

THE OSTRICH

19/11/2025 [2 AM]

I really should quit smoking. Yet my instincts failed me again, and by the time I even took notice of fishing one out, a cigarette was halfway from its pack to my mouth. For a brief moment, the flame of my lighter joined the city lights, and I savoured the familiar sensation of the smoke permeating my lungs. Leaning against the rail of my balcony, I fiddled with the cigarette, lost in thought, trying to guess how many times I had gone through this ritual, while staring at its burning end. I looked over towards the city, yet the faint ember glow of my vice remained the only break within the darkness, a lone firefly.

Wait. Why is it dark? As the cigarette went out, the once comforting quiet of the night turned suffocating, so I flicked the butt over and squinted as I watched it disappear. In the blanket of the night, I could barely make out the outline of the building next to mine, and the streets twenty floors below me were shrouded in darkness. I shoved the lighter in the right-hand pocket of my bathrobe.

It's probably another power cut. The fact that our electricity grid struggles to handle our normal consumption rate, let alone winter-intensified demand, has become increasingly obvious, even to those who do their best to bury their heads in the sand until it's all over, waiting for the return of life as usual. I guess this pretence of normalcy is comforting, but how could anyone tell the direction they are heading towards if they never lift their gaze from the ground? Yawning, I was reminded of an arguably better comfort, and I trudged back to bed, quickly drifting off to dreamless sleep.

19/11/2025 [7 AM]

The alarm on my phone went off, and to my dismay, I woke up to my apartment being barely warmer than a fridge. A longer power cut could have been the perfect excuse to delay getting ready for the day and doomscrolling for a few hours instead, yet since the router would be out of commission until power returns, just thinking about the additional data charges ruined the little fun that the AI slop dominating all social media could have brought.

Oh well, maybe the news has an explanation for the cause of this, or at least how long the power cut will persist. Instead of information, the only thing my browser would yield to my disposal was a pixelated Tyrannosaurus rex, and at that, resisting the urge to throw the traitor of a machine into a wall became a Herculean task.

Fucking useless piece of shit! Maybe I am overreacting, but machines failing to execute the very tasks they were made to do has always struck a nerve with me. Wait, shit, since power has been down for several hours at this point, water

distribution could fail at any moment! I was proven right, as I could only fill up my bathtub halfway before the sluggish flow halted.

This should last me for a while, at least if I ration it... Tough luck for those sleeping in today. Unless the situation is resolved quickly, people will panic, so I should head to the grocer's right as it opens, before the masses descend into hysteria. After washing what was necessary with a wet towel, I put on whatever clothes I had tossed on the floor the evening before and hurried outside.

19/11/2025 [8 AM]

The streets were quiet, aside from the crunch of gravel or splashing slush under my feet. Since the sun had not risen yet, the presence of others was most noticeable through their flashlights bobbing in the rhythm of their stride, visible way before they passed me by. While we have had power cuts before, they have never lasted this long, and the accompanying cutoff of water and communication infrastructures is unprecedented.

In the face of this unknown, no one quite managed to maintain their composure. Glimpses of light revealed furrowed brows and hunched shoulders, as if bracing for impact, and some even flinched when their eyes met mine. I had hoped to chat with someone to ease my nerves, but disturbing the peace that was already holding onto a thread seemed hardly worth it, so I put my full focus into repeating my shopping list like a mantra.

Beans, cigarettes, crackers, jerky, oranges, water, wet wipes, beans, cigarettes... That should be enough for a few days, right? I fucking hope so, I don't have much cash left. I greeted the cashier as she was ringing me up, but all I got from her was a piercing glare.

Nevermind then.

19/11/2025 [9 AM]

While I was shopping, the sun was already rising above the horizon, and the streets had become livelier. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry somewhere, which made the anxious atmosphere even more pronounced. However, all of this came to a halt as the screech of an emergency alert began blaring out of every nearby device. I yanked my phone out of my coat pocket and started reading.

WARNING. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. DUE TO A CYBER ATTACK OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN, THE ELECTRIC GRID IS FACING SIGNIFICANT DISRUPTIONS CONTINENTALLY. THE LOCAL REMAINING CAPACITY IS UTILISED FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES UNTIL THE GRID IS RESTORED. MORE INFORMATION WILL FOLLOW.

Hanging out with a bright blue plastic bag might be a mistake. As if on cue, from the other side of the road, a man so tall he may have been a giant shouts at me.

“Oi trench coat, show me what you have there”, he barks at me, but I had already started sprinting before he finished the sentence. “Fag, I said, show me the goddamn bag!”

With these boots, running feels like I am wearing ankle weights. By the time it took me to lose him, I was sweaty, severely out of breath, and panting. Embarrassing, but the combination certainly deterred any others from bothering me, as the rest of my journey was uneventful. When I arrived home, I tried calling my sister, but it did not go through.

22/11/2025 [3 PM]

I sure as hell am not quitting now. The situation was deteriorating fast, judging by the cacophony below. Shouting, cars honking, sirens... I took another drag, wrapped my duvet tighter around my shoulders, and shivered in the cold.

The last forty-eight hours were a blur. I had positioned a chair to block my front door handle for extra security, not because it would actually stop someone determined to break in, but to at least delay the process and alert me to it happening. Other than that, I had been re-reading my book collection, wasted the rest of my phone battery on listening to previously downloaded music, and otherwise tried to distract myself in order to avoid spiralling to the same madness I hear from below. The constant noise made this effort nearly impossible.

The toilet stinks. I wish it had rained or snowed so I could flush it. Then again, the pipes are probably frozen... Does that mean sewage is less or more likely to back up? Having gone several days without a proper shower, I was starting to feel and smell rancid. To make matters worse, in addition to water, my food supplies (and cigarettes, god forbid) were running out. Networks were still down, and not being able to get in touch with any of my friends or family back home was adding to my list of worries.

The clank and thud of mail being delivered cut my train of thought. Two letters were lying on my floor, one from the local Ministry of Defence and the other from that of my homeland. I ripped both envelopes open and began reading the letter from the local first.

Dear resident,

We would like to inform you of several developments regarding the electrical grid.

The entity behind the cyberattack against our electric grid has been traced back to an extensive hacker network with ties to several hostile governments. Furthermore, this attack was

orchestrated as a distraction and to complicate responding to severe threats. Under the cover of extensive anti-access/area denial capabilities in Kaliningrad, Belarus has seized southern Lithuanian territory, effectively bridging the Suwalki Gap, and its battalions continue pushing northwards. The naval forces based in Kaliningrad are disrupting access to Lithuania via the Baltic Sea.

To make matters worse, our troops positioned along the eastern borders of the Baltic states, especially in Estonia, face heavy bombardment by artillery fire and drones. Meanwhile, Russian forces have launched an offensive from Pskov towards the Gulf of Riga, presumably to surround and swiftly defeat the Latvian and Lithuanian militaries before heading to Estonia. Several Finnish and Swedish fighter jets heading towards Narva were shot down over the Gulf of Finland.

However, while the situation is dire, hope is not lost. Taking the Suwalki Gap was costly to Belarus because of Polish missile strikes, which lasted intensely for a day and a half, and now continue at less frequent intervals. Access to Estonia and Latvia is limited, but they are not blockaded. Moreover, all NATO Member States have affirmed their commitment to Article V at the most recent Summit, and a decisive response is already being formulated.

There is no need to panic. You are thousands of kilometres away from danger. Municipalities will begin distributing firewood, water, food, and other essential goods on November 23rd (see the appendix for the list of distribution centre locations). The National Reserve Corps has been deployed to assist local law enforcement in restoring public order, and we are working tirelessly to restore the capacity of our electric grid. Have strength.

Holy shit. My hands started to shake, and I suddenly felt nauseous. Given what I had just found out, I had no reason to believe that the second letter would be much more positive. Forcing myself to focus, I resumed reading.

Dear citizen residing in a foreign country,

Your local government should have informed you by now of the fact that we are at war. Not only are our allies being invaded, but we may be next, especially as we have opted to take a proactive stance in defending the Baltic States.

Following a bilateral call with the POTUS, our leaders have determined that the risk of complete abandonment is too high to allow ourselves to rely on others for safeguarding. In order to support defensive efforts against this invasion while safeguarding our citizens and territory, all reservists and those liable for military duty are required to return home.

The ongoing electricity issues complicate this matter, but our allies have agreed to assist in your efforts to return, and you will not be charged for any costs the trip would normally incur. You must contact your municipality by November 25th to arrange the matter. Those who do not must accept the risk of potential adverse consequences. We hope this letter has informed you sufficiently on the matter.

And just like that, my shock about finding out about being at war was trumped by the realisation that I may be forced to fight in it. Unfortunately for this occasion, I was a man in my 20s with no dependents or disabilities, which most consider ideal cannon fodder. However, I lacked the kind of physical prowess I would expect to be necessary in war for survival, and even if I was fit enough, the most likely fates would either be sustaining significant injuries or a painful death. The thought made my nausea worsen, I gagged, and as if my strength was suddenly drained, my legs gave out and I fell to my knees. I rolled onto my back, stared at my ceiling, and focused on steadying my breath until the room stopped spinning. I sat up.

Three days to grieve the life I had built for myself, three days until I am plucked away, root and stem. Let me weigh my options. If I indeed go back, I may be drafted immediately, or I will continue living under constant fear of it occurring until the situation is resolved. Given Russia's affinity for wars of attrition, living like this may sap the rest of my youth, and this scenario still assumes civilian life as usual... If my homeland is targeted, I can only guess the kind of hellfire our skies would rain on us. On the other hand, evading the call would also mean abandoning life as I know it, but at least it could be on my own terms. If I get lucky, I will be able to escape the war, though getting back in touch with my close circle may be nigh impossible. Still, I think they would prefer not hearing from me over trying to reach me with an Ouija board.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

23/11/2025 [10 AM]

I have made a concept of a plan for my escape. Partly to avoid suspicion and to avoid spending more money than necessary, I found myself smoking while standing in the slowly creeping line towards the makeshift distribution centre that was hastily set up in a nearby library. My stomach growled, and I was trying to stop

myself from shaking. Eighteen hours had passed since my last meal, and it made the cold feel way worse.

Not much longer, one foot at the other, I am almost there. Eventually, it was my turn, and I walked up to a young woman whose smile did not reach her eyes.

“Good morning, could I see your ID?” she asked, and I handed my passport over the counter. She held it in the air, squinting to see the personal information page. “Oh, you do not have a normal ID card? You know, carrying your passport around can be a hassle. If you would like to skip ID verification, I can upload a photo of you and your passport to our system...”

As she talked, I noticed that the top button of her blouse was far more reflective than the rest. When I looked into it, it glinted. I muttered some lame response about being used to carrying my passport with me, grabbed the supply bag I was for, and hurried back home. After I arrived, I shoved the bag into my backpack along with some clothes, a thin yoga mat, a bottle of vodka, a roll of gauze I had lying around, and a knife with a jagged edge.

I could probably find more supplies, but I think keeping the rest of my cash available will turn out more valuable than anything else I could buy at the moment. Besides, the more I am carrying, the more suspicious I look, and I really need to stay unnoticed at least until I have crossed the border. Perhaps more importantly, given that the deadline is coming soon and one of the letters warns against non-compliance, I should assume that the authorities will start looking for me once they realise that I have zero intent to turn myself in. Therefore, the longer a head start I can get, the better.

23/11/2025 [5 PM]

Given that I had no idea when I would sleep in a bed again, but I knew my journey without a destination would be exhausting, I thought it would be worthwhile to take one last nap. Once I woke up, I made a tactical mess in the apartment to make it seem like I was still living there, double-checked the contents of my escape bag, and put on what felt like an excessive amount of layers, all hidden under my largest woollen coat. I locked my front door and quickly went downstairs to avoid detection and uncomfortable questions from my neighbours.

Despite feeling guilty for it, I prayed that power would not be restored now, as then I would lose the cover of everyone else looking rough. Indeed, as I was unlocking my bike, I looked around to see what everyone else was up to. The atmosphere had once again calmed once the people were provided for, or due to the presence of a pair of vicious-looking officers in uniforms standing at what felt like every corner. I tried to contain my anxiety, but I could not help but feel my stomach turn every time I noticed them looking at me as I passed by.

Once I made it out of the city and onto a bike path alongside a highway, I felt like I could breathe again. Since the bike path was poorly maintained yet the highway had two iceless paths carved by the tyres of previous drivers and the roads were desolate, I eventually decided to cycle on the motorway instead. After

hours of biking under the setting sun and later the moonlight, I was exhausted, and I decided to eat and take shelter under a half-collapsed shed.

24/11/2025 [6 AM]

As expected, sleeping on a yoga mat on the ground was rough. The cold permeated through the thin slab of plastic fast, and even with all of my worn insulation, my muscles and joints were feeling rather stiff. Thankfully, I had managed to avoid frostbite, but this would have to be the last time I sleep on the ground. Without carpenter skills or proper tools, the safer option of building platforms in the woods did not seem feasible, especially given the time constraint I am under to cover as much distance as possible before the authorities realise that I have no intention of showing up.

After gnawing on some near-frozen bread and salami, I hauled my bike back onto the highway and started biking again. My legs were already full of lactic acid and they hurt, but sheer desperation kept me going forward, even if my pace was slower than what I had hoped for. Occasionally, a few cars would pass by, but all seemed to have more important concerns than paying attention to what I was doing. One hour later, I stumbled upon a makeshift campsite next to a gas station. I stopped and listened for footsteps or other signs of life, but all I could hear was heavy snoring from a tent. I checked out his supplies and noticed a portable gas burner.

Normally, I would be above stealing, but I have not had a warm meal in days, and being able to warm up sounds like winning the jackpot at this point. I inched closer, hyper-aware of the sound every step makes, but eventually I got close enough to reach it. I snatched the burner, ran back to my bike, and cycled away to the sound of tired profanities fading away.

25/11/2025 [2 PM]

I need to find more food. The supply bag did not last as long as I thought it would, presumably due to my massively increased activity level. The good news is that the border is not far beyond this city. Crossing it should relieve me from the immediate threat of being caught, but that is still not far enough from the fighting. I wonder what's going on in the Baltics at the moment, since I have been totally disconnected from the rest of the world.

While grocery shopping, the temptation to save my cash for a rainier day and secure my food with a five-finger discount was extremely difficult to ignore, but I figured getting caught would bring me unwanted attention. Cycling past the law enforcement and local reservists still made me uneasy, as their eyes lingered on me for a moment too long.

Better stop with the paranoia, that's not helpful at all! The deadline to seek assistance for transportation back is today, and since I have not used any devices or otherwise left a paper trail hinting at my surroundings, the authorities should not suspect trouble just yet.

26/11/2025 [2 AM]

The good news is, I made it across the border, and I have found a cave to rest in for the night. The bad news is, since the border was along a large river, I had to choose between risking being identified and swimming in freezing cold water. The flame of the gas burner keeps my toes from falling off, but judging by how badly my teeth are clattering, I am developing hypothermia. The flame of the gas burner is enchanting, its dance carrying a message in a language I do not understand.

I passed out for a moment and woke up to the flame gone and the air tasting weird. Exhausted, I opened my eyes, only to see a mystifying sight. A girl, formed of smoke, was staring at me.

“Why are you here?” she asked, “why willingly choose cowering in the dark?”

None of your business, I have plenty of reasons that I do not need to explain to you. Go away. I wave the knife in her general vicinity, to no effect.

“Let me guess what you are afraid of. Death and discomfort? And here you are, voluntarily on the brink of the former, while your entire journey here has been anything but comfortable”, she retorted, trying to catch my eye, while I was trying to hide from her piercing gaze.

I know what war is like, and I know my chances of survival when drafted would be nonexistent. The greatest contribution I could realistically make is taking a hit meant for someone else. At least I am smart enough not to march to a certain death or pretend everything is fine until war knocks on my door.

“How brave. Shivering alone in a cave, assigning superiority to yourself, based on what exactly? You and the willfully ignorant are the same in that you do not dare take on what fate has assigned to be your burden”, she says and pauses before continuing, “is nothing except your own survival worth fighting for?”

Last time I checked, dead people do not fight. Sighing, the girl dissipated, and everything faded to black.

“Ah, too bad the rest of it is smudged, I wanted to know what happens next, sir”, said the young man clad in camouflage.

“Nonsense, son, you already know the story. He was found and returned home soon after, thanks to that ‘Eye’ surveillance system. That victory did not feel sweet for long, as soon after it was discovered that the ‘Eye’ was used as a backdoor to continue destabilising our critical infrastructures”, the older commander replied.

“As soon as we got power back, we turned the tide... Anyhow, what should we do with this? It’s the only thing he left behind”, says the young man.

“Toss it. He is gone, let the family think of him as a hero.”