

War is nothing like you imagine, nothing like they show in films. In fact, what they don't show in films is the battle that rages without mechanical weapons, but still involves sacrifice and the shock and grief that accompany war. This is the war of those who must decide how to act in moments of moral conflict; how they will justify their actions to themselves and those around them. There is also a battle raging on social media, between the images of destruction and those of regular life with its joys and sorrows. No military doctrine or strategy prepares the warriors of these battlefields for the surreal and cognitive dissonance that the weapons of this war bring. Robert, calmly asleep in his bed in St. Petersburg, Russia, was unaware that at 4:00 AM on February 23rd, 2022, he had become, unwillingly, one of these warriors. When he awoke at 8:00 AM, Robert could have conducted his traditional review of social media and the news, becoming aware of the tragedy unfolding in the world. He did, in fact, reach for his phone, what felt like an extension of his body, but stopped.

“I need to take a break from the news,” he reminded himself. That was true. Robert hadn't slept well the past few nights, staying up late watching and reading reactions and commentary on the Russian president's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in the east of Ukraine. He was addicted to watching it all and had always been interested in the details of Russian politics. Despite his worry about the consequences, Robert still felt a sense of excitement in the air as the events were unfolding, of not knowing what would happen next. He had overdone it though, and his mind was overwhelmed, keeping him up late into the night.

So, today of all days, Robert got up and had breakfast without his phone, blissfully unaware of the events unfolding that would push him to pit his moral foundations against his reality. To say he was unprepared would be an understatement. For now, however, he washed his breakfast of eggs, toast, and jam down with a cup of strong, black tea, his favorite. “Chefir” as they called it in Russia. He had learned to love tea after 6 years in the country and had it all the time — for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and all the time between.

At 8:45 A.M. Russian forces rush towards the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, while Robert rushed to get ready for the day. It was Thursday, and he had decided to work from a cafe downtown for a few hours. He liked to get there by 10. Looking at the time, he thought, “Why not walk to the subway today?” He could walk there in 30 minutes from his apartment. 30 more minutes of isolation from the war to be in his thoughts.

Robert walked towards the subway station, Ploshad' Muzhestva (Bravery Square), chilled, but feeling invigorated. The cold February air didn't spoil the neighborhood. Old country houses interspersed among Soviet apartment buildings, small parks, or more like forests, stuck up in between it all. Robert had immediately fallen in love with this place when he first got off at this stop three years ago, completely by chance. A friend had lived nearby. Greener than other neighborhoods in St. Petersburg, Ploshad Muzhestva allowed Robert to forget sometimes that he lived in a bustling metropolis of five million people.

Robert arrived at the subway, his first encounter with other human beings of the day. The station attendants habitually observed everyone suspiciously. Robert never quite understood what they were looking for, though thankfully, today he didn't need to put his book bag through the scanner. He slapped his transport card on the tourniquet, passed through, and got on the escalator for the long ride down into the depths of the St. Petersburg subway system. Robert had been holding back the urge to use his phone, fighting the itch, knowing that it's good to take a break sometimes from the screen. Halfway down the escalator, he caved into the temptation. "Just not the news." He reminded himself. "Let's see what new cafes and restaurants there are."