The Last Ride

by Vasyl Horbatiuk

For this last bus ride of the year, descending into the depths of evening darkness, only a few people climbed aboard.

Stops came and went in one village, then another, until finally a handful more boarded in the center of the third village. With them came the chill, the scent of wet wind that had been swaying the roadside trees.

"Good evening!" greeted one of the women cheerfully, and he found himself unsure — was her greeting meant for everyone on the bus, or just for him, as he sat almost directly across from the door?

He answered but couldn’t make out the woman’s face: it was obscured by a black hood she wore over her head, and she had already stepped forward to pass her fare to the driver.

The woman in the black jacket confidently took a seat beside him. He looked at her in surprise, but the hood still obscured her face.

“Could it be her?” the thought flickered through his mind.

He didn’t recognize her voice. Could the hood be blocking the sound?

The last time he’d seen her was five years ago, and only from a distance because back then the bus was so packed that she couldn’t get near him. But did she want to? And did he? Not at all!

"So, are you heading for New Year’s?" the woman asked.

She pulled back the edge of the hood with her hand and turned her head toward him.

"I didn’t recognize you!" he exclaimed, almost joyfully. For some reason, despite always speaking to her coldly and reservedly during their rare accidental encounters (every five or six years), this time he sounded almost enthusiastic.

"What, have I aged that much?" she asked, seemingly with a smile, as her face was again concealed by the black hood.

"No, it's just that you were so bundled up..."

"The wind outside..."

"Yes, they announced a storm warning…”

He barely recognized himself. What was this lively tone all about? He recalled how many years ago they had traveled together like this, standing close in a bus overcrowded with people, barely exchanging a few words. He carried a heavy burden in his chest for a long time after that. Yet, what was there to say? They had simply attended the same school once. She came from his village. Not even the same class. What was there to reminisce about, and more importantly, why?

This time, however, he felt an inexplicable desire not to remain silent the whole journey, as they usually did. She had sat beside him so confidently, engaged him in conversation... He couldn’t just pout in response like some offended boy... For, back then, standing in silence beside her was fiercely difficult and painful. It was as if cold lightning bolts sparked between them.

"Did you visit the old house?" she asked. "Perhaps you rekindled the stove?"

"Why just rekindled? I kept it burning all the days I was there. Three days."

She knew his house well. Many times, in those distant years, she had passed by on her way to school, a house buried in lilacs…

"Do you often go to the village?"

"For all weekends and holidays. So I both light the stove and plant the garden, tend to the orchard… Since no one is there anymore, I’ve grown especially fond of it all."

"I’m heading out from home on New Year’s night — the grandkids begged me to come — and it’s hard for me to leave everything unattended... My husband is also in the city; he’s on a work shift..."

He recalled he had seen her husband a few times, long ago in the city. Together with her. Tall, broad, with somewhat abnormally long arms, his face strangely shadowed. What did she see in him?

"Do you heat with wood?" she asked.

"Yes."

He looked ahead, past her black hood, through the fogged windshield of the bus, watching as the lights of villages, electric streetlamps, and car headlights drifted by. At the window beside him, near his left shoulder, there was nothing to see — it was plastered with dirt from the outside, and the dim lamp in the cabin cast a reflective glare.

She turned to him occasionally, impeded by the hood from clearly seeing him. She spoke forward; it helped that the seat in front remained unoccupied.

"Last year, my husband and I also used wood heating, saving costs, and this winter we’ve opted for gas — oh, we’ll pay whatever it costs. But it’s warm, clean, cozy..."

His heart clenched. He wasn’t sure why. Was it because he used wood instead of gas to heat his home? But what did it matter?

Yet... The image she painted stood vividly before him, and he thought that his life could have been entirely different... Better? Or worse? Who knows...

But what if... Do we ever really know where that "if" could lead?

What if he hadn’t been brave enough to pin down that ninth-grader behind the crowd of dorm girls back then...

What if she had been afraid of being caught by the class teacher who lived down the hall and hadn’t snuck out to see him from the dorm almost every night, regardless of rain or snowstorm...

What if the nightingales hadn’t sung so passionately, so all-consumingly that spring...

No nightingales sang like that before or since. Perhaps it was because that spring, nearly every evening, he listened to them in the vast school orchard. A paradise for the nightingales... and for them two…

From that spring, the spring of song, music took root in his heart for a lifetime. The music of a brass band. Their village one. Later, in the army, it even appeared in his dreams. Throughout the whole night — a short soldier’s night — that unforgettable music played in his head. Just like once, at his farewell ceremony...

That evening, the last evening, more truly, the night, as the farewell had passed, the empty dorm room was devoid of the nightingales' song or the orchestra's tune. Only the hot, breathless whispers could be heard in the darkness.

He recalled that whisper often — and suffered under the rough soldier's blanket...

"You’ve been living in the village for a while, so you’ve got the gas set up, settled in," he said, staring into the window ahead.

"Yes, it's been more than ten years since we moved from the city. I had to care for my mother. My husband lived in the apartment with the kids for two years, and then he too returned to the village, although he works shifts."

He felt compelled to ask about her mother. But he held back. Why lie to himself?

"Mother passed away three years ago," she said.

He remained silent.

He looked ahead, then glanced at the impenetrable window to his left. She sat silently beside him.

The pause stretched and something cold drifted between them. Like back then, long ago when they had remained silent the whole journey…

"And how are the boys?" he spoke up. "Your boys, who went to our school? Andriy... What was his last name? Worked at a factory..."

"Hold on... I've forgotten myself..."

She pulled back the edge of her hood, and under the bus's faint light, he saw her face. It seemed she hadn’t aged at all. Or was it just the dimness hiding what the years etched upon people?

"Oh, you mean Kazmirchuk..."

"Yes, yes, him..."

"He’s living in the village now, farming."

"And Mitya Sidletsky?"

"Mitya? Mitya’s been gone for a long time. Drank himself to ruin — and it pulled him down..."

He felt like asking about her brothers — both of them. They had been kind to him back then… But why bring it up? Just to remind? Then everything would come flooding back. Everything. Why? Perhaps she had long since forgotten everything! And what if she thought that he…

"Many of my classmates are gone already," she sighed.

"Mine too..."

They knew each other's classmates. They attended the same school. Different classes. It had been a long time since they’d seen each other... That was all. What else needed stirring?

"Are you already retired?" she asked.

"Yes, retired. But still working."

He wanted to ask her but remembered she was only a year younger than him. Probably also retired by now.

"I’m eleven months short," she said. "I had to resign to care for my mother, so I didn’t reach the required thirty years."

He felt like mentioning that he had submitted his pension paperwork with forty-two years of work behind him. But why say that? What did it matter to her? Who was she to him? Who was he to her? Why should she know anything about him? For the sake of female curiosity?

In general... why was he being so chatty?

Of course, if he were traveling and conversing with any other female acquaintance, he would probably share a lot. But with her... Wouldn't it touch upon something… remind… Why? Perhaps she remembered nothing, wished to remember nothing... And here he was... with his questions...

"Do you have grandchildren?" her voice interrupted once more.

“Yes. Two.”

He wanted to add that both were from his eldest daughter, and his son had none yet. But he stopped himself. Would she even be interested?

"From both kids?"

Now, really! She asked herself!

"No, from my eldest daughter, and my son has none yet," he echoed his earlier thought.

"My situation is the opposite. My eldest son has no children, even though he’s been married a while, and the younger one has two. They begged me to visit for New Year's. They just left, carrying presents from me and Grandpa, but they asked me to come again…”

Those words "with Grandpa" jarred him inside. He pictured how it might be... But no, what was he thinking — he had his own grandkids! He was heading to them, to his own! To his children, to his grandchildren, to his family…

He looked through the blind window, inching closer, yet still saw nothing.

In general... Why this conversation? Why all of this? Who was she to him? Who was he to her?

He glanced at her but all he saw was a figure in a black jacket, with a hood concealing her face from him. She appeared larger than he remembered, scrunched against the window. Yet, she had once been slender… alluring…

She had been... So much had been... But how much never happened, never unfolded, never came to be!...

Did she remember anything at all? With her "husband" and "Grandpa"… Strange images flitted through his mind, but he focused on the view from the front window and saw a cluster of lights ahead.

“Oh, are we already approaching?"

"Yes, that's the gas station before the city," she said. "Are you getting off at the terminal?"

"No, in the center."

He wanted to ask if she was getting off soon, upon the city's entry. But he held back. He’d already talked too much today… He had never spoken to her so much, not since...

The bus halted at the city entrance. Passengers stirred. She turned to him again, and he once more saw her face.

"Happiness to you in the New Year!" she smiled.

"And to you too, all the best!"

She rose and moved towards the door. He watched her intensely as she departed. He desperately hoped she’d turn back and look at him once more! But if she did, he didn’t notice.

The bus moved on, but the driver hadn’t closed the door yet, and through the gap, he saw her. Walking along the sidewalk in her black jacket, hooded — tall and graceful. She didn’t turn her head, didn’t look back.

He raised his hand and pinched his chin with his fingers, feeling the roughness of stubble under his palm. In the village, he hadn’t shaved on these days. At home, he would go straight to the bathroom, but… How pitiful that she saw him this way — unshaven, with gray stubble on his cheeks, pressed against the foggy window of the bus. How pitiful…

How pitiful that there had been no more of those wild, unrestrained nightingale trills. The gardens bloomed when he returned from the army, weeping willows veiled cozy benches beneath their branches here in the city, where she worked, where he searched for work and some foothold. But the nightingales didn’t sing like they did two years before, tirelessly. And as autumn approached, her smiles waned, and it slipped from her lips more frequently: "But mom says..."

"But mom says..." What did she say? What was it? She said that they... What? That it wouldn’t work out. Disappointment awaited as she had waited for him in vain...

He tried to prove otherwise, he swore on it, but... No one listened to him, no one believed him. How long could they meet without a purpose? "But mom says…"

He oscillated, pacing side-to-side, yet something hastened him, time kept slipping away, and he found himself more and more pressed against the wall, just like now on the bus. They pressured him. They hurried him. Or even cornered him. "But mom says!..."

And in the end, it happened just as her mom said. But he was the one who did it... After tears, rebukes, clarifications — he once and for all cut everything off...

But if only... If only...

The bus jolted, halting to a stop. This is the center! Time for him to get off!

He grabbed his bag and quickly disembarked.

Looking around at the stop, under the city lights, he could see the swift wind carrying stray flurries of fluffy snow.

People hurried along the street, heads bowed against the wind. Some carried Christmas trees in hand. They’d still have time to decorate before the New Year.