

ALEXANDRA BERKOVÁ

The Little White Notice

Translated from Czech by Corine Tachtiris

Still understanding nothing, but already cold,
Aleksandr Semyonovich looked up.

—A. P. Chekhov

FIRST I SAW A SIGN that said CROSS, so I crossed. Then I kept off the grass, didn't enter the high voltage area, and protected socialist state property—property that belongs to each and every Czechoslovak citizen. Then I didn't litter, I waited for other passengers to get off before boarding, and kept my head and arms inside the tram. And then there was almost nothing left to do, so I didn't smoke for a while, did not obstruct the doors, used the rear exit, and prepared myself for about twenty minutes of not talking to the driver while the tram was in motion. I'm happy to do that, not talk to the driver while the tram is in motion: I often exemplarily stand behind him not talking for up to an hour, to show how cooperative I am. So I went to stand behind him when I saw this little white notice: OFFER YOUR SEAT TO OLDER PASSENGERS. The request didn't say which passenger—evidently that was left up to me. I looked around, chose a particularly pale and tired young woman, and got to work: excuse me for bothering you, miss, I said, how old are you? What? the woman said and peered at me closely. How old are you? I said. Me? said the woman and poked her finger at herself. And it was instantly clear that there was going to be trouble with her. You, I said. The woman looked me up and down, then slowly said *tsssss*, shook her head, and turned her back to me. Probably she didn't want to say her age out loud, so I tapped her on the shoulder and said to her as politely as possible: would you be so kind as to lend me your identity papers? She obeyed immediately, even though she must have known that identity papers must not be lent. Just remain calm, I said cordially, because meanwhile the contents of her handbag had spilled out. I leafed through her identity card, and read about where, when, to whom, and why she had been born, where she lived when, where she lives now, and by which numerals she was designated in this world. The woman nervously cleared her throat

and shifted her eyes all around. I was beginning to find her unpleasant. Well, never mind, I said to myself, I'll read a bit longer so as not to cause offense, then I'll offer her a seat somewhere and pack it in. The woman cleared her throat again. Are you employed? I asked, so the conversation wouldn't stall. The woman stuttered something and looked around, but no one advised her what to do. And why isn't that written here? I said. I, I, chirped the woman and shifted her eyes around again. By then she was really getting on my nerves. I can't stand people who stutter and shift their eyes around. Well, see that you get it filled out, I said. There wasn't anything else of interest in her ID card, so I handed it back to her. So, you were born in forty-eight, that fits; come with me then, I said. The young woman looked around in dismay and bewilderment, and her chin began to tremble. And why? she chirped contrarily. God, she was really bugging me. I was about ready to just leave it, but suddenly most of the passengers alighted from the tram, and so I decided that I would just go ahead and do it already. Yeah, lady, I said, I'm not gonna tell you 'cause I don't know myself; I'm just following an order, and the order reads that you have to sit. And the girl fainted. Just went right to the floor. The tram stopped and they called a doctor. I wanted to ask what had happened to her, but some man took me by the shoulder and led me aside. You mustn't be so strict right off the bat, he said to me amicably, I know, I know, you went about it correctly in principle, I can just tell a newbie when I see one, no offense. I wanted to say something, but the man smiled and slapped me on the shoulder. It's nothing, he said, it'll smooth itself out, otherwise that was good, really good. He gave me a thumbs-up, clapped me on the back, and left.