

Every peaceful moment in Kyiv is a miracle. If only there were more



[David Crowe](#), SMH/The Age, September 17,

Kyiv: I'm at a cafe on a busy street where the locals are walking quickly to work on a slightly chilly morning. I've found a comfortable seat, ordered a flat white and decided to write about the things people never see in all the grim photographs of wartime destruction in Ukraine and its capital.

So, I am writing about a city full of life, even as the people here confront so much death.

I'm near the historic centre of Kyiv at a cafe that is part of the Idealist chain, which does a very good trade in matcha lattes. An artistic neon light decorates the ceiling. People queue at the counter in their business dress: a woman in a soft pink suit, a man in a freshly ironed white shirt. I'm shamed by the dress standards in this neighbourhood.

For a moment, I can imagine a community at peace.

At nine o'clock, however, the background music cuts out, and a woman sitting near me rises to her feet. The room goes quiet, and most of us follow her in standing for a minute's silence for the country's fallen soldiers. This happens every morning across the country, although people vary in their commitment to the ceremony. When it ends, people just get on with their day.



David Crowe video:59

Ukraine's incredible resilience. This Kyiv petrol station was struck by a Russian drone. It's still open for business.

And that is the paradox of this city. The war is all around us, and yet people will not let it crush them. There is pride in the small things, like turning up to a meeting in clothes fit for Paris, with hair perfect. Or putting fresh flowers on display. Or sweeping the streets every morning.

The constant presence of the war seems to lead Ukrainians to savour every peaceful moment all the more. Last night, I saw young people gathered in a park to catch up over a few drinks. Yesterday, I saw children bouncing off each other during playtime at a library. One day earlier, I caught a glimpse of a regular gathering where kids dance to pop music in a plaza. These ordinary moments seem extraordinary in a city under attack.

My time in Ukraine is all about interviewing people dealing with immense hardship and incredible stress, but there are moments between interviews to join in the life of the city. It helps that I met Julian Knysh, an Australian-Ukrainian filmmaker who has lived in Kyiv for the past four years. He took me to [Sens](#), a bookshop cafe humming with activity. I loved the way the cafe was the heart of a thriving social network.

Knysh tells me there is a “choiceless determination” to live life despite the war.

“There is enormous pain and at the same time great joy in celebrating a song, a theatre production that goes ahead (even if interrupted) and the simple everyday moments of connection,” he says.

As an example, he recounts a performance he saw by the Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan that was interrupted by an air-raid alert. Everyone moved to the basement. When Zhadan asked if they wanted him to resume, the crowd said yes. He continued the performance underground.

I don't write about this sense of joy to distract from the terror of the war. In fact, the beautiful moments I see in Kyiv only heighten my horror at the drone and missile attacks. If all we see of a people are the grim faces in the footage of blackened buildings, then we really don't see them at all.

At Sens, I also met Anastasiya Byesyedina, another Australian Ukrainian. She's a political scientist with a PhD in international relations who has lived here since 2022, and we spoke by phone in June for an article about the Russian [drone attack](#) on the historic Pechersk Lavra monastery.



Europe correspondent David Crowe in Kyiv with Australian Ukrainians Anastasiya Byesyedina, a political scientist, and Julian Knysh, a filmmaker. David Crowe

After the bookshop, we visited the monastery with Knysh and found that reconstruction was well under way. Again, there is that determination to recover from every strike.

Byesyedina is worried about the coming winter. She lives in an apartment where the inside temperature fell to minus 10 degrees last winter.

“We didn’t have water or access to electricity for about two months,” she tells me. “It was quite difficult to seek any help from the government at different levels.” Instead, help came when a volunteer veteran group arrived at the tower block with generators, hot water and tents with showers.

Another winter like that could turn into a humanitarian crisis, simply because so many families cannot afford to repair their homes or flee to safer places.

“You have many families who are living in apartment buildings that have no electricity,” says Byesyedina. “Their windows are pretty much plastered up with cardboard because that’s the only alternative.”

Needless to say, Ukraine deserves better.

I wanted a peaceful morning for this city. You can no doubt guess that we did not get one.

The air alert went off at 5.24am, then the all-clear came at 6.03am. Another alert sounded at 7.49am, followed by an all-clear at 8.44am. While writing this, I heard another alert at 9.38am. Then came the distant fire of air defence.

All were yellow alerts, the colour for drones rather than ballistic missiles. I later learnt that two petrol stations had been struck, the latest in a deadly pattern of recent attacks.

Several people were injured; one has been killed. This is the reality of Kyiv. Every peaceful moment is a miracle. If only there were more.