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*Public Image: Stories and Poems*

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# Public Image

Stories and Poems

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## Public Image

Late in the evening, when she was tired and ready for sleep, Svetlana was most afraid. During daylight hours she felt safer: she was active and alert and at work or at the grocery store—public places where he would not create a scene or become abusive. Her husband was brutal, but always behind closed doors; in public he carefully cultivated his image as a caring and devoted husband. It was at night, when he returned to his castle (as he called it), drunk or morose or pissed-off about some imagined failing of his wife, that he needed a target for his aggression. The attacks always began with an offhand question or insignificant demand. But Svetlana knew at such times that there was no right answer to the question or satisfactory solution to the demand. She would say, “I don’t know,” or “I didn’t get that chore done.” Then Vadim would become judge, jury, and prison warden, meting out punishment to the miscreant who if she had only tried harder or done better would not require a beating.

But Vadim was careful, in his way. Never a blow to the face, because it would show in public. Only the upper arms, stomach, back, legs, and buttocks could be bruised. By carefully targeting his assault he was doing his wife a favor. If he were less caring he would smack her in the face. But he allowed her to leave the house without visible marks, at least as long as she dressed appropriately. In return Svetlana expressed her gratitude by accepting his apologies and trying to be less disappointing to him. After all it was her problem, too, because, as Vadim reminded her on a regular basis, he wasn’t a violent man and he had never hit anyone else and clearly she shared in the responsibility because she gave him no other choice.

Svetlana switched off the DVD player. The movie was not yet finished, but it was after eleven, she was tired, and she was having

difficulty concentrating. Since her marriage to Vadim she had developed the ability to multitask: watch a movie, read a book, even talk on the phone, and at the same time keep an ear tuned to Vadim. But tonight she was more tense than usual because she was alone in the house.

She clicked off the living room lamp. The room was enveloped in shadow. She walked carefully to the front window and pulled aside the tasseled drape, but only slightly, creating a narrow slit that admitted the dull orange glow from the streetlight at the end of the block.

The night was quiet. She peered through the divided-light window at the row of hedges on the other side of the rolling lawn. The hedges were shrouded in darkness and Svetlana strained to detect a motion or a shift in the mottled pattern of grays and blacks. She looked to the left, down the smooth gray gravel of the driveway to the mailbox at the street.

What was that? Something moved. There, by the oak tree. Too small to be a human being. A raccoon. She watched it amble towards the house and then poke its head under the lilacs. After a few seconds she lost sight of it in the gloomy mass of pine trees beyond the driveway. Were the trash cans safely placed inside the garage? Yes. She sighed.

Her car was there in the driveway, glinting in the ambient light. The BMW was perhaps too expensive but Svetlana wanted and thought she deserved a luxury automobile. Her commute was an hour each way and there were always business meetings to attend. She spent a lot of time behind the wheel and she wanted to travel comfortably.

A big truck rattled past. You think they'd stop driving those things late at night. And then the street was quiet.

Perhaps he's not coming back tonight.

It was yesterday evening when Vadim had stormed out of the house. During dinner. What had it been this time? The roast was overdone? Her husband had taken his plate (nineteenth-century gold-rimmed china, from her mother's set) and slammed it down on the table. The plate had shattered and food was strewn across the

floor. In an attempt to get out of his direct line of sight Svetlana, practiced in the art of self-preservation, quietly withdrew to the kitchen.

He had followed her through the swinging doors and grabbed her by the arm. She twisted free and ran into the downstairs half-bath. She locked the door and considered her choices. There was a small window but she could not get through it quickly. He was pounding on the door now, the flimsy hollow-core shaking with every impact. Svetlana looked around for a weapon, anything. A razor? No. A broken glass from the sink? Too risky. If she escalated the weaponry Vadim would become more enraged. It was a trade-off: she accepted a certain level of hurt to avoid greater damage. Hiding behind the door was fair; wielding a broken glass would have given Vadim permission to ratchet up the violence.

Suddenly the pounding stopped.

She waited, heart racing, hands shaking, breathing shallow.

Silence.

Was that the front door slamming?

She listened.

She was not wearing a watch. She could not be sure how much time had elapsed. She sat on the closed lid of the toilet seat, quietly, looking at her hands.

She stood up and went to the door. No sound. She gently, very carefully and slowly, turned the knob.

The center-push lock popped out with a deafening “THWAK.”

She held her hand on the doorknob with her shoulder against the door and her foot firmly braced against the bottom.

No sound. Perhaps he was waiting for her. No, he could never muster that kind of patience. Vadim was not a stealthy hunter. He was impulsive, explosive, rage-driven, and incapable of controlling himself long enough to deceive.

Svetlana slowly opened the bathroom door. The house was quiet. She padded into the living room and peered out of the window. His car was not in the driveway. With hands shaking she collapsed on the sofa. She had dodged the bullet. It happened now and then: Vadim exploded, Svetlana hid, and then for some reason

he quit the field, only to return hours or days later as if nothing had happened.

After a minute Svetlana picked up the phone. She dialed.

“Hello, Maliska? Yes, I’m so sorry to bother you. No, I’m fine. He didn’t do anything to me. He left a few minutes ago. Something that I did upset him. No, I don’t know what I want. I just wanted to call. No, no, you don’t have to do that. Well, all right. I’ll be here.”

Life with Vadim had not always been this way. When they were married ten years earlier she knew he was “physical,” as he jokingly said. But he had sworn to treat her with love and respect. Over the years the veneer wore off: first threats, then screaming, then a shove (with tearful apologies after), then a punch in the stomach (more tearful apologies later). Vadim quickly learned that Svetlana was dedicated to marriage and was endlessly forgiving and seemed to share his acidic suggestions that she did not deserve trips to Italy and a nice car and a social life and that she really was quite lucky not to get beaten harder.

A few minutes later Svetlana heard the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway. She went to the window. A tan Toyota—Malina’s car. She watched her sister get out of the car and approach the front door.

“Where is that asshole?” demanded Malina as soon as Svetlana opened the door.

“I don’t know. Probably at the company condo downtown. He has keys.”

Malina plopped herself on the sofa.

“Svetska, you have to get a grip on this situation. Vadim is going to kill you one of these days. You need to take action. Get a restraining order.”

“No, I cannot have that kind of publicity. Family matters are private. You know that’s how Mother and Father raised us.”

“Leave the jerk.”

“You know how I feel about divorce,” insisted Svetlana. “I just can’t do it. I know we can work this out. Vadim is a good man.”

“Vadim is an animal.”

“Besides, I have the kids to think about.”

“Anton and Tatyana? Are you kidding? When was the last time either one of them came home? You told me the last time you saw Tatyana was when you drove to Moscow yourself. You know as well as I do that they are terrified of Vadim and left town as soon as they could support themselves.”

Svetlana looked down. Her big sister was never without a clearly formed opinion.

“I’ll ask him to get counseling.”

“Isn’t that what you said last time, when he hit you with a golf club?”

“This time I can get him to do it.”

Malina shook her head. “You’re dreaming.”

They sat in silence.

Malina sighed and opened her purse. She reached inside and took out a pistol.

“Maliska, what are you doing?” stammered Svetlana.

“Svetska, you must take this. You’re going to need it.”

“You want me to shoot him?”

“No. What I mean is, I hope you don’t have to go that far. You need to scare him. You need to show him that he can’t mess around with you. Next time he comes after you—and there will absolutely be a next time—you stick this in his face. Tell him to back off or you’re going to blow his brains out.”

Svetlana took the gun. It was heavy, black, and cold.

“Is it loaded?”

“Yes. Six bullets. The safety catch is on. Here,” and Malina showed her sister the safety, “Make sure it is locked. If you really have to fire it, switch it over here, like this.”

“But won’t I get arrested for having this in my house?”

“It’s registered to me, clean and legal. Don’t worry.”

“But what if Vadim finds it?”

“Keep it in your purse. I’ll bet he never goes in there.”

Malina was correct. Vadim never touched her purses.

Svetlana put the gun down on the table.

“This is crazy,” she protested. “I’ll go to jail. My life will be ruined. What will the children think? Their mother shot their

stepfather? There is no way I'd be able to go through a trial and all that publicity."

"Think about it. Think about being dead. It's your choice. If you shoot him in self-defense, you may go to prison. But you'll get out. You'll be alive. You've absolutely got to take a stand. The next time he comes after you, you will be glad to have this gun. Keep it."

Svetlana nodded and picked up the pistol.

They spent a few minutes discussing gun safety and strategies for keeping the gun accessible yet out of sight. After ten minutes, Malina rose to leave. They hugged.

"Stay strong," said Malina. "Call me anytime."

And now, twenty-four hours later, Svetlana stood at the living room window, peering into the dark. Things were going to be different this time, she told herself. The next time the bastard lays a finger on me I'm going to turn the tables. He'll feel the fear and know what it's like to tremble. I don't care if I go to prison. I'll have my integrity and my life.

She released the tasseled drape and it fell softly into place. She turned and went upstairs to her bedroom. Opening the drawer of the bedside table, she checked to make sure the pistol's safety was engaged and that it was loaded. Of course it was loaded; it had been loaded since her sister gave it to her the evening before. The pistol seemed menacing and strange. But turning it over in her hands, if only to check for attributes that she knew had not changed, made it seem less alien. Replacing the gun in the drawer, she slipped into bed and drifted off to sleep.

An hour later she was awakened.

A sound.

Faint, but unmistakable. The tires of a car crunching on the driveway.

Svetlana groggily groped for the bedside table drawer and took out the pistol. She swung her legs to the side of the bed and stood up. Feeling exposed in her nightgown, she laid the gun on the bed and pulled on her cotton flannel robe. She tightened the belt, picked up the pistol, and tread softly to the bedroom door.

I'll be ready, she thought.

She opened the bedroom door and went to the top of the stairs. Through the side windows of the front door she could see the overspill from car headlights in the driveway. She paused. The car lights switched off.

He thinks he's going to surprise me. She crouched low at the top of the stairs, watching the front door. With her thumb she moved the pistol's safety switch.

There—at the front door. A movement.

A shadowy figure approached the front stoop. It stopped in front of the door.

But wait. There are two people. They are standing together.

Svetlana froze. What did this mean? Had Vadim brought a friend, an accomplice?

A knock on the door. Not an angry knock, not a pounding knock like Vadim always did, but a regular knock.

Svetlana crept down the stairs, gun pointed at the door, her other hand clutching the banister.

Another knock. Now Svetlana was at the bottom of the stairs, a few feet from the front door. Her finger was on the trigger of the pistol.

"Mrs. Ilyinsky?" a voice called from outside. A man's voice, unfamiliar. "Svetlana Sergikoff Ilyinsky?"

"Yes, who is it?"

"Rostov-on-Don police."

Svetlana reached for the switch on the wall next to the front door, flooding the front stoop with light.

She peered through the side windows. She saw two men. One was wearing police uniform, the other was dressed in a grey business suit. Beyond them, in the driveway, was a police car.

The gun.

"Yes, yes, just a moment."

She hurriedly retreated down the hall to the kitchen. Looking around, she yanked open the drawer where she kept old papers and kitchen utensils and rubber bands. She clicked the safety on and shoved the gun deep into the drawer.

Smoothing her robe, she walked slowly into the front foyer. The men were still standing on the stoop. She opened the door.

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Vadim Ilyinsky?” asked the man in the suit.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Inspector Patim and this is Officer Krasky. May we step inside?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

She stood aside and ushered them through the door.

“May I sit down?” Patim glanced into the living room.

“Yes, certainly. Is anything the matter?” Svetlana felt her knees becoming weak. “Is it Anton? Tatyana? Has something happened?”

They entered the living room and Inspector Patim sat on the wingback chair. Officer Krasky remained standing near the marble fireplace, his head slightly bowed. Svetlana sat down on the sofa.

“I’m sorry—may I get you something? Coffee?” Svetlana knew that she didn’t have any coffee prepared, but she felt as though she had to offer.

“No, no, thank you,” replied Patim. His hands were folded in his lap.

“Mrs. Ilyinsky, I’m afraid I have some bad news. Your husband, Vadim Ilyinsky, was killed this evening.”

Svetlana gasped. Her mind raced. What had happened? How could she tell Anton and Tatyana? Was it an accident? There was going to be a funeral, and relatives. She was going to need time off from work. Was she a suspect? Were they here to arrest her? But she hadn’t done it yet. She was only going to do it the next time he attacked her.

“Mrs. Ilyinsky?”

“I’m sorry. Yes. Can you tell me what happened? Where is he?”

“He is at the medical examiner’s. We will need you make a formal identification in the morning.”

Inspector Patim paused. He smiled, slightly, almost tenderly.

“I know that it will be slight consolation, Mrs. Ilyinsky, but we can tell you that your husband died a hero.”

“A what?”

Inspector Patim eased backed in his chair. He told her a story that would have seemed fantastic if Svetlana had not lived in the city long enough to know that in the annals of crime nearly anything was possible. Earlier in the evening there had been an incident on the waterfront. A crowd of pedestrians had been on the sidewalk in front of a restaurant. They were approached by a man who was armed with a semiautomatic weapon. He started firing. Several people were killed and dozens were injured. The man continued to walk down the street, firing at anyone he saw.

Vadim Ilyinsky had been standing in the vestibule of his company's condominium building, about to exit through the big revolving doors. He saw the gunman walk pass the door. As the gunman continued up the sidewalk, Ilyinsky ran up from behind and tackled him. They struggled, and in the course of the struggle a shot was fired. Ilyinsky received a single gunshot wound to the chest, but he was able to hold on to the suspect for a few seconds before he collapsed.

"Because of his heroic actions," said Patim, "the police were able to apprehend the suspect and place him under arrest. We are certain that had your husband not taken the action that he did, this individual would have killed many more innocent people. Vadim Ilyinsky gave his life so that others might live."

Svetlana said nothing.

"Is there anyone you wish us to call?" asked Patim.

"Thank you, Inspector. I will phone my sister. I also have to contact our two children. They both live out of state."

"We have not yet released your husband's name to the press," said Patim. "We will put it off as long as possible, but now that we have formally notified you, it will be a matter of only a few hours before we have to give his name. It's late. My advice is to try and get some rest before morning. We will send a car here before dawn."

After a few minutes of conversation, Svetlana thanked the inspector and the officer for their courtesy, and ushered them to the door. She went upstairs, took a sleeping pill, and fell into bed.

Early the next morning Svetlana came downstairs. She checked her voicemail: thirty new messages since last night. She looked out the front window and saw parked on the street three news trucks and a police cruiser. The dish antennas of the news trucks glowed pale white in the rising dawn light. Ten or fifteen people were lingering around the trucks, some holding cups from which rose wisps of steam.

She sat down at the kitchen counter and turned on the television. After a commercial, the morning news continued:

“This is Ilyana Fasnev on the scene of that horrific mass murder,” the correspondent said. She was standing on a sidewalk downtown. Behind her were strings of yellow police tape, and the street was full of police cars and laboratory trucks. “We have a reporter at the house of Vadim Ilyinsky, the Rostov-on-Don businessman who is credited with saving untold lives with his heroic actions last night—actions that cost Vadim Ilyinsky his life. Danton, are you there?”

The shot changed. Svetlana stared at the television. There was the reporter, standing in front of her house. The house looked plain and small.

“Yes, Ilyana, we’re here at the Rostov-on-Don home of Vadim Ilyinsky. Police have asked us not to approach the house. An inspector spoke with Mrs. Ilyinsky late last night, and we hope to have a statement this morning. Ilyana, back to you.”

Svetlana reached for the phone. She dialed Malina.

“I’ve been calling you all morning.” her sister said. “I’m glad you’re up. Did the cops talk to you?”

“Yes, they told me what happened. There are reporters everywhere. I’m afraid to go outside.”

“Sit tight. I’ll be right over. Have you called Anton and Tatyana?”

“Not yet. I don’t know if I have the courage. I’ll try.”

She made the calls, and recited, like a robot, the events of the past evening to her children. Anton told his mother that he was very sorry for her loss, asked a few questions, and then said he would come home to help his mother organize the funeral. Tatyana said

that she would come home as soon as she could arrange for someone to feed and walk her dog.

The morning passed as if in a dream. Malina came over and helped Svetlana get into her car and past the crowd of shouting reporters with their microphones and lights and cameras. Malina drove her sister to the medical examiner's and escorted her inside the crumbling brick-and-concrete edifice. When they entered the dingy cinderblock office, another woman was there also, sobbing. Wife, mother, sister of a deceased? She was being comforted by an older man. Svetlana looked at her and wondered how it was possible to be so deeply affected. Perhaps she would feel the same way if one of her children had died.

The medical examiner's assistant led Svetlana to a small room with a large plate glass window and three steel chairs. She turned to Svetlana.

"Are you ready?"

Svetlana nodded.

A curtain on the other side of the window was pulled aside. Svetlana gazed into a green-tiled room lined with stainless-steel refrigerator doors. In the foreground was a gurney parked parallel to the window. On the gurney lay a figure, covered in a white sheet. A man wearing a dingy green set of scrubs and latex gloves was standing at the head of the figure. With matter-of-fact deliberation he pulled aside the top of the sheet, revealing the deceased person's face and shoulders.

Vadim's face was instantly recognizable but somehow distorted—the complexion was pale, the mouth sagging at the corners, the cheeks deflated.

How many times had she seen that same face livid with rage, the veins nearly bursting, the eyes flashing, and the mouth twisted with animal aggression? And then, later, the pathetic tears (sometimes) or the arrogant sneer (more often)? She remembered their wedding day, so sunny and full of promise, and even her children had been genuinely happy at the prospect of this fun-loving guy becoming a part of their lives. She had worn the cream-colored dress (she still had that dress, packed away), the too-tight shoes, and

the hat that her mother had worn when Svetlana was a girl. She searched the dead face for the memory of their honeymoon in Greece, days on the beach, nights locked in passionate love, romantic dinners on the stone terrace of the hotel, and that ride on the boat through the sun-washed islands.

The face was impassive and stony, evoking nothing, and destined to be slowly destroyed by remorseless decay.

How close had Svetlana come to being the agent of death. She shuddered. A madman on a shooting spree had done the job for her. The killer had rewritten history. Horror and gratitude washed through Svetlana as she nodded to the assistant, and the curtain was pulled across the window.

Upon their return Malina handled the reporters hovering outside her sister's house. She informed them that Svetlana would make a comment only after she had time to recover from the terrible shock of her husband's sudden and tragic death.

Anton arrived early in the afternoon. He encouraged his mother to meet with the press immediately. The reporters could get their stories on the eleven o'clock news, and after the press conference they would all leave to cover other stories.

Svetlana agreed. She put on a fresh dress and touched up her makeup while the television crews set up a podium on the front walkway. When all was ready, she opened the front door and stepped to the podium.

"As you may imagine, I am not prepared to make a long statement," Svetlana said quietly. A reporter adjusted the battery of microphones placed in front of her like a metallic bouquet.

"I will miss my husband very much, and our children will miss their loving stepfather. I am only grateful that perhaps his actions may have saved other lives. I apologize for not saying more. Thank you."

She stepped back. She did not know what else to say. She looked at the eager faces of the reporters assembled on her lawn. They wanted a quotable quote, a few seconds of video that would become an iconic symbol of a hero's grieving widow.

Suddenly a man was standing at the podium next to her. She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She turned, and recognized Mayor Yuri Borodin.

The mayor leaned into the microphones.

“Mrs. Ilyinsky, we share your grief. Your husband gave his life to save the lives of many others. It is not often that people are called upon to respond to a life or death situation, such as the one that faced your husband yesterday. He made the choice to confront a killer who was almost certainly going to continue on his terrible course of violence. Your husband Vadim demonstrated bravery and selflessness. We all owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.”

The mayor turned to Svetlana. He took her hand in his.

He really believes what he’s saying about Vadim, thought Svetlana. They all believe. He is a hero in their eyes.

The days followed quickly. The funeral was attended by thousands of people that Svetlana had never met. Reporters phoned, asking for interviews. The Rostov-on-Don Credit Union set up a foundation to provide for Svetlana, and in the first week collected over a million rubles in donations. Svetlana supplied photographs of Vadim for glossy magazines. She had to search through a box of memorabilia to find a photograph that showed Vadim, Svetlana, Anton, and Tatyana together. She found one that had been taken at Easter five years earlier. It was the last time both children had been willing to come home at the same time.

Producers from national talk shows called. One was putting together a package show featuring other heroes’ widows, including widows of firemen, police officers, and soldiers. Svetlana declined them all. Malina stayed with her, even sleeping in the guest room on occasion when Svetlana felt overwhelmed.

One day, Svetlana remembered the gun in the kitchen drawer. She went to the drawer and pulled it open. She saw only the usual papers and kitchen paraphernalia. She dug around in the back of the drawer. Nothing.

Malina came into the kitchen. She saw Svetlana standing in front of the open drawer.

“I took it,” said Malina. “No sense leaving it lying around.”

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“Yes, of course,” replied Svetlana. “What’s done is done.” She pushed the drawer closed.

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