

Let's Go A-Riding

A polyester bag plopped on the asphalt, and the driver shouted something unintelligible. The bus stopped in the city backyard, next to the concrete walls, dotted with tarnished signs. It was barely seven in the morning but the brown river nearby, lined with stunted trees, already exuded a stinky heat.

Judging by the frowning face of the driver, he was not worth annoying. Max looked around.

“Otherwise, the German will call the police. Even in such a hole, there must be some police,” decided he.

Max did not want to encounter people in uniform. He deftly installed himself on the bus, seizing the moment when the luggage compartment was left unattended. The homeless man Fabrizio, who died last year, taught Max this trick.

“Africans are hiding in the planes’ wheels,” the Italian said instructively, “a bus is nothing compared to that,” Fabrizio coughed. “Only in winter it is freezing, and in summer you drenched in sweat.”

Max spoke fluent Italian, but he could not explain anything to the German driver, whose head was crammed with travel rules. Getting into the luggage compartment of the Warsaw-bound bus, Max hoped for the Polish driver. Polacks understood Russian well enough. The bus hissed, closing the doors. He heartily stomped on an empty cola can.

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“I need to think,” Max sighed, “but first, I need to find a hostel and lie down.”

Six hours of travel from Paris to an unfamiliar town with a brown river numbed his body. He had enough money for a cheap hostel and a bowl of noodles. Max scratched his sweaty hair.

The bed and shower were more important. The police did not pick on clean guys in decent clothes. His jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers, though worn, were of good quality. In a warehouse on the outskirts of Rome, nobody was interested in his documents. The elderly monk waited while Max rummaged through the clothes laid out on long tables.

He received from the monk a brochure with a Catholic cross on the cover. Not wanting to throw the book into the trash, Max left it on the bench along the way to the metro station.

Max did not believe in God, being sure everyone in this life plays only for himself. The damned Moldovan who left him without money and documents succeeded in this game. Since then, Max acquired a tattered paper identity card not worth showing the police.

“It will let me into the hostel,” he yawned, “where they look at money only.”

The bus with the German finally disappeared. Only one passenger got off in this backwater.

“I was thrown out of the luggage compartment,” Max gave a girl trampling on the square an unfriendly look, “she was also fare-dodging, only in the cabin.”

A thin disheveled girl looked about fourteen. Hobbling on her feet in terry socks and rubber slippers, she clutched a plastic bag. Not in the least interested in the girl, Max needed to find a hostel with accommodating staff.

“And some grub,” he sniffed, “here there is no chance for an eatery.”

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The brick walls smelled of rubber and machine oil. Max heard a timid voice behind him. The girl was trying to say something in French. He responded.

“Italian, English, “Max could somehow explain himself in the latter, “no French.”

The girl babbled.

“City, where,” he pointed his finger at the sign at the bus stop.

“Belgium, “said Max, “this is Belgium.”

Tears sparkled on the reddened rims of her black eyes.

“No Belgium, “the girl gasped, “Magyaroshtag.”

Max did not intend to find out what it was.

“Sorry, no idea,” shrugging his shoulders, he walked to the peeling houses of the city outskirts.

Max understood the word “no” in almost every language. The African, sitting at the ragged counter of the hostel, shook his head again.

He stumbled upon the hostel in a row of ugly buildings next to the tracks where the freight cars pinged slowly. On the horizon rose a station tower with a large clock. Max learned the name of the city from the plan hanging at the bus stop. He had never heard of it before, nor was he interested in where he ended up.

“No difference, “Max stopped in front of the glass door. “I need to move on to the east.”

He was sick and tired of dummies. The African in the lobby of the hostel turned out to be just like that.

“Usually, they are sharp, “Max sighed. “The guy has been sitting here for a long time. He has dulled, like all the locals. “

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Max had no idea how the Africans got to Belgium.

“But what's the difference, “the African was waving his battered identity card. “A dumbass is a dumbass, no matter where he comes from.”

The guy folded a square out of his fingers, “Photo, photo!”

Max wanted to talk to him in Russian. With his Italian paper, this would be even more suspicious. He bought an ID card with a peeled photograph for his last hundred euros. His buddy Lenin, a clever Colombian, insisted on the power of a document.

“Take a photo in the machine, “the guy said instructively. “There is no stamp on the picture. Who will notice this?”

Max guessed how Lenin had gotten hold of the document. Druggies sold their identity cards on the black market. The Italian police would have checked the name in the database, and the Belgians would do the same.

“And I will go to jail,” Max did not want to give an African a tenner, saved for noodles.

“I should have taken care of the photo instead of sleeping.”

In Paris, Max dozed off on a park bench next to the concrete building of the bus station. He arrived at the French capital in the luggage compartment. The Italian driver did not notice his extra passenger. Max suspected that the hostel guy did not want to risk his ass.

Hostel occupied a tattered building between the garage and a game room. A Vietnamese eatery, which Max was so eager to visit, stood opposite. Max desperately wanted to lie down on the sagging sofa in the dirty hostel lobby, but then an African was sure to call the police.

The filthy hostel door swung open. A hand appeared from behind, and Max turned around.

“What the hell!”

The girl from the bus handed an African a decent-looking plastic identification card.

“Magyaroshtag,” remembered Max. “Hungary. A stupid language, where a normal person cannot understand a shit.”

He did not understand French either but was versed in the money talk. Having received fifty euros in cash, the African calmed down and produced a key. The girl, not parting with her plastic bag, snatched the thing. The African showed three fingers.

Climbing the steep stairs to the third floor, Max found the room door open. The girl slept with her head buried in a well-worn blanket. He recognized her tortured pose.

“She also is running somewhere, “Max neatly lined her rubber slippers. “I understand these things.”

The sleeves of her crumpled jacket lifted, exposing thin scratched hands. Max looked closely. The girl did not look like a drug addict, although she could inject in her legs.

Max deliberately loudly moved the shaky chair across the linoleum. The girl did not stir. Among the red rash on her wrists, he noticed old and fresh bruises. She left the plastic bag on the table. Rummaging in her old underwear and socks, Max found a cheap purse with folded banknotes.

“Three hundred euros,” he went to the window. “I can take the money and get out of here. Buses to the east run every hour. For three hundred euros, I can go to Warsaw and even further.”

“Take and leave, “his fingers trembled. “I do not even know who this girl is.”

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The sunrise painted the tiled roofs with molten gold. The bell-ringing rolled from the city center.

“It’s only eight in the morning,” Max yawned. “I need some rest. She is going to sleep until the evening.”

The dream matured her face. In front of Max was not a girl. Collapsing on the second bed, he delved into the deep sleep, hugging a pillow full of sharp feather stems.

A hearty aroma rose from a bowl of spicy noodle soup.

Max wiped his greasy chin. The girl sat opposite him on an uncomfortable plastic chair. She pulled down the jacket sleeves, but an inflamed rash covered even her bony knuckles. The dark eyes glittered with hunger as she eagerly nibbled on the rice pancake.

“Eat,” said Max. “I pay. No worry.”

The girl nodded gratefully. Max has so far only learned her name. He woke up to the sound of the running water behind the flimsy door. The girl appeared in the room in a shabby terry towel. Her face was young again, adolescent, her hands bloomed with eczema.

Stretching out a thin finger, she poked herself in the chest. The towel slipped treacherously, and the girl muttered a word already familiar to Max. He could say the shit even in the despised Hungarian language. Mastering the towel, the girl suddenly blushed.

“I am Nadia.”

Max thought at first that he met a compatriot. In Mestre, he briefly lived with an enterprising girl. She sent home shipments of poorly stitched clothes made of polyester embroidered with sequins.

“It is cheaper to buy them from China,” Max was surprised.

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Victoria snorted, "Cheaper in your Siberia. Moldova is closer, and this is an Italian product."

The Italian product was made by the Chinese women who filled the hangars in Mestre.

Max decided not to correct the Moldovan woman who did not understand Russian geography. Victoria quickly kicked him out, bringing to the apartment an Italian, as Max thought of him, bastard. The guy was bow-legged, but he had a valuable asset, a local passport.

Max, who has gotten into the extras of the series on ancient Rome, could not boast any documents at all. Taking his backpack, he moved to Tuscany, where farmers always needed the workers.

"Then I ended up in Rome," he slyly examined Nadia. "She is not Russian. She is a gypsy."

Dressing in the bathroom, the girl stuck out her long nose from behind the door.

"My grandmother was also Nadia," she explained. "From Russia. I am from Hungary."

They began to talk. Max has been accustomed to waving his arms and writing on paper scraps. Nadia had an unpronounceable Hungarian surname. She was on her way to a city with an equally unpronounceable Hungarian name, where her older sister could live.

"Wait," frowned Max. "What does it mean she could live?"

He cut himself off.

"You have to eat. Is Vietnamese OK?"

Nadia pulled the purse out of her terry socks.

"I have money,"

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Returning her the bill, Max ordered, "Leave it for a rainy day."

Max noisily sucked in the spicy soup. Perking up, he said, "Speak to me." From her disjointed words and doodles on a napkin, Max understood that the girl was nineteen.

"I live in Paris," she pointed a finger behind her back. "Live with a bad man. I ran home."

Max figured out the baddie already in the hostel room, seeing her skinny arms blooming with yellowing bruises. Nadia was awkwardly moving her left hand.

"It was broken recently," Max was angry. "The moron did it. Sonofabitch, I wish I could talk to him like a man should."

Nadia kept furtively glancing at the deserted suburban street. Rusty cars decomposed under the scorching sun, and faded underwear drooped in the front gardens. Max decided not to beat around the bush. After getting a glass of coffee with ice and condensed milk, he asked.

"You kill a bad man?"

Nadia pressed the hand to the mouth, and her long eyelashes trembled.

"No," she grabbed a dull knife from the plastic table. "A man cut me. I hit him and ran."

Max said in the affirmative, "And take his money."

A feverish blush played on her sunken cheeks. Nadia sadly poked her long nose into a glass of coffee.

"I go," the girl muttered. "Sorry. Goodbye."

Max stretched out his leg in frayed jeans, "Sit. Need to think".

The girl came to Paris last year. Her older sister married, as Nadia slowly explained, a gadjo.



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“This is not a gypsy,” Max chuckled. “Her husband was a Roma.”

After the so-called conversation, he firmly remembered these two words.

“I have taken the plunge,” the dinks did not mind his smoking. “I need to figure out how to move on.”

Nadia quietly sipped her coffee. The girl tried to dodge the bus fare hoping to save some money. Her sister's phone number in the city with an unpronounceable Hungarian name was not answering. Max drew several squiggles on a napkin.

“Police want me,” she said quietly. “You go.”

On the outskirts of his hometown stood an inconspicuous monument. The scarlet star crowned the white-stoned pyramid. A modest sign read, “From the fellow countrymen to the people killed by the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War in 1941-1942.” Max heard that the Nazis shot local Jews and Gypsies in that ravine.

“They were fleeing then, and now she is running again,” Max swore under his breath.

“What the hell, she took only three hundred euros. They cannot jail her for such nonsense.”

Max wanted to go to the west and break the face of a guy unknown to him.

“That bastard had flown off the handle,” Max easily cracked a stray piece of ice on the table.

“He went after the girl with a knife.”

Nadia believed that her sister Zsuzsa could have moved to the Hungarian capital. Max regretfully swallowed the last drops of now warm coffee. He decided they should not hang on buses now.

“Need rest,” Max said. “Need time to pass.”

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Her delicate hand snatched a cigarette from his pack. Clumsily lighting it, Nadia coughed.

“Roma does not smoke,” Max translated her words into Russian for the sake of practice. “I smoke early. Bad life.”

She ruefully smiled as if a butterfly wing touched her cracked lips.

Max first thought that in Paris, she wandered around the city in rubber slippers, pestering tourists. In Rome, he saw Gypsy women in colorful blouses, burdened with a string of kids.

“Roma,” Max corrected himself. “It is better this way.”

He liked the words that Nadia said. It turned out that her husband owned an amusement park.

“Trampoline,” she swayed on her toes. “Bang-bang.”

Max nodded, “The shooting gallery.”

Spreading her arms, Nadia spun around the diner. The Vietnamese behind the counter did not even blink.

Max laughed, “Carousel.”

Nadia straddled the wobbly chair, he smiled.

“Swing. You do what, “he showed his palm to the girl, “tell fortune?”

A glint played in her black eyes.

“No, sell sweets,” she licked her lips. “I can tell fortune too.”

Max sighed.

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“There is nothing to tell,” he looked at her directly. “We need to wait.”

Max waved his hand over the head. “Police do not come to a hole.”

Nadia looked at him in bewilderment. Putting his fingers in a ring, Max winked at her.

“This is a hole. We need to find a room.”

The girl opened her mouth, “Hostel is expensive.”

Max got up, taking a napkin from the table, “No hostel. Wait and see.”

Dinks always had rooms at their eateries. Asians preferred their own, but Max doubted there were other Vietnamese in these boondocks. It took him a couple of minutes and a couple of crossed-out numbers to settle with the guy behind the counter. Returning to Nadia, he showed the girl a napkin.

“One hundred and fifty a month, like a breeze,” said Max. “With free noodles. You can wash,” forgetting the word, he pointed to the bowl. “This shit?”

Nadia nodded readily.

The room was an extension to the shed with cawing chickens. An antique-looking washstand hung on a flimsy wooden wall. The scent of the wet earth and damp green mallow engulfed them. The flowers rose above her black-haired head. Looking around in confusion, the girl burst out laughing.

“Cluck-cluck-cluck,” a neat white bird came out of the shed. “Chicken, chicken...”

Nadia grew up in the village. Her late father owned a car repair shop.

“Then bang,” she turned away. “Car bang. He and mom died. We live with my uncle. Zsuzsa ran with gadjo, and I...”

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Max finished gloomily, "You go to Paris for money."

Her future husband paid her uncle ten thousand euros.

"Uncle buys a house," the girl said quietly. "I cry, but no one listens to me."

Max tossed to the chicken sunflower seeds left in the pockets of his jeans. He bought a packet on a Parisian layover.

"No cry," Max examined the shed. "Eat, sleep, and go home to Zsuzsa. Excellent," he was delighted to find a trestle bed. "I will lie on the floor. I am not a sir."

Nadia hesitantly said.

"Sir has a lot of money. Grandmother sang choir Moscow," she hesitantly sang something familiar to Max. He could barely make out the words.

"Let us go, beauty, go-a-riding," Max grinned. "I am not a sir," he showed his empty pockets. "No problem, I make money."

Nadia gasped, "No steal, police take."

Max assured her, "No police. I work on a construction site. It is my business."

For some reason, he asked, "You want to go where?"

She picked a purple flower.

"I want the sea. Venice," said Nadia passionately. "You know Venice?"

Max smiled contentedly.

"I do. In Belgium, there is a sea. Venice later," he pulled Vietnamese junk out of the shed. "First, let us go a-riding here, beauty."

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Taking off her jacket, she bared the battered arms. Max looked the other way.

"I saw her in a towel. Almost without a towel," Max felt embarrassed. "She is all right, just skinny. She will get fat on noodles, and we will find her Zsuzsa ..."

Nadia said firmly, "Clean everything."

"Clean," Max agreed.

Thin fingers took his palm. Max did not have time to get surprised.

"You live long," her black eyes saddened. "You live at home, and I ..."

Max neatly hung her jacket on a hook in the wall, "You will live home, Nadia."

As Max had predicted, he quickly found the construction site. Wandering through the sleepy streets, he came across a cathedral. A spire soared into the sky. The intricate stone lace was carved in an openwork pattern. It was hard to astonish him after restoring churches in Rome, but Max appreciated the stained-glass rosette above the plywood-nailed entrance.

Scaffolding surrounded the cathedral. Listening to the conversation of the men in dirty overalls above him, Max grinned, "The ball comes to the player."

The Polacks were in charge of repairs. The foreman has not even looked at his Italian paper.

"We start at six in the morning," said the builder, "End at six in the evening." Max nodded.

"Rest on Sunday," added the Polack, "fiver an hour, pay weekly."

Another seven euros per hour ended in the pocket of the foreman, but Max did not argue with him.

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“This is still a shame,” he complained to Nadia over noodles. “A swindler makes eighty euros a day on me. Get ready for the weekend, “Max winked at the girl. “I found out everything. Let us go to the sea.”

Finding the station with a turret close to the church, Max consulted the map at the checkout window. The sea was only half an hour away.

An early train trudged across the green plain. Nadia stuck her nose to the glass, exclaiming enthusiastically, “Cow! Sheep! Horse!”

In the evenings, Max often found her feeding chickens. At home, his late mother kept birds.

“The house is abandoned, “Max realized. “Probably all askance now. I have not been to Russia in five years. Time to go back. I wanted to make some money, but it turned out the other way.”

He carefully put the salary from the construction site in a special envelope. Max was going to take Nadia to Hungary.

“East or West, home is best,” he stretched out his legs. “If we do not find Zsuzsa, I will help Nadia. She is still a girl.”

Nadia said with uncertainty, “I go to the store with Jesus,” the girl crossed herself. “Small money.”

Max nodded, “Charity.”

He saw a sign near the cathedral. Nadia was embarrassed.

“Sea swim clothes,” Max helped her, “Swimsuit.”

“I bought it for one euro, but I do not swim,” she blushed.

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Max assured her, "You learn. Look," he pointed to the window. "The sea."

Morning gold shone in the piercing blue of the water. The wind, bursting into a carriage, left a coating of fine white sand on the benches. Nadia rushed to the door, "Sea, sea!"

The train slowed down. The girl shifted on her feet, "Sea, faster!"

Jumping onto the platform, Nadia was the first to rush to the old-fashioned station building. Max decided not to pinch pennies.

"I was also stunned when I first saw the sea," he recalled. "Let the girl rejoice."

Nadia slept quietly as a mouse. She returned to the extension when Max was already snoring on the floor, stretched on a thin mattress. The diner was open until midnight, but the girl finished scrubbing the dishes and floors in another hour.

Rising in the dawn twilight, Max tried not to look on the trestle bed. He could make out the outline of her body under the sheet.

"I saw her before," occurred to Max. "I will see her in a bathing suit, but it is still awkward."

In the morning, he quickly left the shed, buying coffee on the way to the cathedral. Here they also sold coffee and waffles. Kites and clusters of colorful balloons fluttered over the cobbled street. Lemon, pink, and lilac villas shimmered in the sunlight.

Max stopped at a booth. Nadia received a stick with a cloud of vanilla cotton candy.

"Take it for now," he said. "Then we will eat properly."

Max waved away the seagull circling over their heads.

On the white sand, she took off her rubber slippers. Max had never seen her in a dress before.

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Cheap cotton was beating in the wind, exposing her slender knees. Her legs were not affected by eczema. Noticing the rash on her hands was almost gone, Max smiled. He pointed to the trellised booths, "Swimsuit there."

Nadia shook her head, "At home."

Two scarlet stripes crossed the protruding bones, hugging an almost invisible chest. Nadia pulled a scrunchy out of her ponytail, and black hair flew in the wind.

Max said approvingly, "Good color. It suits you."

Nadia timidly moved towards the hissing surf.

"Cold," a tiny smile appeared on her face. "No, good."

Quickly throwing off his jeans and a T-shirt, Max pulled her along, "Go swim."

She learned to swim before lunch. Bringing fish and chips to the beach, Max flopped on the sand.

"Take a boat," he nodded at the sign of the rental. "Go deep."

Nadia threw a piece of fish to the seagull.

"Deep is scary," the sun shone in her black eyes.

"Not with me," Max responded confidently.

Nadia first quietly settled at the stern, but then the girl lowered her hand into the water. The wind drove waves from the north, and the sea played with iridescent radiance.

Max chuckled, "Russian song, remember?"



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He was tone-deaf. Max still yelled over the wind, "Let us go, beauty, go a-riding! I have been waiting for you a long time!"

He only knew this line. Nadia hummed the tune, and the oars paddled on the water.

The girl cut herself off, "I no beauty," Nadia looked aside. "You go to Russia?"

Max nodded, "Home. Small town, pretty," he smiled, "The river is large. I have an old house and a boat."

Nadia said in a small voice, "And wife."

Max shook his head, "No wife."

The girl twisted the string of the swimsuit, "Why?"

Throwing his oars, he stretched, "Because the sky is high. Here swim," Max got up. "Here deep."

He plunged into the sweet coolness of the water. Emerging, Max held out his hands. Nadia hesitated in the stern.

"Jump, beauty," he smiled. "I am with you."

She stepped into the sea, fearfully closing her eyes. Wet hair brushed the cheek, and his lips caught the salty mouth.

"There is no wife," whispered Max. "Because of you, beauty."

Seagulls cried in the fiery sunset above them.

On Friday evening, returning to the diner, Max allowed himself a contented whistle. Catholics celebrated another holiday tomorrow. The foreman gave a crew a day of rest.

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“We sleep,” thought Max sweetly. “We go to the sea. The weather is good, why waste the summer? We swim until we move to Hungary.”

Nadia still wanted to find her sister.

“We will find her,” agreed Max. “Then go home and get chickens. I have a job as a builder, “Nadia laid her head on his shoulder. “No worries about the border. My Polish buddies will help. Home good,” Max stroked her tousled black hair. “Home quiet.”

Flicking his lighter, Max stopped. He would not mistake the police siren for anything else. Hoping it was about the dinks, Max cautiously peered around the corner. Cops came to the diner with the damned circus of two cars waiting at the entrance. Idle local grannies hovered around.

The door of one of the cars stood open. Max swore helplessly. Nadia was handcuffed.

“Found the criminal for three hundred euros,” he remembered the weekly wage in his pocket. “I can turn around and go to the station.”

He kept the old identity card in the new embroidered wallet. Nadia made the thing in the evening, having bought fabric and thread in a thrift store.

“A gift,” the girl smiled embarrassedly. “We Roma do that.”

Max also had three hundred euros on him.

“This is enough to get to Warsaw,” the policeman was speaking with obsequiously nodding Vietnamese. “Fuck them and fuck the horses they rode on.”

Unceremoniously pushing the grannies, Max shoved the fat cop away. The thin guy speaking to Vietnamese raised his voice. Max began to make out some French. The cops were interested in who he was.

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Throwing “Little Red Riding Hood” over the shoulder, Max banged the car door. Nadia hunched in the back seat, squeezing her now eczema-free hands between the sharp knees.

Turning to him, the girl gasped.

“Max, no! My fault, I steal and run,” Max hugged her.

“No fear, Nadia,” he said affectionately. “I am with you. I will always be with you.”

The policemen were muttering puzzledly in the front seat. Not giving a fuck about them, Max kissed her tiny smile. The car started, he turned the window handle.

Leaning into the free wind, Max sang happily, tunelessly.

“Let us go, beauty, go a-riding! I have been waiting for you a long time!”