



# AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Project  
Anonymous

# Little Stories of the Big Steppe

## Anonymous

“Oh, Mommy, please,” was the final appeal of my baby sister.

Mom gave it another thought and, given that all three of us were all over her, the only choice she felt she had was to surrender. Blissfully, we started jumping up and left and right while our Mom went to her coat, took all the money she had in its pockets and – after looking at the contents of her palm for a moment – put the coat on, told us to behave, and left.

From the entrance door, we rushed to the window overlooking our front yard, and only from that window was the shop visible – standing proudly on a tiny hill. At that moment I was to report to my two younger siblings on Mom’s journey to that only shop in the village.

So I go, “She’s halfway through.” They unanimously scream “Yaay!”

That reporting duty of mine was due to me being the only one of the three tall enough to reach the window. Well, with a bit of windowsill support, while those two didn’t reach even the windowsill.

“And now? Where is she now?”, they asked impatiently while jerking my hand jumpingly. I say, “She’s entering the shop!” My baby brother dropped to the floor under the weight of happiness his tiny heart was overjoyed with.

“Tell us everything you see!” my sister commanded.

“I will”, was my response.

“And now, and now? Has she exited yet?”

My jumping heart was so joyous that I'm not sure my reporting duty was being carried out sufficiently. But gosh, even a split second-long delay would upset those two, so I pulled my free-spirited philosophical self back together and said that Mom was still in the store.

My baby brother got up and, with all the seriousness of the matter, stated that that was due to the difficulty of choice. A huge smile appeared on his face when he added, “Maybe Mommy will get us something in addition to the cookies!” They both started jumping again, while I was jumping in my heart just imagining it was true.

“She's out!” I screamed. The euphoria that came upon us filled the entire room – perhaps, the whole tiny house we lived in.

“Do you see what she has in her hands?” my brother asked.

“She is carrying a bag”, I responded.

“Is it big?” my sister continued.

“It is big,” was my response after careful examination of the bag's size thanks to what I thought back then was my magical skill of zooming in.

“Can you see what's inside?” one of them inquired. And while I was thinking how to respond, Mom opened our wooden gate and entered. We three rushed to the entrance door and started applauding in unison when she opened it.

“What did you get us, Mommy?” we asked altogether. And instead of answering she just stretched her arm toward us and gave us the bag.

We gladly took it and rushed to the kitchen, turned left, and entered our teeny-tiny living room. The sofa was implicitly chosen as our place for landing. As soon as we reached it, we put the bag onto it, carefully opened it, and saw the cookies. What a blissful sight that was! We asked Mom to divide them for us and right after she did, we each grabbed one and started savouring it, looking at each other with the happiest sparks in our eyes.

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It was not before I got into my adulthood that I could fully embrace and appreciate how difficult it was for our parents to provide for us back in the 90s in Ukraine.

The country had just gained its independence. “Splendid!”, you’d say, right? And it was! However, the people of Ukraine quickly realized that the country was left in economic ruins after decades of Soviet rule, with an urgent need to relaunch itself... and little strength to do so.

This is how the decade that became quite idiomatic came about. In the 2000s up until 2014, you would hear from many something like, “Are they trying to send us back into the 90s?” – where 90s would stand for dark, hungry, volatile, and uncertain times.

Truth be told, this is not how we, then children, felt. But thinking back to our parents with full-time jobs from dawn ‘till dusk – for which neither of them was paid for years – and having to provide for the three of us... it never ceases to break my heart.

Those were the times of temporary currency, inflation, devaluation, and other terms only economists use confidently. Those were the times that if you get luck and get paid your monthly salary, sometimes the only thing you could afford buying would be a box of matches.

Speaking of matches: they were quite necessary, during long and

regular blackouts, which lasted for years. I remember doing my homework by candlelight while the world outside our tiny window was immersed in complete darkness. Those evenings by candlelight must have left a lasting effect on me, as even in the present times, I never fail to appreciate the evening city lights. They turn me into a little girl in awe admiring their beauty.

My family comes from the northwest of the country. After the Chernobyl disaster, our village fell into one of the radioactive contamination zones, which forced us to move all the way to the south of the country, just a few dozen kilometres up the Crimean Peninsula. Some doctor advised such a move to my mom, saying that the sea breeze will heal her children. And we did move, however, the sea breeze became the seas' breeze, in plural, as we started living between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

I clearly remember my first day at school: my classmates didn't understand me, and it felt quite lonely during the recesses. It wasn't because they were mean; it was because their language was surzhyk, a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, while I spoke Ukrainian with a few Belarusian words. Now I know they were Belarusian, but back then I was confident they were Polish.

Step by step – or better, recess after recess – we started understanding each other's '*language*' so to say. The school programme was in Ukrainian, though, but maybe their challenge with understanding me was the fact that we were first graders, and they simply didn't hear much of Ukrainian before, or at least not enough to develop an ear for it.

In the South of Ukraine, we have steppe. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as:

1. one of the vast usually level and treeless tracts in southeastern Europe or Asia
2. arid land with xerophilous vegetation found usually in regions of extreme temperature range and loess soil.

*Our Steppe* in the Kherson region definitely falls into the above categories: it's vast with blistering hot summers and sometimes harsh winters. It's not exactly treeless, however, due to human presence and perseverance. It's rather an oasis.

But most importantly, it smells like Home – home, where you always want to come back: be it to lick your wounds, be it to celebrate life. By pure accident or a game of fate, if you wish, the Steppe got forever engraved in my heart and soul.

Historically serving also as a home for numerous tribes like Sarmatians, Scythians, and Goths, to name a few, our Steppe is free in spirit and vast in nature. A reliable irrigation system made it possible to grow amazingly sweet fruit and juicy vegetables, providing for its people.

Our Steppe became part of my identity, the indispensable one. Its first winters, however, were a tad challenging.

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Mom dressed us up: a few pairs of pants, a few sweaters, heavy scarves, headscarves and on top of them went our winter hats, then coats with gloves attached to a string. God knows how many pairs of socks, boots. And having achieved that, she put us out of the door, asking us to be careful.

I immediately put myself between my sister and brother, took their hands and we started the journey to their kindergarten. Just to help you imagine: the distance from our home to the kindergarten was a few hundred meters, but sometimes it felt like a mission impossible, and that was one of those days.

The wind got so wild that instead of walking, we were running – and not out of our own free will. It was blowing into our backs so strongly that the only thing that saved us from being blown away was my school backpack filled with heavy textbooks, copybooks, pens, and crayons.

So *runningly* we reached the kindergarten and I felt relieved that half of my mission that morning was accomplished. But right after the 'phew' moment came a question: how in the world was I going to make it in the opposite direction, having to fight *against* the wind this time? And this time without those two little balancing kettlebells I happened to have left in the kindergarten!

Somehow, I got to the kindergarten's gate and slowly proceeded one-on-one against the wind in my face, hugging every lamppost and tree on my way – at the end of that journey they felt like my best friends.

That day I didn't get 'gone with the wind' – but I was close. And that was the day when little me fully comprehended the difference between my former home's climate and the new home's climate – the Steppe's climate.

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When we moved into our new home, our neighbours from all sides came to meet us. One evening our '*left*' neighbour came over and, when he found out where we were from, he took us to his barn and gave us a watermelon he preserved from the summer. Watermelon in February! We, the kids, were delighted!

A watermelon back from where we were from was a very rare treat, and apparently knowing that our kind and generous new neighbour exclaimed, "You will have plenty of those here in summer!" In that moment, in our eyes, our new neighbour looked like Saint Nicolas to us, a younger version, though, than the one usually portrayed in children's books.

We couldn't believe our luck and rushed back home to have the watermelon. Sadly, the watermelon aged inside, but the image of it got engraved into our memory forever. Now we were in the Watermelon Land! Think about that for a minute!

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To make ends meet, our parents had a huge vegetable garden. There were plenty of fruit trees for jams and jellies, as well as chickens, ducks, geese, and pigs. Since no one had any money, people bartered, exchanging goods and services. Even salesmen who eventually ended up visiting the village, offering some typology of goods and knowing that nobody would have any money to pay them, often asked the price in chickens.

I remember one day a sort of tiny van came and stopped next to the shop – the only shop in the village – so passers-by would stop and ask what that family was offering. Needless to say, the news about parrots reached the school in very little time, and all the children instead of heading home, ran to the place to see real parrots. I wasn't an exception and in my own timid way approached the van and started staring at the parrots, admiring them.

They were fascinating: light blue and light green, and there were so many of them!

As I was standing there with my friend, the lady said, "They are budgies. You can get one for two hens or one rooster."

We thanked the lady and headed home, thinking that there was no way whatsoever that we would ever get our respective parents to pay such a high price for a parrot. We also discussed that a bird for bird price does actually make sense, for parrots are birds and so are chickens, just bigger and heavier, and with less flying experience.

My friend, however, unlike me, had grandparents living in our village, so we decided to ask her grandma for help. The negotiations lasted for what felt like a couple of hours, and finally the grandma gave in, adding though, "I'll give you a rooster, forget about two hens!"

Fair enough, we thought. Overwhelmed with joy, we waited outside their household for the rooster. He came in a potato sack, and we headed back to the village center.

*This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.*

*The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The previous pages feature one selected example of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.*



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