Final Thesis for BA Degree

in Russian

Lyudmila Petrushevskaia

Bravely Exposing the Depths of Human Suffering During the Soviet Union and Beyond

Vasilisa Isabel Hunton

June 2019
Lyudmila Petrushevskaya

Bravely Exposing the Depths of Human Suffering During the Soviet Union and Beyond

Thesis for BA Degree

Vasilisa Isabel Hunton

Kt.: 190197-3529

Advisor: Rebekka Práinsdóttir

June 2019
Abstract

Lyudmila has played an important role in Soviet and post-Soviet literature, as a voice speaking out for change in censorship. Despite her work being repeatedly banned, she continued to write extensively, and it was not until glasnost and perestroika that her realistic portrayal of all parts of life for the urban Russian citizen, which often was dark and dismal, was unbanned and released for public acknowledgment. Gaining widespread and even international popularity during perestroika, some would say Petrushevskaya was ahead of her time when compared with other women’s prose writers, as well as practitioners of chernukha, a gloomy Russian literary style. After thoroughly researching Petrushevskaya’s writing, five observed common themes of her writing are defined; human suffering and examining the human psyche, unfiltered honesty and implementation taboo physical phenomena, prominent female characters, representing the ordinary person, and family and relationship dysfunction. Within this thesis is included a translation of one of Petrushevskaya’s short stories named “That Kind of Girl” (“Такая девочка” 1988), along with a literary analysis of the piece. This thesis aims to show readers how Lyudmila Petrushevskaya influenced Soviet readers before and after the fall of glasnost, as well as how the author was influenced by events in her own life. Additionally, it intends to give English-speaking audiences a deeper glimpse into the realities of Russians during communist times, examining how Lyudmila Petrushevskaya utilized her voice to portray the inner sufferings of humans in a raw, unfiltered manner, despite active efforts to censor the talented writer.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... 3

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................... 5

2. Background Information Regarding the Life and Writing Career of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya ........................................................................................................ 6
   2.1 Early Life Background Information and Writing Influences .................. 7
   2.2 Timeline of Writing Career ................................................................. 9
   2.3 Chapter Summary ................................................................. 10

3. Defining Characteristics and Themes ............................................................... 11
   3.1 Human Suffering and Examining the Human Psyche ..................... 11
   3.2 Unfiltered Honesty (Implementation of Taboo Physical Phenomena) . 13
   3.3 Prominent Female Characters (Protagonists) ............................... 14
   3.4 Representing the Ordinary Person ............................................. 15
   3.5 Family and Relationship Dysfunction (Dysfunctional Love) ....... 15
   3.6 Chapter Summary ................................................................. 16

4. Perestroika, Glasnost: How They Altered Russian Literature .................... 17
   4.1 Petrushevskaya and Chernukha .................................................. 18
   4.2 Understanding Women’s Prose in Connection to Russian History ..... 19
   4.3 Chapter Summary ................................................................. 20

5. A Literary Analysis of “That Kind of Girl” (“Такая девочка” 1988) .... 20
   5.1 Analysis of Characters ............................................................ 21
   5.2 Common Themes in Relation to the Story ................................... 22
   5.3 Structure and Writing Style ..................................................... 27
   5.4 Chapter Summary ................................................................. 29

6. Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 29

Works Cited ............................................................................................................ 32

Appendix .................................................................................................................. 34
1. Introduction

Lyudmila strives to present the tragedies of ordinary citizens during the Soviet Union, never censoring depictions of their often distraught and dysfunctional day to day lives. She strives not to change the opinion of an audience, merely to educate and enhance understanding of the everyday lives of her characters (Aiken, et al. 196). Even for native Russians, the work of Lyudmila was and is considered surprising, bringing about a shock factor with its extreme honesty and vulnerability (Dalton-Brown vii). For English-speakers and those who did not live in the midst of the challenging circumstances of Soviet Russia, the events that Petrushevskaya honestly depicts may seem absurd and unlikely to many, but these happenings have potentially influenced a percentage of the Russian population. It can be said that Petrushevskaya plays a role in exposing overseas, non-Russia societies, to the truth of life under communism simply because of the fact that her works have been translated into English and other globalized languages, broadening the scope of her reach.

In many ways, as a female and as a writer, Lyudmila undergoes a brave task of portraying reality, and for this, she was for years rejected due to her fierce honesty in a society historically dominated by prominent male figures and suppression. Petrushevskaya certainly changed the narrative in a society that craved a deeper acceptance and acknowledgment of the undergone hardships, and she was not the only author to do so. Her depictions of human suffering are relatable for those who have gone through similar experiences and the author’s exceptional vulnerability in many ways serves as a healing tool, allowing those with alike narratives to feel at least a little more understood. These are the realities of Soviet Russians under a communist reign and likewise after the fall when structure had been destroyed and uncertainty filled the future. Petrushevskaya used and still uses her voice to portray the deeper inner sufferings of the average urban Russian citizen in a raw, unfiltered manner.

This essay discusses how Petrushevskaya’s life story and influences impacted her writing, later delving into a timeline of her writing career and defining themes that were prevalent throughout her work. The five themes discussed in this thesis are human suffering and examining the human psyche, unfiltered hon-
esty and implementation of taboo physical phenomena, prominent female characters, representing the ordinary person, and family and relationship dysfunction.

Later, information is examined on how glasnost and perestroika played their role in the exposure of Lyudmila’s writing, along with how she contributed to chernukha and women’s prose. Finally, a literary analysis of one of Petrushevskaya’s pieces (“That Kind of Girl”) is conducted, along with an analysis of the story’s characters and characteristic style. This thesis ends with an English translation of “Такая девочка” (“That Kind of Girl”), written in 1968, but published only twenty years later. The primary role of this thesis is to provide English-speaking audiences with another deep glimpse into Lyudmila Petrushevskaya’s contributions to Soviet and post-Soviet literature, which has been previously done by many.

2. Background Information Regarding the Life and Writing Career of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya

This chapter covers the early life background of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, including aspects of her childhood, family dynamic, and early writing influences. A timeline of the author’s writing career is also mentioned. This information is important in order to receive a more well-rounded perspective surrounding Petrushevskaya and her premises.

Every individual has a backstory, especially those with something to say and a pertinent influence. The impact of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya is no different, and much of her upbringing did, indeed, play a role in steering the direction in which her works eventually went. Some would agree it is vital to understand the background context of an author’s life influences in order to dynamically grasp the purpose of their writing. Lyudmila Petrushevskaya is a “playwright, poet, and prose writer, whose own devastated childhood in children’s homes, on the edges of war and surrounded by the Terror, shapes her dark vision and style” (Emerson 232).
2.1 Early Life Background Information and Writing Influences

Lyudmila Petrushevskaya was born in 1938 in Moscow, not long before World War II began. Her childhood was far from peaceful, as was the reality for much of Russia during this time. Lyudmila, along with her generation in general, suffered from the traumatic experiences of a war-stricken country, facing evacuation, post-war hunger, and deprivation. Citizens of Russia were left with no work and no food, coupled with the fear produced by Stalin’s Terror, setting up an overall air of a desperate need to survive and nothing more. Many Russians were simply trying to get by, and it was challenging for many to stay afloat (Laird 23).

Petrushevskaya, sent by her barely-making-ends-meet mother to a children’s home for starving youth, had already felt the hellish impact of such deep poverty by the time she was ten. Once her mother was able to eventually put food on the table, she brought Lyudmila back home to Moscow, where the girl lived with her grandfather and mother in a twelve-square-meter room of a communal city apartment (kommunalka1) – hardly adequate living conditions as considered in the modern age, but unfortunately the reality for an immense quantity of Russian citizens at that time. Many of the author’s family members were the unfortunate victims of the 1937 and 1938 Stalinist purges, a tragic circumstance in itself (Dalton-Brown 1). Petrushevskaya was the granddaughter of a well-known linguistic professor, but Lyudmila’s grandfather lost his job and in 1951 was denied a pension. This event, along with other psychological circumstances, essentially caused the man to downwards spiral, until he was sent to a mental hospital in which he spent 15 years of his life. Living in cramped quarters with an insomnia-ridden, unemployed former linguistics professor, was a tormenting experience for Lyudmila, her mother, and her grandfather, for Petrushevskaya and her mother were never able to sleep without interruptions, while Lyudmila’s grandfather could not establish peace of mind (Laird 28-29).

Poverty was rampant all around Russia, so Lyudmila had not much to do outside of school. For this reason, she spent her extra time in the library reading books (Laird 28-29). She was not alone – many young individuals did the same,

---

1 *kommunalka*: “a communal flat in which two other families compete for use of the shared kitchen, bathroom and toilet” (Womak 1).
thus potentially promoting the development of the next generation of intelligentsia. Those who chose to spend their time in libraries reading, rather than on the street misbehaving in order to survive, were separated from the street world; the two groups didn’t particularly interact (Laird 29). Societal schism influenced this author’s decision to sometimes portray the inner-psychological realities of the street driven demographic; it was a life she had not lived, and she deeply desired an understanding of the ordinary person, claiming “As a writer I’ve always sought to get inside this world that was inaccessible to me as a child, to discover the beauty of its language, to show its suffering” (Laird 29). Not only does Petrushevskaya depict the urban street lives of Russian citizens, but she also includes stories about the “Soviet city life of the intelligentsia.” Many of her characters are women living through difficult circumstances; they’re divorced, single, or even widowed, and almost always end up getting betrayed or taken advantage of by others; abused and neglected, all leading up to complete exhaustion from the trials they’re put through on a daily basis (Shneidman 100).

In the story “That Kind of Girl,” translated in the Appendix of this thesis, the narrator as well as one of the main characters, Raisa, both undergo these types of torturous life circumstances endured by women in some societies. Raisa experiences severe abuse when she is young, leaving her traumatized to the point where she will have sex with just about any man that knocks on her door. The narrator, on the other hand, has just as hard of a life, but for different reasons. She must find a way to hold her marriage with Petrov together so that she may continuing surviving; having a roof over her head and providing her son Sasha with a decent life. Meanwhile, Petrov repeatedly has affairs with various women, and throughout the entire story, the reader witnesses the narrator’s back and forth struggle trying to keep Petrov in the picture.

Petrushevskaya went on to study journalism at the Moscow University, and after 1956, worked as a reporter on the radio and television for a magazine called Krugozor. Realistically, she wanted to write full-time, but she had children to feed, and after the death of her first husband and her widespread silencing, she struggled to make ends meet (Laird 23).
2.2 Timeline of Writing Career

First published in 1972 after being rejected by the popular journal *Novy mir* who claimed “without publication, but don’t lose track of the author”, two of Lyudmila’s short stories were featured in the St. Petersburg journal *Aurora*, sparking public interest for the controversial author (Laird 23, 33). The story Petrushevskaya initially sent in for consideration to *Novy mir* was, in fact, “That Kind of Girl” (“Такая девочка”) which she wrote in 1968, but it was not published until 1988, 20 years later (Петрушевская 9).

The early years of her work (the 1970s, 1980s) were filled with censorship so it was not all that surprising that “Такая девочка” was also one of those silenced pieces; Petrushevskaya mentioned difficult, taboo topics and refused to conform to that which publishers expected of her, which often led to their reluctance and disapproval (Laird 30). Often referencing challenging occupations and physical phenomena such as alcoholism, prostitution, suicide, nymphomania, abortion, etc., before *glasnost*, officials were not ready to accept the harsh truths portrayed in Lyudmila’s writing (Balina and Lipovetsky 224; Goscilo, *Fruits of Her Plume* 139). Petrushevskaya was deemed “unprintable” for years. Not only did the author describe in detail the harsh Soviet living conditions, but she also unveiled complexities and problems of the human heart, “how to love and be loved and make sense of your life”, challenges that extended far beyond what the government did or did not provide (Laird 28). Soviet ideology was intensely driven by fear during these years, fear that was shrouded by denial, a false optimism, and black-and-white morality, one that completely failed to examine the painful “existential angst” that citizens faced (Laird 28). This suppression of acknowledging the human condition and difficult emotions potentially contributed to a looming denial narrative, and authorities avoided confronting uncomfortable topics deemed excessively real.

In the mid-1970s, Petrushevskaya became involved in playwriting (Laird 23). No publishers, however, dared to release her plays officially, and for that reason they were usually released in the underground theatre; her experimental
plays performed by student theatre groups and dubbed “creative evenings,” taking place in makeshift theaters, back rooms, tiny apartment buildings, factory clubs, anywhere where people could secretly gather to watch (Emerson 232; Balina and Lipovetsky 222; Laird 23). Petrushevskaya describes the experience of her work being “singled out for banning” as a “compliment”, for it projected a “sign of quality”, stating, “To be banned was the opposite of being stigmatized, they banned you out of sheer enthusiasm for your work!” (Laird 33). It was this lack of advertisement precisely and authoritative banning of Lyudmila’s work that sparked the attention of many, for suddenly audiences were beginning to take notice. Slavnikova describes Petrushevskaya’s sudden popularity exquisitely: “For Petrushevkaia, like for many other literati of her generation, communist censorship had played the role of a rejuvenating fruit” (Slavnikova 58-59). She then continues to explain that many of the underground authors appeared from below and many audiences met them with a positive reception.

Everything shifted once Lyudmila’s play *Three Girls in Blue* (Rus. *Три девушки в голубом* 1989) was produced by Mark Zakharov at the Leninsky Komsomolets theater. Under *glasnost*, this was one of the first times her writing was “unbanned”, and Russians took notice. On opening night in 1985, the theater was completely packed, even with patrons forming lines outside who couldn’t get their way in. Audiences were left emotional, raw; filled with both laughter and tears. They were moved by what they had witnessed, a major milestone for Petrushevskaya’s budding career (Laird 31-32).

### 2.3 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, background information is provided relating to Petrushevskaya’s personal life and writing career. The dynamic of her childhood upbringing, as well as family dynamics are mentioned, as well as some of the early inspirations for her writing. Additionally, a brief description is offered about the long-time rejection the author experienced up until *glasnost* gave her a new opening for exposure and recognition. This chapter leads to a further, deeper analysis of the author’s common defining themes.
3. Defining Characteristics and Themes

As is the case with many authors, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya features specific defining characteristics and themes throughout her work. These themes not only exemplify the cutting-edge and revolutionary writing styles of the author, but they also represent a common air that filled parts of Russia’s literary society. These recognized themes will be focused upon in greater depth later on in relation to “That Kind of Girl”, but for now Petrushevskaya’s themes will be generally examined. For the purpose of this thesis and after researching Petrushevskaya and reading her works, five prominent findings have been defined:

- human suffering and examining the human psyche
- unfiltered honesty and implementation of taboo physical phenomena
- prominent female characters
- representing the ordinary person
- family and relationship dysfunction

Although many elements seem to greatly overwhelm the majority of this author’s works, these five themes that are about to be mentioned are deeply consistent, including in relation to Petrushevskaya’s short story “That Kind of Girl” which is translated into English in the Appendix and analyzed at the end of this thesis.

3.1 Human Suffering and Examining the Human Psyche

Arguably one of the most prominent themes out of five as defined in this thesis could be interpreted as Petrushevskaya’s intention to portray human suffering and examine the human psyche for what it is; unfiltered, raw, authentically inauthentic. For this reason, in part, the author was also rejected from Soviet society. Many did not want to stare at the reality of their own lives; possibly her work was too relatable. It can be said that “a readiness to philosophize all the warts and wounds of the human psyche, accounts for Petrushevskaya’s exclusion from official Soviet literature” (Goscilo, et al., “The Unbearable Heaviness of Being” 19).
Petrushevskaya does not pretend in her stories; characters are depicted in brutal honesty, exactly for what they are, and in the author’s monologues especially, the first-person narration style allows readers to hear the direct perspective of the main protagonist along with the personal projections and reactions to other events and personalities. As Goscilo, et al. describe, “Her fiction and drama illustrate Tennessee Williams’ tragic conviction that “we’re all sentenced to solitary confinement within our own skins” (“The Unbearable Heaviness of Being” 19). Petrushevskaya knows, no matter how much we try, we cannot escape our inner selves at the end of the day; what occurs within the mind and spirit impacts the rest of life. In this manner, one can either learn to wallow in their circumstances or create a drastic shift. Most of the time, her characters wallow, victims of the tragic societies they were raised in. “Petrushevskaya’s universe is grim and unsentimental. A rejection of all benign, coordinating narrative authority and all hope for a spark or leap of communication between human beings” (Emerson 232).

This cycling of suffering and trauma becomes the nature of Petrushevskayaian characters, those that repeatedly fail to embody the positive actions and emotions that give the world its life and vibrancy. The author wants audiences to understand, to recognize how circumstances can negatively, and potentially permanently, affect citizens. Those who seemingly do good usually have an ulterior motive, an expectation or reward in mind.

Petrushevskaya treats all the positive aspects of human feelings - love, trust, pity, desire to help-as an illusion. At best, the illusion is unselfish; at worst, it serves as a means of bringing pressure to bear on a next of kin, a weapon of psychological blackmail. (Slavnikova 62)

By doing this, Petrushevskaya offers a glimpse into the inner workings of the human mind, in a manner that is open and honest. It almost could be perceived as if the individual is offering up their first-hand account of what it means to suffer deeply.
3.2 Unfiltered Honesty (Implementation of Taboo Physical Phenomena)

Often times, when reading a story or a written selection, there are certain details that get left out. The mundanity of everyday life is not frequently described—not in films, not in books, not in songs, not in art—especially not in close detail. Eating food, going to the bathroom, getting sick, and other bodily functions tend to be avoided by many authors and by society in general, but this is far from the case with Petrushevskaya. Her innate ability to convey the lives of others is supported by the use of unfiltered honesty, the kind where taboo physical phenomena are implemented and described in depth so that the reader truly gets to grasp what existence is actually like within the story. Petrushevskaya does not place a filter on her written expression. “Her books are catalogues of various diseases, calamities, crying injustices. Petrushevskaya, it seems, abhors any kind of creative verbal or metaphorical anesthesia” (Slavnikova 61).

In this manner, Lyudmila honors her truth. She is not afraid if others are offended by the truth, the reality of life for others, so long as she is portraying genuine human experience. Although some authors may dare to venture into controversial, sensitive topics now and then, shocking audiences by doing so, Petrushevskaya does so in just about every piece she’s ever written. Whether it be the death of a child or a tragedy unfolding for a character with an already tragic enough life, no territory is left uncharted by the brilliant, brave author (Slavnikova 61). Lyudmila does not try to make human existence any more romanticized, fantastical, or beautiful then it is. The human body, in particular, is not elevated in quality, beauty, or being. “They [the bodies] routinely vomit, urinate, sweat, and bleed. But these bodies are not mere vehicles for substance abuse of casual suffering; they are symbolic of damage done to spirit” (Emerson 233). Petrushevskaya does not unnecessarily describe the sometimes considered gross bodily functions of people. She utilizes this tool purposefully as a means to support the message she is trying to get across; that portions of this society in Russia and many other places in the world experienced and underwent such tremendous hardships; blood, sweat, tears, urine, and feces all went along with that life and it was in no way pretty—it was, however, real. Viktor Erofeyev describes the happenings of Russian society as the Russian people being good, yet what made their
lives inherently bad was the circumstances. For this reason, many authors wrote of a philosophy of hope for the Russian people, that their circumstances would improve and that optimism for vital change was an important mentality to hold (Ерофеев 7). During the author’s time, there was, in general, a shift away from the hope philosophy. Petrushevskaya’s stories lack this underlying tone of hope and instead she focuses more so on what’s really going on outside of the hopes and fantasies for a better life.

3.3 Prominent Female Characters (Protagonists)

A third prominent, self-professed theme in Petrushevskayaian prose could considerably consist of the evident presentation of female characters, in particular protagonists. Lyudmila does not consider herself to be a women’s writer, “[she] feels that women’s prose implies superfluous ornateness or decorativeness. She sees herself as writing in the “male manner,” which means to her, a focus on the essentials of plot and character” (McLaughlin 77). This does not change the fact that Petrushevskaya’s works are filled with the influence of noticeable female characters. As Goscilo, et al. explain, Petrushevskaya’s literary environment is full of female characters, including in her novella The Time: Night (“The Unbearable Heaviness of Being” 20). From the “prominent mother-daughter connection in The Time: Night to the dynamic relationship of the female narrator and Raisa in “That Kind of Girl”, Petrushevskaya gives a voice to women in Soviet Russia, offering accounts of their life stories” (Slavnikova 64).

Subsequently, Lyudmila reverses gender roles. The absence of males as frequent figures in her works allows women to be “tested and to fail on what was traditionally male terrain (honor, creativity, supporting a family), making use of men’s excuses” (Emerson 235). It was not until after glasnost, however, that Petrushevskaya and other Russian women prose writers took advantage of the country’s newfound willingness to be open. Citizens turned away from the positive mindsets that literature presented before glasnost, and this is why Petrushevskaya’s work gained most of its popularity once the nation was ready to listen to the brutal truths she exposed (Sutcliffe 60-61). Petrushevskaya set up a literary precedent long before society was even ready to hear what she had to say.
This determination to stick to her desires of spreading the notions of honest life is also what makes her such a revolutionary.

3.4 Representing the Ordinary Person

Finding solace at the library as a young person as a means of staying off of the street, in some ways Petrushevskaia was disconnected from the world of the ordinary street person. This certainly plays a role in why Lyudmila frequently portrays the life of the average, struggling human during Soviet times; “[A]s a writer her [Petrushevskaia’s] intent has always been to re-enter that life of the ordinary, suffering person, and so rejoin the people” (Dalton-Brown 2). This, in turn, also expressed why representing the ordinary person could be considered a fourth theme of the author’s works. By giving a prominent voice to the every day, struggling Russian, Petrushevskaia’s prose in and of itself becomes dismal and tragic. “Her texts are... damning in their indictment of the living conditions within which most Russian urban citizens exist” (Dalton-Brown 4). These were difficult times for the average Soviet individual, and so Petrushevskaia did not need to make up fictitious stories. She was able to pull from the real experiences of those surrounding her, and possibly even some experiences of her own.

3.5 Family and Relationship Dysfunction (Dysfunctional Love)

For Petrushevskaia, love stories are tinged with tragedy, so as a fifth recognizable theme, family and relationship dysfunction comes into play. In the words of Slavnikova, “In Petrushevskaia’s books, natural, normal love is simply impossible” (63). Every single relationship is challenged, all concepts of healthy, functioning love are broken apart, often times because of traumas that have gone undressed with and hardships that force characters to survive instead of thrive. From the way in which the character Anna in The Time: Night (Rus. Время ночь, 1992) loves her daughter Alyona so much that she ends up being abandoned by her entire family due to her controlling and smothering nature to the way that the narrator in “That Kind of Girl” knows of her husband’s repeated sexual affairs yet still opts to stay by his side for the purpose of survival and subtly manipulates him in the process, one does not have to search far to find examples of family and
relationship dysfunctions in Lyudmila’s writing (Петрушевская 9-11). To summarize an understanding of just how widespread the theme of dysfunctional love is in the Petrushevskayaian narrative, Goscilo, et al. explain how married couples are unfaithful to one another; they end up hating, beating, and deceiving to the point where suicidal actions are considered. Grown children steal from their parents, whether it be emotionally, financially, or physically, all while wearing down their brothers or sisters with manipulative torment. Few aspects of family dysfunction are left untouched and even mothers end up murdering or ruthlessly humiliating their own children (“The Unbearable Heaviness of Being” 20).

Petrushevskaya shows us that this dysfunctional love is a manifestation of pain, internal battles that have gone unfaced in a world where everyone is just trying to get by (Lipovetsky 180). Characters become the merciless victims of the cards life has dealt them, and they rarely find their way out of these tormenting, internal cycles of deterioration. Petrushevskaya’s stories do not end happily; more often than not this toxic love is what ruins lives. It is love, or at least some distorted interpretation of the word, that tears her characters apart. “Her tales have no victories to offer except the sheer persistence of the protagonists’ endurance; the contemporary Petrushevskaya epic is one of ignominious, farcical survival or defeated death, a tale of a spirit tormented by its physical housing” (Dalton-Brown 16).

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter focuses in upon Petrushevskaya’s literary themes. After reading and researching a lot about the author, for the purpose of this thesis five primary themes were defined. These themes include human suffering and examining the human psyche, unfiltered honesty and the implementation of taboo physical phenomena, prominent female characters, representing the ordinary person, and dysfunctional family and love relationships. These five aforementioned themes appear throughout the works of Petrushevskaya and are valuable additions in understanding the literary intentions of the author. This chapter leads into how perestroika and glasnost impacted Petrushevskaya’s career.
4. Perestroika, Glasnost: How They Altered Russian Literature

*Perestroika* and *glasnost* played their part in elevating Petrushevskaya’s career; this newfound openness allowed the author’s previously banned works to finally be published, such as the story under review in this thesis, and Russia certainly took notice. During this time, a group of writers also formed under the phenomena *chernukha*. This chapter serves as a glimpse deeper into the ways in which *perestroika* and *glasnost* altered Petrushevskaya’s career and Russian literature in general, as well as what role Petrushevskaya played in *chernukha*. Finally, women’s prose in relation to Russian history is inspected.

Only becoming well-known by the mid-1980s to the Russian audience, Petrushevskaya’s primary reason for her late gain in popularity ties in with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and how they altered Russian literature; influences that can still even be seen to this day (Shneidman 99-100). *Glasnost* (translated as “openness”) and *perestroika* (translated as “restructuring”), were democratic reforms that took place in the mid-1980s under the influence of Mikhail Gorbachev. These reforms, “enabled a public critique of Soviet ideology and the publication in Russian of previously banned literary works” (Kahn, et al. 560). Not only did these moments in Russian history impact Russian literature as a whole, but they also played a deep role in furthering along Lyudmila Petrushevskaya’s professional career as an author. As expressed by Goscilo, et al., Petrushevskaya’s professional career was heavily altered after *perestroika* for theaters began to agree to the production of her works and major journals that were capable of capturing the attention of large audiences started accepting her pieces (“The Unbearable Heaviness of Being” 20).

During *perestroika*, some of Petrushevskaya’s *byt* prose style stories written in the 1970s were actually finally published. Although *byt*, a theme describing everyday city life of the urban middle class, was the general genre of prose written during the 70s in the Soviet Union, Petrushevskaya “takes it a step farther by rejecting the interference of ideological editorial scrutiny and censorship”, likely playing a role in the overall banning of many of her works before *glasnost* (Shneidman 38, 106). The concept of *byt* during the 1960s and beyond in Russia contradicted many of the campaigns that the government was attempting to promote, including anti-alcohol propaganda, which is why censorship occurred and
journals refused to acknowledge the works of honest authors such as Petrushevskaya (Sutcliffe 15). The author was affected by the societal refusal of her efforts to spread the realities of everyday life, but she, nevertheless stuck by her artistic intentions even if rejected.

4.1 Petrushevskaya and Chernukha

Due to her harsh portrayals of the realities of everyday life, critics have grouped Petrushevskaya with the chernukha. This literary tendency was prevalent primarily during the 1980s and 1990s in Russia (Sutcliffe 62). “Following the logic of chernukha, Petrushevskaya uses a grim external reality to suggest an even more frightening internal wasteland” (Sutcliffe 69). Petrushevskaya’s categorization with chernukha is more apparent if the term is first defined.

The slang term chernukha, derived from the Russian word meaning “black,” refers to images that portrayed the dark nature of the Soviet reality for citizens (Dalton-Brown 11). Especially prominent after glasnost and in the early post-Soviet years, the lives and existences of certain societal groups were exposed and openly displayed and many of the atrocities of Russian life became transparent. Some of what was discussed and unveiled includes prostitution, juvenile crime, violence, homelessness, prison horrors, and other difficult social phenomena. This dark expression of actual life was not new knowledge for many citizens, for some had lived through or experienced similar circumstances themselves. However, the conceptualization of the term chernukha added legitimacy to the sufferings of these individuals by becoming an official term displayed in published journals and books, and the authors a part of chernukha began to shed light onto the phenomena of everyday life that were considered taboo by Soviet society. While there are still remnants of chernukha in the present day and age, this phenomena is not nearly as widespread and impactful as it was during the years of glasnost and early post-Soviet times (Липовецкий). In many ways, the adaptation of chernukha began to acknowledge the struggles and difficulties that so many in Russia had to live with for years under a strict communist rule and thereafter once the economic, societal, and political structures began to plummet just after the fall of the Soviet Union.
Some argue that Petrushevskaya not only represented a significant role in chernukha, she actually went beyond other practitioners of the phenomena. As Sally Dalton-Brown describes it, Petrushevskaya writes of topics that are frequently terrifying and horror-inducing, regularly discussing loss, complicated love, and demise, but it is the exquisite manner in which she depicts these tragic circumstances “that raises her work above other practitioners of ‘chernukha’” (Dalton-Brown 161). Instead of merely portraying the sufferers, Petrushevskaya took her intentions a step further by generating a conversation surrounding life’s challenges, in many ways initiating or igniting the important process of transparency and healing for a seriously confused and torn apart nation.

4.2 Understanding Women’s Prose in Connection to Russian History

Although forming many of her expository beliefs in the 1970s, it was not until perestroika that Petrushevskaya “resonated with a new generation of younger women writers” (Kahn, et al. 683). During the Gorbachev perestroika era, the philosophy turned towards literature’s purpose of uncovering the collective experience of women (Sutcliffe 95). It was the opposition of two tendencies that truly pushed along the vulnerable and honest agenda of women’s prose writers: “critique of traditional roles by some intellectuals and the reinforcement of these same identities by state and economic forces.” This time of contradictory culture shift displayed the overall energy of the gender climate between the years of 1985 and 1991 (Sutcliffe 92). Prior to these years “Russian women’s writing [had] always suffered from alienation and the absence of stable identity” making it difficult for women to openly voice their realities and concerns in a manner that would actually be heard by general society (Sutcliffe 91). The arrival of perestroika gave the female authors that had been hushed under a communist regime and even before that period, a new opportunity to speak their truths, and also the truths that many women endured in Russia. Even still there was backlash and criticism. At least, however, some citizens encouraged the continuation of the revelations of these truths for all walks of life, including women.
4.3 Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 focuses upon a some historical context and how certain events impacted not only Petrushevskaya’s career but Russian literature in general. It is explained how Petrushevskaya’s work came into prominence essentially only after glasnost and perestroika when this new openness allowed for the author’s words to be unbanned and even published. This skyrocketed her career and gave her the wide-spanning exposure she had been trying to achieve for many years as a writer.

Next, readers are offered a description of chernukha and its participants, a style of Russian literature that focused primarily upon the dark and dismal portrayals of inner human sufferings, keen on exposing audiences to the realities of what life was actually like for Russian citizens, unfiltered. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of Petrushevskaya’s contribution to Russian women’s prose, along with how women’s prose impacted Russian literature.

5. A Literary Analysis of “That Kind of Girl” (“Такая девочка” 1988)

Because the included translation focuses upon a key piece of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya’s literary work, a brief literary analysis serves as a way to examine the author’s defining characteristics and themes in practice. “That Kind of Girl” exemplifies many elements of Petrushevskaya’s style and voice, from distinct character development to realistic language and beyond. It was not until Petrushevskaya was in her thirties already with kids of her own that her writing style truly took its full form, “stating that only after learning about motherhood and its attendant responsibilities had she really attained the maturity necessary to write her first real story, ‘Takaia devochka’ (‘Such a Girl’)” (Dalton-Brown 2).

Chapter 5 presents a literary analysis of Petrushevskaya’s short story “That Kind of Girl,” relating to the English translation of the story located in the Appendix. This literary analysis walks readers through a brief analysis of the story’s prominent characters, as well an analysis of the five themes mentioned in Chapter 4, but this time how they relate to “That Kind of Girl.” Finally, the chapter concludes with a consideration of Petrushevskaya’s artistic structure and writing style.
5.1 Analysis of Characters

As is usually the case in literature, the profiles of the characters in “That Kind of Girl” are truly what gives the story its life, meaning, and purpose. There are three prominent roles in the short story, with the two main people being female (Raisa and the unnamed narrator).

Raisa
A young, Tatarian woman who survived a challenging upbringing which involved a disabled father, sexual abuse, time spent in a labor prison, and escaping a torturous home. She works as a professional prostitute and has sex with just about any man that knocks on her door. Raisa is married to a man named Seva (Sevka) who is aware of her profession but also realizes this is a way to pay the bills. Raisa suffers from highly depressive episodes and often spends her days running around or simply crying for hours. Raisa has an affinity for the narrator and often does what she can to please the narrator.

Narrator (Woman)
A likely middle-aged woman with a son named Sasha. Married to Petrov, and also quite emotionally unstable. Feels somewhat trapped in her marital situation but does not dare to divorce nor leave her unfaithful, disrespectful husband because she must stay with him in order to have a roof over her head and, most importantly, to protect the wellbeing of their child Sasha. She puts up with Petrov’s antics for survival purposes; in many ways, she feels she has no other option if she wants her son Sasha to have the best chance at life. Sometimes, the narrator takes care of Raisa emotionally by offering her valerian root and conversing with her. The narrator, although at first destroyed by hearing of her husband’s infidelities, becomes somewhat hooked on learning about his affairs. Eventually, she takes on a manipulative tactic where she stops reacting as strongly to his comings and goings and she discovers new ways to cope with his unloyal behavior.

Petrov (Narrator’s Husband)
Petrov is the narrator’s husband. He repeatedly has affairs with other women and comes and goes as he pleases, without considering how it impacts his wife or their
young son Sasha. Petrov plays the role of the hyper-masculine male, one that cheats with no remorse or care for his actions. Although initially playing games with the narrator’s heart, the narrator begins to play games with him by showing indifference as he leaves her time and time again, as well as turning his insensitive actions back on him, i.e. when she tells him, “From yourself, my dear, you won’t run away. If you’re a schizophrenic then go get help” (Petrushevskaia, Appendix 37).

5.2 Common Themes in Relation to the Story

The themes mentioned earlier that are regularly presented in Lyudmila’s work are also present in the translation at hand. “That Kind of Girl” was originally published in Russian in the journal Ogonyok (Rus. Огонёк) in 1988. Here, examples from the piece are explained and broken down into the five common Petrushevskayaian influences.

Human Suffering and Examining the Human Psyche

Petrushevskaia has never shied away from diving deep into the depths of human suffering, examining the human psyche from an internal perspective. This technique used by the author is likely so effective because it helps the reader to feel as if they are in the shoes of the characters, witnessing their lives firsthand. In “That Kind of Girl,” the narrator endures her husband’s cycling affairs and suffers through them in order to protect the wellbeing of her child Sasha and hold the household together. She agonizes frequently over the uncertainty of her husband Petrov leaving altogether, because this would entail the loss of many basic survival necessities for the narrator and Sasha, including a roof over their heads. Aiken, et al. describe their experience of “That Kind of Girl” (“Такая Девочка”) expressing that “The story is absolutely ordinary, trite, even banal, but that quality is precisely calculated to reveal the incalculable ugliness and inhumanity of contemporary life and the resulting moral degradation of the individual” (194).

In the story, the audience is exposed to the pain of every prominent character; from the manner in which we learn of Raisa’s traumatic upbringing and her
career as a prostitute, to the extreme infidelity in the marriage between the narrator and her husband Petrov. The narrator prepares to jump from her apartment room window and commit suicide the first time her husband leaves her, exemplifying the extensive co-dependency and depressive tendencies the narrator carries. The manner in which Raisa screams “Let’s do it together, let’s do it together, wait for me,” as if forming a suicide pact with her neighbor (the narrator) adds to the topic of people in the story simply feeling as if their lives are so horrible they are not worth living (Petrushevskaya, Appendix 36).

This depiction of human suffering in “That Kind of Girl” also reflects back upon the contributors of chernukha, Petrushevskaya being one of them. Chernukha works portrayed the dark and dismal internal turmoils of Russian citizens, and Petrushevskaya describes the inner dilemmas and fears of the main characters in her story,” including both the undealt with trauma of the prostitute Raisa and how it impacts her choices and influences her promiscuity, as well as the careful dance the narrator takes part in in order to keep her cheating husband from leaving as to protect their son Sasha and her own survival.

Lyudmila Petrushevskaya leaves no corner untouched; she does not fear the brutality and rawness of the suffering human. Instead she sheds light onto circumstances that existed or were perhaps even prevalent during the Soviet Union, as tragic as that is to say.

**Unfiltered Honesty (Implementing Taboo Physical Phenomena)**

As is typical of Lyudmila, she does not shy away from being completely honest and vulnerable with her depiction of the sufferings of the focused upon demographics of Soviet society (such as the ordinary Soviet citizen). An aspect of this tender glimpse into real life is the implementation of taboo physical phenomena. In the case of “That Kind of Girl,” the story quickly reveals Raisa’s profession; she’s a prostitute and Petrushevskaya wants the audience to know that. She does not bother to name prostitution some undercover word. She just lays the facts out as they are devoid of nicknames or coded language.

The same can be said for other physical phenomena. The act of crying, for instance, is exposed front and center. Raisa suffers, and in turn, she wallows in her grief and sadness by regularly shedding tears. “Or she [Raisa] cries. She’d
begin to cry out of the blue — crying for four hours non-stop” (Petrushevskaya, Appendix 35).

Another example is the great lengths Petrushevskaya goes to describe the narrator’s suicide sequence. From the manner in which she depicts the set up of the narrator’s intended suicide; from the obtaining of various household items that are rigged up so she can jump and simultaneously hang herself out of the balcony window, to the way the scene from outside the window is described with such attention to detail, Petrushevskaya seemingly wants the reader to experience, and potentially understand the narrator’s pain on a profound, almost empathetic level:

The wire was strong, insulated with chlorovinyl. And I tied that wire to a spike, one that Petrov hammered into a concrete wall long ago in order to secure a bench...I tied the end of the wire to that spike, but the wire was smooth and no matter what, it wouldn’t stay put. Nevertheless, I twisted the wire and made a noose on the other end for my neck, somehow figuring out what to tie where. (Petrushevskaya, Appendix 36)

Here, the reader in great detail learns of how the narrator intends to commit suicide, along with the thoughts that are racing through her head as she creates a noose with wire and begins to take action towards her self-inflicted death.

**Prominent Female Characters (Protagonists)**

In “That Kind of Girl” the two primary characters are female, which is common for pieces written by Petrushevskaya. The reader learns the backstories, upbringings, and events of Raisa, the young prostitute woman who lays around at home crying all day, sinking deeper and deeper into the dark voids of her own sufferings. Although her husband Seva (Sevka) is briefly mentioned, the story focuses primarily upon the relationship between Raisa and the female narrator. The female narrator has responsibilities that would be similar to a man in many gender-ruled Russian literary pieces. She is responsible for not only taking care of the household and protecting her son Sasha, but she also serves as the glue that holds her family together, which she does not out of love for her husband Petrov, but in
order to survive and ensure that little Sasha has a future. Her endurance of emotional suffering for the sake of protecting her son also makes her take on the role of the protector which could be considered stereotypically masculine. As her husband runs off with random women, the narrator raises her son Sasha, the love of her life. She has to constantly consider his wellbeing but at times life becomes so dismal that she essential forgets about even what matters to her the most. As she is standing in her window preparing to jump to her death, she expresses how she forgets about Sasha altogether for a moment.

Interestingly enough, it is Raisa that saves the narrator from jumping, but not how one would expect. Raisa wants to jump too, but her intrusion into the apartment room frightens the narrator, causing her plan to be foiled. In some ways, these two women suffer in silence together doing their best to make ends meet, while the narrator’s husband Petrov runs off with other women and seldom supports their family and Raisa’s husband Sevka works endlessly and even takes care of the household errands. The narrator suffers likely due to the complexities of her circumstances with Petrov’s affairs, while Raisa suffers more due to her own traumas that have not been confronted. Even though their struggles are different, they still find a way to relate to one another and this forms the basis of their bond. This prominence placed upon the role of the female in “That Kind of Girl” is, in some ways, empowering. Women are finally given a voice to tell their stories to an audience. At the same time, witnessing the horrific conditions and gloomy dysfunctions of their existences is heartbreaking.

**Representing the Ordinary Person**

In the story in question the realities of character struggles are left out and in the open. From Raisa’s difficult upbringing in an abusive family to her persistent abuse by men in her life, to her taboo profession as a prostitute, Raisa is, very much so, an ordinary individual living in urban society during the Soviet Union. Of course, not all women in Russia at this time lived a life like Raisa, but often they were faced with struggles that could be deemed just as challenging. Russia had, and arguably still has “...male-dominated social systems predicated on marriage and the preeminence of paternal genealogy” (Aiken, et al. 217). This fact that traditional marital roles have driven Russian society and many other societies for
decades or even longer, also helps to clarify the narrator’s reasons for staying with her incredibly unfaithful husband Petrov.

Probably the most brilliant part about Petrushevskaya’s choice of displaying the quite ordinary sufferings and struggles of the Soviet urban citizen is that many readers potentially would believe her to be exaggerating the truth. At times, her portrayal of this part of society is so extreme, it may feel as if these circumstances are uncommon. Sorrowfully, the events in “That Kind of Girl” and other stories written by Lyudmila are accurate in their representation, and in an interview the author even expresses that the inspiration for “That Kind of Girl” came to her after she heard a story from her friend Zinka who was friends with a prostitute (Фаворов).

Family and Relationship Dysfunction (Dysfunctional Love)

The most transparent example of dysfunctional love in “That Kind of Girl” is the relationship between the female narrator and her unfaithful husband Petrov. Essentially, the entire story centers around their back and forth exchanges. Petrov has numerous affairs throughout the timeline of the story, and although the narrator is completely destroyed after the first time Petrov leaves, she becomes accustomed to him coming back and then cheating again. Instead of standing up for herself and choosing to no longer live with an individual who disrespects her repeatedly in this way, the narrator takes on a somewhat manipulative stance for dealing with Petrov; basically laughing at him and pretending she barely cares each time he runs off with someone new. On some level, the narrator even eventually learns to forgive Petrov, but even the way in which she only refers to him by his last name shows how much intimacy and personal connection their relationship lacks (Aiken, et al. 195). The narrator only learns to forgive Petrov, for she recognizes she must forgive Petrov in order to protect her housing and the wellbeing of her son Sasha, and even then this forgiveness is more of a tolerance.

Another prominent example of this relationship dysfunction is the dysfunction between the narrator and her mother. Her mother catches Petrov with one of his other women, a lady named Nadezhda, and she becomes incredibly enraged when she discovers how the narrator set up this entire encounter. The narrator eventually exposes what she believes to be the truth:
My mother also already didn’t love me. Yes she never loved me as a human being, only as her own creation, her flesh and blood. Now, in her old age, she was sickly attached to Sasha and her other granddaughter, Ninotchka. And I, and Petrov, and my older brother plus his wife, she was already unconcerned about us — we were just relatives (Petrushevskaya, Appendix 45)

Petrushevskaya causes the reader to truly question the quality of love that exists between Petrov and his wife. It is obvious their relationship is far from healthy and displays serious signs of toxicity, abuse, and dysfunction. As Goscilo explains, “The narrator of “Такая девочка,” ...has no scruples about recounting her husband’s multiple infidelities, her own pleasurable curiosity about the details of his conquests, and the readiness with which their neighbor, the former prostitute Raisa, has sex with any stranger who knocks on her door” (Fruits of Her Plume 145). It is likely Lyudmila portrays this marriage for what it is because she does not intend to sugarcoat anything in her writing. There is a possibility that some marriages mirrored the one of Petrov and his wife during the time in which “That Kind of Girl” was written so the author intended to bring awareness to this reality.

5.3 Structure and Writing Style

Part of fully understanding a piece of Petrushevskaya’s prose is examining her unique writing style and structure in order to comprehend the bigger picture. Her work is certainly innovative, most commonly defined by run-on sentences that are intensely complex, continued with conjoining words such as “and,” “but,” “then,” etc. The choice to use a longer sentence structure may be due to Lyudmila’s somewhat train of thought style. In many ways, this brings another type of life to the characters. “Sentences [are] constructed out of clauses that are not only grammatically independent but autonomous in their meaning. They seem to be connected by nothing more compelling than a conjunction: i (and) or the ambiguous Russian a, which can mean “and,” “but,” or something in between.” These long, drawn-out sentences offer readers the illusion that the story really is going somewhere, but in reality, the characters remain trapped in the
same cycles, tormenting thought patterns, and familial difficulties seemingly without an end in sight (Woll 126).

Because Petrushevskaya aims to give her audience a glimpse into the internal psyche of the ordinary human during Soviet Russia, utilizing a free-flow writing style allows for the character’s words to become even more believable. A good example of this long, drawn-out sentence structure is as follows:

Only when my Petrov for the first time left me, when he wanted to marry that Stanislava woman and they were already searching for credit to pay for our divorce and cooperative and they wanted to adopt my Sasha, — then was the only time in my life when I fell apart. (Petrushevskaya, Appendix 35)

This example is lengthy, without a doubt, but most of all it expresses the somewhat chaotic nature of the narrator’s thoughts. She continues to cycle through a similar thought pattern throughout the rest of the story, always fixated upon some aspect of Petrov’s romantic affairs and searching for solutions, whether it be suicide, indifference, or nosy interest, which relates back to the manner in which Petrushevskaya utilizes this drawn-out sentence structure to express how the narrator is trapped in the same tormenting cycles.

The use of “and,” “then,” and dashes (—) creates a complex sentence structure that feels more conversational if anything, as if spoken by someone going through a deeply traumatic incident or on the verge of a nervous breakdown. These small details help readers imagine that these words are being spoken directly from the mouth of the character as if being presented with an immensely real, intimate, first-hand account.

Then there’s the careful deliberation of choice in narrator. “That Kind of Girl” utilizes first-person narration as a direct access point into the mind of the speaker, who just so happens to also be the main character or protagonist of the story. This first-person style of writing is one that Petrushevskaya uses in her monologues specifically, compared with her short stories that are more so classified as prose and feature a third-person narrator such as in the story “Дитя” (Woll 125). The narrator’s perspective allows an audience to not only attempt to sympathize with the depressing happenings but potentially even empathize with the dysfunctional and tragic events that occur. At the same time, the reader has
enough distance away from the narrator and has the opportunity to still analyze the events that unravel. This dual access point into the inner life as well as the outer circumstances of the narrator also makes her personality more understandable, because one can witness her reactions as if living by her side.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This fifth chapter examines the work in question, “That Kind of Girl.” The primary characters of the short story are briefly described and readers are offered more insight into their life dilemmas and personalities. Next, the five aforementioned themes are observed in relation to the circumstances presented in “That Kind of Girl”, which includes the examining of human suffering, implementation of taboo physical phenomena, representation of the ordinary person, utilization of prominent female characters (protagonists), and portrayal of dysfunctional love and family relationships. The chapter is finalized with an inspection of Petrushevskaya’s use of specific structure in the work in question, along with her chosen writing style.

6. Conclusion

Petrushevskaya provides audiences with a deeper glimpse into the sufferings and hardships of the Russian people during Soviet times, as well as in a post-Soviet state. This thesis contributes an examination of the manners in which Petrushevskaya offers readers this insightful perspective into life and society. A contributor of both women’s prose and the dark and dismal chernukha, critics claim Petrushevskaya went beyond other practitioners, due to her deeper understanding of human emotions and how to depict them with words. Influenced by early-life experiences and the street life she so often observed but did not get to be a part of growing up in Soviet Russia, she sometimes mentioned the hardships of this demographic, as well as mentioning those in the intelligentsia, a group of educated Russians she was a part of. Lyudmila Petrushevskaya has, without a doubt, left a massive mark on Soviet and post-Soviet literature for her honest portrayals of Russian society. Her own experiences growing up in challenging, barely post-Stalin circumstances that included poverty, living in cramped kommunalka
housing, and having to go to great lengths to survive, encouraged the author to depict the lives of her characters transparently. Petrushevskaya, although technically writing fiction, utilized experiences she heard about and possibly even her own happenings to generate the plots of her stories that were fueled by dysfunction, trauma, and suffering.

From her censoring under a communist regime to her re-unveiling under the influence of Gorbachev, perestroika, and glasnost, the author has undergone quite a journey to get her voice heard and recognized for its profoundly honest descriptions of the lives of urban Russian citizens. Discussing taboo topics such as prostitution, abortion, alcoholism, suicide, infidelity, violence, and many others, much of Petrushevskaya’s works share a few common themes that have been categorized for the purpose of this thesis. Typically, the author presents themes of understanding human suffering and the depths of the human psyche along with displaying unfiltered honesty and the implementation of taboo physical phenomena. Furthermore, she represents the ordinary person and ordinary life, while including prominent female characters (protagonists), along with family and relationship problems and dysfunctional love. These characteristics not only give Petrushevskayaian literature its unique distinctions, but it also adds to the author’s unfiltered vulnerability and strength.

In addition to examining Petrushevskaya’s influence on the Russian literary world along with her common themes and writing characteristics, her tendencies are explored in application to the included English translation of one of her monologue-style short stories, “Такая девочка” (translated here as “That Kind of Girl”), which is considered to be Petrushevskaya’s first real story. The implementation of the author’s themes are examined in relation to this piece of prose, the three prominent characters are briefly described, and Petrushevskaya’s writing style and structure are analyzed. In conclusion, Petrushevskaya truthfully portrays the life of urban Russian citizens, doing so by utilizing her tasteful and descriptive writing style and common themes that reek of actuality. Although some may argue, many would agree that Lyudmila Petrushevskaya has made incredible contributions to the Russian literary world with her works.
Works Cited

English sources:
Slavnikova, Olga. “Petrushevskaya and Emptiness.” Translated by Vladimir


*Russian sources:*


Appendix

English Translation of “That Kind of Girl” (“Такая девочка”)

Russian text sourced from: Огонек, no. 40, Oct. 1988, pp. 9-11

Note: The original English translation of “This Little Girl” was not read prior to the production of this translation. The original English publication of “This Little Girl” was translated by Sally Laird and released in 1995 in New York City by Pantheon books as part of the collection of Petrushevskaya’s works, Immortal Love. It can be found on pages 232-252 of the collection.

A message about the translation style: Petrushevskaya uses extremely distinct punctuation and sentence structure, so in order to maintain the integrity of the author’s preferences, this English translation mimics similar punctuation and sentence structure patterns, even if the decision to do so is not always grammatically correct in the English language.

“That Kind of Girl” [published in Russian in 1988]

Now, in my eyes it was as if she had died, and just maybe, she really did die, although during this month no one in our home has been buried. Our house is quite usual — five stories without an elevator, four entrances, the building in front of us is a copy of ours and this repetition continues on. If she had died, it would have become apparent right away. That must mean, she is still somehow alive.

Imagine this: my drawer filled with blank forms has a photo card glued to it, a contact print. That’s her, Raisa, Ravilla, the stress goes on the last syllable — she’s a Tatarian. Not much can be seen on that contact, her face framed by her hair, two legs and two arms: in the pose of Rodin’s “The Thinker.”

She always sits like that, even not long ago on my birthday she sat like that. I observed her for the first time as she socialized with others, before that moment we communicated only amongst one another, two on two — she with her Sevka and I with my Petrov.

It turned out, she didn’t know how to dance so she sat quietly like a mouse. My Petrov pulled her to dance but after that she immediately went home.
Sure, she doesn’t know how to dance, but as a prostitute she was a professional. Where from did Sevka take her, from which cesspit? She had only just left the corrective labor colony and again was in prostitution, and he took her and married her. Touched, he himself told of this, but asked me, under a tremendous oath, not to tell anyone. He also told me about her father, how Raisa at five years old was gluing pill boxes, she along with her mother glued them for her father who got this type of work, because he was disabled. And then her mother died from heart failure in the hospital and her father began openly inviting women to his bedroom. Overall, frightening situations. Raisa ran away from home, ended up with some guys in an empty apartment, and they would not let her out for a few months, and then, after some time, that apartment was uncovered. But that is all history, now that doesn’t concern us anyway, the important thing is that now Raisa still does this type of work.

Sevka leaves for work, Raisa stays home, she doesn’t work anywhere. Sevka leaves her lunch — comes back home from work, and she hasn’t even warmed up the food, hasn’t even gone into the kitchen. She lays around, all day, smoking or she hops from store to store. Or she cries. She’d begin to cry out of the blue — crying for four hours non-stop. And, of course, the neighbor would run over to me, the life drained from her face, crying “go run and save dear Raisa.” And I’d run to her with Validol, with valerian. Although I also feel this way – but not like Raisa who feels like this without a reason, — to the point where I just want to lay down and die. But what is going on within my soul, the difficulties I must deal with — no one understands. I do not scream, I do not ride on an unmade bed. Only when my Petrov for the first time left me, when he wanted to marry that Stanislava woman and they were already searching for credit to pay for our divorce and cooperative and they wanted to adopt my Sasha, — then was the only time in my life when I fell apart. Honestly, Raisa protected me then, as if I were her child, and she threw herself at Petrov with her nails up.

Petrov leaves me three to four times a year, what an eternal, infinite love. This pattern I am now already aware of. But when he left me for the first time, I almost threw myself from the third story of our building. I was shaking all over impatiently hoping for it to all be done with, because that evening he told me that Stanislava was coming over to get to know Sasha. Early in the morning, I drove Sasha to my mother’s at Nagornaya street, and then came back home and waited
for them the entire day. And then I climbed onto the window sill and began tying a piece of wire, one that was left over after Petrov hung it up in the kitchen in several rows for Sasha’s diapers. The wire was strong, insulated with chlorovinyl. And I tied that wire to a spike, one that Petrov hammered into a concrete wall long ago in order to secure a bench. Back then we had only just obtained this room, and Sasha hadn’t yet been born, and I remember how Petrov hammered that wall for almost an hour. I tied the end of the wire to that spike, but the wire was smooth and no matter what, it wouldn’t stay put. Nevertheless, I twisted the wire and made a noose on the other end for my neck, somehow figuring out what to tie where. And right at that very moment someone at the stairs began to open the room with a key. And I forgot everything in this universe — I even forgot about Sasha, and I remembered only that they wanted to adopt him, and because of this it was as if he had been befooled in my eyes, as if I hadn’t given birth to him, as if it wasn’t I who breast fed him. And I panicked, thinking Petrov with Stanislava were entering the apartment, and I jerked the window with my hand in such a manner that the plaster cracked. We plaster the window for the winter.

But inside the room it was already dark, directly ahead from outside the window could be seen a home, empty, without a fire — the house still hadn’t been occupied, only the light of a street lamp glowed not far below. And I again jerked the window, this time the frame giving way. And at that moment Raisa entered the room and threw herself at my feet, hugging them tightly. She is weak, and I am strong and was angry at that moment, but she clung onto my legs like a dog and kept repeating: “Let’s do it together, let’s do it together, wait for me.” And I thought to myself why are you climbing, what’s your problem, — and I even somehow felt insulted for myself. It could be said that my life was in pieces, my husband abandoned me, left me with a child and now wanted to take that child away from me — so, what’s your problem? Still, Raisa climbed and climbed on her knees at the open window, although throwing yourself from the third floor into deep snow without a noose on your neck — that would just be silly. And with all of my strength I pushed her, hitting her face, and her face was wet, slippery, icy. I jumped down from the window all together, closed the window, and the plaster completely shattered, and there was no possibility of fixing it, yes and my hands wouldn’t cooperate.
And after this series of events, only one thing was left — frigidness in my head. I don’t know if Raisa played a role in this, but I understood that all these meaningless projections and going-ons at the first cry of the soul — it all was not my experience. Why must I compare my circumstances to Raisa?

It turned out, everything needed to be done wisely. I took action in such a way, that Stanislava more or less became a fairytale person. This turned out to be extremely easy, because Petrov, in all his stupidity, disclosed her profession and where she works, and wow her name was especially rare. Later on, other women came to Petrov. Many of them I didn’t know by name and I felt like spitting on them, but not throwing myself and hanging on them. And when there were talks of him divorcing me, I simply brushed it aside. I was unaffected by his crying, by his words, by him hating me. With a smile I’d just respond to him: “From yourself, my dear, you won’t run away. If you’re a schizophrenic then go get help.”

But, to tell you the truth, he was at a stalemate: he knew I would not sign away my rights to his room. I had nowhere to go. It wasn’t possible to divide our sixteen square meter space into two. And one more thing: when Sasha was born and Petrov got a promotion, his factory promised us a two room apartment. Because of this, I knew every time that he’d wander around for a while and then return, for when the house would finally be built and officials would start asking for potential residents, as one individual, no less a divorced man, they’d give him nothing. And when we get a two-room apartment — it would be possible to exchange it and divorce. Therefore, Petrov stayed with me each time, waiting for the two-room apartment. Or maybe, this wasn’t the case, and he’d kept coming back to me not for that purpose. For, I always felt, if Petrov had the urge to run away for real, he wouldn’t care about the apartment, not about anything, and would just leave, as if he never existed.

When his back-to-back romances ended, he began staying home in the evenings, glancing over at me, the way I’d go flying from the kitchen to the living room, he’d help me with Sasha — even picking him up from preschool and putting him to bed when I’d be working an evening shift. And finally (after a long time), he would bring home a bottle of semi-sweet champagne, knowing that I love that wine. I must say that I always foresaw this type of moment and also from my end prepared for it. He said to me with a sigh: “Will you drink this with me?” — and from the kitchen cupboard I’d retrieve my Czech wine glasses. This was always
exciting, just like it was on the first date, with the only difference being, we both knew how it would end this time. These zig-zags in our life gave it its bite. And Petrov whispered to me that I am the hottest, the most tender, the most temperamental.

And Raisa — with such things like this she’s stupid as can be. Our acquaintances, the ones that had their business with her, — you can’t really say they slept, because all this would actually take place during the day, when Sevka wasn’t home, and it was just enough to catch her in her room by herself to win the prize, — the guys would say that being with her wasn’t interesting and she behaves herself not only as if she couldn’t care less, but even displeasingly. After this she did not wish to speak to anyone, just like it usually is, — after all people aren’t only animals but also thinking beings, it’s interesting for them to know how a person lives, the one that’s next to them, who the person is in general. Sometimes Petrov and I would speak all night, especially after his zig-zags, and we couldn’t get enough of talking. He would tell me about his women, comparing them with me, and I never had enough of that either — I asked him for more and more details. And together we laughed, truly very kindly, about Raisa. After all, all of our acquaintances, well literally all, even those from Petrov’s hometown, all our visitors met Raisa. And they all told us about her.

Such as, for example, this guy, Grant, from the hometown of Petrov. We wrote to him, that if he arrives and we aren’t home — a spare key is kept at the neighbor Raisa’s apartment, and that she’s almost always there. We set this up a long time ago, that a spare key is always stored at Raisa’s, — this is just more convenient. And we had a spare key of hers too. This was done so that we wouldn’t need to needlessly ring each others doorbells, and also as to not get other neighbors involved in our business.

When we arrived home from work — Grant was already sitting on Sasha’s futon, all red and sad looking, glancing at a painting by Sisley. And on the kid’s dresser Raisa’s keys from our apartment were laying. We understood everything right away, started laughing. I asked: “What, did Raisa spill the beans?” And he looked back at us with fear, shattered. Later, when we explained everything to him, he became clear and calmed down, told us about all the details of what had happened. When she opened the door for him he even said: “What frightens you about me so much? Why are you so afraid of me? I don’t bite.” But she jumped
into the corner. She was wearing nothing but a robe, she always walks around the
house like that. And he added, that he got the impression that she usually agrees
to everything, because she was afraid of something and it caused her to lose her
memory out of fear. And because of that later all that’s left is a bad imprint on his
soul, as if he insulted someone, although she never spoke up and never resisted.

But we calmed him down, so that he wouldn’t worry. From the outside, this
is what Raisa looks like. She leaves the first impression of a small, young, dark
looking girl, and even though she doesn’t know how to dance, and when guests
come to visit us, she quietly sits on Sasha’s futon, and getting her to dance takes
a lot of effort, because she’s shy around crowds of people. And all our guys fall for
this, within every one of them awakens a hunter’s instinct, all of them pull her out
of the corner by the hand, and she trembles all over. And away she goes home.

From the very beginning, she left a pitiful first impression on me, like a new-
born, innocent animal, not small but definitely newborn, not in a good way, but
in a way that punctures the heart. No love can prevent that feeling, this is a pure
pity, the kind that takes your breath away.

It started when she rang our buzzer at four in the morning, without thinking
these are people she doesn’t know, that it’s the middle of the night. I opened the
door and there she stood in her robe, cheeks wet, tears dripping down her chin,
hands in her pockets, shaking all over — asking for a cigarette. I led her into the
kitchen, turned on the light, and found in Petrov’s jacket an opened pack of ciga-
rettes. We smoked together, and I asked her: “And where is your Sevka?” And she
answers with swollen lips: “On a business trip.” We sat and talked for a long time,
I boiled her some coffee, until she stopped trembling. Then I felt that Sasha
kicked the blankets off in his sleep, I went to the bedroom, covered him up, and
returned — she again was doubled up on the high stool — crying. “What’s with
you?” — I asked. — “You probably miss your husband?” She lifted up her head
and answered: “I am afraid of nuclear bombs.” She is not afraid of death, but
bombs, can you believe it? And you can tell, she’s not joking — it was not in her
nature to play games. She always did whatever she had to do, and never pre-
tended. That’s what was very strange about her — that she never resisted. Some-
thing in her was damaged, something about her instinct of self-preservation. And
you could feel this right away.
As she left, right at the door, she started crying again and went back home in that state. I didn’t bother to stop her — since it was already morning, and I had to be at work by nine. And then at work I told all my girlfriends about my neighbor, that kind of girl, the conscience of the world. I even started to be proud of her.

And we couldn’t live a day without one another. Either she with Sevka would hang out at our apartment, or we would hang out at theirs. When I’d go for a cigarette — she’d ask: “Let’s smoke together.” And for two hours. I always told her everything, just like I’m telling you now. I’m the type of person that feels lighter when I say everything. And here we sit for two hours, discussing the whole world’s problems — about life, about people. I’m sitting quietly, talking. I’m a great house keeper, everything is done by the early morning, I prepare dinner, and right after that I quickly go to my institute, when I have a second shift. But she doesn’t work, and doesn’t take care of anything either — as if she’s not the wife of Sevka. He goes to work and does the shopping, and flies back home like a mad man, as if he has a small crying baby waiting for him. He’ll come home, clean everything up — although aside from a full ash ray, there’s nothing to clean up after Raisa. She even doesn’t make any dishes dirty, Sevka leaves soup for her in a pot and a second course on the frying pan — she doesn’t even look, doesn’t even stir it with a spoon.

Sevka even took her to the doctor, took time off work and took her. The doctor found sheer exhaustion in her, and even almost dystrophy. Like a person living during the time of the blockade. He prescribed her aloe vera IV injections.

She bought herself a syringe — and here’s some entertainment for you, she began injecting herself on the leg above the knee. Everything was in order — cotton swabs, rubbing alcohol, a beaker for sterilizing cotton. She would boil the syringe needles herself. Where she learned this from, who knows. Then she’d sit at the window saying: “Turn the other way,” — and then you’d hear such a quiet, sigh-like sound. It always made me shudder inside, I look at Sevka — he’s standing pale, glued to the wall. And she says: “That’s it, idiots,” — but she still hadn’t pulled out the needle, still observing how the last drops of liquid leave the syringe.

That’s how our friendship was, she would fight about me with my husband Petrov. She couldn’t fight properly, and would say: “You’re a real bitch, got it?” That’s probably how they expressed themselves in the corrective labor colony.
Not long ago, Petrov became interested in a girl, she works at the institute in the Antonov lab. You probably know her, she’s flabby, large, and is a waste of space. And my Petrov would routinely pick me up from work, even though he knows I am, let’s say, on a second shift and can’t go home yet. And nevertheless asks me: “Are you coming home?” I answer him no. “Then I won’t wait for you.” And he goes straight to the that lab to visit the other woman. And she, strangely enough, started visiting me in the filing room. And Petrov is already right there with us. They had a common subject to discuss, and before I realized it, Petrov invites her to visit us as a guest. He loves it when we have visitors, he just can’t live without it. If our evening is free, he’ll sit dismally, and then suddenly he’ll get up and leave.

And eventually the time came, when this emptiness needed to be filled with something. I simply physically could feel this time coming. I looked around at all the girls and asked myself: will it be that one or another? At this point in time, we had a lot of visitors in our house. I practically moved Sasha over to my mother’s on Nagornaya street, aside from the fact she also had another granddaughter there. Every evening guests — Petrov and I lived hectically, like people running a guest inn, our guests sometimes arrived with guitars, bringing wine. I’d cook my own speciality dishes — sausages made of cookies with nuts wrapped in cellophane and also fried onion with egg yolks and croutons made from black bread. And I had the impression that everything would come to a dead end, everything would fall apart, because, despite the songs on guitar and dances, despite the tape player and good looking guys and ladies, the atmosphere in our house during those nights was utterly tormenting, boring.

And I looked at all the young women, which were maturing in whole clusters while I was giving birth to Sasha, raising him, going to all the stores, feeding and caring for Petrov, while we were buying a tape player and children’s furniture for Sasha. The women attacked us in entire battalions — beautiful, with modern hairdos, elegantly managing to juggle life with their tiny scholarships and small salaries, ready for everything aggressively. But I knew it’s not of them I need to be afraid. I knew my Petrov quite well. And I was watching those girls and I knew, my Petrov needs a girl like Raisa, not for one time only, but for his whole life.

But strangely, the energy between them didn’t get better, it got worse. Raisa couldn’t stand the sight of him and was rarely seen in our kitchen in his presence.
She couldn’t forgive him for the fact that I was falling apart because of the unknown — truly, I told her everything, aside from my main suspicions.

And then he invited over that large, flabby woman named Nadezhda who works at the third laboratory. Petrov has this strange habit: every one of his girls he absolutely will bring to our apartment. I cannot figure out what it is in him that makes him do that. Sometimes I think, he does this for my benefit, against my benefit, in order to make me suffer even greater and by doing that getting even more pleasure out of his zig-zags. But then I think, that maybe I’m wrong altogether, and that Petrov brings his next girl in line over for his own peace of mind, so that everything is fair and square, without any deception, so that the girl knows what she’s getting herself into, what she is up against — and after this Petrov would remove himself from the trouble, he’d remove himself from that deadly space, separating me and the other woman, so that we’d have to fight with each other and not with him. And maybe, Petrov isn’t capable of such complex mind games and simply in the beginning, when they had not made it to the bed yet, he’d lure the girls in with the prospect of being in such an ambiguous and finicky position of being a girlfriend of a married couple. Actually, Petrov physically has such an ordinary look, so I really don’t know what all these women see in him.

In short, in the midst of that chaos in our house this woman Nadezhda appeared. It even seemed to me like Petrov wasn’t that interested in her, that she is only a weaker equivalent of me in bed and this time the zig-zag wouldn’t be a long one. She was very submissive and agreed to everything he’d say undemanding. She didn’t have that prey-like quality, where he’d have to be careful not to scare her off. She was like a domesticated animal, one that you can push in the desired direction with a twig. For that reason I took pity on her. And we even kind of became friends. We would leave the institute together when I was working on the first shift. And slowly I realized she doesn’t understand anything in life, and doesn’t know a thing about anything — not underwear, nor books, nor food. She just sensed with her whole body warmth and kindness, without changing her facial expression or saying a word, she’d go towards that warmth. In her account, she had a few unsuccessful love affairs at the institute, and even a pregnancy which resulted in a still birth. I remember that event and remember how all the women in our institute were saying that this was better for Nadezhda.
Our friendship continued for a while and it would have kept going, if it weren’t for one event. As I was exiting the room to get the coffee pot, I looked at myself in the entry-way mirror. There was a reflection of the part of the room and table where Petrov and Nadezhda were sitting. And I saw how Petrov gently, like a child, was brushing his hand against Nadezhda’s cheek and how Nadezhda took that hand of Petrov’s, placing it right on her breast.

I pulled myself together even though I was tormented by one thing: how could I have missed this? Why did I think Raisa was the real threat — when Nadezhda just popped out right next to me, and this was scary because she visually was unattractive. Raisa is for all that “the conscience of the world, that kind of girl,” and Nadezhda was just some empty void.

Petrov went to walk Nadezhda home and came back at one o’clock at night, exhausted and worn out, wasted. I didn’t bother to touch him, didn’t bother saying anything, because I knew: in such a condition, Petrov has only one goal — sleep. If I would say something to him or kick him out of the house, he’d be able to fall asleep in the kitchen, on the staircase, on the windowsill. He might have gone back to Nadezhda and stayed with her. For whatever reason he came home. That meant that not all was lost. This meant, this was not the last straw, but just the beginning of another zig-zag, as a protest against boring daily married life. And nothing else made Petrov thrash about quite like this. Just one beautiful day he’d become bored. Sometimes from some place he’d acquire and bring home il-literately typed and copied lectures about health advice — but it was purely pornography. We read this aloud in the presence of Sevka and Raisa, but it must be said that this never had the intended affect on them. They attentively listened, but they were indifferent, as if we were reading advice to patients with atherosclerosis. Although these lectures made me and Petrov laugh till we were red in the face. And for us it was the beginning of some zig-zag, but it was very short-lived and without a doubt it had an absence of pacification, which usually happened when Petrov would come back to his family.

And so, I was counting on that Petrov would come back again this time as well, so I didn’t pay attention to it — didn’t pay attention to Petrov’s later arrivals, or to how Petrov completely abandoned Sasha and stopped teaching him how to read. After some time, a neighbor told me that all this week while I was working night shifts, Petrov had brought over some tall, plump woman and would walk
her off just before I’d return home. During these evenings Sasha wasn’t home — my mother was picking him up from preschool and he’d stay with her on Nagornaya street, so the room was available.

I called my mother right away and as an exception, asked her to stay with Sasha at our house that evening, put him to bed and wait for my return. Mother didn’t want to because she had a lot of work on Nagornaya street, my older brother essentially threw the responsibility of his child Ninotchka onto her. But I managed to talk my mother into helping me — let my brother figure things out this one night without our mother. I don’t remember what lies I told about my brother to convince my mother into helping me. My mother didn’t know anything about the zig-zags of Petrov, and if she’d find out she’d very quickly make sure we’d divorce. Because of this I didn’t tell her anything, and she had a pretty good relationship with Petrov.

Just as I had planned, that evening Petrov again invited over Nadezhda, and they happened to run into my mother. Something went down with my mother and Nadezhda. This was because, I repeat, there was not a war between Petrov and I, but between Nadezhda and I. It was my calculation, that when Nadezhda would see Petrov’s mother in law shouting and Petrov’s crying son, that she’d back off.

And maybe she did back off. But Petrov didn’t. That night he didn’t come home at all, and it seemed like he’d never come back. He did come home a few times — for his shaving razor, for socks and shirts, and later for the tape player. He became avoidant, taller and suddenly started looking like that sweet boy that was madly in love with me once upon a time. I didn’t say a word to him, silently handing him the tape player and anything else he wanted, and he behaved obstinately, as if in his mind he was answering the questions I never brought up. But I remained silent, even though it was evident that no gratitude would ever get him to come back.

And here I understood, that I am losing everything, the entire world. Only Raisa was on my side, while the rest of the world was on the opposite one. Mother, shaken up by the unexpected results of her interference was angry at me for planning such an encounter. Sasha? I am a realistic woman. I know that children’s attachment and love is never specifically directed because of the person a parent is, merely it exists because they’re the parent. I think he would have loved any
other face, figure, hair color, character with the same intensity. He would love me even if I was a murderer, the greatest violin player, a store clerk, a prostitute, a holy person. But that's only up to a certain point, only while he's sucking the life out of me. Then, indifferent as to whether it's me or another person, he'd leave. This awareness of Sasha’s forthcoming betrayal always discouraged me, when I bent over to hug him, already clean and lying in the dusk on his futon. Maybe I owe thus feeling to Petrov, for he’s taught me to expect betrayal.

My mother also already didn’t love me. Yes, she never loved me as a human being, only as her own creation, her flesh and blood. Now, in her old age, she was sickly attached to Sasha and her other granddaughter, Ninotchka. And I, and Petrov, and my older brother plus his wife, she was already unconcerned about us — we were just relatives.

I went over to Raisa and told her everything. As I’ve noticed, I already have lots of experience telling stories like this one. I’ve told them to the girls at the institute, I’ve even told them to acquaintances, women you lie with in the maternity hospital for three days after an abortion. But to Raisa I told stories differently. Raisa definitely understood, that she is the only one there for me in the world. She understood that the words were already not about the zig-zags, but about the loss of a place to live for Sasha and I, it was about the loss of the two-room apartment I had wanted so desperately and which I had even seen in my dreams. So many times during our night talks Petrov and I would imagine how we’d furnish that apartment. Petrov wanted to paint the wall in the kitchen like a Siqueros piece, like one giant fresco, he even wanted to paint the cooking cover in the same style, even wanted to paint the refrigerator door. These were all dreams, although my Petrov can draw alright with a calligraphy pen, nicely copying the portraits of famous jazz musicians from magazines, inserting them into black, thin bags and hanging them on the walls. Petrov can even play jazz parts on the piano, for several years he was part of an amateur group that performed at the club “Pobeda,” he did this until he felt himself too old for those activities, felt himself too old for all those bus trips to collective farms, felt himself too old to be an accompanist for those who were taking vocal lessons. Petrov taught himself to play percussion and contra bass. And several times he even solo sang accompanied by his quartet — grand piano, guitar, contra bass, percussion — an english
song “Shaykhem” — I think that’s how it was pronounced. But no one appreciated his simple, pure voice without any hoarseness or nuances, his perfect English pronunciation. He sang different than how he spoke, which sounded very artificial too. He sang straight forward, loud, and monotone, but that voice had a deep masculine sincerity to it, defenselessness. He sang intensely like a tightened string, and he’d slightly jolt to the rhythm of the songs. I heard him only one time, when Sasha was just two months old. I wasn’t really into listening to Petrov that evening, milk inflamed my breasts, filling up every cell, and they felt wooden, crystallized. I was going crazy and becoming nervous, feeling like Sasha wanted to eat, and Petrov’s part, like always, was at the very end of the program. And finally his group appeared on stage, they were rolling out a grand piano, and Petrov was carrying a small microphone, a new thing at that time. For a long while the percussionist set up his instruments, and then they played Chamberlain, a gentle waltz, and then finally “Shaykhem.”

Petrov sang, simultaneously shaking his whole long body to the rhythm, and I caught myself listening to him for a little while, but the milk started leaking from my breasts, and I understood that I needed to run to Sasha, for he was crying and demanding food. And I stood up even though the song wasn’t done, turned my back to Petrov and ran out of the concert hall. In that moment Petrov wasn’t a priority, just like he isn’t a priority right now, because all of my energy was preoccupied with Sasha, when milk took up the entirety of my breasts leaving only the membranes between glands. And still to this day I don’t know how Petrov perceived that moment when I rushed from the auditorium, and who knows if people were clapping after his performance like he deserved, — I didn’t even ask him, and he never explained. I didn’t explain anything to him either, because at that time we didn’t converse much.

I don’t know why I told all this to Raisa. I cried in front of her, as if she was the only one that could save me. I didn’t know how to get Petrov back. Not only did the dream about the apartment disappear — but also the gloomy thought of Sasha being treated as a bastard in life appeared, and because of this thought, maybe, I was always so attached to keeping Petrov. I will become a single mother, Sasha will be missing a strong, masculine presence and will run away from me at the first wave from a comrade. He’d follow after any man starving for masculine words and attention, he may end up in a gang or a corrective labor colony.
I cried in front of Raisa while she sat still as a stone in her signature pose at the edge of the futon. Upon hearing the word “corrective labor colony” she didn’t even blink.

But by the morning I had already dried up. Suddenly, I started to think that for Petrov this was another zig-zag, because he didn’t love Nadezhda and between us nothing bad had happened, no fight and no conversations, — really it was just my mother that had fought with him, and my mother — that’s not me. And as I was walking to work, a crazy idea popped into my head, that I should go and talk to Nadezhda. But later I abandoned that idea. You could change her mind only by showing her kindness and care, and what good things did I have to offer her? Just very recently she set her eyes on Petrov — and asking her to leave him kindly? She just wouldn’t understand me.

But this wasn’t what was important — the most important was to convince Petrov, so that he’d at least pretend to be my husband and a father again. He could go where he wanted, as long as Sasha would get to see him. But how to ask Petrov to do that — for he would never go for it on his own and not on my request either.

I went over to Raisa and asked her to speak with Petrov by phone. Like, um, hmm, I haven’t seen you in a while, stop on by, let’s talk — that type of conversation, simple and straightforward, that’s what I suggested she’d say. She agreed. But she agreed reluctantly. I didn’t really pay attention to that part.

That evening I went over to Raisa’s. She was laying on the futon smoking. She told me that she had spoken with Petrov. That he’d return tomorrow. That is all that she told me, but then as per usual, she began crying. I brought her a glass of water from the kitchen and ran to go pick up Sasha from preschool.

The next day, Petrov returned with a briefcase and the tape player. In his briefcase were two balled-up shirts and socks tucked in a newspaper. It was clean and cozy as we ate breakfast, the three of us together. Sasha tugged at Petrov’s newspaper, asking him where each letter was.

In all reality, the end of his zig-zag was not in sight. Petrov didn’t notice me and was barely ever home. But this was already better than complete absence.

I was very busy and didn’t have time to stop at Raisa’s. And I didn’t have a necessity to do so anyways. The domestic life took over my existence. Petrov’s work would soon decide the fate of the new apartment. I ran around, standing in lines, waiting to buy a new furniture set.
Petrov began looking at me with a question in his eyes, looking at me with obvious pleasure, observing how I’d fly from the kitchen to the living room, observing how I spoke with Sasha. Before dinner Petrov left without a word, and returned home with a bottle of semi-sweet champagne. He said:

— Will you drink with me?

And I ran to the kitchen to get the Czech crystal glasses. We made a toast. I jokingly said:

— For Raisa. For our kind, genius.

And Petrov smirked and somewhat ironically said that the guys were right about what they said, she is definitely dumb as a wall.

At that moment I figured it all out and pitied that Raisa had deceived me.

And she stopped existing in my mind, as if she had died.