

It was not the most tired of nags that ambled eastward on the imperial highway on this hot September afternoon, nor the most dilapidated of carts. The man with the pipe in his mouth was not the most unhealthy of men, nor was he the worst. In his belly, the midday cabbage protested in one of the innumerable afterthoughts that his meals tended to produce, like a judge who, seemingly fallen asleep at the bench, rouses himself to utter a codicil to his declarations, slightly startling those remaining in the courtroom. This was how the physiology of Bogdan Vissarionovich Grushkin typically operated: through afterwords and appendices, by which I do not mean that mysterious demi-organ, the vermiform appendix, but a postscript to the main text. One could even question the proposition that there was a main text to Bogdan Vissarionovich's body: it was a ~~scorpus~~ roughly divided into torso, limbs, and head, without any clear unity among them; his left eye floated at a slightly different level than his right, and some said that, in a certain light, the two eyes had completely different colors; his beard grew unevenly, favoring the left cheek as moss favors the southerly bark of trees; and his great paws ended in delicate fingers that appeared to have been grafted on, borrowed from a young girl. All the same, Bogdan Vissarionovich was not the most homely of men.

"Will the godforsaken village never appear? It should have been here an hour ago," muttered Bogdan Vissarionovich to the horse, or the flies, or the lowering sun at his back, as if it were the village that were approaching him, trundled upon a wagon, while he was rooted stably on the ground. He glanced back at the bundle in the wagon, wrapped in burlap, which remained deferentially and demurely poised in a corner, merely swaying back and forth as the wheels of the wagon negotiated the ruts in the highway.

Overhead, a precocious swallow swept up and down along invisible parabolas, catching some sleepy late-summer insects. But I do not believe that Bogdan Vissarionovich noticed the bird, as he was now occupied in tamping down the burly tobacco that had been considering an escape from his pipe.

Across a rather poorly cultivated wheat field at his left, our hero did see a faded manor house, its windows gaping like an idiot's mouth at the end of yet another Wednesday. And in another half hour or so, Bogdan Vissarionovich was met by an officer, looking less than delighted, mounted on a dappled horse. The officer did not deign to glance at Bogdan Vissarionovich's nod or at the greasy cap that Bogdan Vissarionovich now touched with his feminine fingertips. It may be that the officer was headed for the manor that had seen better days, that he was calling on a young lady there or on the father of the house; that they would share vodka and discuss the state of the fatherland; or that the officer would pull out his pistol and murder a rival who happened to live in that house. But that story will have to await another storyteller.

Finally, the dome of a church shone ahead, and a small grove of poplars added its rustlings to the barking of dogs and the faint laughter of children. Just as the candles were being lit in the houses of Chernobytsk, Bogdan Vissarionovich's cart rolled into the outskirts of town and deviated from the highway, seeking out an ill-paved, meandering lane that terminated in a weathered wooden house.

With a grunt, Bogdan Vissarionovich dismounted and hit the door with his forearm, creating a thump that echoed dully inside. The door opened to reveal a tiny blonde woman whom I would not venture to call either youthful or exhausted, but who was in a transitional stage of life that has its own sort of charm.

She frowned, then opened her eyes wide and cried, "Bogdan Vissarionovich! Bogdan Vissarionovich Grushkin! Come in, come in, you're just in time for supper!"

"Anna Nikolaevna, you never disappoint. And do you have a bed?"

She gave him a look from his boots to his cap, pausing at his lopsided but muscular torso. "Yes."

"Then you have a guest for the night." And Bogdan Vissarionovich unloaded his modest bag, picked up the burlap-wrapped object, and followed Anna Nikolaevna to a room where he deposited them in a corner, with care. After feeding and watering the nag, the hostess and her guest dined upon borscht, dry smoked herring, select lettuce leaves, black bread, and notable quantities of vodka.

After supper, Anna Nikolaevna lit a fire and opened the windows, for the evening was warm, and the scents of the fields and town competed with the smoke of the fireplace to decide which would most thoroughly permeate the room. Among the words that passed between our two friends, the following seem to me worthy of being recorded.

"So, Bogdan Vissarionovich, what brings you back to Chernobytsk? Surely one of your business deals."

"No, not exactly, Anna Nikolaevna, this is a matter that transcends business, that leaps high above it."

"To what, then?"

"To matters of progress and state security."

"Bosha, you're a dreamer."

"And dreamers make the world, Anya. Dreamers make the world."

"Does it have anything to do with that parcel you brought in?"

"It may and it may not, Anishka."

"But Bogdasha, you can tell little me."

"Anishenka, you don't need to worry your pretty little head with questions of state."

"My Bogdyshenka is so mysterious."

"The most mysterious man you will ever meet, my little blackbird."

"Yes, my great mountain badger. But tell me, is it a military matter?"

"In a manner of speaking. I will venture to say that what I have to propose will be a matter of concern to the greatest enemy of our beloved country."

"Really? You mean, to--"

"Yes, Anyuzha, my favorite half-grown squirrel. To Russia itself!"

And the events of the remainder of Wednesday night are best left to my readers' imagination.

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Bogdan Vissarionovich was up well before lunchtime. His clothes were creased in a comparatively Euclidean pattern and the grease stains were camouflaged by the weave of the outfit.

"And now?" said Anna Nikolaevna.

"And now to the house of the Lord Mayor."

"What, on a matter of importance to the state?"

Bogya did not take kindly to this questioning. "Of course, woman! One approaches the nearest authority in order to be referred to the next authority up, and so forth, and so on. Within no less than twenty visits I should be in the presence of the Emperor's Undersecretary for Communications himself. One goes through channels!"

"Nonsense. Go to Overko's on Raskovskaya. There you should ask for the Count. Count Gryshkin. ~~He's~~ He's an amiable man, Bogdan Vissarionovich -- just bring him one of his favorite pastries." And Anna Nikolaevna presented one of the kuliki that she had been baking for the last two hours. Bogya could not deny that it had a perfect, tanned, subtly modulated exterior; that it gave off an aroma redolent of duck, figs, and local heavy cream; and that it was shaped into a near-perfect replica of the shape of Lake Balaton, where kuliki are universally reputed to have originated.

"Are there more where this came from?" asked Bogya, his mouth beginning to water.

"Of course," Anya replied with her characteristic generosity.

And within an hour, our hero was taking leave from his friend, who was repeating, "The Count has connections. You'll see." In the back of the cart, the burlap-wrapped bundle was back in its traditional location, swaying gently back and forth, like a young boy humming to himself as he dawdles down the street on a Sunday.

Raskovskaya was one of the two main streets in the town of Chernobytsk, and no expense had been spared by the local authorities in decorating the thoroughfare in a manner befitting its status. Nearly every corner was adorned with a ~~small~~ sapling, the sewer was covered, and the sidewalks had recently been nailed back together. Along this street one could find representatives of Chernobytsk's most prominent families perambulating, hobnobbing, and purchasing well-plucked chickens. Near the intersection with Imperial Avenue stood Overko's Inn, a landmark well-known for its stewed rutabaga, its potted ~~pork~~ pork, and its ample supplies of black beer. It was this establishment into which Bogdan Vissarionovich trudged, cradling an object swaddled in burlap, immediately addressing the bald man who presided over a surface that doubled as desk and bar counter -- Maximilian Alexandrovich Overko himself.

"My good man," began Bogya, "may I ask where I may find his excellency, Count Gryshkin?"

"And you are...?"

"Bogdan Vissarionovich Grushkin, at your service."

"Grushkin seeking Gryshkin." Overko started to chuckle at a snail's pace, provoked by his own feeble witticism, a process that built up in excruciating lassitude and culminated in a fit of hacking and expectoration.

"Yes. Precisely. It is a matter that will be of interest to him."

"Namely?"

"I have ... an object that will appeal to His Excellency's concerns."

"Which is?"

"A kulik," stated Bogdan Vissarionovich with solemnity.

"It must be the largest kulik yet baked," pronounced Overko with a contemptuous glance at the bundle.

"Where can I find him?"

Overko cleaned all his teeth with the tip of his tongue, and then asserted, "The Count is not present."

"Well, when will he return, please?"

"It is not for the likes of us to know the minds of nobility." And with that reverent and philosophical observation, Overko returned to polishing a beer mug with the nether area of his apron.

It took the better part of the day before Grushkin's thirst and boredom sufficiently overpowered his spite and pride to make him request his own mug of beer, which Overko filled from the slowest tap yet found in Christendom and would not hand him in advance of the payment of 5 kopecks, a payment that Overko inspected with a skepticism worthy of the great Sextus Empiricus himself before tossing into a jar.

No sooner had our hero quaffed two gulps of the brew than ~~before~~ a tall man in a cape darkened the doorway. Bogya sprang to his feet, spilling most of the rest of the mug, and sputtered, "Your Excellency! Count Gryshkin?"

"That I am. What can I do for you, my man?"

"Ah ... may I first offer you a fresh-baked kulik?" From the bundle at his feet, Bogya extracted the aforesaid pastry, which was now rather dented and congealed. Overko began one of his protracted and funereal guffaws, but had to nip it in the bud when the Count reacted with delight, sniffing the kulik like a bloodhound and grinning. "Excellent!" pronounced the nobleman. "Let us confer in my quarters." And he led the way, leaving not a single crumb on his moustache as he dispatched Anna Nikolaevna's brainchild in four bites.