

The Minibus Journey

Cesta autobusem

Petr glanced back at the minibus he was about to board and quickly realised his privilege. The driver gave him a friendly nod, indicating that he should sit up front beside him—the only available seat with a bit of space. The rest of the passengers, mostly local black men, were already crammed into the narrow benches at the back. He hesitated for a moment before sitting down, an uneasy feeling creeping in that perhaps he didn't quite belong here.

As the last pieces of luggage were loaded, a woman's voice called from the back. „Could Rediet sit up front?“ asked a relative of the young woman, who was precariously balancing on one foot, trying to squeeze herself into the crowded space. „There'd be more room at the back.“

Petr agreed at once. „Of course, please, let her sit here,“ he said, shifting his backpack onto his lap.

Rediet smiled at him gratefully as she took the seat beside him. Despite the limited space between them, her presence wasn't uncomfortable.

„Would you like me to hold your bag for you?“ she offered.

But Petr shook his head. „No, thanks, I'd rather keep it with me,“ he replied with a slight smile.

As the journey continued, they began talking. Petr spoke in English, and Rediet occasionally translated his questions into Amharic, allowing him to engage with the other passengers. Every sentence, every glance, drew them closer.

Then, the minibus ground to a halt.

A group of armed men had emerged onto the road ahead. The bus fell silent. The passengers froze, their eyes locked onto the strangers. Petr felt Rediet's fingers brush against his wrist as she nervously adjusted her scarf.

One of the rebels stepped up to the driver, his tone sharp and authoritative. The tension in the minibus was palpable. Then, the man's gaze landed on Petr. His expression softened—clearly, he hadn't expected to see a foreigner here. The rebel's lips curled slightly into something that could have been a smile—or perhaps just a trick of the light.

„Tourist?“ he asked in English.

Petr nodded. „Yes, tourist,“ he replied calmly.

The rebel sized him up, tilting his head slightly. He fiddled with the strap of his rifle before speaking again.

„Alone?“

Another nod.

The rebel smirked. „And how do you like it here?“

Petr shrugged. „The landscape is beautiful. And the people... they're interesting,“ he said with a faint

smile.

The commander slung his rifle over his shoulder and let out a low chuckle. „That, they certainly are,“ he said, amused. Then, after a pause, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, and scribbled something on it before handing it to Petr.

„Here’s my number. If you have any trouble in this area, give me a call. I can take care of you.“

Petr hesitated before taking the paper. Inside, he had to laugh. Just moments ago, this rebel leader and his men had been the ones everyone was terrified of, the reason why people were stuffing their phones into the floorboards. And now, he was offering him protection.

All that was missing was a selfie. Too bad my phone’s tucked away too, Petr mused. Instead, he simply responded with genuine politeness:

„That’s very kind of you. Thank you.“

The commander gave a brief nod and signalled to the driver. „Safe journey,“ he added, surprisingly courteously.

As the minibus pulled away, the tension dissipated. Petr held up the slip of paper with exaggerated seriousness. „Contact details for my new rebel friend.“

Laughter rippled through the bus. Someone clapped him on the shoulder, and the driver shook his head in disbelief. „First time they’ve taken nothing from us.“

The relief was tangible. People looked at Petr with gratitude. Rediet smiled at him, and for a moment, it felt like he had become their protector.

As the journey continued, the space between Petr and Rediet seemed to grow smaller in a different way. In the cramped confines of the minibus, there was no shortage of accidental touches—an elbow brushing against an elbow, knees barely grazing, fingers meeting for the briefest of moments as they both reached for the same handrail.

Small gestures. Things they wouldn’t have noticed in any other situation. But here, every moment carried weight.

At one of the stops, Rediet’s relative suddenly remarked: „You two look like brother and sister, don’t you?“

Petr laughed. „Of course! I’m her African brother, and she’s my European sister!“

The passengers burst into laughter.

At another stop, Petr finally gathered the courage. „Maybe we should exchange contacts?“ he suggested.

„You can scan my WhatsApp code—here,“ she said, already holding out her phone, prepared.

They both laughed at the synchronicity. There was a visible ease, a quiet relief in knowing that their journey didn’t have to end at this bus stop.

When they finally reached the city, they both knew something had changed. More than just friendship had begun to take root. And when Rediet invited him over for coffee the next day, Petr accepted,

despite the conflict stirring inside him.

He wasn't sure what this meant.

But he was glad the journey wasn't over just yet.

The next afternoon, as he sat in the courtyard of her small home, the sun beating down, Petr felt like he was in another world. From a nearby church, soft chanting of midday prayers drifted through the air. Somewhere in the distance, goats bleated.

Inside, Rediet was kneeling by the fire, carefully preparing jebena—the traditional Ethiopian coffee pot. The rich aroma of roasting coffee beans and burning incense filled the air. Everything was beautifully arranged—fresh grass laid on the floor, flowers scattered delicately, small bowls of fruit and sweets placed before the fire.

She moved with a quiet grace. Her white dress swayed gently as she bent forward, tending to the flames.

Petr watched her in silence.

I can't remember the last time I saw someone so effortlessly beautiful.

The simplicity of her clothing only highlighted it. He wondered if she even realised how extraordinary she looked.

Then, her relative's voice cut through the air. „Are you married? Do you have children?“

The question landed like a blade.

Rediet's hands froze mid-motion. Her eyes lifted, unspoken words lingering between them.

Petr's fingers tightened around his cup.

He could dodge the question. Evade, make light of it. But for how long? A day? Two? And then what?

There was only one answer.

„Yes,“ he said, quietly but firmly.

Silence. Heavy, suffocating.

Rediet's smile barely faltered—but her eyes changed. Something cracked between them.

She had imagined a future. And with one word, it shattered.

„This is the end,“ she thought. „Nothing will ever be the same.“

Petr felt it too.

He reassured himself—„I had to say it. Otherwise, I'd cause even more pain to even more people.“

But it hurt anyway.

Petr took a sip of his coffee. It tasted bitter now.

That afternoon, as they set off into the city, Rediet wore a light summer dress in soft pastel shades—a colour that gave her an air of effortless grace. Her relative and young nephew walked alongside them, keeping the conversation light and easy.

Petr tried to push his thoughts aside, to pretend this was just another pleasant day. But their eyes kept meeting. Over every smile, every casual photograph, he felt it—he didn't want to lose her.

„Like brother and sister,“ they joked aloud.

But inside, they both knew it was far more complicated than that.

When they returned, Petr suggested they all rest for a while—then, he'd take them out to dinner.

The relative picked a restaurant with a breathtaking view over the city.

That evening, as Petr's tuk-tuk pulled up outside Rediet's home, they were already waiting for him.

She was wearing a deep blue evening dress, the colour of twilight, the colour of oceans. In that moment, she looked like something from another world.

„You look stunning,“ he blurted out.

„Thank you,“ she replied with a soft smile. But deep inside, she felt a sadness she couldn't shake.

The view from the restaurant was spectacular.

Petr took out his phone and captured a few moments—the glowing city, the last rays of the sun—but mostly her.

Rediet, bathed in golden light.

They barely spoke. But every time his hand brushed hers—helping her step down, guiding her across the terrace—it was a silent moment of comfort.

When dinner was over, he offered her his hand as they walked towards the tuk-tuk.

She took it, gently.

And in that instant, they both knew—this was more than a simple gesture.

But the night was not finished testing them.

Tuk-tuks were only allowed to run until seven. After eight, a strict curfew was in place.

They were still on the road when a police checkpoint appeared ahead.

„What are you doing here? It's past seven!“ The officer's voice was sharp, his stance rigid.

The driver mumbled something, but his words were uncertain. Petr stepped in immediately.

„I'm sorry, sir, this is my fault. I asked him to take me to my hotel. I hadn't realised how late it was.“

The officer studied him for a moment, then nodded.

„Fine. But make sure he takes you straight to the hotel.“ Then he turned to the driver, his tone

shifting. „You—leave your documents here. You can collect them on your way back. That way, you won't get any ideas about going anywhere else.“

But that wasn't the end of their troubles.

Just before reaching the hotel, they were stopped again—this time by soldiers.

„Papers!“ a harsh voice barked.

The driver went pale. „I don't have them,“ he whispered. „The police took them.“

The soldier frowned and gestured towards his commander.

Petr stepped out of the tuk-tuk and positioned himself beside the driver.

„This is my responsibility,“ he said, calm but firm. „We were on our way to the hotel. We were already stopped earlier, and the police took his documents as security.“

The soldier barely glanced at him. „You—get to your hotel.“

And just like that, Petr understood what was happening.

The soldiers didn't care about him. They wanted to „squeeze“ the driver, shake him down for money.

If Petr left, the man would likely walk away empty-handed—or not at all.

So he stayed exactly where he was, standing by the side of the road, making it clear that he wasn't moving.

The soldiers hesitated.

It seemed they weren't quite brave enough to try anything in front of a foreigner.

A silent stare-off. Then, at last, one of the soldiers waved the driver away.

And the tuk-tuk took off as fast as its little engine would allow.

When Rediet heard what had happened, she felt two things at once—fear and pride.

„He showed that he cares about us,“ she thought.

The next morning, they went to the market.

Rediet and her relative wandered happily through the stalls, bargaining for every little thing.

Petr stood off to the side, shifting his weight from foot to foot, hands in his pockets.

After a while, it dawned on him—he wasn't enjoying this at all.

Later, they ducked into a small local bar, the kind where the air was thick, the lighting was dim, and the tables were worn with age.

They were served tella, the traditional Ethiopian brew.

Rediet caught his eye.

They clinked their glasses together.

It tasted strange. Like beer. Like something that had been left in a dusty barrel for far too long.

A moment later, her relative announced she was heading home.

Petr assumed he and Rediet would still go on their planned trip to the mountains.

But suddenly—she changed her mind.

„No, I won't go. You go alone.“

Petr frowned. „Are you sure?“

She shook her head.

„No,“ she said quietly. But the look in her eyes said more than words ever could.

She couldn't.

Because if they went there, she wouldn't want to come back.

And that would be wrong.

For her. For him. For everyone.

Petr waited, as if expecting her to say more.

She didn't.

He let it go.

„Maybe this is for the best,“ he thought.

But the thought brought no comfort.

When he left, Rediet tried to lose herself in work.

It didn't help.

„Why does this hurt so much?“

Her thoughts kept drifting back to him.

„What is he doing now? Is he thinking of me?“

For Petr, the mountain trip felt hollow—a landscape from a fairy tale, but without its magic.

When he returned to the hotel, all he felt was exhaustion.

By evening, Rediet couldn't take it anymore.

She reached for her phone.

„Petr?“

Her voice was quiet. Uncertain.

„Rediet?“ he answered, relief evident in his tone. „I’m glad you called.“

„Can we see each other again tonight?“ she asked.

But they both knew tuk-tuks stopped running after seven.

In the end, they agreed to meet in the morning.

Rediet couldn’t stop thinking about it. How little time they had left.

The next day, she had planned her words.

But when she saw him, they all disappeared.

She knew this moment was going to hurt.

Petr took her hands. „You have no idea how happy I am that you came.“

His voice was steady. But his eyes were full of confusion and sorrow.

He held her hands longer than necessary.

She squeezed his fingers a little tighter.

As if holding on to time itself.

Then, without thinking, she stepped closer.

Petr didn’t even have to ask.

Their lips met—softly, slowly.

Not as a goodbye.

Not as a promise.

Just one fleeting moment—where everything they had shared fused into a single breath of sorrow and joy.

As the car pulled away, Petr turned back one last time.

She stood there, watching him leave.

She wanted to cry—like she never had before.

But instead, she smiled.

The way she had been taught.

To wear a mask that hides the pain of moments like these.

Petr waved.

And when their eyes met one final time, something tightened in his chest.

He watched her until she was gone.

Only then did she allow herself to close her eyes.

And feel the weight of it all.

Not regret.

Just the knowledge that some paths must divide, no matter how much we wish otherwise.

And still—she was grateful.

Grateful to have met him.

Petr leaned back in his seat.

His mind replayed it all—her laughter, the minibus, the scent of roasted coffee.

He didn't want to begin something that would end in pain.

He wanted to believe that, sometimes, love means letting go.

Outside the window, the landscape drifted past.

And from the radio, a soft voice sang:

„Goodbye, my love, let me go...”

As if someone had been reading his thoughts.

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