

Wednesday, March 14, 2068, 7:00 a.m., Vele, in the Ural Mountains, Russia

It was a special day for the children who lived at the orphanage in Vele. Today was the day they would get to see the doctor in the small city of Ust'-Uls. It meant a 25 kilometer drive along the narrow winding road that followed the Vishera river and then crossing the suspension bridge that brought them into the city itself. The trip would take all day and the earlier their start, the earlier they would return.

Vladimir, the driver of the ancient school bus, watched as the twelve children, aged from six months to fourteen years, filed into the vehicle, taking their places in the worn bench seats. The babies were cradled in the arms of two of the younger caretakers, Ivana and Galina, while the older Yulja sat with the toddlers to try and keep them in line. Yulja's husband, Fjodor, sat with the older children. At the front of the bus was a paying customer: Ilya had a job interview in Ust'-Uls and asked if he could ride with the orphanage bus to the city.

There was a definite air of excitement among the coughing of the older children and the crying of the babies. Vladimir took one last look around, and, satisfied that his charges were ready to go, started up the bus. The engine puffed out black smoke as the engine gave a deep rumble, and with a noisy clashing of gears, the expedition took off.

The road was narrow, barely wide enough for two vehicles passing side by side. The bus hugged the side nearest the mountain, making Vladimir feel safer, for the roads were slick at that time of morning. Traffic was light; the few autos that were on the road moved at the same snail's pace that the bus did. But things changed once they got to the next small town, Ust'-Garevaya. This small town was larger than Vele, and more traffic flowed southward towards the bigger city. More autos, more trucks, and more impatient drivers. Finally, just before the bridge that crossed the ravine, a driver who could not contain himself pulled out from three places behind the bus and tried to pass. And, as karma would have it, a truck appeared, coming from the other direction.

The impatient driver never stood a chance. He couldn't turn without going into the ravine. He couldn't pull back into the traffic. The road was slick, and though he put his brakes on and skewed his car around, and though the truck driver, in a panic, swerved to his right, the two vehicles collided with a sickening crunch, followed by an explosion. This created a chain reaction, as the cars nearest to the wreck tried to avoid it, and instead, crashed into each other.

Vladimir, always cautious, turned the bus to the left, trying to pull into the now empty lane to avoid smashing into the vehicles before him. But the other lane was less traveled at that time of day and was slicker. The vehicle began to slide, and the truck behind them, whose driver had a similar idea, bumped heavily into its back corner. The children screamed and the women clutched the little ones tightly as the bus slipped and skidded along the edge of the old wooden barrier at the edge of the road. It finally gave way, and the nose of the bus protruded over the edge of the ravine. The truck, as helpless on the slick lane as the child-laden transport, smashed into the back end again, rendering the emergency door useless. The front door was shattered by the broken barrier, but it kept the bus from going forward any farther... for now. In back, Yulja wailed, crossing

herself and praying out loud. This added to the confusion and panic of the young passengers.

But the worst was yet to come. The noise of the explosion echoed and re-echoed in the ravine, disturbing the snows that still lay on the side of the mountain peaks. The snow began to slide downward, picking up speed and finally rolling down the steep side and spilling over the cut of the road, burying one car and half burying another. Fjodor cried out, "Avalanche!" and crossed himself, too, as the road behind them disappeared under tons of snow, rock, and trees.

Ilya took stock of the situation. The explosion meant that any help coming from Ust'-UIs couldn't get through. Nor could anyone from Ust'-Garevaya come to their aid. The bus creaked and groaned and threatened to fall into the ravine. While Vladimir coached the children and their caretakers to move to the back of their transport, Ilya pulled out his cell phone. He kissed it, crossed himself, and placed a call to the authorities in Ust'-UIs. With a deep breath, he asked them to call for the only people he thought could help them... International Rescue.

Post by Tikatu on 11/10/2004

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