

Billancourt Fiesta

It was the national holiday on the Place Nationale. The evening of July 14th.

A stage had been set up where our people usually sit at sunset twiddling their thumbs, or stroll, chatting. On it was a four-man orchestra that had been engaged to play the same waltz all night long. The drum beat sad and loud, couples swirled, a thick wall of people watched from the sidelines; there was plenty to look at.

This time the couples were the genuine article, each cavalier dancing with his lady; occasionally you'd come across two cavaliers, of course, but rarely, and no one paid them any mind.

The local lion danced (I never did find out how this lion earned his living). A Chinaman danced, a swoop of hair carefully trained over his right eye; my boss, my foreman (a member of the French Communist Party, actually), wearing sky blue suspenders, danced.

The rest of the politically unaffiliated public, with some Arabs interspersed, were standing in a circle, arms hanging at their sides.

There were many precious and even priceless faces in that crowd, shaven not only because of the national holiday but also because it was Sunday. Parts ran across heads like bright shoelaces, took a turn eight and a half centimeters above the ear and, rounding the crown in a free line, descended to a starched collar. The starched collar that dug into the neck was clean as a whistle, something you couldn't say about the tie, which twisted and turned for no apparent reason on the chest of someone who had already suffered more than his share. A vest of a blue so dark it was almost black, nipped in at the waist by a tailor's invisible stitch, often swathed such a chivalrous form you couldn't help but feel a certain pride for the vest's wearer. The cleaned boots and colorfully patterned socks were less visible by dint of the twilight. The most priceless faces, as always, were rather pale and puffy from their cares and God only knows what nutrition. Even on a holiday you saw no happy satiety in them; what mostly showed through were their nerves. Individuals walked around the square, to and fro, watching the dancing. The sky was growing dark, the apartment buildings shrouded in the evening's gray. The drum beat sad and fine.

There were three of us—Shchov, Petrusha, and me—sitting under a high canvas awning lettered "Cabaret." Petrusha—my dear friend Peter Ivanovich, actually—simply could not come to any agreement with Shchov, who'd fought alongside him, concerning where they both were at dawn on December 23, 1919. And if it was on that side of B., the famous fortress, then why wasn't Colonel Maimistov with them? Their argument had dragged on since morning with only brief respites.

"Grisha, tell him!" Petrusha—Peter Ivanovich, that is—shouted at me. "Why don't you say something? Tell him he was

drunk that day so his memories have flitted away like moths. Because if we really had been on that side, Maimistov wouldn't have been away at headquarters, that stubborn soul, he would have been right there with us like the most inseparable friend."

"I was not drunk," Shchov replied. "I mean, I couldn't have been drunk because it was Wednesday."

"Wednesday! Dear God, now he really has lost his mind. Grisha, believe me, it was Monday! Why don't you say something?"

Why did they have to hash out every detail of the distant past? He, Petrusha, Peter Ivanovich, that is, later admitted to me that he wanted to write a military history, even if he only printed three copies, for God's sake: one for himself, one for posterity, and one for the woman he loved, should she ever come his way. Shchov was only annoying him as a matter of course.

Just then, a vision appeared from around the corner. It was wearing a sky blue, knee-length silk dress and a sky blue hat; it was holding a brown leather purse. Head held high, it walked past the three of us toward the dancing. Everyone turned to look. It lingered in the crowd, shifting from foot to foot, and suddenly evaporated before our very eyes: it had gone to dance with the local lion to the waltz the reader has already heard all about.

A mere scrap of blue hat flashed by. The crowd of spectators was getting thicker and thicker, and the drum was beginning to fill them with longing.

"That's it! That's it!" Petrusha shouted when we lost the scrap of hat entirely. "Right this minute my entire life's happiness may have gone to dance, and simpleton that I am, I'm sitting here wondering about Colonel Maimistov. What I'd like is

a better fit between my emotional behavior and the circumstances of my life.”

“Often there is no fit,” said Shchov. “Why should there be? You don’t think it comes from living a good life, do you?”

Neither one of us had anything to say.

“If you want a fit, go dance: it’s the national holiday on the Place Nationale, the band is playing. . . . What are you sitting here for?”

But we didn’t dance.

“You know, Shchov, you’ve got it all wrong again,” exclaimed Petrusha. “I say you have to try as hard as you can.”

“It’s not in our nature.”

He was taller than both of us, and he must have been able to see the blue hat because he glanced in that direction much too often.

“The drum’s playing. If you’re not going to dance, at least you should walk around and look at the others. Or else what?”

Petrusha stood partway up again and searched with his eyes. In the crowd I finally saw the ethereal dress and the brown purse in the small hand. The vision was waving her handkerchief. Not one of us took his eyes off her. We didn’t feel like talking about December 23, 1919, anymore.

“Hello, Petrusha,” said Semyon Nikolaevich Kozlobabin the businessman as he walked up to us. “Isn’t that your car parked on the corner? How about making some honest money by driving me to the Gare du Nord and back? I have to meet my brother.”

Kozlobabin the businessman looked troubled. He had tied a silk kerchief around his neck and put on a raincoat, even though the night was practically hot.

“Are you still celebrating? Then I beg your pardon, I’ll find someone else. Perhaps the captain is at liberty?”

Shchov didn’t answer. Petrusha said: “Oh, why not, I’ll go.”

Semyon Nikolaevich Kozlobabin looked at his watch.

“I want to meet my weak-chested brother,” he repeated without any special enthusiasm. “We haven’t seen each other in nine years.”

Petrusha went to start up the motor. He couldn’t just leave, though: he got out of the car and walked over to me.

“Can I ask you one favor, Grisha?” he said. “Watch her, brother, the one in the blue with the purse, see who she goes with and where. Got it?”

I didn’t blink. “Fine, Petrusha my boy, I’ll watch her.”

As he was getting in the car, Semyon Nikolaevich Kozlobabin said to me: “Would you like to come for a ride with us, Grigory Andreevich? There’s room. You might get various impressions: you might see a train or someone might get run over. Isn’t that the sort of thing you like? Maybe some interesting idea will occur to you.”

Again, I didn’t blink. “No, I’m very grateful, but life’s too short to go chasing after ideas. I’d rather sit here with the captain.”

Shchov and I were left in our seats and our silence.

It was growing dark. The calvados in our glasses was dispersing its fragrance. The dance circle was getting rowdy.

“Why does our businessman seem less than overjoyed at seeing his brother?” Shchov, asked. “He should be jumping up and down, hugging every friend and stranger he meets, but he’s his usual self.”

“So the way he’s acting doesn’t fit the moment.”

"Exactly."

"You know, though, Captain, I might not be doing exactly what I ought to right now either. Maybe I have reason to hate someone but I'm just not saying anything."

He gave me an astonished look.

"And maybe," he said significantly, "maybe I have reason right now to start a fight."

"You mean you don't always find yourself fitting the circumstances either."

He looked as if he had just remembered something. He pushed his cap back on his head and wiped his sweaty forehead with the palm of his hand. He eyed me as if he were unsure of something, as if he had definite doubts.

"Swear to me, Grisha, swear you'll never tell anyone this, no matter how hard things get for you, no matter how bankrupt."

"Well, would you listen to that!"

"Swear."

"And just where am I supposed to go telling anyone? What am I, a writer or something? Who do you take me for? And how long can they put me away for this?"

"So you'll swear?"

What could I do! I swore. He began his story, and for a while I forgot all about the blue hat.

"It happened ages and ages ago. I was twenty-eight years old and married—not to Maria Sergeevna, to Maria Fyodorovna still, who ran off with Lieutenant Tsarsky in that very first year of our marriage and later died in childbirth in Bakhmut, at 3 Sadovy Lane.

"At the time, that is, the time I'm telling about, we were

young newlyweds living on Gorshevaya Street, not Sadovy Lane. We lived with Maria Fyodorovna's father, my father-in-law, Fyodor Petrovich—his last name was Petrov, too.

"Which is to say that we were managing. My father-in-law was a retired staff captain, though in all his days he'd never seen combat—he'd had that great good fortune, not like you and me. But my father-in-law loved to tell stories about military life. We'd be sitting there on a holiday, it would be dusk, and my father-in-law would be so wrapped up in talking about maneuvers you could never cut him off. He walked with a cane and was striking to look at, quite attractive really. His small capital, all he had, he gave to his daughter Maria Fyodorovna on her wedding day, holding back a mite so he could eat, drink, and wear clean linen. I must say, he was a sweetie pie, not a father-in-law.

"Time flies, though, and my father-in-law was turning sixty-one. One fine spring evening, just as he was getting ready to reminisce about a certain parade, he was taken by a stroke, first his tongue a little, and then it got stronger and stronger through his arms and legs. The next day Fyodor Petrovich was dead.

"Maria Fyodorovna cried a day, a night, and then another day. Truth be told, this dreadful event laid me pretty low, too.

"The house was inundated with aunts of every stripe—fat ones, who mostly rummaged around in the storerooms, and skinny ones, who went for the dresser drawers. Requiems were offered up twice a day and the guests were served heavy food and drink. The deceased lay oh so quietly off by himself in the corner of the room, the same room where his canary always sang, before and after his death.

"The day of the funeral came. It was morning, the sun was shining, the flowers were blooming. People had gathered at the house, the parish clergy, guests. I was standing in our bedroom, wiping my boots with a cloth, all set to go out, but Maria Fyodorovna just couldn't seem to get her veil attached to her hat. She'd torn the veil taking the hat off the shelf (the veil had been sewn on in haste, for another funeral). But she had to get her hat ready because immediately after the prayers came the bearing-out, and there was only a moment, that is, no time to fuss with a veil.

"I was standing in the middle of the room when from outside the window, our open second-story window, I heard from far away someone walking through our quiet streets. In the middle of the day some not entirely sober personage was playing the concertina and singing.

"At first you could barely hear it. At first, that is, there was still hope that this concertina would pass us by, that it would go down another street, the next one. But then the whole crew turned right down Gorshevaya and you could hear the song up and down the street, with its crazy bawling and strumming, the likes of which I've never heard since:

If a gentleman has no watch chain

Then the gentleman has no watch.

"I took a few steps toward the window and saw the singer himself, who dipped with each step, his eyes focused on the sky, his elbows opened all the way out, and the concertina traveling along in his arms. He was trailed by eight or so little boys of indeterminate age who were running, running ahead, running in small circles, laughing. . .

"That watch and chain made me shudder. The song was

coming right up to our windows; the concertina (where did he get it?) was plucking, pulling, exhausting, clattering, flicking, pestering, cudgeling, arranging the notes. I'm sorry, but they really were something special.

"And all of a sudden I couldn't keep it up. I stopped fitting the moment—the deceased and the bearing-out and everything. Right then, unwittingly, who knows why, my shoulders started twitching to the beat. Maria Fyodorovna didn't notice. As I said, she was fixing her veil. She was so preoccupied that quite mechanically, a pin in her mouth, she hummed a few notes and fell silent immediately. Then, placing the hat on her dresser and uttering a soft *tra-la-la*, she took two little steps to one side while tilting her head toward her shoulder.

"I took a cautious step and Maria Fyodorovna looked over her shoulder. Evidently it was getting to her as well, but who else it was getting to I don't know. She stretched both her hands out to me, and at first we trod in place, catching the music with our feet, then we took a few steps between the commode and the sewing machine, and then we launched into a polka around the room along with the concertina:

If a young lady wears a corset,

Then the lady has no bust.

"Suddenly the music broke off. The patrolman on the corner had put an end to it. We stopped, still holding on to one another. Stricken, Maria Fyodorovna collapsed in my arms, which scared me, and my head began spinning. I opened the door wide and dragged my wife out, into the hall—to the seat of honor, ahead of all the aunts. The prayers were starting."

Shchov stopped talking, and I saw his eyes slanting in the same direction as mine. The vision had emerged from the

crowd, which in the meantime had become much denser and larger: a button nose, a hat with just a little too much froufrou. She was followed by the local lion threading his way through the crowd. He was carrying her leather purse and his boutonniere was coming unpinned.

Shchov pushed his cap forward and jumped up:

"I've got to go. I have to. I can't just let this happen."

He took off across the square after them. The drum was beating, tearing at my heart.

Little by little I started recalling the times my own behavior hadn't fit, when I'd started to dance just like that, or nearly like that, at the wrong time, all the times I'd led with a six when I should have led with an ace. All the times I'd laughed at the wrong moment and been drunk in front of people who weren't. Or felt like going home to mama when I had my marching orders. Who hasn't had rotten experiences like that! Of course, I'm not talking about foreign citizens, who always do everything at the proper time, naturally.

Then Petrusha's car pulled up right in front of me—at the entrance to the Hotel Caprice actually. Semyon Nikolaevich Kozlobabin the businessman and his weak-chested brother, newly arrived, were getting out. The brother looked to be about fifty and was wearing a dark shirt without any tie, a cap that had gone out of style a long time ago, and an earring. My Petrusha was dragging a pillow out of the automobile—all the weak-chested Kozlobabin had for luggage was this strapped-up pillow and an Easter cake wrapped in newspaper. The weak-chested brother looked all around—the drum was a little intimidating—and kept an eye on Petrusha to make sure he didn't swipe his Easter cake. Semyon Nikolaevich took him by the arm:

"Don't be afraid of the drum, Kolya. It's our national holiday: the storming of the Bastille. You know better than I, of course, what happened then at that point in history. Brother dear, you need to drink something after your long trip, let a quick shot or a glass of *joie de vivre* slide down your throat. Peter Ivanovich will carry your things straight to the room. Madame will show him where. Everyone knows us well and respects us here. There's really nothing for you to be embarrassed about."

Semyon Nikolaevich the businessman walked over to my table, introduced me to his brother, and sang my praises. They sat down and continued their brotherly conversation:

"So, you're here, that means you tore yourself away to see us, so to speak. . . . My family's gone to the dacha, though, so I'm on my own right now, you understand. I have business here, you know, I just can't get away. But you don't care about that, I'd rather hear about Misha. Is he alive? What about Anna Petrovna? Where are the Kuroyeds? In one piece?"

"Yes."

"Did you see Marusya before you left? Have you had any letters from the Don? Aren't the children going to school already?"

"Yes."

The weak-chested Kozlobabin was sitting there and you could tell he was listening to the drum, looking around, and marveling—and worrying a little. Petrusha walked up and leaned over to me: "Did you see?"

"Yes. They left together and Shchov ran after them. I hope there's no fight. If I were you, I'd pass."

Petrusha bit his lip, sat down, and started listening to the brothers' conversation, too.

I can't lie, they weren't really having a conversation. Kozlobabin the businessman was peppering his brother with questions about all sorts of people, plying him with liquor, trying to explain his own material situation. The brother sat perfectly still and silent, shuddering occasionally, wary. He would look at Petrusha and me as if he could not tear himself away, then look around at the increasingly noisy celebrants nearby, at the dancers, the spectators, the lovers, the Chinese chasing each other, the elegant full-breasted girls from the bread, sausage, and dairy stores.

On the far corner, where there was another little café which we zealously avoided, our own musicians announced their presence. They began sawing away at the fiddle and slapping the bass, and a horn floated over us like honey. As far as I could tell, the two orchestras were playing completely different pieces simultaneously.

And something strange started happening to our weak-chested Kozlobabin brother. He hunched over his glass and hid his hands under the table, his face turned red, a tear rolled down his cheek. Very odd.

Semyon Nikolaevich the businessman immediately left off his familial talk, and the newcomer grew embarrassed and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket—very slowly. The handkerchief was filthy from his train trip.

"What's wrong, you aren't crying are you?" asked Semyon Nikolaevich. The newcomer guiltily raised his eyes to Petrusha and me.

"What's the matter? Look, there's music playing, people are having a good time, it's a holiday here today. They're dancing. What's wrong?"

The newcomer looked down at his knees and a second tear crawled down his other cheek.

"Forgive me, comrades," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

Petrusha blushed and started squirming in his chair. "I humbly beg the comrades to leave him in peace. Our extremist elements might hear and raise a scandal."

The newcomer covered his face with his hands, which after his trip were not like the hands of someone on his way to Easter services. Nor were his nails.

Semyon Nikolaevich was embarrassed. "What an odd fellow you are, Kolya! How I'm supposed to console you, I don't know."

I moved my saucer a little.

"Did you leave some beloved object at home?"

Kozlobabin's weak-chested brother did not reply.

"Did you lose it en route?"

"Does something hurt after your trip?"

"Do you regret spending the money?"

The newcomer didn't answer but kept his hands over his face. It was getting awkward to look at him. Petrusha wouldn't let up.

"Don't you like our national holiday?"

"Are you sorry they aren't dancing like this in Moscow?"

"Or do they dance there every day, whereas here we only dance once a year, and you feel sorry for us?"

He sat there perfectly still without answering, and his glass started trembling slightly on the table. We could not fathom the reason for this disparity between his state of mind and his surroundings.

Still, he wasn't a young man and he was the brother of

Semyon Nikolaevich Kozlobabin, a man of substance whose wife and daughter had managed to slip away to the dacha. He was a newcomer, and we were having a holiday on our square, where some were strolling arm in arm with girls from sausage stores and others with girls from bakeries. And this lack of fit between his mood and the waltzers' hadn't been obvious at all.

"We'd better hit the hay," an embarrassed Semyon Nikolaevich finally said. "It's time you went to bed, little brother. Traveling's got you down."

The newcomer finally uncovered his face, which was now perfectly dry, and everyone felt a little better. Kozlobabin took his brother by the elbow, paid for them both, and they went to get settled at the Hotel Caprice.

That left Petrusha and me. And once again we saw the vision. But this time it was walking on Shchov's arm showing all its pearly teeth as it laughed. Petrusha couldn't stand it and rushed over to introduce himself. Should I have taken advantage of the moment, too? But I didn't budge.

I sat there a little longer and listened to both of the hired orchestras, which were still playing different pieces. Night was lingering, floating, sailing up—I don't know how else to put it. And then they set off the fireworks. People started dancing on the third corner, where they sell oysters and other shellfish in the winter and where one of ours was plucking on a balalaika.

The crackling fireworks made a pretty show and flew apart harmlessly in the sky. What children there were screamed, and the women squinted and tossed their heads back—as if they knew squinting and tossing their heads back became them. In the sky, where the moon should have been, all you could see were green and red sparks. No one gave a

thought to the moon, though, and what could you say about the stars?

It was probably a good thing that Kozlobabin's weak-chested brother had been taken away before any fireworks. If street-lamps could make a man cry, a man tempered in life's battles, then fireworks might have had the devil knows what effect on him. And what man in our day hasn't been tempered in life's battles? For us, there is no such man.

1929

Photogénique

Gerasim Gavrilovich, brother to the Boris Gavrilovich we all know, father of a family, infantryman and worker, was sitting on a bench in the middle of the square, twiddling his thumbs. He didn't feel like going home—it was crowded there and they weren't counting on an extra place for supper. It was a little crowded for him in our small restaurant, too, and most of all—it cost money. So here was the brother of our Boris Gavrilovich sitting and, as I said, frittering away his time.

It was dusk. Couples were strolling. Don't go thinking knights and young ladies, which, due to the dearth of ladies among us, rarely happens. It was just working men strolling, always one tall and one short, for some reason. They fanned themselves from the heat with whatever came to hand, smoked cheap cigarettes, stopped in at the Cabaret, and recalled bygone days and battles where together they had brandished swords.

Truth be told, most were coming down our street to have supper.

Gerasim Gavrilovich was sitting, twiddling his thumbs. The smell of pickles, fruit drops, and fish was coming from the

grocer's, where they were lighting the lamp. Kvass was being sold on the corner and an impecunious photographer was lounging on the other. The usual scene.

Gerasim Gavrilovich noticed a copy of the French evening paper under his bench. He picked it up and read it while there was sufficient light. He skipped events in China and the rivalries among deputies, as well as some interesting lawn tennis competitions, and turned straight to the classifieds. In the seven years of his French life, Gerasim Gavrilovich had caught on to reading the employment notices and had even taken a liking to this. He had often had occasion to peruse them, but always somehow with results imperceptible to the unaided eye.

Without the slightest haste or visible agitation, Gerasim Gavrilovich poked the paper with his index finger and tore out a scrap that he stuck in his pocket. And then, as if nothing whatsoever had happened, he made a sour face and moved on to the deputy rivalries, seeing as how his friends and acquaintances wouldn't emerge from the little restaurants until they were well fed and the August night had fallen.

Gerasim Gavrilovich's person had been seen in a number of places: he'd worked on a Greek steamer, in a mine in Belgium, and at a factory in Creusot. How and why he ever ended up here we didn't know. At one time his esteemed brother wanted to teach him his art, but nothing came of it: Gerasim Gavrilovich turned out to have no talent for hairdressing. And his wife was up to her ears in children all day.

"How is it," she used to say to him angrily, "that you, the great Baron von Lazybones, can't make your way anywhere? How is it that God never gave you any talent? Are you planning to live your whole life without a profession of any kind?"

"They pulled the ground right out from under me," Gerasim Gavrilovich would say then. "Your spaces, your seasons, your climates—none of them suit me."

And Boris Gavrilovich, his energetic brother, would deliver his favorite speech about how every person has to know himself. "You," he would say, "you have to know yourself, know which way you're inclined. The ancient Greeks reminded us of this. Sense what's ahead, where your abilities lie: working in a mine or plying the hairdresser's trade. Otherwise, in our day, without a career, you'll be lost. We know all about people who are allowed to do whatever they want!"

Gerasim Gavrilovich left the house early the next morning with the classified in his pocket and headed for the office of a cinematic *société anonyme*. The fact that the company was *anonyme* bothered him a little, but he decided to shrug it off.

The office was located in a spacious film studio. It was noisy on the other side of the wooden barrier. Work was under way, and he could hear chattering, a voice shouting crudely, anything but shy. A man of gloating appearance sat at a desk, and in front of him, silent and melancholy, milling around like sheep, were people who had come in search of work as extras—in crowd scenes or smaller groups—in the new cinematic drama.

The young ladies here were fashionable, completely without eyebrows (there was one with heavy eyebrows, but it turned out she was dreaming of a comic rôle). The browless young ladies jangled their bracelets and earrings and twirled colored scent sticks. Two brigands and one general, all three wearing worn jackets, stuck together. Gilded youths with cheeky ties were taking this free moment to exchange winks with the young ladies. The boss had his own way of dealing with this

whole large flock: he would raise his head a fraction to see whether you were going hungry.

Gerasim Gavrilovich walked up to the desk.

"Do you have a tailcoat?" the boss asked. "Do you play soccer? Dance the minuet?"

Gerasim Gavrilovich turned to walk away.

"Stop!" the boss exclaimed. "We might be able to use you. Monsieur (he said a name) needs to look at you."

My God, the envy in the looks the browless young ladies shot Gerasim Gavrilovich! They were all escorted out then and there, the gilded youths along with them. Of the whole throng they held back one brigand. He and Gerasim Gavrilovich sat together for an hour and a half awaiting momentous decisions.

Monsieur (he said the name), wearing a thousand-franc jersey, sweaty, skinny, and good-looking, ran up smoking two cigarettes at once (to make it stronger) and fiddling with a tape measure. He ignored Gerasim Gavrilovich until he had located a big apple in the desk drawer and consumed it on the spot. Then he flung himself down in the armchair (causing a column of dust to rise in the air) and ordered Gerasim Gavrilovich and the brigand to walk back and forth in front of him as if they were strolling across a bridge and admiring the river. Without inquiring about tailcoats or the minuet he led them both past the barrier.

Under the studio's high roof loomed a Spanish town of enviable proportions. Several Spanish caballeros, yawning, were refreshing themselves with sandwiches. A child all made up as Spanish clung to his mother, who was anything but a Spaniard. It was their break time. Two staircases led to the ceiling. There, someone was dangling his legs, probably the lights man, but it

might even have been a stuntman. Two painters, one tall and one short, were walking about in leisurely fashion. You weren't supposed to smoke in there.

"Gerasim Gavrilovich, is that you?" exclaimed one of the painters. "My dear man, don't you recognize me? I knew you on the ship, and in Creusot. Have you forgotten Konoteshenko?"

Gerasim Gavrilovich went over to embrace him.

"What are you doing, looking for work? As a painter? A carpenter?"

Gerasim Gavrilovich became flustered.

"I answered an ad for an actor. I'm waiting for a final answer from the bosses."

Konoteshenko, the painter, was awfully pleased.

"Well, they're probably going to give you a shot, to find out whether or not you're *photogénique*. There's luck for you, Gerasim Gavrilovich. Other people spend weeks hanging around before they're told to prop up a set for twenty-two francs a day, but they obviously want to give you a part. Then you'll finally have a career. And it's true, your looks are very suitable, how come you never realized that before?"

Here it should be pointed out that Gerasim Gavrilovich's appearance was nothing like Boris Gavrilovich's. As everyone knows, Boris Gavrilovich is not particularly tall, whereas Gerasim is quite. Boris Gavrilovich greases his hair professionally with petroleum jelly; Gerasim's is shaggy around the ears. Their noses are different, too. One looks like it's made from the crust of a loaf of bread, the other from the soft insides.

Gerasim Gavrilovich perched on a counter in the studio after listening to Konoteshenko. Had his life's path actually led him to a real career? If that wasn't the damndest thing! Had he

really come to know himself, as the ancient Greeks had enjoined? Were the time and the space and the climate finally going to suit him?

For another hour and a half, Gerasim Gavrilovich waited alongside the brigand. The Spanish caballeros went to play billiards. The child was led away. What was happening on the other side of the barrier was a mystery. The tedium was just about to kill Gerasim Gavrilovich when suddenly he and the brigand were told to stand up.

The pomade and makeup on his face were slightly nauseating. They gave him eyebrows that met above his nose. "Go over to the cameras," they said. "For your screen test."

"Don't look at the camera!" they screamed. "Don't look at the lamps!" they screamed.

What the deuce! Where should he look? At the light? It would blind him. The camera? They'd tell him he wasn't *photogénique*.

"Look at the set, choose some unobtrusive tack and push it in!"

(Choosing's all well and good, but how were they going to get him out of here without him dragging the set away, too?)

Action! The little wheels were spinning, the light was hissing, the lights man was on the spot, the boss in the thousand-franc jersey was screaming: "Over there! Over here! *Comme ça!* More! *En face!* Action!"

Phooey! Konoteshenko was nowhere in sight.

Next to Gerasim Gavrilovich—to cut costs—the brigand was twisting and turning his heavily browed mug and following the same commands.

Then they said show up for an answer in three days and

declined any responsibility for removing the makeup from his face. When Gerasim Gavrilovich went home it was three o'clock. The streets were empty, the factory was droning away. The Cabaret was empty. It was the midday break at Boris Gavrilovich's hairdressing salon: a lady was having her hair curled.

Gerasim Gavrilovich thought about how if this turned out to be his star, if he turned out to be *photogénique*, his whole life would start over. He would have plenty of money. He would have his picture taken and pass out cards to his acquaintances. His wife would start enjoying life. He would rub his famous brother Boris Gavrilovich's nose in it. One fine day he might decide to have something tasty to eat or buy himself new trousers. . . . Not everyone was lucky in life, not everyone was *photogénique*. Take Konoteshenko, look at all the people he knew at the *société anonyme*, but he wasn't an actor. If such a fortunate honor were to befall Gerasim Gavrilovich, his fate in this world would not be the hard fate of an infantryman and worker.

He wandered the streets for a long time that day. He decided against going back to the factory: it felt odd for an actor to be going to a factory. He returned home as night was falling. In the courtyard, the Chinese were pouring water over each other, the rich neighbors had their gramophone cranking out a fashionable dance, and his own, Gerasim Gavrilovich's, children were playing noisily up and down the stairs.

Gerasim Gavrilovich washed up, leaving grime on the towel. His wife was hunched over at the kitchen table.

"You and I very definitely have to talk," she said to him in a way that was actually kind. "Do you think you might find a free half-hour? And could you possibly think logically, too?"

He gave her a big smile, asked her to wait another three days, and left the building again.

It was that hour when the lamp is lit over the grocer's, when the delicious smell of cutlets wafts from the bistros' open doors, when, at last, even the indefatigable Boris Gavrilovich closes his doors and locks his shutters—but does not stop working: he lets his regular clients in through the back door. And from the street you catch the faint fragrance of the now hidden salon, a pink light shows through a crack, and if you put your ear to the shutters, you can hear the *tsik-tsik-tsik* of his long, light scissors.

Gerasim Gavrilovich stood there listening to this scissoring, and it grabbed him by the soul, the way brass horns did. It was dark outside, dark, empty, and joyless. He thought about himself, about his nasty and messy life, about the hard times, the foreign climate, and the law of geographical space by the grace of which he had had his rightful soil taken away. The scissors kept up their quiet scissoring behind the shutters, and the air continued to be filled with the smell of dust and perfume.

The three days passed. Gerasim Gavrilovich either lay on the bed or sauntered from street to street. He borrowed money against the future. His wife stopped crying. Their three small children were almost ready to go to school—they were of an age to made literate.

The hour arrived for Gerasim Gavrilovich to return to the *société anonyme*.

Even though it was all under the same high roof as before, it seemed a little stuffier. The brigand was already sitting awaiting sentence. Gerasim Gavrilovich sat down as well. He noticed complicated cameras and preoccupied people walking around who were also enigmas, but the usual lights were still burning.

There was no Konoteshenko to be seen. He began pondering his near future. What kind of rôles would he have to play? Would they be very small? Would he have to depict any disreputable characters? Would they start criticizing him and swearing at him? Would he inadvertently ruin the film with his face and be dragged off to court to pay the costs?

His heart was heavy in anticipation of the appointed hour. Next to him, the brigand was clenching and unclenching his fists and biting his lip; he could not seem to relax. Gerasim Gavrilovich, although in agony, actually surprised himself by feeling sleepy.

After a little while the boss came out.

"You," he said to the brigand, "you can get the hell out of here: we don't need you. But you"—this to Gerasim Gavrilovich—"you really are photogenic. We have no objections to that."

The brigand's eyes reddened, and he stalked off. Gerasim Gavrilovich was left standing in the middle of the studio. Someone came out to take a look at him. The thousand-franc jersey flashed before his eyes.

"Go get made up," they said. "Shooting's in half an hour. We'll show you what to do."

They started applying makeup to Gerasim Gavrilovich, giving him a single eyebrow. This time the kohl wouldn't adhere to him and the makeup man struggled. Konoteshenko came in and shyly watched his friend from the sidelines.

"The die is cast for you," he whispered. "Gerasim Gavrilovich, give it your all! Later they'll take you to Spain, for a hundred francs a day, all expenses paid. The bosses had a discussion about your unusual looks yesterday."

They dressed Gerasim Gavrilovich in tatters and brought him out. He started feeling uneasy. What was all that about a tailcoat, then? he thought.

A señorita came out through hidden doors and dropped her purse. It was a beaded purse, crocheted, the devil knew what was inside it! Gerasim Gavrilovich was rooted to the spot; he couldn't move. And all he had to do was pick up the purse, hide it in his shirt, and retreat into the shadows as if nothing had happened.

"Pick it up!" they shouted at him, "since you're so photogenic. You're just missing one little thing. Heaven sent you what's most important" (or something like that).

Gerasim Gavrilovich stood there staring at the purse. Doubt gripped him, shyness overwhelmed him. The fact that all this had to take place in full view of everyone, and the fact that the purse belonged to someone else—it all embarrassed him.

The jersey repeated the instructions: "Today you happen to have to pick up someone else's purse. A dropped purse, with gold in it. You're also going to have to hide it under your shirt. You've certainly got the right expression on your face for that."

The señorita laughed, and the others laughed, but somebody was getting annoyed.

Gerasim Gavrilovich girded himself. He picked up the purse and went to give it to the jersey. He saw Konoteshenko standing to one side. Konoteshenko was embarrassed.

"The die was cast for you," he said.

They explained it to him a third time and measured out his steps. Again the señorita started walking and dropped her purse.

Gerasim Gavrilovich ran after her, snatched the purse off the ground, and shoved it into her hand. The cameramen actually cursed in French; they could no longer vouch for their patience.

Gerasim Gavrilovich was just not cut out to be an actor.

"Take the makeup off this *photogénique*," they said. "To hell with him!"

The señorita looked at him sympathetically:

"Why not let him try playing the grandee? I like him."

As if he could be a grandee! Gerasim Gavrilovich went to take off his Spanish tatters and scrub the grease from his eyebrows. He thought about looking for Konotesenko before he left, but his friend had made himself scarce.

No one watched him go, no one looked round. So he quit those parts and went home, having failed to fall in step with the times. He left sanguinely and bought the French evening paper on his way—to read the classifieds again. He recalled certain past victories on the front of daily life, though they were very far in the past, nothing worth going into.

That day, I ran into him as night was falling.

"So, Gerasim Gavrilovich, how are things? How is your personal relationship with Monsieur Renault?"

"Broken."

"How's your health in general and in particular?"

"My eyes have been hurting for days. The daylight bothers them."

"Why is that?"

Then he told me the whole story.

"So," he said, "Grisha, have you ever heard anything like it? Or maybe read it in the papers?"

I thought for a moment. I said:

"Never heard it or read it. Nowadays the papers prefer to write about the opposite, about jutting chins and people getting ahead. I'm afraid no one's going to want to read about you."

I felt no regret whatsoever at that moment. We left our regret and our baggage back in Sevastopol.

1929

About the Hooks

Madame Klava said to me:
“Why is it, Grishenka, you’re always writing about people you know, about such ordinary and, to be perfectly frank, boring people? One fails at a career in the cinema, another loses out on a bride, and I can’t even remember what the third one did. They’re all such colorless characters, really! Write us a few words about a king of nature, some American type who sets your heart to pounding so hard you want to drop everything and run after him to snatch a moment of insane happiness, move in with the man and spin a beautiful fairy tale together.”

“I don’t have an American type,” I replied. “Where am I going to get an American type? There was one gentleman, though, a man, not a boy, who came close to being like that. About as close as I am to you.”

“Well, then? If it didn’t work out for him, you can invent an ending to make it more intriguing.”

“My name would be mud. Everyone figured out a long time ago there weren’t any American types on my horizon.”

She lapsed into thought.

"All right, then write it down just the way it was and then we'll see. Write the whole truth and leave in his real first name and patronymic and his real last name, too."

Fine. I got home, sat down at my desk, and wrote a story about Alexander Evgrafovich Barabanov. There is such a person, and there was a time when he and I had occasion to see quite a lot of one another.

I began my story with a description of the weather. Lots of Russian writers don't sneer at the weather. In fact, for some that's their only claim to fame. Our writers can pay more attention to nature because their material situation is better than others'. And if someone has no material concerns, who are you to say where he should look at nature? The weather there is closer and more obvious. It can soak you to your very bones, soak you all the way to your soul, especially if there's a little rain.

It was a cold, rainy, windy, raw, tedious autumn day—that's how I began. There wasn't any sky at all this time, I mean, undoubtedly there was somewhere very high up, near the other planets, for instance, or very far away, say, in Orel or Kazan. In Paris, though, there wasn't any sky, there were clouds. They raced thickly above our reckless heads and from time to time crossed our field of vision. We had lots of clouds, more than we needed. And God only knows how forlorn it felt.

Alexander Evgrafovich Barabanov walked out of the train station onto the square, and his heart started pounding, who knows why. It was probably a little of everything—hope, loneliness, presentiment, penury, and anything but first youth, all of it strung lightly together, which is why his heart started pounding. Alexander Evgrafovich stopped for a moment by the station exit; he looked as if he were saying a quick prayer. In fact, he

had had a perfectly useless, unconscionably stupid idea: What if this raw autumn wind, which is so bad for rheumatics, were to pull me from this very Parisian train station, right back across the threshold, and onto a train, and it took me down all my old roads, through Thionville (where he had just come from), through Liège, Uzhgorod, Belgrade, Alexandria, the Princes Islands, on ships, trains, roads, and rivers? And what if I were to wind up with fleas on the lower deck of an English steamer and we were to dock, the last stage in our journeying, on Odessa's shores (which is where it all began)? This whole appalling idea flashed through Barabanov's mind and vanished just as quickly. And Alexander Evgrafovich moved off not in the reverse direction but forward. How is it, speaking in general now, that a man's legs can hold him up?

He walked down the stairs, marveled at the number of newspapers in the kiosk, and noticed the flower store on the left-hand side as you go toward the trolley stop. Trolleys kept passing him without explanation. Then he stuck his hands in his pockets.

His left hand was holding his left pocket, where something had stirred for a moment; his right hand felt for his wallet, and he recited the familiar address by heart, only now it seemed different and fresh, not like when he had read it before. Before he'd read it platonically: here's the street and the address, and here's the trolley he's supposed to take. Now he was face to face with that trolley and in a little while he'd come face to face with the street and house and . . .

The trolley carrying Alexander Evgrafovich set out with a whistle, a bell, and a rumble.

What a city Paris is! A new arrival is the least of its concerns! You could be a Solomon and people would still rush past

and not one of them would look round. You might feel like embracing the whole world, but no one cares in the least. You might, like a certain famous boy, have your vitals gnawed upon by a fox. Well, you can have your fox because no one cares. It's not, as I say, like in Orel or Kazan. And in this regard, our new arrivals divide up into two neat categories: some tell themselves (I remember, I was like this), That's fine, if you don't want to then I won't look at you either, to hell with you, even if you are handsome and famous and damn magnificent. And it's true—provided they don't look for an hour or two after their journey, or if they keep themselves in check until dusk, if they exercise restraint. Others, accustomed from their travels to every kind of humiliation, sear it with their gaze. We don't care if Paris grinds us in the mud by ignoring us, what we're doing is small, what we're doing is admiring the capital of the world if ever we have the chance—just wait—to visit it while passing through. Paris, not Tristan d'Acuna.

Alexander Evgrafovich not only admired Paris, his gaze seared everything, from the signs on the buildings to the nail on the conductor's pinky. He sympathetically weighed each exquisite detail of the city, each blemish on its face. When he got off the trolley, he inquired about the rest of his way and proceeded on foot, standing for a long time at a certain intersection (we know which one), admiring the elevated train, which rested on stone piers in the middle of the street. And peculiar thoughts ran through his mind. Commercial thoughts.

He arrived at the address—a large and prosperous apartment building. The concierge's wife showed him to the elevator and pressed the button. The narrow doors slammed shut on his nose and fingers several times. "Oh my, the doors here bite," he

thought. As he got out, they struck him in the neck again. He sent the contraption back down and stood on the landing for a moment. And new thoughts again crept into his mind. And again, they were commercial.

He walked in, still holding on to his left pocket, where something had been wriggling around for a long time, but was now quiet. He was asked to wait. He sat down with dignity and asked for a glass of water. They brought him water, he took a ceremonious sip and handed the glass back. He was trying to hear who was talking in the next room. Who exactly? Wasn't that the voice of a fourteen-year-old girl? (Yes, a full fourteen years already, just see how time flies!) Wasn't that little Liubochka's voice he heard?

A fine gentleman walked in. He was a businessman, a man who had seen to his own best interests, a high-flying bird from the looks of him, with very very clean hands, clean-shaven, impeccable, who looked as if he were part of this magnificent city, as if he'd been born here and had never left.

"Hello, Pavel Petrovich," said Alexander Evgrafovich, standing at attention.

"Hello. Here you have Barabanov."

Pavel Petrovich reached out with both hands and touched Alexander Evgrafovich on the shoulders.

"Ah! Barabanov! Very pleased. So pleased. Very, very pleased. We've been looking forward to seeing you."

Both men sat down at the desk. There was a tremendous quantity of papers on it, as well as a telephone, and a Russian abacus, and a typewriter—no, I'm lying! two typewriters. And next to the inkwell, a single flower in a glass.

Alexander Evgrafovich inquired respectfully:

"Have you been well, Pavel Petrovich? What about Maria Danilovna? And your mama?"

"Everyone's fine and dandy, we're doing fine, no one's starving. What about you?"

"We're fine, thank God. And Liubochka?"

"Liubochka, too. . . . We've been considering your proposal. It's an interesting idea."

"Since I didn't receive an answer to my letter and thought I might speed things up, I decided to make the first move, Pavel Petrovich. I arrived this morning from the provinces especially to talk things over with you. And here, I brought Liubochka . . ."

"This morning? And straight to see me? Very energetic on your part. Let's talk."

"Here, I brought Liubochka . . ."

"Liubochka is well, too, *merci*. Studying, the top student at her school, a great girl. So then, let's think this through, the what and how of it, and together we'll earn a crust of bread and butter."

Barabanov focused his thoughts, wiggled his fingers, and became very still.

"Personally, Pavel Petrovich, I don't need a commission, just whatever you think is right. Instead of a commission I'd like you to arrange for a certain patent."

"An invention of yours?"

"Yes. You know all the ins and outs, you know how to see any kind of business through. Instead of a commission I'd like the patent on my invention and let that settle my fate."

"Fine, that's what we'll do. It's not hard. You mean you've gone and become a real businessman?"

"Of course not! That's easier said than done. This all comes

from too much spare time. Your mind is constantly working, it's exhausting, your head hurts. Even now, on my way to see you, I had the glimmer of an idea about using the free space between the piers under the train tracks. For instance, you could get a concession from the municipal administration to put in a garage there, or a bathhouse, or a shop. The space is going to waste, despite all the modern overcrowding! Or take those little elevator doors: it's a flawed mechanism!"

"Easy now, easy!" exclaimed Pavel Petrovich. "To begin with, tell me everything you know about that, about the first business, about what you wrote. About the hooks."

Barabanov placed one foot next to the other.

"As I wrote you, Pavel Petrovich, we were taking down the military wire in what was once a front zone. Well, we worked for a month, we worked for two, we actually got used to the wire, we couldn't have asked for anything better even. Then they switched us to clearing bombshells—all under the same contract. Well, we made our peace with that, too. I wouldn't say we came to love the bombshells like our own children, of course, but we didn't complain, and then about a month ago I had a commercial idea, but whom was I to share it with? Only you might know how to see this kind of thing through."

"Well, then, go on."

"Here was my idea: Even the most miserable spent bombshell has a small copper hook on its side which has its own independent value, as a metal, naturally. That's when it occurred to me: find some clever person in the big wide world with capital—you, for instance, Pavel Petrovich Gutenshtam—and let him buy up all these hooks, melt them down (giving our shop the job, by the way), and sell the metal by weight. If you melted it

down properly, you might get half a million in copper. I'd also like to arrange for a patent for an idea of mine."

"Who do you think you'd be dealing with?"

"I've thought everything through, everything, it's kind of funny actually. First I wondered whether it might not be some kind of illegal act here. I started asking my boss questions: Doesn't someone need those hooks? No, it wouldn't be so hard to do, they told me. The minister would authorize a concession, they said, the governor is moaning and groaning about what to do with those hooks, they said. The authorities would certainly give their approval once they knew you intended to see the business through."

"Who does that depend on, the military ministry or the civil authorities?"

"The military, exactly. You get a contract from them, for knocking off the hooks. The hooks, you see, will pay for it. You hire a shop—we have about thirty of our men there, and also Andrei Nikanorych, remember him from Rostov? This year a priest came for the Feast of the Dormition and conducted a service, and we subscribe to two newspapers. This is a job for them. You keep the records, and you don't have to ship the hooks anywhere because right next door, in Metz, there's a plant that casts steel. It's prepared to buy up all your copper and is also interested in my little patent. I've already made inquiries."

"Do you know people there?"

"Yes. Among the lower classes, but useful ones, they might come in handy."

Pavel Petrovich pursed his lips and pulled at his nose.

"How much money do you want?"

Barabanov became flustered.

"I just need to cover my travel expenses, I'm not interested in any bonuses. My patent will settle my fate. I hope my patent won't be too much trouble for you?"

"Not at all. But first let's get this hook business settled. Today I'll call one extremely influential person, get some information from him, then I'll go see someone else, also a very interesting person—with the necessary pull. After these two conversations, I'll calculate what our profit might be. Come by tomorrow at the same time and bring your passport and patent. If my calculations are favorable we'll send your papers off to a special department right away. I'll pay you half a percent of the gross on the hooks, so if the deal is worth half a million, you'll get two and a half thousand. We'll do the math, send in the patent, and tomorrow evening we'll go to the site so that I can get familiar with the situation."

Alexander Evgrafovich stood up:

"I hope we can see this through."

Pavel Petrovich stood up as well. His ears were burning, shot through with a pinkish light, like apricots. He made a dry sound rubbing his hands together, adjusted his pince-nez, and smoothed his eyebrow.

"Mmm, yes."

"I'll be going now, Pavel Petrovich. Please say hello to Maria Danilovna and your mama."

"Thank you, I certainly will. Until tomorrow then?"

"And Liubochka. I brought her this . . ."

"And Liubochka, certainly. She's at school right now, classes started last week. They work so hard."

"I have here . . ."

"Certainly. I'll tell her everything. She remembers you and

once asked me, 'What ever happened to Barabanov, Papochka? Such a smart man, really.'"

"Say hello for me."

He retreated, and retreated some more, toward the doors, the first set, then the second. The new and improved lock clicked. One more step and he found himself on the staircase and the door shut behind him. All of a sudden it was very quiet. Then a truck drove by, the building shook and settled down. A ragman cried out in the courtyard.

Alexander Evgrafovich pressed his hand to his left pocket. He took a cautious step away from the door and started taking out something that was trying to leap out of his hands. In his palm he held a lop-eared puppy of indeterminate breed with paws curled under and a limp tail. During their conversation Barabanov had not found a way to give it to Pavel Petrovich for Liubochka. Sometimes Barabanov lost all his resolve over the small things.

He went downstairs, stowing the puppy in his pocket, and walked down the street. What a city this was! What a city—don't take this for undue enthusiasm—Paris was! The gray day was blustery, the sky was lowering onto your head, the noise rent your soul, and roasted chestnuts tempted you from the street corners.

Barabanov was in no rush. He seemed as confident of himself as he would have been of the most loyal friend. It never occurred to him to find refuge in some Hotel Caprice. He had exactly twenty-three francs and change, and another ten he'd borrowed, and, naturally, his return ticket to his place of residence. But until tomorrow, until his final departure, there was nothing more he needed.

He walked without a thought to where he was going. He surveyed all kinds of different streets, long and short, commercial and seigniorial, and saw a tower above the buildings a few times, but had no way of reaching that tower, which kept receding first to his right and then his left. It was better that way. Had he reached the tower, Alexander Evgrafovich would certainly have climbed it with all his commercial ideas and probably would have started thinking up all sorts of nonsense, such as, What if you projected advertising against the tower in the evenings? He started walking through a large formal fall garden, taking an interest in everything, including whether or not they locked the garden at night. Nature's withering was in full swing here: the fountains weren't running, and rotted russet leaves were tossing in the wind, sticking to his shoes, to children's noses, to the umbrellas of the *bonnes* and nannies, who had opened them just in case.

At exactly seven o'clock, Alexander Evgrafovich went to a cafeteria to eat supper, spent fourteen francs plus a tip, and when he was outside fed his left pocket some squished bread. The puppy looked barely alive.

The formal garden was closed. It was quickly growing dark, the gray air was thickening, and streetlamps punched holes in it here and there. Time stretched out down the boulevard with its benches. He sat down and concentrated. He lit a cigarette.

The coming day did not worry him, his outlook was clear as far as the near future was concerned. He had only to recall the satisfied look on Pavel Petrovich Gutenshtam's face in order to await the coming day with equanimity. The military ministry, the factory in Metz, Pavel Petrovich's apartment, the train Barabanov had taken to Paris and would take home tomorrow,

all this began reeling by slowly, then faster and faster, in his mind.

The streetlamps suddenly ran at him in rows, they ran fast, but they couldn't catch up with one another, they ran like strung beads, like copper beads, like round hooks scattered from black space. He couldn't count them all, ninety-nine and a half slipped past him, one last half got caught somewhere close by. This little half was his property. Hundreds of thousands of hooks were flying, and Pavel Petrovich had said—in the pleasant voice of a well-groomed man from the capital—that . . .

"You can't sleep here," a policeman said and walked on.

The boulevard's streetlamps were standing still now, but then the trolley flew by, rumbling over every switch.

Barabanov crossed his left leg over his right, but the puppy in his pocket gave a shrill yelp. He took the little mutt out into the fresh air. This sobered him up. He had spoken of Liubochika a little, mentioned Andrei Nikanorych, vaguely promised something for her tomorrow.

He hadn't had a moment to give Liubochka her present. The whole time he'd been preoccupied with the idea of isolating high-tension currents.

Who on earth cared about high-tension currents? Damned if he knew! Barabanov's invention was devoted to isolating these currents, and his patent concerned this secret. It would settle his destiny, the destiny of a former military man, and the crucial paper was in his pocket, along with Gutshtam's address, his return ticket, and this year's purple passport. It was all there together on his broad Barabanov chest.

Ahead lay independence. Go where you like, my soul, come and go, make new discoveries!

He turned his collar up. It was nighttime quiet on the boulevard now. He decided the puppy had had enough and put him back in his pocket. His thoughts returned to Pavel Petrovich's desk, and from it—to Liubochka.

She was sleeping sweetly now, the ink washed from her fingers. Her alarm would wake her in the morning, she'd jump up and start running around the room, in a hurry to get to school. She'd put on a dress and fasten her metal beads, but the thread would break and the copper beads would spill down her arms and dress. He had to count them. "Papa, what ever happened to your Barabanov?" shouted Liubochka. "Remember how he used to bounce me on his knee when I was little, in Alexandria?" And the beads were still spilling down with a jingle. Don't miss that one little half, it's yours!

"You can't sleep," the policeman said again, touching him on the shoulder and walking on.

"*Pardon!*" exclaimed Barabanov, and he stood up and walked away.

It was growing light. There, above the rooftops, above the formal garden which God only knew when they'd open, the clouds were growing light and an unexpected rain was falling rapidly on the buildings, the pavement, Barabanov. The shower ended, and the sun rose behind the clouds, not here, but somewhere very high up, near the other planets, or very far away, say in Orel or Kazan. Barabanov was walking through the city, he looked well slept, he looked as if his mood couldn't be better.

He reached Mr. Gutshtam's apartment at eleven o'clock in the morning. That was his appointment. He had drunk his coffee and eaten four croissants, two eggs, and a sausage sandwich,

washed his hands under the spigot at the intersection (you know which one) and splashed a little water on his face. He had had to leave the puppy beside the municipal trash bin: it was unclear what it had died from, whether it had suffocated in Barabanov's pocket or he had crushed it in the night when he fell asleep on the bench. Or whether it had been taken away from its mother too soon. He rang the doorbell. Someone ran to open it. And the ragman cried out from the courtyard below.

He was left standing on the landing. The telephone rang, but no one answered it. He rang the doorbell again. Even if there were five rooms in the apartment, or seven, wouldn't someone hear him ringing? No, there they were, hurrying from far away and exclaiming: "It must be from the office!" And they let him in.

Silence again. Something odd was happening behind the closed doors, some movement. Someone seemed to want to come out to see him in the entry but didn't. The door opened slowly, and Maria Danilovna came out, still holding on to it—her eyes, puffy and her hair uncombed. She who always wore a corset and her hair and hairpieces piled high on her head.

She stopped and stood stock-still. The light had gone out in her eyes, and her red, swollen face started to quiver.

"Barabanov. He had an appointment with you," she said, and she swayed from side to side, this large, heavy woman. "Barabanov, so this is how we meet again. . . . He died, in the night, in his sleep, a heart attack. He went to bed and never woke up. . . ." She was crying, her legs were starting to buckle. Barabanov stood there mute.

"No one dreamed he had a bad heart. Remember how he used to run around and play tennis and all of that? He was out

yesterday making inquiries for you. Other men live to be a hundred. When he came back last evening he was so pleased. . . ."

Barabanov said: "I'll leave, I won't keep you. You don't have time for me."

She didn't answer, she was crying. And he walked toward the door. For the briefest of moments he hesitated in front of her. Should he turn around and inquire about Pavel Petrovich's mama, about Liubochka? Or should he leave without saying anything? Or might Liubochka run out of the back rooms at any moment? No one did, though, so he decided to leave. He turned his head as if he were making a low bow; at decisive moments he didn't always know how he should behave.

All of a sudden he remembered the hooks, the night on the boulevard, his dreams, and the fact that sleeping was, in point of fact, forbidden.

And that's the end of my story. I'm afraid it was a little long, especially since Barabanov wasn't from Billancourt, so there's nothing inherently interesting about him for my readers. I'm also afraid people will say that finding the American angle in this story is quite a stretch, like night and day! About as American an angle as Orel or Kazan!

But we've never come across anything closer.

Versts and Sleeping Cars

My roads have not been easy roads, my roads have been largely rails. My young life jolted along the train tracks, but a canary is more important than I am. My roads led me from small towns to big cities, from forests to rivers and from cannons to billiard cues. This system of transport had its own minister—the Lord God, shall we say, only I've never seen him. There was doubtless some chief of locomotion, if only I could have had a glimpse of him. As a result of this locomotion, for a long time my feet itched and my soul tended to drift off. I recovered from this condition only very recently, all of four months ago.

We're not going to discuss the reasons for our journeys. We'll refrain. Our papers write about them every day. The reasons are always the same—here one minute, gone the next. An Englishman or Englishwoman might choose a good time for a little trip and take in a couple of thousand versts around Europe easy as pie, but we're not like that. After the first thousand we lose our equilibrium and then live the rest of our lives as beaten men.

Occasionally, too, an unhealthy condition besets us after all those journeys: you start thinking the journeys will never end, that you're still moving even when you're sitting in place, that the wheels are turning underneath you again, the telegraph poles are racing past, that it's carrying you, just count the turns. That's how it was with me, and it went on for a long time, but now it's over. Here's the station.

A woman was to blame for these protracted sensations, that is, of course, a young woman. What was she like? they ask. Large or small, what height approximately, and what coloring? We just can't seem to get along without asking those questions.

The questions are legitimate and basic. To this day people can't decide which is better, a large woman or a small one. They have reached no consensus on this point. The matter can even go as far as fisticuffs, son can rise up against father. Some get too worked up even to discuss the subject.

In my opinion, a small woman is a hundred, if not a hundred million times better than a large one. What can you do? You never know what side to embrace a large woman from. Before you can get your arms around her the whole process might even strike you as absurd. A large woman will never ask for anything and then will demand something impossible. A small woman will simply say:

"Grigory Andreevich"—or "Grisha," or "Grishenka"—and you'll know she needs your protection or has a surprise for you.

Actually, it's been a long time since anyone called me Grishenka.

A small woman's foot, for instance, will fit entirely in your hand. Because she's small, you can look at a small woman from above and see the nicest part of her: the way she does her hair,

her eyelashes, and the very tip of her nose. You have to look at a large woman from below and sometimes you simply never see anything past the cheeks; you have to guess about a lot from the expression of those cheeks, which are also large, naturally. And the objects a small woman finds need for are incomparably more appetizing: her gloves, or suit, even her handkerchief. . . . And it's true that there is much less litter from a small woman.

Actually, in Billancourt we have neither small nor large women. That is, we have both, but very few of either. This was particularly striking at Easter last year, when a full thousand men gathered at and around the church, and for this brave thousand—bathed, hair pomaded, polite and exchanging triple kisses—there were fewer than thirty women. A woman doesn't live in Billancourt, she flees to Paris.

In Paris both small and large women are in clover. In Paris there are handsome positions galore. For the most part, it's foreigners living there, in the evening the streets are lit up, and all the cabarets are full of cheerful, sober people, whereas here sometimes there's not even anywhere to sit on the Place Nationale—all the benches are taken. And then the men stand on the corners, pretending they're having a good time anyway. But the wind blows up their sleeves.

We don't have any women. What I mean to say is that we don't have nearly enough. And you can count the young women on your fingers. As embarrassing as it is to say, we have no prospective brides.

Not long ago we did have one who was as bright as a star in the sky. She was on the short side, she had even teeth, and she flashed her big blue eyes, her beautiful big blue eyes, all around. This was my fiancée.

It might sound funny, but I'd never had a fiancée before her. In Billancourt I hadn't had a chance to get myself a fiancée. When they sawed my clavicle in Rostov I proposed to one nurse, but I never saw her after that, and she and I lost touch. I wanted to look for her later, to apologize for my passionate raving, but I never did.

My journeys began at Zet junction. In those days, trains did not run on schedules. Our echelon had been transferred from the western line and was parked directly opposite the water pump, and from morning til night we hung around this water pump, or ran down the embankment, making the Plymouth Rock that roosted with the other hens on the station palisade swoon. One particularly nasty evening, we wrung the neck of this tempting Plymouth Rock and from it made such a soup that its owner, the junction chief, came by weeping with trembling knees, to taste the soup, and even thanked us, and when we offered him the neck, in view of his advanced age, he refused with tears in his eyes.

In the morning, though, there wasn't even half a spoonful left of the soup, so we took a walk through the nearby streets. No matter where you looked, the sky touched the earth. It was a mournful autumn, and late rooks soared in the sky—there was such a bird. The buildings for the most part looked uninhabited: the closed windows and flayed acacias seemed always to have been that way. Most of the shops were wrecked and nailed shut—not much in the way of shops to begin with. You would never find shops like that in Billancourt, let alone Paris. Nonetheless, somewhere we got a hold of a loaf of bread made from real sifted flour, some tobacco, stamps, and a gray, slightly sour tea they called "Ceylonsky." If I were to come across that

Ceylonsky, the manufacturer, now, I'd give him a good sock in the head.

As we were walking down the street, we saw a woman in a window, that is, a young woman. She was sitting there, sewing, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. When a woman sits in the window and sews, well, it's like a picture in a frame.

"Won't you give us something to drink, mademoiselle? Don't be afraid, we're not expecting anything alcoholic!" We called to her through the window, tapped on the glass with our fingers, and bowed. Me and my buddy.

She opened the window partway and frowned. It was autumn 1919, and there was a wind up.

"You'd better come through the front door," she said, "or the room will get chilly."

The window closed and we walked around to the front door.

Heels clicked down steps, and the old door yielded with a rusty creak.

"Mademoiselle," my buddy said, "please keep your distance. We may already have typhus."

"That's all right," she said. "*Merci.*"

She brought us an earthenware pitcher of milk, a pitcher as pink as the sky. She was wearing a thimble on her finger; there are women who are adorned just as well with a thimble as a ring.

"What are they saying, though, will you be leaving soon?" she asked shyly, and she twisted her foot in its patent shoe.

"We don't have the right to talk about that."

"You don't have to. I know myself you're leaving."

"As you like."

"But where are your horses?"

"We're infantry."

"I'm going to give you something for good luck."

My buddy stuck out his hand.

Without thinking, she removed the thimble from her skinny, not perfectly straight finger and put it in my buddy's open hand.

"That's all," she said, and clutching the empty pitcher to her chest, she went up the stairs. It would have been pointless to ask her to stay.

When I returned to Zet junction a month later, that building was nowhere to be found. At least five blocks had burned to the ground, and the neighborhood's inhabitants were dreaming of planting potatoes in those places. But I had actually come to return the thimble: my buddy didn't need it anymore, they'd buried my buddy. Rest in peace, Kolya.

So the wheels jolted along beneath me, the telegraph wire flashed by in the sky, barring the way for all the rooks, the waves roared by the feed crops on the Crimean shores, and I was racing along at top speed. The sea wasn't just the sea, the sea was the one we had sailed under the tsars, from the Varangians to the Greeks.

In the upper left-hand pocket of my tunic the thimble, like a jewel, like some kind of pearl, was racing with me to a far-off land. Anyone else in my place would have tossed it onto the waves of the Bosphorus long before or buried it in the Turkish earth. After all, not only did I have no use for it—it wouldn't go on my pinky—but it had brought my buddy irrevocable harm. I wouldn't think about it for weeks on end—once or twice I shook it out the window while cleaning Balkan dirt off my tunic, and once I lost it in a move in the folds of my suit-

case (the suitcase lining swallowed up a number of tiny objects at that time). But the thimble always returned to me, never letting me forget that voice, those eyes, and those dear shoes.

Truth be told, I didn't try to forget them. What was there for me to remember if not them? Nothing, I guess. I recalled the building, the window, the acacia, as if it were all still there, as if it had not been swept whole into the beyond, along with its curtains and door knobs, by a heartless, well-aimed shell. It was as if this dear building had not been borne away with all its jambs and lintels to a heavenly valley but was living out its peaceful days on a quiet street with a marvelous woman—a young woman, that is—in the window.

And the farther I went, the more my soul sought that framed picture I had once glimpsed. My heart ached in the Saros Gulf, in Tyrnov I didn't sleep one night in three, in Rudnik I started discussing whether it wouldn't be natural for this picture to turn up again in my distant journeying. But when I moved to Prague—I don't mean to boast, I was in Prague, too—I began paying more attention to the female staff at the Russian cafeteria. Hope overwhelmed me.

At that time, I was in my sixth year of traveling with no end in sight. And then, in Prague, I saw her.

"Hello," I said. "I have the honor of having met you during the civil war, which was so hard for each and every one of us."

"Excuse me," she said, "but I don't know you."

"Excuse me," I said, "but you do know me: here's your thimble."

And right there on the stairs I pulled out the slightly dented but perfectly fine thimble.

"I'm sorry," she said again, "but I didn't lose a thimble."

I wouldn't let her go, though. On the contrary, I took a step closer. I was ready to take her by the hand, but it didn't go that far. Since the time she had clutched the pitcher of milk to her chest she had curled her hair and bought herself a new dress.

The people who used the Russian cafeteria were not altogether poor, not entirely down and out, so to speak.

"Do you know there's not a trace left of your building or the neighboring buildings, if I may say so?"

"What building? You must be confused. Such a strange man you are."

I took a step closer to her. She came up to my shoulder. Her eyes were the same.

"There's a famous American war picture playing at the cinema," I said. "Would you go with me?"

"Why not? *Merci*."

In Prague, going into the fog is like going out in a smoking field. The thought of losing her frightened me. I took her arm in mine and leaned toward her to swallow a little of her air. When we walked under the streetlamps, I could see every single hair, every freckle, and since there could be nothing nicer than this, I kept trying to break out of the fog under the streetlamps, pulling her to the left, then the right, and back, gazing into her face.

By the time the American war picture was over it was nighttime.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"Paris."

She led me down a dark lane. She'd managed to get used to me a little and even laughed occasionally. I listened to her and

saw a long road, my road to Paris, which was steep and scary and took my breath away.

"This is where I live," she said suddenly.

How had she been able to find the right building in this gloom?

"So, will you take the thimble?" I asked warily. "Or shall I bring it to Paris?"

"Such a strange man you are," she repeated and smiled, and then suddenly she became sad, and still sad, she went into the building.

I walked away from the door and remembered the address—#45. This night might have had a terrible effect on the nerves of someone less tough than I am. I was fine, though. I was happy.

Paris is not Prague. It might as well be a month's journey from Prague to Paris—so different are the cities. Over Paris, the sky splits open and a dove flies from the clouds; the sun over Paris is a white sun. And if it's raining lightly, it's as if people had begun dancing in the streets: the men (have you noticed?) walk through the puddles on tiptoe, and the women dash across the street and immediately lift a foot to see whether their stocking was splashed—Oh yes, it was!—and run on.

This is Paris. And Billancourt is next door.

I arrived in winter, one morning, very early, the same morning snow fell briefly. I hadn't been able to leave Prague right away. A year had passed, a long and difficult year. I arrived in the morning, left my things with a buddy, cleaned myself up, and went out. I was looking for a street and address. I started wandering in the vicinity, as if I were taking in the city.

That entire long year I had been thinking about this build-

ing, imagining it. Lots of people lived in it besides Taniusha, lots of men and women, large and small. And one of them (a small one, naturally) still seemed to me like the end point of my wanderings. My versts and sleeping cars!

After I had examined everything she came out, alone, and I barred her way, stretching my arms out so she couldn't get by. She wanted to pass under my arm but halted, staring at me full in the face and then she recognized me.

"You've become quite the beautiful lady!" I exclaimed. And it was true, her eyelashes were like spider's legs, and her gloves were kid.

"I recognize you," she said, and gave me her hand.

"Do you remember the American war picture?"

But she didn't.

"Your address was #45."

"Is that really important?"

I couldn't tell what she was thinking at that moment.

She started walking with me and telling me that her father was in America and she was planning to go visit him. She was going to bring money back to get married.

"To whom?"

"I'll be back soon, by spring."

So I went to America. . . . That is, naturally not. I stayed here, though I might as well have gone there, in her wake. But Monsieur Renault—that's another story, which doesn't concern us now. I went to see him through the passage that lets out on the embankment, where they interview and hire people—and where, by the way, they toss them out on their ears. In short, I hurried after her, but lagged behind.

Oh, America, the ocean! My native land!

In the evenings I would walk the Billancourt streets (don't laugh: the Paris stars burn over Billancourt at night!) and think about the fact that it was probably broad daylight in America now. I saw its green steppes, its sandpipers, its cherry orchards, and all its natural charms: broad rivers like ours, thick forests, nameless roads. That's how I viewed America at the time.

I thought about myself, about the fact that my life kept moving down the highways, that my friends had come to a stop long before but I was still going. And about the fact that my friend and I were breathing soot, and we were hot from the open-hearth furnaces, and despite the fact that I had moved into a room I got from my bosses, the verst markers kept racing up to me.

It blows hard up our sleeves, anyone can tell you that. It takes a few shots of our native spirit—less than that won't make it right. It's medicine, not alcohol. At night you get a little feverish once or twice but no more. We have short nights. If you have a fever, the best thing is to shut the door tight to deter visitors and turn your face to the wall.

And now there was a knock at the door. I opened the door with my left hand and switched on the light with my right.

"Excuse me," someone said on the other side of the door. "I guess you were sleeping. I've been here with friends, the Petrovs," (or maybe it was the Vedrovs) "and learned you were living here so I decided to look you up."

"From America?"

"Yes."

I closed the door, pulled up my trousers, put on my jacket, turned up my collar, and fastened the snap at my neck with my finger.

She sat down on the chair and looked around. She was in my room, she had come to see me. She needed me.

"Well, how are things going on the western front, no changes?"

"None whatsoever."

"Did you get settled?"

"Yes, I did."

She now had a gold tooth and her hair had been dyed a strange color.

"I waited for you to come to America. But you didn't."

I actually got upset.

"Don't joke with me, Taniusha. I'm still very delicate inside."

She put her foot on the heating pipe.

"I'm not joking. I kept thinking, what if he keeps his word? But you didn't."

"You mean I should chase you all over the world? Don't distances mean anything to a young girl?"

"Why have you started talking in verse?" she said in an unfriendly way. "Since when did you become a poet?"

There was a moment of silence.

"I can't keep chasing after you everywhere. As it is, I see no end to my journeys. My entire life is nothing but versts and sleeping cars."

"What sleeping cars? You mean the ones that go cross-wise?"

"The very same." She looked out the window. But I didn't take my eyes off her. I had come to the preliminary conclusion that I didn't recognize her.

Yet it was she. She seemed to be searching for something

else to say but not finding it. And I couldn't help her there.

"Well then, I'll be going. I see you don't have any news for me. But I have lots."

That scared me.

"I didn't bring back any money, and I didn't get married. It's like news on the telegraph. I don't know where to start. I'll tell you another time."

My head started spinning, I didn't know what I was saying, and I kept my finger on my snap.

"Marry me. You've been my fiancée for a long time. We'll go to Harbin together. Or Nice."

"Why Harbin?"

"A little while ago someone from back home left for Harbin, he says it's better there."

She looked at me with dismay and began tying her scarf.

"Your fiancée. . . . What, do you consider a thimble an engagement ring? It wasn't even given to you."

We both stood up simultaneously, and because she was a very small woman, she passed under my arm.

I was left standing there, paralyzed, as if my train had come to a sudden halt and I had fallen from the upper berth onto my neighbor and my suitcase had fallen on us both from the upper berth. Her steps died away. I looked to see whether she had forgotten anything because then I would have run after her.

People know me in Billancourt. I have a long road behind me, no one here has such a long road. But now it's quiet all around, like in the sky.

1930

The Billancourt Manuscript

Vania Lyokhin died on Tuesday night, the 7th, in the thirty-sixth year of his hard but colorful life.

"Drop your bachelor doings," Shchov said to me. "Vania Lyokhin's dead."

I dropped my bachelor doings and left. I didn't have far to go: Vania Lyokhin lived in the Hotel Caprice, but how he lived—there's no point getting into that.

As I entered I suddenly didn't want to look. I wanted to cough and say, "All right, Vania Lyokhin, get up. It's no good lying around, you're no fine lady!" But I didn't, I stared at Vania's ashen face, walked around the bed, and sat down at the table. His will lay on the table. Shchov had just pulled it out of a drawer. It concerned him and me.

One other person was mentioned in it as well, but it's not a name for the press. The daughter of the Hotel Caprice's owner was fully accounted for in it. We didn't have to go far to find her: she was standing at the head of the bed, blowing her nose, eyebrows raised, and crying. That morning she'd shaved Vania with her own hands. He hadn't finished drinking the lemonade

she'd squeezed for him before dinner. She used all these mundane details to keep Vania's soul from slipping away, but it didn't work, his soul was already gone.

Across the street, in the dappled twilight, a priest was walking along with a briefcase under his arm, his cassock swinging back and forth. I stood up and put the will back on the table.

"What's wrong with you?" said Shchov. "You should read it. There are some curious things in it, you know."

I knew Vania Lyokhin could not possibly have left millions. He wasn't that kind of person. And I felt sorry for him.

"I'll get to it," I told Shchov. "I'm going downstairs. I'll meet the priest."

Thirty-five years of life is nothing to sneeze at. It's as if the hands of the clock said it was four o'clock, as if the page on the calendar from Wednesday to Thursday had been torn off, that's what thirty-five years is. The very middle of a day, a week, a life; time surges behind and in front of you, like water.

A couple of days later Vania Lyokhin was carried through his own Billancourt streets. The heavily burdened, not terribly frisky mare, wearing blinkers as big as skillets, stepped out. The coachman gathered up the reins, tch'ked at the horse, and yawned right and left. Vania Lyokhin was half covered with a white rug or some other sturdy stuff, and just behind the rail, looking at Vania Lyokhin right through the wheels, Shchov and I walked with our other friends, the infantrymen and workmen; a sympathetic French crowd we didn't know very well came along with us; and even the daughter of the Hotel Caprice's owner, a very sweet-faced young woman, walked with us, sobbing.

They carried him down a familiar street past Mr. Salmson's tedious buildings and fences, where all of us have done and will do our share of walking. They carried Vania Lyokhin past the very streetlamp where not that long ago our army-mate cracked up in a car while in a drunken stupor, past those gates where for a year a single Russian word had been written in coal—everyone knows it. They brought Vania Lyokhin to our new cemetery, where no matter how many flowers you ask for no one puts any, where the weather in winter is raw and in summer dusty and where—like it or not—you and I, too, will be buried not far from Vania Lyokhin.

They carried Vania past rusty, useless black wreaths to a deep hole. Naturally they didn't bury him where there are promenades, statues, and flowers. They buried him in section five, where he would lie peacefully for five years next to Gustopsov, Semenchuk, and Dementiev, where you could see a smokestack very close by, our smokestack, a famous smokestack, actually. A piece of mirror had been glued to a wire decoration and on it was a gold leaf portrait of a Chinese youth, U Yu Men, who also of course had had nothing and so was buried here.

For five minutes the priest painted a picture of Vania Lyokhin's life. An airplane buzzed overhead; I don't know whether anyone up there noticed us as we shifted from foot to foot around the grave. Vania Lyokhin had a modest mound built up over him out of earth, sand, and stones, and a short cross was planted with an inscription of who lay there and when he died. We might have liked to depict many other things on this cross, but there wasn't room. In the other sections, where the promenades and flowers were, the tombstones had room for entire histories.

The tall cart with the folded white rug clattered off on its way back, though at first the mare had not seemed terribly frisky. That means the mare was faking when she was pulling Vania Lyokhin. And once again I felt sorry for him. But Shchov said: "Turn right around and go straight to the Hotel Caprice. You have to see the will."

I turned my collar up and followed Shchov. We got well ahead of the others (no more than ten of them) and the young lady—so sweet, really, and still so very young. People say they adored one another, like husband and wife.

The will really did prove to contain some surprising points. Who would ever have thought anything of the kind about Vania Lyokhin? As I had expected, he did not leave millions. He gave his linen and clothing to Shchov, his boots to the poor, and asked that his automatic pen, tie, and tobacco pouch (from *those* days) be left for a museum of Billancourt life, should one ever come to be. Vania instructed that all the small stuff—his hairbrush, three postcards, a piece of something unidentifiable, a French grammar book, and a family photograph—be given to the daughter of the Hotel Caprice's owner, and to me he designated a manuscript in a file held together with an old rubber band. It was this that amazed both Shchov and me: our Vania Lyokhin, it turned out, had been planning to become a Russian writer, another Mamin-Sibiryak, in fact!

It was dusk. Across the street, at the Cabaret, a gramophone started playing. People were walking by outside. Women were picking up a few items—not mothers of families, though, not wives, not housewives. *They* go out in the morning, they take their children to school at a regular time, they do everything on a schedule. No, these were the dolls from the street that's right

by the river, that crosses ours, dolls who had just arisen, who had bright yellow hair, raucous voices, haunches draped in black silk, and legs like upside-down seltzer bottles. But even dolls like to eat—meat, cheese, a bottle of red wine—so they go out for food at dusk, and they walk, and they curse, and they linger listening to "Stenka Razin" on the Cabaret gramophone, and they stop to examine the perfume and pomade on display in the window of Boris Gavrilovich's hairdressing salon. And then they go back down that cross-street where at night there's music, and shooting, and drunken shouting in eight languages.

I opened the old file in my room, under the lamp. Inside that file was the breath of Vania Lyokhin, breath from his never-once-pierced chest. The manuscript was long, about a hundred pages. To all appearances, this was only the beginning of something—a novel, shall we say. He had made a fair copy of the first twenty pages in the most earnest way, but the rest were still messy—I'm certain Vania Lyokhin would never have shown the last pages to the woman he adored. The paper the novel was written on was marked off in squares, and the handwriting was the Vanialyokhin-ish handwriting I knew so well, slanting down, with loops.

From my first glance a question crept into my soul: Was the novel the cause of his death, dear Vania Lyokhin's death? All of a sudden I realized that something had burned inside him as if it were on fire, and it was because of this long-burning fire that he couldn't go on living. How come we never guessed the agony his imagination was causing him? This could be happening to some other friend, too, without us ever knowing! But none of our friends would ever admit it. Myself first of all.

I began to read the writing he had bequeathed me.



The night was black. The last leaves were blowing off the trees. When I walked away from the station you could still discern the smoke escaping from the chimney, the flickering in the window, and the green fire by the station house. Then the gloom moved in. The ruts of the road, washed by the rains, were just now dark, and my foot kept landing in them. The clouds were racing by.

I walked for quite a while. The field came to an end, and so did the woods. Once, a very long time ago, two sides first had fought in these woods, then they had killed and looted. The road went uphill. At an exposed spot the wind nearly knocked me off my feet. A cemetery stretched out. I imagined returning here tomorrow morning, in the gray weather, and recognizing the straight path, the lilac bushes, the stone on my father's grave.

The municipal hospital partly blocked my view. The town began.

I knew this town. I knew these streets. Trees swayed inside palisades, dripped rain, creaked. In the town, though, it was quieter. From time to time a gate would bust open and from the depths of the yard a dog would hurl itself at me in silence and then immediately stand back. I did not encounter another soul at that late hour. I counted the crossings and made the turns from memory. At one corner I came across a half-torn-down sign: Karl Liebnecht Street. I thought I recognized the intersection. It used to be Ekaterinskaya.

A few hundred steps from the spot where I was now walking, I knew, paved streets began, maybe there was even a beer stand still open, lights on in the building, a lamp behind the colored curtain, or a late trolley passing. But I couldn't hear anything because of the wind. And I walked on, the way blind men walk through their own houses.

At last, I found my building, I saw the address, the same one I had been putting on envelopes for so many years. Two steps led to the porch. The windows were dark. But above the roof, above the old chimney, the clouds were moving.

The windows were shuttered from the inside—that was the custom in my town.

There wasn't any bell. You had to knock, but knocking in the night might frighten them. I listened carefully for something stirring in the house, but at that hour probably only I was awake in the whole town.

I put my ear to the door and knocked twice. Something slammed somewhere, maybe three blocks away. Someone scuffling felt slippers came up to the door. I grabbed the doorpost and squeezed my suitcase handle with my other hand. I couldn't feel my heart knocking in my chest. In the darkness, an unseen hand touched the lock.

"Who's there?" asked a quiet male voice suddenly close to me.

"Vania Lyokhin," I answered just as quietly.

The handle turned. The door opened. An eye beamed at me, big, black, and shining.

"Come in," said the man. "This is quite an event! Only quietly, no need to wake them. It's night, let them sleep. They're tired during the day."

My suitcase and I squeezed through the door. Now, in the gloom, I couldn't see anything. Somewhere a clock was ticking calmly and fairly loudly.

"I should introduce myself," said the man in a whisper, and I sensed him extending his hand toward me. "Moisei Borisovich Gotovy, Sonia's husband."

I took his hand, which was small and burning.

"Follow me," he whispered again. "I'll show you our kitchen."

He took me by the hand. According to my memories there ought to have been a staircase here to the second floor, but there wasn't. A door opened without a sound, and we moved silently, as if we were sailing. We went in where it was warmer and the air was different.

A match was struck and a shadow passed across a burner and some shelves. I saw a small man leaning over a lamp. The smell of warm kerosene reached me; the flame jumped briefly in the glass.

"Sit down," said Moisei Borisovich. "Now you'll get some fish soup. Today we had fish soup for dinner."

"What about Sonia?" I asked quietly.

"Sit down, I'll tell you. Sonia is dreaming. Why didn't you warn us? The surprise could make someone ill."

"And mama?"

"Your mama will be back tomorrow morning. She went to see relatives."

"What relatives? What for?"

"Shh! What are you shouting so for? There are children here."

He fished a piece of perch and a long thin carrot out of the kettle. He sliced off a piece of bread, hugging the loaf to his chest. Now I got a good look at this man: he was over forty and he was wearing long drawers and a shirt. Light black hairs stuck up from the top of his head, and the same little hairs poked out of his large ears and even the nostrils of his heavy nose. He sat down opposite me and our gazes met. We looked at each other for a long time.

"Well, eat your soup," he said, agitated. "This is quite an event!"

He lowered his eyes.

I ate the perch and bread. And the bread seemed alive to me, it breathed, it saw me, it reached out for me, entered into me, satiated me and made me happy.

"It's so quiet here," I said. "Everywhere."

"Yes, now, thank God. . ." he replied, and a half-forgotten fright flashed in his moist eyes.

I finished eating.

"I know one interesting thing," he said suddenly. "I'll put you in mama's room, we don't have another bed, we have two other rooms. People live upstairs."

I didn't reply.

"Only quietly, you mustn't make any noise. Take your baggage." I picked up the suitcase. "We'll go through the bedroom. But then how you'll sleep! Just like in Paris."

He blew out the lamp. We were left in total darkness, and he again took me by the hand and led me. We sailed. A door opened, then another. I lost my orientation and walked as if in a dream. The darkness, the uncertainty, and the black night were making my head spin. I held his small, hot hand and felt each joint of his hairy fingers. Then his hand slipped out of mine. The light blazed on.

With the ceiling light on, I recognized the room I'd been born in.

Above the bed, above the dark featherbed, hung a portrait of my father, lackluster and not at all like him. There was my own portrait from the '16 draft, and on the table, like a warm house pet, lay her knitting with her needles sticking into it.

Moisei Borisovich looked at me, and there was curiosity in his big eyes. Then he nodded to me, hitched up his drawers, exposing his skinny, hairy ankles, and disappeared behind the door. And no matter how hard I listened, I heard nothing more.

I took off my boots and slowly circled the room, and everything, from the rug that yielded under my feet to the round mirror (which had seemed so high when I was a child), everything suddenly became mine again. In these old, dusty, and perhaps even worm-eaten things, my soul met the souls of the people who lived here. Weary, I sat down on the bed and lingered for an hour and a half with the vague thoughts that were running through my mind. It wasn't any one of them that held my memory in thrall, except maybe, on

its own track, the thought of Madeleine's letter. I had promised to write immediately. There could be no question of that. But some phrases for the coming day did pop up and ready themselves in my mind:

"I only just arrived. The train was late. There were a million people. I searched for the house in awful weather in a totally dead town. Of course, I was worried, like an idiot. My sister's husband greeted me, *un type assez rigolo*. Sonia and the children were sleeping, and mama's coming back tomorrow. I'll write you more, I can imagine what it would cost you to come here. . . . How is everything with you? Are you well? Write about everything. Did you get my postcard from Moscow? Whom have you seen of our dear friends? What's going on at the Caprice? Send regards to everyone, especially Shchov, and thank him for the cheese he slipped me without anyone noticing as I was leaving. . . ."

I put a stop to the flow, finally. I stretched out on the featherbed without undressing. The ceiling light was still on when I fell asleep. The wind howled in the chimney of the big tile stove.

When I awoke it was daytime, there was noise and light, the shutters were open and things were happening in the next room. I sat up in bed and immediately the door opened very quietly and I saw four child's eyes.

The two were perfectly identical, about six or seven. Their hands hung straight at their sides, they didn't blink, they didn't close their mouths. Their pants were laundered, their little jackets mended. I

beckoned them to me and kissed each one on the head. They smelled of feathers.

"I have an orange," I told them, and I opened my suitcase.

They had never seen an orange, and they poked their thin, sharp-nailed fingers into it. I gave them a chocolate bar and the empty cheese box with the laughing cow on the lid, and I held their cold, fragile hands in mine.

"Do you know who I am?"

Yes, they knew.

"Hurry up, then, tell your mama to come in."

I stood up and Sonia ran into the room.

She came in with a painfully tense face, as happens when people are trying at all costs to keep from giving away what they're feeling. She was wearing an old fall coat instead of a bathrobe. I hugged her and felt how terribly, how unrecognizably fat she'd become, how low and heavy her breasts hung, how stooped her shoulders were.

She couldn't say a word. Tears streamed down her face, and I found myself thinking what a stranger she had become to me, she who had once bathed in the same tub with me. Her hands, which I remembered as the light hands of a schoolgirl, were large and stiff, and she wore her heavy engagement ring on her pinky now. There was something halfway between timidity and envy in her eyes as she stared at me.

"You, you," she repeated. "Look what you've become! A Frenchman! A White Guard! Ah!" She

started crying. "Many of your kind have come back this last year, but did we really believe it? Take care you don't kill mama!"

She and I were standing by the window, and I noticed I was almost not looking at her anymore, I was looking out the window. Looking out the window at the quiet gray street.

A man there was pushing a hand cart, and the house across the way had the most *ordinary* look. It was a private house, only the windows had been shattered and the porch was littered with fallen leaves. And at a certain instant that had probably been fixed a thousand years before that day, coming around the corner, I saw *her*.

She had the kind of walk that people do in their seventh decade, people who have become one with the land, their arms held slightly away from their bodies, with a slight spring in their knees. She had become small and probably very light; she was wearing a rather wide skirt down to her heels and a thick woolen fitted jacket. On her head was a tan woolen kerchief that outlined a knot of what was now probably all gray hair. She was carrying a homemade cloth purse and a long, needle-thin umbrella with a white handle. She crossed the street near our porch and walked up the steps.

Through the open doors, through the room where Moisei Borisovich was helping his sons, I saw the door open in the vestibule, I saw her walk in and carefully shut and lock the door, I saw her wipe her feet on the doormat and unhurriedly begin to shake out her kerchief. And then I stepped toward her.

At that same instant she turned around. I thought she would cry out, fall down, and I hurried, my arms outstretched, to catch her. But she seemed to detach herself from the floor and float toward me. . . .



And so on and so forth.

There were about a hundred pages, as I already said, but now it was all clear to me: Vania Lyokhin had died of imagination. It had turned into a fever that must have been ripping him apart this entire last year, but what a wonderful man! Billancourt loses out on every score. Its best people die; the decent ones pass away. They abandon themselves, secretly at first, to all kinds of gloomy distractions and torture themselves each according to his abilities. But some don't have far to go. They pick up a pen and paper and start writing. And it's a sad sight: that kind of energy doesn't befit them, that kind of energy will consume them twice over.

Thus we shall remain, my friends, infantry and workmen, what we have always been! We don't need a pen, or paper, or an inkwell. We won't let fame, or large sums of money, or the love of a bewitching creature disturb our dreams. Keep your head down, advises a guy experienced in these matters.

Let other people write about us. We ourselves—whatever we imagine—we aren't writers!

The Violin of Billancourt

It's still the same.

Yet it has had to change a little. Had to because it has no monuments, no fountains, no bell towers, none of those ornaments on which any ordinary city built for eternity rests. Instead it has a grocer's, a Polish tavern (in what was once a church), a nightclub, a hairdresser's, and factory gates where a barrier with a red light is lowered during working hours, just like crossing on some long journey. Not by this does a city endure.

True, there are also four smokestacks holding up our Billancourt sky, as someone once said. In our city they take the place of columns, if I can put it that way. But can they really save the day and protect the city from weather and time? No, they cannot save the day.

The weather is cloudy and dark; it's always autumn here, unless it's hot. Time passes and everything changes. For Kozlobabin's grocery business, for Boris Gavrilovich's hairdressing salon, for the residents of the Hotel Caprice, for the clients of the nightclub (where the owner, by the way, has filled out

markedly), three years passing here is like three thousand years for some caryatid or equestrian statue. Three years passing. . . . Once there was an accordion on the cross street and Shurochka stamped her heels there, a happy drunken voice bellowed "The Steward of Mariupol" across the Place Nationale, and at noon a crowd emerged like herring from the open-hearth furnaces and squealing transmissions, from that whole hellish factory, following their noses: for a little something to eat, a bite, a snack. This was life. Billancourt did not believe in tears. For a proper existence, for a place of their own in the world, people repaid the world with their labor, which smelled of sweat, garlic, and alcohol. This was life. But since then something in it had hesitated, as if a shudder had gone through the world's equilibrium. There can be no doubt of this, especially if you bear in mind that Misha Sergeich was walking down the street with a not altogether firm step, walking and carrying a violin.

Something had hesitated. And anyone who had been counting on people was a little worse off, and anyone who had been counting on God's mercy was all right, as always. But then there were the others whose hopes were on themselves, on their four limbs and their minds, and they may have been a little better off. In any case, Misha Sergeich was walking down the street with his violin.

Those who had counted on people now didn't care when people fired from their jobs rushed off to Paris or lay low at home, suddenly ceasing to have any need of de Gurevich the venerologist, or Sauset the dentist, or Gnutikov the solicitor, who had long since chosen chicken soup over eternity and now wore his felt shoes in all weather to cross the street for some

tobacco. One fine rainy day, Boris Gavrilovich's hairdressing salon closed down, and dry goods were hanging over the door soon after: warm stockings, jerseys, and aprons. In place of Abdulaev's restaurant, where flaccid hunks of meat sprinkled with parsley always lay in the window, a shoe repair shop opened, and now shoes were set out there, soles up. Where there used to be a nightclub was now a laundry, and instead of the vacant lot not far from the Moonlight, where the owner had also put on some weight, instead of this vacant lot where they had once found a dead body, now stood a house built as an investment, which was empty and drafty. Not making a profit.

Yes, things had had to change a little. Why should they be any better for you or me? Our newspaper explains this by referring to the world crisis. Where it came from, where it first flourished, no one knows. Maybe in America. That's just a guess, though. Some things don't change: for instance, our unbreakable Billancourt moon and the carnival blockhead that people hit to test their strength. Could our accidentally beloved backwater really become different? In essence, it's still the same. Let them think, as they say, that because of this and that the end is coming to Billancourt. There is no end or limit to Billancourt, nor will there ever be.

Misha Sergeich was short and for this and no other reason Sonia had hesitated for many years. "Lord," she always thought, "why is he that height? Maybe I'll still meet someone I like just as much but someone taller. After all, he comes up quite literally to my shoulder." She lived in Paris and had a million illusions, whereas he lived in Billancourt and had a million agonies. They hadn't seen each other for eight months when she came to visit him.

He came home with his violin and they told him downstairs that a lady was sitting in his room. Ladies did not visit him, and he worried: this wasn't his wife coming to see him, was it, the wife he hadn't seen for twelve years? They had parted in Africa. It turned out to be Sonia. Skinny, pale, and wearing something fancy and torn, she was sitting on his sofa.

"There's a story for you!" said Misha Sergeich, so overjoyed he had no idea what he was saying.

"The story lies ahead," said Sonia, very agitated. "I'll tell you a story right now."

He sat down on the chair and put two glasses and a bottle of ice-cold, tart red wine on the table. "Hello, hello," he said, "I'm listening."

"This is Paris speaking," she replied, wiping a tear from her eyelash and trying to keep her voice from shaking. "I haven't had a job since summer."

It was a short little story, and funny, but with a sad ending. Sonia had gone from being a salesclerk in the spring to working as a maid, a high-class maid, naturally, dressing a young lady (the lady turned out to have been Russian once), serving at the table, keeping the silver clean, and from time to time washing her silk stockings. Then the gentleman lost his money and everyone in the house was fired. They paid her off with a little rug and the tulle from the window in the dining room. She had been left like that in September. And now it was December.

Misha Sergeich offered her some wine but she refused. Then he drank some himself. He was silent for a while and then asked whether she knew how to sing. She said that depended and he got ready to listen some more.

But she didn't feel like going on with her story. It was about these three months that she was reluctant to speak. She asked: "Don't you come home for lunch anymore? And why is it four o'clock now and you're not at the factory?"

"I've changed profession," he said, "and the lunch hour is my busiest time."

She gave him a long, hard look, then shifted her eyes to the violin, which was stained too bright a color.

"You go around to courtyards?" she asked.

"Yes, I go around to courtyards."

At that she pulled out a handkerchief and started crying.

She cried for a long time, and he didn't try to console her, he didn't say anything cheerful, didn't try to play her a saucy foxtrot or a march like "Longing for Home." He didn't even offer her a drink. He sat in silence and looked at her long legs, the hands covering her face, her parcel, which in the gathering dusk seemed larger than it in fact was. When she was finished crying he stood up and walked to the window. An empty square, a fence, a bakery on the corner. He had seen all this before.

"Your arms are so skinny now," he said all of a sudden, "and so are your legs."

If a third party had heard this he probably would have thought these words beside the point. Especially about her legs. But they were alone, so he also said: "This is all temporary. It will be different. We'll think of something. Right now I'm going out to buy something. We'll have tea."

Outside it was true night as it can only be on a December afternoon, long before nightfall. There, on the left, the river had frozen to the embankment, which no one used this time of

year, and here, on the square, by the lighted sausage shop, stood a derelict looking at the sausage. For the New Year, the confectioner's elaborately decorated window shone with a tin-foil star and gold and silver ribbon, and under the streetlamp stood a sooty child selling sclerotic roses to passersby, flowers that had been nipped by the frost that morning and were now halfway from the hothouse to the garbage heap. They were being bought up because of the holiday, the foil star, and the cheap sparkle.

It was dark in the room, and Misha Sergeich thought Sonia was gone. In the light, though, it turned out she was sitting right where she had been. And he realized that he had gone out to give her a chance to leave without any explanations if something was wrong. But she hadn't gone, and her parcel was in its place. He started fussing with the kettle and the burner, handsomely arranging cheese, ham, and bread on a piece of paper. Sonia ate. He sat across from her. He was so happy he felt like explaining a certain theory of his to her, but he didn't know how to begin.

"Have you been doing this for long?" she asked.

"Half a year."

"What do you play?"

"The classical repertoire. And military marches. Occasionally something light. There's a gypsy here, he has a guitar, he sings ballads. We try not to horn in on one another."

"You always knew how to play the violin."

"Oh, yes!" He wanted to tell her about how in Petersburg, when he was a student at the Psycho-Neurological Institute, he had had his own orchestra, but he decided he would tell her some other time.

He looked at her for a long while, not knowing whether to take her hand or not.

"I have this theory," he said finally, and he placed his hand on hers. "Lord, how skinny your fingers are!" Sonia shivered but didn't move. "This theory: We're not coming back to this earth. . . . Oh, my God, don't cry, I'm telling you something cheerful! We aren't coming back to this earth and we don't know any other and it's unlikely we ever will. You have to work from this assumption."

Two tears dropped from Sonia's eyes onto the ham.

"Give close thought to what I'm saying. This is very important."

She nodded.

"And once you get some rest . . . actually, later about that."

She looked at him silently, pensively. He moved closer to her.

"I can change my repertoire."

She didn't say anything.

"I can switch to ballads. If you agree to sing. It's not at all frightening. And you know, I'm certain this is only temporary."

She nodded and smiled.

"Just now, when I was coming back from the square, I saw a couple pushing a cart, a husband and wife, a cart piled with all kinds of junk, which they set up for business by the factory in the evening. You know, they looked so happy pushing it together, their hands held on as solidly and as tightly as they did to each other."

"They won't let us."

"Then we'll come up with something else."

She looked at him for a long time, and he felt her looking

at him tenderly, that for the first time in his life she was looking at him tenderly.

"Don't you get cold?" she asked quietly.

"Sometimes, but it'll be warmer together."

She thought about something for a rather long time and suddenly smiled.

"I've been so lost the last few weeks. Absolutely. Literally."

"You'll tell me all about it."

"Maybe."

And he realized she was here to stay. And that this was the beginning of their life.

Opposite the barrier with the red light the streetlamps were already lit. The barrier was raised and people had begun streaming out. A gramophone started playing in the café where the carnival dwarves and the bearded lady gathered to warm up at the zinc bar. At half past eight there was supposed to be a performance starting on the square.

A rope was strung up to mark off the stage; a worn rug had been spread on the cobblestones in the middle and the dumbbells put out for the crudely made-up athlete. A clown was walking his trained dogs. The crowd would begin gathering at around eight o'clock. Taking advantage of the fact that people would get bored waiting, Misha Sergeich's friend came with his guitar, sat down on a box, and in his gypsy voice sang:

*I have a mustache,
Marusia has her braids.
Our life will pass for nothing:
Down the same highway.
I have a mustache,*

*She has pretty hair,
Our life is an illusion:
The wagons rumble by . . . -*

and already money was collecting in the hat.

1934