

QUICK READS

Drive North

A short story by Patrick Kennedy



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Part One

‘Where are we?’ asked Olga.

‘I’m not sure,’ replied her husband, Vladimir.

‘We’re lost!’ shouted Olga. This woke up their twelve year old daughter, Sasha. She was sleeping on the backseat of their car.

‘Are we lost, Papa?’ asked Sasha, sitting up. She looked out of the window. It was dark, but she could see fields of snow and some trees.

‘No, Sasha, we’re not lost,’ said Vladimir. He turned round and smiled at his daughter.

‘Look at the road!’ shouted Olga. ‘Yes, we are lost, Sasha.’

‘Let’s stop and look at the map,’ said Vladimir.

‘OK, good idea,’ said Olga. ‘If we keep driving in the wrong direction, we will run out of petrol and then we will really be in trouble. I don’t want to sleep in a car in Siberia in the middle of winter!’

The family was going to visit Olga’s cousin in Irkutsk. They were going to take the train, but then they decided to drive instead. Irkutsk was a long way from their home in Omsk, and Vladimir didn’t know the way.

‘Why didn’t we just take the train?’ asked Sasha.

‘Well, your mother wanted to bring a lot of things from home, so we drove instead,’ said Vladimir, stopping the car at the side of the road.

‘Oh, it’s my fault, is it?’ Olga was very angry now. ‘Why is everything always my fault?’

‘I didn’t mean that it was your fault,’ said Vladimir calmly. ‘I was just explaining to Sasha why we didn’t take the train.’

‘Just look at the map!’ Olga threw the map at Vladimir.

‘What’s that?’ asked Sasha. She was looking out of the window.

‘What’s what?’ asked Vladimir, unfolding the map and looking at it.

‘I think there are lights over there... behind those trees,’ said Sasha.

Vladimir looked out of the window. He could see some lights, but they were quite far away. ‘It looks like there are some buildings over there.’

‘Well go and ask them where we are then,’ said Olga. She pulled her coat tight.

‘OK, let’s drive over there and ask them,’ said Vladimir.

Vladimir drove further up the road. He looked for the way to the buildings. After about one hundred metres, he saw a track on the right. He turned off and drove down the track. It was snowing a lot. Vladimir couldn’t see very well. He could just see the lights of the buildings behind the trees. Then they passed a sign. It said: **VAROSPOL POPULATION 167**

‘Varospol,’ said Vladimir. He scratched his head. ‘I’m sure I know that name...’

‘What are you talking about now?’ asked Olga. She was still angry.

‘This village is called Varospol. I’m sure I have heard that name before.’

‘Well, who cares?’ said Olga. ‘Let’s just go there and ask someone for directions to Irkutsk.’

‘OK, OK,’ said Vladimir.

They drove past the trees and then they saw the buildings clearly for the first time. They were all white. The houses looked old. One building’s lights were on; all the other buildings were dark. Vladimir stopped outside the building with its lights on.

‘Can I come with you, Papa?’ asked Sasha.

‘No, you stay here with your mother, Sasha.’ Vladimir didn’t know why, but he was afraid to go into the building.

‘But I need to go to the toilet, Papa,’ said Sasha. She was already opening the door.

‘Oh, OK then,’ said Vladimir. He opened the car door and got out. It was a cold and windy night. Sasha held her father’s hand and pulled him towards the house.

Part Two

‘Come on, Papa. It’s freezing.’ She ran up the wooden steps to the front door. She started knocking on the door.

‘Sasha, don’t knock so hard.’ Vladimir ran up the steps and stood next to Sasha. After a few seconds, the door opened. An old man with white hair and glasses looked at them through a gap in the door.

‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘Good evening,’ said Vladimir. ‘We are on our way to Irkutsk, but we are lost. Can you tell us which way to go, please?’

‘Drive north,’ said the old man, and he closed the door.

‘Well, that wasn’t very helpful, was it?’ said Vladimir.

‘Papa, I really need to go to the toilet,’ said Sasha.

Vladimir knocked on the door again. After a minute, the door opened. ‘What now?’ asked the old man. He looked very annoyed.

‘I’m sorry, but my daughter really needs to go to the toilet. Could we...?’

The old man looked at Sasha. She smiled back at him.

‘OK, then... but be quick,’ said the old man. He opened the door and moved to the side.

Vladimir and Sasha walked into the house. They were very surprised because it was even colder inside the house than it was outside.

Sasha looked up at her father. ‘Papa, why is it so...?’ she started to ask, but Vladimir put his finger to his lips to tell her to be quiet.

‘The toilet is upstairs.’ The old man pointed up the dark stairs. He walked down the hallway to the kitchen. Sasha went upstairs. Vladimir stood at the bottom of the stairs and watched his daughter go into the dark.

‘Is there a light for upstairs?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said the old man from the kitchen.

Vladimir looked at some photographs on the wall. There was a picture of a family. It looked like a grandmother, a grandfather, two children and their parents. Vladimir moved nearer the picture. The grandfather was the old man.

‘This is a nice photograph of you and your family,’ said Vladimir. He was trying to be friendly.

The old man didn’t reply. Vladimir looked at some writing at the bottom of the picture. It said: The Barov Family – July 1966. His heart started beating faster.

‘How... how long have you lived here?’ asked Vladimir. He could hear the old man drinking tea in the kitchen.

‘I don’t want to chat with you,’ said the old man.

‘OK, sorry,’ said Vladimir.

After a few minutes, Sasha came down the stairs. She was shivering. ‘It’s even colder upstairs, Papa,’ she whispered.

‘Let’s go,’ said Vladimir, taking his daughter’s arm.

‘Goodbye,’ Sasha shouted, but the old man didn’t reply.

Vladimir and Sasha ran down the steps and got into the car. They were happy to be warm again after being in the freezing cold house.

‘So where are we?’ asked Olga.

‘We need to drive north,’ said Vladimir. He took the map out and looked south of Irkutsk, but he couldn’t find Varaspol.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ said Olga. ‘I want to get there before midnight. It’s eight o’clock now.’

‘OK, OK,’ said Vladimir, starting the car.

They drove north for about an hour and then they saw a sign that said – Irkutsk 56km. ‘Finally, we’re on the right road,’ said Olga.

‘Yes, we’ll be there soon, don’t worry,’ said Vladimir.

After a couple more hours, they arrived at Olga's cousin's house. They went inside and drank some tea with Olga's cousin and her husband, Ivan.

'How was the drive, Vlad?' asked Ivan.

'Oh, it was fine, thanks,' said Vladimir.

'But we got lost,' said Sasha.

'Oh no, really?' said Ivan.

'Yes, but we stopped in a village and got directions,' said Sasha.

'That's right,' said Vladimir. 'It was called Varospol. Do you know it?'

'Varospol?' Ivan looked surprised. 'I don't think it was Varospol, Vlad.'

'Why not?' asked Sasha.

'Nobody has lived in Varospol for nearly fifty years,' said Ivan. 'There was a very cold winter in 1966. It snowed for one month without stopping. In March, when it got a little warmer, some people went to Varospol to see if they were all right.'

'And?' asked Sasha.

'Everybody was dead,' said Ivan. 'All of them froze to death. Nobody has lived there since then.'

'But we...' Sasha started to say, but her father just put his finger to his lips.

'It was probably a different place then,' said Vlad. 'Let's have some more tea.'