

Lights Out: Call Signs

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SUMMARY

“... hauntingly poetic in effect ...” (Radio Times) A man, a Mouse and a morse key: the story of a radio amateur in Kyiv as the Russian invasion unfolds. When his wife and two children flee Kyiv to escape the war, Volodymyr Gurtovy (call sign US7IGN) stays behind in their apartment with only his radios and the family hamster, Mouse, for company. Prohibited by martial law from sending messages, he becomes a listener, intercepting conversations of Russian pilots and warning his neighbours to hide in shelters well before the sirens sound. During air raids, he hides behind the thickest wall in his apartment, close to his radios, their flickering amber lights opening a window to another world. A story of sending and receiving signals from within the darkness of the Kyiv blackout. “Truly special ... Seek it out.” (Patricia Nicol, The Times)



[SFX - a forest, full of life]

Volodymyr

Before the war I would go out into the pine forest with a sleeping bag in the back of my car and a fishing rod, a simple fishing rod.

[SFX - the buzzing of a fly]

And I would use the fishing rod to cast my simple wire antennas high up into the tallest pine trees, almost into the sky

[SFX - an antenna hurled into the sky, catching on the branch of a tree]

The most beautiful antennas I ever made in the forest are inspired by spider webs. They look like giant webs of silken threads strung through the treetops.

[SFX - morse code swirls into the landscape of the forest]

Strangers can't believe that I have such a big fishing pole and no fish at all.

[MUSIC - a gentle drone descends like dusk in the forest]

And when I come back to the city, people often ask me, where are your fish? Sometimes my friends, my family like to ask me every time where is my fish.

[SFX - the delicate whirring of a fishing line]

But I wasn't out there to catch fish.

[SFX - radio transmissions begin to emerge]

I was looking to catch distant radio waves.

[SFX - voices from the radio start to recite their call signs, swirling through the world of the forest]

It will be better people thinking you're a fisherman, than that you're a spy. It is a big difference. So sometimes I even have to catch a fish to not attract attention to me. But then I like to put it back into the water because I love fish, but I not like to kill them. They're so beautiful. I prefer to catch radio waves.

[SFX - morse code, birdsong]

And when I turn on my radio and start sending out my call sign, I become a woodpecker tapping out messages in Morse Code.

My web of fishing line antennas hung in the trees allows me to make contact with other radio amateurs from all over the world.

[SFX - call signs push through radio static]

Over time, we get to know each other. A familiar call sign appears on the air.

We have conversations in Morse Code from treetop to treetop. It's magic, truly magic.

[SFX - air raid sirens, dissolving into the atmosphere of Volodymyr's home, dogs howling in tune to the sirens]

Now I'm sitting here in my apartment in the centre of Kyiv, in the centre of war and explosions and missiles. Again, we have no electricity here. Now most of the city is in the dark. I never went to shelters. No radios in shelters and no antennas. You can't hear anything underground. You are like a blind man. And it is very difficult for me. I prefer to stay in my apartment close to my radios.

[SFX - clicking of a switch on a radio, a sea of gentle static]

Another empty band. I can't hear any stations at all. Strange. Nothing. One weak signal only...

My name is Volodymyr Gurtovy, Włod for short. And my call sign is United Sierra Seven Italy Golf Norway. I used to play with radio and make my antennas just for fun, but when the war began, the radio became my lifeline.

[SFX - Volodymyr reaching across the airwaves, his voice submerged in a sea of static. A woman responds]

First day of the Russian invasion before my family left Kyiv, my wife and I agreed to communicate with each other by radio. We decided to use ham radio.

I have to use my Morse key, I think. Wait a second... yes!

[SFX - picking up a metal key]

[MUSIC - a gentle warm tone, pulsing like a ghostly morse code, embraces the scene]

I have too many radios here and just one key, my favourite key. We can't imagine what will be there, if we lost our internet connection or phone connection, if she lost connection with me, I will transmit my call sign.

I will try. Oh, you can hear...

[SFX – Volodymyr taps out his call sign in morse code]

If I transmit my call sign using morse code, it is enough to understand that I am alive and able to transmit. Morse code is very slow, but you can say a lot with a little. Sometimes you can say more with a few dots and dashes. It can say more than many words.

[SFX - the music and morse code are suddenly swallowed in an explosion that feels like the rumble of thunder. A siren passes in the distance, urgent voices sputter out of radios. A car alarm is triggered by the blast. Morning birdsong.]

The first explosions were so hard and so close that you can feel it touch your skin. When we woke up at five o'clock on the 24th of February, we feel it. Me and my wife and my two children woke up all together on one second. And we say, Do you hear it? Do you feel it? What's going on? It was so sudden...

[SFX - a nearly inaudible voice speaks beneath a sea of radio static. A British newsreader talks about the Russian invasion of Ukraine]

I had a very bad feeling, I think it was about one week before the invasion. So we were prepared to leave Kyiv but we weren't ready for missiles. But we stayed calm.

[SFX - more news streams through static out of the radio. A Ukrainian news broadcast is interrupted by an air raid alert. A distant air raid siren moves through the background]

I decided to stay in Kyiv. My wife was against that idea. I understand her. It was very hard to say to her to bring the kids and go away. We discussed this situation all morning, but then it all happened in five minutes. And she left just with two suitcases and two children.

[SFX - a radio marks the hour. A drink pours into a cup. The siren continues.]

It was a very hard decision to us, but they had to do it because we have the same situation in Donbas in 2014 and we know what war looks like. So we decided that they will go to Poland. I stayed behind here in Kyiv in our small fifth floor apartment, in the centre of Kyiv, with only the family hamster and my radios for company.

[SFX - sirens dissolve into radio signals as Volodymyr searches for frequencies]

I want to hear someone else. Only noise, only interference. Okay, go another...

[MUSIC - warm synths slide underneath the scene]

[SFX - radio static, a fragment of a voice]

On the first days, there are no cars, no people in the streets at all. So it was a silent, dead city. You can imagine, Kyiv is a capital, it's a very big city. It's a very noisy city and first day on the war, it was empty. Even birds not singing. And you heard every sound and everyone tried to be silent.

[MUSIC - the low warmth of the synth evaporates for a moment as a more anxious high pitched tone reverberates across its surface]

[SFX - voice through radio - *"There have been very loud explosions. You might hear them now, one after the other. They seem to be distant..."*]

You have to close your windows, because of shells, missiles and explosions. They say you have to close your windows but when you close your window it is hard to hear something and I used one window in my bedroom. I open it and it was my ability to listen.

[SFX - the quiet hum of the outside world through a window. A bird]

I'm sitting on the floor in the hallway and listening to sounds from my bedroom window.

[SFX - a sea of radio static starts to gently rise]

Yeah, it was a compromise for me to be in the safest place in my apartment and to stay able to hear something. It is very hard to say, but it is true, when you're afraid you still want to know what's going on.

[MUSIC ends]

[SFX - gunfire echoes across the city, caught in the air]

I'm not in army and I'm not fighting but I can still help support territorial defence in Kyiv. **[SFX - footsteps walking through the city, gentle birdsong]**

I can help to train people for radio communication, I can help people to repair radio, to create emergency communication network.

[Voices talk with each other in Ukrainian about repairing a radio]

I use my roof to set up my antenna and it works very well, even to listen to Russian pilots or soldiers.

Wait a second I will try to tune it...

[SFX - a radio coming to life, empty airwaves]

You can hear tone signal...

Once I made a radio antenna from steel bed springs. You just need to have a tuner, because it allows you to tune any metal thing, even a bed frame and you can't believe it but that can pick up radio signals up to 2000 kilometres away.

Even when it is dark in Kyiv, I can still listen to the sky just using my simple homemade antenna.

[MUSIC - warm tones, low and high slide across the surface of the radio static]

It sounds like a crazy woodpecker... hmm this is interesting. Oh! It works!

I made it from junk. I used little pieces of aluminium pipes and I put it on my balcony.

[SFX - a dial turns round and round]

It looks like an old TV aerial so no one would know it is an antenna.

[SFX - voices emerge from the swirls of radio static]

When I made it, I didn't think that it could be so useful during the war.

[SFX - voices emerge from the swirls of radio static]

I'm listening to the Russian Air Force radio signal. Their communications are unencrypted. I can clearly hear Russian pilots at least 200 kilometres away. I know when they fly, and I can warn my friends or my neighbours and tell them to go to the shelter.

[SFX - walking through the stairwell of the apartment building. An air raid siren carving through the background]

I live in an old building on the fifth floor. No lift. It takes me several minutes to get to the street, so I just hide behind a thick wall in my apartment. But with my radios.

[SFX - voices emerge from radio. The air raid siren returns]

Maybe it's not smart. Maybe it's crazy. But I did so and I'm still alive.

[SFX - unlocking the door. Morse code]

[MUSIC - a warm pulsing tone]

Sometimes it is hard to open the door without light but I get used to it. So...

[SFX – Volodymyr greets Mysha - his son's hamster]

[MUSIC ends]

When my family left Kyiv, they left me with my son's hamster, Mysha - Mouse, in English.

[SFX - Volodymyr talks to Mysha. The sound of the hamster quietly nibbling on sunflower seeds]

Sometimes I give her cheese and she likes a little piece of toast. So every morning we have breakfast together.

And I never thought how it will be important to have Mouse, my little hamster, with me in the middle of the war. I think she became a real member of my family when I lost other members of my family.

[SFX - a computer beeps to life. Włod talks with his wife in Ukrainian.]

They are in Poland now and my children went to school there... I miss them very, very much, every day I'm thinking about them. When we have internet and electricity, we have a call. They often ask me, how is Mouse, how is she doing and sometimes they ask about hamster before they ask me how I am here. **[Laughs]** It is very good to hear that our Mouse she's good, that she's happy. It distracts from the war and it makes us happy in some way.

[SFX - the conversation dissolves into the swirl of radio waves, filling Volodymyr's apartment. A Russian voice emerges from the radio]

Day after day, night after night, Mouse spins on her wheel. I spin the dials of my radios, spinning and listening, waiting out this war together.

[SFX - different radios crank into action. An old song, from the 30s or 40s, waltzes out of one of them]

When I was a child I have an old lamp radio of my grandfather. He allowed me to listen it and it was magic to see the glowing tubes and smell the dusty smell. And I was never thinking how it will be important to me in my life. And when the war began, it allows me not only to have another different source of information. When you listen to a radio station from another country, you could imagine that you're also there - it allows you to rest a little.

[SFX - a switch clicks. A jazz band from the same era cuts through the dreamy singing with an invitation to dance. Crackling with static]

Here is fuel shortage - we have no fuel, because I don't know why - we all know why! **[Laughs]**. Today's 29th of April, yes, two months since invasion and missiles continue to fly over the entire country. There's still war.

[SFX - radio stops]

A good thing is that one man asked me to fix his radio - another radio will be fixed and alive.

[SFX - a dial turning, radio repair sounds building into a gentle rhythm beneath Włod. The sharp fizz of his soldering iron as the radios are repaired]

I've been running a small radio surgery here in my apartment for my friends, for my neighbours and I'm lucky to have enough spare parts for radios here. And it helps me to do repairing.

[SFX - the rhythm ends. Gentle clunking, exploring the insides of radios]

One of my grandfathers also knew how to repair old receivers, so sometimes I helped him. I got to know what was inside the radio and I liked it very much. You can imagine how it felt to be a little boy putting your own hands inside a radio.

[SFX - the whirring dial returns, building a rhythm again. The fizz of heat, crackles and sparks]

It was an old tube radio - high voltage - and I still have little scars on my fingers. But I wasn't afraid again and again putting my hands inside the radio. When those old tubes are warm, the dust on them smells like good whiskey, old good whiskey. I want to advise you to try to smell it, if you still can find this old radio somewhere.

[SFX - rain washes away the radio surgery]

Rain started again...

[SFX - thunder rumbles]

...oh, another thunderstorm. Now, it sounds exactly like our air defence work when they shot at missiles in the sky. It sounds exactly the same. Exactly same as thunder. The thunder still makes me nervous because now, after more than three months of war, I don't like any loud sounds and explosions. Sometimes I just can't hear difference between thunder or shelling or explosions. It is very hard for many people here. Maybe after the war we will learn again to hear thunder, to hear sounds and not think about war. When the drops of rain fall on my roof, sometimes I'm afraid. Sometimes I don't understand what is it - maybe it is shelling, maybe it is missiles, maybe it is something wrong. And you don't know what to do. It is some kind of panic, I think. But when you wake up, you understand that it's just rain.

[SFX - rain hammering on a rooftop]

Sometimes in the empty apartment, my hamster - Mouse - I wake up in the middle of the night from the sounds of her wheel and when you're asleep in your dreams, sounds of her wheel can seem like it's something else. You hear maybe sounds of wheels of tanks on the streets.

[SFX - rain continues. Volodymyr whispers to Mouse in Ukrainian]

One time she was doing something strange with her teeth and it sounds like a Trata Tata Tata Tata. It is another different sound and I can't recognise what is it and I go through apartment and looking for something wrong, something strange, but when I make one step, she stopped. And when I go away, she started chewing again. I spent maybe three hours to understand what it was. And it was her, it was Mouse.

[SFX - a tone slides through the drip drip of rainfall outside the apartment. A radio cranks into action]

My crazy tuner...

[SFX - radio static]

This is my crazy tuner doing his job. It tunes now this ham radio frequency. So now I can transmit here.

[SFX - morse code, radio transmissions]

Hotel Sierra Three November Bravo Radio - a Thailand station. He is very loud, here in Kyiv. And it is my first "QSO" (contact) after three months of silence.

Ham radio here is something like your usual cup of tea maybe. To be on air, it is a little piece of normal life, I think. It is all about morale and your feelings and it is very important in case of war.

Yes, we still have problems. We have air raids here. But when I hear the radio, I can't hear those awful alarms. Maybe it will be dangerous to miss it. But after three months of those sirens, you can hear something different. It is like a window to another world.

[MUSIC - warm tones drip into the scene]

[SFX - the world transforms, returning to the lush birdsong of the forest. The music melts into morse code, dissolving into static and voices]

Hmm. The Crimean Bridge has blown up this morning. I don't want to celebrate it but it is very good news for us. Maybe this is some kind of Rubicon. Maybe war not last long now.

[SFX - the gentle beep of a computer melts away the radio. Volodymyr is talking with his wife. Their conversation runs beneath his interview]

Now it is autumn and the war is not end. And it is very dangerous in Kyiv, still dangerous because there are many missiles hit every day. We decided that my family will spend the winter in Poland and we hope maybe even in the spring the war will end and we can live together.

[SFX - Volodymyr and his wife speak. Static rises up to swallow the sounds of the computer. A harsh buzzing - melts into multiple voice. Fragments of the news.]

I'm in the dark again. I only have the radio here.

[MUSIC - warm, slow music floats under the surface of Volodymyr's speech. A gentle bass walks quietly in its lower registers]

When it is blackout in Kyiv and when I'm looking out the window I can see black, black hole, big black hole. And if there is no clouds, I can clearly see stars. When it is too much light in the city in the night, you don't pay attention to the stars. But when it is a blackout you can see stars. It is so unusual. You can see a very bright moon and sometimes you can see very little glowing red dots on the streets, when people smoke. It is impossible to see it when it is bright lights on the streets. But in the blackout you can pay attention to very tiny things, to the tiny details, and it is a new universe on your streets.

[SFX - radio crackles quietly, a voice or two, before it falls into silence]

You can hear more details. There is no noise. On the air you can hear radio clear. You can find good things - you can even enjoy it.

[SFX - Volodymyr speaking into radio. The occasional gentle burst of static]

Now it is very cold outside. All my windows are closed. But on the air all the windows are open now.

[SFX - voices reply through radios. A sea of static rises up and dissolves]

I've heard about several Ukrainian radio amateurs who died during this war. When a radio amateur dies, we call them 'silent key' because when someone dies, his morse key falls silent, but his signals continue to live.

Some signals go out to space and fly forever, I think, and maybe sometimes someone on another planet can hear your signal. And we believe that while our signals fly away for a million years, we still live in these signals, because it is part of me...

Like a form of eternal life, I think, hmm.

[MUSIC dissolves. A single, delicate tone - like a flash of starlight - slips the scene into silence]