Scene 1

Lights up on a stage divided in two. On one side is JULIE in her American teenager bedroom. She is 17. On the other side of the stage is MILENA in her Ukrainian bedroom. She is of the same age. Each is holding her cell phone. JULIE speaks as she types on her phone, while MILENA holds her phone up in different positions, attempting to catch a signal.

JULIE
Hi. (Reconsiders, and deletes it.) Hey. (She pauses once more, and deletes it again.) Hello. (Whispers to herself as she deletes once more.) Come on... (She is typing now.) Hi, Milena. I wanted to check in. I know you might not get this. If you do, please text back as soon as you can, please. Mom and dad tried to reach your parents. We... we’re all really worried about you, and hoping and praying that you’re safe. So stay safe, please. I miss you.

(A beat, then a sound indicating that the message has failed to go through. As MILENA speaks, JULIE turns on her computer and reads the news)

MILENA
Well, I can’t get any bars; so let’s just hope that you didn’t text me the answer to world peace yet. (Pause,
then a slight chuckle. Continues nervously.) Wouldn’t that be something, right about now? If only we were in those bad fantasy novels you like so much—someone with magic power would show up and... poof everything back to normal. That would stop everyone here from constantly scouring the news trying to decipher politicians’ speak to get a glimpse of what’s going to happen next.

I hope your biology test goes well.

Love you, Jul.

Scene 2

JULIE

(JULIE is reading out headlines while the set for MILENA’s space changes, either in front of the audience or in the dark, from a bedroom to an unfinished basement with grey cement walls and floor. MILENA helps with the switch, taking her home off-stage.)

“Russian foreign minister frames the Ukraine invasion as a ‘special military operation.’”

“How to be on the lookout for rampant Russian misinformation.”

“United States places strict economic sanctions on Russia in hopes of deterring attacks.”

“‘They just haven’t made a decision yet,’ says a senior European official.”

“Thousands of Ukrainians forced out of their homes and into bomb shelters, cellars, basements.”

MILENA
(MILENA is now holding a backpack. She looks slowly around the basement. She gently places her backpack down and takes her phone out. She sighs before typing out her message. JULIE continues reading the news.)

Hi, Julie. None of my messages show as sent, but I’m going to try one more. We are now staying in an improvised “bomb shelter” in the basement. Things are ok. Quiet-ish. Not the good kind of quiet, like Babusya’s dacha at night when all you can hear are the crickets and an owl in the distance. It’s more like the quiet when you wake up from a nightmare. It’s the middle of the night and your heart is beating fast and stomach feels heavy, because it’s dark enough that it’s hard to tell if what’s just happened to you was real, and whether it could go on.

(She pauses, taking in her own words. Looks around her surroundings once more.)

But it is real. As much as I wish it was a nightmare. Those you can wake up from with a pinch. Pinch me, will you? (It’s a lame joke, and she knows it.)

Ya tebe kohayu.

(She settles down on the basement’s floor.)

Scene 3

JULIE

(Laying upside down on her bed, JULIE runs her hands through her hair and over her face several times. After turning over and a brief moment of deliberation, she picks up her phone.)

You know what’s funny? Words. Examples include spatula, wee, snazzy, coagulate, and that’s just in English. Sometimes I think
about words. *(Pause.)* Obviously sometimes I think about words, that’s what this whole message is about. Back to my point: you know how if you repeat a word too many times it becomes dust on your tongue? I could repeat “soup” for thirty seconds and it would lose all meaning. It’s not just small words, though. It’s big ones that weigh on me. The kinds that get bolded and capitalized.

“Invasion”
“Refugees”
“Negotiations”
“War of Attrition”
“Collateral Damage”

At some point they become blurry and distant. And then you remember the people, the faces. The stories without headlines. The minds full of intimate thoughts, with words they find funny. Not the words that terrorize us by turning human beings into statistics.

*(She takes a deep breath and exhales forcefully, trying to expel the despair creeping up inside her. She looks at the sky outside her window. From her side of the world, MILENA looks up as well. There is no window in the basement, but they are looking towards the same sky nonetheless.)*

The front-page words always barge back into focus. *(Her speech gets progressively faster as she gets more and more wound up.)* They become so big that they consume us as if we’re specks of ink. We’re all small, true, but not like that. We’re small parts of something infinitely larger, something balanced that we also
happen to embody. And yet some megalomaniacs decide that they’re the ones who scale us all to fit their headlines.

(She stops. Shuts her eyes and breathes for a moment. She feels deeply, the situation forcing her thoughts to the edges of a space they should not have to be in. She deletes the message she’s been typing, shakes her head to reset her mind, and begins to type again.)

You won’t receive this now, but once you do, I want you to know something: every time I say that I miss you and that I love you, I mean it, Milena. Truly. (A pause.)

I love you.

Scene 4

MILENA

(This time she speaks while her phone stays by her side.)

I should probably update you on things, Jul. For the past 26 days, mom, dad, Anton and I stayed in the basement. We’ve had no electricity, heat, or running water. Internet and phones do not work. I don’t know how my friends are, and we haven’t heard from aunt Tatyana.

JULIE

(Reading headlines on her computer screen.)

“Humanitarian Catastrophe Unfolding in the City of Mariupol.”

MILENA
We don’t know what’s going on. We just hear explosions in the city. When a shell lands very close, we can feel the walls shake. Anton keeps asking questions, but I don’t know how to explain to a six year-old that big men decided to start killing each other.

JULIE

“The Negotiations May Last Months.”

MILENA

By the third day, you begin to adapt. At night and in the morning we listen to cannonades and play “Cities” to stay awake. Sometimes it’s possible to sleep a couple of hours during the explosions, and sometimes they replace the alarm clock. I’ve learned to sleep with all my winter clothes on, covered by three blankets. I’m glad I’ve got the warm hat you gave me for New Years, Jul.

JULIE

“The United Nations Maintains at Least Ten Million Civilians have Evacuated.”

MILENA

Yesterday it snowed. Normally that’s not much to talk about. You get it, you’re from the Midwest. But everybody here was so happy! We ran outside with shovels and scoops, together with all the neighbors, and raked snow into basins, cans, bowls, buckets—into anything that could hold it. We melted the snow over the fire and brought the water inside.

JULIE
“Ukraine’s Food Supply Chains are Breaking Down and the War is Leading to ‘Collateral Hunger’ Around the World.”

MILENA
Today we’ve had warm meal for the first time. Some brave souls from the neighborhood made a track under fire to a bombed-out store and brought back potatoes. They put up a grill and backed them for everybody while shooting was going on around.

JULIE
“We will Continue This Military Operation Until Our Demands are Met, Says Foreign Minister.” “War Stocks Are Surging.”

MILENA
I have lost the sense of time and it is difficult for me to say how many days we’ve spent in the basement. The basement itself is not as frightening as the unknown. You don’t know what awaits you above surface. Will you see the neighbors’ houses when and if you go outside? I will not pretend, Julie. I am scared.

JULIE
“West to Send ‘More Lethal Weapons’ to Ukraine, UK Defense Minister Says.” “Some NATO Members on the Eastern Flank Also Oppose the Peace Deal.” “Military Spending Surges in Europe. These Stocks Stand to Benefit.”

MILENA
In the basement, you redefine your sense of time—it seems to be night all the time; rethink your priorities—I would give up everything I have just to get out of here alive. We need to get out, we need to survive.
Scene 5

(Asterisks indicate the two girls speaking in unison.)

MILENA*
Do you remember the time we went camping?

JULIE*
Do you remember the time we went camping?

MILENA
We were like, eight, or something.

JULIE
It was when you came here and we went to Wisconsin.

MILENA*
It was your first time camping.

JULIE*
It was my first time camping.

MILENA
I remember we tried to build a fire using sticks because it always works in movies.

JULIE
I was utterly clueless about the whole thing, but you were able to teach me a thing or two about the great outdoors.

MILENA
I made you lift up rocks with me so we could watch the bugs.
JULIE
We spent half our time looking up at the sky watching different kinds of birds and naming different kinds of clouds.

MILENA*
You were obsessed with the ducks.

JULIE*
I was obsessed with the ducks.

(Both laugh a little at the memory.)

MILENA*
The sky felt like it was ours, that week.

JULIE*
The sky felt like it was ours, that week.

(There is a pause. They both remember the expansiveness of the sky.)

MILENA
Let’s go camping again, sometime.

Glossary & Pronunciation of Ukrainian words:

Babusya – Grandmother
Dacha – Summerhouse
Ya tebe kohayu (/ja ’tebe ko’hayu/) – I love you