

## On the Trolley Bus Ring

Vladimir Skrebitsky

Translated from the Russian by Avril Pyman

### I

*It was yet another day* he hadn't done his stint — not making the round even of half the trolley buses running along the Garden Ring, not picking up even half the cancelled tickets from the floor. If things were to go on like that, he'd simply get the sack: who would want such a worker!

But what could he do, how could he make it in such a jostle — just as you try to bend down, they almost lay you out. Everyone's in a hurry, no one cares for you, everyone's got their work, their own problems.

His work consisted of picking up tickets. He had to go through all the trolley buses of the "B" (Belt) route making sure not a single ticket was left lying on the floor. His shift started at eight and ended at five, with a one hour lunch break. Then, obviously, someone else had to take it over. But that was not his responsibility. He wasn't complaining. After all, this job wasn't any worse than many others. Take, for example, one of his neighbors, who was a cashier at a food store: sitting in her booth all day long, asking which department, clicking her abacus . . . What was so much better about that?

His other neighbor was a waitress at a cafeteria. He would go there during the lunch break. It was very convenient because the cafeteria was located just opposite the trolley bus stop. He would eat his lunch and, losing no time, go back to work. As for him, though, he would never, not for love nor money, agree to work at a cafeteria. He wasn't into stationary jobs: he needed to be always on the move, always traveling, changing places, keeping himself continually busy. That, after all, is the very essence of any job. That's why it feels so scary to

think you might lose it. It's not that you'd have nothing to live on – you could manage somehow – his allowance was small, anyway. But having nowhere to go, nothing to do – that's what was really terrifying! What's the use saying that housework is never done, not in a hundred years. Nonsense. You can't stay indoors for long, the walls start closing in on you. Being at loose ends is equally absurd. You've got to work – you can't live without it. If only it could be a little bit better organized. But how? How did one set about it?

Several times he tried to think through the matter, but nothing ever did come out. The thoughts were absolutely hazy, he couldn't even remember who had assigned him to this job, who had told him what to do, when to start and when to end his work. Definitely, there was someone, for he couldn't have devised it all by himself. But, when he tried to think about it, he had a somewhat uneasy, uncomfortable feeling, as if something inside him was being displaced. He even felt nauseated. That's why after two or three unsuccessful attempts to find out, he realized this kind of activity wasn't good for him. And, after all, did it really matter? He knew for certain that he had to turn up at work, he knew where and when, he knew what he was supposed to do. So, what else?

There were times, however, when he suspected he wasn't doing quite the right thing. But who hasn't had such suspicions? To think about that was just pointlessly racking your brain. Sometimes he was overcome with an idea that nothing had ever needed to be done in the first place: do it or not – what did it matter? But this idea seemed so disgusting that he always tried to fight it off. It didn't stay long, anyway.

Oh, no. Not always. Sometimes it did. And it didn't just stay, it pressed down on him, squeezing him flat. Then, he would stay in bed for a day or two or three. It felt so sickening both inside and outside: as if everything was covered with slime, and there was only one desire left — to fall asleep and never wake again.

But then it would pass. He would wake up in the morning – as if nothing had happened. Everything forgotten. Hard even to bring it back to mind – what was it, why was it? He wouldn't want to remember it, anyway. Everything bad seemed to have been scrubbed off him, and he again needed to go to work. And how good it felt!

On that day, he couldn't stay late at work. He needed to go to the Polytechnic Museum. Some kind of exhibition was on, something related to trolley buses. He wouldn't say it interested him that much, but there was someone he had to meet there. Or, rather, someone

had told him he should visit the exhibition and hinted that he was also going to be there himself.

He had never seen the man before. He had unintentionally struck up a conversation with him on the trolley bus, having noticed the man seemed interested in his work.

Normally, he wouldn't talk to passengers — what was there to talk about: they were getting to work and he was at work; to each his own. But that man's look was very earnest, as if thoughtful; probably, that's why he had dared to accost him. What's more, as he was telling him about his work, the man didn't smile not once, but instead kept nodding, and even looked slightly sad as if he felt sorry for him. He had even wanted to cheer the man up, telling him not to worry because his job wasn't that bad, after all.

Then, it seemed to him the man couldn't make up his mind whether to tell him something or not. And then, the man had decided to tell him about the exhibition, saying that he should definitely visit it . . . and shot him a significant kind of glance. And then added that he was certainly going to be there himself.

He had agreed without a second thought and even pretended the exhibition interested him very much. Leaving the trolley bus, he had again confirmed (on his own, this time nobody urged him to) that he'd be sure to be there that evening, and inquired about the exhibition's closing time. The man bent his head and closed his eyes, as if to say it was a deal and they'd see each other again tonight.

As soon as he got off the trolley bus, he realized he shouldn't have made this arrangement. What use to him were that exhibition and that man? Why the hell should he go there, who made him promise all that?

How he hated the idea of going there, how stupid it all was!

He started talking himself into doing it, but somehow got so confused and felt such anguish that he was almost willing to fling himself under a car.

As always, his work saved him. While he was scuttling between trolley buses, trying to decide which one was better to board, his anguish started to dissipate. It was not so tragic, after all; maybe the exhibition would arouse some interest in him. If only it had been possible to end his work a little bit earlier and take a break first.

But how! He could hardly get home and have a cup of tea, when the exhibition closed at seven . . .

When he pushed into a crowded Metro carriage, the absurdity of the idea of going to this exhibition became absolutely clear to him. He must have been a total idiot to let himself agree to anything so stupid.

“All right, all right, since it happened, it couldn’t be helped“ — he kept on reassuring himself — “I’ll just drop in for a minute without looking at the exhibits, what the hell use are they to me! I’ll just ask the man what he wants from me, and go back home. Go back and hit the sack!”

Near the entrance to the Museum, a small crowd had gathered, but he immediately recognized the man he was expecting. He was standing away from the others, hiding behind a newspaper. He went right up to him. The newspaper was lowered. Behind it was an old man he didn’t know wearing spectacles.

He entered the vestibule. A group of people beside the cloak room were trying to hide someone. He went straight through the middle. They gave way, there was no one behind them.

. . . Already half an hour had passed and he’d been walking around the museum, feeling different people staring at him, yet nobody came up to him or tried to ask him questions.

Indifferent as he was to all the items on display, he nevertheless couldn’t fail to notice that the exhibition had virtually nothing to do with trolley buses. From the fragments of overheard conversations, he understood it was a Japanese industrial exhibition which, among other items, featured automobiles but definitely not trolley buses. Displayed in the center of one of the halls was a Japanese racing car.

The exhibition was becoming less and less crowded. He thought his man would come when the place became completely empty.

There was a young couple standing beside the racing car. The young man was trying to push his girl friend onto the driver’s seat. She resisted his efforts, giggling. Suddenly, a bell sounded.

“Dear guests, it’s seven o’clock already. We are closing. Please vacate the premises.”

He was left alone with the racing car. “What? What does it mean? Am I allowed to go?”

“Young man, are you going to spend the night in here?”

An old man wearing a red arm-band approached him.

No, he wasn't going to do that. He felt hope stirring inside him. Without stopping or looking back, he went to the cloak room and, next minute, was engulfed by the street.

He was walking in a blissful, relaxed mood, teasing and comforting himself.

“What a silly boy. Dreaming up such dumb things! Where did you get such ideas? Why did you frighten yourself so? Are you that important? Whoever needs to follow you? What kind of a big shot do you think you are?”

The evening city was radiating good will. The Metro welcomed him hospitably, and he enjoyed spreading out in his seat. Well, as a matter of fact, today hadn't gone so badly after all. A good day's work done in the morning. It hadn't gone so well in the afternoon, though. But we'll make up for that tomorrow. After work, he had been to that exhibition. True, that bit hadn't gone so well, either. He smiled again.

“Oh, what a softy. You can't behave like other people. You didn't even take a look at the exhibits. Imagine remembering only that racing car. But never mind! This is not the last day. Maybe some other day you'll go there again. Maybe that man will come too, after all. He must have been meant it for the best suggesting you go there . . . Oh, what a softy . . .”

He remembered how nervous he had felt, running to the Metro. This time, he wouldn't be in such a hurry: he'd take a nice stroll, return home, have his tea and then fall asleep. . .

Interesting, had they finally finished building that house in Lev Tolstoy street? Will it have loggias or not? . . .

He started dozing and nearly missed his stop.

## II

*Working in autumn* was especially difficult: it grew dark early, passengers didn't wipe sleet off their feet, and it felt almost disgusting to pick up tickets in the slush, not to mention the fact one could easily miss them.

Passengers, however, seemed a different sort of people to him. Crossing the threshold of a trolley bus, they became a part of the world which he had been consecrated to serve. He regarded them as guests, pupils – peevish, ungrateful, but nonetheless familiar. Because of their bad manners or out of mere carelessness, they threw tickets on the floor – while his

job was to pick them up and arrange them in neat piles on his bookshelf at home, because nothing made by human hands deserved to be discarded and trodden in mud. . . As a matter of fact, he was doing the same thing everybody did at his work place: maintaining the necessary balance without which the whole world would have long ago been plunged into chaos and filth.

But, outside trolley buses, all people seemed alien to him. He had almost no communication with his neighbors in the communal flat. What was he supposed to talk about? Once home, he immediately locked himself up in his room and was happiest when no sound from outside penetrated his seclusion. Without turning the light on, he would sit down on the sofa, put a cushion under his back, and feel how the emptiness started taking shape inside him. All the happenings of the past day and many events from previous days, various thoughts and memories, haphazardly accumulated in his head, were compressed into great compact layers and gradually peeled away, leaving him more and more hollow. And he himself turned into an emptiness absolutely detached from the life about him. Although this life, resembling a dirty sewer, continued to make itself felt through a loudspeaker blaring from the street or through a tape recorder squealing behind the wall, he became indifferent and unsusceptible to it. Becoming void, he soared over roof tops, higher and higher. The world, seen from so high above, no longer seemed to him as abominable and disgusting. Sometimes he would be transported to other parts of the universe where he saw different cities and slate roofs, and streets which somehow seemed familiar to him, but he knew he couldn't go beyond that point: this was the beginning of slumber, which he didn't like at all. It was enticingly sweet but also very deceptive: at any time it might turn into something abhorrent. He liked to be a void. . . That was his life-style – when he came back from work, nobody was allowed to enter his room and disturb him.

Only one neighbor was permitted to enter his room – the lady who worked at the cafeteria. She would do the room and bring food for supper. It had started long ago, when his mother was still alive. They had been friends, his mother and this lady. Mother, of course, was much older, and her friend used to come and complain that her husband had left her. Mother would soothe her, saying that, perhaps, living without a husband was even better. And then she, in her turn, would complain of her poor health and of what would happen to him when she died. At that time, he was doing really badly. He hadn't yet found this job and was loafing in the street or staying in bed all day. So, when his mother was taken to the

hospital, this lady had brought him there twice, and when his mother finally died, hadn't be able to decide how to tell him about it. She was pacing the room, dusting here and there, moving this or that . . . and finally she had been struck by the indifference with which he accepted the news. She had almost forced him to go to the funeral (at that time, he had just got the job and had to establish himself). During the burial ceremony, everybody wondered at his being so cold and indifferent. But he went to the cemetery again in the evening, alone this time, and wept like a madman, burying his face and hands in the mound of fresh earth, not because he missed his mother but because he didn't want to live any longer and didn't want to go back to that filthy house, to that empty room. . .

Next morning, he went to work and, for the first time in his life, realized what great happiness and deliverance it brought him.

### III

*He woke up well rested* and refreshed, and, lying in bed, thought over everything he had to do during the day. It was pleasant thinking, his mind was clear and concentrated, his thoughts weren't slipping away. He envisaged the whole day before him, step by step: how he'd get up, go to work, say hello to the driver of the first trolley bus, inspect the aisle between the seats, apologize to the seated passengers and look for possible tickets under their feet, walk to the rear of the trolley bus. . . He tried to picture the details as clearly as possible, and when they became fully clear to his inner view, he turned the picture off so that his conscious mind would become void, and now he knew he had to be up and going or else some filth would creep into this emptiness, and then the whole day would be ruined.

He went out to the street with a sensation of hazy lightness. There were people standing at the trolley bus stop. He approached them as if he were just an ordinary passenger like them. As if for him also the trolley buses were just a means of transport and not his work, not his vocation. He leaned against a tree trying to guess which one of the trolley buses would come first. He might recognize any of them by sight. They were his fosterlings, his children: big-browed, willful, sometimes a bit silly, each with its own character and its own little ways. . . That one, for instance — the Bullet-Head, always gets his contact shaft snapped off the wires. . .

But this morning, it wasn't the Bullet-Head who came first. It was the Gentleman. He gave it that nickname himself. This one, indeed, was a real gentleman, you couldn't call it otherwise: always correct, fast, extremely well-functioning. Very warm and clean inside. People who came aboard always felt they had to behave themselves here.

He didn't spend much time on the Gentleman. Actually, there was nothing to do at all. Not a single ticket was seen on the floor. Under the back seat, there was a cigarette butt. He picked it up and got off near the Gorki Park Metro station. The next trolley bus hadn't appeared yet and he again leaned against a tree and started watching the passing cars. Well, another working day begun. There were some three or four trolley buses to catch – then it would be lunch time. And after lunch, the end of work would be in sight. So, days raced by. A day might look as if it would never end, but just turn around, and you'll see it's been gone in a wink, and you begin to count in years, not days. You couldn't remember well when this or that actually happened – just the odds glimpse. Once, he was getting off a trolley bus which hadn't yet come to a halt, and sprained an ankle – when was that? Two or four years ago; hard to say. So many years had passed since he started working on trolley buses, but it seemed as if it was only yesterday when he picked his first ticket from the floor. . . By a mere accident, following some vague instinct. He saw a ticket lying on the floor, bent down and picked it up: first this one, then another and already he was looking deliberately to see if he could find any more. . . That's how it all started.

Only then did he realize that with these tickets the sprawling minutes could be bound together, that by collecting them he might even set in motion the stopped clock of time. This was his mission in life, his profession, this was what he had been called into God's world to do, just as anyone else might have been called to be a pilot or a head of a government. Here, the knot of his days was tied up, and everything that previously had been no more than a pastime, found sense and justification. Here, he finally realized why he had to get up in the morning and go to bed in the evening. Now everything was explained, everything in its proper place. . .

He stood, leaning against a tree and watched cars speeding by. It was one of those days in October that seem to fall out of continuity, existing as if on their own. And every thought appearing on such a day existed on its own and dissolved quietly in contemplation as do jet contrails in the sky, as does the soul exposing itself to peace and hope.



He stood and thought how beautiful it must be in the country now. Next Sunday, early in the morning, he'd go somewhere for a whole day of wandering through forest glades and coppices, enjoying still distant landscapes. . . On such days, the Lord himself admires the beauty of the world he created. . .

He thought that, in fact, he had little to complain of in his life – as far as the most important things were concerned, it was quite a success. For instance, how lucky he was to work on trolley buses. Neither on those smart-alecky buses, nor on the gloomy tramways banished to the city outskirts and crushed by their inferiority complex, but precisely on trolley buses: stately, unhurried, never overtaking, like swans circling. . .

He inspected several more trolley buses, lunched, worked for another couple of hours and, riding past the street clock in Smolenskaya Square, saw it was already a quarter past five and his working day was already fifteen minutes overtime. . .

He quickly ran up the stairs to his apartment. This day's end seemed just as unclouded as its beginning had been: now he was going to rest awhile, have some tea and then go to the last showing of a movie. It was a new French comedy. Apparently, some silly stuff again, but he didn't care. After another worthwhile day, how pleasant it was to relax in a dark cinema and then unhurriedly return home, thinking about his Sunday outing.

#### IV

*She had promised to come at seven p.m.* but he had completed his preparations already by six o'clock. On this day, he had intentionally gone to work one hour earlier in order to be able to leave in the same way. He knew it was allowed. On the way back, he was lucky to buy a small bouquet of Michaelmas daisies that decorated his room quite nicely. He thought he might afford this even without such a special occasion: just a few little flowers, but the room began to look quite different. It was even hard to believe. His room had everything he needed: the dining table at which he ate, the sofa on which he slept, several chairs and the old chest of drawers which he never opened but knew contained linen. On the chest of drawers, there were a TV set which he never watched so he didn't even know whether it was functioning or not and an enlarged photo of his mother set into a frame.

It was an amateur photograph taken during the war. Mother, wearing a nurse's uniform, looked relatively young.

To make a long story short, he had everything an ordinary man might need; probably, only a pet was lacking. And now, these flowers. . .

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to find a vase for the flowers, so he had to put them into an empty milk bottle. Then he produced two cups with saucers and two little jam dishes. He didn't know which kind of jam she preferred, but, happily for him, there was nothing to choose from at the grocers', so he bought some mixed preserves, hoping that she wouldn't be too demanding on their first date.

So, once the preparations were over, he had only to wait. When she arrived, he would have her seated on the sofa and start telling her about himself. He would tell her about things he'd never told anybody else. He would talk to her as he talked to himself but even better, much better. In fact, he talked to himself every day, but this time he'd be talking with her — it would be so different. Probably, she would want to watch TV. He turned the power switch on to make sure the TV worked.

She hadn't said straight out that she would come at seven. Maybe she was shy about her aunt, his neighbor, whom she was visiting on the day she had made the date. She hadn't once addressed him directly, but she had looked at him several times when he came into the kitchen, given him a smile, and then, on leaving — and he had somehow or other been hanging around in the hall — she had several times distinctly repeated today's date, and, afterwards, somewhat less loudly, the time — 7:00 p.m. — and then looked at him once again. What else needed to be said! He was the kind of person who was very quick in the uptake, for whom a nod was, on occasion, every bit good as a wink. Just one special intonation, just one sideways glance, and everything was clear to him. When anything was not clear from the outset, then however much people talked and explained it never became any clearer.

That work of his required precisely these qualities: always being tense, high-strung; overlooking nothing, having in-depth understanding and perception of each and every passenger. Such work wasn't suitable for just anyone, only special people were required for it, the people like him. There had been no admission examination — they saw right through you straight away, and you were required to follow suit.

He had this intuitive understanding not only of people but of animals as well. When their flat was being renovated, his mother had sent him to live with his aunt's family. They

had a little dog there, not a pedigreed one: quite an ordinary, simple dog, a mongrel. But it was such a clever, intelligent creature. He was aware of it all the time, sensed all its feelings as his own. They would sit at the dining table and it would be standing close he felt on pins and needles, unable to eat, aware of the poor little dog all the time, feeling for it, how it must be not to be fed. And, during the night, he would also sense the dog, its yearning, its uneasiness and, because of that, would feel ten times more uneasy than it did and couldn't even sleep. Finally, he had become so upset by the dog that his mother had had to bring him home, not waiting for the renovation to end. Other people had no empathy for the dog. They'd just feed it in a corner of the hall and let it out for a walk, but the rest of the time it might just as well have not existed.

He glanced at his watch. Three minutes past seven.

What if she doesn't come?

Nonsense, nonsense. She said she would.

What if she doesn't come?

That sort of thing couldn't happen, he knew it for sure. . .

What if she doesn't come?

She can't not come. She promised. . .

Still, if she doesn't come after all, then what?

I don't know, I don't know.

He dithered and came up to the table.

What if she wouldn't come? At that moment, the bell sounded from the hall. A weight fell from his heart. He cast a final glance at his room and ran to open the door.

But it wasn't she. It was a neighbor's son coming home from school. Somehow he decided to use the doorbell although he had a key. . .

He returned to the room. Something had happened. Before, he had been communicating, talking with someone. But now this link was broken.

He suddenly felt very strange: as if something had passed from his chest down to the lower abdomen, then ran like a chill from spine to neck and then back to his chest. . .

What if she doesn't come? She won't come. It is quite clear she won't come now. What made you think she would? Idiot. Trolley-bus-crazy idiot. She did promise! Ha-ha. Idiot. Idiot. She'll be watching television. Ha-ha.

Everything inside him was jerking: down his back, in his chest, he couldn't pull himself together, everything was shaking. Idiot. Idiot. He collapsed on the sofa. All right, then! Ah, if that's the way it is! He felt a supple living rod between his fingers. Ah well, if she doesn't come – I don't care. Damn her!

And, as soon as he started doing it, he became aware of himself, and all the muck both inside him and on the walls instantly took shape, heaved and spread along the rod, started quivering, shaking . . . more, more, and more again. Suddenly it burst, then everything fell away, so that only the emptiness remained inside him and he was the emptiness. . . A kind of fog came down: a winter day, he and his mother in the country, skiers speeding downhill . . . he would grow up and learn to ski, but there is a lion looking at him from a page of a large wild animal picture book and he is drawing spectacles around the lion's eyes; there at the dacha the path is so fragrant in the evening, the older boys are playing volleyball and he is told not to get in the way, but in the evening he may go and watch the steamboat. .

But she won't come: not today, not tomorrow – never! So the tension inside him begins to build again, and he doesn't need to watch television with her on the sofa, not in the least; this, this is what he needs. . .

After he had done it again and then again – everything collapsed, nothing was left.

## V

*The weather had been bad* for three days now. It was hard to imagine that just a little time ago it had been so clear, sunny and nice. Now it was pouring rain, rain drops were drumming on the sill, flowing down the panes, everything was filled with a uniform gray mass that never let up from dawn to sunset, only growing more and more impenetrable.

He was lying fully dressed on the sofa, covered by a blanket, a pillow under his head. His damp socks and shoes were scattered on the floor nearby. He didn't go to work: rose at about two in the afternoon, lunched at the cafeteria, getting himself all drenched on the way, and went back to bed. He had been feverish for the whole day; after lunch he fell into an unpleasant sleep and woke up with a headache. By evening, he was feeling really rotten and couldn't even imagine how he would get himself to work tomorrow, but he had to go.

Usually, he was allowed to miss a day or two. Not that it was officially permitted, but all the signs were that his seniors were prepared to overlook a temporary absence. He took advantage of this opportunity every now and again. But now it was different: a monthly safety-on-the-roads campaign was underway, so all the transport workers were required to adhere to the strictest discipline. He was always hearing that tardiness and absenteeism were considered absolutely unacceptable; he might be fired even for the slightest breach. He understood only too well what being out of work would mean to him: staying within four walls, having nowhere to go; or hanging out at loose ends in the street as he had done before. . .

It was about nine o'clock, when the door opened and his attentive neighbor appeared on the threshold. She entered the room, closed the door, and stood there for some time without turning on the light or saying anything. Then she came closer to the sofa.

"Why are you lying there with your clothes on?" He didn't answer.

"Are you ill or what?" Again he didn't answer.

She went back to the door and turned on the light.

"Today we had chicken puree soup. I brought you some. Would you like some?" He shook his head.

"Why?"

"Don't want anything."

"Have you eaten today?" Still no response.

"Anything happen?"

She sat on the edge of the sofa and adjusted his blanket. Then she touched his forehead and looked at the damp shoes.

"Hey, you've got a temperature. Good heavens! That's all you need! You haven't even got another pair of shoes. You'll have to forget about going out tomorrow. Understand?"

He stared in front of him gloomily and kept silence. Then he forced himself to say:

"Tomorrow I've got to work."

"No, you don't have to, you have a temperature and nobody goes to work running a fever."

"I'll get fired."

"No, you won't. They don't fire people who are ill. It's against the law."

"I have to go."

She fell silent, thinking.

”Let’s do it this way,” she said finally. “You’ll stay in, and I’ll go there and arrange everything. I know they value you. So they’ll allow you to stay at home for several days.”

”How can you do it if you have no authority?”

“But I do have the authority, the ultimate authority. You want me to show you the document, I can do that.”

No, he didn’t need to be shown anything, he never had believed in all that paperwork. Something moved inside him, started melting, flowing. . . Yes, yes, how was it that he hadn’t known it before, of course she had the authority. He even knew where from: from his mother. His mother had also been invested with immense authority, she could take a great many things on herself, had been able to relieve him of many worries. He had shunned her during her last years, though, wishing to be independent. . .

Half an hour passed, and he was still crying, not ashamed of his tears and the idiotic way he looked.

She was sitting beside him, looking straight ahead with a strange fixed stare. Every now and then she stroked his hair and, when he started sobbing harder, she repeated again and again:

”There, there. I’ll arrange it. Everything’s going to be all right, everything’s going to be all right.”