

Cup of Tea

That day didn't start well for Bogdanov. Early in the morning he was woken up by the telephone. It was his former school friend, Alyonka. She was ringing from Vladivostok, he could hardly hear her. He just understood she had got married. The conversation was cut off. After that crazy unexpected phone call his thoughts got confused. "Why did she ring?" Serega thought. "What does it have to do with me? I was her friend, I really liked her eyelashes. I still do. But what does Vladivostok have to do with it?" He knew something had happened but he didn't know what. This thought was bothering him. What made it even worse was that he was annoyed and dissatisfied with himself after the stupid calls to all district organizations.

At ten all the staff were called into the assembly room. Without any introduction, the assistant secretary began to announce addresses for visits. "What visits? Don't we have enough letters to answer? Every single one of us has about twenty of them. They are all urgent and need attendance," head of the industrial department whispered loudly enough to be heard. He was worried about the report at the plenary meeting and couldn't imagine all of his instructors and his assistant going somewhere today.

Two days a week they all turned up for work at twelve. Each of them was supervising the building of two nine-storey blocks of flats in a new district. In autumn they would wear wellington boots, with their trousers

turned up and carrying their clean boots over their shoulders. Their job was to supervise engineers and technicians collecting the carrot crop in their sponsored farms. In spring they would watch them break the ice in the roads and pavements just before the first secretary of the region party committee turned up.

The assistant secretary was stating the task with his monotonous voice. It was about who needed to go where to carry the information to the people. He was punctually crossing off his table sheet what he had just said.

They had to go to fifteen flats in their district to inform the people about their relatives' death. A plane had had a crash outside Leningrad at night. They couldn't announce it on TV. Then it would have been a published event. So the men had to deliver the news.

It happens all the time. If something doesn't fit standard, something unexpected happens, the district committee is to blame. It means they didn't take everything into account. Ready, set, go!

At the first address where Bogdanov came no one was in. He thought he was lucky and he went to the next address. When he rang the bell, a short middle-aged man opened the door. It was only midday but the man was already tipsy. Bogdanov could hear voices from the flat. Several people were sitting at the table having a drink. It was some sort of celebration, they had more bottles than plates on the table.

Sergey called the man, who opened the door, into the kitchen. In there two women were cooking something. Bogdanov could hear someone's voice, "Where have you gone? Come here! Who is that? It must be the new dad. At last!" But the man could see it was not the new dad.

"What do you want, lad?"

"I am from the district party committee..."

"So? You want to have a drink with us?"

"Hang on. I was sent to you..."

"It's not election time, is it?"

"Does Pyotr Vasilyich Lozhkin live here? I mean, he died today."

The man fell silent. In his head one event was overlapping the other. Celebration and the arrival of that one...

"What are you talking about? What the hell... Where is Petka?"

"His plane had a crash this morning outside Leningrad." Trying to prove he was telling the truth, Bogdanov poked his party committee ticket into his face. "I told you, I am from the district party committee."

Sergey suddenly thought, "So, if I am from the district committee, they should believe in the death of their relative, but if it was from the Council of the people's deputies they wouldn't believe, not in a million years. No, I think any certificate will work here. This is how it works. If something happens, they ring an attendant on duty in the district committee."

"Hang on! Who do you think you are to tell us this?" the relative shouted. "Katya, Lena, come here! Quick! The two young women came up to them and Bogdanov had to repeat everything again. Only now three pairs of eyes were staring at him.

"Here's the phone number you can call. They will answer your questions. Now, excuse me, I've got to go," Sergey mumbled.

The instructor saw his listeners eye lose their joy, then puzzlement. They became scared, faithless and aggressive. The bloke walked around Sergey and blocked the front door.

"No, wait a second! I don't get it... What's happening now? You've got to tell us what, why, where we've got to go. You tell THEM," the man pointed at the people sitting at the table. They must have been the parents and young wife of the dead. "I don't need your card. Do you think you can do it just because you're wearing a tie? You came here, dumped a load and now you're going to run!"

The man was pushing Bogdanov inside the room with his belly, then snatched his card from him and threw it on the bed. "Klava, look what they are doing! Just look!" the man shouted and pointed at the party card lying on the pillow. "Going around and destroying people's lives."

"Shut up," the elderly man said quietly and with menace in his voice. He must have been the father of the dead. "Klava, calm him down." He lifted himself up, got the card from the bed and headed for Bogdanov. He stopped in front of him and looked at his face without blinking. The old man's eyes were getting more and more narrow and his low lip was slowly pushing itself against the upper lip. Occasionally he would turn his head to look at the elderly woman, who must have been his wife. She was making a fuss trying to get up and she dropped a couple of bottles on the floor. Next to her stood Klava. She was howling and screaming.

"Uncle Vasya! Uncle Vasya! Don't listen to him! They are swines!" she started howling again and waving her fists as if fighting evil spirits. "Auntie Klava, don't listen to him. They are scum bags..." she didn't even look at Bogdanov but was still waving her arms.

The old man was holding the lapel of his blazer covered with a stock with medals and orders with his left hand and he was holding Bogdanov's card with his right hand.

"He is going to hit me now. With the card. It was better to get a blow than to watch them..." Bogdanov was thinking who he looked like at the moment, he just shrank into himself instinctively.

"Go away, lad," the old man said sharply. He pointed at the door. "You don't even understand how much damage you've done. You just came here and..." The man shook his head and waved his hand strongly. "Just go. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know. I don't even understand how people can do it... This is not the way to do it!"

Sergey turned to the front door. There was no sense in saying anything. "Damn!" he remembered about his card. At that very moment the first man kicked him out of the flat. "Go away, scum bag in a tie! We'll find out everything without your help. They will show it on the box. It might be all wrong. Sending the scum bags – it's out of order!"

Sergey ran down the stairs from the fourth floor and stood downstairs, shaken up. This job looked like a hangman's. People look at you like you are a hangman. Of course, they do. There was a person and you come and say he has died. It looks like you are to blame. Like a postman in the wartime, when he would deliver a death notice. At least a postman had a letter, he had nothing, just words. Those days everyone had the same grief and many saw others being brought dreadful news. Why is it the district party committee? Why not deputies? They had been elected so they were known at least. It was easier with Afghanistan. People from the military commissariat dealt with that. They were the ones to draft, they are the ones to return. But here... It looks like it is the party's fault if the party members visit families and tell them the dreadful news. How can he get his card back? He will be in trouble without it!

The window on the fourth floor opened and his card fell on the snow right in front of Sergey.

At the last address there was an old woman, the mother of the dead. As soon as she saw Bogdanov in the doorway, crumpling his hat and going to say something, the woman froze on the spot and a few seconds later she started crying quietly.

"I knew, I felt something happen. I couldn't sleep all night. What's the matter with Igoryok? Where is he? Something wrong with the plane?"

Sergey was silent, he lowered his head and thought it was silly to say he was from the party committee. His

unexpected visit coincided with what the woman had dreamed of last night. She didn't need anything else. The woman was standing at the doorway and crying. Her next door neighbour peeped out of his door. He was a middle-aged man with long red hair. He looked around, watched the crying woman, then Bogdanov and shut his door.

"He is going to call the militia," Sergey thought, and he had no document of the catastrophe. They could say he was frightening people. The militia men liked to arrest people with cards and certificates, especially if someone was waving with them.

Suddenly the woman turned around and went into a room. She took a black knitted scarf and covered the mirror in the hallway with it. She looked around indifferently at the self-made radio on the window sill, the photo of her son and daughter-in-law on the chest of drawers. She came back and took the scarf from the mirror. Then she sat on the chair and without a word took the kettle, filled two cups with hot water, moved a little glass bowl with three chocolate bars into the middle of the table and said quietly, "Sit with me".

Sergey took his hat off, sat on the edge of the chair and drank the boiling water which burnt his lips. He didn't dare raise his eyes or even think it was not tea they were drinking, just hot water. They had been sitting like this for half an hour. The militia did not turn up.

"Do you know for sure what happened to Igoryok? Did you see it? He might be alright after all," the woman said quickly. She didn't expect him to answer, she was just sobbing and from time to time touched her eyes with a white handkerchief.

The woman told him that in the early thirties her husband, an engineer, was arrested, and she survived on her own during the siege of Leningrad and after the war, in the fifties, she adopted a boy from an orphanage...

"This is it, isn't it?"

Sergey closed his eyes and nodded.

After such visits Bogdanov didn't feel like thinking about factories developing, party work perfection or executing the decisions of the Central Committee plenum. By the evening everybody had returned to the district committee. No one asked them how they felt or how the people they had visited felt. No one needed reports about the work done. They knew one of the instructors of the Organizing Committee was taken into hospital; the relatives of the dead were alright, but she was not. Another instructor was nearly arrested but he managed to cope.

The work day continued.

An elderly woman with grey smooth hair, in thin-framed glasses and a small brief-case on her lap had been sitting on a chair in the corridor of the district party committee. She was a professor, a doctor of science and a party member. She was waiting for the person in charge for her speech at the plenum. Bogdanov had a PhD in geography, so he was in charge of all scientists' speeches.

Sergey hastily opened the door, greeted the woman and apologized for being late. He let her come in and sit down. He took her typewritten speech. For her it was a usual procedure, it was always better if someone from the district committee would look through her speech, it was safer. "I have mentioned Brezhnev in the beginning, named all his posts," the professor said.

"Oh, yes, thank you," Bogdanov mumbled, realizing how silly it was to thank her. He saw Brezhnev being mentioned only once and he tensed up. His name needed to be mentioned twice. At the beginning and at the end of the speech. The regalia could be mentioned once. Still...

Sergey knew the most skilful experts in the town committee managed to mention Brezhnev three times in a five-minute speech. They did it so cleverly, no one even noticed it. That's how good the text was. They

didn't just say, "As the General Secretary, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev said..." followed by what he said. No, they did it skilfully and elegantly. First they would say what was needed, then "This is how the party and its general secretary teach us..." It sounded soft and subtle, as if those were not his words. The rest of the speech usually didn't interest anyone.

"That's a big error," Sergey thought, "I won't be able to get away with it later."

The assistant manager was sitting at his table and looking at the known scientist. She was talking about science, her institute, her speech... He could hardly hear her. His head was full of today's visits to people's homes, all that nonsense of the staff and ideological subterfuges. And why did Alyonka ring? He had spent all the reserves of his mind to struggle with negative emotions. His feelings were beginning to come out, he was finding it difficult to hold them inside.

To tell the elderly woman the rules of behaviour at the plenum, all the tricks and dodgy games of "organizers" and "ideologists" was absurd and shameful. Especially when she looked like the woman he had recently been sitting and silently drinking "tea" with.