

POBEDA 1946

A CAR CALLED VICTORY

by

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What kind of gibberish is this? thought the man, looking at the date on the letter. It was already a few months old. He took a Sport cigarette from its pack, crushed its long hollow cardboard filter, and put it between his lips. He lit it, settled back into his chair, and read the letter once more.

Dear Alan,

Before the end of the war the opera house was bombed. I wasn't on the stage at the time. A spectacular ballet called Kratt was being performed. The horned beast, who escaped from the stage with his life, ran in his red costume across the square in front of the theatre into town. Bystanders watched the National Opera House in flames and the Devil running out of it, apprehending that Dostoyevsky's demons had penetrated the town. Those demons are still here. In the meantime they have multiplied and there are more and more of them every day. They have taken over the town, although they don't dance on the opera stage. I don't sing there any more either, because there is no stage. I do not intend to start singing Aida and Carmen at the culture houses and cinemas. Let the demons sing Dunayevsky's marches there. I am still thinking of my Rinaldo in London.

Your Aida

The man put the letter down with a frown. Even the translation seemed wooden. *We should hire more girls with language skills*, he thought. He picked up a shiny black trophy fountain pen, twisted it open and noted with satisfaction that the ink in it hadn't dried yet. The Third Reich had lost, but their fountain pens worked.

His secretary appeared in the doorway, twiddling a key between her manicured fingers.

"They delivered it!" Anna exclaimed cheerfully. The man pushed himself away from the desk and jumped up. He snatched the key from Anna's hand and rushed downstairs. Parked there in the courtyard it stood in honour and glory. A brand new car called Victory. The man opened the door of the Pobeda and sat inside. The leather seat squeaked and bounced nicely under him, like a bourgeois sofa. He straightened his back and his head didn't hit the ceiling. Hurrah! There was even room for his knees and he could almost stretch out his legs. He sized up the width of the passenger seat and lay on his side. Now he saw the car from a different angle – underneath the dashboard. A few cable-ends and an unfinished paint-job showed. *Still can't shake off the Potemkin village of the Tsarist times*, he thought, and smirked. Then he turned on his back. *Here you could even sleep or fool around with someone*. He wrinkled his brow and chuckled. *You don't even need to climb into the back seat*. He sat up again and gripped the elegant steering wheel with both hands. He gazed at his well-maintained hands and felt that this vehicle would submit to his every hand movement. Yes, he was at the helm. He settled down and looked in the rear-view mirror. With a face like that he could have been an actor. But now he had to act in the national theatre of everyday life.

The man pressed the pedals and turned the ignition key on. The engine growled like a bear. "Mmm," he murmured with satisfaction. The sound was powerful and promising. He toyed with the accelerator and the engine growled more savagely, then more tamely. It obeyed the tamer's words. There was no need for provocation.

Where will I go now? wondered the man, releasing the clutch, and then turning slowly out of the gate. To get past the crowd of immigrants blocking the way with their bundles, he had to drive on the kerb. A big pothole in the road shook the car. It didn't throw the man's head against the ceiling or shake his innards like other old cars. *It really does have good shock-absorbers*, he thought. He turned right towards the residential district. The houses on the fringes of the town were still in ruins and covered in winter dust, having just awoken from the cold mud in spite of the warm weather. There was rubbish from the war everywhere, as if the war had never ended. The town looked like a rape victim. The shiny brand-new vehicle slid through it like an alien body from another planet.

The man adjusted the rear-view mirror, hitched his pants at the groin to allow himself more room, and accelerated.



The boy had to be silent again. Daddy said, with a frown as always: "Don't talk so loudly."

"He can talk," interjected his mother, "but you have to be quiet and don't boom in your deep bass."

But what's the use of talking alone, thought the boy, *if Daddy isn't allowed to answer and Mummy doesn't want to?*

The room was dark and gloomy. The boy climbed onto the window-sill and looked out between the curtains. The street was getting dim and damp as well. Yet muted lights shone from the windows of the house next door and the boy saw shadows moving. They were running, playing, maybe even laughing there.

His mother said in a quiet, scolding tone: "Close the curtains."

The boy was sad that his father was sullen, while his mother was always angry about something. Mummy was always busy,

making meals, washing dishes, ironing clothes, mopping the floors, darning socks. Always in silence. She didn't like the boy laughing, shouting, or asking her anything. She liked it even less when Daddy did it. He wasn't allowed to talk at all. Not to go to the door or the window. He always had to hide from everyone, but he never wanted to play hide-and-seek with the boy. He sat or lay in the back room, reading old, bad-smelling books. Once the boy had found an old photograph album with pictures of Mummy and Daddy in which they were laughing and beautiful.

"Now you look quite different. Horrible," the boy had said, at which his mother took the album from his hands and put it on a high shelf, so that the boy could no longer get at it.

"I'm bored," he told his father. Daddy was smoking, and didn't raise his eyes from some old magazine with yellowed pages.

"You want to look at pictures of tanks and armoured cars?" asked his father. Those pictures the boy had seen countless times, however, and knew the make of every armoured car by heart.

"May I go outside and play?"

"Off you go," said Daddy, without looking up.

"But not far from the house," warned his mother, nervously brandishing the iron.

The boy was already grabbing his cap and sprinting out into the brisk air. He climbed onto a woodpile on the other side of the street and sat down on a thick log that extended from the stack, as it rocked under his weight. Finally he was back in the driver's seat. He switched on the engine, put it into gear and felt the bus starting to move under him. He rocked himself on the wooden seat as he drove along the potholed road, and the noise of his bus got louder when he changed gear. As he drove and battled with the bumps in the road, he noticed two lights approaching from the end of the street. A splendid shiny car was slowly approaching. It was brand new, and beige in colour.

"Psssh" – the boy was pressing the button to open the bus doors. "Last stop! All passengers please get off."

The approaching Pobeda had stopped on the other side of the road. The boy climbed down from the woodpile and stepped closer to the Pobeda, curiously, his heart pounding. He had seen beautiful cars before, but none so brilliant and new. Sitting in it was a tallish man in a grey coat, who had noticed the boy and was looking at him, smiling broadly. He didn't get out of the car or turn off the engine. The boy approached the car with a self-conscious gaze. He made a circuit around the car, bent down behind it and sniffed the exhaust-pipe gases. Even that smelled wonderful. The man wound down the car window and leaned his head out toward the boy: "Do you want to be a car mechanic?"

"No, a bus driver," replied the boy.

"So cars don't interest you much?"

The boy moved alongside the car closer to the man, rose on tiptoe and looked in the window. Coloured lights shone on the dashboard and the seats were covered in leather.

"Do you want to get in?" the man asked the boy with a friendly glance. The boy knew that he mustn't talk to strangers, but sitting in a car like this was worth breaking the rules for. He could simply sit in it quietly. The man opened the door, stretched out his warm hand and pulled the boy up onto the seat. He looked slyly at the boy and flashed the dashboard lights to please him. The man laughed. His hair was nicely styled and he was clean-shaven, not like Daddy. It was hard to sit silently when such an amusing man was wanting to chat. And they did chat for a bit, about cars.

Then the man inquired: "What's your name? Where do you live?" The boy didn't answer those questions. Mummy had forbidden him to answer such questions. He didn't understand why, but Mummy and Daddy didn't let him talk to strangers. He stretched out his arms and tried the steering-wheel. It was cold, smooth and curved. How nice it would be to hold onto, not like the stick with which he drove his bus. The man seemed

to read his thoughts, shifted aside and said: "Come, sit closer and hold onto the wheel like proper bus drivers do." The boy placed both hands on the wheel and looked straight ahead through the windscreen. The man pressed some button and the wipers suddenly sprang into action. The boy squealed in surprise and they both laughed. The man took the boy's hand, pressed the button again and the wipers stopped.

"Now you try. Does your father have a car too, or does he go by bus?" asked the man.

"My Daddy doesn't go out at all," the boy blurted out. He looked at the man, startled. But the man only smiled. He stared deep into the boy's eyes and replied, almost consolingly, "Not all guys are car enthusiasts like we are." *This man can be trusted*, the boy thought.

"My Daddy is only interested in tanks and armoured cars." But now his mother's perpetual warning rang in his ears again: "Never talk about Daddy to anyone."

"Has your Daddy driven a tank?" asked the man curiously. "What has he told you about them?"

The boy pressed his lips together firmly. He wouldn't say anything more about it.

"Do you want to go for a drive?" asked the man.

"I'd like to, but I'm not allowed," the boy answered glumly. "Now I have to go home."

The man was silent for a moment. "All right then, bus driver. Maybe we'll meet again."

He gave the boy an encouraging look.

"You could sit at the wheel yourself tomorrow evening. I'll teach you how to drive. Since your Mummy and Daddy don't especially care for cars, let it be our little secret!" He looked deeply into the boy's eyes and asked: "Can you keep a secret?" The boy nodded solemnly.

The man reached out his big hand, took the boy's hand in his own palm, and squeezed it firmly.

"These are things to be kept between drivers," he said. "Let's meet here again tomorrow, if you're able to come."

He leaned over the boy and pushed the car door open, so he could leap down from the seat.

The boy was sorry to leave the warm car. He could still feel the upholstered leather seat under his bottom and the pleasant aroma of the car in his nose. It was an unfamiliar smell that was a mixture of petrol, cologne, leather seats and the scent of the dashboard. He plodded slowly towards his home, stopped at the door and glanced backwards. He saw the Pobeda slowly and almost noiselessly slipping away behind him.

The boy knocked on the door. He heard the shuffling of his mother's slippers, the grating of the key, and then saw the door crack open and his mother's glaring eye appear. "You must be chilled through! Come and eat some soup."

The boy didn't reply. He wasn't cold, and he'd been having drivers' talk with the man. Their own secret.

He entered the smoke-fusty room, where apart from the smell of broth there were the smell of damp wood and the crackle of the stove being heated. His father opened the door of the back room a little.

"I'd like some soup too," he said in a whisper.

The boy didn't know why his Daddy wasn't as bold as the friendly man in the splendid car and why he always hid away in the back room if anyone came. Why couldn't they ever laugh together?

They ate the soup in silence.

"Time for you to go to bed," said Mummy. And so the boy did. He was sorry that he couldn't talk to his father about the man's car.

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Johanna was heading down the street in the direction of the tram stop. Life had become totally unrecognizable since the Soviet troops' triumphal entry. She stepped cautiously in

her suede shoes, since the cracks in the pavement seemed bigger than the paving stones. They were filled with discarded cigarette butts, rubbish and manure. *I haven't seen any street-sweepers for a whole year*, thought Johanna. *The rubbish bins have been stolen and all the sweepers have been sent to the Higher Party School. The war and the new era have brought the freedom to spit, urinate and throw rubbish anywhere you please.*

Johanna had sung Verdi's *Aida* and was able to identify with the enslaved Nubian princess, whose country had been devastated by the soldiers of the Egyptian army. Over the past few years, foreign forces and immigrants had repeatedly taken over Johanna's home town, ultimately covering it in a layer of ash and the dust of ruin. Since the Red Army regiment of female aviators had dropped bombs on the opera house, Johanna had kept away from the theatre. She had become an independent soloist before the war so that she could sing on other opera stages as well. Now she had lost even those opportunities, because the borders were closed. A singer in her forties could devote herself to playing bridge as well. Yet *Madame Butterfly* and *Tosca* still haunted her in both daytime and dreams.

The street ran past the ruins of houses, and Johanna sharpened her gaze. *There isn't someone hiding behind the wall, waiting to rob and murder me, is there?* Her friend the baritone had told her how even illegal sausage factories were flourishing in the shadow of political repression. Someone had allegedly found a little fingernail in a sausage bought from the market. Johanna had also just paid a visit to the market today, and had purchased flour in exchange for her genuine freshwater pearls. She hadn't much of an appetite for sausage, though it was on sale at the market too. People were really disappearing from the streets daily. Johanna thought that most of them were vanishing to Patarei Prison. Everywhere were the big ears and suspicious eyes of Stalin, seeking out enemies of the people. Stalin and Beria had wanted to relocate the entire nation to Siberia, but the war had spoiled their plans.

Johanna glanced instinctively backwards. Slowly approaching her was a handsome, brand-new, light beige car. She had not seen that make before. *Is someone following me again?* At the wheel was a nice-looking youngish man who didn't seem dangerous to her. The man was watching Johanna through the car window and smiling. Johanna calmed down and looked at the road again. There was no need to fear a car like that. People were rounded up in dark lorries, the Black Ravens.

A noisy bunch of drunken sailors emerged from the building next door and cast their bleary looks at the well-dressed Johanna, and then at the new car that was passing. *"Смотри, Победа, какая красавица! Look, a Pobeda, what a beauty!"* cried one of them as he noticed the car, and whistled. Thinking the whistle was directed at her, Johanna quickened her pace, and the man driving the car also accelerated, whizzing past her.

Parked at the intersection was an old taxi with an eternally waiting driver yawning in it. *I'd take a cab, but God knows where it would take me,* thought Johanna. *My coat and hat would guarantee him a month's easy living,* she reckoned bitterly, continuing toward the tram stop. A horde of absolute newcomers was already standing there, people she hadn't seen in the town before, ready to attack the tram door. Since the tram was still not in view they turned and scowled at Johanna as if she were an approaching apparition. Somebody seemed to even recognize her and merely stared with a glazed expression. The blinkers on the heads of the elegant, forward-looking horses of Johanna's youth sprang to mind. She would have liked those defences for herself now, but she didn't lower her gaze.

Two men in soldiers' uniforms strolled closer, observing her suspiciously with narrowed eyes. *What on earth have the war and this new regime done to us,* she thought. *Look at these comrades' posture; their bad-tempered furrowed brows. Gone are the easy-going attitudes, the relaxed smiles. Equality, fraternity,*

but not a speck of love for your fellow man. Even getting on a tram you have to fight for your spot under the sun. But the Soviet sun doesn't warm or shine. Instead of cologne, a bouquet of garlic, two-day-old sweat and sperm wafted toward her from the men. Johanna turned her back to the men, adjusted the silk scarf around her neck, and inhaled the traces of old perfume deep in its folds. She recalled the cologne that her London gentleman, Alan, wore – Mischief. His subdued English smile and impeccable manners. She turned up her crimped coat collar and looked at her watch. The hands were moving too quickly on their accustomed course. She stared at the rails and felt herself frowning. *Have I already become like them?* The tram still hadn't come. To calm her mind she hummed the leitmotif of *The Ring of the Nibelungen*. She was exiled from the company of the gods to the mortal currents of the underworld. She eyed the crumbling plaster and cracked paint on the walls of the building opposite and was sure that as long as the English fleet had not docked in Tallinn harbour, it would continue to crumble for all eternity.



The boy couldn't wait for the Pobeda man to come again. He perched on the woodpile, his gaze fixed steadily on the end of the street. Then he saw the familiar Pobeda slowly turning the corner.

"Citizen passengers! The bus is broken. You all have to get off now," he said briskly, and pressed the button for the door. Pssssh! The doors opened.

The boy leapt off the woodpile and ran towards the Pobeda. He could see the familiar man's broad smile through the windscreen. The Pobeda stopped, the door opened and the man extended his arm so the boy could do a panther-leap onto the leather seat. The car emitted its familiar smell.

It was nice and warm inside.

"Great to see you again, bus driver!" said the man cheerfully. "Turn this knob here."

He pointed to a round button on the dashboard.

The boy reached out his hand and turned the knob. The radio started to play. It sounded so good and filled the entire interior, not like the scratchy radio at home.

"Now we'll hear a popular melody from Veera Nelus, soloist of the Working People's Culture Centre," the announcer's cheery voice proclaimed. A lady began singing "Whistle while you work" in a pretty, high voice.

The boy looked over at the man, who was grinning proudly. They swayed along to the rhythm of the music.

A dark-coloured lorry drove past the window. The man's gaze turned towards it. The boy's eyes were now also following the large vehicle, which stopped in front of his house. Men in leather jackets jumped out and headed at a run towards the door of the boy's house.

The man leaned closer to the boy, pulled him over and said "Now we'll do a little test-drive. Put your hands on the wheel. You're driving." He took the boy on his lap and pressed his hands on the wheel. The boy grasped it firmly. He felt the man's legs moving. The man pushed the clutch with one and gave it some gas with the other. The car started slowly moving. The boy turned the wheel, and indeed the car responded. They drove past the lorry and his home. The boy glanced at the house, but the man commanded: "Bus driver, keep your eyes on the road, look straight ahead!" The boy turned his gaze back to the road. What fun it was to drive such a big and responsive car.

They drove past the neighbours' houses, turned onto side streets, and found a parking lot encircled by a plank fence.

"This is the cars' home, where they sleep at night," explained the man. The boy squealed with excitement when the car started to climb onto the pavement. The man's foot pressed the brake and they adjusted the wheel again, and kept

driving. Music played and the car drove on. They completed their circuit and arrived back at the boy's house. The street was empty. The lorry had disappeared. The man parked close to the house.

"You're a good driver," he said. "Our work's done for today."

He reached out and gave the boy a manly handshake. The boy was happy. He had become a real driver.

The man opened the door. The boy climbed down from the seat and shut the door behind him. The man waved merrily to him and drove off. The boy followed the receding Pobeda's tail lights with his eyes and strolled toward the house.

The front door was ajar. He pushed it open and stepped inside. His mother was sitting on the floor. She looked frightful: her eyes were puffy from crying and her hair was tousled. His mother stretched out her arms and grasped him in her embrace. The boy felt uncomfortable in his mother's cramped grip. He stared at the door to the back room, which was wide open. His father was nowhere to be seen.

"Daddy went out," said his mother.



How long will I have to cry, wondered the woman, drying tears from her eyes with her sleeve. She stepped over to the window and drew back the curtain. Usually, when someone had been lost, the curtains were drawn, as if mourning couldn't stand the light. She had lived behind closed curtains for nearly two years already, and could now pull them open in her sorrow.

An almost blinding sunlight shone in through the window, painful to the eyes. Especially since her eyes were red and bleary from weeping. She had to shut her eyelids for a moment, then cautiously parted them again, squinting.

Maybe it's premature to mourn? My husband was taken away, but perhaps he's still alive? As a member of the National

Committee* he had fought for national sovereignty and supported the short-lived independence between the two occupations. Most of his companions had been killed or escaped to the forest; he, however, had hidden away in the back room. *Is there still any hope for him?*

They had heard about the executions, the deportations, the arrests and the vanished war veterans every day. Therefore they hadn't been able to decide anything about their own lives. Even the hope of living in the forests, of the white ships or the friendly English troops arriving in Tallinn Bay had gradually faded. So their family happiness had started to deteriorate in the atmosphere of hopelessness, indecision and passivity, and doubts began to sprout in the woman's soul like potatoes in a sprout cellar.

She brushed strands of hair away from her face and stared out the window, as if accustoming her eyes to the new light. She alone was the one who went out, earned a living, bought food, communicated with the surrounding world, raised their child, and took care of the household. At the same time her husband had buried himself ever deeper in the back room, in an ever thicker haze of smoke, like a fuming chimney that doesn't know what it is heating or why it still produces smoke. They had only cast wordless reproaches at each other through the door, blaming each other for the world's injustice and the surrounding social system. For there was no hope.

Neither of them had a choice any more.

Her husband was a man of principle and wouldn't have sold himself to the new regime. Not himself, not his companions, not his principles. They had let the last boats to Sweden, the last ships to western Europe, go without them, because every other vessel was sunk, and the woman didn't want to lose their son in the waves.

Better to live in a bad society than to die on the way to a better one. *And was there a better one any more anyway?* She had guiltily caught herself thinking how much simpler life would be if she didn't have to hide her husband in the back

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room. But now that he was gone, she missed him.

She watched her son playing on the woodpile outside the window, and reckoned that her sacrifices hadn't been in vain. *There sits my six-year-old, swinging on the end of that board. Alive and well and blissful in his six-year-old ignorance.*

She walked across the room to the other window and drew back the curtain from it as well. *Let there be light*, she thought gloomily, mourning her smoky husband and their irretrievable love, which had faded like daylight in a dark back room.

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