

The Fateful Bus Ride

You want to know what changed my life. It was that bus ride. Only much later I would determine with near certainty that was the moment and the place when and where my excruciating and slow transformation had began.

At about twenty, I walked to the bus that would take me to the village where, because of shortage of teachers in rural areas, for a semester, I would start my new life as a paid student teacher. I was almost running as I thought about my own money and more or less stopped when thinking about crazy middle school brats.

I looked around trying to figure out what lies ahead for me. It was late August, with extreme heat a memory and the days warm and bright with just an occasional cloud in the southern blue sky, I anticipated a relaxing ride.

I glanced at the small once yellow bus and jumped the step. Even under the mild morning sun, the packed bus felt hot. With the same curiosity, I looked intently at the passengers, mostly misshapen older women in colorful kerchiefs that allowed telling apart their sunburned faces. Talking quietly, they paid little attention to me. It fit me well. I smiled and looked for a seat. My smile froze as soon as I noticed in the far corner by the window a young girl and the only free seat next to her, my seat. She appeared small in stature, with black hair that fell about the childlike face. A cloud covered the sun, and the sudden darkness ran over the silence.

You would think that at my age I would become even more excited; not me. Young unfamiliar girls terrified me. I never spoke to girls whom I didn't know at least from middle school. They seemed to glue my lips together so even Hercules couldn't take them apart. My spine straitened as if someone

barked “at attention” and my neck became inflexible. Without looking at anyone, the smile still glued to my face, I dragged myself to my seat. Without bending my back I lowered myself into it.

I looked straight ahead and hoped that my face expressed my deep and smart thoughts. But that was not what was running through my head

What a shmuck! When it will stop?

What churns and agonizes me?

Oh god, why are you punishing me?

Do something.

What? Now!

It felt as if a sound proof glass was between us, the cold glass.

I closed my eyes in the hope darkness would give me some relieve and courage.

- Hi, I’m Jacob. What’s your name?
- Maria, nice to meet you Maria.
- Where are you going?
- What brings you there?
- Well, it’s been lovely talking to you.

I opened my eyes; my mouth didn’t follow the lead. For what looked like a long time, I continued telling myself that the next moment the rehearsed words would come out of my mouth, but my subconscious had already decided that it wouldn’t happen.

Even if by some magic my lips moved apart, I wasn't sure that the girl knew her part of the script. I tried to look at her without turning my head, but all I could see was a hill, framed by the window, with a path winding up

The arrival at my destination was a God-sent gift.

Like before, I dragged myself the whole length of the bus to the door that promised some reprieve. Self-pity tore my heart to pieces. Feeling as if I had been put through a meat grinder, I lowered myself off the bus.

One step, but who knew that it would be the beginning of long and arduous makeover.

A quick look around. Broken boxes against the wall of a local eatery. A pregnant woman with a suntanned face, her belly protruded crookedly, approaching the bus, softly singing a peasant song. A young man followed her, a trendy cap on his long curls.

The late afternoon sun was immense, the heavens deep, the air pure. *It* smelled of country, fresh bread, and grapes that even the smell of the overheated engine and dust behind the bus couldn't hold back. The dust carried off the crimson fire of the sun. I took a deep breath, first in a long time and inhaled a sun-colored day of the country. The wind blew through the treetops, and they bent forward as if forced to their knees

Suddenly, as if guided by an outer force I walked along the bus to the last window. The girl in the window frame reminded me of a picture by a famous Russian painter Levitan. Without thinking, I raised my hand and waved to her. Magically, my lips moved apart saying good bye. As if waiting for this, she waved back and shyly smiled at me. I didn't know that the sun can become even brighter and birds can sing so loud.

What a day! A day of hot sun, of serene air, of deep skies; a day of consequence.