These early stories also reveal Babel's growing interest in using language in new and unusual ways. He has a young woman offer herself to her lover, "and the lanky fellow wallowed in businesslike bliss." Odessa matrons, "plump with idleness and naively corseted are passionately squeezed behind bushes by fervent students of medicine or law." Babel describes the Czarina as "a small woman with a tightly powdered face, a consummate schemer with an indefatigable passion for power." In a forest scene, "green leaves bent toward one another, caressed each other with their flat hands." We also see the recurring motifs of sun and sunset, which are to play an important role in Babel's later writing.

Babel's piquant brand of realism soon caught the eye of Maxim Gorky, who was to be the single most influential literary figure in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s, and who was particularly instrumental in helping young Soviet writers. Gorky published Babel's stories "Elya Isaakovich and Margarita Prokofievna," and "Mama, Rimma, and Alla" in 1916 in his literary magazine LETOPIS, *which marked the beginning of Gorky's mentoring of Babel's career. This mentoring was to last until Gorky's death exactly twenty years later.*

November 15, 2015

OLD SHLOYME

Although our town is small, its inhabitants few in number, and although Shloyme had not left this town once in sixty years, you'd be hard-pressed to find a single person who was able to tell you exactly who Shloyme was or what he was all about. The reason for this, plain and simple, is that he was forgotten, the way you forget an unnecessary thing that doesn't jump out and grab you. Old Shloyme was precisely that kind of thing. He was eighty-six years old. His eyes were watery. His face—his small, dirty, wrinkled face—was overgrown with a yellowish beard that had never been combed, and his head was covered with a thick, tangled mane. Shloyme almost never washed, seldom changed his clothes, and gave off a foul stench. His son and daughter-in-law, with whom he lived, had stopped bothering about him—they kept him in a warm corner and forgot about him. His warm corner and his food were all that Shloyme had left, and it seemed that this was all he needed. For him, warming his old broken bones and eating a nice, fat, juicy piece of meat were the purest bliss. He was the first to come to the table, and greedily watched every bite with unflinching eyes, convulsively cramming food into his mouth with his long bony fingers, and he ate, ate, ate till they refused to give him any more, even a tiny little piece. Watching Shloyme eat was disgusting: his whole puny body quivered, his fingers covered with grease, his face so pitiful, filled with the dread that someone might harm him, that he might be forgotten. Sometimes his daughter-in-law would play a little trick on Shloyme. She would serve the food, and then act as if she had overlooked him.

The old man would begin to get agitated, look around helplessly, and try to smile with his twisted, toothless mouth. He wanted to show that food was not important to him, that he could perfectly well make do without it, but there was so much pleading in the depths of his eyes, in the crease of his mouth, in his outstretched, imploring arms, and his smile, wrenched with such difficulty, was so pitiful, that all jokes were dropped, and Shloyme received his portion.

And thus he lived in his corner—he ate and slept, and in the summer he also lay baking in the sun. It seemed that he had long ago lost all ability to comprehend anything. Neither his son's business nor household matters interested him. He looked blankly at everything that took place around him, and the only fear that would flutter up in him was that his grandson might catch on that he had hidden a dried-up piece of honey cake under his pillow. Nobody ever spoke to Shloyme, asked his advice about anything, or asked him for help. And Shloyme was quite happy, until one day his son came over to him after dinner and shouted loudly into his ear, "Papa, they're going to evict us from here! Are you listening? Evict us, kick us out!" His son's voice was shaking, his face twisted as if he were in pain. Shloyme slowly raised his faded eyes, looked around, vaguely comprehending something, wrapped himself tighter in his greasy frock coat, didn't say a word, and shuffled off to sleep.

From that day on Shloyme began noticing that something strange was going on in the house. His son was crestfallen, wasn't taking care of his business, and at times would burst into tears and look furtively at his chewing father. His grandson stopped going to high school. His daughter-in-law yelled shrilly, wrung her hands, pressed her son close to her, and cried bitterly and profusely.

Shloyme now had an occupation, he watched and tried to comprehend. Muffled thoughts stirred in his long-torpid brain. "They're being kicked out of here!" Shloyme knew why they were being kicked out. "But Shloyme can't leave! He's eighty-six years old! He wants to stay warm! It's cold outside, damp. . . . No! Shloyme isn't going anywhere! He has nowhere to go, nowhere!" Shloyme hid in his corner and wanted to clasp the rickety wooden bed in his arms, caress the stove, the sweet, warm stove that was as old as he was. "He grew up here, spent his poor, bleak life here, and wants his old bones to be buried in the

small local cemetery!" At moments when such thoughts came to him, Shloyme became unnaturally animated, walked up to his son, wanted to talk to him with passion and at great length, to give him advice on a couple of things, but . . . it had been such a long time since he had spoken to anyone, or given anyone advice. And the words froze in his toothless mouth, his raised arm dropped weakly. Shloyme, all huddled up as if ashamed at his outburst, sullenly went back to his corner and listened to what his son was saying to his daughter-in-law. His hearing was bad, but with fear and dread he sensed something terrifying. At such moments his son felt the heavy crazed look of the old man, who was being driven insane, focused on him. The old man's two small eyes with their accursed probing, seemed incessantly to sense something, to question something. On one occasion words were said too loudly—it had slipped the daughter-in-law's mind that Shloyme was still alive. And right after her words were spoken, there was a quiet, almost smothered wail. It was old Shloyme. With tottering steps, dirty and disheveled, he slowly hobbled over to his son, grabbed his hands, caressed them, kissed them, and, not taking his inflamed eyes off his son, shook his head several times, and for the first time in many, many years, tears flowed from his eyes. He didn't say anything. With difficulty he got up from his knees, his bony hand wiping away the tears; for some reason he shook the dust off his frock coat and shuffled back to his corner, to where the warm stove stood. Shloyme wanted to warm himself. He felt cold.

From that time on, Shloyme thought of nothing else. He knew one thing for certain: his son wanted to leave his people for a new God. The old, forgotten faith was kindled within him. Shloyme had never been religious, had rarely ever prayed, and in his younger days had even had the reputation of being godless. But to leave, to leave one's God completely and forever, the God of an oppressed and suffering people—that he could not understand. Thoughts rolled heavily inside his head, he comprehended things with difficulty, but these words remained unchanged, hard, and terrible before him: "This mustn't happen, it mustn't!" And when Shloyme realized that disaster was inevitable, that his son couldn't hold out, he said to himself, "Shloyme, old Shloyme! What are you going to do now?" The old man looked around helplessly, mournfully puckered his lips like a child, and wanted to burst into

the bitter tears of an old man. But there were no relieving tears. And then, at the moment his heart began aching, when his mind grasped the boundlessness of the disaster, it was then that Shloyme looked at his warm corner one last time and decided that no one was going to kick him out of here, they would never kick him out. "They will not let old Shloyme eat the dried-up piece of honey cake lying under his pillow! So what! Shloyme will tell God how he was wronged! After all, there is a God, God will take him in!" Shloyme was sure of this.

In the middle of the night, trembling with cold, he got up from his bed. Quietly, so as not to wake anyone, he lit a small kerosene lamp. Slowly, with an old man's groaning and shivering, he started pulling on his dirty clothes. Then he took the stool and the rope he had prepared the night before, and, tottering with weakness, steadying himself on the walls, went out into the street. Suddenly it was so cold. His whole body shivered. Shloyme quickly fastened the rope onto a hook, stood up next to the door, put the stool in place, clambered up onto it, wound the rope around his thin, quivering neck, kicked away the stool with his last strength, managing with his dimming eyes to glance at the town he had not left once in sixty years, and hung.

There was a strong wind, and soon old Shloyme's frail body began swaying before the door of his house in which he had left his warm stove and the greasy Torah of his forefathers.

AT GRANDMOTHER'S

On Sabbaths after six classes I came home late. Walking through the streets didn't seem to me pointless. I could daydream remarkably well as I walked, and I felt that everything, everything around me was part of my being. I knew the signs, the stones of the houses, the windows of the stores. I knew them in a very special way, a very personal way, and I was firmly convinced that I saw the fundamental secret within them—what we grown-ups call the "essence" of things. Everything about them was deeply imprinted on my soul. When grown-ups mentioned a store in my presence, I envisioned its sign, the worn, golden letters, the little scratch in the left corner, the young lady with the tall coiffure at the cash register, and I remembered the air around this store that was not around any other. I pieced together from these stores, from the people, the air, the theater posters, my own hometown. To this day I remember, feel, and love this town—feel it, as one feels one's mother's scent, the scent of her caresses, words, and smiles, and I love this town because I grew up in it, was happy, melancholy, and dreamy in it. Passionately and singularly dreamy.

I always walked down the main street—that is where most of the people were.

The Sabbath I want to tell you about was a Sabbath in early spring. At that time of year, our air does not have the quiet tenderness, so sweet in central Russia, resting upon its peaceful streams and modest valleys. Our air has a sparkling, light coolness that blows with a shallow, chilly passion. I was no more than a young boy then and

November 15, 2015

"Study!" she suddenly said forcefully. "Study and you can have everything—wealth and glory. You must know everything. Everyone will fall on their knees before you and bow to you. Let them envy you. Don't believe in people. Don't have friends. Don't give them your money. Don't give them your heart!"

Grandmother stops talking. Silence. Grandmother is thinking of bygone years and sorrows, is thinking about my fate, and her severe testament rests heavily, eternally, on my weak, young shoulders. In the dark corner, the incandescent cast-iron stove is blazing intensely. I'm suffocating, I can't breathe, I want to run out into the air, into the open, but I don't have the strength to lift my drooping head.

Dishes clatter in the kitchen. Grandmother goes there. We're going to have supper. I hear her angry, metallic voice. She is shouting at the maid. I feel strange and troubled. Just a short while ago she had been breathing peace and sorrow. The maid snaps back at her. Grandmother's unbearably shrill voice rings out in an uncontrollable rage, "Get out of here, you dreck! I'm the mistress here. You are destroying my property. Get out of here!" I cannot bear her deafening voice of steel. I can see Grandmother through the half-open door. Her face is distorted, her lips are trembling thinly and relentlessly, her throat has thickened, as if it were bulging out. The maid answers back. "Get out of here," Grandmother says. Then there is silence. The maid bows, and quietly, as if she were afraid of offending the silence, slips out of the room.

We eat our dinner without talking. We eat our fill, abundantly and long. Grandmother's transparent eyes are staring immovably—what they are staring at, I do not know. After supper, she [. . .]*

• • •

More than that I do not see because I fall into a deep sleep, a child's sleep behind seven locks in Grandmother's hot room.

*Gap in manuscript.

ELYA ISAAKOVICH AND MARGARITA PROKOFIEVNA

Gershkovich came out of the police chief's office with a heavy heart. He had been informed that if he didn't leave Oryol on the first train, he would have to leave town in a chain gang. And leaving meant he would lose business.

With briefcase in hand, gaunt, unhurried, he walked down the dark street. At the corner, a tall female figure called out to him, "Will you come with me, sweetie?"

Gershkovich raised his head, looked at her through his shimmering spectacles, thought it over, and guardedly said, "I'll come."

The woman took him by the arm. They walked around the corner.

"So where will we go? To a hotel?"

"I want something for the whole night," Gershkovich answered. "How about your place?"

"That'll cost you three rubles, Papa."

"Two," Gershkovich said.

"Not worth my while, Papa!"

• • •

He managed to haggle her down to two-and-a-half rubles. They began walking.

The prostitute's room was small, nice, and clean, with frayed curtains and a pink lamp.

When they entered, the woman took off her coat, unbuttoned her blouse, and winked at him.

"Hey!" Gershkovich said, knitting his brow. "Stop messing around!"

"You're in a bad mood, Papa."

She came over and sat on his knee.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Gershkovich said. "You must weigh at least five *pood*!"

"Four-point-three *pood*!"

She gave him a long kiss on his graying cheek.

• • •

"Hey!" Gershkovich said, knitting his brow again. "I'm tired, I want to go to sleep."

The prostitute stood up. Her face had become hard.

"You a Jew?"

He looked at her through his spectacles and answered, "No."

"Papa," the prostitute said slowly, "that'll be ten rubles."

He got up and walked to the door.

"Five," the woman said.

Gershkovich came back.

"Make up the bed for me," the Jew said wearily, then took off his jacket and looked for a place to hang it. "What's your name?"

"Margarita."

"Change the sheets, Margarita."

The bed was wide and covered with a soft eiderdown.

Gershkovich slowly started undressing. He took off his white socks, stretched his sweaty toes, locked the door with the key, put the key under his pillow, and lay down. Margarita yawned, and slowly took off her dress, squinted, squeezed out a pimple on her shoulder, and began plaiting a thin braid for the night.

"Papa, what's your name?"

"Eli. Elya Isaakovich."

"A tradesman?"

"Well, if you want to call it a trade . . ." Gershkovich answered vaguely.

Margarita blew out the night-light and lay down. . . .

• • •

"Well, I'll be damned!" Gershkovich said. "That's a whole lot of woman here."

Soon they were asleep.

• • •

Next morning the sun's bright light filled the room. Gershkovich woke up, dressed, and walked to the window.

"We have sea, and you have fields," he said. "Great."

"Where you from?" Margarita asked.

"Odessa," Gershkovich answered. "The number-one town, a good town." And he smiled slyly.

"It looks like you pretty much feel nice and fine everywhere," Margarita said.

"You can say that again," Gershkovich said. "Wherever there's people it's nice and fine."

"You're such a fool!" Margarita said, propping herself up on the bed. "People are evil."

"No," Gershkovich said. "People are good. They've been taught to think that they're evil, and they ended up believing it."

Margarita thought for a while, and then smiled.

"You're funny," she said slowly, and she ran her eyes carefully over him.

"Turn around, I'm going to get dressed."

Then they ate breakfast, drank tea with hard rolls. Gershkovich taught Margarita how to spread butter on a roll in a special way and to put the sausage on top.

"Try it! Though I have to be on my way now.

"Here are three rubles for you, Margarita," he said on his way out. "Believe me, rubles don't come easy nowadays."

Margarita smiled.

"You skinflint, you! So give me three. You coming back this evening?"

"Yes, I am."

That evening Gershkovich brought dinner with him—a herring, a bottle of beer, sausages, apples. Margarita was wearing a dark, high-buttoned dress. They talked as they ate.

"Nowadays you can't get by on fifty rubles a month," Margarita

said. "And what with this job, if you don't dress up, you don't get no cabbage soup. You have to take into account that I have to pay fifteen for this room."

"Back in Odessa," Gershkovich said pensively, straining to cut the herring into equal parts, "for ten rubles you can get a room in the Moldavanka fit for a Czar."

"You have to take into account that people tumble all over the place in my room, what with the drunks and everything."

"Every man must bear his burden," Gershkovich said, and started talking about his family, his faltering business dealings, his son who had been called up by the army.

Margarita listened, resting her head on the table, and her face was attentive, quiet, and thoughtful.

After supper, he took off his jacket, painstakingly wiped his spectacles with a piece of cloth, and sat down at the table to write some business letters. Margarita washed her hair.

Gershkovich wrote unhurriedly, carefully, raising his eyebrows, stopping to think, and when he dipped his pen into the inkwell, he never once forgot to shake off the extra ink.

After he finishing writing he had Margarita sit down on his notebook.

"Well, I'll be damned, but you sure are a lady with bulk! Do me a favor and keep sitting there, Margarita Prokofievna."

Gershkovich smiled, his spectacles shimmered, and his eyes became small, more sparkling, full of laughter.

The next day he left town. As he paced up and down the platform, a few minutes before the train was to leave, Gershkovich noticed Margarita walking quickly toward him with a small parcel in her hands. There were pies in the parcel, and oily blotches had seeped through the paper.

Margarita's face was red, pitiful, her chest agitated from walking so quickly.

"Greetings to Odessa!" she said. "Greetings. . . ."

"Thank you," Gershkovich answered. He took the pies, raised his eyebrows, thought about something for a moment, and bent forward.

The third bell rang. They stretched their hands out to each other.

"Good-bye, Margarita Prokofievna."

"Good-bye, Elya Isaakovich."

Gershkovich went inside the railway car. The train began moving.

November 15, 2015

MAMA, RIMMA, AND ALLA

From early in the morning the day had been going badly.

The day before, the maid had begun putting on airs and walked out. Barbara Stepanovna ended up having to do everything herself. Then the electric bill came first thing in the morning. And then the student boarders, the Rastokhin brothers, came up with a completely unexpected demand. They had allegedly received a telegram from Kaluga in the middle of the night informing them that their father had been taken ill, and that they had to come to him at all costs. They were therefore vacating the room, and could they have the sixty rubles back that they had given Barbara Stepanovna "on loan."

To this Barbara Stepanovna answered that it was quite irregular to vacate a room in April, when there is no one to rent it to, and that it was difficult for her to return the money, as it was given to her not on loan but as a payment for the room, regardless of the fact that the payment had been made in advance.

The Rastokhin brothers disagreed with Barbara Stepanovna. The discussion became drawn-out and unfriendly. The students were stubborn, infuriating louts in long, clean frock coats. When they realized that getting their money back was a lost cause, the older brother suggested that Barbara Stepanovna give them her sideboard and pier glass as collateral.

Barbara Stepanovna turned purple, and retorted that she would not tolerate being spoken to in such a tone, that the Rastokhins' suggestion was utter rubbish, that she knew the law, her husband being a member

of the district court in Kamchatka, and so on. The younger Rastokhin flared up and told her that he didn't give a hoot that her husband was a member of the district court in Kamchatka, that it was quite obvious that once she got her hands on a kopeck there was no prying it loose, that they would remember their stay at Barbara Stepanovna's—with all that clutter, dirt, and mess—to their dying day, and that although the district court in Kamchatka was quite far away, the Moscow Justice of the Peace was just around the corner.

And that was how the discussion ended. The Rastokhins marched out haughtily and in silent fury, and Barbara Stepanovna went to the kitchen to make some coffee for her other boarder, a student by the name of Stanislaw Marchotski. There had been loud and insistent ringing from his room for quite a few minutes.

Barbara Stepanovna stood in front of the spirit stove in the kitchen. A nickel pince-nez, rickety with age, sat on her fat nose; her graying hair was disheveled, her pink morning coat full of stains. She made the coffee, and thought how these louts would never have spoken to her in such a tone if there hadn't been that eternal shortage of money, that unfortunate need to constantly snatch, hide, cheat.

When Marchotski's coffee and fried eggs were ready, she brought his breakfast to his room.

Marchotski was a Pole—tall, bony, light blond, with long legs and well-groomed fingernails. That morning he was wearing a foppish gray dressing gown with ornamental military clasps.

He faced Barbara Stepanovna with resentment.

"I've had enough of there never being a maid around!" he said. "I have to ring for a whole hour, and then I'm late for my classes."

It was true that all too often the maid wasn't there, and that Marchotski had to ring and ring, but this time he had a different reason for his resentment.

The evening before, he had been sitting on the living room sofa with Rimma, Barbara Stepanovna's oldest daughter. Barbara Stepanovna had seen them kissing two or three times and hugging in the darkness. They sat there till eleven, then till midnight, then Stanislaw laid his head on Rimma's breast and fell asleep. After all, who in his youth has not dozed off on the edge of a sofa with his head propped on the breast of a high school girl, met by chance on life's

winding path? It is not necessarily such a bad thing, and more often than not there are no consequences, but one does have to show a little consideration for others, not to mention that the girl might well have to go to school the next day.

It wasn't until one-thirty in the morning that Barbara Stepanovna declared quite sourly that it was time to show some consideration. Marchotski, brimming with Polish pride, pursed his lips and took umbrage. Rimma cast an indignant look at her mother.

The matter had ended there. But the following morning it was quite clear that Stanislaw hadn't forgotten the incident. Barbara Stepanovna gave him his breakfast, salted the fried eggs, and left.

It was eleven in the morning. Barbara Stepanovna opened the drapes in her daughters' room. The gentle rays of the weak sun gleamed on the dirty floor, on the clothes scattered throughout the room, on the dusty bookshelf.

The girls were already awake. The eldest, Rimma, was thin, small, quick-eyed, black-haired. Alla was a year younger—she was seventeen—larger than her sister, pale, sluggish in her movements, with delicate, pudgy skin, and a sweetly pensive expression in her blue eyes.

When her mother left the room, she started speaking. Her heavy bare arm lay on the blanket, her little white fingers hardly moving.

"I had a dream, Rimma," she said. "Imagine—a strange little town, small, Russian, mysterious. . . .The light gray sky is hanging very low, and the horizon is very close. The dust in the streets is also gray, smooth, calm. Everything is dead. Not a single sound can be heard, not a single person can be seen. And suddenly I feel like I'm walking down some side streets I don't know, past quiet little wooden houses. I wander into blind alleys, then I find my way out into the streets again, but I can only see ten paces ahead, and I keep walking on and on. Somewhere in front of me is a light cloud of whirling dust. I approach it and see wedding carriages. Mikhail and his bride are in one of them. His bride is wearing a veil, and her face is happy. I walk up to the carriages, I seem to be taller than everyone else, and my heart aches a little. Then they all notice me. The carriages stop. Mikhail comes up to me, takes me by the arm, and slowly leads me into a side street. 'Alla, my friend,' he says in a flat voice, 'all this is very sad, I know. But there's

nothing I can do, because I don't love you.' I walk next to him, my heart shudders, and more gray streets keep opening up before us."

Alla fell silent.

"A bad dream," she added. "But, who knows? Maybe because it's bad, everything will turn out well and he'll send me a letter."

"Like hell he will!" Rimma answered. "You should have been a little more clever and not run off to see him. By the way, I intend to have a word or two with Mama today!" she said suddenly.

Rimma got up, dressed, and went over to the window.

Spring lay over Moscow. The long somber fence outside their window, which stretched almost the whole length of the side street, glistened with warm dampness.

Outside the church, in its front yard, the grass was damp, green. The sun softly gilded the lackluster chasubles, and twinkled over the dark face of the icon standing on the slanting column by the entrance to the churchyard.

The girls went into the dining room. Barbara Stepanovna was sitting there, carefully eating large portions of food, intently studying the rolls, the coffee, the ham, through her spectacles. She drank the coffee with loud short gulps, and ate the rolls quickly, greedily, almost furtively.

"Mama!" Rimma said to her severely, proudly raising her pretty little face. "I'd like to have a little chat with you. You needn't blow up. We can settle this quietly, once and for all. I can no longer live with you. Set me free."

"Fine," Barbara Stepanovna answered calmly, raising her colorless eyes to look at Rimma. "Is this because of yesterday?"

"Not because of yesterday, but it has to do with yesterday. I'm suffocating here."

"And what do you intend to do?"

"I'll take some classes, learn stenography, right now the demand—"

"Right now stenographers are crawling out of the woodwork! You think the jobs will come running—"

"I won't come to you for help, Mama!" Rimma said shrilly. "I won't come to you for help. Set me free!"

"Fine," Barbara Stepanovna said again. "I'm not holding you back."

"I want you to give me my passport."

"I'm not giving you your passport."

The conversation had been unexpectedly restrained. Now Rimma felt that the passport matter gave her a reason to start yelling.

"Well, that's marvelous!" she shouted, with a sarcastic laugh. "I can't go anywhere without my passport!"

"I'm not giving you your passport!"

"I'll go turn myself into a kept woman!" Rimma yelled hysterically. "I shall give myself to a policeman!"

"Who do you think will want you?" Barbara Stepanovna answered, critically eyeing her daughter's shivering little body and flushed face. "You think a policeman can't find a better—"

"I'll go to Tverskaya Street!" Rimma shouted. "I'll find myself some old man—I don't want to live with her, with this stupid, stupid, stupid—"

"Ah, so this is how you speak to your mother," Barbara Stepanovna said, standing up with dignity. "We can't make ends meet, everything is falling apart around us, we're short of everything, all I ask is for a few minutes of peace and quiet, but you . . . Wait till your father hears about this!"

"I'm going to write him myself, to Kamchatka!" Rimma shouted in a frenzy. "I'll get my passport from him!"

Barbara Stepanovna walked out of the room. Rimma, small and disheveled, paced excitedly up and down the room. Angry, isolated phrases from her future letter to her father tore through her brain.

"Dear Papa!" she would write. "You are busy, I know, but I have to tell you everything. May the allegation that Stanny dozed on my breast lie heavy on Mama's conscience! It was an embroidered cushion that he was dozing on, but the center of gravity lies elsewhere. As Mama is your wife, you will doubtless side with her, but I can't stay here any longer, she is a difficult person! If you want, Papa, I can come to you in Kamchatka, but I will need my passport!"

Rimma paced up and down, while Alla sat on the sofa and watched her. Quiet and mournful thoughts lay heavily on her soul.

"Rimma is fussing about," she thought, "while I am completely desolate! Everything is painful, nothing makes sense!"

She went to her room and lay down. Barbara Stepanovna came in wearing a corset. She was thickly and naively powdered, flushed, perplexed, and pitiful.

"I just remembered that the Rastokhins are leaving today. I have to give them back their sixty rubles. They threatened to take me to court. There are some eggs in the cupboard. Make some for yourself—I'm going down to the pawnbroker.

• • •

When Marchotski came home from his classes at around six in the evening, he found the entrance hall filled with packed suitcases. There was noise coming from the Rastokhins' rooms—they were obviously arguing. Right there in the entrance hall Barbara Stepanovna, somehow, with lightning speed and desperate resolution, managed to borrow ten rubles from Marchotski. It was only when he got back to his room that he realized how stupid he had been.

His room was different from all the other rooms in Barbara Stepanovna's apartment. It was neat, filled with bibelots, and covered with carpets. Drawing utensils, foppish pipes, English tobacco, ivory paper knives were carefully laid out on the tables.

Before Stanislaw even managed to change into his dressing gown, Rimma quietly slipped into his room. He gave her a chilly reception.

"Are you angry, Stanny?" the girl asked.

"I am not angry," the Pole answered. "It is just that in the future I would prefer not to be encumbered with having to bear witness to your mother's excesses."

"It'll all be over very soon," Rimma said. "Stanny, I'm going to be free!"

She sat down next to him on the sofa and embraced him.

"I am a man," Stanny began. "This platonic business is not for me, I have a career before me."

He gruffly told her the things that men more or less say to certain women when they've had enough. There's nothing to talk to them about, and flirting with them is pointless, as it is quite obvious they are not prepared to get down to business.

Stanny said that he was consumed by desire; it was hampering his work, making him nervous. The matter had to be settled one way or the other—he didn't care in the least which, as long as it was settled.

"Why are you saying such things to me?" Rimma asked him pensively. "What is all this 'I am a man' about, and what do you mean by

'the matter has to be settled'? Why is your face so cold and nasty? And why can we talk about nothing else but that one thing? This is so sad, Stanny! Spring is in the streets, it's so beautiful, and we are in such an ugly mood."

Stanny didn't answer. They both remained silent.

A fiery sunset was sinking over the horizon, flooding the distant sky with a scarlet glow. On the opposite horizon a volatile, slowly thickening darkness was descending. The room was illuminated by the last glowing light. On the sofa, Rimma leaned more and more tenderly toward the student. They were doing what they always did at this exquisite hour of the day.

Stanislaw kissed the girl. She rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. They both burst into flame. Within a few minutes, Stanislaw was kissing her incessantly, and in a fit of malicious, unquenchable passion began shoving her thin, burning body about the room. He tore her blouse and her bodice. Rimma, with parched mouth and rings under her eyes, offered her lips to be kissed, while with a distorted, mournful grin she defended her virginity. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Rimma began rushing about the room, clutching the hanging strips of her torn blouse to her breast.

They eventually opened the door. It turned out to be a friend of Stanislaw's. He eyed Rimma with ill-concealed derision as she rushed past him. She slipped into her room furtively, changed into another blouse, and went to stand by the chilly windowpane to cool down.

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The pawnbroker only gave Barbara Stepanovna forty rubles for the family silver. Ten rubles she had borrowed from Marchotski, and the rest of the money she got from the Tikhonovs, walking all the way from Strastny Boulevard to Pokrovka. In her dismay, she forgot that she could have taken a tram.

At home, besides the raging Rastokhins, she found Mirlits, a barrister's assistant, waiting for her. He was a tall young man with decaying stumps for teeth, and foolish, moist gray eyes.

Not too long ago, the shortage of money had driven Barbara Stepanovna to consider mortgaging a cottage her husband owned in Kolomna. Mirlits had brought over a draft of the mortgage. Barbara

Stepanovna felt that something was wrong with the draft, and that she ought to get some more advice before signing. But she told herself that she was being beset by altogether too many problems of every kind. To hell with everything—boarders, daughters, rudeness.

After the business discussion, Mirlits uncorked a bottle of Crimean Muscat-Lunelle that he had brought with him—he knew Barbara Stepanovna's weakness. They drank a glass each and right away had another. Their voices rang louder, Barbara Stepanovna's fleshy nose grew red, and the stays of her corset expanded and bulged out. Mirlits was telling a jovial story and burst out laughing. Rimma sat silently in the corner, wearing the blouse into which she had changed.

After Barbara Stepanovna and Mirlits finished the Muscat-Lunelle, they went for a walk. Barbara Stepanovna felt that she was just a tiny bit tipsy. She was a little ashamed about this, but at the same time couldn't care less because there was simply too much hardship in life, so everything could go to hell.

Barbara Stepanovna came back earlier than she had anticipated, because the Boikos, whom she had intended to visit, had not been home. She was taken aback by the silence that lay over the apartment. Usually at this time of the day the girls were always fooling around with the students, giggling, running about. The only noise came from the bathroom. Barbara Stepanovna went to the kitchen. There was a little window there from which one could see what was going on in the bathroom.

She went to the little window and saw a strange and most unusual scene.

The stove for boiling the bathwater was red-hot. The bath was filled with steaming water. Rimma was kneeling next to the stove. In her hands she held a pair of curling irons. She was heating them over the fire. Alla was standing naked next to the bath. Her long braids were undone. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Come here," Alla told Rimma. "Listen, can you maybe hear its heart beating?"

Rimma laid her head on Alla's soft, slightly swollen belly.

"It's not beating," she answered. "Anyway there's no doubt about it."

"I'm going to die," Alla whispered. "I'm going to get scalded by the water! I won't be able to bear it! Not the curling irons! You don't know how to do it!"

"Everyone does it this way," Rimma told her. "Stop whimpering, Alla. You can't have that baby."

Alla was about to climb into the tub, but she didn't manage to, because at that very moment she heard the unforgettable, quiet, wheezing voice of her mother call out. "What are you doing in there, girls?"

Two or three hours later, Alla was lying on Barbara Stepanovna's wide bed, tucked in, caressed, and wept over. She had told her mother everything. She felt relieved. She felt like a little girl who had overcome a silly childish fear.

Rimma moved about the bedroom carefully and silently, tidying up, making tea for her mother, forcing her to eat something, seeing to it that the room would be clean. Then she lit the icon lamp in which the oil had not been refilled for at least two weeks, undressed, trying hard not to make any noise, and lay down next to her sister.

Barbara Stepanovna sat at the table. She could see the icon lamp, its even, darkish red flame dimly illuminating the Virgin Mary. Her tipsiness, somehow strange and light, still bubbled in her head. The girls quickly fell asleep. Alla's face was broad, white, and peaceful. Rimma nestled up against her, sighed in her sleep, and shuddered.

Around one in the morning, Barbara Stepanovna lit a candle, placed a sheet of paper in front of her, and wrote a letter to her husband:

Dear Nikolai,

Mirlits came by today, a very decent Jew, and tomorrow I'm expecting a gentleman who will give me money for the house. I think I'm doing things right, but I'm getting more and more worried, because I lack confidence.

I know you have your own troubles, your work, and I shouldn't be bothering you with this, but things at home, Nikolai, are somehow not going all too well. The children are growing up, life nowadays is more demanding—courses, stenography—girls want more freedom. They need their father, they need someone to maybe yell at them, but I simply don't seem to be able to. I can't help thinking that your leaving for Kamchatka was a mistake. If you were here, we would have moved to Starokolenny Street, where there is a very bright little apartment available.

Rimma has lost weight and looks rather bad. For a whole month

we were ordering cream from the dairy across the street, and the girls started looking much better, but now we have stopped ordering it. At times my liver acts up a little, and at times it doesn't. Write me more often. After your letters I am a bit more careful, I don't eat herring and my liver doesn't bother me. Come and see us, Kolya, we could all unwind. The children send you their greetings. With loving kisses,

Your Barbara.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

One feels right away that this is the kingdom of books. People working at the library commune with books, with the life reflected in them, and so become almost reflections of real-life human beings.

Even the cloakroom attendants—not brown-haired, not blond, but something in between—are mysteriously quiet, filled with contemplative composure.

At home on Saturday evenings they might well drink methylated spirits and give their wives long, drawn-out beatings, but at the library their comportment is staid, circumspect, and hazily somber.

And then there is the cloakroom attendant who draws. In his eyes there is a gentle melancholy. Once every two weeks, as he helps a fat man in a black vest out of his coat, he mumbles, "Nikolai Sergeyevich approves of my drawings, and Konstantin Vasilevich also approves of them. . . . In the first thing I was originating . . . but I have no idea, no idea where to go!"

The fat man listens. He is a reporter, a married man, gluttonous and overworked. Once every two weeks he goes to the library to rest. He reads about court cases, painstakingly copies out onto a piece of paper the plan of the house where the murder took place, is very pleased, and forgets that he is married and overworked.

The reporter listens to the attendant with fearful bewilderment, and wonders how to handle such a man. Do you give him a ten-kopeck coin on your way out? He might be offended—he's an artist. Then