THE UNION OF SOVIET THINGS

BY

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The Tompkins Agency for
Ukrainian Literature in Translation
www.tault.org

Part One

A CARAMEL, BANANAS, AND NUCLEAR WAR

They were taking the train from Kyiv to Lviv: one to see his mom, the other, his grandma. One was going for the visit; the other was too, but also because he had been promised a birthday present, a present every teenager dreams of. Fields covered in the pale green of winter crops and forests whose leaves were just beginning to fall flew past the window. The Intercity train could cover almost 350 miles in five hours. It would have arrived even sooner, but for some reason it stopped for a whole minute in Korosten.

The conductor scanned their tickets right from the screen of their tablet. The name on the child's ticket was Matviy; the adult one said Petro.

At first Matviy played on the tablet. His character jumped from skyscraper to skyscraper, destroying his enemies and scooping up gold coins. Later he got bored and looked out the window. He sighed and shook his father by the shoulder, bringing him back from the nap he was drifting into. Matviy said the train was barely moving and that he felt sorry for his dad because he didn't have

smartphones or tablets when he was a kid. He probably would have died of boredom on that train!

Petro stretched and said, no, that his childhood hadn't been boring at all.

"Well, how did you and your friends decide to go out and play?" Matviy asked.

"You could call them on the phone. Of course, not everyone had a home phone. Ours was for two apartments, so when our neighbor was on the phone, I had to wait."

"You see!"

"No, it was no problem! I could just go to my friend's house, ring the doorbell, and ask if Sashko could come out and play." Petro was trying to convince him things weren't that bad in his day.

"Eh," his son made a face.

"You could also stand under the window and yell. We'd get two or three of us, so it'd be louder, and then we'd shout, 'Oksaaaana! Vasyyyyl!'" his father said, but without much enthusiasm.

Matviy smiled skeptically. He checked out the gray hairs in his father's beard, the bald spot getting bigger and bigger on the top of his head, the wrinkles that popped up across the bridge of his nose when his dad squinted at his phone's screen. What did he have left? Okay, maybe twenty or thirty years. You probably

can't live long with wrinkles or a bald spot like that. Matviy felt sorry for his dad. What a fossil…

"Dad, were there computers when you were a kid?"

"No."

"So, what, was there no internet either?"

"Of course not. We got that when I started college. And it was really expensive. And to go online, you had to make a phone call."

The son looked at his father as if he was pulling his leg. That's like saying that to take a shower you had to turn on the iron.

"We couldn't travel abroad either," Petro said thoughtfully. "Only if you got really lucky, and then only to other countries in the socialist camp."

Now Dad was using unheard-of terms. What's a "socialist camp"? But Matviy didn't ask because he didn't want to get a boring lecture. Then he'd have to pretend like he was paying attention, and that would be awful. So, Matviy, who was going to turn fourteen in a week, asked his dad to tell him about his childhood. For example, about daycare or school. He could tell him quickly and then go get wieners from the café car. A Polish sausage in a rye bun. And a latte.

His dad was quiet for a bit. He wiped his glasses with his handkerchief, gathered his thoughts, and said, "Would you like me to tell you the story of Nakonechna?"

"Who's Nakonechna?"

"A girl from our daycare."

Matviy winced. No way did he want to listen to some story about some girl from Dad's daycare. Especially since now she was an old lady, just as bald and wrinkly as Dad. That is, if she was even still alive. But Matviy was so bored that he decided he could even listen to a story about her. If he didn't like it, he could always interrupt and ask for a hot dog.

Petro stared at the monitor hanging between rows from the ceiling that showed stupid clips on repeat. When he started talking again, it wasn't about Nakonechna at all. "You know what they fed us at daycare? Boiled chicken necks! They were bluish and cold and had lots of tiny bones."

"Dad, you just ruined my appetite."

But Petro, it seemed, was just getting started. He spoke right in Matviy's ear: "They also gave us lumpy semolina porridge. Yuk! To this day I can't even think about it."

"Da-a-ad, stop it! I don't want to know this. Why'd you go to such a terrible daycare anyway? I'd have run away if they tried to feed me that!"

What was Matviy thinking starting this conversation? Who knew if anything his dad said was true or if he was just making it up as he went? His dad was a master leg-puller.

"Fine, fine," his dad shrugged. "But I went to daycare only for two things: the cheesecake with jam and the lazy dumplings. Oh! You cannot imagine how delicious they were. Even your grandma couldn't duplicate that taste. I'd go back to daycare right now if I could eat that."

Petro rolled his eyes dreamily and suddenly said, "And they forced us to hold our spoon properly. I couldn't do it, and one time they hit me on the forehead with a ladle so huge it echoed!"

Matviy's jaw dropped. He was stunned. He started listening carefully.

"There was an old lady who lived in the kitchen at our daycare. At least I believed she lived there. She went around in a dingy old housecoat and slippers her big toes had worn holes in. She was so mean that she hissed when we peeked our heads in the kitchen and teased her. Sometimes she chased us, but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst was when she beat us with the ladle. We were all afraid of the ladle, even Nakonechna."

"Dad, who is this Nakonechna? Tell me already!"

"Nakonechna was the strongest person in our daycare and a head taller than everyone. When she got angry, she would beat her fists like a ferocious ape! Then you really had to hide because Nakonechna's fists were powerful. Some people said she came to our daycare from the first grade because she beat up everyone at school, even the principal. They thought she'd calm down a bit in daycare because

we had nap time. But there was no way! We were all really scared of her, so we always avoided her and ran away when she tried to talk to us. Only Nakonechna could beat up the old lady in the kitchen. And I really wanted to see that. What am I saying? We all wanted to see that."

"So, did she beat her up?" Matviy was leaning on the armrest.

"Hold your horses. It was in daycare that I learned the power of things." Petro could tell his son was finally interested. He lowered his voice and went on: "I learned this when Anzhela Melnyk brought a pink pencil case with Bambi on it to school. Bambi would blink when you moved the pencil case around. We all admired it during nap time."

"You didn't sleep during nap time?"

"Not me! Never. Well, maybe once. By accident. I used to lie there and pretend I was sleeping when the teacher would walk by to take a good look at each of us. When she thought we were all asleep and left the room, we would jump out of our beds and have a pillow fight. We were all fighting the system. Only the babies slept!"

"Sure," thought Matviy, "now you even nap on the train."

"But Nakonechna loved to sleep. She would lie in her special bed—the biggest one of all. It would have even fit the teacher!" Petro paused and then continued dreamily: "If I had had a pencil case like Anzhela's, I could have bought

off the lunch lady so she she'd stop hitting me with the ladle. But I didn't have family in Canada. The only toy I could make was a paper plane from a page torn out of my notebook like my grandpa taught me. Or a boat. Grandpa could also make a devil out of paper that could walk down an inclined plank, but it was hard to do."

"What, you didn't have any normal toys?"

"No, I did. At daycare there were two metal trucks, dolls for the girls, and a constructor set."

"Legos?"

SOVIET TOYS

Like most other consumer goods, it was difficult to buy quality toys in the Soviet Union. Often parents would bring their children dreamed-of gifts from business trips to Kyiv or Moscow, since availability was so much better in bigger cities. In the Children's World chain of shops, you had to stand in long lines to get the truly interesting toys like cars or remote-control moonwalkers.

Children in the USSR in the 80s played with plastic toy soldiers—generally cheap sailors and infantrymen of the Soviet army. The figures of Indians, cowboys, and even primitive people were of much higher quality. Kids also liked models of military vehicles and 1:43 scale metal cars. Sometimes even adults collected these model cars. Games like Battleship, tabletop foosball, and tabletop hockey were also popular. In the 80s people also loved the game At the Wheel, where you had to steer a magnetic car around a rotating track.

The USSR produced plastic and metal constructor sets, but the small pieces were of very low quality. Parents often improved these toys by adding motors or making additional pieces at the factories where they worked. Soviet stuffed animals and dolls didn't look very appealing, but there wasn't a large selection in the children's stores of the time.

"Oh no. Well, I guess the idea was the same. The trucks were really only good for having amazing crashes. The ones at the daycare were banged up. They had only two wheels each and barely rolled. That was why everyone fought over the constructor set. We'd cram as many pieces into our pockets as possible so we could at least build something. As parents picked up their kids in the afternoon, there'd be more and more pieces. I loved getting picked up last. By the time my parents came, I could build an entire palace or tower with countless rooms—nothing like our apartment. At home I also had a firetruck I could put water in and then squirt out from the hose by squeezing a rubber bulb."

Petro scratched his balding head. He was quiet for a moment and then jumped to what was probably his favorite topic: "Once Anzhela showed us a caramel. We all saw the candy in her chubby hand when we were taking off our coats near the lockers after a walk. Anzhela was sitting on the bench. She stuck out one foot in its mustard-yellow tights and tucked the other underneath her, still wearing its shoe. She teased us all with that candy, like we were chickens and it was corn. I've still never seen anything more beautiful than that candy! It was light years ahead of Golden Key caramels, those shapeless bricks, as sticky as tar! And the shiny wrapper was so beautiful! Soviet candy wrappers were dark and dull, but this was made out of transparent space-age material! There were two barely visible thin white lines along the edges, and the words were tiny and in Latin letters—this

was the alphabet of a fantastical world that only a few things reached us from. Things like that pink pencil case with Bambi and this perfect caramel: transparent, streamlined, laconic, ideal!"

Petro was so excited that he threw up his hands. Then he began to imitate the voice of a young girl, embarrassing Matviy in front of the other passengers: "I'll give it to whoever gives me something interesting!" Anzhela's voice as performed by his father was hoarse and deep. But his dad didn't realize how mortifying this was. "In an instant Anzhela was surrounded by the hands of children offering up:

- a bitten-into apple
- a crumbled-up cookie
- a naked baby doll missing an arm
- a ponytail holder
- a wheel from a toy truck (in no better shape than the truck)
- an empty hand, but a big one at that

"This hand, which didn't look human, but brown and furry, belonged to Nakonechna. She had just been cracking unripe walnuts that she had gathered up on our walk. She also wanted the candy that Anzhela so 'lovingly' was offering up. Ah, what can I say? I didn't have a chance," his father sighed. "Not many people had less of a chance than me!"

Anzhela disdainfully examined the offerings and almost stopped on the dismembered baby doll when I felt something in my pocket that gave me hope. It was an ordinary wrapper from a cheap and just so-so candy that I had found on our walk. But the most important thing was on the inside: a ring made from real gold that had been lost for months. But that wasn't all: the ring also had a delicate red stone. It was held in place by just two metal prongs because the third had snapped off. The stone wiggled and could have fallen out at any second. But it didn't! How could I have forgotten about this treasure at the bottom of my pocket in the pants with the sandy, grass-stained knees?!

SOVIET EDUCATION

School in the Soviet Union went up to grade 10: first through third grade was elementary school, fourth through eighth was called "incomplete secondary school," and grades nine and ten rounded out secondary school. From 1940 to 1956, you had to pay to go to the upper grades: 9–10. This meant that the poorer strata of society, like peasants, couldn't finish their secondary education. After eighth grade, you could go to a technical school to learn a trade (turner, carpenter, welder, etc.) or to a technicum where you could get a more specialized education.

The Russian language was mandatory in all schools of the Soviet Union; however, schools in the Russian Federation didn't teach Ukrainian, Belarusian, or, for example, Kazakh.

Starting in 1984, they began introducing a new eleven-year system. In order to make the switch, they introduced "0" classes. Children entered zeroth grade when they were six years old. Schools were outfitted with special bedroom classrooms so the little kids could have nap time, just like in the daycares. But the system didn't take hold. The six-year-olds were unable to fall asleep with the loud school bell ringing every 45 minutes and older kids making noise in the hallways.

Grades in Soviet schools were given on a 5-point system. A 1 or a 2 meant "unsatisfactory," a 3 was "satisfactory," a 4 was "good," and a 5 was "outstanding." All students wore identical uniforms, which their parents bought. Elementary schoolkids' uniforms always included a pin in the shape of a red star with a portrait of the Communist leader Vladimir Lenin. Periodically a special patrol made up of teachers or older students stood at the entrance to the school making sure the children were wearing their stars. These stars were called "Little Octobrists pins," since it was in October of 1917 that a Communist coup took place in the Russian Empire. The pins often broke or got lost, so it was best to buy them by the handful and keep extras at home.

In fourth grade everyone went through the process of becoming a Pioneer—now the students had to wear a red handkerchief tied around their necks to school. This tradition was copied from the world scouting movement. Pioneers had to collect scrap paper and scrap metal and deliver it to special drop-offs. Plus, tying the scarf correctly added five minutes to getting ready for school each day, so most Pioneers breathed a sigh of relief when the USSR collapsed.