
СЧАСТЛИВОГО
1956
ГОДА
12+
ДИАНА РЕЙН

Happy 1956

Berdsk, 1956

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Счастливого 1956 года

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

Happy 1956

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Translated from the Russian. No official English edition of this work exists.

This edition was prepared with the assistance of machine translation, then reviewed and edited.

Well, what could you say — 1955 had hardly been the happiest of years for Tipa and his brother Toshka. Nor had the four that came before it... But the new one, 1956, was simply bound to be the very best!

Antip Varnakov — a teenager, no more — blinked the frost from his eyelashes, drew a short breath of icy air, and edged carefully into the very thick of the market. The crush was so dense there wasn't room to drop an apple, and Tipa threaded his way through the throng, doing his best not to jostle anyone. It was the twenty-fourth of December, a Saturday — as if a crowd were ever in doubt on a day like that. For all his nimbleness, the boy still caught an elbow in the ribs, then a heavy boot coming down on his foot, then a plain shove, and each time his slight frame flinched.

But as everyone knows, a crowd is a thief's best camouflage.

Besides, it was warmer in among so many people. Here the wind that had whipped up lost some of its bite, and Tipa could put the cold out of his mind and set to work. His quick, dark eyes darted this way and that, scouting out the goods on the stalls, while his thin, chilled hands, sheathed in gloves, stayed tucked deep in his pockets for the time being.

Ahead of the holiday, heaps of people had streamed into Berdsk — into the new Berdsk! From Novosibirsk, from the villages roundabout, and every last local had turned out too. A car struggling through the press blared its horn, shrill and desperate, and somewhere off in the distance a child was crying. The villagers for the most part haggled and unloaded their goods, all the while eyeing their neighbors sideways. They offered up chunks of meat, whole plucked geese, homemade sausage, salo…

Tipa's steps slowed of their own accord, his gaze drinking in the abundance of it all — the chunks of ham, the strings of sausages. What a feast it must be, for those who could afford such treats! His stomach cramped painfully with hunger, and he hastened on.

Just wait until he and his little brother Toshka had settled into their new place — sausage sandwiches for breakfast every single morning!

He made his way past counters displaying carpets and knitted and embroidered linen napkins, and by a bearded man pouring kerosene into cans. A splash of kerosene would have come in handy for him as well — there was hardly a drop left in his lamp. But that could wait.

With New Year's drawing near, everyone was especially eager to buy toys — clay and wooden ones, most of them brought in by the villagers as well. There were little whistles that trilled like real birds once you filled them with water, wooden rattles, and, of course, the "blacksmiths."

Tipa had promised himself he would not go drifting about the square, getting under people's feet, yet here he was, dawdling again in spite of himself. What a charming little contraption! On one side, a clumsy little bear with a hammer; on the other, a little man with one to match. You rocked the slats back and forth, and the two set to work tirelessly, their tiny tools tapping at the anvil. If only he could lay hands on such a toy for Toshka — his little brother would be beside himself with joy…

Tipa gave a start when he suddenly met the seller's gaze full on; he ducked his head and hurried away at once.

Time to get out of here.

Tipa worked his numb fingers open and shut as he edged cautiously toward the pastry stall. Neat rows of Karaleks, vatrushkas, and pies covered the entire counter. Several people were milling about at it, picking out the fluffiest, most golden-brown pastries and only too glad

to trade a word or two with the proprietress. Tipa sidled up unnoticed and stationed himself among the shoppers, his fingers cramping with nerves.

While the women chatted among themselves and the head of the household examined jars of pickles at the neighboring counter, Tipa picked out a vatrushka — the one at the very edge. He loosened his frozen fingers inside his pockets. Shot a glance back over his shoulder. Then at the people around him once more. One last look at the woman chattering beside him…

And just like that, he was already walking away, vanishing without a trace into the throng. In his pocket, his right hand cradled the bun — still faintly warm, it seemed, beneath its firm crust. He tried not to look at anyone, not to meet anyone's eye — yet not to quicken his pace too much, either. Not to stand out from the crowd in any way. To dissolve into it. To disappear.

Once he had left the square for the street, he allowed himself to break into a light jog, warming up as he made all haste toward his uncle's house, where Toshka was waiting for him even now. Tomorrow, his little brother would receive a real present from him.

Tipa's throat tightened, though he blamed it on the frosty air. This would be their last New Year in the old Berdsk—the last year of poverty and stealing. In the new one, fifty-six, they would have a home of their own, and Tipa would hold a proper job. And then, come fifty-seven, he would give Tosha that very toy with the blacksmiths, and vatrushkas of his own buying, and plenty of other things besides.

He quickened his pace, picturing how delighted his little brother would be tomorrow, and all but smiled himself. Next year a new life would begin for them. Of that much he was certain.