



**Yuri Shcherbak**

## **DRIVE WITHOUT LOOKING BACK**

Slowly, a walking stick clutched in his hands, he went up to the elevator. Its doors parted quietly and mysteriously like in a dream, inviting him to visit other – submissive and automatic – worlds. He stood still, taking in the empty, badly illuminated elevator car. Some seconds later the doors closed, and their rubbery reunion seemed to have produced a brief sigh of sadness. Leaning on the stick, he plodded down the stairs, feeling not only the leaden pain in his legs and broken ribs, but also the joy of the first victory over his body. On the second floor he had to stop for a rest. He passed a hand across the forehead and attentively looked at the palm: it was wet with sweat. From behind a door lined with dark-red leatherette came the solemn music of a grand piano – so passionately youthful and wonderfully incomprehensible that it was difficult to believe that it was played by a gray-haired granny who, with disheveled hair and wearing a faded flannelette dressing gown, appeared in the backyard every morning and fed pigeons; someone had stuck flowers into the slot of the mailbox on the granny's door. Or maybe no one had put them there at all. Maybe they had grown inside that apartment, filling it amply with the rosy flesh of their petals and bursting outside at long last with the music as an undisputed material evidence of the existence of this music? Reflecting on this wonder, he walked down to the dark main entrance, inhaled its damp, almost basement-like air, and pushed the door with his walking stick.

In front of him was a dazzling and blazingly hot day in August. He stood there not stirring, not daring to make a step from the darkness to the sun, from the music still floating from upstairs to the mundane sounds of the large backyard: a van with mineral water was being unloaded, the crates grating when pulled out along the tin-covered innards of the van, the bottles ringed tinkingly, and the driver of a gray Volga sedan was cussing loudly – he wanted to drive into the yard, but the van with the mineral water obstructed the way. Troyan's Zhiguli car, tied to a special rotation device, was lying on the side. Its owner lustily hammered away at the bottom painted with red lead, while the car looked now like a boat readied for launching.

The shouts of children attracted the attention of the man who stood in the door, leaning on his walking stick: several shrieking boys were running after Yurko, the son of the janitor, Yulia. At first he could not understand what made this noisy bevy circle erratically around the backyard and who was drawing the tangled line of their race. The children ran up closer, and only then did he figure out everything: Yurko held in his hand a thread, to which a white butterfly was tied. The butterfly was nervously and frantically flapping its wings and darting from side to side, without understanding what was going on, as it tried to fly upwards. For some reason he recalled

the old puzzle his auntie Dunia used to ask him to guess: "A legless bird came flying and alighted on a twig, then a mouthless gammer came along and gobbled up the legless bird. Now, what is it? A legless bird – that's the snow. Well, and what about the mouthless gammer? It's spring, of course, you silly. A mouthless gammer came along and gobbled up the legless bird – that's the beginning of summer for you."

The din behind his back compelled him to look around in fright – more than once now – as his memory revived the dark shadow of the truck and he experienced again the short and horrible moment of the expected blow, flight, weightlessness and darkness. The din came from the elevator – it was just the grating sound of the elevator car that had stopped on the ground floor.

Nobody paid any attention to the emaciated young man who, limping with the left foot and leaning on a walking stick, came out of the backyard. The children ran after the white butterfly, janitor Yulia continued beating the dust out of a sumptuous three-meter-long carpet with a tennis racket, the driver of the gray Volga sedan was furiously pressing the horn, having lost all confidence in the convincingness of his voice bawling horrible damnations, while the loaders, absolutely oblivious to the clangorous horn, were pulling out the crates with the bottles: one of them, a young fellow in a red track suit, dashingly carried the crates in front of him, while his older mate in gray greasy overalls hauled them onto his back. These were his acquaintances, but puffing and panting that they were now, they did not notice him. He walked out into the street and stopped, astonished by the grandeur of what he saw: at the factory opposite his house the shift had just ended and people were streaming out of the gates, immediately increasing and multiplying the crowd on the sidewalk and the zebra crossing (crosswalk), making the cars slow down. Now the cars were quietly creeping through a dense human corridor, time and again stopping before the people who were crossing the street. Most of the workers emerging from the factory were young people and their faces and pace excited him – the shadow of fatigue on their faces no more than underlined the concentrated, serene beauty of those who had finished the shift. For the first time he seemed to have seen himself offside, realizing for the first time that he, too, when walking out of the gates of his factory, was proceeding at the same unhurried pace of a tired man, not alone, not in a detached random crowd, because these people coming out of the factory gates could nowise be called a crowd. How can a column of marchers or a group of people united by a common movement and a common goal be a crowd? After seeing himself being just like these young people from a factory he did not belong to, he envied his past, now so distant, inaccessible and beautiful. He realized what happiness was about: to be like everybody else. Not to differ from them in any way. To be together with these people. To walk out of the gates of his factory, exchanging jokes with the girls from his department, agree with the boys about going to the stadium, part with them at a bus stop, get onto a bicycle and drive off bent over the handlebars, pedaling on without looking back, only ahead, and imagining to be an entrant in a cycle race.

Not far from his house there was a little photographer's studio. Overcoming pain, he hobbled to the studio and went inside. Such a lot of customers had crammed the place for an urgent photo that there was no room to swing a cat. In the little cubicle, where the photographic action took place, lamps were shining brilliantly, heating up the air that was already swelteringly hot. He joined the line behind two girls of thirteen-fourteen years of age. The line was tightly coiled like a watch spring. The girls standing in front of him (dressed in mini skirts and identical jersey sweaters tightly fitting their skinny bodies of teenagers) were in an almost maniacal state of coquetry, suffering from an incurable malaise at this age – the desire to attract attention in every possible way. They talked loudly about some Alex, affecting such meaningful manners and

pauses as if he were the Prince of Wales, and then – suddenly and for no obvious reason – burst into ostentatious roars of laughter or tittered. It seemed to him that the skin, hair, shoulders and backs of these girls were feeling the looks of the boys and men surrounding them, and if such looks were lacking (as they mostly were), the girls invented them in their minds. The girl in front of him worriedly straightened the sweater where the first naive swell of breasts was evident. In the childish awkwardness of her movements, in the extension of the pale fingers and subtle defenselessness of her neck something immortally feminine was already showing through. He smiled, imagining for some reason these coquettes in the attire of the Middle Ages – two lanky princesses smitten with first love.

As a matter of fact, he didn't have to stand in the line, because being photographed was not his intention. He came here just to have a look at the unfamiliar girl he had been frequently thinking about while in hospital – not at the girl he never saw in his life, but the one on the photograph nine by twelve centimeters in size. The photograph was lying under the glass on the desk of the receptionist who filed the orders. The stranger was a dark-haired girl with a short haircut. Several months ago – before the accident with the dump truck – he saw this photograph for the first time and some joyous foretoken stirred in his heart; it was something new and unknown, unlike any of that shallow and quickly passing excitement he had earlier experienced when he fell in love with girls. For the first time he was visited by a feeling of deep and complete happiness, the existence of which he did not even suspect. The girl in the photograph did not belong to the photo beauties such a run-of-the-mill studio as this one could be proud of. More likely than not, she was not beautiful, what with her large wire-rimmed eyeglasses and a smile that had something of the boyish, insolent and derisive about it. Probably her photograph was displayed by accident, but not for advertising purposes.

He understood what this girl was and could be for him – a sunshine – when he was laid up in hospital, mutilated and immobile, hovering between life and death. One day in summer, at six o'clock in the morning, when he was lying at an open window of his ward, he was roused from sleep by a warm touch of the sun after his horrible, hopeless and disordered dreams. They haunted him every night like a TV serial, monotonous and filled with brutal details: his descent into the kingdom of the dead, into the cold catacombs of another world where merciless, mud-splashed dump trucks empty as the skulls of exhumed animals were driving around. Frightfully waiting for the advent of night at the hospital, he realized why people needed these horrible dreams: to acquire a better understanding of the happiness of awakening and returning to the life and joy that a summer sun brings at sick o'clock in the morning, when everyone in the ward is still asleep and only the nurse on duty carries in the syringes and thermometers.

The line had moved ahead perceptibly, and an old woman wearing a white children's Panama hat came up to the receptionist's desk. Opening a cardboard folder, the woman produced two photographs and extended them to the receptionist. On one small photograph the firm features of a young face stood out among the yellowish blots of time. The man wore a military cap and service shirt. The other photograph was larger in size and not so old, showing the woman together with an elderly man, his bald head leaning toward her.

"That's my husband," she said, pointing at the serviceman. "And that's my son. Could you make it so that we'd be together, in one picture?"

"Sure," the receptionist said in a tired voice. "We can do everything."

The photograph of the girl for whose sake he had come here was no longer where it had been. Instead, there was a greasy price list. The receptionists pulled it out and after licking it with her forefinger, began to turn the pages.

The photograph of the girl was gone.

Under the glass there was now a portrait of a plump boy dressed as a rabbit with long ears sticking out like the propeller blades of an old airplane. How come? Where had the photograph of the girl disappeared? Or maybe it had not been there at all? Maybe this girl did not exist in this world? Now don't worry, don't jump to conclusions, he told himself. Look more attentively, what if the photograph was moved to another place? But the dark-eyed girl had disappeared. Why hadn't he approached the photographer and asked for the invoice to find out at least the girl's surname? He'd have done that if it were not for the dump truck.

He was seized with despair as if he had lost the closest friend, the one without whom life had no sense. Short of air in this miserable studio and infuriated by the silly hee-haw of the two crazy princesses, he pushed his way out of the line. Near the entrance stood a huge glistening drum of a drying and glazing machine that resembled a road roller. He looked with disgust at his grotesquely distorted reflection – a short-legged and lop-sided creature capable of arousing only pity. He thought how quickly he would have dealt with this freak had it appeared on a TV screen. He recalled the plain and comprehensible world of his factory: hundreds of TV sets standing on shelves, TV-lined walls and TV-lined narrow corridors of the engineering control department, and the spectral glimmer of the TV screens subordinated to the logical and coherent laws of electronics. Their sound was switched off, the announcers moving their lips like fish in an aquarium. After several years of work at the factory he learned to make out almost unerringly what the announcers and correspondents were talking about, as if he had gone through a course in a school for the deaf-and-dumb, and when looking at the face of a singer, he could tell what voice he had: in most cases it was a lusty baritone that performed joyous songs about distant forest ranges and dreams come true.

It'll be tomorrow, he decided. Whatever may be, but I'll drive to the factory tomorrow, because otherwise I'll go nuts for idleness, boredom and loneliness. The boys will be surely surprised.

At last the backyard noticed his appearance, his resurrection from the dead.

"Good God!" Yulia exclaimed, clasping her hands. "What misfortune! You look like someone taken off the cross. How do you feel?"

"Fine," he said, his eyes searching Yurko with the butterfly. "Everything's all right."

"Did they find the villain that hit you?"

"Still looking for him."

Troyan was painting the bottom of his car in something black that looked like tar.

"Patched you up?" he said, making it sound more like a statement than a question. "Listen, how old are you? Twenty-six? So when will you become dry behind the ears at last? Haven't you any brains in your nugget?" Troyan tapped his forehead with a finger, leaving a black trace just where the Hindu women paint their red marks. "Take some pity on your parents, if you don't pity yourself. I told you many times – get rid of that dratted bicycle, because no good will come out of it. Quit the factory. What the hell do you need it for? Just driving there ten kilometers – is that a joke for you? Join our workshop, you've got hands of gold, the pay is good and you'll get something extra every day. Buy yourself a car, say, an old Zaporozhets; after all, it's got four wheels unlike that sorry contraption of yours. It's time you got married, boy, and rear children. If this smash-up doesn't teach you a lesson, then ..."

He switched off Troyan's sound like he did on the TV sets. The black tar was running in heavy streamlets onto the asphalt where it formed glistening oil-like puddles. He wanted to sit down on the bench under the sun and slumber a little bit so that the sun warm his face and the

leaves rustle overhead. In an attempt to withstand the temptation, he walked to the upper part of the backyard. Near the transformer vault stood a row of sheds. After he opened the rusty lock of his shed the first thing he saw was a small rosy potato lying right by the door at the meeting point between the strip of shadow and light and warmth. A pale sprout ran from the young potato into the depth of the shed. Forgetting about the pain, he bent over the potato, carefully touched its warmed body, and lightly ran his fingers along the sprout like a signalman along a telephone wire. The slightly cold, brittle sprout proved to be long – almost two meters – and stretched into the darkness and dampness. It was only in the farthest corner of the shed that he found by groping something rotten and sleazy, out of which the sprout had grown. This was the point from which its persistent movement to light had started. It was a half-rotten, old potato of last year's harvest, which had rolled under the boards by accident.

For some unknown reason he gave a subdued and joyous laugh. The pain and weakness in his body had receded, and it seemed to him that he was hearing marvelous and incomprehensible music coming from the second floor, although, of course, the sounds of the grand piano could not reach the shed. He pulled outdoors an old bicycle he hadn't been riding for several years. His hands turned dark-gray from the dust. He stood the bicycle on its handlebars wheels upward and turned a pedal. The roller chain was slackened, but the wheel turned quite easily, even without squeaking. Intoxicated by an inconceivable joy, he exultingly turned the pedal for a long time, and when he let it go, the spokes merged into a solid shimmering disk.

Standing before the bicycle without tearing his eyes off this wonder, he knew that he would again straddle the saddle and bend over the handlebars, and again ride ahead without looking back, because when a cyclist begins looking back, he will inevitably be frightened by the trucks overtaking and outspeeding him, and he will be frightened by the hot air wave that pushes him off the road. He must not be made to sway, he must not be afraid to drive onto the highway, not paying any attention to the rattling trucks, not succumbing to their brutal, implacable speed, but drive on, without thinking about the dump trucks, in defiance of bad weather and rain, of Troyan's lecturing, of his parents' fright, drive on to his friends and the job he liked, drive on, thinking about the unfamiliar dark-haired girl, drive on in anticipation of happiness.

**Translated by Anatole Bilenko**