

Nadeshda Pavlovna

by C. P. Boyko

“A machine for converting bread into dung,” said Ippolitsky. “What would I do with a dog?”

“But Comrade sir, you wouldn’t have to feed it.” The peasant implored him with eyes that looked like they were smeared with honey.

“And what use would I have for a starved dog?” muttered the rent collector.

The dog crouched on the table, eyes staring blankly out of its bulging skull, as though ignoring, out of polite embarrassment, the discussion of its fate.

“You wouldn’t have to feed it,” repeated Petrov slowly, with the slightest emphasis on *you* and *it*.

Ippolitsky looked around the disgusting little room. The Petrovs had already eaten through anything of value, like rats eating through walls. The bare floor seemed bleached, picked clean even of colour. All that remained were a couple of beeswax candles, a pot, the primus stove (useless until another paraffin shipment arrived), the obligatory portrait of the General Secretary, and the filthy clothes the peasant, his wife, and snivelling child stood up in. And the dog.

Ippolitsky had eaten partridge, and fox, and raccoon, and once, in his childhood, he and his sisters had been driven to eat rats. He had never eaten dog.

“You could sell it,” coaxed Petrov. “To someone in dire straits . . .”

“And where do you suppose,” said Ippolitsky dryly, “I could find someone with money not yet spent on real food?” He bent over to scrutinize the mongrel. Its pelt was as ragged and flea-bitten as the upholstery of an old armchair. Its eyes flicked sideways and met his for a moment; a tremor went through its haunches. “Besides,” he said, straightening, “there can’t be more than a pound of meat on him.”

“*Her*,” sobbed the child.

Petrov glared menacingly at his wife, who glared pleadingly at the child, who glared miserably at Ippolitsky, who smiled grimly. Perhaps next month it would be the child cowering on the table.

“You would be surprised, Comrade sir,” murmured Petrov’s wife, squeezing her dirty little hands into lemon-like fists. “Its breed has a naturally lean look, but we’ve been feeding it well.”

“Which is why you can’t make rent,” said Ippolitsky. Clapping his hands behind his back, he paced what little of the room there was. The rhythmic sound of his boot heels striking the rough floorboards soothed him.

“Listen, Petrov, if you think the damn thing will be so easy to sell, why don’t you do it?”

“But surely, Comrade sir, you can get a better price than I.”

In other words, he knew that Ippolitsky would give him more than the mutt was worth. But to go on discussing the matter only showed weakness.

“One week,” he said.

The peasant and his wife fidgeted but said nothing.

“Two weeks’ rent,” said Ippolitsky in the same firm voice, as though he had not budged and would not budge.

“Thank you, Comrade sir,” whispered the wife.

“Grisha,” the peasant hissed at his whimpering child. “Bring us a rope—a *short* one.”

Madezhkov paid with women’s stockings. Tambov paid with pillows. The Zemstovs with charcoal pencils—god in heaven only knew where they’d grubbed them up. And now a dog! Where would he sell a dog? He could never take the thing to Andreyev Grishkovich.

Ippolitsky hated winter. No one paid with ration cards or eggs or extra clothes any more. During his first months here, before the power plant was sabotaged, the work had been not unlike his work on the *kolkhoz*. On the collective farm, peasants hid grain; in the city, they hid roubles. One had

only to find what they'd hidden, or, better yet, persuade them to show you.

But as winter wore on, the peasants had less to conceal—and they became more adept at concealment. Last month, after a thorough search of the Yomjiev's room had turned up nothing but a bucket of dried-up potatoes and a slab of kitchen soap, he had been on his way out the door when the gnarled old grandfather began to cough—he'd almost swallowed one of the coins he'd been holding in his mouth. After that, Ippolitsky made certain that his tenants at least opened their mouths to greet him and to bid him farewell.

If there was one place they could not conceal their money, it was outside the co-operative stores. He had taken to prowling the lineups whenever a new shipment was announced.

“Good morning, Ada Maximova.”

“Good morning, Comrade landlord sir.”

“You're in a good spot here. Arrived early, eh?”

“Five o'clock, Comrade sir,” she said with pride.

“And what are you waiting for?”

“Eh? The store isn't yet open, Comrade.”

“I mean, what have they brought in? What is the shipment?”

“Playing cards, I believe, sir—Comrade sir.”

“And bowls,” someone else in line chimed in eagerly. “I've heard there'll be bowls.”

“Tin bowls?” inquired another.

“Clay.”

“Oh, it'll never be clay.”

“What I heard is what I heard.”

“What you heard was the wind whistling through the holes in your head.”

“I must confess, Ada Maximova, I'm surprised. Do you have such a great need of playing cards and tin bowls?”

“Oh, but you know how it is, Comrade sir. One snaps up what one can, when one can . . .”

“And just how much are the playing cards and the tin bowls on sale for

today?”

There appeared at last on her face a look of dawning anxiety. “Oh, I couldn’t say for certain.”

“So no doubt you’ve brought a tidy little sum, just to be safe.”

“Oh, a very little sum indeed, sir.”

“I wonder, all the same, if your need of playing cards is, after all, greater than your need, and your family’s need, of four walls and a roof over your heads?”

“But haven’t we paid up already this month?” asked the woman miserably.

“No, not paid. Defrayed some of your debt to the State, perhaps. It’s a long time since I’ve received any *payment* from Unit 317. Besides,” he said softly, taking her by the elbow and leading her out of the line, “there is always next month, and times, as you know, are hard . . .”

“Is it the first of the month already?”

“No,” he said. “Yes. It will be. In a few days.”

Nadeshda Pavlovna Radshova did not invite him in but stood aside with her back to the door, as though defying him to come inside and find anything amiss.

“Is your husband . . . not home?”

“Ivan Pavlovich—no. He is away.”

She stared at him for a moment, betraying nothing, then disappeared inside.

He did not go in, though he could have. It was only habit; Radshov had always brought the rent to the door. He had been one of the few who still paid in cash, and paid on time. Old *intelligentsia*. Old aristocrats. One had only to look at the woman, his wife, to see that.

He watched her outline, the brown lustre of her hair, moving in the space between the hinges of the door.

“The rent collector,” he heard her say to someone—the grandmother, presumably—without bothering to lower her voice.

Ippolitsky cleared his throat. "And when is he . . . expected back?"

She returned to the door and seemed for a moment surprised to see him still there. But it was only her usual look, her mask of composed disappointment, as though her deepest, most important thoughts had been carelessly disturbed.

"He is on a *komandirovka*."

"Oh yes?" said Ippolitsky casually. "For his organization, I assume?" He was being reckless, toying with her in this manner.

She hesitated, or rather, simply stood silent for a moment.

"For his organization," she repeated.

He laughed at the boldness of her lie. Then, quickly, to conceal the cause of his amusement, he muttered, "Somehow I can't imagine Ivan Pavlovich on a train to Moscow."

"And why not?"

Her brown hair was very brown. Her eyes were all pupil. Her skin was soapstone.

"I always thought he seemed quite . . . comfortable here. Among his many fine things."

Resolutely, without a trace of embarrassment, she said, "Will you return in a day or two? I will have the money then."

Because Radshov had always been polite to him, had never gone out of his way to make Ippolitsky feel stupid or beneath him, because he had always paid on time, and because now he was gone (and not on a *komandirovka*), Ippolitsky said yes.

It had nothing, he told himself, to do with guilt.

Andreyev Grishkovich took the stockings, the pillows, the linen, the pendant, and finally, after a great show of reluctance, the two icons. But he would not touch the pencils.

"Domestically made," was his verdict.

"But there's a shortage," protested Ippolitsky. "In all the offices."

"That is the offices' business, and the government's business. I do not

sell to offices.” He surveyed his fingernails, which he had chewed down to the flesh, with evident satisfaction. “It would be counter-revolutionary.”

“Then sell them to someone else.”

Andreyev Grishkovich picked up one of the pencils and looked at it sadly. “My customers wouldn’t be interested in such poor quality stuff. You know how it is. The tourists and foreigners are accustomed to lead, and anyone with money to spend on such trifles wants actually *to spend* money.”

“Then charge more, for God’s sake,” Ippolitsky sputtered.

The shopkeeper laid the pencil, as though to rest, on the counter. “Have you tried the bazaar?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Starving peasants don’t spend their money on *pencils*.”

Andreyev Grishkovich’s posture stiffened. “One shouldn’t exaggerate, Comrade.” He nodded at the other customers in the store.

Ippolitsky bristled. This was the Party co-operative; there should have been no need to speak so carefully behind closed doors. Besides, he did not understand how the mere acknowledgement of shortages could be counter-revolutionary, unless one also took it for granted that the revolution was to blame. To his mind, the real counter-revolutionary act was this mealy-mouthed circumspection; it was this wilful blindness to what was obvious to everyone that betokened the bad conscience.

His own conscience was clean. But he went through with the ritual anyway: “Of course I misspoke. Of course no one is actually *starving*, and if they are it’s only the despicable *kulaks* who by resisting collectivization have brought difficulties upon their own heads—of course.”

Andreyev Grishkovich shrugged the formality aside. “So you see, your pencils are too good and not good enough.” He tittered at his witticism. “Too expensive for the workers, not expensive enough for me. Still, you might try the bazaar.” He nibbled at a fingernail and snickered. “You might get lucky. You might find a struggling young Pushkin.”

Ippolitsky no longer knew exactly who or what *was* to blame for the present

difficulties, but of one thing he was certain: *Things are better now for more than they have ever been before.* Those who denied that or refused to see it, those who cursed the Party for all their hardships, were the real counter-revolutionaries.

The stupid, stubborn recalcitrance of the starving peasants themselves was, of course, partly at fault. He had seen enough horses slaughtered and grain torched by ignorant farmers resisting collectivization—not all of them, by any means, rich *kulaks*—to realize that a large number of the people's wounds were self-inflicted.

But there had to be—he had to believe that there was more at work than stupidity and fear of change. The peasantry could not be their own and only enemy. There had to be forces of oppression still active. How else to explain the shortages, the discontentment, the difficulties on so many fronts? The agents of reaction, the white agitators, the soldiers and spies of the counter-revolution had only gone underground. Most of them, he supposed, were to be found among the old tsarists, the old *intelligentsia*, the old aristocrats . . .

It was every good citizen's duty to sniff out and expose these saboteurs.

Ippolitsky hated the bazaar. It stank of poverty. Although it had been several years since he had known hunger, like any old acquaintance banished to exile and consigned to disgrace, he had no desire to meet it face to face in the street. The sight of the peasants—with their bones sticking out of their tattered clothing, their eyes popping out of their swollen faces, and all their junk spread out on the frozen ground, like the steaming innards of a slaughtered horse spilled out onto the snow—the sight of them, not to mention their smell, disgusted him.

The bazaar was chaos. The peasants arrived at the square in the morning, dropped their wares wherever they could find a spot, and hunkered down over their precious filth like brooding hens. They were desperate to sell and loath to relinquish. They knew that what they hawked was rubbish, but desperation and sentimental attachment converted the valueless to the

invaluable. Every pair of eyes accused him of theft and at the same time begged him to commit it.

The vendors of anything edible—or semi-edible, or once-edible—did the briskest business. For cups of sour milk, strips of rotten meat, unidentifiable fragments of bone, dirty flour, flyblown pails of grain, and hard crusts of black bread there could always be found willing buyers. Next in saleability were the inedible but needful things: matches, buttons, belts, boots, knives, thread, paraffin, primus needles, scraps of cloth, links of chain, fly-paper . . . That the usefulness of most of these things was, in fact, illusory—the matches didn't light, the oil didn't burn, the belts had no buckles, the boots no soles (or the soles no boots), the knives were dull, the thread came in a clump of one-inch lengths, and so on—did not seem to dissuade the buyers. On the contrary, they took the flaws for granted, and seemed even to set store by them. A peasant coming to the bazaar to buy thread might be deterred, even repulsed, by the sight of anything so fine as a spool.

Whatever else one might say about them, the difficulties on the harvest-collecting front had at least revealed the inherent uselessness of “fine” things. A jewellery box was, in the end, just a fancy box; a china cup was just a brittle receptacle for drink; medals, rings, pins, and pendants were only so much molten metal; portraits, the most useless of all, were even less than so much firewood, so many square inches of oil-speckled canvas: they gave off an unpleasant smell when burned; left unburned, they identified their owners as the offspring of some feeble inbred aristocrats who had thrived under the old tsarist regime, feeding upon the blood and toil of the serfs, living like gods in rarefied luxury, surrounded by things as fine and useless as themselves. Indeed, *all* the fine old things were tokens of exploitation and cruelty. Ippolitsky could not, even now, look at a jewellery box or handle a leather-bound book without a flare-up of the old anger: How many mouths had to go hungry so that such beautiful trifles could be made? *Quality precludes equality*—for once the slogan had got it right.

The more expensive something had been, the more worthless it was now. The neat symmetry of this reversal pleased Ippolitsky. But, as a result, only rarely did anything of interest turn up here—a clock or book that Ip-

politsky might pass along to Andreyev Grishkovich at a profit, a necklace or locket that Maria Smirnova, in her inscrutable discernment, might accept. And, because you could not eat a book, because no one in their right mind would trade so much as a fist-sized lump of rancid cheese for the finest clock in the world, Ippolitsky could usually walk away with these things for a song. Often it did not matter what he offered in exchange; if the peasant had been waiting long enough, if they were hungry enough, any trade was a good trade. The opportunity to sit around not selling something else for a change was, for most of them, an irresistible temptation. He would never be able to sell the pencils outright, but he just might trade them for something he could sell or take to Andreyev Grishkovich.

Sometimes, too, he came across one of his own tenants trying to convert their cherished rubbish into bread. If he caught them late enough in their chain-trading, he could often relieve them of something almost as good as roubles.

Of all his tenants, the last he had expected to find at the bazaar was Nadeshda Pavlovna.

He couldn't tell whether she was buying or selling. She stood alone, in one spot, as though she owned it. But this might have been an illusion of posture or bearing. She occupied space the way other people occupied their homes. Today, even in the midst of so much squalor, she looked more comfortable—more at home—in her shabby overcoat than he had ever felt in his own skin.

She was holding a box of some sort, and it seemed to Ippolitsky that she held the box in the same way that she held herself: delicately but firmly, as though it were an object of great value. But even at a distance he could see that, whatever it was, it was too fine to be of any value to anyone here. Its dark red wood gleamed in the white sunlight.

She saw him approach, and smiled. It was almost enough to make him check his stride. It was a smile that invited interpretation and simultaneously denied it. Beneath all its self-deprecating frankness there was a thin, hard,

reflective crust of defiance: *Whatever you think this smile means, you're wrong.*

"I don't really know what I'm doing here," she said, smiling.

Ippolitsky grimaced. With the white sun smeared out across the sky by a thin gauze of cloud, the day was almost unbearably bright.

"Perhaps," he said lightly, "there is something I can do to help?"

"A gramophone," said Andreyev Grishkovich, contemplatively chewing the red nub of a finger to conceal his excitement. He looked at Ippolitsky shrewdly. "Does it *work*?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Ippolitsky had never before seen such a contraption, not in the homes of even the richest farmers, not in the fanciest hotels requisitioned by his squad during the Revolutionary War. Nadeshda Pavlovna (without quite hiding her amused astonishment at his ignorance) had said simply that it was for playing music. He had seen music boxes before—his sister had had one, once—and assumed this was the same sort of thing. Only larger, and finer.

Andreyev Grishkovich slapped his hands together twice, as though dusting them off, and lifted the lid of the box. He gave the crank at the side one gentle turn, then several more, and the black disc began slowly rotating. Then, reaching out as though from a great distance, he laid the little arm down onto the outer edge of the spinning black plate.

It was not like a music box.

By the time she opened the door, Ippolitsky had already gone through ten or fifteen minutes of the ensuing conversation in his head. Thus it caught him off guard to find himself still standing in the hallway, still holding out the fifteen roubles, when in his imagination she had long ago, with a quick nod expressive of deep gratitude and humility, taken the money and hidden it away somewhere in the plush folds of her gown—when in reality they had not yet spoken a word; nor was she wearing a gown.

She glanced down at the money and lifted a hand to her face. This gesture—two fingers lightly touching her cheek—was somehow, coming from her, more evocative of anguish than another woman pulling out her hair or clawing at her eyes.

“Oh. Is that—”

He stuffed the money back in his pocket, then realized how foolish this must look—like a gloating child flaunting his little hoard of sugared raisins.

“That’s not all,” said Ippolitsky quickly. And so it was that with the first words out of his mouth he was already repudiating himself, correcting the mistaken impression he had made, instead of calmly and laconically explaining the scenario that he had so carefully formulated. A flare of resentment shot up through his chest, constricting his windpipe. “That’s not all.” He held out the money again. “That’s what was left over.”

She just looked at him.

“After rent.”

“Oh.”

In fact, Andreyev Grishkovich had offered an amount that was one and a half times the Radshovs’ rent, and which Ippolitsky could surely have pushed up to two or three. But he had not sold the gramophone. The fifteen roubles—the amount supposedly left over after deducting next month’s rent—were to make her think he had. He had thought this detail particularly ingenious, and felt that, in all justice, it should have been all the more convincing for putting him out fifteen roubles—not to mention the month’s rent that he would now have to account for somehow. But standing before her, holding out the coins as though anxious to be rid of them, he realized how guilty he must look. Why should she believe that he had deducted only the rent money, and not a kopeck more? Because everyone would skim a little off the top if given the opportunity. It was expected. That’s what was done.

She picked the coins, still warm from his own pocket, out of his palm one at a time, like rotten blackberries. He blushed at what she must think of him; and the injustice of her assumption—natural, but incorrect—added to his shame a flush of rage.

He hated her. He hated the way she made him feel.

“Perhaps,” she said thoughtfully, turning her head and gaze as far away from him as was possible without actually showing him her back, “perhaps we could find one or two other things for you to sell . . .”

The free-market restaurant was almost empty. Maria Smirnova gave Ippolit-sky a look of triumphant reproach, but magnanimously allowed him to take her coat.

One of the girl’s most mystifying qualities was the ease with which she turned every situation and circumstance to her advantage—or, rather, his disadvantage. If the restaurant had been crowded, she would certainly have reproached him for exposing her to so many eyes. She had been reluctant to come tonight. When pressed, she’d said something about the difficulties on the food-distribution front, and how would it look? But the free-market places, where they made no bones about serving you in the best international (capitalist) style, had always been technically illicit. What others might think had never bothered her before. On the contrary, what others might think had always struck him as one of her prime motivations for coming here. Only tourists, Party members, and employees of the better organizations could afford to. Why the sudden scruples? She wouldn’t say, and instead trotted out one of her all-purpose Komsomol slogans, something to the effect that one must be vigilant always. Her I-told-you-so look just now was her way of gloating that she had clearly not been alone in those scruples. He might have pointed out that, in any case, with the place empty there was no one here to see them; or that anyone who did show up could hardly throw stones in *their* direction; or that the only other place one could be reasonably sure of getting fed would have been the Party restaurants, and she, he need hardly remind her, was not yet a member. But he did not want to get off to a bad start. It had been more than weeks since she had last agreed to see him.

She looked more than usually madeup tonight. Not necessarily any prettier—he did not think anyone would have called her pretty, exactly—but more meticulously arranged, sculpted, lacquered. He wondered if any of this

was for his benefit; and, to forestall any flattery he might have felt, mused that only women lacking natural beauty had to bother, and only those who had, early in life, lacked the means to do so went to such lengths. He thought of Nadeshda Pavlovna's beauty. Perhaps Maria Smirnova's children would be prettier than she. Perhaps all of tomorrow's children would be prettier than today's. This seemed, on the face of it, quite plausible. There might even have been something in the Party line about it.

Maria told him what to order for both of them. He took what she had read from the menu and compressed it to its essence, stripped of all adjectives and secondary ingredients, and told the waiter simply, "The vichyssoise; the stuffed chicken; the caviar to start." This brusqueness was as close as he dared come to stating that he would have preferred a good blood sausage and three or four hard-boiled eggs. Maria thought his tastes hopelessly common; and, though he doubted that she enjoyed actually eating things like red pressed caviar or cold soup as much as she enjoyed ordering or being seen ordering them, she had the power to make him feel ashamed of what he liked with a single disapproving glance. He tried not to embarrass her, though in one way or another it seemed he could not avoid it. The last time they were here he had mortified her by removing his own coat.

They ate in silence, Ippolitsky because he was determined to get as much pleasure and satisfaction out of the food as possible, Maria because she was distracted, her attention drawn to the entrance with every new arrival of diners. Her appetite, as usual, was no match for her imagination.

"Are you really finished, then?" he asked, nodding at her plate.

It galled him to see food left uneaten. Though he realized that it would not likely go to waste. If the maître did not eat it himself, one of the waiters or cooks surely would, and even if by some amazing oversight Maria's scraps were thrown out, there would be a horde of waifs only too ready to pick through the restaurant's leavings, and more still grazing like cattle on the rotten trash heaps outside town. He supposed, on reflection, that it was better she didn't finish—and he felt a swift pang of guilt at his own appetite, which was as much conscience as it was hunger. It occurred to him that he might take the leftovers back to Nadeshda Pavlovna's grandmother. But

Maria Smirnova would never allow that.

She looked prepared to ignore him. Then, dabbing at her lips with her napkin, she changed her attitude, and said calmly, "I'm not hungry."

"You will be," was all he said.

Though not hungry, Maria insisted that they take dessert, a raspberry torte with vanilla syrup and chocolate shavings, and coffee with brandy. Ippolitsky tried not to think that he would have preferred a piece of carrot cake and a cup of beef tea.

"You'll never guess who just came in," she said, leaning over the table in her enthusiastic conspirator's manner.

"Who?"

"You'll never guess," she assured him, but nevertheless wanted him to try. When she realized he wouldn't play, she told him, but with an offhand, slightly wounded air. "Elinskiev and his fat wife," she said, naming the manager of the post office. His wife was supposed to have a position of some influence in the regional division of the State publishing organization. "Can you believe it?" said Maria Smirnova with ominous glee. "After his cousin was deported . . . They must have a death wish."

"Just because someone in the family becomes corrupt doesn't mean—"

She stared at him with blank contempt. "Don't be a fool, please. Reaction runs in the blood." She had a real talent, Ippolitsky had to admit, for delivering slogans: at an even, slightly raised pitch, as though surprised, even in the articulation of it, by the profundity of the thought. "At least everyone acts like it does," she said, moodily now, stirring her coffee in lieu of drinking it. "They should know better." She sounded as though the Elinskievs had quite ruined her evening.

He withdrew from his trousers pocket the necklace that he had been meaning to give her since she first came to her door. There was no occasion for it, and he could not decide how much ceremony to put into the giving. In the end, he simply held the necklace up over the table in the hope that the gesture would draw in its wake the appropriate words, the right tone. But her gaze remained on her coffee cup, and it seemed somehow pompous to begin any speech without her attention. In clearing his throat he set free a

little bubbling burp. She looked up then, of course; and the disgust still lingered in her eyes even as she reached out for the necklace—not to take it, like a dog snapping up a scrap of meat, but in an instinctive caress, the way he had seen some women reach out towards babies, as though to get a better look at them with their fingertips.

“Where did you get it?”

“I bargained for it,” he said, pitching his voice somewhere between pride and humility; it came out sounding merely deceitful.

A smile slowly broke out on her face. She held the necklace up; it glistened blackly in the candlelight.

She murmured, as though to herself, “Beth Yuriovna, you can be sure, doesn’t have anything like it.”

She leaned over the table to plant a kiss approximately on his cheek. His heart thudded—once, like a cannon—in his ears. He could not shake the foolish feeling that all eyes were on them, crawling over them like spiders.

As usual, Ippolitsky was made to wait half an hour in the anteroom outside Kronstrov’s office. A pale young man dressed all in khaki, like a soldier in an American film, went in and out several times while Ippolitsky waited. A messenger or secretary, he supposed—though the man was on no obvious errand, carried nothing in and brought nothing out. Each time he passed through the anteroom he had a sly smile for Ippolitsky, who grew annoyed at not knowing what attitude to take towards him. On his third or fourth appearance, Ippolitsky got to his feet; the young man did not object. It was the outfit that had decided him: no lowly messenger or secretary would dare to dress in such a ridiculous fashion. At last, he left Kronstrov’s door open on his way out, and a minute or two later Ippolitsky was mournfully called in.

For being bald, or nearly so, Kronstrov’s head was a remarkably variegated surface, crosshatched with scars and wrinkles, spattered with moles, liver spots, and what might have been a birthmark. Ippolitsky found he could scrutinize it indefinitely, which was just as well, since the old man of-

ten left him standing there with little else to do, while he stared balefully at the papers on his desk, bobbing and ducking his head as though physically parrying the information that rose up from the page.

“Will you close the door?” Kronstrov said, abstractedly but clearly. Kronstrov never mumbled.

The door was already closed, but Ippolitsky went over and touched the doorknob again.

Eventually Kronstrov’s head, for the most part, stopped moving.

“I have been looking over your figures for last month, Comrade.”

“Yes, Comrade?”

“They seem to be in order,” said Kronstrov, his tone ominously even.

“I should hope so, Comrade.”

“You’ve not encountered any . . . difficulties in your collections?”

“Difficulties?”

Kronstrov looked up. His grey gaze, magnified by his round rimless spectacles, startled Ippolitsky.

“No one . . . refuses to pay?”

“Not everyone is always equally . . . willing.” He had almost said *able*. But an inability to pay might be thought to have something to do with a lack of money, and to acknowledge shortages of any kind could conceivably be seen as recklessly counter-revolutionary. “But I know how to persuade them,” he added.

“Of course, but perhaps,” mused Kronstrov, “you need not persuade quite so diligently.”

Kronstrov had removed his glasses and was vigorously rubbing his face, like an old farmwoman scrubbing bloodstains out of a blanket. Ippolitsky waited for him to finish before saying he did not understand.

As though reading from one of the dossiers spread out before him, Kronstrov said, “Of course your building is close to the offices of the People’s Water and Electricity Commission.”

As he seemed to expect some confirmation—or, more accurately, some violent denial—Ippolitsky said mildly, “I guess it is.”

“A Comrade Toblomov is, I am told, being transferred to those of-

fices.”

“I see.”

“From Moscow.”

“Yes.”

“I am given to understand that Comrade Toblomov would benefit from a flat close by.”

“Of course. But my building—there are no vacancies.”

“Comrade Toblomov is coming to aid in the resolution of the difficulties on the electricity front.”

Of course Comrade Toblomov, arriving from Moscow, and affiliated with no less an organization than WATCOM, would be a Party member; of course he would be given a flat close to his office. To make up for his momentary obtuseness, Ippolitsky blurted out what had been implicit but should have been immediately obvious: “I should free a room for him.”

Kronstrov, perhaps as a reproof, did not bother to confirm the obvious.

“When does Comrade arrive?”

“Soon,” said Kronstrov vaguely, then again, more forcefully: “Soon.”

“It won’t be a problem,” said Ippolitsky with some fervour. “I can think of a few tenants who’ve been more trouble than they’re worth, of course.”

“Before you go,” said Kronstrov, as though he had caught Ippolitsky on his way out the door. “Anything more to report on that Radshova woman?”

Carefully, and with the careful avoidance of brevity that characterized the more official Party discourse, Ippolitsky said that there was not.

“Mmm. Well, keep an eye on them. The grandmother especially.” Here, to Ippolitsky’s surprise, there escaped from Kronstrov’s throat what, coming from another, he would almost have called a laugh. “An old spy, that one.”

Ippolitsky, who had been keeping an eye on them well enough to see that the old spy was quite unable to feed or dress herself or defecate unaided, agreed that one must be vigilant always.

The Yomjievts were frying onions; the smell wafted down the staircase. The

Zemstovs had been home again all afternoon, smoking *mahorka* and playing cards; he'd heard them trudging back from the employment offices shortly after noon. There was a veritable party going on in the Madezhkovs' room; each day more of the wife's family arrived from around the country; each day there were more names for Ippolitsky to register and more feet clomping across the floor of Unit 224. He would have gone inside, if not for the smell of so many bodies.

From 113 there came neither smells nor sounds. He knocked.

She opened the door wide, like she was on her way out. Ippolitsky had to tell himself to stand his ground.

"Good afternoon, Comrade."

"How are things?" he asked, with a solicitous glance past her, into the flat.

"You've not come for the rent, surely."

He dismissed the very idea with a limp shake of his fingers.

"Would you come in," she said evenly, with neither the rising inflection of a question, which might after all have conveyed a genuine invitation, nor the falling inflection of a command, which might have betrayed the perfunctory familiarity of genuine friendliness. As usual, she gave nothing away. He stepped inside.

As soon as the door clicked shut, she went about her business as if he weren't there, stirring something at the stove, checking on the old woman, whose gobbling cough came from the far side of the curtain that divided the flat.

"The rent collector," he heard her say.

The room was barer than he remembered it. Radshov had invited him in during an *écarté* game once, and the impression that had stayed with him was one of cramped comfort, luxury softened by shabbiness. But aside from one antique chair and a tottering armoire, Unit 113 was as sparsely furnished as any of the others, and certainly no cleaner or brighter.

He peered inside the armoire and was repelled by the sight of so many books. On another shelf were several records. Towards these he felt an ambivalent distaste, such as a man might feel towards his wife's mother or sis-

ter: whatever charms they might share only stripped his beloved of her uniqueness, and their flaws her perfection.

"I could sell these, perhaps," he said. This reference to the absent gramophone was as close as he could come to acknowledging their secret bond.

She shook her head, the slightest gesture imaginable.

"How are—" No, he had already asked that. "How is your grandmother?"

"Fine."

Fine. That was what she was, all right: "fine." He had once heard someone say at a meeting that, in the future, they would exterminate the old and the infirm, just as soon as the value they contributed to society was exceeded by the burden they placed on it. He never learned if that was in the Party line or not. He'd never heard anything about it again.

"And . . . your husband?"

"Ivan Pavlovich—is fine." He thought maybe she stiffened a little.

"Oh? You've heard from him, then?"

She said nothing.

"But of course he must write from time to time . . . Naturally, if he is on a *komandirovka* . . ."

He felt his face flush red. Had he hoped to bait her, provoke some tearful confession? He was a fool. Her silence said as much.

And who are you? A rent collector?

More than that. Someone who knows what music is . . .

"Here," he said, digging in his pockets for some justification of his visit, "fifty, sixty roubles. For the clock." It was not really enough—Andreyev Grishkovich would have offered at least eighty or ninety—but it was all he had.

From the Petrov's apartment there came the unmistakable smell of meat.

He felt laid open, exposed. It was like having fingers moving inside him, warm, dry, gloved fingers, palpating his organs with firm expertise.

For the first time he understood how names like Beethoven and Tchaikovsky could be uttered, like the names of saints, with almost superstitious respect, even by ignorant peasants. Indeed, Ippolitsky naturally assumed that the piece of music Nadeshda Pavlovna's gramophone played had been composed by one of these luminaries (Tchaikovsky he thought most likely). It was inconceivable that anyone less than a genius could have produced, out of his own head, such sounds.

The "song" (he felt the word's inadequacy, but knew no other word for it) had taken on for him all the significance of a historical, even a revolutionary event. He wondered how its existence had never been celebrated, or indeed mentioned in the newspapers. The music itself seemed to invite, even demand, a revolutionary interpretation. Not just in the sheer immensity of its sounds, the tremendous, earth-shaking importance asserted in its whispers and crashes, but in its progression, the very arrangement of its notes.

The song began with trilling ups and downs that surely signified the fermenting, but disorganized, dissatisfaction of the pre-revolutionary proletariat; then, as though from afar, there entered for the first time the major melody, the sad but uplifting theme that came in to give sudden coherence, order, and direction to the impotent turmoil; and eventually, after a few unforeseen deviations, interruptions, and delays that could only signify the War itself, the rising and falling turmoil dropped entirely away, and only the theme remained, stronger and clearer than ever.

And it was this recurrent melody—melancholy but always climbing, even when it descended, always pushing forward, despite occasional, inevitable setbacks, setbacks that it magically incorporated into itself, as if these had been planned all along to be used as footholds from which it could spring even higher—it was this melody that seemed the most direct and eloquent evocation of Revolution possible. The feeling that this music was calling him to arms, urging him to action, was, at times, almost insufferably potent. But then came other passages whose placid beauty seemed to say, with the utmost warmth and gratitude, that everything that need ever be done had already been done. By the end of the song he often felt as though he had fought several wars single-handed, had smashed stars and been crushed be-

neath heels, had slaughtered armies and died many deaths. He felt stretched out and deflated, as though his skin no longer quite fit him.

Such at least were the thoughts that occupied his mind when he was not listening; when the gramophone played, anything that might be called thought was drowned in the tide of emotion that flooded through him. The closest analogy within his experience was extreme illness, when you forgot who you were, even *that* you were. It frightened him.

Down through the ceiling came the sound of Madezhkov's glutinous cough. Disgusted, Ippolitsky lowered the volume on the gramophone and moved his ear closer.

Snow the colour of ash fell in clumps from the eaves. The oily smell of the refineries hung in the air. A thick knot of factory workers stood waiting for the morning tram, indolently jostling one another for a better position on the curb; when the overloaded tram came into view, those at the back of the group would probably not find room to ride, not even hanging off the running boards. In the mouth of an alley, two waifs quarrelled, striking at each other viciously but without much effect. He could tell they were waifs by their sheer bulk: they wore everything they owned, which buffered them from one another's blows. The taller one held something over his head, a hunk of bread, perhaps, which the other was trying to get at. Ippolitsky watched them for a moment, debating whether or not to intervene. He had taken a step towards them when they toppled over into the gutter. The disputed crust went flying.

The small one got to it first. Good, thought Ippolitsky. But the victor, instead of fleeing, reached back and threw the hunk of bread as far as he could; it landed on the roof of a nearby shop. The tall one tackled him, and they resumed their thrashing of one another.

Ippolitsky moved on, with ambivalent disgust. Perhaps it had not been a piece of bread after all.

“Who is *that*?” whispered Maria Smirnova.

Ippolitsky slowly turned his head, then quickly looked away.

“The Radshova woman,” he said, after a pause.

“No, *with* her. I’ve never seen him before.”

“Some engineer or something.” He made a sound of passionate indifference.

“How do *you* know?”

“He’s moved into the Petrovs’ old flat.”

“From Moscow?”

Ippolitsky shrugged.

“What a fool,” said Maria with relish. “To be seen *here*, with *her*, when her brother has just been sent away . . .”

“Brother?”

“Oh, they let people think they were married, all right. Probably so they could go on sleeping in the same bed. But then you would know more about that than me.”

Was it possible? But Kronstrov would have known, would have said something ... Nadeshda *Pavlovna* Radshova; Ivan *Pavlovich* Radshov. Yes, it was possible. Ippolitsky tried to remember if she had ever actually called Ivan Pavlovich her husband. Or had she simply never corrected the assumptions of others? Not that it mattered now . . . Nevertheless, for some reason, he felt a spasm of chagrin, as though he had forgotten something, left something undone.

“Is he a Party member?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s your tenant, but you don’t know if he’s from Moscow, you don’t know if he’s a Party member, you don’t know anything. What are you *doing*?”

“What does it look like? Inviting them to join us.”

Maria Smirnova’s discomposure did not last long. Curiosity soon overcame scruples.

“Nikolai tells me, Comrade Toblomov, that you are here about the power plant.”

Toblomov lifted his gaze from the menu, smiled as if at some distant music, and gave Ippolitsky a long, playfully reproving glance—one that announced that whatever his role might or might not be, it was in any case a matter of such importance and sensitivity that a man less genial and easygoing than Comrade Toblomov might consider Comrade Ippolitsky’s disclosure to be indiscreet.

“Yes,” he said at last, “Comrade Ippolitsky is not incorrect.”

“You are an engineer, then?”

Toblomov smiled sleepily. “Studied in Vienna and Berlin.”

“Oh—you’ve been to Berlin?”

“You *could* say that; I lived there for four years.”

“It must have been *horrible*—yes?” Maria Smirnova asked eagerly.

Toblomov looked momentarily puzzled, or would have, Ippolitsky thought, if his features had not been too elegantly indolent to adopt an expression of puzzlement.

“It was not entirely bereft of charms,” he said, smiling now at Nadeshda Pavlovna. She did not smile back, Ippolitsky noted with satisfaction; and Toblomov’s heavy gaze slid back down to his menu.

Maria Smirnova tried to look at her own menu, but soon gave up this valiant struggle of self-denial. “How many—tell me, Comrade Toblomov, how many factory workers die each day in Berlin? Is it true that their corpses are piled up in the street?”

Toblomov looked at her with faint curiosity. One of his eyes, Ippolitsky noticed, was lazy.

“I never saw any, my dear.”

“I suppose,” said Ippolitsky irritably, “it’s well known, of course, that the *intelligentsia* in any country would be largely shielded from the more brutal realities . . .”

Grandly ignoring the interruption, Maria Smirnova tried a broader approach. “In your opinion and in your experience, Comrade Toblomov, is *envy* or *hatred* the more prevalent manifestation of foreign capitalist jealousy

of our socialist homeland?”

“Oh yes,” said the engineer inattentively, “jealousy, definitely . . .”

Nadeshda Pavlovna looked up: first, sympathetically, at Maria Smirnova, then, almost affectionately, at Toblomov.

“Vasiliy, tell them about the confectioners.”

Toblomov, with a great show of effort, recalibrated his gaze. “What?”

“Come, you know, the story about the confectioners’ shops in Germany. You tell it so well.”

The waiter appeared. Toblomov ordered for himself, Nadeshda Pavlovna for herself, and Maria Smirnova, following suit, ordered for herself, which caught Ippolitsky off guard. He pointed at something on the menu and the waiter went away.

He watched Toblomov speak. The man had been in town for less than a week and already she was calling him Vasiliy. Ippolitsky looked contemptuously at Maria Smirnova, who, despite her scruples, was obviously hanging on his every word, was obviously delighted to be seated at the same table with—to be *dining with*—someone as fine as Nadeshda Pavlovna. It gave him a sting of vicious satisfaction to think that she would never be as fine. That kind of beauty, that grace, that confidence, was innate. It could not be mimicked, or donned, or bought. It was not in the clothes or the hairstyle or the elaborate, ritualized mannerisms; it was in the blood. Fineness was for Maria Smirnova a foreign language, one that she would always speak with a thick accent. She would remain an outsider, a barbarian, all her life. Like him.

“Why Berlin?” he demanded.

Toblomov, like a river in full spate, could not change direction suddenly. His flow of words had to slow to a stream, a brook, a trickle, before they finally dried up. His head was brought to bear on Ippolitsky even more slowly, like artillery rotating on a turret. He said: “What?”

“Why did you go to Berlin? Are there no engineering schools in the country of the future?”

“Assuredly there are, assuredly. But at the time of which we are speaking, they were not, how shall we put it, quite up to the standard of some of

their foreign counterparts.”

“Schools in Berlin are better than schools in Moscow, is what you’re saying.”

“*Were*. Yes. Are?” Toblomov rolled this rough proposition around in his skull until it came out a gleaming gem. “Yes, perhaps *are*. But *will be*?” He held up a finger and grinned. “Ah. Indeed. That is the question.”

Maria Smirnova, who had been making a sour face since Ippolitsky’s interruption, asked if Toblomov’s work was at all dangerous, as though she rather hoped it was.

“Dangerous, my dear?”

“There must be *some* cause to fear additional attacks on the plant, once everything is up and operative again.”

Toblomov parted his dry lips and looked blankly at Nadeshda Pavlovna. “Attacks?”

“Sabotage,” Ippolitsky cut in. “The power plant,” he said impatiently, leaving the *as you well know* implicit in his tone, “was sabotaged.”

Toblomov half closed his eyes and let out a long, rising grumble, which context alone permitted Ippolitsky to identify not as a death rattle but rather, presumably, laughter. Toblomov laid his hand on Nadeshda Pavlovna’s, as though for strength.

“I think,” she said softly, “that was just the story. For the . . . newspapers.”

By this time Toblomov had recovered enough to say, “Yes.” A little later, he was able to add, “No *sabotage*, I’m afraid. No *saboteur*.” He pronounced the words in the French manner, as though they were the names of *hors d’oeuvres*. “The whole mess simply stopped working.”

“Pre-revolutionary technology, then,” said Ippolitsky.

“No,” said Nadeshda Pavlovna. “They couldn’t have built it more than five, six years ago.” She turned to Maria Smirnova. “You remember the fuss they made over it in the local papers.”

“I remember it was modelled on the Dnieper.”

“Sheer nonsense,” said Toblomov gaily. “They’re completely different arrangements, completely different.”

“So what is your point?” Ippolitsky demanded. “That power plants are better in Berlin? So what if they are. Just because something is better elsewhere is no reason to . . .” He grasped at the thought as it fled. “You only make people dissatisfied with what they have.”

“I suppose,” said Nadeshda Pavlovna diplomatically, “one has to follow the best example. Learn what you can from them, take what you need, and leave the rest.”

Toblomov patted her hand. “Assuredly, my dear, assuredly.”

“No,” said Ippolitsky. “That’s wrong.”

You couldn’t take from exploiters and oppressors, he wanted to say, without being tainted by what you took. The good and the useful only came at the expense of the bad. You couldn’t take a capitalist power plant without, to some extent, taking capitalism. The correct thing to do, the revolutionary act, was not to take, but to *break* what they had. The counter-revolutionary spies, at least, knew that much. Which was precisely why they had sabotaged the power plant . . .

He wanted to say this, or something like it.

Toblomov and Nadeshda Pavlovna were watching him. Maria Smirnova was looking at no one.

He said nothing.

The food came. He’d ordered mussels, it seemed. They glistened in the candlelight like black opals. He wasn’t hungry.

A few nights later, Toblomov came to his room. With money.

“I understand,” he said languidly, “that Nadeshda Pavlovna is somewhat behind on her rent.”

“Not precisely,” said Ippolitsky.

Toblomov held out the money as if he could not stand the smell of it. Ippolitsky took it, counted it. Three months’ rent, exactly.

“She would also like some of her things back, if possible.” He cocked his head to one side, tried to peer past Ippolitsky into the room.

Ippolitsky held the door firm. “I sold them.”

Toblomov smiled. "Ah. Yes. But you can get them back?"

"Of course not. I sold them."

"I seem to have gotten the impression that she was particularly interested in a gramophone."

"I don't have it." He began to shut the door.

Toblomov's smile broadened slightly, as though at some pleasant private daydream. "Yes, well, good evening, Comrade . . ."

There was already a long line stretching down the street from the public cooperative store. The newspapers had promised a shipment of onions, and, unbelievably, another of sugar.

He spotted Nadeshda Pavlovna almost instantly. She stood out like the martyr in an old religious painting.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning, Comrade."

"Will you come with me?" he said softly, as though to spare her embarrassment. He crossed the street without turning to see if she was following. But then he heard the crunch of her boots hurrying after him.

"What's the matter?" she said. "I'll lose my place in line."

He said nothing. He could think of nothing to say.

"Is it grandmother?" she asked, suddenly anxious.

He shook his head impatiently. "You don't have to wait in line," he said at last.

He could feel her gaze on him, as if it gave off heat.

He took her to the Party store. She would not come in. Still, he was relieved that Andreyev Grishkovich was not working, or was in the back with a customer. Ippolitsky bought a bag of white onions, a pound of the hard yellow sugar.

"What is this for?" she asked when he handed the items to her. She took them as though she were only holding them for him.

"A gift," he said with a tentative grin.

But it did not have the hoped-for effect. She only stared at him with the

same mixture of suspicion, puzzlement, and stung pride.

Pride, he used to think, was one of those strange, contradictory words, like *hubris* and *narcissism*, that was uttered derogatively yet rang with positive overtones. One should not be proud (not *too* proud); yet pride implied strength, resilience, self-sufficiency, even a certain will to power.

Looking at Nadeshda Pavlovna's face, he understood for the first time how pride might be despicable. The proud stood straight and held their heads high; this was surely intended to be a sign of strength, a show of resilience. But only the weak needed to advertise their strength. Backed into a corner, a dog bared its teeth. A wolf simply tore out your throat.

Pride was fundamentally defiant; it dared you to attack. In straightening the back one exposed the spine; in holding the head high one gave the executioner a better view of the neck. Pride was the cloak that weakness wore to preserve its dignity.

He was stronger than she was, and she knew it.

"Thank you, Nikolai Ivanovich," she said, "but I do not need your gifts."

She turned and walked stiffly away—still carrying the sack of onions like a messenger, as if it belonged to someone else.

Several days later, Ippolitsky was summoned. This time he did not have to wait, either outside or inside Kronstrov's office. The old man handed him a letter, written in pencil, that he did not need to read. Nevertheless he pretended to study it for a minute or two, though with Kronstrov's eyes on him he found it difficult to concentrate. He caught the phrase "Revolution runs in the blood," and wondered now if this was too much.

He looked up. "I am not surprised," he said weightily.

"You were expecting something of the kind?"

"No . . . No, not expecting, not exactly." He passed the letter back to Kronstrov, who laid it on the desk without looking at it. "All the same . . . I am not entirely surprised, either."

"Your opinion of the Radshova woman, then, I am to understand, has

undergone a change?”

Ippolitsky pretended to ponder this, then found himself actually pondering it. He would have to be careful.

“In light of this letter—yes,” he said.

“But you just finished saying that the letter did not surprise you. Which implies that its contents, its allegations, could not have been the only decisive factor in your . . . change of heart.”

“My suspicions . . .” He paused, cleared his throat, started again. “Recently, in my contact with the Radshova woman, I might have started to entertain certain doubts as to her loyalty to the revolutionary cause. Nothing more than comments, really . . . her general attitude . . . her bearing . . .”

“What sort of comments?”

“Oh, disparaging comments about the backwardness of our technology, for example. That sort of thing.” Ippolitsky clasped his hands behind his back and stared fixedly at the wall above Kronstrov’s head. “By themselves,” he went on, “these probably wouldn’t have been sufficient to convince me. And yet . . . On the other hand, without them, I might not have been wholly convinced by the letter you just—the letter you just showed me.”

Kronstrov sighed, and looked mournfully down at this and the others papers on his desk.

Ippolitsky, who felt somehow that the worst had passed, added, “I admit now that I might also not have properly taken into consideration the full force of background factors: her upbringing, her family . . .”

“You were mistaken, Comrade Ippolitsky?”

“I was,” Ippolitsky said, “mistaken.”

They came, as they always did, in the morning, when it was still dark.

At the door was the young man from Kronstrov’s office, the one with the sly smiles who dressed like an American soldier. He was not dressed like a soldier now, and he did not smile. He was not alone.

“We are searching the premises,” he said, his voice ringing down the hallway with pride and self-importance.

“What,” said Ippolitsky, “the whole building?” He was still half-asleep.

“We will start here,” said the young man indifferently, “with your room.”

Ippolitsky stepped aside. “Comrade Kronstrov’s orders, I suppose?”

“*Kronstrov*,” said the young man with a sneer, “is on his way to Siberia as we speak.”

Ippolitsky didn’t know what they would find. They would certainly find something. Jewellery, torn-up books, gramophone records . . . It didn’t matter. Anything could be used against him. Things were in motion now.

They would find him guilty, he knew, for the wrong reasons, of the wrong crimes. But somehow, he felt, they would not be wrong to find him guilty.

“What is this?” asked one of the men.

“Shut up,” said Ippolitsky, “just shut *up* . . .”

The Petrovs’ dog would not stop barking. He was afraid it would wake the whole building.