

LILIYANA GADYKA,

The Price of War: On (Un)certainty, Power and Self-Deception

Inhoud

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Chapter 1. The first meeting

It all began with a date in February 2010. She was the sister of a Dutch Miss Universe contestant – and to be honest: even more beautiful than her sister. She deeply impressed me. We went out for dinner at the Olympia restaurant in Rotterdam. What has stayed with me most from that evening is not even what we ate, but how time flew.

Because we were talking so intently, we lost track of time and the staff remained passively present long after closing time without warning us. It was not until half past midnight that we realized we were the only ones still at the table. She told me about her ex-boyfriend, with whom she had recently ended her relationship. A man with several Grand Cafés, a huge house in Brasschaat and a fleet of cars to die for.

I had nothing but a bicycle. As she spoke, I knew enough. I was not in that financial league. Not at that moment. I was slowly recovering from a divorce three years earlier that had left me completely destitute. A daylight robbery – at least that is how it felt at the time. In the early days, in 2004–2005, there had been times when I literally had to live on one euro a day.

But I survived, thanks in part to my elderly mother who supported me in everything. What does not kill you makes you stronger. Many men fared worse than I did and had to sleep under a bridge or worse. I had also survived because, during that same period, I had been living for three years with one of the most beautiful and kindest women I have ever known. Nurse Monique.

She gave me stability and, looking back, had been my lifeline. But as is so often the case: what saves you at a certain stage of your life is not necessarily meant to last. After three years, our relationship had reached a dead end. No drama, no major arguments, just a hard landing – but also the overwhelming feeling that it was over between us.

That we both needed to go our separate ways. I have never believed in possessiveness within relationships. If you absolutely love someone, you must set them free. Not as a cliché, but as a reality. Around that time, I saw a short clip from the Bhagavad Gita on YouTube, and it really resonated with me.

The essence was that you own nothing and no one in life, and that everything is on loan to you. It is no different in love. Everything in life is merely temporary. That thought stuck with me, perhaps because it rang true. Monique wanted to buy a bigger house, to take the next binding step. But to me, that did not feel like progress. On the contrary.

Rather, it felt like a form of stagnation, a life that was already predetermined. I saw buying a house as a guarantee of a monotonous life, a mind-numbing rut. A kind of mental prison, which to me felt like a waiting room for death. I had three incredibly young daughters, aged 8, 6 and 3, whom I looked after for the most part during all the holidays and weekends.

They were my priority and came first. Monique was devoted to her two Sphynx cats. She was clearly unable to cope with the responsibility of my children – who, incidentally, behaved impeccably when with her – and suffered from constant chronic migraines. She herself had never had or wanted children, which says it all.

That does not necessarily make someone a bad person, on the contrary. It shows self-awareness. I, too, initially had no desire to have children, but when I did have them later in life, I found it wonderful. Monique lived in her own world and had her own priorities.

We no longer fitted into the same story. We had become extras in the wrong film. Young children are so lovely because they are still uninhibited, playful and usually completely honest. Not yet fully socialized. After that, a subtle process of transformation and socialization begins at school (unlearning natural behavior), and that does not always result in the same perfectly honest young adults.

I was the only son and had four older sisters. From the end of my late teens, I was already living with the doppelgänger of the singer Sade. She was three and a half years younger than me. Back then, nobody made a fuss about it. When I was still a small child, my father would often spend evenings peering through the curtains as my sisters were brought home by prospective brothers-in-law.

In his eyes, no bloke was good enough for his daughters. And after four decades of reflection, it turned out he was absolutely right. Only one was any good, and he was driven into the madhouse by my youngest sister when he was in his mid-forties.

Relationships can be a blessing, but they can also be a curse or even prove fatal. I never adopted my father's protective attitude towards my daughters. Only one passed his 'inspection.' This Cor was a very handsome and kind chap who served in the air force and, to a certain extent, resembled Elvis Presley.

I still remember him coming to our house in a light blue uniform that made quite an impression. My parents gave me complete freedom in everything, and I did the same with my children. Yet all three have turned out well so far. I never interfere in their private lives either.

Not out of disinterest, but out of trust, and besides, I intuitively prefer not to stir up potential hornets' nests. Furthermore, looking back, I have put myself at the service of others' interests too much and too often.

Giving and taking is better and healthier. It has been my turn for a few years now. This short sentence best sums up my current mindset. You might well ask yourself whether the importance of a 'good upbringing' is not exaggerated and overrated. Most people are inherently good-natured.

Among other things, I graduated in criminal law. But I think fundamentally differently about crime and criminals than most mainstream criminologists. Like the so-called abolitionists, who often wrongly label criminals as pitiable and attribute their misbehavior to a bad upbringing (in psychological jargon, nurture) or the flawed environment in which they grew up.

I attach far greater weight to hereditary factors (in technical jargon, nature) which largely determine human nature. Top footballers in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro demonstrate that, with talent and willpower, one can rise above even those criminal neighborhoods. A person's nature is unchangeable, except after a highly traumatic experience that prompts a fundamental re-evaluation.

I would have been completely unsuited to the profession of criminal defense lawyer. All defendants are innocent or pretend to be. I generally regard criminal defense lawyers as semantic twisters, or rather professional liars who twist the law and turn it on its head, regardless of the suffering of the victims and their bereaved families.

I look down on them, except for the few who are good and honest, such as Mr. Geert-Jan Knoops, for whom I have profound respect. In a constitutional state, one cannot, unfortunately, do without them. After all, every defendant has the right to a professional defense.

Some professions are functionally indispensable, such as gravediggers, refuse collectors and, consequently, criminal defense lawyers. However, it is the middle group that commands my greatest sympathy and respect. At the age of thirty-four, I served for several years on the board of ROTEB and as project leader for the AVR-ROTEB merger.

ROTEB was founded in the late 19th century and enjoyed great authority in the sector, both nationally and internationally. The company did much more than just collecting rubbish. If the rubbish is not collected for two weeks, you will understand why this essential profession is undervalued in terms of social status.

It simply becomes unbearable. Is this a paradox or not? Indispensable, yet with the image of an Indian pariah. That evening at the Olympia restaurant, I sat opposite a woman who seemed to have it all. Beauty, charisma, intelligence, but above all, charm. In the presence of that Hindustani beauty, I was not my usual self.

I behaved a little submissively, looked up to her too much and talked too much and too fast. I always think at lightning speed. When I discuss a seriously complex issue with someone or a group and they are, so to speak, still at the letter A or B, I am already at the letter Y or Z and have all the conclusions and various solutions ready in my mind.

During my first proper job at the Economic Affairs Department of Rotterdam City Council, I taught myself in that political environment not to let that behavior show too much, unintentionally, because it makes many people feel insecure, unsettled, or they do not understand a word of what I'm saying.

I also liked to give councilors the feeling that they had produced a clever idea. I knew better. Because of my inner, restless impatience, I never became a teacher, even though I do hold a first-degree teaching qualification in economics and law.

I love that subject, alongside numerous other disciplines. Occasional guest lectures or presentations to large groups are right up my street. But the daily grind and going through the same old routine is deadly for me. Nobody is 100% perfect, and you cannot fundamentally change yourself.

But at the very least, you must try to learn the art of self-reflection to recognize your pitfalls. The ancient wise Greeks summed this up with the motto: Know Thyself. That evening with the Hindu woman, I searched for words unnoticed and tried to make an impression.

That backfired because, all the men were already doing the same thing every day. I was not used to that myself. Normally, I was more confident. All my life, incidentally, I had been surrounded by extremely attractive women. That helped shape me. I was the only son with four older sisters. My eldest sister looked exactly like Elizabeth Taylor.

The others were hardly any less stunning. Young, horny lads would lie waiting like Labradors with their tongues hanging out at the door of our rented flat at Stoutenburg 7c in Rotterdam-Zuid. By the age of five, I was already madly in love with a girl called Constance, a headstrong, beautiful blonde who certainly was not shy about speaking her mind.

She flatly refused to play with doctors and nurses with me. I am sometimes surprised by the current overprotective behavior of neurotic, nervous parents when young children innocently explore their first crushes. That is just natural behavior. In my day, we did not need lessons on spring fever.

We were more likely to be the ones teaching our parents how things really worked. Ever since I was able to think for myself, I have felt particularly drawn to fun, free-spirited, lively, energetic, sparkling girls with a sense of humor. I still remember them exactly by name and what they were like.

That sort of woman is a particularly good person. Feminine energy is fundamentally different from masculine energy. Yin and Yang, you know. From an early age, I had relationships with women who stood out – not just because of their looks, but because of their presence.

I was used to beauty. My ex-wife was also one of the most beautiful women in the Netherlands; she was Serbian. We had a wonderful, long relationship lasting almost 14 years. But every relationship, even the best, has an expiry date. In the end, the relationship had become toxic, and our once-perfect communication had turned into an exchange of misunderstandings.

That is always down to both parties. I am not resentful, and once the dust of misplaced hatred had settled, I realized that the break-up would have been inevitable anyway. Many couples get stuck in a meaningless relationship once things have gone sour. Often out of fear, habit, cowardice and a lack of resolve.

Or they cheat and ‘fool around’ on the side. I never did that and always chose, once a relationship threatened to become unbearable, to embrace my freedom and move on to the next true love. I was, and still am, what some might call serially monogamous. There was something mesmerizing about this Hindu woman.

And she sensed that I was not fully present. Or perhaps that I wanted too much, too eagerly. Either way, it remained at that single encounter. In hindsight, which made sense. I was not sufficiently balanced yet. Neither financially nor mentally. Besides, she and I talked too much about exes, and when you do that, you are still too consumed by them.

But that evening did leave behind something lasting that has incredibly enriched my life since. A thought that would not leave me alone afterwards. She had told me that her ex would lock himself away in his study for hours on end, chatting with Russian and Ukrainian women. I could not imagine it. I had never met such an enchantingly beautiful woman as her – a Hindu goddess, a Lakshmi.

Why would you go and chat with Russian and Ukrainian women when you have such a stunning woman by your side, I wondered to myself? But my curiosity had been piqued. At some point, I decided to take a look at myself. Curiosity killed the cat. And at first, I could not believe what I saw.

Women from Russia and Ukraine – every single one exceptionally attractive, highly educated, talented. Too good to be true. I seriously thought it was a fraud. That behind those profiles were men – a certain Igor and Boris – who were fleecing Western men financially.

That sort of practice still exists worldwide. One regularly reads stories in the mainstream media about a lonely man or woman who has been swindled and left completely ruined by romance frauds. Dating sites are little more than clever revenue models. And yet... I went exploring back then. My curiosity had been piqued, and it outweighed my mistrust.

Together with my best friend Frank, the brother I had never had, I decided to take the plunge and make the trip to Kiev. Partly because the quality of the nightlife in Rotterdam had hit a low at the time. We were not looking for anything specific. Intuitively, we felt there was something there that we did not yet understand. In May 2010, we boarded a plane bound for Ukraine. In some respects, this experience resembled the film **Coming to America** starring Eddie Murphy. We struck gold, because Ukraine in general, and cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odessa in particular, were, in a positive sense, unlike any other Western European cities or countries.

In terms of entertainment and culture, they were unique. Kiev, in particular, was a vibrant city, brimming with positive energy and a magnificent atmosphere. This city would capture my heart forever, only to break it years later.

Chapter 2 Kiev

We began our journey in Vinnitsa, a city where the former president Poroshenko had once been mayor. We were driven from Kiev to this city of 371,000 inhabitants in an old, rattling, rusty Lada. We only stayed there for a few days, as our real destination was Kiev.

We saw it as a mental warm-up. We had in touch with a woman from a dating agency via the internet, which is why we started in that city. But we soon realized that dating was not for us. We wanted to ‘meet and get to know women in the wild.’ We explored the city a little first.

We went to a museum, which we always did as a matter of course and still do when we are active on holiday. This city, founded in the 14th century, turned out to have a long yet at the same time dark history. I am referring in particular to the Second World War. Prior to that, Vinnitsa had often been the battleground between Poland, the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire, with much wrangling and serious wars.

In 1793, this oblast – another word for region or province in our parlance – was definitively incorporated into the Russian Empire. During the Second World War, half of all Jewish inhabitants, totaling 34,000, were shot by so-called Einsatzgruppen with the enthusiastic assistance of Ukrainian militias.

The remaining half managed to flee just in time or were conscripted into the Red Army. Of those 17,000, not many will have survived the war, as the losses on the Soviet side were astronomical. At least 27.5 million. The leading American military expert, Colonel Douglas MacGregor – a military expert whom I hold in extremely high regard, also as a person – even speaks of thirty-nine million civilian and military casualties.

He bases this, amongst other things, on KGB archives that were opened after 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hitler had had his temporary headquarters near that town, in a forest fifteen kilometers away, for eight months during the period 1941–1942.

The next day, Frank and I visited a cemetery for fallen soldiers. All young men aged between 18 and 22. Horrific! It left us speechless. I was overcome by a deep sense of sadness. My heart cried deep inside. How truly monstrous people can be. What a loss, also for the countless bereaved families.

The crimes of the Ukrainian Nazis during the Second World War were so horrific that the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, banned this Ukrainian army group at the request of a high-ranking SS general. I will not mention a single concrete example in this book, as that would be too shocking and sickening, and this book is about love and self-reflection. In Vinnitsa, we went to a club called Farida Piazza on Friday evening.

The music and atmosphere were fantastic. The drinks were cheap. Stunningly beautiful women would occasionally ‘accidentally’ bump into us with their firm, pointed breasts and realized we were exotic types from the ‘rich West.’

We were a head taller than the men there. Frank's eye was caught by an extremely attractive, sturdy woman with red hair in her twenties. She had vanished just as quickly as she had appeared. Years later, Frank was still talking about her. What is enchantment that makes it such a special phenomenon? In 2012, at Borispol Airport in Kiev, I saw an incredibly beautiful blonde stewardess with lightly tanned skin, large brown eyes and dressed in a cobalt-blue outfit.

Those few seconds are etched in my memory forever. I nearly fainted. This phenomenon originates in our early childhood or is locked away in our DNA. Who knows. A chick regards the very first creature it sees that takes it under its wing and cares for it – a mother duck, cat or human – as its protector, and that remains the case.

When I am at a big dance party with, say, fifty women who look almost identical, only one stands out within a fraction of a second. Why? How does that mechanism work? Is it the energy she radiates? Her aura? A young Arab man came to warn Frank that the woman in red was an unbelievably bad woman, which only further piqued his interest.

But she slipped away from him. The next day we explored the city a bit more and on Saturday evening we went back to that club. We were not disappointed, because there were more beautiful and energetic women in that club than in the whole of Rotterdam put together. This gave us back that proper nightlife vibe we had been missing so much in the Netherlands for over a year.

After a long weekend, we headed to our real destination, Kiev. We wanted to fall properly in love again after our divorce. Age differences between men and women turned out to be completely irrelevant in that culture, and we felt like we were twenty-five again.

We had boundless energy. This proves that age and old age are mainly in the mind. You are as young as you feel. I still remember a concert by Tina Turner at Ahoy Rotterdam. At the age of sixty, she had the energy and charisma of three young women in their twenties.

The key is both mental and physical: staying as active as possible, eating healthily, not smoking and not taking drugs. Then your telomeres shorten more slowly. I have hardly changed at all since I turned thirty. That is not just the boast of a man in a midlife crisis, but a fact.

From the age of 4 to 20, I was a budding professional footballer. Every day I played football for hours on end with my older friends, every single day. Come rain or shine. At 19, after a match against the Ajax Under-19s, I chose with complete conviction to pursue science and my sweetheart, the Sade lookalike to which I was engaged. I hung up my football boots.

In my dreams, I still scored the most beautiful goals and provided assists. I have sometimes wondered why a brilliant professional footballer is considered too old when he is only thirty-five. Surely you can still be in top condition at a later age.

Isn't it a false assumption, an ingrained habit of stopping for the day as a footballer at 35, or has the sacred fire been extinguished, the pockets filled, and is that the real reason? In 2010 and 2011, we had only been to Kiev for two long weekends. But we had become completely hooked on it. It gave us oceans of positive energy, hope and a dream future.

We had a mission again. After a long weekend, we could live off that for months, and even now, 16 years on, we still reminisce. But by the end of 2010, I realized that Kiev might not be a viable option for me after all. I was working 60 hours a week, had ultimate responsibility for several hundred colleagues, most of whom were highly educated and required a great deal of attention, and I could not be away for long.

That posed too great a risk of disruption in a political environment. Partly for that reason, I stuck around for six months, apparently out of laziness, with a Brazilian woman who lived in my hometown of Rotterdam. An extremely jealous woman. I thanked God on my bare knees that after six months I was rid of her again.

When I was on the loo, she would text me non-stop, asking what I was doing. I could have texted back that I was thinking of her, but I did not. My love for Brazil only recovered in 2023 when I spent a month on holiday in Rio de Janeiro, in Copacabana. When I broke up with her, she pretended to be pregnant with my child.

But for a Michael Kors bag, she was willing to 'have it removed.' When I also offered her a matching wallet from the same brand, her decision was quickly made. Later, I read an article by a well-known Brazilian psychologist, in which she explained that many Brazilian women are pathologically jealous.

The women in Kiev were nothing like that at all and would sometimes bring a friend along to share with us in a threesome. From 2012 onwards, we stayed there more often and for longer periods. From April 2012, I even went there for six weeks straight because I had freed myself from the gloomy political arenas in my country.

I had become a senior civil servant at an early age and, by the age of thirty-six, had risen to the position of deputy city clerk of Rotterdam, at that time still the largest port city in the world. But I was the opposite of a traditional, bureaucratic civil servant, a permanent employee who held things back.

Nor was I a careerist. My promotions happened spontaneously, naturally. I never asked my superiors for a pay rise or a promotion. I was too proud of that. I was always asked to take on a new challenge or role. I simply enjoyed myself immensely and did my absolute best out of a sense of professional ambition to achieve meaning and deliver real added value. I set the bar high for others, but above all for myself.

Do not touch the legal status of the permanent staff who act as brakes, because then they will wake up and the beast within them will be unleashed. Looking back, at the age of 27 I was ‘chosen’ as a reformer, tasked nine years later with modernizing the local authority with over 33,000 employees, and to be honest, I did so with mixed success, through trial and error.

Because civil servants are just like white mice; they multiply at a furious pace, and organizations of this sort are just like Silly Putty. It does not matter how you stretch them. They always return to their original shape. When, in 2004, I had reduced the administrative department – another word for the town hall – by a third together with two colleagues, and I paid a visit again after five years, the workforce had grown by 40% once more.

And money was never, and is never, the real problem. They simply increase local taxes to balance books. A year ago, I received a letter from the same council announcing that paid parking meters were being installed in my neighborhood. The argument was that my neighborhood was too busy due to parkers from outside the area. A highly creative excuse, but it made no sense whatsoever.

The citizen has simply become a stable revenue source, and in the Netherlands, we have an extremely high tax burden and an impressive array of all manner of taxes, levies and import duties. In Kiev, there were no parking meters. Life there was much freer than here, and the people there were much more self-reliant.

Although I spent over 22 years working at the town hall and for various municipal departments with immense pleasure and unprecedented freedom, in all honesty I must say that I did not fit in at all with that bureaucratic culture. For me, the citizens and local businesses were central to my work, but that was often not the case for other colleagues, nor for the local politicians, who, over time, became increasingly frivolous and self-important.

In the end, I could no longer tolerate those people. I was wasting my precious time. In 2011, I drew a definitive line under this career adventure. I should not complain, though, because I was very privileged and had a golden life with an unimaginable—or rather obscene—number of days off each year, partly thanks to the generous parental leave I enjoyed on three separate occasions.

And yet those (semi-)civil servants just keep complaining, whilst most people in the private sector have to work their asses off for much less pay. I estimate unemployment hidden in the public sector at 50%. Is it any wonder, then, that the tax burden in our country is so high?

That 50% mainly concerns so-called ‘bullshit jobs. Jobs which, according to the late professor of cultural anthropology David Graeber, no one would miss if they were scrapped, except for the civil servant in question, who would then really have to get back to work.

This thought alone can lead to anxiety attacks. I have always loved and continue to love challenging work and achieving tangible results – labor ennobles – but these are often not the core competencies valued or even appreciated in such organizations.