

A Chance Meeting

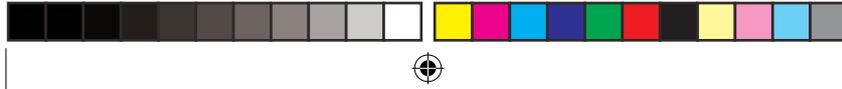
There was a pleasant slamming of compartment doors all up and down the train. The shrill whistle of the platform man signaled the 'all clear' for the train to resume its slow journey toward Moscow.

Ivan leaned back against his seat with a slight smile and closed his eyes. He was pretending to be a seasoned traveler, weary with the routine of the journey, a trifle bored with the delay of the train as it stopped at small villages to pick up a chance passenger or two.

Actually he was loving every minute of the journey and was glad there was still a long way before pulling into Yaroslavsky Station in Moscow where Momma and Poppa and Katya would be waiting to greet him.

It wasn't a journey he had wanted to make. A courtesy visit to distant relatives hadn't seemed like much fun when Momma and Poppa suggested it, but it had been a long time since Poppa's family in Vologda had been visited. A new baby had been born to a cousin Ivan didn't even remember, and Momma wanted to send along a special gift for the baby's first birthday.

At first the whole family had planned the journey together, but in the end it was decided that Ivan would go alone. Poppa did not receive permission from his supervisor at the factory to have time away from his



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job, and Momma's factory's quota was increased so that there was extra production and longer hours to work in order to reach the goal. Katya begged to be allowed to go with Ivan but Momma was firm.

'You would be too restless on the long journey, Katya. And it is too much responsibility for Ivan to keep you out of trouble.'

Katya folded her arms indignantly and looked so innocently outraged that everyone laughed. Finally, even Katya smiled and plopped into a chair, playfully pouting at having been made to change her mood.

'I do not get into trouble!' she declared from the depths of the chair. 'It's possible that things happen to me from time to time, but that is the result of a lively and inquisitive nature.'

'Oh, indeed?' Momma tilted her chin at Katya thoughtfully.

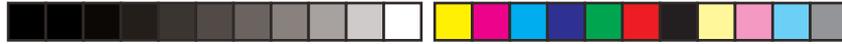
'Yes!' came the muffled insistence. 'My teacher Valentina Semionovna says it is a fine thing to have a lively and inquisitive nature.'

'She didn't think it so fine when you got lost at the Science Exhibit,' Ivan declared, giving one of Katya's fat braids a pull. 'I didn't hear her praising you then!'

A pillow came flying from the chair, barely missing Momma's prized samovar on a table by the couch. Momma caught the pillow with a shake of her head. It was best for Ivan to make the journey alone.

Ivan felt the train lurch to a start. At the same moment, the compartment door opened and a battered suitcase was pushed through the door, followed by a boy Ivan's age. Ivan sat up straight with a smile.

'Hello!'



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The strange boy hoisted his suitcase to the overhead rack, sat down on the bench opposite Ivan, and arranged his plastic bag of food on the side of the seat away from Ivan before answering.

‘Hello.’ He immediately stared out of the window.

Ivan continued to look at him for a moment. The boy was nicely dressed and had slightly long hair. He had a smooth complexion and lustrous dark eyes. Perhaps he is from Georgia, Ivan guessed.

The boy looked sad or sullen. Ivan couldn’t decide which, but he began to feel uncomfortable at the boy’s silence.

‘Going to Moscow?’ Ivan asked.

The boy turned his head to Ivan. ‘Of course.’

Ivan shrugged. ‘Me too.’

The boy was looking out of the window again.

‘My name’s Ivan. Ivan Sergeivich Nazaroff.’

The boy continued to gaze out of the window for so long Ivan was afraid he wasn’t going to speak again at all. Finally with a sigh, he turned his head again. ‘I am Volodia Petrovich Dyomin.’

Ivan smiled encouragingly, but Volodia turned again to the window. Ivan shifted in his seat uneasily. His companion clearly did not wish to talk. It was obvious he wanted to keep to himself. Such unfriendly behavior in a Soviet train was so unusual Ivan began to regret that the boy had come to his compartment. People always passed the time on trains talking, laughing, eating together. Another person in your compartment meant a new acquaintance, the exchange of stories, the sharing of meals, someone with whom to enjoy the passing view.

It’s a good thing Katya isn’t here, Ivan thought,



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wishing suddenly she were. She would have filled up the silence with many questions. Katya would have paid no attention to Volodia's unsociability. Of course if Momma were here, she would have restrained Katya, whispering to leave the boy alone. Then, Ivan knew, Momma would have silently prayed.

Ivan looked more closely at Volodia. Although his body was tense, Ivan could see he was athletic and sat with an uneasy grace. A slight frown was creasing his forehead and from his profile, his sad expression seemed anxious, as if he were thinking very hard about a difficult situation.

Ivan leaned back again against his seat and closed his eyes. 'You can always pray, son.' How many, many times had he heard Poppa say those words? From as early as he could remember, in times of disappointment or frustration or worry, when it was true that nothing at all could be done about some problem in the church, some sorrow at school, some injustice, Poppa's advice was the same. As Ivan prayed, he could sense Volodia relaxing. He shifted and sighed and Ivan could hear him changing his position. When Ivan opened his eyes again, the boy was looking at him.

Ivan smiled.

Volodia nodded.

Ivan took a deep breath and sat up. 'I think it must be time to eat!'

'Of course,' Volodia agreed politely. 'I ate just before coming to the train. But you have been traveling a long time?'

'Four or five hours. From Vologda.'

Ivan opened the large bundle of food his Aunt Sophia had carefully wrapped in newspaper for him.





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There was a large chunk of black bread and some cheese, hard-boiled eggs, sausages, and a tightly capped bottle of mineral water. Ivan offered the bundle to Volodia. Volodia shook his head quickly. 'Truly, I ate just a little while ago.'

Ivan paused to thank the Lord for the food and for the new friendliness of Volodia. 'Let me help him, Lord, if I can,' he prayed.

'Well, go on! Don't hesitate on my account. Really, I have just eaten,' Volodia encouraged.

Ivan took a bite of bread and chewed it thoughtfully. 'Are you going to Moscow to take part in some sports event?'

The boy laughed, his face lighting. 'No. Why do you ask that?'

'I thought you looked athletic. I play soccer and hockey for my school.'

Volodia nodded his respect. 'So you are how old?'

'Almost thirteen.'

'Ah. A loyal Young Pioneer, of course?'

Ivan suppressed surprise at the question, although he was suddenly on guard. Why would Volodia ask if he were a member of the Communist Young Pioneers? Almost every student in Russia, except those disqualified because of misbehavior or children with religious beliefs, belonged to the organization. As a Christian, Ivan had never belonged, in spite of the pressure of his teachers. But it was most unusual for a passing acquaintance to mention such a thing.

Ivan shrugged casually. 'Well, that's a good question.' It was an evasive answer showing he didn't want to discuss it.

'No?' Volodia looked suddenly interested. 'You





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are not a Young Pioneer, I think, yet you are in sports? Something wrong?’

Ivan smiled. ‘Nothing is wrong. At least, not with me. But you are right. I am not a Young Pioneer.’

Volodia shot out the next question. ‘Why not?’

Poppa and Momma had taught Ivan that the Bible instructs Christians to be ready to give an answer to anyone about their faith. A direct question requires a direct witness. ‘Although it is against the law to try to persuade people to be Christians, it is always permitted to answer questions,’ Poppa would say.

Ivan paused a moment to choose his words carefully. ‘Well, you know how it is. I am a believer.’

Volodia’s dark eyes were alive with curiosity. ‘A believer?’

‘In God. In Jesus Christ. A Christian.’

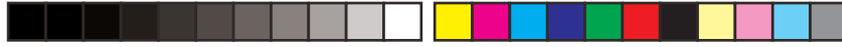
There was silence in the compartment as Volodia thought about what Ivan had said. His response came slowly. ‘I thought only old women...’ His voice trailed off. Volodia frowned, bit his lip and started again. ‘I’ve heard about religious believers.’ He dropped his voice. ‘I’ve heard such people still exist in our Soviet society, although they are mostly old women. But sometimes they are not.’

Ivan grinned. ‘As you see,’ he said.

Volodia did not return Ivan’s smile. ‘Is it true that sometimes religious believers are sent to prison camps or to hospitals for the insane?’

Ivan began to feel frightened. How could an ordinary boy like Volodia know such things unless he had some contact with the Secret Police?

Volodia suddenly stood up and pulled his suitcase down from the overhead rack. ‘See this?’ he asked



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brightly, pointing to an emblem sticker on his suitcase. It looked familiar and Ivan bent forward to read it.

'I am a member of the circus,' Volodia declared proudly.

Ivan was amazed.

'Have you never gone to the circus?' Both boys were staring at each other in mutual surprise.

'No.' Ivan tried to be tactful. 'It is not the custom for believers to go to the circus. But I have sometimes wished to go.'

Volodia heaved his suitcase back on the shelf and sat down.

Ivan offered him some cheese and this time Volodia accepted. Ivan cut off a chunk with his pocket knife and handed it to Volodia with a question.

'What do you do in the circus?'

'I am an acrobat. And I sometimes help in the clown acts.' Volodia wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. A look of sadness passed over his face. He looked as if he wanted to say something. Ivan waited. 'I didn't mean anything by the question about your not being a Young Pioneer,' he said finally. 'I'm not crazy about the organization myself. In fact, even though I am fifteen, I'm not a member of the Komsomol.'

'Why not?' It was Ivan's turn to risk a question.

Volodia gave Ivan a steady look. 'Should I tell you everything about myself?'

'I told you I am a believer.'

Volodia raised a quizzical eyebrow in agreement. 'Let us say perhaps there are those in my family who have some differences with the politics of our government.'

Ivan glanced out of the window. A surge of



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appreciation for the openness of his new friend warmed him. Outside, the pale spring green of the central Russian plains slipped effortlessly by. A turn of the head to the compartment door showed it was tightly closed.

When Ivan made no answer, Volodia continued. 'Especially an uncle of mine. An uncle I love very much.'

Ivan reached out to touch Volodia's arm. 'I am sorry.'

Tears glistened in Volodia's eyes. His voice was so low Ivan had to lean forward in his seat to catch what Volodia was saying.

'Is it true what I have heard about some religious people? Sometimes they are sent away...'

Ivan interrupted quickly. 'Yes. Sometimes...'
'In camps?'

Ivan nodded. 'Only certain very active leaders. Or believers who are outspoken. Or sometimes it is just a matter of an official who wishes to pass his time making trouble for some believer.'

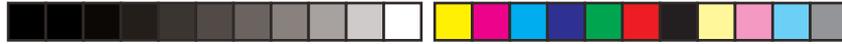
Volodia stared hard at Ivan. 'And in hospitals? Are Christians ever sent to psychiatric hospitals...'
His voice was a whisper. '...for the insane? When they are not – insane in the least?'

Tears now flooded Volodia's eyes. Embarrassed, he looked out of the window as he regained composure.

Ivan leaned over in his seat and grasped Volodia's shoulder. 'I understand, my friend. It is your uncle who has been put in such a place. But why?'

'He has criticized the government. He has had terrible trouble. Interrogations. Lost his job. And now...they have taken him to a special hospital





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where he is without rights. Possibly they are giving him treatments.'

Volodia stood up again and paced briefly in the swaying compartment. When he sat down his face was hard. 'But you could not understand what it is like to have someone you love in such a place.'

Memories flooded Ivan's mind. Volodia stared at Ivan's face.

'You do know,' he said softly.

Ivan smiled faintly in resignation. 'I do know. Once a pastor I loved was taken away to such a place.'

'Yet you smile.'

Ivan answered slowly. 'For believers, too, it is very hard. But for us, it is also an honour. Only the best of us suffer in these ways for Jesus Christ.'

A playful grin flitted over Volodia's face.

'Jesus Christ? But really, Ivan, isn't he a mythological character?'

Underneath the train, sparks flew as steel streaked across steel. In the compartment above, Ivan began to talk.