

A Bus Ride

The bus was full, he might have to stand. The old man scanned the seats further back, and there it was, a complete bench was open. He sprinted for the seat by the window. He liked the window seat. The window gave him a diversion from the monotony of yet another bus ride home. He kicked the slush from the street from his boots onto the floor of the bus.

It had been a busy work week and he was glad that it was done. His work in the accounting firm, while quite boring, paid the bills all right. It being tax season didn't help. There would be no letup until May. He settled into his hard-plastic seat, weary from the week. He was weary, weary from a long life. He was weary from a long life, lived imperfectly.

A middle-aged man in a long woolen overcoat and a felt hat, with a very noticeable limp, had followed him onto the bus. Ostensibly there being no other seats available, the limping man approached.

"d'You mind?"

He brushed a piece of paper, that the former occupant of the seat next to him had left. "No, not at all."

The man with the limp sat down. "How far are you going?"

"To the end."

“What luck! Me as well.” The man with the limp smiled.
“We’ll have time to get to know each other.”

A somewhat long silence followed where he was unsure if the limping man next to him was formulating his thoughts for the proposed conversation, or if he was waiting for him to respond to indicate his willingness to participate. The awkwardness of the situation finally got the best of him and so he started.

“So, I detected a bit of an accent in your speech.”

The man with the limp took a breath. “Eastern Europe. A town called Brinet.”

He rolled the word over in his mind. Where had he heard that name? He couldn’t quite place it. “Been in the US long?”

“Yes. A while now.”

“Tell me about your country.” He figured that would get him talking for a while and he could zone out a bit. It had been a rough week.

“Life was good there, before the war.”

“Oh.” He feigned interest.

“Yes. My family had a small butcher shop in the town, and we made a nice living. We knew everyone in the town. It was a somewhat idyllic remote rural life.”

It sounded just fine. He wondered why anyone would leave that for the bustle of the city. “You said there was a war?”

“Yes. It started in the south and we thought we would be safe from the horrors there. That is, until the enemy advanced and occupied our little village. They called themselves, The Party.” The man with the limp’s face presented a somber serious sour visage.

“Oh.” He had not expected anything this serious. Most folks talked of the weather, or their kids.

“They rolled into the town square in tanks and rounded us all up into a line in front of the courthouse. Their leader was a captain. A Captain Bartol. He arrived in a car, a Mercedes Benz if my memory serves. He was quick with his orders. He tolerated no nonsense.”

“I see.” This story was starting to frighten him a bit.

“The captain ordered his men to divide the people of our town into the old and the young. Then the young and the very young. The old he marched out of town to the fields. My mother and father were in that group. His men had been ordered to execute them. We could hear the rifle shots and the cries of mercy, but we were unable to do anything.” The man paused, visibly shaken by the memory. His face was twisted from the deep emotions underneath.

“I was with the young group, my sister the very young. She was only three years old that day.”

“Hmmm.” He wanted to change his seat, but even with the people getting off at the stops the bus had made, the man with the limp was blocking his way. He would have to be rude to make the escape and he was unsure how this damaged man would react. He was fairly sure the man would not allow it.

“The youngest he ordered the men to cut their throats with their knives. The flesh was soft, and they couldn’t waste their bullets. My sister cried out for me, but a rifle butt to the head caused me to lose consciousness before I could get to her. I lost my entire family that day.” The man with the limp leaned back in his seat.

He resigned to hear the rest of the story. It appeared the man with the limp was intent on telling it.

"That's when the real tortures began. The captain reviewed we remaining young people. He selected out the girls. These he reserved for his men. They would be their whores. They housed them at the hotel."

The man with the limp took a deep breath before continuing. "He picked a small boy with leg braces from the group. He dispatched the boy himself with his knife. One of the girls, the ones in the hotel, was our neighbor, Greta. She was a shy sensitive girl with long brown hair that she wore in two pigtails. They found her one morning hanging from her window at the hotel, a noose fashioned from a bedsheet around her neck."

The man with the limp paused again, his face screwed tight with the pain that lay just below.

"The boys would be housed in the church. We would be woken early to work on building walls around the town, for their defense. We were beaten constantly to try and get us to move more quickly. We fell together at night with pitiful little to eat between the twelve of us. But what was the greatest misery, was the cold. They wouldn't spare a twig for us to burn to heat our barracks in the church. We huddled together for warmth. Three of us died from the cold."

The man with the limp took a longer pause now to compose himself. These memories had taken an emotional toll. The depth of the suffering was written in the lines on his face and the tightness of his fists. In time, the man resumed his story.

"You may have noticed my limp. I received that when a section of their wall fell on my leg. The injury rendered me useless to them. They threw me in the open grave where my fellow townsfolk were decomposing. They figured the cold would kill me, and again they dare not waste their precious ammunition. I would prove their predictions wrong, however. I crawled out of the grave and inch by

inch made my way to a farmhouse on the outskirts of the town. I spent the next weeks healing my wounds while living on frozen potatoes."

"When the war was over, I left the village. There were too many bad memories. I made it my purpose in life to find this Captain Bartol and bring him to account. But he had fled the country. I tried again and again to find him but whenever I would get a clue, the trail eventually ran cold. I had all but given up hope of ever finding him. That is, until yesterday."

The bus was slowing to a stop. The bus driver shouted, "End of the line." The driver hopped from the bus and sought refuge from the weather in the coffee shop on the corner.

The man with the limp arose. He buttoned his overcoat and placed his hat on his head. "Shall we go for a walk?"

He felt it was futile to resist this man. He had the cold stare of one that would not take 'No.' very well.

"I suppose so."

The men exited the bus. The man with the limp pointed across the street. "Shall we walk in the park?"

"Yes. I think that's best."

As the men walked, a snow shower began to fall.

He was curious. "What happened yesterday?"

The man with the limp pulled his coat collar close to keep out the snow. "There was a news bulletin. As I watched I noticed a familiar face coming out of the building where you work."

"Ah, the bomb scare." The old man had been caught on camera leaving the building when it was evacuated mandatorily.

“Indeed. It was simply a matter of waiting until you got off work.” There he had said it. He had revealed all. The man, that the man with the limp sought, was he himself.

He knew this day might come, but with the passing of years it had seemed less and less likely. Perhaps this was for the best, though, the endless nights of dread and anticipation would finally be over.

They happened on a cluster of pine trees. “This might just do.” He opened his hands to indicate the relative privacy the trees offered.

The man with the limp stopped. “Yes. It will do.” The limping man pulled a revolver from his coat pocket and pointed it at the old man’s head.

He stood straight. “What I did then, I did for The Party.”

The man with the limp cocked the trigger of the gun. “What I do now, I do for justice.”

The falling snow softened the report of the weapon. The bus driver, not noticing the sound, took one last gulp of his coffee and threw the empty paper cup into a trash can. He boarded his bus and changed the sign on the front to read ‘City Center’.

