls of our 7 picked up on my lead. They went up the boys lined up and chose one to say goodbye to. Valentina went up to one tall good-looking young man and did more – she kissed him.

“Make sure that you bring my boyfriend back in one piece,” she angrily shouted at the recruiter.

“We just give them uniforms if we have them, and put them on a bus,” said the recruiter. It was clear that he disliked his job as much as we disliked him.

He and the others sent by the Commissariat moved on the next day, but the strange thing was that none of the 7 of us went back to living as a man the day after. It was said that it was because we were on the main road between Kirov and Syktyvkar and the recruiters would pass through all the time until the Partial Mobilization was complete, but that was not it. It was as if something had happened on the day our boys were taken away. It was as if pacts had been made to those boys that we would serve our time as they would, but in another way. It just seemed wrong that we should abandon our status because they could not. If they would not strip off their uniforms and run away then we would not strip off what we had become to avoid whatever fate held for them.

In fact, as at today one of the 7 has abandoned womanhood. “He” fell in love and married a local girl.

As at today of the 19 boys who were recruited that day 3 have come back to us as corpses and 2 are assumed missing. Valentina’s boyfriend and one other were captured by the Ukrainians, who allow prisoners to contact their loved ones by phone. It is clear that Valentina loves this man, and had done so for years. Then it had to be secret, but now it seems that it does not need to be.

As for me, well, Mikhail returned to the village badly injured only a few days after my father died. I felt compelled to move next door and care for him. It seemed as if he had suffered for me. But we had stayed in touch even before he was wounded and had developed a special relationship. When he came back we both realized that it was love.

I am taking hormones now, and we are talking about surgery to enable me to become his wife, but first he needs to recover from his injuries. He will but he will never be able to serve in the army again.

And as for the war, it continues. We look forward to the day when the Komi Republic can break away from the Russian Federation and pull our boys out of it. Together with my special “sisters” we pray for that day.

The End

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