



SECTION INTERNATIONALE BRITANNIQUE

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Document Annexe



The following text is the beginning of the novel “The Road Home” by Rose Tremain. Read the text carefully and answer the questions on your exam paper.

Don't worry, you do not have to understand everything!

On the coach, Lev chose a seat near the back and he sat huddled against the window, staring out at the land he was leaving: at the fields of sunflowers scorched by the dry wind, at the pig farms, at the quarries and rivers and at the wild garlic growing green at the edge of the road.

Lev wore a leather jacket and jeans and a leather cap pulled low over his eyes, and his handsome face was gray-toned from his smoking, and in his hands he clutched an old red cotton handkerchief and a dented pack of Russian cigarettes. He would soon be forty-three. After some miles, as the sun came up, Lev took out a cigarette and stuck it between his lips, and the woman sitting next to him, a plump, contained person with moles like splashes of mud on her face, said quickly, "I'm sorry, but there is no smoking allowed on this bus." Lev knew this, had known it in advance, had tried to prepare himself mentally for the long agony of it. But even an unlit cigarette was a companion — something to hold on to, something that had promise in it — and all he could be bothered to do now was to nod, just to show the woman that he'd heard what she'd said, reassure her that he wasn't going to cause trouble; because there they would have to sit for fifty hours or more, side by side, with their separate aches and dreams, like a married couple. They would hear each other's snores and sighs, smell the food and drink each had brought with them, note the degree to which each was fearful or unafraid, make short forays into conversation. And then later, when they finally arrived in London, they would probably separate with barely a word or a look, walk out into a rainy morning, each alone and beginning a new life. And Lev thought how all of this was odd but necessary and already told him things about the world he was traveling to, a world in which he would break his back working — if only that work could be found. He would hold himself apart from other people, find corners and shadows in which to sit and smoke, demonstrate that he didn't need to belong, that his heart remained in his own country.

There were two coach drivers. These men would take turns to drive and to sleep. There was an on-board lavatory, so the only stops the bus would make would be for gas. At gas stations, the passengers would be able to clamber off, walk a few paces, see wild flowers on a verge, soiled paper among bushes, sun or rain on the road. They might stretch up their arms, put on dark glasses against the onrush of nature's light, look for a clover leaf, smoke and stare at the cars rushing by. Then they would be herded back onto

the coach, resume their old attitudes, arm themselves for the next hundred miles, for the stink of another industrial zone or the sudden gleam of a lake, for rain and sunset and the approach of darkness on silent marshes. There would be times when the journey would seem to have no end.

Sleeping upright was not something Lev was practised in. The old seemed to be able to do it, but forty-two was not yet old. Lev's father, Stefan, sometimes used to sleep upright, in summer, on a hard wooden chair in his lunch break at the Baryn sawmill, with the hot sun falling onto the slices of sausage wrapped in paper on his knee and onto his flask of tea. Both Stefan and Lev could sleep lying down on a mound of hay or on the mossy carpet of a forest. Often, Lev had slept on a rag rug beside his daughter's bed, when she was ill or afraid. And when his wife, Marina, was dying, he'd lain for five nights on an area of linoleum flooring no wider than his outstretched arm, between Marina's hospital bed and a curtain patterned with pink and purple daisies, and sleep had come and gone in a mystifying kind of way, painting strange pictures in Lev's brain that had never completely vanished. Toward evening, after two stops for gas, the mole-flecked woman unwrapped a hard-boiled egg. She peeled it silently. The smell of the egg reminded Lev of the sulfur springs at Jor, where he'd taken Marina, just in case nature could cure what man had given up for lost.(...)

On the woman's knee a clean cotton napkin was spread and her white hands smoothed it, and she unwrapped rye bread and a twist of salt.

"My name is Lev," said Lev.

"My name is Lydia," said the woman. And they shook hands, Lev's hand holding the scrunched-up kerchief and Lydia's hand rough with salt and smelling of egg, and then Lev asked, "What are you planning to do in England?" and Lydia said, "I have some interviews in London for jobs as a translator."

"That sounds promising."

"I hope so. I was a teacher of English at School 237 in Yarbl, so my language is very colloquial."

Lev looked at Lydia. It wasn't difficult to imagine her standing in front of a class and writing words on a blackboard. He said, "I wonder why you're leaving our country when you had a good job at School 237 in Yarbl?"

"Well," said Lydia, "I became very tired of the view from my window. Every day, summer and winter, I looked out at the schoolyard and the high fence and the apartment block beyond, and I began to imagine I would die seeing these things, and I didn't want this. I expect you understand what I mean?"

Lev took off his leather cap and ran his fingers through his thick gray hair. He saw Lydia turn to him for a moment and look very seriously into his eyes. He said, "Yes, I understand."