

# *Stalin's Daughter*

Translated by Terry Myers

Something's always going on in our building. Like this morning, for example. A person in an electric wheelchair ran into his own toilet. Simply ploughed right into it, full speed. In other words an accident took place, a collision between the chair and the toilet. The toilet, of course, cracked wide open. Right away there was a fountain spraying the ceiling, flooding. The maintenance man recounted that there were twenty gallons on the floor, he could barely scoop it all up. And while he was scooping, behind him, he heard footsteps, someone step-step-stepping cautiously. He glanced around, he was almost scared; and from the hallway he could see a shadow falling on the gleaming floor. And then he caught the sound of rapidly receding steps. Someone was running on tiptoe. The maintenance man was a hardy, tall, broad-shouldered and seasoned guy. But now he was wary. Because you could expect almost anything from our tenants. He rose from his squat and carefully entered the room. It was dark in that room, and very quiet. And the tenant, our tenant, the one who had run with his wheelchair into the toilet, was lying under his blanket, sleeping, his hands folded peacefully on his chest. (We must not forget, the tenant, supposedly, couldn't walk on his own.) When the maintenance man demonstrated these hands folded on the chest for me, his broad face wore a tender and touching expression. And the history behind his tale sounded soft and tender. Maybe on account of his accent. He was from Poland, you see.

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Elderly people live in our building. There are many of them, and they are aging steadily. At any rate, during the several years I've worked here, many of them have begun to noticeably decline. And when you learn that someone has died, a person whom you just saw yesterday in the cafeteria or in the hallway, you don't cease to be amazed. After all, he was standing alive before your eyes, and now he's gone, at any rate he's no longer with us.

Our tenants are pushy, at times unbearable. They feud among themselves and with management. They are needy, and loud, and constantly need help. They don't understand their mail, the tons of paper that come to them written in the language they couldn't master. They forget keys, slam doors, lose documents and purses; they continually want something, or are unsatisfied with something. They curse Russia and America. They vote Democrat, they vote Republican, in accordance with the recommendations of their trustworthy friends, and watch an endless number of programs on Russian television.

But here you have Tereza... She never complains about anything. I'll smile at her, and she'll smile back at me. And she explains herself with complete precision in English. It's no joke, you know, trying to acquire a language at her age. Therefore, when she ran up to me on Friday morning, I was taken by surprise. "Help me!" she cried out from a distance upon seeing me in the hallway. "Help! Help me, Zhenia, I have bedbugs! What should I do?! Tell me, what should I do?" She was almost sobbing.

I went together with her to see management. "This is a very serious problem," I said. I wanted to calm her down. Make her understand that we're going to do something, which we're not going to have her battle the bedbugs on her own. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saving me, it's horrible, I thought I would die. Thank you."

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During the second half of the day I went together with our administrator to see her. It seemed she had been beside herself this whole day. Every thirty seconds she would interrupt me. I asked her to wait, I had to interpret what she was saying. She would agree to this, nod her head, curse herself, cover her face with her hands, but after a minute she was already interrupting me, and the administrator, not letting us finish, with a ready-made nervous reaction toward every word, every argument. We had already summoned an extermination

team, already arranged a time when they were supposed to come to her apartment. All her bedding, all her things had to be packed in plastic bags; the mattress had to be taken off and vacuumed, all the drawers removed from the tables, dressers, and nightstands.

Tereza was in despair, she kept grabbing her head. The hairs around her head dispersed in the air and formed a cloud, a puff of smoke, a delicate, lacy halo; with this beautiful, old-fashioned hairdo, she looked just like a gracious lady from an antique miniature portrait. But Tereza was not a lady from a miniature, she was a grandmother from the former Soviet Union now living in a residence for the elderly, sick, and impoverished. The concrete balcony of her apartment was chipped, its white paint was flaking off like scales. It seemed like the balcony was becoming moldy, covered with stains. I saw the inner wall of the balcony through the non-curtained window, and it reminded me of the trunk of an old and mighty plane tree.

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At the end of the next day the administrator phoned me.

“She’ll have to pay for the mattress protector,” she said in an apologetic voice, “or to have this mattress and box spring professionally packaged up and taken to the dump.”

“Rather than you speaking with her directly, it would be better for me to interpret all this into Russian for her,” I said, instantly imagining Tereza’s reaction.

“Okay,” the administrator sighed. “I can try and see her tomorrow.”

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The day had ended, evening had arrived, and it was stifling. I went home and began watering the flowers. The edges of the leaves were wilted and yellowed. I got the garden shears and started to trim them off. An orange tabby came by, thin and mangy, with either a dark wound or scar on its side. It wearily sat down on the porch. I wanted to shoo the newcomer off, but felt sorry for it right away – I pictured myself as an insensitive, mean aunt, a homemaker, a *petit bourgeois*, a nasty, cranky proprietress. Most likely the cat was starving – it looked emaciated and exhausted. Still two more felines scooted past. Two years ago a family moved into the neighboring house; the family had received a Section 8 – a certificate to obtain subsidized housing because of low income. “We pay taxes and run ourselves ragged, and they...” I griped. As a matter of fact, the neighbors never worked in the garden, never cleaned up the dry fallen leaves. The place they rented on the third floor was wallowing in patchwork repairs and holes, in toothless, bristling squalor. It was a monument to, visual aid for, and proof of the merits of private property. The neighbors on the other side diligently and impeccably tended to their lawn, they raked the leaves, mowed the grass, and watered the flowers. They were worthy descendants of the immigrants from Old England.

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On Wednesday we set off to see Tereza. The organization owned five massive brick edifices linked by connecting passages and galleries and hallways. Major repairs were going on in Tereza’s building. The rugs in the corridors, which had been covered with a fine layer of stucco, would have to be replaced. All sorts of blemishes and separation lines remained visible on them, traces of leaks from burst pipes, tracks of construction workers’ shoes, stains of unknown origin. It was unbearably stuffy in the hallways; dust floated on the air and down through the hall; from under the doors came the smell of Chinese cooking, Russian borscht, or cheap fried fish.

Tereza greeted us with her arms outstretched. “Take a look!” – She waved her arms, she ran through her tiny apartment, she showed us bales of bedding and warm items packed in plump plastic bags. “I can’t do this anymore! There’s one thing left for me to do – throw myself from the balcony. Do you call this a life? How could you call it a life!? You don’t understand, I’ve already lost my mind, I run around the entire place, I peek into every corner; they pop up at every step! Take a look, take a look!” And she began to display her terror to us, her fear of the bedbugs, lifting items from the table and peeking under napkins, letters scattered across the table, papers, small items and magazines; she picked up the salt shaker and leaned her head forward, and began examining it from underneath. “Take a look at my legs!” Tereza cried. She hitched her hem to show her bite-ridden legs. She was wearing a pale blue dress with flowers. She seemed surprisingly normal in spite of her distress. Her fragile pink skin was covered with fine wrinkles. She was still beautiful in spite of her badly decaying teeth, in spite of her weary watery eyes. Her posture was erect and she had girlish manners and an old-fashioned dignified hairdo like a powdered wig.

“We have two options,” the administrator said, “two possibilities, two paths to take. You can ask the team handling your apartment to cover your mattress with a special protector, so that the bugs don’t crawl out of it even if there are still eggs the bedbugs have laid.”

“What? I’m supposed to sleep on the bedbugs?”

“No, these mattress protectors are specially processed. Most likely, the bedbugs under them will die.”

“And what else can we do?” Tereza asked and leaned forward above the table, as if she wanted to move closer to the administrator.

“We can still ask to have the mattress taken to the dump. But first it has to be wrapped in a particular manner. But this all won’t be for free,” the administrator added and gazed at Tereza sympathetically.

Tereza immediately became agitated and began to talk rapidly in broken English, interspersing her speech with Russian words and phrases. Both of them clearly understood one another. Maybe I wasn’t needed here? But Tereza’s resentment kept increasing. It seemed that her words were inflaming her, forcing her to transition into Russian completely.

“*Dengi!* Money! It’s all about *dengi!* A misfortune has befallen me, and I won’t pay for my misfortune! It’s a matter of principle, do you hear me, I won’t! Everything inside me is against this. What money? Money from where?”

The administrator, by all appearances, took her distress for granted and nodded her head. Yes, her sympathetic face said, yes, I understand everything, I hear you and I’m with you. Despite the screaming, there was no threat, no hostility in the tone of Tereza’s voice or in her face. It seemed that, like a child, she was waiting for them to stop her. Are they taking me seriously? Are they listening to me?

“I won’t pay,” she said, her voice already normal again. I translated this phrase into English, and the administrator nodded her curly head. Eyes dark as cherries flashed behind the round panes of her expensive glasses. A chain with a diamond draped from the square, old-fashioned frame.

“...I understand,” said the administrator and nodded again.

“What a dreadful life I’ve had! And there’s nobody with me, nobody!” Tereza suddenly started weeping. “My grandson’s in Israel, and Masha, my granddaughter, is in Argentina...” That’s interesting; I thought to myself, does she have children? For some reason she only talks about her grandchildren.

“I’ve suffered my entire life, my entire life.” Teresa was weeping, and I interpreted the words that were bursting through her tears.

“She sounds really bad,” I remarked to the administrator. “Can’t we do anything for her?”

“I don’t know...,” she said, and her pendant earrings suddenly began swaying. “Maybe I can call the agency, they sometimes have funds for cases like this... But don’t promise her anything.”

“I won’t.”

“Tereza, are you a widow? Perhaps you’re a widow? They sometimes have funds for widows...” I translated the administrator’s words. My head kept turning right and left. When I turned left, towards Tereza, I saw the peeling balcony wall behind her.

“Of course I’m a widow! What else would I be?!” The tears seemed to seep under her eyes through the scrawny skin, wet like grass in the rain, soft like thin parchment. She covered her face with her hands. Thin transparent nails, unpolished, thin bronzed hands, dry aged skin on her wrists.

“So what’s your choice? We have to make a decision today. Do you want to toss your mattress out? To roll it up and take it to the dump will cost you a hundred dollars. And then you’ll need to buy a new mattress...”

“Why new? This is new! I bought it seven years ago! It’s a good mattress. I paid three hundred dollars for it. How come a new mattress? Do something! I’m already afraid to approach the bed. For a month already, you see, for a month I’ve been sleeping on the couch! Do you know what this is like? I don’t understand what kind of a world I’m in! It’s a nightmare, horrible, I can’t sleep, I’m in bad shape... I paid three hundred dollars for this mattress. I realize a new one would cost five hundred dollars. But you have to buy a new one, don’t you... Why must I pay to have the mattress hauled to the dump!? That’s just stupid! Why? I can haul it myself! Yes! I’ll haul it.” She leapt up and ran into the bedroom.

“Tereza! Wait, don’t leave!” I cried out. “We’re obligated to act in accordance with the law. Do you understand? It’s our duty.”

“I understand everything.” She stopped in the doorway, clutching the jam. “I understand everything. Forgive me. Honestly, I have nothing against you. It’s simply a matter of principle.”

“We’re not working for ourselves, but for an organization financed by the government, do you understand? We have to behave as they require us to do, it’s our duty.”

“Yes, I understand...” She returned to her chair by the window. There was, as a matter of fact, a door to the balcony. Above the table hung a large map of the world and on the map there was a photograph of a beautiful young woman. Tereza had already said that this was a photograph of her granddaughter.

“You don’t have to toss out the mattress,” the administrator said gently. “We’ll engage the company that does our extermination work, and they’ll place a special covering on the mattress to...” The administrator never had a chance to finish the phrase she had started. Tereza became agitated again. “I’ve lived here for twenty years already,” she screamed. “Twenty years! And not once did I ask for anything! What, you think I brought

you these bedbugs from Russia? Like it was contraband, a bomb with a delayed fuse? What, I did this with some special purpose in mind?"

"Tereza, nobody's accusing you. We simply have to make a decision, today." The administrator looked with an expectant gaze at the old woman, who lowered her head into her hands, then bent towards the table.

I translated and thought that this was all so very strange. We're talking about bedbugs! Just think, bedbugs.

"I'm already eighty-five," said Tereza. "That's a lot of years."

"Everything will be fine," I said.

"No, nothing will ever be fine," she objected.

"Believe me, it'll all be fine. We'll think of something."

"I'll call the agency and try to get you some help," the administrator said.

"Thank you!" Tereza exclaimed. "Thank you. God bless you!"

"Thank you," the administrator said with some embarrassment.

"So what will you do?" I asked after a minute had passed.

“Do? What am I supposed to do?”

“About the mattress...”

“What, I’m supposed to make a decision now, today?” And she suddenly started to cry. “My entire life’s been like this... My entire life! Do you understand, my entire life! They shot Papa in ’37. And then, wherever you poke your face, you’re an enemy of the people. He was an enemy of the people, and I was the daughter of an enemy of the people.” She took my hand and looked me dead in the eyes. It seemed she had calmed down and was simply passing on very important information about herself to me, what was most essential. “If you wanted this job, it was forbidden to you, you’re the daughter of an enemy of the people. You go here, you go there, and again you’re the daughter of an enemy of the people. There was nothing to eat, there was always nothing to eat. We lived for three and a half months in a chiffonier, in a wardrobe cabinet – on the street. And then there was the war...” I interpreted and my head was completely spinning. After all, we’d only come to Tereza’s to talk about the bedbugs.

The administrator, attentive in her quiet, inquisitive way, raised her perfectly groomed eyebrows, and I felt the need to add some historical context. And she kept nodding her head. Perhaps she had heard something similar before. Perhaps she had read about all this and understood what Tereza was talking about?

“And in the war they evacuated us... Oh!” Tereza waved her hand and fell silent.

The administrator looked at me expectantly, but I was still busy, interpreting everything. In my mind, before my eyes stood the chiffonier, the wardrobe cabinet in which they had lived. How could you live in a cabinet?

“Before we left there they wouldn’t even allow me to take a notebook with me, I couldn’t even take my friends’ addresses with me.” She fell silent again and lowered her head. The administrator was also silent, biding her time, apparently, trying to understand something, allowing Tereza to speak freely and waiting for her moment to intervene. “All my life! All my life has passed me by... I won’t pay, it’s contrary to who I am, I can’t do this on moral grounds. Money! *Dengi!* Everywhere it’s about money, money, money... Who cares about money when a person suffers a misfortune! Even millionaires get sick, they also suffer and die. Money doesn’t help anything.”

“But people do get sick, and afterward they send them a hospital bill, and they pay no matter what, even if they’re forced to undergo a heart operation. Do you understand?”

Tereza was silent.

“What do you want, Tereza, how do you want to solve this problem?” I asked.

“Me?” It was as if her eyes had found me, seen me, and were focused. “Well, now I’ll explain it to you. I’m from Russia. We’re used to this. We had bedbugs, and we got rid of them. But now we’re in America. Let them do a treatment with something more powerful, and the bedbugs will disappear.”

“They’ve already done a treatment with a very powerful chemical, but the bedbugs won’t die right away. They’ll lay more eggs. We can’t just carry this mattress out of the building, because then these eggs and the bedbugs themselves would wind up at your neighbors. And then it’s very dangerous to your health,” said the administrator. “I knew this one person, the bedbugs ate him up so bad that he ended up with anemia, a low blood count, and he was forced to get a blood transfusion.”

“What a nightmare!” Tereza’s lower jaw had dropped, and she had thrown up her hands.

“They treated the apartment with a very strong chemical, Tereza,” the administrator said.

“Nothing’s changed. They’re crawling around everywhere! Let’s go, I’ll show you!”

“You don’t have to, I believe you.”

“Uh-huh, and what kind of treatment did they do? Obviously a bad one! Hire a good company, and let them do a real treatment!”

“They did a good job of treatment. The bedbugs will die off soon enough,” the administrator calmly answered.

“Tereza, you’re not totally correct,” I butted in. “I’m also from Russia, they’d poison the bedbugs there, but then they’d come back, and they’d lay eggs under the wallpaper, and then we’d rip this wallpaper off.”

“Yes! I remember, it was awful! They’d run along the wall and head for the neighbors’.”

“And do you remember Mayakovsky’s *The Bedbug*? It’s the hardiest insect. It would survive an atomic explosion.”

“It seems to me that it’s the cockroaches that would survive a radioactive explosion,” the administrator clarified.

“Well, anyway it's one of the hardiest insects.”

“Please, would you just simply save me?! It's all clear to me! It's all clear to me now. I thought if I were in America, they'd be able to think up something, that they would have already invented something against bedbugs long ago. But they're not dying! Right? It's all clear to me now. Thank you! What would I ever do without you?!”

“Don't be that way, Tereza! Let's think together about the best thing to do,” the administrator continued.

“You. You do the thinking.”

“Do you want me to make the decision for you?”

“Yes! I can't, please understand me, I just can't. My grandson's coming to visit me, and where will he sleep?! God, what am I to do!”

“Tereza, take it easy.” I placed my hand on her wrist. Her skin was dry and scrawny, covered with dark spots, the hand of a shriveled old woman. “Everything will be fine,” I said again.

“Thank you! It's nice that there are still good people in this world.”

I became ashamed. I hadn't done anything for her. I interpreted, wishing that this all would be over soon. My arms and neck were itching, and I thought about the chair I was sitting on. Were bedbugs also lurking in the chairs?

“Come on, let’s wrap your mattress in a special protector, it’ll be cheaper that way, and there’ll be no need to buy a new mattress.”

“You’re right! God, I’m so grateful to you! You’re right! And they’ll croak there! All of them! They’ll kick the bucket! Isn’t that so? We’ll kill the bedbugs! Let them breathe their last! *Pust’ podokhnut!*”

“Let them...*podokhnut*,” the administrator laughed, repeating the syllables of the Russian word. It came out all wrong: “*petokhnyet*.” But surprisingly close to *petukh*, rooster. Tereza also started to laugh.

“After all I’m strong,” she said. And she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’ll survive. After all I’m a daughter of Stalin!” And she started to laugh again. “Yes! That’s right! He killed my father, all our fathers, and then adopted us. Do you understand? He adopted me, you see? Now I’m Stalin’s daughter, a strong woman.”

The administrator smiled. She didn’t understand.

“It’s a joke,” Tereza smiled in response.

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On the street it was hot and stifling, but your body was glad for the warmth. Your skin began to breathe, softening in the sun’s rays.

“You know, there was this book. It was called *Love’s Executioner*, a collection of stories about some people, the patients of a psychologist. An American psychotherapist wrote it in the 1960s,” I said.

“I wouldn’t know, I never read it,” the administrator shrugged her shoulders.

“There’s a story in it about a woman who endured many things, became a widow. And, nevertheless, she held on. And then she lost her purse when she went into a store to get groceries. And this loss produced such a reaction in her... As if this loss were literally the last straw...”

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In the evening I watered my garden again. The grass was suffocating under the sun, the large leaves of the African elephant ear plant were wilting, and the flowers in their beds were drooping on withered stems. Three cats ran past. They were chasing each other, nonchalantly hovering in flight like four-footed birds with tails. I could hear their fierce screeching transitioning into a protracted “me-e-ow.” At night they’ll wake me again, screech, and somersault under my window.

The End

Boston, 2006 - 2015