

Psychoprohylaxis, 1966

Fyodor's mother, unfortunately, was still attractive to men. When they got the new flat and she moved in with them, forty-seven years old and skinny as a schoolgirl, with black eyes snapping up what they saw and black arcs of eyebrow pencilled above, along came Ivanov, a foreman from the plant where she worked, though he had a family of his own in a building nearby. They sat at the new kitchen table, the two of them, drinking and laughing and making up to each other as if they were teenagers. Ivanov was forever wiping his mouth with his fingers, and then wiping his fingers on the edge of the tablecloth. Fyodor didn't mind; he laughed along with them. It was normal to him. When he was growing up she'd always had boyfriends, his father being out of the picture, usually men with some leverage to offer in the thousand skirmishes of *communalka* life, and since they were all packed in six or seven to a room, there was not much mystery to what Mama got up to under the blanket with her latest beau. The only time he put his foot down was when he needed peace for his Party paperwork, or to do his homework for his law course. He was registered with the All-Union Legal Correspondence Institute, and there was an essay a week for him to write, left hand propping his forehead and tugging at his clean black hair, textbooks spread out round him on the tabletop. This, his mother respected. Fyodor was on the rise; he was going to be a big man someday, a judge or maybe something at the obkom. On the whole she approved of Galina as a trophy of that rise, a fancy wife for a working boy made good, though speaking personally rather than categorically she made it clear enough she thought her soft-headed and impractical. On essay nights she tiptoed round Fyodor, snatching the little plates of nuts or salami Galina had made so that she could be the one to slide them reverently into his peripheral vision.

'All right, son?'

'Thanks, ma.'

But the noise she made when she and Ivanov were at it in the bedroom! It came right through the thin walls. Galina could hardly bear to meet any of their eyes in the mornings, when they all packed round the stove to slurp black tea and jam before work, as if Fyodor and his mother and Ivanov belonged to some slightly different species which by nature clustered close, at ease in the straw, pushing into the envelope of heat and noise and smell made by each other's bodies. Galina had not spent her childhood nights in the shared sweat of a *communalka*. She had slept in clean sheets in her own room in the manager's little house by the railroad line, with a doll dressed in a embroidered gown leaning against the mirror and her Pioneer uniform hanging neatly from a hook in the wall. The coal trains had clanked out mineral lullabies. When she tried to raise the matter, in a delicate and tactful way, her mother-in-law only said, 'D'you think we can't hear the two of you?'

They probably could. She did not think about it when it was not happening, but in bed Fyodor made her tremble and shake and break loose from herself in a way she had no idea how to fit together with the person she was in daylight. It had been true right from the beginning, from the first time she saw him again, six months after the disaster at the American exhibition. Fyodor's report had got her into the trouble that had lost her Volodya; then it had got her out of trouble again, or at least limited the trouble so that the way she had behaved could be put down as nothing more damaging than a character flaw.

The word 'hysterical' appeared several times. She was a hysteric rather than a security risk, forever on file now as somebody too panicky for the kind of joint Party career she and Volodya had imagined, but still quite acceptable as, for example, a Party wife for someone starting a little lower down. Fyodor was good at pressing exactly the right buttons, it seemed, when he saw something he wanted. And what he wanted, it turned out, was her. 'Give us a kiss then,' he said, when she stammered her thanks. They were on the river embankment, a place where kisses were unremarkable, so she stepped forward to give him a dry-mouthed peck of gratitude and he ran a finger down her spine while she was doing it. A quite new and disturbing ripple of feeling followed his finger; she shivered and choked, because her mouth was suddenly wet. 'Oh,' said Fyodor, grinning at her, squinting at her from close up; 'Oho,' he said, as if his suspicion had been confirmed. And he pulled off her beret and put it in his jacket pocket.

So they were married; so she had a life in Moscow, after all. It just didn't quite seem to be hers. She worked as a nutritionist at the office supervising workplace meals for the north-western sector of the city, and at the end of the day she walked back to the flat from the new metro station, across the gouged earth of the micro-region, carrying a string bag of food, some bought, some taken as her share from the model kitchen in the office where recipes were tested. Fyodor brought home luxuries, thanks to his contacts: a washing machine, a telephone along with a man to install it. 'D'you want a piano?' he said. 'I've got a line on one.' She shrugged; she had never really cared one way or the other about music. But he got the piano anyway, for everyone knew that it was part of the good life to have a piano, and there it sat unplayed in its dust cover, brown and gold.

Fyodor was as ambitious as Volodya had been, but in a very different vein; not with the placid determination to better something he already had, but scrambling up, pushing himself up the slope before him with his elbows out and his legs kicking and his hands grabbing at whatever seemed to offer a purchase. There was something untidy about his energy; careless, even. He never seemed to have to compose himself, as she and her university friends had done, to say the things that would make the right impression. He said the right things copiously, effortlessly, it having apparently never occurred to him

that you could care enough about the content of politics to say anything except what you were supposed to say. There was nothing to be careful about, as far as he was concerned. The world was what it was. That was that. He laughed a lot, and he hung out with other men who laughed easily too; beefy men a little older than him, mostly; back-slappers, drink-standers, middle-rankers, who looked out for chances to do each other some good. Sometimes he needed her to come along when he and his cronies went

junketing, and she'd dance with Fyodor on the darkened little dancefloor of a restaurant, feeling inside the stir of helpless reaction to him as they boogied about, and on her skin the eyes of the other men appraising her as they circled by holding their wives, solid ladies from Accounting or Procurement with beehive hairdos and party frocks in orange or lime-green orlon. Galina was the youngest one. Then back to the table for saucers of pineapple chunks and interminable toasts in sticky liqueur. Fyodor didn't seem to mind the way the gazes ate her up. She turned round one time in a restaurant, coming back from the buffet, and found him and one of the friends staring at her thighs together, with their heads tilted at exactly the same angle and identical appreciative smirks on their faces, as if her flesh were something good on TV. She didn't see her own friends any more. Her parents came to visit once,

and she watched Fyodor working like a safecracker on her gruff father, who had expected better for her, till he too grinned and guffawed and started to say what a good fellow she'd found. Her mother gave her one look of helpless anxiety as they were going. And that was that. But it bothered Fyodor that laughter didn't work on her. On a night at the flat when he and his mother and Ivanov were roaring at some comedy show on the television in the corner – that got used, all right – and her face was aching from smiling politely for so long, he chased her into the kitchen as she was clearing a tray of glasses away, and tried to tickle her. The prodding fingers put her in a panic. Far from relaxing she drew back into a crouch; she cowered, covering her head with her hands. Somehow his pulls and grabs to make her come back out grew angrier and angrier, as if he thought she was acting this way to spite him, and then he punched her. It hurt less than she would have guessed a fist would, at first – just a numb jolt to the eye socket.

He

backed away staring. Then he made a gesture as if he were throwing a disgusted double handful of air at her, and went back to the hilarity next door. Not knowing what else to do, she went to bed. The sounds from the living room seemed no different from usual, and he didn't come to bed until after she was asleep. 'About last night,' he said in the hall next morning, not meeting her eye. 'That's not how I want things to be. It won't happen again. But it would help if you didn't needle me when I'm plastered. Have a bit of sense, eh?' She nodded, though she didn't remember needling him. 'You missed a

bit,' said a woman at the office she'd never liked, and drew her into the toilet to dab powder onto her cheekbone where the bruise-purple was showing through. 'There.' Sometimes she had the urge to run. She thought about just going to the station and buying a ticket home; letting Moscow dwindle to a departing view from the window of the long green train east, folding itself up, tucking itself back to nothing, like a paper sculpture being put away; just an idea that hadn't worked out. But then what would she have to show for any of it? So she stayed, and she stayed. And now it was too late. The baby was coming. Everyone knew that youth ended with the first child, and she had waited as long as she dared – two more abortions – but Fyodor said the time was right to start a

family. They had the space, and his degree would be done with in just a few more months, and then he'd be out of the electric plant for ever. She felt the orange orlon descending towards her like a shroud. 'Listen to this,' said Fyodor one Sunday morning in November. He was reading the court reports in the newspaper. 'This is great. A nice little puzzle.'

'What?' she said, turning from the sink and crossing her wet hands over her belly. 'Apparently, the deputy director of a pig farm's on trial for speculation under Article 154, because he used farm funds to buy a load of timber that the quarry next door was going to burn off. He said he needed the wood to build sties or the pigs would all snuff it this winter. Quote, "When arrested he claimed he had been acting in the interests of the state." What d'you think the story was there, then?' 'You mean, why he really did it?' she offered. 'No,' said Fyodor impatiently. 'It's obvious why he *did* it. He'd've been in the shit if the pigs had died. Not as much shit as he's in now, but he didn't know that. Anyone would have *done* it. It stands to reason. The question is –' 'Why it's in the news?' 'No. Shut up a minute, can't you? The question is, why he got caught. Now, if I were on the panel for a case like this, I'd be looking at the guy, and I'd be thinking: dimwit, blabbermouth or pain in the ass? Because this is simple stuff, this is just your most basic supply swap. So either this guy is too stupid to pull it off – and I'd say that the money was a point in favour of this theory, because he could have paid in bacon, for heaven's sake – or else he's incredibly indiscreet, and he's been talking about his dear old pigs freezing to death so loud and so long in the wrong kind of places that someone virtually had to look into it. Or, option three, he's annoyed somebody, he's just the kind of fellow who pisses people off, and now the word has come down, make a bit of an example of someone in your district this quarter, so that the thievery doesn't get out of hand, everyone thinks, who *deserves* to be in the shit, who's been making a nuisance of himself. So, I'd be looking at him for the little signs –' And Fyodor was off, his hands on the tabletop in quick motion, his face full of the pleasure of attending to his own clear grasp of the world; and Galina found it easy to picture him in a few years' time, sitting on the bench with two other judges, blank and

dignified of expression then of course, yet still alert, interested, inclining his head to detect the traces of the crime the court had really gathered to punish. Culpable lack of smarts, is it? Or culpable excess of speech; or culpable failure to be likeable. He was going to look good in a robe. 'So which d'you think?' Fyodor was saying. 'Hello?' 'Oh,' said Galina, painfully certain of being disappointing. 'I –' But she was saved from having to answer by a gush of liquid pattering on the floor around her feet. 'What's that?' said Fyodor.

'I think my waters have broken,' she said. And then a sensation assailed her that she had never felt before; quite faint, but definite, a tightening, gripping motion of muscles deep inside her that had never, in her whole life, sent her a signal before, but which now wished to announce that they were present, and would be squeezing when they felt like it, irrespective of the softness of what they squeezed. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh shit,' said Fyodor. 'Ma!' His mother sat with her while he rang to call for the ambulance, and while he ran downstairs to wait for it at the front door of the block.

'Don't worry, Princess,' she said. 'You won't remember it afterwards.'

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Galina had rhesus-negative blood, and Fyodor had pulled strings to book her into one of the three Moscow maternity homes that specialised in Rh-neg patients. It was a long drive, even with the city quiet for Sunday afternoon. Fyodor looked nervously at his watch several times, as if they might be late for something; he held her hand but said very little. Neither did the midwife who had come with the neat little white ambulance van, once she had satisfied herself that nothing urgent was happening. She spent the journey writing something lengthy on many pages of lined paper. Galina assumed it must be medical records the woman was writing up but when she stole a look over her shoulder it turned out to be a letter, a dreary series of complaints about slights she had received from various people. As her pencil moved her head in its white cap like a fabric flowerpot nodded up and down. Galina felt most strange. The contractions only came at long intervals yet even in the spaces between them her body felt indefinably different; or perhaps the world did. Everything that was not her body seemed to have moved further away, into a state of floating inconsequence. She looked out of the ambulance window at low clouds roofing the city in dirty pearl, and she felt a kind of hungriness for the life going quietly on out there, for the putting on of gloves and the greeting of acquaintances, but she had already left it, it had already receded; it was flowing along in a separate stream, distant and unreachable on the other side of the glass.

At the maternity home Fyodor positively jumped out, and bustled around while she was being signed in and changed into a hospital gown. As soon as he had her street clothes bundled up on his arm he darted forward to kiss her cheek and stroke her head – and then he was backing, dwindling, absenting himself from the scene, with an expression of obvious relief on his face. Out through the doors; gone. She didn't blame him. She

would have liked to be able to step away herself, and let the birth happen to someone else.

'Well, you got a good-looking one,' said the new midwife who had taken charge of her, a big woman in her fifties with a face beneath the white flowerpot that seemed to disapprove of the world, and to disapprove of it with a perfect right, as if she were everyone's righteous, put-upon auntie. 'Two of a kind, I suppose,' she said, looking at Galina. She didn't make it sound like a compliment. 'Right, follow me.' She led Galina along a corridor, and round a corner into a room with shower stalls and toilets in it, and a pair of examination couches. Everything was white tiles, but not very clean ones, once you got close up to them; there was a speckling of brown mould on the grout, and when Galina had to stop and lean on a wall, her hand came away slightly sticky.

'Come on now, don't make a fuss,' said the angry aunt. 'You've barely begun.' She let the midwife take back the gown and put her under a sluggish blood-warm shower – and then do something utterly disgusting to her with a length of rubber tube which sent her scurrying crabwise to a toilet – and then lay her on one of the couches and shave her pubic hair. It was peculiar: ordinarily

she would have hated every moment, and she still did but again remotely, with the strength of the signal turned way down. To be treated like this felt as if it were of a piece with the way that her body, which had expanded to fill the whole significant portion of the globe, was also turning impersonal on her. It had stopped being hers to direct. It was in the grip of a process in which she had no say. There was something comforting in the thought that it knew what it was doing even if she didn't. And if the nurses knew what they were doing too, that was good. She was being looked after. The midwife painted her down below with an orange disinfectant that stung the newly scraped skin. It looked as if she'd spilled a soft drink in her lap. Then Angry Aunt tossed the hospital gown over the top half of her, and went to fetch a doctor, a woman with a face ironed slack by tiredness. Her eyelids drooped and fluttered as she snapped on rubber gloves, and though she gave Galina an exhausted smile her fingers seemed clumsy and mechanical as she did the pelvic exam. 'Primipara,' she said to the Angry Aunt, standing by with a clipboard. 'Twenty-six years old. Labour not yet urgent. Early rupture of amnion. Longitudinal position of fetus. Left occiput anterior. Normal course; cervix at two centimetres; initial dilatation phase now at – when did you start, dear?' 'About eleven o'clock this morning,' said Galina.

'Three hours, then,' said the doctor. 'Now, my dear,' she said, hoisting the tired smile, 'everything is going perfectly normally, so don't worry at all. Inna Olegovna here will take you through to the labour ward, and then it's just a question of remembering your exercises when the contractions strengthen. Room B3,' she told the Angry Aunt. 'I think it's full.' 'Is it? G1 then – but she shouldn't really be climbing stairs, not with waters broken. Is the elevator working?' 'No.' 'Oh well. Can't be helped. Goodbye, my dear.'

'Wait a minute, please, wait a minute,' said Galina, but the doctor was almost gone and only turned her head in the doorway. 'Sorry,' Galina said, 'but – what exercises?' 'You didn't do the psychoprophylaxis classes?' 'The what?' The doctor stifled a yawn with her hand. 'You should have had a letter,' she said. 'Didn't you get a letter?' 'Yes – but that was about childcare and things, wasn't it? I couldn't go, I didn't have time.' 'Well,' said the doctor, 'You had nine months. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that at this moment I don't have time either. I was due off shift at six this morning and I have family waiting. Inna Olegovna will explain things to you. Goodbye.'

But the Angry Aunt didn't say much as they were making their way along more tiled corridors and up a stair where open windows slotted the steamy warmth with shafts of cold. She only muttered about the doctor loading her up with chores. A contraction came when Galina was on the landing, the hardest yet, and Inna Olegovna was resentfully obliged to prop her up. Galina panted, and not just from the squeezing and the clenching inside of her. She had worked out that that sound she could hear, the noise like seagulls in the distance, was actually the rising and falling cacophony of a flock of female voices, crying out. Screaming, in fact, some of them. At the top of the stairs the cries grew louder, with a particular focus, a particular clot of decibels, coming from the far end of the new corridor in front of her. 'Please,' Galina made herself say, 'what is this thing I'm supposed to know about?'

'You girls,' said Inna Olegovna with satisfaction. 'You girls get everything handed to you on a plate.' 'But how am I supposed –'

'In here,' said the Angry Aunt, and showed her through the first doorway on the left, into a white-tiled room with six beds in it, four of them already occupied. Galina was so relieved not to be sent to the room with the screaming, which she imagined must be a kind of a bedlam judging by the noise, a place of dreadful abandon, that she grasped at the reassuring signs of order here – the big clock that the rows of beds all faced, the stack of clean sheets on the trolley by the door – though there were groans too, and cries, and grunted sounds, as the women in the beds struggled through their internal surges and ebbs, or lay big-eyed and sweating, waiting for the next round. 'Hello,' said Galina. Nobody answered. She sat on the edge of an empty bed and levered herself round and back onto the pillows. There was a big light-fitting directly above her head, a wide white bowl strangely pock-marked with black. The Angry Aunt twitched a thin grey bedspread over her legs. 'Now,' she said. 'Pay attention. When the contractions come, breathe deeply. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. If you need extra help, rub the skin of your belly in circles. Use the clock to time the contractions. You'll know you're reaching the next stage when they come a minute or less apart. How much it hurts depends on how well you conduct yourself.' 'Is that really all you can tell me?' said Galina. 'Huh. Better than nothing,' said the Angry Aunt. 'I wouldn't worry,' said the woman on the right of Galina, when she'd gone; a thin woman in her thirties with

curls stuck to her forehead. She kept her eyes on the second hand of the clock as she spoke. 'You didn't miss much.'

'You went to the classes?' 'Yes, but it was only stuff about taking lots of walks, you know, and how to prepare baby food, and then there were five minutes at the end about labour pain being an illusion promoted by capitalist doctors, and how it was really only messages from the subcortex of the brain which you could turn off by stimulating the cortex. Or maybe the other way around.'

'I don't know what that means,' said Galina. 'Neither do I,' said the woman.

'I do,' said her neighbour on the other side, a sturdy-looking teenager. 'It means they're not going to give us any painkillers.' And she started to laugh, but her next contraction arrived. 'Oh shit,' she said. 'Here we go again. Oh you bastard, how did I let you talk me into this? Oh you cocksucker. Oh. You. Motherfucker.' 'Must you talk like that?' said Galina. 'It's very vulgar.'

'You stuck-up bitch,' said the girl, through clenched teeth. 'Just you wait.'

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The girl was right. Galina did wait, faithfully counting the interval between contractions, five minutes, four minutes, and trying rather self-consciously to breathe in through her nose and out through her mouth, while her new muscles worked, and perhaps it did help, sort of; but after a while, a long while or a short while, the feelings changed, in quantity of discomfort and therefore in quality too, until they began to stab holes in her deep breaths, and to leave her gasping, with the breath forced up into a tiny bouncing flutter in her throat, and everything further down surging along out of control. It was not squeezing that she felt, any more: it was a crushing, a pulping. It was not stretching now, but tearing. It put her in mind of what she'd seen butchers doing in the big meat lockers, twisting apart joints against the angle of the bones, the cartilage popping, the fibres of the meat pulling out in red strings. And the Angry Aunt did nothing to help. The first time she came back, Galina watched her hungrily, expecting that there would be a pill to swallow or an injection to take, but she had only brought a bowl of water, and briskly wiped all the foreheads in the room with it, like a person scrubbing tabletops. Galina had never in her adult life experienced anything that really hurt, a physical sensation that would be up there in intensity of unpleasantness with sorrow or humiliation, and the discovery was astonishing. When each contraction reached its peak, she found that she would gladly have re-endured any awful emotion she had ever known, if it had just meant that she didn't have to experience the next instant of this. She would rather be back in the conversation she had had with Volodya when she came home from Sokolniki Park. She would rather be lying in the dark with one hand over her eye and

the pillow wet and the TV braying through the wall. No contest. But no one was interested in making the swap. The next instant came, and then another one, and

another, though the pain that filled each one up made it impossible to imagine that she would be able to endure any continuation whatsoever of this sharpness, this blade slicing in the tissue, this lightning-fork running through the nerves, until she did, and she had, and she was facing the impossibility of an instant further on. She didn't want to stroke her belly or her back. She didn't want to touch anywhere down there, where her body was not her own any more, and some kind of terrible misunderstanding had arisen about sizes and volumes and the feasibility of getting an object as big as a city bus out through narrow flesh. She wanted to watch from the other side of the glass. But that was the other discovery. It had been a ridiculous illusion to suppose that some detached bit of her would be able to watch her body getting on with it. The contractions sucked her down into flesh and bone. While they lasted, her body was all there was. Only her body existed. She was all body.

Now she too watched the clock, pushing at the second hand with her eyes, as if the thin red wand creeping round the dial directly controlled what she was feeling. It was the last thing in the room that made sense. The seconds tugged and dragged at it as it passed – they were viscous gulfs, they were treacherous hectares of wasteland, they were wet mouths – but it went on moving. It pushed on. Nothing else helped. The time the hour and minute hands measured went away. People went away. Fyodor seemed as remote as the stars; the baby was unimaginable. The woman in the right-hand bed disappeared, then the teenager, wheeled away up the hall in a kind of thrashing paroxysm. It didn't matter. Nothing was real except her and the second hand. Because if she clung to it for two whole revolutions, every black division round the face a separate passage through an experience worse than

sorrow or humiliation, it would arrive, in the end, at the second that ended the contraction, and make the pain drain abruptly down like water in a holed mug, and she would be briefly her recognisable self again, panting and trembling, with luxurious seconds of respite ahead of her. Gradually the respites ended sooner and sooner: three circuits of the second hand, two, one and a half. But it was all there was to hold onto, and it gave her just enough strength to bite her teeth together and stop herself making those dreadful groaning noises coming from the other beds. She could just, just manage it. Her and the second hand.

And then the second hand let her down. Two minutes of pain, and she waited for the end, she waited and waited, while the red needle crept onwards, up and over the top of the dial, and round the bottom again, and through two more whole turns before she understood that the respite wasn't coming, this time; wasn't coming any more. And the pain of the contraction changed shape too. It had come, before, in gathering waves, rocking in and rising higher and higher, all surging so to speak in one direction, all stretching and tightening – all tearing and crushing – towards the one goal, the one

object. She'd been being opened. She couldn't help knowing that. But now there seemed to be no object, no pattern. If the pain was a sea, it was a choppy mess of froth now, churned by waves running every which way and slapping into each other. The butchers' hands forgot what they were doing and ripped at her at random. Things had gone mad inside her. And the seconds were just as hard to get through, and now they were going to come at her forever and ever, without stopping, with no order or logic or justification at all. *This can't be right*, she thought. *I can't do this*. 'Nurse,' she called, her voice a squeak. And again. And again. In the end Inna Olegovna came, wiping red hands on a towel. 'What is it?' she said. 'I think something is wrong,' Galina whispered. The Angry Aunt sighed and rummaged in the parts of Galina for which she had never found a name she was comfortable saying out loud. 'Nothing's wrong,' she said. 'It's just the second stage. Perfectly normal. A couple more hours, maybe.'

Two hours maybe. A hundred and twenty minutes maybe. Seven thousand two hundred seconds maybe. Forever and ever.

'Please,' said Galina, *please*. Can't you give me something? This is torture. I can't bear it.'

'We don't have anything like that,' said the Angry Aunt. 'It's against policy. You aren't ill, you know.'

'But I can't bear it,' Galina said, and helplessly began to cry, not in sobs, but in weak streams from the outside corners of her eyes. Down in the salt water dripped the awful liquor of everything: her body's betrayals, her ruined plans, her utter loneliness. 'I can't,' she wept. 'I can't, I can't, I can't.' 'Well, you have to,' said Inna Olegovna. 'You have no choice. You're not helping yourself with this kind of attitude, you know. It's all in how you think about it. So pull yourself together and breathe right, or you'll kill the baby.'

Oh, she knew this game. All her life it had been the cure-all. *Pretend the world better*. If you weep, pretend you're smiling. If you're puzzled, pretend you're certain. If you're hungry, pretend you're full. If you see chaos, pretend there's a plan. If today stinks, pretend it's tomorrow. If it hurts – psychoprophylaxis. The butchers' hands worked without cease. Behind Inna Olegovna's head the black splotches on the light shade swam into focus. Stalactites of black mucus with little legs and wings in them: they were all mashed flies, swatted and left to fester. *But why should I pretend this doesn't hurt?* she thought, and was all of a sudden angrier than she could ever remember being before. The Angry Aunt was going.

'Nurse!' shouted Galina, and found she could throw the pain into her voice if she stopped trying to make it hurt less. Into the shout, the whole thing, the whole experience of being scraped out alive into a bloody tunnel. 'Nurse!'

The midwife came back, looking surprised. 'Now what?' she said. 'My husband', croaked Galina, baring her teeth, 'is the Komsomol secretary at Elektroavodskaya.' 'All the more reason you should set a good example,' said the Angry Aunt, but she was

cautious now. 'He has friends everywhere. Good friends. At the City Soviet, at the Party Control Commission. Some of them supervise the hospitals,' she said, and the word *hospitals* came out with a hiss. 'They would be very upset if he were upset. Do you understand me?' 'It's policy to –' 'Do you understand me?' 'Yes.' 'So go and get me something for the pain. This is a *hospital*.' Hiss. 'You'll have some morphine on a shelf somewhere. Go and get it.' 'But –' 'But nothing. Do what you're told!' Inna Olegovna scurried.

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Well, they did have a little injection of something tucked away on a shelf, and it just about lasted her until the last stage began, and they moved her down the corridor to the bedlam of the delivery room, not caring at that point about the shouts and screams because she was adding to them herself as she started to push. The teenager was in the next bed, all done, white and quiet and stunned, baby already papoosed up and whisked away; but she laughed when she heard the words that Galina was shouting. *I am going to get his mother out of that flat if it's the last thing I do*, thought Galina, and prepared to meet her future.

Notes – V.3 Psychoprophylaxis, 1966

1 He was registered with the All-Union Legal Correspondence Institute: founded in 1932, with more than forty thousand graduates by 1968. Added together, students attending evening classes (652,000 in 1967–8) and studying by correspondence (1.77 million in 1967–8) earned almost half of the bachelor's degrees awarded in the USSR, and for law degrees the proportion was even higher, 43,000 out of 65,000 in 1967–8. A law degree was a tool of working-class social mobility, as in the United States, appealing to those on the rise, like Fyodor, rather than to those with established family traditions of education. Figures from Churchward, *The Soviet Intelligentsia*.

2 The thousand skirmishes of *communalka* life: see Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, pp. 47–9; and for the special political claustrophobia of communal flats in times of purge and denunciation, see Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Lives in Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), which includes floor plans of the extraordinarily crammed places his witnesses inhabited. For the surreal spectacle of Stalin himself picking his way through a *communalka*, and looking with touristic interest at the writing on the wall around the telephone, see Grossman, *Life and Fate*.

3 Orange or lime-green orlon: orlon being the Soviet brand-name equivalent to Western nylon.

4 The deputy director of a pig farm's on trial: a famous case from 1969, hoicked back in time for the usual unscrupulous reasons of dramatic foreshortening. For the trial coverage, as presented for the outrage of liberal-minded intellectuals, see *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (1969) no. 27, p. 10.

5 One of the three Moscow maternity homes that specialised in Rh-neg patients: I get my details of hospital conditions for this chapter from Katherine Bliss Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet*

Union (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), pp. 185–7, and Peter Osnos, 'Childbirth, Soviet Style: A Labor in Keeping With the Party Line', *Washington Post*, 28 November 1976,

pp. G13–G14. Some details of Soviet medical procedure for childbirth come from Elizabeth Lee, 'Health Care in the Soviet Union. Two. Childbirth – Soviet Style', *Nursing Times* (1984), 1–7

February; 80 (5):44–5, which is a view of a system by a British midwife, focused mainly on differences in goals and intentions. All of these apply to periods ten to twenty years after the date at

which Galina is giving birth, so some of what happens here is inevitably conjectural. But the system does not appear to have changed fundamentally, and any allowance made for decaying

facilities and increasing cynicism as the Brezhnev years went on can be balanced against the truth that the special Rhesus-negative maternity hospitals were the sought-after best of the

system. A different kind of allowance needs to be made for my other major source on procedure. I. Velvovsky, K. Platonov, V. Ploticher and E. Shugom, *Painless Childbirth Through*

Psychoprophylaxis: Lectures for Obstetricians, translated by David A. Myshne (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1960) is a manual for export, offering an idealised version of

psychoprophylactic childbirth as it would have been if implemented in every Soviet hospital with the care it was given in the one hospital where it was invented. What Galina experiences is my

best guess at psychoprophylaxis as actually practised.

6 And then he was backing, dwindling, absenting himself from the scene:

husbands were forbidden to attend childbirths, or even to visit during the mandatory ten-day stay in the hospital

afterwards. Some will have been sorrier than others about this, just as some women will have been sorrier than others for the enforced rest from family life. See Hedrick Smith, *The Russians*

(London, 1976), for a description of the gaggle of men crowded beneath the recovery-ward windows to see the babies their wives were holding up, and to load eatables into the baskets the women lowered on strings.

7 A face beneath the white flowerpot that seemed to disapprove of the world: Inna Olegovna is entirely fictional, but my sketch of her aunt-like self-righteousness borrows from my memory of the array of censorious, reproving middle-aged men and women in the late-Soviet documentary film *Is It Easy to Be Young?*

8 Everything was white tiles, but not very clean ones: see Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*, p. 186. Her witness reports 'sliminess'.

9 She let the midwife take back the gown and put her under a sluggish blood-warm shower: the shower, the enema, the shaving and the painting with disinfectant were all standard procedure. Having to walk up flights of stairs while in labour was not standard procedure, but happened frequently anyway.

10 'Primipara,' she said to the Angry Aunt, standing by with a clipboard: medical vocabulary authentic, and taken from the sample case histories given in Velvovsky et al., *Painless Childbirth Through Psychoprophylaxis*.

11 'You didn't do the psychoprophylaxis classes?': expectant mothers were in theory supposed to be led by patient stages through a confrontation with their fears over birth pain, a reassuring explanation of the physiology of childbirth and a demonstration of relaxation and breathing techniques. In fact, in almost every case the classes were taught by midwives or doctors who had not been specially trained, and did indeed consist mainly of the 'stuff about taking lots of walks' which Galina's neighbour reports to her on the labour ward, with the specifics of what to expect and to do reduced to an unhelpful gabble at the end. Not knowing that there was anything important to learn, most women, like Galina, didn't bother to go. So the positive programme of the psychoprophylactic method scarcely touched them, yet they were still subject to the prohibition on drugs associated with it, and were still likely to be judged as if difficulty with the pain represented a failure of virtue on their part.

12 When the contractions come, breathe deeply: if the few bits of psychoprophylactic advice Galina gets seem vaguely familiar, that's because they are. Psychoprophylaxis, in a melancholy

irony, is the basis of the phenomenally successful Lamaze method for natural birth in the West. The Soviet ideas were carried back to Paris by the French doctor (and communist) Fernand

Lamaze, and humanised there – partly by bringing in birth partners, and less passive positions for labour, and more sophisticated techniques of auto-suggestion, but most of all by being

made voluntary. A woman ‘doing Lamaze’ can aim for a birth with minimal medical intervention while knowing that the pethidine and the gas and the epidurals are there if she needs them.

Psychoprophylaxis may seem to Galina here to be just another form of compulsory pretence; but it would be equally just to see it as another piece of mangled Soviet idealism, another

genuinely promising idea ruined by the magic combination of compulsion and neglect.

Velvovsky and his colleagues were the century’s pioneers in trying to see childbirth as something

better than an illness to be endured.

13 It was really only messages from the subcortex of the brain which you could turn off by stimulating the cortex: one reason for the rapid promotion of psychoprophylaxis to orthodoxy in the

USSR lay in its use of a Pavlovian framework that dovetailed with late-Stalinist ideological preferences. For the history and personalities involved here, and the role played by this association

with soon-discredited science in later Soviet obstetricians’ indifference to the technique they were supposed to be promoting, see John D. Bell, ‘Giving Birth to the New Soviet Man: Politics

and Obstetrics in the USSR’, *Slavic Review* vol. 40 no. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 1–16.

14 It means they’re not going to give us any painkillers: in some hospitals, a single small injection of painkillers was allowed. See Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*.

15 She had only brought a bowl of water, and briskly wiped all the foreheads in the room with it: the only thing a midwife was permitted to do for women at this stage of labour, apart from

watching for complications which might require surgery.

16 So pull yourself together and breathe right, or you’ll kill the baby: an encouraging remark passed on to the American journalist Peter Osnos by the woman who had it said to her. See Osnos, ‘Childbirth, Soviet Style’.

17 They were all mashed flies, swatted and left to fester: attested in Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*.

18 Baby already papoosed up and whisked away: immediately after birth, the newborn was swaddled in a tight roll of white cloth, held up for the mother to see, and then carried off to a nursery for twenty-four hours – apparently to reduce mother–baby transmission of infections, although it is hard to see how this can have worked. After that, the baby would be returned for breastfeeding, the Soviet Union being, in one more authoritarian commitment to naturalness, partly caused by the faulty supply of powdered milk, an entirely pro-breast society. See Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*, and Lee, 'Health Care in the Soviet Union'.