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## President Zelensky

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I never asked you, Kirill, if ordinary Russians were happy. Privately, Robin whispered that people on the street never smiled. She pointed out the nearly empty windows of stores with scarce consumer goods (most funds were focused toward military expenses). At a bookstore, she mischievously requested the novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, knowing it would never appear on the shelf. Careers, our leaders had informed us, were chosen by the state, so none of you young men would ever have a choice.

Despite constant radio propaganda mumbling over the fulfillment of five-year plans, you must have seen the wide gap between fiction and reality. You must have realized that it was impossible to even catch a glimpse of a dream. "Put us in your suitcase," Kirill and Sasha said as we prepared to leave their country. Their voices were fervent yet wistful, cynical; they knew they were flirting with a fleeting fantasy. Did you ever really know what freedom meant?

Kirill, I confess: as our plane rose, as we flew closer to our homeland, elation lifted us high and higher. Unlike you, we could "move around the cabin." Your world receded back into surrealism as we crossed back out of the Iron Curtain.

With today's newspaper headlines (invasion of Ukraine, spring 2022), you exploded back into reality. My tears have flowed till they could flood into the Neva. How sorry I am that I could not take you with me, away from coercion, draft, war and losses of men over Ukraine.



President Zelensky, Acrylic on Canvas

\_Marilyn Peretti