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A Lesson from Ukraine

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How to Ruin Statistics

A Lesson from Ukraine

Ilya Kharkow

"Statistics likes to talk about people in large numbers, because that way it can't see their faces."

EXCAVATOR

No one looks at an excavator and thinks:

"What a shame it's not destroying anything right now."

But the moment I refused to take part in a war, people suddenly appeared who were convinced I was wasting my life.

LANGUAGE

I'm tired of having to justify the fact that I was born in Ukraine and consider Russian my native language. I grew up in a Russian-speaking mining town in eastern Ukraine. It wasn't a political statement. It was my life.

Before becoming president, Ukraine's current president played a president in the popular Ukrainian TV series *Servant of the People*. The show was in Russian. If most Ukrainians had spoken Ukrainian back then, the show probably would have been in Ukrainian too. But for some reason it wasn't. Neither were most of the films, music, books, TV programs, and everyday conversations I grew up with.

Some people see language as proof of loyalty. I see it as a tool. A hammer doesn't become guilty because someone used it to hit another person. Language doesn't either.

DUTY

Talk of duty begins precisely where volunteers run out.

No one asks a hammer whether it wants to drive nails or crack skulls. Its value is measured solely by its usefulness. Conversations about a man's duty to his country often work the same way.

If I am expected to pretend to be a tool, then let me be neither a hammer nor a rifle. I'd rather be somebody's vibrator.

UNITY

On the first day of the war, I boarded a bus from Kyiv to Lviv. Back then, every missile seemed to be flying not just toward the city, but directly at you. At least that's how it felt.

Somewhere along the way came the news that men were no longer allowed to leave the country. A strange feeling. That morning you had still been a person. By evening, you had become a prohibited category.

Then soldiers pulled me off the bus. They forced me to sign a document stating that I was volunteering for military service. Later, friends explained that such a thing couldn't possibly have happened. Later, women on the street politely reminded me that all men were expected to report to the draft office. Later, taxi drivers stopped asking for my destination and started asking: "The draft office?"

TV talked about national unity. In reality, the world was losing its mind faster than a morning erection appears. I've already used some of these stories in my fiction. The rest are still too dangerous to publish.

Everyone kept saying the war would be over in a few days. Four years have passed. No, the last missile won't change anything. Some wars end before they begin. Others continue long after the ceasefire.

BORDERS

There it is again: another well-fed, comfortable person talking about the importance of borders. It's strange hearing that from people who cross dozens of invisible borders every day.

The border between work and home.

The border between a friend and a lover.

The border between a child and an adult.

The border between the person you were a year ago and the person you are today.

Everything good in my life began with breaking someone's rules. So whenever I hear that borders are sacred, I remember that love, emigration, and growing up begin with crossing them.

NATURE

I'm tired of hearing that sex between men is unnatural. That we should look to nature for guidance. Fine. Let's take a look at what nature actually has to offer.

As a child from a broken home, it pains me to write this, but nature is not particularly sentimental. A cuckoo chick dropped into another bird's nest throws the other chicks out to monopolize the attention of its foster parents. Nobody calls that unnatural.

I've been on many dates. Some of them were terrible, but none of my partners ever tried to eat me afterward, as female praying mantises and some spiders do.

Ducks evolved complex reproductive anatomy to protect themselves from gang rape.

Maybe we shouldn't look to nature for moral guidance in every situation. Maybe we should just make love.

If morality is determined by nature, then infanticide, cannibalism, and group violence must also be considered natural.

Fortunately, people usually build ethics not on what exists in nature, but on consent, freedom, and the absence of harm. That's why the argument that something is "unnatural" tells us nothing about whether it is good or bad.

And if my sex life is still your strongest argument against me, perhaps you've simply run out of arguments.

OBSERVATION

No important story in my life has ever started with:

"I followed all the instructions."

THE FACELESS MAN

States love faces. Faces are easy to hit. Easy to photograph. Easy to paste into documents.

I met the Faceless Man in Romania. He was trying to sell an old book. What interested me wasn't the book itself, but the description. It read:

"They say the illustrations in this book were drawn by Satan himself."

Naturally, I didn't believe it. But I became curious about the kind of person who would advertise a book that way. That's how I found the Faceless Man.

Now he helps me distribute my stories. He's from Ukraine too. Also of military age. Also refused to fight. We both find it amusing when people ask, yet again:

"Why doesn't he have a face?"

Are you aware that men with Ukrainian passports can't even access consular services anymore? It's hardly surprising that he has no face. That country steals young men's identities. Or at least tries to.

Later he admitted that he had never intended to sell the book. He simply knew that a book like that would attract unusual people.

One of those people was me.

SECURITY

I was walking down the street listening to a podcast about Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. It talked about how the state created a system in which people police themselves even when no one is watching.

In May, the Faceless Man disappeared for two weeks. It later turned out that he had simply gone to buy a book. When he returned, he said:

"The state loves statistics for the same reason a butcher loves scales."

After that, I had to buy him a beer.

QUESTIONS FOR HOMEWORK

If borders are so sacred, why do people cross them for love?

If language determines loyalty, why did the Ukrainian president play a president in Russian?

If security is so important, why do cameras appear before trust?

If coercion works, why do states have to threaten people with punishment?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROPER CONDUCT

And while people continue searching for moral guidance in nature, let me remind you that necrophilia has been repeatedly observed among those adorable penguins.

Welcome to the world of natural values.

ANTIHERO

Today, the Faceless Man told me about a dream he had. In the dream, he was trying to burn off his fingerprints with acid. It hurt. When he woke up, the first thing he did was check his hands.

Sometimes I think the Faceless Man exists only because states need people they can enter into a spreadsheet. Every phenomenon eventually creates its opposite. There are no locks without lockpicks. No heroes without villains. No system of records without those who want to disappear from them.

If nobody tried to count him, describe him, classify him, or use him, perhaps his face would have returned long ago. But that hasn't happened. And the longer I watch the world, the less the Faceless Man seems like an exception.

He simply understood what was happening before everyone else.

That's how a woman wears makeup not because she wants to, but because she feels compelled to meet expectations imposed on her idea of femininity.

That's how a prisoner behaves even after the guard has walked away.

I'd read Foucault before. I'd walked down that street before. But only then did I notice that there were sixteen cameras on it. None of them was pointed directly at me. None told me to stop. None demanded my papers. They were simply there.

That's what a modern city looks like: nobody accuses you of anything. They just keep watching, in case.

COLLECTOR

The Faceless Man collects weird things. Banned books. Photographs of demolished monuments. Letters written by executed authors.

The thing is that this weirdo doesn't really collect objects. He collects evidence that the world could have been arranged differently.

STATISTICS

When the war began, I quickly realized that, as far as the state was concerned, there were two different people.

The first was me.

The second was a military-aged man.

The first read books, wrote stories, and had sex.

The second existed only in a spreadsheet.

The state showed little interest in the first one, but a great deal of interest in the second. That was probably the moment I first understood how dangerous statistics can be.

Statistics doesn't know who you are. It only knows which category to place you in. Age. Sex. Citizenship. Fitness for service.

To statistics, I was never a person. Every statistic is a cemetery where names have been replaced with numbers. I was merely the intersection of several parameters. That's why I en-

joy ruining statistics. Sometimes it's the only way to remind a system that it made a mistake.

COERCION

I'd like someone to shave me every evening. But I'd want them to do it with care. I'd want them to enjoy the feeling of the razor gliding across my neck.

Problems don't begin when people develop unusual desires. Problems begin when they stop caring about reciprocity and start valuing an action more than the person involved in it.

Yes, I'd like someone to shave me. But I'd want there to be an erotic subtext. The act itself doesn't interest me. That's why it would never occur to me to force someone to do it. Coercion would destroy the very thing that made it meaningful.

States and ideologies make this mistake all the time. They try to obtain through coercion what can exist only voluntarily.

An employer dreams of a worker who arrives at work with the same enthusiasm people bring to a date. A state dreams of a soldier who dies with the same enthusiasm people bring to bed. Both love talking about duty. Both become nervous when a person remembers their right to refuse.

The greatest stories of love, success, heroism, and self-sacrifice always exist on the other side of coercion. An artist carrying paintings from country to country while living in exile. A volunteer driving humanitarian aid across half a continent. A woman donating a kidney to her sister. What makes them beautiful is that they could have chosen otherwise.

Try forcing them to do the same thing, and you end up with an entirely different story.

DIALOGUE

"You can find something positive in any situation," I tell the Faceless Man.

"Even this one?"

"At least the state can't steal your identity twice."

EUROPEAN PROTECTION

For all four years of the war, one thing has continued to irritate me. The European Union granted temporary protection to people with Ukrainian passports, yet never said the obvious part out loud: some of us need protection not only from the war, but from Ukraine itself.

I am one of those people.

At first, I thought the EU's refusal to acknowledge this was merely a bureaucratic oversight. The Faceless Man disagreed. We even made a bet. If he turned out to be right, he would shave me every day for a month. What I would owe him if he won is better left undisclosed.

Now, as more and more people discuss restricting or even revoking protection for military-aged men, I am beginning to suspect that the Faceless Man was right.

It no longer looks like an oversight. It looks like a reservation left for the future. A way of preserving the right to decide, one day, who I really am. A refugee. A taxpayer. Or military manpower.

It seems the Faceless Man won't need to buy new razor blades after all.

STRENGTH

I like large dogs. But when people see a Rottweiler, they immediately start talking about what it might do: maul someone, attack someone, tear someone apart. Very rarely does anyone point out that a dog can also lie in the sun and mind its own business.

Something similar happens whenever people talk about men. The moment a man happens to be physically stronger than those around him, society starts discussing what that strength should be used for: let him die for state borders, let him die for women and children. For some reason, people are far less interested in a man's right to simply keep that strength to himself.

IRONY