Sofia Petrovna

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LYDIA CHUKOVSKAYA

Lydia Chukovskaya was born in 1907 in present-day Finland, though the country was part of the Russian Empire at that time. Her father was Korney Chukovsky, perhaps the most famous Russian author of children's books. Growing up in St. Petersburg, Chukovskaya took to reading at a young age and purportedly showed an early interest in social justice, though she mainly spent her time reading poetry. Because of her father's literary success, the family house was often full of influential Russian artists, exposing Chukovskaya to a wide range of thinkers. When she was of working age, she took a job in a publishing house and also began her own career as a writer, publishing her fist story under a pseudonym. During this period, she married a well-known physicist named Matvei Bronstein. The young couple had daughter, but the family was split up in the 1930s when Joseph Stalin's campaign of repression—known as the Great Purge or the Great Terror—began. Chukovskaya's husband was arrested on false pretenses, imprisoned, and executed in 1937, though she didn't know his final fate until much later. Chukovskaya herself would have been arrested, too, if she hadn't been traveling at the time. She began writing her first novel, *Sofia Petrovna*, in 1939 while desperately awaiting news about her husband. The novel is notable for its real-time, firsthand account of the Great Purge. It was secretly distributed among writers and editors for years before its eventual publication in 1965. In the decades after the Great Purge, Chukovskaya devoted herself to advocating for Soviet dissidents, speaking out in support of a number of influential Russian cultural figures facing suppression. She died in her father's old country house in 1996.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sofia Petrovna is set in the Soviet Union in the mid-to-late 1930s, when the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, carried out what's now known as the Great Purge. The Great Purge was a frenzied campaign of state repression ostensibly aimed at consolidating power and striking down anyone who wanted to sabotage the Communist Party. This campaign largely began because of the assassination of a high-ranking Soviet politician, Sergei Kirov, in 1934. At that time, the Stalin regime was experiencing internal division, and Kirov's assassination prompted an investigation that purportedly revealed plots within the government to sabotage Stalin. The validity of these claims has been thrown into question in more recent times, but Stalin's regime nonetheless used these alleged plots to justify mass arrests and executions—arrests and executions that initially began at the government level and then spread to general population. The vast majority of the so-called "dissidents" imprisoned or executed during the Great Purge were completely innocent, and the government used fearmongering tactics to create an atmosphere of constant dread for those who hadn't yet been persecuted. The death toll between 1936 and 1938 is now estimated to have been somewhere between 700,000 to 1.2 million people. Most prisoners who weren't executed were sent to forced labor camps known as Gulags that were scattered throughout the Soviet Union, making it that much harder for survivors to reconnect with their families in the aftermath of their sentences.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Sofia Petrovna* is that it's quite possibly the *only* surviving novel about the Great Purge that was written while the events themselves were still taking place. There are, however, a number of books about the horrific persecution of Soviet citizens at the hands of Joseph Stalin in the 1930s. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, for instance, is about a Soviet citizen who is arrested and imprisoned by the Stalin regime. There's also Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, a work of nonfiction that chronicles not just the terrors of the Great Purge, but also life in the Gulags (political labor camps where many innocent Soviet citizens were sent). Solzhenitsyn also wrote *In the First Circle*, a novel about the intellectuals who were sent to Gulags during the Great Purge and forced to form research teams—a topic based on his own experience in a Gulag. (Lydia Chukovskaya herself advocated for and defended Solzhenitsyn's dissident literature.) More broadly, it's worth considering *Sofia Petrovna* alongside other works of literature about Soviet repression—like, for instance, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* or, for a more modern title, Amor Towles's *A Gentleman in Moscow*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sofia Petrovna
- **When Written:** 1939–1940
- **When Published:** 1965
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Novella, Dissident Fiction
- **Setting:** Leningrad during the Great Purge (1936–1939)
- **Climax:** Sofia finally receives a letter from Kolya, in which he reveals that an interrogator beat him into confessing to false crimes.
- **Antagonist:** Soviet repression during the Great Purge

(Joseph Stalin's regime)

EXTRA CREDIT

Helium Love. Lydia Chukovskaya's husband, Matvei Bronstein, was a renowned physicist who wrote a popular children's book about the history of helium entitled *Solar Matter*. Chukovskaya served as the book's copy editor, later commenting that the topic of helium is what brought her and her husband together.

Uncensored. Although *Sofia Petrovna* was first published in 1965, it wasn't published in Chukovskaya's native Soviet Union until 1988. The publication paved the way for many of Chukovskaya's other works to come out in the Soviet Union, since she had previously vowed not to print anything in the Soviet Union until the government allowed *Sofia Petrovna* to be published.

PLOT SUMMARY

After her husband's death, Sofia Petrovna starts working as a typist at a Publishing House in her home city of Leningrad. She takes the job because she needs to support her son, Kolya, whom she wants to have a good education. But she also comes to love her job at the publishing house, where she works as the senior typist. She makes friends with an intelligent, hardworking young typist named Natasha, appreciating her work ethic and enjoying her company. The two women often stay late to do extra work, and Sofia gossips to Natasha about the other employees. In particular, she's fascinated by the director, whom she thinks is a very impressive, admirable man.

As Sofia settles into her job, Kolya studies with his best friend, Alik. They're preparing to attend the local mechanical engineering institute. They're both extremely interested in helping the Soviet Union make technological advances, clearly seeing their work as an important part of strengthening the Communist Party. Before long, Kolya is accepted as a member of the Komsomol, which is a youth branch of the Communist Party. His mother sees this as something to be proud of, especially since the Komsomol doesn't accept just anyone. Natasha, for instance, has been denied entry into the Komsomol multiple times, despite her fierce commitment to the Communist Party. Sofia is frustrated on Natasha's behalf, but Kolya insists that it makes sense for the Komsomol to deny Natasha's applications—after all, she comes from a bourgeois, landowning family, so the Komsomol is suspicious of her commitment to the communist cause.

After gaining entrance to the mechanical engineering institute, Kolya and Alik are sent to work at a factory in another city. They will complete their studies by mail while working to increase productivity at the factory. During this time, Kolya invents a new mechanism for creating **cogwheels**, and though Sofia has no idea what a cogwheel does, she's immensely proud of her son when his invention gains him widespread acclaim. His picture is even published in a newspaper article about his ingenuity.

Around this time, Sofia learns that the majority of the medical doctors in Leningrad have been rounded up and arrested on suspicion of terrorist activity. She's shocked, especially because her late husband was a doctor. His close colleague, Mr. Kiparisova, is one of the physicians that has been arrested, but Sofia can't fathom the idea of this man conspiring against the state. She intends to visit his wife, Mrs. Kiparisova, but she never gets around to it. In the aftermath of the arrests, everyone talks about how stealthy some saboteurs are—there are fascists lurking in the Soviet Union who want to undermine the Communist Party, the newspapers suggest. Even the most unsuspecting person might be a saboteur.

There's a mandatory meeting at work one day. Comrade Timofeyev (who works at the publishing house on behalf of the Communist Party) gives a speech about the necessity of maintaining "political vigilance," and then the chairman of the trade union, Anna Grigorievna, announces that someone at the publishing house was arrested the previous night as an "enemy of the people." When Natasha asks what this employee did, Anna Grigorievna says he's related to a known saboteur, implying that this is reason enough to fire him.

On her way home that night, Sofia runs into Mrs. Kiparisova and is shocked by how downtrodden she looks. She tells Sofia that Mr. Kiparisova is innocent, and Sofia insists that she knew he couldn't have possibly conspired against the state. She then reassures Mrs. Kiparisova that since her husband didn't do anything wrong, he will soon be freed. The Communist Party, after all, doesn't keep innocent people in prison.

The very next day, the director is arrested. Sofia is shocked, as she can't believe that he would ever do anything against the Soviet Union. That evening, though, Natasha shows her a newspaper article about a respectable citizen who was duped by an attractive woman into giving up secretive state information while he was traveling abroad. The director, Natasha reminds Sofia, has traveled abroad, too, so it's entirely possible that he fell prey to a similar scheme. Just as Natasha is about to leave Sofia's apartment, Alik rushes in and tells them that Kolya has been arrested.

Apparently, authorities appeared in Alik and Kolya's dormitory in the middle of the night and asked Kolya to come with them. He was sure it was a mistake, so he didn't even bring a change of clothes (even though they urged him to). They most likely brought him back to Leningrad, so Sofia goes to the prison the following morning to find out more. What she discovers, though, is that she's not the only person looking for information about the sudden imprisonment of a loved one. There's a huge line outside the prison, mostly comprised of women who have been standing in the cold for hours in order to talk to somebody

about their sons or husbands. Many of these women are getting deported because of their association with their imprisoned loved ones. Others are waiting to give the authorities money, hoping that these officials will pass the cash along to their relatives in jail. But when Sofia finally reaches the attendant and confirms that Kolya is, indeed, imprisoned in Leningrad, she learns that she's not allowed to send him money. Other prisoners can receive money, but for some reason Kolya can't.

In the coming weeks, Sofia takes a leave of absence from work. She spends her time standing in line at various government buildings, trying in vain to find out more about Kolya's arrest. She still doesn't know why he was imprisoned, but she's certain it's all a big mistake. Regardless, she has faith that everything will work out, since she believes the Soviet Union doesn't hold innocent people in prison.

Sofia returns to work, having learned that there's not much she can do until Kolya's case is brought before a prosecutor. During this period, Natasha is fired from the publishing house for accidentally typing "the Ret Army" instead of "the Red Army." At a meeting after she's let go, Comrade Timofeyev and Anna Grigorievna claim that her typo was an intentional attack on the Communist Party. They also cite her upbringing in a bourgeois family, failing to acknowledge that her father died when she was quite young and left her to live a rather unglamorous life. Sofia speaks up and points out that Natasha clearly didn't intend to make such a typo. Her comment is met with silence, until Timofeyev insists once again that Natasha has undermined the Communist Party.

Alik has returned to the factory. Now, though, he returns to Leningrad and informs Sofia that he was fired from his job because of his association with Kolya. Both he and Natasha are in a terrible predicament because nobody will hire them. Still, they wait in line for Sofia, saving her a place at the prosecutor's office on the day Kolya's case finally makes its way to his desk. When she meets with the prosecutor, though, he tells her that Kolya has already been sentenced to 10 years in a remote work camp and, moreover, that he signed a confession saying that he engaged in terrorist activities. Sofia can hardly believe what she hears, but she manages to leave the office without losing her temper. She assumes that Kolya must have confessed to undermining the state because a prosecutor confused him.

Sofia soon learns that her job is at risk because she defended Natasha at the company meeting. That night, Natasha comes to her apartment and tells her that Alik has been arrested. Over the next few days, Sofia senses that everyone at work is distancing themselves from her. Eventually, Natasha pays her a visit and urges her to resign from the publishing house before she gets fired. This way, Natasha claims, it will be easier for her to find work. Sofia follows her advice, resigning the very next day. When she goes to tell Natasha, though, she discovers that her friend has taken her own life.

When Sofia goes to the prison, she has nobody to wait with her—Alik is imprisoned, and Natasha is dead. Worse, she learns from the attendant that Kolya has been deported, but he won't say where; Kolya, the man claims, will write to Sofia himself. She goes home depressed and alone. She wants to send Alik money, but she sees her friend Mrs. Kiparisova one day, and she warns Sofia against doing this; if she gives Alik money, the government will connect Kolya and Alik's cases, which wouldn't be good for anyone.

It has now been a year since Kolya was first imprisoned. Sofia works part-time at a library, where she keeps to herself. She also avoids her housemates, since one of them—a nurse—speaks badly about her, saying she can't be trusted because her son is in jail. She's huddled in her small room one day when Mrs. Kiparisova rushes in and tells her that some prisoners have been released. Sofia immediately assumes Kolya will soon be freed. If they're letting innocent people out of prison, she reasons, Kolya surely won't have to wait much longer. She thinks all night about this seemingly good news.

The next morning, she finds herself telling a housemate that Kolya has already been released. She claims that he wrote a letter saying that he has been freed and that he's going to work for a little while at the factory, then go for a vacation paid for by the government, and then—finally—come see her at home in Leningrad. She makes this claim multiple times throughout the day, loving how the idea of Kolya's imminent return makes her feel. But then she actually receives a letter from Kolya, who explains that he's still imprisoned and that he's not sure how much longer he'll be able to survive. An interrogator beat him into signing a confession, and he had to convince a kind soul just to sneak this letter out for him. He implores Sofia to do whatever she can to appeal his case, fearing that he'll soon die if he has to stay in prison.

Sofia rushes to find Mrs. Kiparisova. When she reaches her friend's apartment, she learns that Kiparisova and her daughter are being deported. But Mrs. Kiparisova still looks at Kolya's letter. After considering it for a moment, she tells Sofia not to write an appeal on Kolya's behalf. Doing so won't help his case, but it *will* attract attention to Sofia herself. The government, Mrs. Kiparisova says, has clearly forgotten to deport Sofia. But if she writes an appeal, the authorities will notice this oversight and finally deport her. With her friend's words in her mind, Sofia goes home and burns Kolya's letter.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sofia Petrovna – The novel's protagonist, Sofia Petrovna is a woman living in Leningrad with her son, Kolya. After her husband dies, she finds a job as a typist at a local publishing house, wanting to ensure that Kolya will be able to pursue

higher education. A proud woman, Sofia enjoys her job as a senior typist, relishing in being productive and working around literature. She also likes telling the other typists what to do, and she makes a point of developing a close friendship with the best, most accomplished typist, whose name is Natasha. When Kolya is sent to another city to work in a factory while completing his studies in mechanical engineering, Sofia passes her time gossiping with Natasha and acting as the official representative of her communal apartment—another small form of authority that she enjoys. In general, she thinks of herself as a loyal citizen who's raising an impressive son, and she values the idea that the Soviet Union is a just society that enables worthy, capable people to thrive while contributing to the Communist cause. Her optimism, however, is put to the test when the government starts arresting many of the people she respects, including the director of the publishing house, one of her husband's former colleagues. Eventually, Kolya is arrested too. Sofia only knows that he was taken in the middle of the night and that he's now imprisoned in Leningrad. Over the next year, she spends most of her time standing in line, trying desperately to get more information about his imprisonment. When she learns that he has confessed to engaging in terrorist activity against the government, she can't bring herself to believe that it's true. And yet, she also struggles to admit that the Soviet Union would beat a confession out of him. She's thus left to reconcile her misplaced faith in the government with her loyalty to her son. In the end, she finally acknowledges the government's corruption and realizes that there's little she can do to help Kolya.

Kolya – A young man studying mechanical engineering, Kolya is Sofia Petrovna's son. He's a confident and idealistic person who loves designing machines and working with his best friend, Alik, to solve problems. He's a strong believer in the Communist cause, joining the Komsomol (a communist youth organization) and often going on at length about the importance of remaining loyal to the Soviet Union by contributing to the Communist Party. To that end, he starts working in a factory with Alik while still completing his engineering degree. Though he's quite busy during this period, he manages to invent a new way of cutting **cogwheels** in the factory—an invention that earns him widespread attention. A newspaper even prints his picture in an article celebrating his ingenuity and his valuable contribution to the Soviet Union's technological advancement. And yet, Kolya is imprisoned not long after this article is printed, suggesting that even the most celebrated Soviet citizens are still at the mercy of Joseph Stalin's unpredictable regime. Kolya, for his part, is so confident that his arrest is a mistake that he refuses to heed the authorities' suggestion that he bring a towel and some extra clothes with him. He insists that he'll be back in a day or so, but this isn't the case. He ends up spending the rest of the novel in prison and remote work camps, and it isn't until over a year later that he finally gets a letter to Sofia. In this letter, he explains that an interrogator beat him until he signed a confession claiming that he engaged in terrorist activity against the Soviet Union. An old school acquaintance, Sashka Yartsev, apparently named him as a co-conspirator against the government. It's untrue, Kolya writes, but he had no choice but to sign the confession. He pleads with Sofia to appeal his case, saying that he doesn't think he'll survive much longer. But Sofia soon realizes that appealing his case will do nothing, so she simply burns his letter.

Natasha Frolenko – Natasha is a young woman who works as a typist at the publishing house with Sofia Petrovna. Sofia takes a liking to Natasha because of her flawless typing skills, diligent work ethic, and kind, unassuming nature. A quiet woman, she lets Sofia go on at length whenever they stay late at work, giving Sofia the opportunity to talk about her life or gossip about their coworkers. Natasha is a devoted communist, but her application to the Komsomol (a communist youth organization) is denied multiple times because her father was a bourgeois landowner and decorated member of the pre-communist military. Because of her family background, then, the Communist Party doubts that she genuinely believes in socialist principles, assuming that she thinks that her own family deserves more wealth, land, and power than everyone else. In reality, Natasha's father died when she was very young, forcing her and her mother to move in with a relative. Both her relative and her mother died before Natasha was very old, so she has spent the entirety of her young adult life in relative poverty. In other words, she has never truly lived the life of a bourgeois anti-communist. To the contrary, she believes wholeheartedly in the Communist Party and wants more than anything to join the Komsomol. Amid the hysteria at the publishing house, though, she gets fired for accidentally typing "the Ret Army" instead of "the Red Army" in a company document—a mistake that her superiors claim reveals her intent to undermine the Communist Party. Without a job, Natasha devotes herself to helping Sofia find more information about Kolya. She's especially invested in helping Sofia because she's in love with Kolya. When it's clear that trying to free Kolya is futile, though, she takes her own life.

Alik Finkelstein – Alik Finkelstein is Kolya's best friend. Like Kolya, he's studying to become a mechanical engineer. He looks up to Kolya and promises Sofia that he'll keep her son safe when they travel to another city to work in a factory together. But Alik is unable to stop the government from arresting Kolya in the middle of the night. At first, he assumes the whole thing is a mistake and that Kolya will be back after a day or so. When Kolya doesn't return, though, he gets worried and travels to Leningrad, where he tells Sofia and Natasha what happened. In the ensuing weeks, he takes time off of work to help Sofia seek out information pertaining to Kolya's case. He often helps Sofia by saving her a space in line so that she doesn't have to stand in the cold all night, but he soon has no choice but to return to the factory. And yet, he's eventually fired for refusing to dissociate

himself from Kolya—an illustration of his fierce loyalty to his friend. He returns to Leningrad and once again tries to help Sofia Petrovna by standing in line, but she worries that he might make things worse by openly voicings his frustration with the government. Sofia thinks that Alik lets his anger get the best of him too often, assuming that this must have been why he was fired from the factory. She formulates this theory after Alik suggests that the government's persecution of innocent people has gotten out of hand. Her reaction to his complaint underscores her hesitancy to renounce the Soviet Union's practices, even when those practices have been used to harm her own son. In the end, Alik is imprisoned, too, leaving Sofia all alone.

Mrs. Kiparisova – Mrs. Kiparisova is a family friend of Sofia Petrovna's. Her husband is a doctor who was close colleagues with Sofia's husband, Fyodor Ivanovich. Sofia is shocked to learn one evening that Dr. Kiparisov has been arrested as an enemy of the Soviet Union. She can't bring herself to believe such a thing, and she says as much when she later bumps into Mrs. Kiparisova on the street. She's shocked by Mrs. Kiparisova's appearance, thinking that she looks older than she actually is. The old woman is dressed in felt boots even though the weather isn't that cold, and she tells Sofia that her husband isn't guilty. Sofia is overjoyed to hear this, saying that she knew Dr. Kiparisov wouldn't betray the Soviet Union and that he'll surely be let out soon, since the government doesn't imprison innocent people. But Mrs. Kiparisova isn't so sure. When Kolya is later arrested, Sofia experiences the same thing her friend went through; she even finds herself wearing felt boots in fairly warm weather. Throughout Kolya's imprisonment, Mrs. Kiparisova stays in touch with Sofia, eventually urging her not to write an appeal on Kolya's behalf. Doing so, she says, will only remind government officials that they forgot to deport Sofia. As for Mrs. Kiparisova, she and her daughter are being deported, and she has little hope of ever reuniting with her husband.

The Director (Zakharov) – Zakharov is the director of the publishing house where Sofia works as a senior typist. An affable man in his mid-thirties, he shows Sofia kindness and strikes her as a very impressive, respectable person. She's especially pleased when he congratulates her after Kolya is celebrated in the newspaper for inventing a new way to make **cogwheels**. In short, she sees the director as a shining example of an accomplished Soviet citizen, so she's astounded when he's arrested for conspiring against the state. Of course, he's mainly arrested because he hired employees who were later accused of engaging in terrorist activity, but everyone seems to believe in the aftermath of his arrest that he must have done something more to deserve imprisonment. His downfall foreshadows Kolya's arrest by illustrating that even the most upstanding, respected people are in danger of persecution at the hands of the repressive Soviet government.

Comrade Timofeyev – Comrade Timofeyev works at the publishing house as the party secretary, serving as an official representative of the Communist Party. Alongside Anna Grigorievna (the chairman of the trade union), he orchestrates the firing of the director and a number of other employees at the publishing house—including Natasha. He claims that Natasha wants to undermine the Communist Party, using as evidence the fact that she typed "the Ret Army" instead of "the Red Army" in a company document. Despite his overzealous attempts to eradicate potential saboteurs from the publishing house, though, he himself is later fired and arrested as an enemy of the state. His fate is a good indication of just how frenzied and irrational the repressive political climate was in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s.

Anna Grigorievna – Anna Grigorievna is the chairman of the Mestkom, which is the local trade union. Severe and unrelenting, she works at the publishing house with the ostensible goal of advocating for the workers' rights. And yet, she spends most of her time accusing employees of being enemies of the state. Along with Comrade Timofeyev, she plays an instrumental role in firing the director and Natasha.

Erna Semyonovna –Erna Semyonovna is a woman who works in the typing pool at the publishing house. Sofia Petrovna dislikes her because she makes so many mistakes, but Erna Semyonovna has a security clearance, which means that she's the only person allowed to type up sensitive information about the Communist Party. When an **anonymous article** in the newspaper attacks Sofia for speaking up for Natasha after she was fired, Sofia is certain the nameless author is Erna.

The Nurse –The nurse is one of the tenants living in the same communal apartment as Sofia Petrovna. She's outwardly hostile toward Sofia in the aftermath of Kolya's arrest, claiming that Sofia can't be trusted because she's related to a criminal. Her harsh viewpoint keeps Sofia from spending time in the communal spaces of the apartment, instead hiding alone in her room as much as possible.

The Director's Wife –Sophia Petrovna encounters the wife of the former director of the publishing house while waiting in line at the prosecutor's one day. The director's wife explains that her husband has been sent to a remote work camp and that she and her daughter are being deported. When Sofia tries to tell her to remain persistent in her attempt to make things better, the director's wife laughs in her face, implying that Sofia's outlook is insensitive and out of touch with reality.

Sashka Yartsev –Sashka Yartsev is a young man with whom Kolya went to school. Kolya has never liked Sashka, who insulted Alik Finkelstein one day at school by calling him an anti-Semitic name. The Komsomol decided to hold a mock trial in response, and Kolya acted as the prosecutor. Later, Sashka Yartsev tells an investigator that Kolya conspired with him against the Soviet Union. This is a bald-faced lie, though Kolya notes that Sashka was probably beaten into giving up names

(the same way that Kolya himself was beaten into signing a confession).

MINOR CHARACTERS

Degtyarenko's Wife – Degtyarenko's wife lives in the same communal apartment as Sofia Petrovna. Unlike many of the other residents, she shows Sofia empathy in the aftermath of Kolya's arrest.

Degtyarenko –Degtyarenko is one of the tenants living in the same communal apartment as Sofia Petrovna. He's a police officer, but he isn't involved with the arrests taking place all over Leningrad, since they're carried out by secret police.

Fyodor Ivanovich –Fyodor Ivanovich is Sofia Petrovna's late husband. He was a widely respected doctor when he was alive.

Dr. Kiparisov – Dr. Kiparisov is Mrs. Kiparisova's husband. A former colleague of Sofia's husband, he's arrested on suspicion of state sabotage along with a number of other doctors in Leningrad.

TERMS

Komsomol – The Komsomol was a Soviet communist youth organization that was generally viewed as the youth wing of the Communist Party.

Mestkom – The Mestkom was the trade union originally formed to help workers control industry in the Soviet Union, though the Mestkom's actual power had markedly diminished by the 1930s, when *Sofia Petrovna* takes place.

Joseph Stalin – Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1953 (the year of his death). Even though the Soviet Union was supposed to be governed by collective leadership, Stalin eventually became its authoritarian leader and led a repressive, violent campaign called the Great Purge from 1936–1938.

Sergei Kirov – Sergei Kirov was a Soviet politician whose assassination led to the Great Purge, in which Joseph Stalin's regime carried out mass arrests and executions. The Stalin regime used Kirov's assassination as an initial justification of why it was necessary to persecute its own citizens, claiming that Kirov was assassinated for political reasons and that there were internal saboteurs trying to undermine the Communist Party—claims that have been doubted by historians.

The Great Purge – The Great Purge was a violent political campaign that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin carried out from 1936–1938. Its aim was to eliminate any resistance to the Communist Party, resulting in mass arrests and executions. It's estimated that at least 750,000 people were killed during the Great Purge.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

UNCERTAINTY AND DISBELIEF

Sofia Petrovna illustrates the intense emotional torture that often arises when people face chaos and uncertainty. The novel is set during a period in the 1930s known as the Great Purge, in which the Soviet Union imprisoned and murdered thousands of innocent citizens accused of undermining the communist cause. Sofia Petrovna's son, Kolya, is one of these citizens, but Sofia doesn't know anything about his case. She doesn't know why he was arrested, nor does she know for the majority of the novel where he's being held. She's not allowed to communicate with him, and the government keeps her—and all the other mothers and wives trying to contact their imprisoned loved ones—in a perpetual state of fearful uncertainty. In this way, the government thoroughly disempowers people like Sofia Petrovna, since it's impossible for them to advocate for their loved ones without knowing what happened or how to prove their innocence.

This uncertainty doesn't just make Sofia powerless; it also cuts her off from any sort of emotional closure, which is perhaps why she deludes herself by continuing to believe in the Soviet Union and its supposedly just ways. For instance, instead of losing heart and recognizing the government's corrupt tyranny, she insists that the Soviet Union doesn't let bad things happen to innocent people. "In our country innocent people aren't held [in prison]," she thinks. "Particularly not Soviet patriots like Kolya." This is a way of coping with the fact that she has no idea what might happen to Kolya in prison. On an emotional level, it's much easier to embrace disbelief (and even delusion) than it is to live with utter uncertainty. Therefore, Sofia clings to the only thing that could possibly make her feel better: the patriotic belief that the government wouldn't harm an innocent citizen like Kolya. She even starts telling everyone that Kolya wrote to her and said he's about to be freed. Of course, this isn't actually true, since Sofia doesn't even know if Kolya's *alive*. Still, though, she seemingly half-believes herself, and this delusion is a testament to how hard it is to deal with a lack of emotional closure. The problem, however, is that such delusions are nothing more than a form of denial. No matter what Sofia tells herself, the fact remains that Kolya disappeared into a Soviet prison and has yet to emerge. In keeping with this disappearance, the novel ends without any sort of resolution—Kolya doesn't come home, and though Sofia *does* receive a letter from him, it only confirms that anything could happen to him in prison. In turn, the novel leaves readers with

the same uncertainty that Sofia herself experiences, ultimately highlighting how hard it is to cope with loss and hardship when everything is shrouded in a frightening sense of ambiguity, doubt, and confusion.

PATRIOTISM AND FANATICISM

In one way or another, all of the characters in *Sofia Petrovna* get swept up in a fanatical, overzealous kind of patriotism in support of the Soviet Union. Their intense commitment to the Communist Party is largely a function of the Soviet Union's political climate in the mid-1930s—a time when the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, carried out a frenzied campaign of state repression after the assassination of a high-ranking Soviet politician. Because the government punished people accused of sabotaging the Communist Party, many citizens made an outward show of their commitment to communism. Sofia, for her part, believes strongly in the Communist Party, and everyone around her feels the same. Kolya, for instance, is an active member of the Komsomol, which is a communist youth organization. He frequently goes on at length about the importance of remaining "politically vigilant" in these uncertain times, referring to the threat of fascist saboteurs infiltrating the Communist Party and working to undermine it. However, this culture of hyper-patriotism gradually turns into something sinister, as the people in Sofia Petrovna's life succumb to mass hysteria orchestrated by an increasingly tyrannical government.

For example, the publishing house where Sofia works becomes a hotspot for political fanaticism, as the employees accuse one another of betraying the Soviet Union. Even the director, who is a well-respected communist, is fired and accused of treachery. Similarly, Kolya is arrested as a saboteur even though he was recently celebrated for making great technological strides on behalf of the Communist Party. The fact that people like Kolya and the director are arrested indicates that even the most patriotic citizens are in danger of persecution, regardless of whether or not they've conspired against the government. There's also a social element at play, as nobody wants to associate with people who might attract the government's suspicion. As a result, people quickly become ostracized for small, petty reasons. Sofia's friend Natasha, for instance, is fired from the publishing house for accidentally typing "the Ret Army" instead of "the Red Army." Suddenly, it becomes dangerous for Sofia to associate herself with Natasha, even though it's obvious that Natasha isn't an actual saboteur; after all, making a subtle typo would be a pretty pathetic attempt to undermine the government. Nonetheless, Sofia ends up having to resign after sticking up for Natasha at a company meeting, thus illustrating just how absurd and irrational the people around her have become. Fueled by a culture of fear, otherwise rational citizens betray one another for insignificant reasons, suggesting that this kind of hypervigilance and performative patriotism leads to little more than societal unrest and division.

PRIDE, STATUS, AND MORAL SUPERIORITY

Although *Sofia Petrovna* is primarily about the horror of losing a loved because of a corrupt and tyrannical government, it's also a novel about what happens to vanity and social status in the face of hardship. Before her son is arrested, Sofia Petrovna takes great pleasure in her role as a senior typist and the small amount of authority that comes along with the position. She condescendingly tells one of her housemates that it's a shame the housemate doesn't have a job, since working can be so fulfilling. It's clear, then, that Sofia Petrovna takes pride in her work and thinks she's doing something meaningful with her life. Her pride also extends to Kolya, who's on the path to becoming a well-regarded engineer. In fact, she has such a high opinion of Kolya that she doesn't think her own best friend, Natasha, would be a worthy romantic partner for him, despite the fact that she otherwise deeply respects Natasha. There is, then, a touch of vanity to the way Sofia moves through the world, as she clearly sees herself and her son as superior to the average Soviet citizen.

But Sofia's vanity is put to the test when Kolya is arrested and the people around her begin to question her identity as a model citizen. In particular, one of her housemates—a nurse—treats her as if she's a criminal who ought to be avoided. "If one member of a family's in jail—then you can expect just about anything from the others," Sofia overhears the nurse saying one night. And yet, Sofia still clings to her pride, believing that she has "no reason to be ashamed of Kolya." In fact, she even maintains her sense of superiority while waiting outside the prison with the other women whose loved ones have been arrested. She condescendingly feels sorry for these women, thinking about how horrible it would be to find out that a loved one was a saboteur. It never enters her mind that these people are in the same situation as her; in other words, she judges the other women in a condescending way instead of recognizing that she's in the exact same boat as they are. What's more, her desire to be seen as respectable and enviable is made evident by her fantasies about Kolya returning from prison and putting her judgmental housemate to shame. It's almost as if the embarrassment of losing face in society is one of the things that torments her most about Kolya's imprisonment. She therefore starts lying about his imminent return, and though it's arguable that she genuinely deludes herself into thinking this is true, it seems likely that her invented story is mostly an attempt to show the people who have shunned her that they were wrong. The novel therefore illustrates that people still sometimes yearn for status and respectability even in the darkest, most challenging moments of their lives.

LOYALTY, POLITICAL ALLEGIANCE, AND TRUTH

Sofia Petrovna questions the limits of political allegiance, exploring how long people will remain loyal to repressive governments. As someone who genuinely believes in the good intentions of the Communist Party under Joseph Stalin, Sofia Petrovna is slow to question the government's actions—even when her own son Kolya is arrested and imprisoned without just cause. For most of the novel, she insists that Kolya's arrest was nothing more than a mistake. Despite the fact that she has met multiple people who say their innocent loved ones have been in jail for months, she thinks she'll easily be able to clear up the misunderstanding and convince the authorities to free Kolya. Her optimism in this regard doesn't emerge from her own foolishness or naivety but from a strong belief in the virtues of the Soviet Union. She maintains her conviction that Stalin's regime values justice, which is why she's so convinced that she'll be able to free Kolya simply by telling the prosecutor about his commitment to communism. Once she gets the chance to do this, though, she discovers that things won't be quite so easy. The prosecutor hardly listens to her, and she learns that Kolya has signed a written confession. Of course, he surely signed this confession as a means of self-preservation in the face of torture, but Sofia doesn't consider this possibility—yet another sign of her genuine belief that the government is just and humane.

However, Sofia is also a devoted mother who believes Kolya would never conspire against the Communist Party. She's thus torn between her loyalty to her son and her loyalty to her country. In order to support Kolya without thinking ill of her government, then, she performs some rather complex mental gymnastics, reasoning that Kolya—who she knows is innocent—must have encountered an "overzealous investigator" who "confused him" and made it impossible for him to prove his innocence. Her thought process reveals her attempt to make sense of the government's cruelty, essentially demonstrating how hard it can be to admit the evils and shortcomings of a corrupt political system that originally meant so much to its citizens. In fact, Sofia doesn't fully stop believing the government will do the right thing until Kolya has been imprisoned for over two years, at which point all of her close companions are either dead or in jail. The novel thus highlights how long it can take for some people to give up their deeply held beliefs in order to acknowledge the reality of their circumstances.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE COGWHEEL

The cogwheel that Kolya sends Sofia symbolizes the hypocritical nature of the Soviet Union during the 1930s. On the one hand, the Soviet Union celebrates intelligent innovators like Kolya, framing the technological advancements they make as a form of admirable devotion to the Communist cause. When Kolya invents a new method of making cogwheels in a factory, for instance, the Communist Party sings his praises in the newspaper, and Sofia proudly displays the first cogwheel made by his new method, letting it loom over her room on the windowsill as a reminder of the great work he's doing for the country.

On the other hand, though, the cogwheel itself also symbolizes the relative powerlessness of people like Kolya and Sofia under repressive regimes. Cogwheels, after all, are small parts of much bigger machines, and though they're integral to the machine's functioning, they're ultimately controlled by stronger forces—a good representation of how Communism can go wrong and end up functioning as a way for the government to manipulate its citizens instead of empowering them. As the novel progresses, Kolya's cogwheel remains on Sofia's windowsill, but its meaning changes. At first, it represents the great opportunities he has been given and the fantastic strides he's making for the country. By the end of the novel, though, it symbolizes little more than the fact that even widely celebrated and devoted citizens are subject to the horrific cruelty of repressive governments.

THE ANONYMOUS NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

The anonymous newspaper article denouncing Sofia for defending Natasha symbolizes the tense and paranoid social climate of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Nobody, it seems, is safe from scrutiny, as evidenced by the fact that Sofia attracts suspicion simply because she stood up for Natasha by saying that her friend made a typo when she typed "the Ret Army" instead of "the Red Army." Her superiors insist that Natasha *meant* to type "Ret," and that it's a sign that she wants to undermine the Communist Party—an utterly ridiculous claim. And yet, nobody stands with Sofia when she suggests that Natasha made an innocent typo. To the contrary, an anonymous editorial appears shortly thereafter, and the unknown author insinuates that Sofia herself should be reprimanded and investigated for sympathizing with someone like Natasha. The fact that this article is anonymous is a perfect representation of how willing people are to turn on one another in the fraught political context of the Great Purge. By instilling a sense of paranoia in the country, the Soviet government essentially incentivizes people to turn against their fellow citizens, as if doing so is the only way to avoid suspicion oneself. The newspaper article thus comes to symbolize the

disconcerting possibility that anyone could be betrayed by one of their peers at any moment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Northwestern University Press edition of *Sofia Petrovna* published in 1994.

Chapter 1 Quotes

The typists were a bit afraid of her and called her the schoolmarm behind her back. But they obeyed her. And she wanted to be strict, but fair. In the lunch hour she chatted in a friendly way with those who did their work well and conscientiously, talked about how difficult it was to make out the director's handwriting and how lipstick was far from suitable for everyone. But with those who were capable of typing things like "rehersal" or "collective" she adopted a haughty manner.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, The Director (Zakharov)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of her husband, Sofia Petrovna takes a job in the typing pool of a local publishing house in Leningrad. It isn't long before she makes a name for herself at the publishing house, where she develops a reputation as a serious, diligent worker—the kind of worker who intimidates the other typists, especially since she moves into a senior position and, in this capacity, oversees the entire typing pool. Still, Sofia wants to strike a balance between being "strict" and "fair," clearly hoping that everyone will like her while also recognizing her hardworking nature. Even at this early stage in the novel, then, it becomes quite clear that Sofia Petrovna cares about her personal image and her overall status in society, apparently enjoying the small amount of power afforded to her as the senior typist. It's also evident that she judges other people who fail to live up to certain standards, which is why she treats the unskilled typists at the publishing house with a "haughty," disapproving attitude.

Sofia Petrovna would open the door and the assistant manager would drag Erna Semyonovna's typewriter out of the typing pool into the restricted special department. Erna Semyonovna would follow her typewriter with a triumphant expression: as they'd explained to Sofia Petrovna, she had a "security clearance" and the party secretary summoned her to the special department to type up secret party documents.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Erna Semyonovna , Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Sofia Petrovna works in the typing pool with a young woman named Erna Semyonovna, who she learns has a "security clearance" from the Communist Party. This means that Erna Semyonovna is the only person qualified to type "secret party documents" that come through the publishing house. It's obvious that she enjoys the status that this role confers upon her, since she always has a smug look on her face as she leaves the rest of the typists to go work on secret documents.

However, Sofia Petrovna doesn't understand why Erna, of all people, has a security clearance—after all, she's the worst typist in the entire publishing house (at least according to Sofia). The fact that Sofia takes note of Erna's "triumphant expression" every time she's called into the "restricted special department" is a good indication of Sofia's proud, competitive nature. As the senior typist, she seems to feel somewhat challenged or threatened by Erna's special role at the publishing house, revealing her desire for status and respect—a desire that will later make it even harder for her to deal with the ostracization she experiences as a result of Kolya's arrest.

Sofia Petrovna didn't really understand what it was all about, she was bored and wanted to leave, but she was afraid it wasn't the thing to do and glared at one of the typists who was making her way to the door.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

When Sofia Petrovna is still a relatively new employee at the publishing house, she has trouble seeing the point of the periodic meetings the senior staff holds to talk about the rise of fascism in the West. The publishing house works closely with the Communist Party, which has even installed a representative in the office to oversee its day-to-day activities.

These measures are directly related to the fact that the Soviet Union in the 1930s was full of tension and paranoia regarding the threat fascism posed to the Communist Party, especially after the assassination of a high-ranking Soviet politician named Sergei Kirov, which ignited discord within the Communist Party itself and threw the Soviet Union into a climate of fear and suspicion. Sofia, however, doesn't really care about politics—she just wants to go home, indicating that whatever allegiance she feels to the Communist Party doesn't have much to do with political ideals. Still, though, she not only stays at the meeting but casts negative judgment on a typist who decides to leave, thus demonstrating her tendency to see herself as morally superior to others.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ The Mestkom gave her the job of collecting the union dues. Sofia Petrovna thought very little about why the trade union actually existed, but she liked drawing lines on sheets of paper with a ruler and marking in the various columns who had paid their dues for the current month and who had not; she liked pasting in the stamps and presenting impeccable accounts to the auditing commission. She liked being able to walk into the director's imposing office whenever she chose and remind him jokingly that he was four months in arrears, and have him jokingly present his apologies to his patient comrades on the Mestkom and pull out his wallet and pay up. Even the sullen party secretary could safely be reminded that he owed his dues.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, The Director (Zakharov), Comrade Timofeyev

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

When Sofia becomes the person to collect union dues from everyone at the publishing house, she revels in the glory of this small form of authority. What's noteworthy, though, is that she doesn't even really consider "why the trade union actually exist[s]," therefore illustrating her lack of political zeal; she doesn't spend time thinking about unions and other staples of a communist society. Rather, she simply takes pleasure in the power she gains by collecting the dues. Of course, this power isn't all that significant, but it *does* enable her to gently chastise important figures like the director or Comrade Timofeyev, both of whom are otherwise much more powerful than her. The fact that she enjoys this job so much is a good illustration of the pride she takes in being the kind of person whom others might view with respect. To her, playing an important role in the Communist Party has nothing to do with her political beliefs and *everything* to do with her desire for status.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Sofia Petrovna had one consolation for the loss of her apartment: the tenants unanimously elected her official apartment representative. She became, as it were, the manager, the boss of her own apartment. She gently, but firmly, spoke to the wife of the accountant about the trunks standing in the corridor. She calculated the amount each person owed for electricity as accurately as she collected the Mestkom dues at work.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In addition to the small amount of power that Sofia enjoys while working at the publishing house, she is elected to be the official representative of her apartment, which is a communal living space that houses multiple families. The apartment used to belong to her family exclusively, but with the rise of socialism in the wake of the Russian Revolution, many large apartments were converted to accommodate more than just one family.

The fact that Sofia used to own the apartment with her husband suggests that they were relatively well-off, but Sofia doesn't seem to talk about this very much—most likely because members of the wealthy bourgeoisie tend to attract harsh judgment in Soviet society. Still, this is not to say that Sofia was legitimately wealthy; she simply had a nice place to live. The fact that she views her role as apartment representative as a "consolation for the loss of her apartment" implies that she would otherwise be upset about having been forced by the government to share her living space. In turn, it becomes clear that—despite her devotion to the Communist Party—she doesn't necessarily

cling to communist ideals. Her commitment to the Soviet Union, then, has less to do with political ideology than it has to do with a desire to fit in.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Sofia Petrovna even wrote to Kolya about the injustice Natasha had suffered. But Kolya replied that injustice was a class concept and vigilance was essential. Natasha did after all come from a bourgeois, landowning family. Vile fascist hirelings, of the kind that had murdered comrade Kirov, had still not been entirely eradicated from the country. The class struggle was still going on, and therefore it was essential to exercise the utmost vigilance when admitting people to the party and the Komsomol.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Natasha Frolenko, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Natasha's father was a decorated colonel and a member of the bourgeoisie, but he died when she was very young. She then lived a modest life with her mother and a relative, and she has never truly benefited from her father's former position in society. Nonetheless, the Komsomol—a youth wing of the Communist Party—refuses to let her join because of her bourgeois family ties. Sofia thinks this is incredibly unfair, especially since Natasha is one of the most ardent and disciplined supporters of the Communist Party that she knows.

Kolya, however, thinks it's reasonable for the Komsomol to be weary of people like Natasha, arguing that the Communist Party is still very much under attack. Ever since the high-ranking Soviet politician Sergei Kirov was assassinated, he says, the Soviet Union has been in turmoil. The best way to make sure the Communist Party doesn't succumb to fascist infiltrators is by showing the "utmost vigilance," he claims. In essence, then, he endorses the very same culture of paranoia and suspicion that he himself will eventually face when he's wrongfully arrested for terrorism.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Two years before, after the murder of Kirov (Oh! What grim times those were! Patrols walked the streets…and when Comrade Stalin was about to arrive, the station square was cordoned off by troops…and there were troops lining all the streets as Stalin walked behind the coffin)—after Kirov's murder there had also been many arrests, but at that time they first took all kinds of oppositionists, then old regime people, all kinds of "vons" and barons. But now it was doctors.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing that most of the doctors in Leningrad have been rounded up and arrested, Sofia thinks about the aftermath of Sergei Kirov's assassination. Sergei Kirov was a Soviet politician, and his assassination set off extreme unrest within the Communist Party, since Stalin began to suspect that there were people within the party working to undermine the cause—or, at least, this is the justification he used to make a number of arrests. At the time, Sofia more or less accepted the necessity of such arrests, apparently agreeing that it was a good idea to rid society of "old regime people" who might not align with the Communist cause. Now, though, she begins to sense that things are getting a bit out of hand, as the government arrests a group of doctors, thus casting suspicion on an otherwise upstanding segment of the population. Of course, it takes a long time for Sofia to *truly* question the Soviet government (the entire novel, in fact), but even at this early stage it's evident that she can intuit something isn't right.

After the murder of Kirov they had sent away, as a member of the nobility, Madame Nezhentseva, an old friend of Sofia Petrovna's—they had attended school together. Sofia Petrovna had been astonished: what connection could Madame Nezhentseva possibly have to the murder? She taught French in a school and lived just like everybody else. But Kolya had explained that it was necessary to rid Leningrad of unreliable elements. "And who exactly is this Madame Nezhentseva of yours anyway? You remember yourself, Mama, that she didn't recognize Mayakovsky as a poet and always said that things were cheaper in the old days. She's not a real Soviet person…"

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of Sergei Kirov's assassination, one of Sofia's friends was arrested for apparently having ties to "the nobility," which is to say that the government suspected her of remaining loyal to the system of monarchy that was overthrown in the Russian Revolution. Sofia didn't think this was necessary, since it was obvious that her friend had nothing to do with the assassination of a high-ranking Soviet politician like Sergei Kirov. Kolya, on the other hand, thought it was good that the government had arrested his mother's friend.

The language he uses in this passage reflects the atmosphere of hypervigilant patriotism and paranoia in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, as he insists that this woman wasn't a "real Soviet person" simply because she didn't like the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky, a famous communist poet. Needless to say, this detail doesn't mean that Sofia's friend wanted to undermine the Soviet government, but Kolya believes that it made her worthy of suspicion—a clear sign that even the smallest things can attract negative attention to a person in such a fraught political climate.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ "Arrested last night was the ex-supervisor of our print shop, now unmasked as an enemy of the people—Gerasimov. He turned out to be the nephew of the Moscow Gerasimov, who was unmasked a month ago. With the connivance of our party organization, which is suffering, to use Comrade Stalin's apt expression, from the idiotic disease of complacency, Gerasimov continued to, so to speak, 'operate' in our print shop even after his own uncle, the Moscow Gerasimov, had been unmasked."

Related Characters: Anna Grigorievna (speaker), Sofia Petrovna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In a meeting at the publishing house, Anna Grigorievna—the chairman of the labor union—informs Sofia and the other employees that the supervisor of the printshop has been fired and arrested for acting as an "enemy of the people." But Anna Grigorievna isn't all that clear about what, exactly, the supervisor of the printshop actually *did*. Instead, she emphasizes the fact that he's related to someone else who has *also* been "unmasked as an enemy of the people," and this association in and of itself seems to be enough to cast suspicion on him.

Anna Grigorievna also uses this arrest as an opportunity to argue that everyone at the publishing house has to be even more vigilant when it comes to keeping an eye out for terrorists and saboteurs. In fact, she argues that the employees are suffering from "the idiotic disease of complacency," by which she means that everyone should be ashamed of themselves for not reporting the supervisor. In turn, Anna Grigorievna adds to the culture of fear and paranoia at play in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, essentially urging coworkers to spy on one another.

❝ "And really, why are you so upset? Since [your husband] isn't guilty—then everything will be all right. Nothing can happen to an honest man in our country. It's just a misunderstanding. Come on, don't be discouraged…Stop by and have a cup of tea sometime!"

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna (speaker), Mrs. Kiparisova, Dr. Kiparisov, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Sofia speaks these words to her old friend Mrs. Kiparisova after bumping into her in the streets. Mrs. Kiparisova's husband, Dr. Kiparisov, has recently been arrested as a saboteur working to undermine the Communist Party. Mrs. Kiparisova, however, tells Sofia that her husband is innocent, and this comment prompts Sofia to console her friend by assuring her that she has nothing to worry about: Dr. Kiparisov will surely come home soon because "nothing can happen to an honest man" in the Soviet Union. Her remark illustrates the faith she has (misguidedly) placed in the virtues of the Soviet government, which she still thinks is a fair and reasonable governing body. Of course, Mrs. Kiparisova surely understands that Sofia's optimism is unwarranted, but Sofia herself has no reason to doubt the Communist Party or suspect it of foul play—though this will soon change when Kolya is arrested without just cause.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"They say our director has been abroad," Natasha recalled. "Also on a mission. Remember Marya Ivanovna, the elevator woman, told us that he'd brought his wife a light-blue knitted suit from Berlin?"

Related Characters: Natasha Frolenko (speaker), Sofia Petrovna, The Director (Zakharov)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

On the day that Zakharov—the director of the publishing house—is arrested for terrorist activity, Natasha shows Sofia an article in the newspaper. The article tells the story of an honest citizen who worked for the Soviet Union and was sent to Germany on a mission. While working abroad, he fell in love with a woman who, unbeknownst to him, wanted to undermine the Communist Party. She ended up stealing secret documents, and though he later found this out, he didn't say anything. Instead, he returned to the Soviet Union and hoped nothing else would happen, but then foreign agents started threatening to reveal what happened unless he gave them *more* information. He was eventually found out and arrested.

This article seems relevant to Natasha in the wake of the director's arrest, as she implores Sofia to ask herself if the director might have been involved in a similar situation. In a sense, this proposal is an attempt to preserve the director's integrity while also explaining why he might have acted as a traitor, since such a situation would suggest that he never truly intended to betray the Communist Party. However, it's also a fairly outlandish idea that the director's travels abroad make him worthy of suspicion, and the fact that Natasha points to his foreign coat as possible evidence of wrongdoing underlines the extent to which suspicion and a culture of fear can lead to irrational thinking.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Just think of it, all these women, the mothers, wives and sisters of saboteurs, terrorists and spies! And the men, the husband or brother of one…They all looked perfectly ordinary, like those on a streetcar or in a store. Except they all looked tired and baggy-eyed. "I can imagine how awful it must be for a mother to learn that her son is a saboteur," thought Sofia Petrovna.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

After Kolya is arrested and Sofia goes to the prison to find out more information, she finds herself standing in line with hundreds of other people who are, like her, trying to discover what has happened to their loved ones. Even though she's in the exact same position as these people, though, Sofia doesn't feel a sense of camaraderie with them. Instead, she views the people in line as the relatives of "saboteurs, terrorists and spies." She doesn't even consider the possibility that their loved ones are probably innocent.

And yet, she herself is convinced that *her* son doesn't deserve imprisonment. In this way, she assumes an internal stance of moral superiority, looking down on everyone around her and giving them (in her mind, that is) a patronizing, condescending form of pity. "I can imagine how awful it must be for a mother to learn that her son is a saboteur," she says, failing to recognize the irony of this statement, which is that she *is* a mother who has been told that her son is an enemy of the state. It's clear, then, that she's in a state of disbelief about her (and Kolya's) situation.

Chapter 10 Quotes

The night before, in the line, one woman had said to another—Sofia Petrovna had heard her: "No point waiting for him to return! Those who wind up here never return." Sofia Petrovna had wanted to interrupt, but decided not to get involved. In our country innocent people aren't held. Particularly not Soviet patriots like Kolya. They'll clear the matter up and let him go.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Sofia spends her days in the weeks after Kolya's arrest waiting in lines in the hopes that she might find out more information about where he is, why he was arrested, and what she needs to do to help his case. While waiting in line one day, though, she overhears a woman pessimistically—but perhaps *realistically*—say that anyone

who has been imprisoned has no real chance of being freed. This comment stands in stark contrast to Sofia's own outlook, which is so optimistic that it seems somewhat naïve, since she wholeheartedly believes that the government will let Kolya out of prison very soon because they'll realize he's innocent. In reality, the vast, vast majority of citizens imprisoned in the Soviet Union in the 1930s were innocent, but this didn't mean they would be let out of prison. Still, though, Sofia's belief that everything will work out isn't necessarily a sign of naivety—rather, it's an indication of just how strongly she believes in her government, which she thinks is just and reasonable.

❝ No, Sofia Petrovna had been quite right to keep aloof from her neighbors in the lines. She was sorry for them, of course, as human beings, sorry especially for the children; but still an honest person had to remember that all these women were the wives and mothers of poisoners, spies and murderers.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

While waiting in line one day to find out more information about Kolya's case, Sofia Petrovna looks over someone's shoulder and reads a sensationalist news article. The article is about prisoners who have made written confessions, and the newspaper has even run one of these confessions, which goes into detail about terrorist activity and the life of a saboteur in the Soviet Union. Reading this while standing in line, Sofia suddenly feels justified once more in her decision to keep a certain distance between herself and the other people whose loved ones have been imprisoned. After all, these people are clearly related to the sort of citizens who actually *deserve* to be in jail—unlike Kolya. This, at least, is what Sofia thinks, as she privately extends a condescending kind of pity to the people around her. And yet, she also casts negative judgment on her fellow citizens, demonstrating once again her tendency to indulge a sense of moral superiority even when she's in the same exact position as the people around her.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ "And who is this Frolenko? She's the daughter of a colonel who under the old regime was the owner of a so-called estate. What, it is asked, was citizeness Frolenko doing in our publishing house, the daughter of an alien element, appointed to her job by the bandit Zakharov? Another document will tell us about that. Under the wing of Zakharov, citizeness Frolenko learned to blacken our beloved Red Army of workers and peasants, to strike counterrevolutionary blows: she calls the Red Army, the *Rat* Army…"

Related Characters: Comrade Timofeyev (speaker), Natasha Frolenko, The Director (Zakharov)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Natasha is fired from the publishing house, Comrade Timofeyev talks about her at a meeting, explaining to the other employees that she originally came under suspicion because of her family history. Of course, he doesn't acknowledge that Natasha had very little to do with that family history when she was growing up, since her father died when she was quite young. She thus lived a modest life with her mother and a relative, enjoying none of the perks that would have come along with the bourgeois lifestyle that her father led.

And yet, none of these details matter: the mere fact that she can be linked to an "old regime" family (that is, a family with ties to the pre-Soviet monarchy in Russia) casts suspicion on her in the fraught, paranoid context of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. To that end, Comrade Timofeyev looks at an obvious typo and blows it way out of proportion, claiming that Natasha called the Red Army the "*Rat* Army" simply because she accidentally typed "Ret" instead of "Red" in a company document. In turn, it becomes overwhelmingly clear how easy it is to find oneself the target of a fearmongering form of ostracization.

❝ "So she thinks he's some kind of innocent lamb," the nurse began again. "Excuse me, please, but people don't get locked up for nothing in our country. Enough of this. They haven't locked me up, have they? And why not? Because I'm an honest woman, a real Soviet citizen."

Related Characters: The Nurse (speaker), Sofia Petrovna, Kolya, Degtyarenko's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

While Sofia is in the bath one night, she overhears the nurse talking about her to Degtyarenko's wife in the kitchen. The nurse insists that somebody has been stealing kerosene from her own supply, and she immediately blames Sofia because one of her family members has been imprisoned. When Degtyarenko's wife stands up for Sofia, the nurse says that Kolya is surely guilty of terrorist activity. But what's most notable about this passage (other than that it illustrates just how far Sofia has fallen in the eyes of her peers) is that the nurse uses the same exact rhetoric that Sofia herself has used in the past about how "people don't get locked up for nothing" in the Soviet Union. Sofia herself has said multiple times throughout the novel that innocent people aren't held in prison for long, ultimately voicing her belief that she lives under the rule of a fair and beneficent government. Now, though, this belief is put to the test, as the nurse implies that Kolya *must* be guilty simply because he's still in prison.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"You're still very young, I assure you, you're mistaken. It's all a question of tact. For instance, yesterday I defended Natalia Sergeyevna at the meeting. And the result? Nothing's happened to me because of it. Believe me, this business with Kolya is a nightmare to me. I'm his mother. But I understand it's a temporary misunderstanding, exaggerations, disagreement…One has to be patient.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna (speaker), Alik Finkelstein, Kolya, Natasha Frolenko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

While standing in line with Alik Finkelstein one day, Sofia chides him for expressing his frustration with the Soviet government so freely. She thinks that he needs to learn to control his temper, which might otherwise get him in trouble (in fact, she thinks he was fired from the factory because he must have said something to upset a superior). To make her point, she notes that she stood up for Natasha in front of all of the employees at the publishing house—and nothing happened. She uses this story as an example of how people can still express their feelings and misgivings without upsetting anyone or inviting negative attention. And yet, she fails to recognize that something could *still* happen to her as a result of what she said in Natasha's defense at the employee meeting. It's true that nothing particularly noteworthy happened in the direct aftermath of what she said, but it's still quite likely that her peers and superiors will now look on her with the same suspicion they have for Natasha.

"You have to be persistent," said Sofia Petrovna quietly. "If they won't tell you here, you must write to Moscow. Or else, what's going to happen? You'll lose track of each other completely."

The director's wife looked her up and down.

"Who is it? Your husband? Your son?" she asked with such intense fury that Sofia Petrovna involuntarily drew back closer to Alik. All right then, when they send your son away—you just be persistent, you go find out his address."

"They won't send my son away," said Sofia Petrovna apologetically. "You see, he's not guilty. He was arrested by mistake."

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed the director's wife, carefully enunciating each syllable.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, The Director's Wife (speaker), The Director (Zakharov), Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

On the day that Sofia can finally visit the prosecutor to learn more about Kolya's case, she finds herself standing in line next to the wife of the publishing house's former director. The director's wife tells her that Zakharov (the director) has been sentenced to 10 years in a remote work camp and that she and her daughter are being deported. Sofia is devastated to hear this news, realizing that the director and his wife won't be able to find each other once his time in the work camp is finished—a realization that hints at her inability to fully grasp the reality of the situation, since it's quite unlikely that the director will ever make it out of the work camps in the first place.

Nonetheless, Sofia tells the director's wife to remain "persistent," but her comment only offends the director's

wife, who tells *her* to be "persistent" when Kolya is finally sent away. The fact that Sofia earnestly tells the director's wife that this won't happen because Kolya is innocent emphasizes just how strongly she believes everything will work out. She still thinks that bad things don't happen to innocent people living in the Soviet Union. But the director's wife knows firsthand that this isn't the case, which is why she laughs at Sofia's optimism.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Lying in her bed, she would think about her next letter to Comrade Stalin. Since Kolya had been taken away, she had already written three letters to Comrade Stalin. In the first she had asked him to review Kolya's case and have him released since he was not guilty of anything. In the second, she had asked to be told where he was so that she might go there and see him just once more before she died. In the third, she implored him to tell her one thing only: was Kolya alive or dead? But there was no answer…The first letter she had simply dropped into the mailbox, the second she had sent by registered mail, and the third, with a return slip for confirmation of delivery. The return slip came back after a few days. In the space "signature of recipient" was an incomprehensible scribble, in small letters: "…eryan."

Who was this "Eryan"? And had he given Comrade Stalin the letter? After all the envelope had been marked: "Personal and Private."

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Kolya, Alik Finkelstein

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

It has now been over a year since Kolya was first arrested, and Sofia has no information about what has happened to him. To make matters worse, Alik has been imprisoned, and Natasha has taken her own life. Sofia is therefore completely alone, left to her own devices as she grapples with the devastating uncertainty surrounding Kolya's fate. And yet, she still makes the rather optimistic assumption that the government is on her side and is available to help her. She writes personal letters to Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union who is ostensibly responsible for the mass arrests, executions, and deportations taking place during what's now known as the Great Purge—a time of intense suffering and repression. Even though seemingly everyone around her has been plunged into hardship and despair because of Joseph Stalin's authoritarian regime, Sofia clings to the idea that she can reach out to Stalin himself for help. Again, this could be seen as a sign of her naivety, but it's also arguable that it's simply a sign both of her strong political allegiance to the Soviet government *and* of how desperate she is to help her son.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Sofia Petrovna went back to her own room and sat down on the sofa. She needed to sit somewhere quiet, to recover from her own words and grasp their meaning. Kolya's been released. They've released Kolya. Looking back at her from the mirror was a wrinkled old woman with dirty-gray hair streaked with white. Would Kolya know her when her [sic] returned? She stared deep into the mirror until everything began to swim before her eyes and she could no longer tell which was the real couch and which the reflection.

Related Characters: Sofia Petrovna, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after she learns that some prisoners have been set free, Sofia suddenly finds herself telling her housemates that Kolya has been let out of prison. Having spoken these words, she goes back to her room and tries to comprehend what just happened. This moment—in which she sits down to "recover from her own words and grasp their meaning"—is noteworthy because it sheds light on her state of mind. It's never clear if she tells her housemates about Kolya's return because she actually believes it, or if she's just lying in an attempt to save face. Of course, it would make sense if she were lying, since people like the nurse *have* judged her harshly for having a relative in prison, so it's likely that Sofia would be eager to restore her social status. And yet, the fact that she stares into the mirror until she can "no longer tell which was the real couch and which the reflection" hints that she has entered something of a dissociative state in which she has trouble separating reality from fantasy.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"Don't write it!" whispered Kiparisova, bringing her huge eyes, ringed with yellow, close up to Sofia Petrovna's face. "Don't write one for your son's sake. They're not going to pat you on the back for an appeal like that. Neither you, nor your son. Do you really think you can write that the investigator beat him? You can't even think such a thing, let alone write it. They've forgotten to deport you, but if you write an appeal—they'll remember. And they'll send your father away, too…and who brought this letter, anyway? And where are the witnesses?...And what proof is there?..."

Related Characters: Mrs. Kiparisova (speaker), Sofia Petrovna, Kolya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

When Sofia finally receives a letter from Kolya, she learns that he was beaten into signing a confession and that he doesn't think he'll last much longer in the work camps. He therefore implores her to write an appeal on his behalf, saying that she's his only hope of surviving. Sofia immediately takes this letter to her friend, Mrs. Kiparisova, presumably so that she can help her draft the appeal letter.

However, Mrs. Kiparisova surprises her by saying that she *shouldn't* write the appeal. She then goes on to outline what would happen if Sofia wrote it, pointing out that the Soviet Union won't look kindly on someone willing to boldly talk about the government's violent tactics. Indeed, it wouldn't be in the government's interest to look into Kolya's case, since doing so would mean acknowledging that he was tortured into signing a false confession—and such an acknowledgment could lead to great unrest throughout the Soviet Union, since so many people have loved ones who supposedly signed confessions. If it got out that Kolya was beaten into making a confession, then, everyone else would suspect that the same thing had happened to *their* imprisoned loved ones. Therefore, if Sofia writes an appeal, it's more likely than not that the government will do whatever it takes to silence her, ultimately deporting her so that she can't attract attention to Kolya's case. Simply put, Mrs. Kiparisova helps Sofia finally come to the bitter realization that she's powerless to help her son.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Sofia Petrovna becomes a typist in the aftermath of her husband's death. She wants to make sure she'll be able to pay for her son, Kolya, to pursue higher education—she knows it's what her husband, Fyodor Ivanovich, would have wanted. She lands a job in a publishing house in her home city of Leningrad, and though she has never worked in an office, she quickly takes a liking to the daily routine of her role as a senior typist. She oversees the other typists, assigns them work, and makes sure everything is presentable. She feels important in her job, especially because it means she works in the orbit of new Soviet works of literature.

Sofia Petrovna's positive attitude toward her job as a typist reveals her desire to contribute to the Soviet Union as a productive citizen. She clearly takes pride in fashioning herself as someone with a certain amount of importance, relishing the status that comes along with managing the typing pool—a job that isn't all that powerful. Nevertheless, she likes feeling important, and she finds meaning in her job because it's connected to Soviet culture. The novel thus presents her as a citizen who is wholeheartedly devoted to contributing to the Soviet Union.

It's not long before Sofia's superiors at the publishing house recognize her competence. The other typists treat her with respect, though they're a little intimidated by her. One woman in particular irritates Sofia. Her name is Erna Semyonovna, and she's a terrible typist who misspells almost every word she types and carries herself in an arrogant way that reminds Sofia of a housekeeper who used to flirt with her late husband. But there are also people at work whom Sofia really likes, such as Natasha Frolenko, who is a wonderful worker and a great typist.

Sofia has a fondness for hard workers, indicating that she values diligent people who value being productive Soviet citizens. Conversely, she dislikes Erna Semyonovna because she makes so many mistakes but still seems to think she's worthy of respect. Sofia's judgmental attitude toward Erna hints that she harbors a certain sense of moral superiority, as she's quick to form negative opinions about people who don't live up to her high standards of how good Soviet citizens should behave.

Although the typing pool is separate from the editorial department of the publishing house, Sofia Petrovna soon gets to know the higher-ranking employees. A kind accountant starts talking to her in the halls, and the director's secretary says hello to her in the mornings. She even gets to know the "party secretary," Comrade Timofeyev, who periodically visits the typing pool to summon Erna Semyonovna. Erna has an official "security clearance," so the party secretary needs her to type "secret party documents."

Comrade Timofeyev works at the publishing house as a representative of the Communist Party—a fact that shows just how intertwined the government was with everyday life in the Soviet Union during the mid-to-late 1930s, when Sofia Petrovna *is set. Because of the close connection between the publishing house and the Communist Party, Sofia's sense of herself as a contributor to the Communist cause makes sense, enabling her to see her work as something that plays into a broader governmental structure.*

The director of the publishing house is impressed by Sofia Petrovna's skills, since he's heard that she's particularly good at deciphering his terrible handwriting. As a result, he asks her to work overtime, and his compliment gives her great pleasure—she leaves his office feeling fulfilled and proud.

The director's kind words delight Sofia because they affirm her sense of importance. She sees herself as a productive Soviet citizen, and the fact that the director specifically commends her hard work supports her feeling that her job as a typist is something she can be proud of.

Sofia Petrovna attends her first meeting, where the director delivers a speech about the rise of fascism in Germany. After he speaks, Timofeyev talks about how everyone must stay vigilant and get "the facts" straight, though he doesn't elaborate. Then, Anna Grigorievna, the chairman of the Mestkom (the local trade union) gets up and says that the publishing house must hold its workers to a high standard, in light of everything going on in the world and in the Soviet Union. Sofia doesn't quite grasp what everyone's talking about, but she doesn't dare leave early. In fact, she looks disapprovingly at a typist who moves toward the door.

There was a fair amount of political tension building in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The assassination of a high-ranking Soviet politician, Sergei Kirov, sparked internal unrest within the government, as Stalin began to suspect that certain politicians wanted to undermine his party. One of the party's fears at the time was the growing popularity of fascism in the West, as countries like Italy and Germany fell under fascist rule. The mounting fear surrounding the potential fascist infiltration of the Soviet Union is what provokes the leaders of the publishing house to hold this meeting about remaining vigilantly committed to the Communist cause.

Sofia eventually gets used to attending meetings at the publishing house. Her interest in these meetings increases after the director publicly praises her for her good work, pointing to her as an example of the kind of worker everyone else should aspire to be during these tumultuous times.

For all of her interest in being a devoted and productive Soviet citizen, Sofia isn't particularly tuned in to the current political climate. Instead, she's mainly concerned with her own job performance and whether or not impressive people like the director think she's doing a good job. Her commitment to the Communist cause, then, has less to do with political ideology than it has to do with an unquestioned sense of loyalty and allegiance to the Soviet Union—a loyalty that will be challenged as the novel progresses.

CHAPTER 2

In the coming months, Sofia Petrovna spends all of her free time with Natasha Frolenko. Mostly, though, she works. Her son, Kolya, jokes about how devoted she is to social activism, as the Mestkom appoints her to be the person who collects union dues from the other workers at the publishing house. She doesn't pay much thought to the point of these dues, but she *does* enjoy collecting them. In fact, she learns that she can even gently reprimand the director and the party secretary if they get behind on their payments—and she enjoys doing so.

It's clear that Sofia likes power. This is not necessarily because she's hungry for authority, but because having power makes her feel important. In other words, she cares about social status, and the way to gain respect in the Soviet Union during this period is by showing devotion to the Communist Party. Therefore, she takes pride in her duty to collect union dues from her colleagues, since this task makes her feel important.

Sofia and Natasha frequently stay at work late. Alone in the darkened typing pool, Sofia enjoys talking while Natasha patiently listens. Natasha herself isn't much of a talker, but Sofia makes up for her lack of input by gossiping about their coworkers and superiors. She also tells Natasha about her late husband, how deeply in love they were, and about Kolya as a child. Natasha, for her part, doesn't have many stories about love, which Sofia chalks up to the fact that Natasha has a very pasty, sickly complexion.

It becomes obvious that Sofia Petrovna is a very proud woman—not just when it comes to her role as the senior typist or as the labor union's dues collector, but also when it comes to her family and personal life. She enjoys telling Natasha about her loved ones, and she doesn't seem to mind that Natasha doesn't have much to say in return. In particular, her love for Kolya shines through what she says, establishing how much she cares about her son and, in turn, how devastated she would be to lose him.

Natasha's father was a wealthy colonel who died when she was a child, at which point she and her mother moved in with a relative. She had to start working at the age of 15, and now both her mother and her relative are dead. She's a staunch supporter of the Soviet Union, but the Komsomol—a communist youth organization—won't let her in because her father was a high-ranking military man and a homeowner. The Komsomol thus doubts her allegiance to the ideals of communism.

The Komsomol's refusal to let Natasha join illustrates how suspicious people were of one another in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Natasha herself has lived a modest life amongst the working class, but the Komsomol refuses to admit her simply because she originally came from a wealthy family. The fact that her father was a colonel implies that he was in the military before the Russian Revolution (1917–1923), meaning that he would have fought to preserve the Russian monarchy against socialist revolutionary forces. Now that Natasha lives in a fully socialist state, then, her family ties to a pre-communist Russia mark her as a threat to the Communist Party—this, at least, is what the Komsomol seems to think.

Sofia gives a pledge at work to several esteemed guests from Moscow; she was chosen to give the pledge on behalf of the publishing house's "nonparty workers." Afterwards, she feels extremely proud and can't wait to tell Kolya all about it, but she has to wait for him to get home from studying for his final exams with his good friend Alik Finkelstein. As she waits for him, she talks to one of her housemates in the kitchen, saying that it's really too bad the woman doesn't have a job, since it adds meaning and purpose to life. "Especially if your job is connected with literature," Sofia adds.

Sofia delivers a pledge to the Communist Party on behalf of the publishing house's "nonparty workers" (or people who have no official affiliation with the government or the Communist Party). This pledge gives her the opportunity to prove her loyalty to the Communist Party, but it also satisfies her desire to feel like an important, productive Soviet citizen. Feeling this way, she can't help but speak condescendingly to her housemate, acting somewhat superior because she has a job that she believes adds value to her life.

When Kolya comes home, Sofia doesn't have time to tell him about the pledge she made at work. He immediately tells her that he's now an official member of the Komsomol. Going on, he excitedly talks about his day, mentioning that there was an argument at school and that it was instigated by a boy named Sashka Yartsev, whom Kolya says is a "real old-regime jerk." Apparently, Sashka Yartsev called Alik Finkelstein a Yid (an anti-Semitic term), so now there will be a mock trial. Kolya tells his mother that he has been appointed to act as the public prosecutor. When Sofia finally tells him about the pledge, he expresses his admiration for her and then goes to bed.

Kolya is even more wrapped up in the Communist Party than his mother, as evidenced by his membership in the Komsomol. To that end, he and his friends draw on their power as a communist collective to address inequality head-on when Sashka Yartsev calls Alik an anti-Semitic name. In a way, his experience with the Komsomol during this period hints at the potential benefits of living in a socialist society built on the belief that the people should have the right to govern themselves. In this moment, such a system empowers Kolya to deal with anti-Semitism alongside his peers. Unfortunately, though, the same kind of governmental system also leads to corruption and repression.

CHAPTER 3

It's a long time before Sofia gets a vacation. She looks forward to using her free time to do various chores and purchase a nice coat for Kolya. When she finally goes on vacation, though, she quickly gets bored and wishes she were back at work. She spends most of her time in the evenings with Natasha, asking her about the latest gossip at work.

Again, it's clear that Sofia's job gives meaning and structure to her life. Without it, she's unsure of what to do with herself. Because she takes pride in her role as a senior typist at the publishing house, she has no problem working long hours. Simply put, she finds her job rewarding, partially because she thinks she's contributing to the Soviet Union's cultural advancement by working at a prominent publishing house.

Sofia doesn't see much of Kolya, who's always in the library with Alik. They're both getting ready to go to college to study mechanical engineering, and Kolya is passionately committed to the Komsomol, speaking frequently to Sofia about politics and communism. He has a strong sense of right and wrong, so when Sofia complains about the fact that their family apartment now houses multiple families, he tries to show her that putting extra tenants into large "bourgeois apartments" is the right thing to do—it's revolutionary, he insists. Sofia agrees, but she still dislikes it when the other families are messy. One consolation, though, is that the tenants elect her to be the official representative of the apartment.

With the onset of communism after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, communal apartments appeared throughout the Soviet Union. The idea was to take large apartments and turn them into dwelling spaces for multiple families, thus emphasizing the needs of the collective and creating a more egalitarian housing landscape—something that was especially important because many urban areas in the Soviet Union were facing housing shortages. In this passage, it becomes clear that Sofia and her husband owned a large apartment that was, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, repurposed to serve multiple tenants. Sofia appears to have had some trouble with this sacrifice, suggesting that her commitment to the Communist Party doesn't have much to do with her actual belief in communism itself.

Serving as the official apartment representative pleases Sofia. She likes telling the others to keep things tidy, and she generally gets along with them quite well. She often spends time with the wife of one of her tenants. The tenant is Degtyarenko, and he works as a police officer. Degtyarenko's wife makes jam and often brings it to Sofia and chats with her, sometimes gossiping about a nurse who lives in the apartment. Degtyarenko's wife insists that the nurse must be terrible at her job. The nurse also has a daughter, who often yells at her parents and uses language that shocks Sofia. Otherwise, though, the apartment functions relatively well, unlike some of the other units in the building.

Sofia's problems with her fellow tenants seem pretty average, as it's quite normal for people living in close proximity to get on one another's nerves. Still, serving as the official apartment representative helps Sofia deal with these minor grievances. Once again, then, having a small amount of authority lends purpose and a sense of importance to her life, illustrating that she likes the feeling of possessing a little bit of power.

Finally, Sofia returns to work. It's a relief to be back, though she still finds herself resentful of Erna Semyonovna, intimidated by the party secretary, Comrade Timofeyev, and contemptuous of the Mestkom chairman. But she's fond of the director and wishes she could be his secretary. During this period, Kolya and Alik pass their entrance exams for the mechanical engineering institute. They decide to build a radio together as a celebration. Sofia doesn't love the idea at first, since Kolya and Alik have embarked on ambitious building projects before, and the projects always clutter Sofia and Kolya's room with materials. But when they finish the radio, she sees what a luxury it is to listen to music and the various programs in the morning.

At this point in the novel, everything is still going quite well for Sofia. There are some minor annoyances in her life, like the fact that Erna Semyonovna makes so many mistakes at work, but she's mostly content with her existence. Similarly, Kolya and Alik are on track to become successful engineers and are quite pleased with their current circumstances. At this stage, then, the current landscape of the Soviet Union seems—for all intents and purposes—perfectly harmonious, showing few signs of the turmoil to come.

Natasha often comes over to listen to the radio with Sofia. However, Sofia is uninterested in listening to the news, though Kolya tries to show her the importance of keeping track of current events. He tells her about the rise of fascism in the west, but she only listens to humor him.

Again, Sofia doesn't show much interest in politics. Her support of the Communist Party is therefore mainly an act of conformity, not necessarily an indication that she strongly believes in communist ideals.

CHAPTER 4

It has already been three years since Sofia started at the office. She has secured a raise, and she's grown quite proud of Kolya, who is tall, handsome, and intelligent. But her pride in him only makes her feel guilty that he doesn't have his own place to stay. He's an adult now and should have his own room, but they can't afford a bigger place. While Sofia complains to Natasha one day about how Kolya should have his own space, Natasha points out in a nervous voice that she herself lives alone. She trails off, and when Sofia asks what her point is, Natasha abandons the topic altogether.

It's apparent by Natasha's comment in this moment that she has romantic feelings for Kolya, but Sofia doesn't even consider the possibility. She's extremely proud of her son and thinks very highly of him, so it's unlikely that she would want him to date Natasha, who she thinks is pasty and unattractive. It doesn't even occur to her, then, that Kolya and Natasha would ever be a suitable match.

The issue of finding Kolya his own place to stay becomes a moot point when both Kolya and Alik receive word that they, as honor students, are being sent to an engineering plant in the city of Sverdlovsk as part of a "labor allotment." The plant is in need of engineers, so their school has arranged for them to fill this need while completing their studies via mail. Sofia is worried about sending Kolya off on his own, but Alik promises to take care of him. She sees them both to the train station and then walks home with teary eyes.

It's hard for Sofia to say goodbye to her son, but she can—at the very least—be proud that he's been chosen to carry out an important job. For someone who views her own working life as a meaningful contribution to society, she undoubtedly views Kolya's placement in the factory as a good opportunity for him to become a model Soviet citizen—that is, a citizen of whom she can be proud.

CHAPTER 5

As the months pass without Kolya, Sofia spends more and more time at work. When she's not working overtime, she goes to the movies with Natasha. They both enjoy films depicting acts of great patriotism. Natasha is particularly fervent about supporting the Soviet Union, reading the entire newspaper every day and talking to Sofia about politics—just like Kolya used to do. And yet, the Komsomol once again denies her application. Sofia writes to Kolya about how unfair it is that Natasha, who is so devoted to communism, isn't allowed to join the youth group of the Communist Party. But Kolya disagrees: he understands why the Komsomol won't let her in, since she comes from bourgeois landowners. He also notes that fascist infiltrators are lurking throughout the Soviet Union, so the Communist Party has to be extra vigilant.

There's a degree of hypervigilance to how Kolya and the other members of the Komsomol think about political allegiance. After all, it's quite clear that Natasha isn't a fascist infiltrator, nor does she even hold the same values as her landowning father (whom she barely knew). And yet, even Kolya thinks the Komsomol is right to deny her from joining the organization, demonstrating how intense commitment to a cause can push people to irrational thinking and paranoia.

Kolya thinks the Komsomol will let Natasha in after a few years. He, for his part, is quite excited about the work he's doing in the engineering plant. But Sofia still worries about him, so she writes to Alik and asks if her son is doing well. Alik writes back and assures her that Kolya is fine and that Alik himself is looking out for him. Shortly thereafter, Kolya sends Sofia a **cogwheel** produced using a new "cogwheel cutter" that he designed at the factory. It's the first cogwheel created by this means of production, and though Sofia doesn't know anything about cogwheels, she proudly displays it on her windowsill.

The fact that Sofia prominently displays Kolya's cogwheel in her bedroom underscores how proud she is that he's contributing to the Soviet Union's technological advancement. She doesn't understand the specific significance of Kolya's invention, and this lack of comprehension mirrors her entire approach to communism—she's a patriotic Soviet citizen simply because she thinks it's honorable and good to devote oneself in such a way, not because she actually cares much about politics or socialist values. And yet, just because her patriotism is ambiguous doesn't mean her political allegiance to the Soviet Union is weak. To the contrary, her support of the Soviet Union is even stronger *because it's vague and all-encompassing.*

A couple days later, there's an article in the newspaper praising Kolya's ingenuity. Natasha rushes to Sofia's apartment and shows her the article and begs to send Kolya a telegram. That night, Sofia realizes that Natasha is in love with her son. But she doesn't see Kolya ending up with someone like Natasha. Instead, she imagines him with a tall, beautiful wife with a name like Ludmila.

Sofia is a very proud person, and her pride extends to her son. She sees him as someone with status—an enviable, important person. As such, she doesn't think he should be with Natasha, who isn't particularly beautiful. Sofia's slight superficiality and vanity comes to the forefront of the novel in this moment, especially since Natasha is someone she legitimately respects. If even she *isn't good enough for Kolya, nobody will be.*

CHAPTER 6

The trade union throws a New Year's party for the children of the employees at the publishing house, and Sofia is tasked with organizing it. She and Natasha work together to find good gifts for all of the children, disagreeing only when Sofia tries to buy the director's daughter a bigger doll than the ones the other children will receive—something Natasha insists is unfair. They end up buying the girl a small trumpet instead. When they decorate the office for the party, they replace the standard portrait of Stalin with one of him sitting with a child in his lap.

Sofia's impulse to buy the director's daughter the biggest doll is a good indication that she doesn't care all that much about communism from an ideological standpoint. After all, communism is a system in which people shouldn't be treated with favoritism. Just because the director's daughter comes from a successful, influential family doesn't mean she deserves a better toy than the other children. More than anything, then, Sofia simply wants to impress the director, apparently caring more about looking good than about demonstrating good communist ideals.

At the party, Sofia is pleased to see how much the director's daughter likes her trumpet. She also enjoys watching the director himself talk kindly to the young girl, which makes Sofia fantasize about Kolya's future children. She can't wait to have grandchildren and thinks about how Kolya might name a boy Vladlen or a girl Ninel. Just as Sofia's about to go home, an accountant approaches her and informs her that almost all of the doctors in the city have been arrested. He tells her this because her husband, Fyodor Ivanovich, was a doctor when he was still alive. One of the people arrested, it turns out, was Doctor Kiparisov—one of Fyodor's close colleagues.

This sudden arrest of multiple doctors in Leningrad shatters the false sense of peace and harmony that Sofia—and seemingly everyone close to her—has relaxed into. Suddenly, Sofia is plunged into chaotic confusion, as she tries to understand why an upstanding member of society like Doctor Kiparisov would be arrested. On an unrelated note, it's worth mentioning that the names "Vladlen" and "Ninel" were popular in the Soviet Union during the 1930s because they paid homage to the revolutionary politician Vladimir Lenin—"Vladlen" combines his first and last names, and "Ninel" is "Lenin" spelled backwards.

Sofia is astounded. There were many arrests two years ago after Sergei Kirov was assassinated, as Stalin made multiple arrests. But those arrests made sense to Sofia, since the people taken off the streets were "oppositionists," "old regime people," and wealthy bourgeois people. At the time, Kolya had explained to his mother that the Communist Party had to rid the cities of suspicious people for the safety of the Soviet Union. Now, though, Sofia can think of no reason for somebody like Doctor Kiparisov to be arrested. Before she can think much about the arrests, the director congratulates her on Kolya's accomplishment at the factory—he read about it in the paper. His comment fills Sofia with delight, and she leaves the party thinking about what a fine man the director is.

Sergei Kirov was a Soviet politician whose assassination threw Joseph Stalin and the Communist Party into turmoil, as investigations supposedly revealed that there were people in the government working to undermine the Communist cause. Sofia and Kolya seem to have made their peace with the idea that it was necessary for the government to make sweeping arrests in the aftermath of Kirov's assassination. Now, though, it's not quite as clear to Sofia why, exactly, all of the doctors in Leningrad need to be rounded up by secret police. But she doesn't dwell on the matter very long, since it doesn't directly impact her. Instead, she lets her mind drift after the director praises Kolya, demonstrating that it's possible to completely overlook the first signs of government repression.

CHAPTER 7

There's nothing in the newspapers the following day about the arrests. Sofia wants to visit Mrs. Kiparisova to check in on her, but she doesn't. She doesn't have time. Plus, she hasn't seen Mrs. Kiparisova in three years, anyway, so it would be odd to show up out of nowhere.

For Sofia, life goes on like normal, even though a large group of people in her city have been arrested—including some of her own personal acquaintances, whom she has no reason to suspect are guilty of anything. The fact that she doesn't even visit Mrs. Kiparisova suggests that she doesn't want to burden herself with the matter, instead preferring to continue with her pleasant daily life.

That month, Sofia starts actually reading the newspapers and tracking current events. She and Natasha read every day about fascists infiltrating the Soviet Union and how it's necessary to arrest anyone engaged in "terrorist" activities. These are the people, Sofia learns, who apparently murdered Sergei Kirov, and now they want to kill Joseph Stalin and threaten the soviet way of life. Everyone around Sofia talks about how even the most unsuspecting people might be working against the Soviet Union.

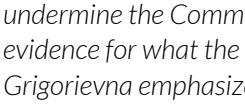
Although Sofia continues with her daily life in the aftermath of the arrests, she does *start reading the newspapers to get a better sense of what's going on. However, doing this only gives her one side of the story—namely, the government's side, since the newspapers themselves report in ways that are favorable for the Communist Party. Therefore, Sofia is inundated with fearmongering propaganda about the "terrorist" activity that is supposedly taking place in the Soviet Union.*

The publishing house holds a mandatory meeting to talk about the current situation in the Soviet Union. Comrade Timofeyev—the party secretary—talks about how enemies to the Communist Party are lurking everywhere, which is why everyone at the publishing house has to redouble their efforts to maintain "political vigilance." After he speaks, he hands the floor over to the chairman of the Mestkom, Anna Grigorievna, who declares that the publishing house itself has been infiltrated by enemies of the state. Everyone is shocked. She explains that the supervisor of the printshop was arrested the previous night for being an "enemy of the people." She then chides the company for allowing this to go undetected for so long, which is why everyone must be extra diligent.

A sense of paranoia creeps through the publishing house as the Soviet government spreads fear and hysteria. The authorities in Sofia's professional life only add to the propaganda that is already circulating about infiltrators. In fact, everyone *around Sofia seems to get swept up in the idea of maintaining "political vigilance," and this "vigilance" leads to an atmosphere of hyper-patriotism and suspicion.*

Anna Grigorievna says that the supervisor of the print shop was identified as an "enemy of the people" because his uncle had been arrested for the same thing. When Natasha asks what, exactly, the supervisor *did*, Anna Grigorievna indignantly reiterates that he was the nephew of a known dissident. She adds that he was in contact with his uncle, and then she makes a few vague allegations about how he interfered with the Communist Party's goals on his uncle's orders, though she doesn't say how.

Natasha's question brings up a good point: there's a lot of hysteria and paranoia about infiltrators in the Soviet Union, but not much solid evidence that there are actually that many people working to undermine the Communist Party. Instead of laying out clear evidence for what the supervisor of the print shop did, though, Anna Grigorievna emphasizes his association *with someone else who has been arrested. This suggests that merely being affiliated with a suspected dissident is enough—in the Communist Party's eyes—to prove an otherwise innocent citizen's guilt.*



In the coming days, everyone is on edge at the publishing house. The director visits the party headquarters in Leningrad, and Comrade Timofeyev makes frequent visits to the typing pool and takes Erna Semyonovna into a private room to handle secret business. Sofia, for her part, writes to Kolya and tells him to remain on the alert for dissidents and enemies of the Soviet Union. She herself learns at work that Anna Grigorievna blames Comrade Timofeyev for the situation in the printshop, and Comrade Timofeyev, in turn, blames the director.

The climate of political fear and hysteria has clearly put everyone around Sofia on guard. Nobody trusts one another, as evidenced by how suspicious the authorities of the publishing house are of one another. In these circumstances, then, it seems as if anyone is in danger of getting arrested—regardless of what they have or have not done.

On her way home one day, Sofia runs into Mrs. Kiparisova. She's astonished by the way her old friend looks. Mrs. Kiparisova is wearing felt boots and galoshes, a scarf and a hat, and is using a cane. Sofia thinks the old woman has "let herself go," but she still treats her with kindness, asking if her husband has been accused of anything serious. He was always such a respected doctor, Sofia notes, saying that her own husband always thought of him as an esteemed colleague. Mrs. Kiparisova insists that her husband didn't do anything, which greatly pleases Sofia, who says she never even believed the accusations. She's sure Mrs. Kiparisova's husband will be let out very soon, insisting that the Soviet Union doesn't keep innocent people in jail.

Sofia's optimism about Doctor Kiparisov's fate isn't necessarily a sign that she's naïve—rather, it's a sign of her strong belief in the virtues of the Soviet government. She isn't all that invested in communism from an ideological standpoint, but she is invested in the Soviet Union, clinging to a strong sense of patriotism that keeps her from recognizing the government's flaws. Therefore, she genuinely believes that Mr. Kiparisov will be let out of prison soon, because she thinks the Soviet government is just and kind.

CHAPTER 8

The next day, everyone talks about how the director is headed to Moscow that night to give a report of the publishing house's progress so far this year. But when Sofia goes to his office to deliver documents that afternoon, she's stopped by the party secretary, who tells her she can't enter the director's office. She glimpses inside the door and sees a man on his knees going through a filing cabinet, at which point the director's secretary whispers to her that the director has been arrested.

Sofia has great respect for the director of the publishing house. The fact that he has been arrested, then, clearly comes as a shock to her. After all, he's an influential, widely respected person; his arrest therefore goes to show that even the most powerful, accomplished Soviet citizens are at the mercy of the government.

Sofia can't believe that the director, whose name is Zakharov, was arrested for being a saboteur. In fact, she *doesn't* believe it, but Natasha insists that it could be true. She and Sofia talk about the matter after work, going back to Sofia's apartment to discuss. Natasha shows her an article about a Soviet sent by the government to do work in Germany. This citizen was loyal to the Soviet Union, but he fell in love with a young woman who stole top-secret documents from him. He was too nervous to report the incident after returning to the Soviet Union, so he simply devoted himself to the Communist Party to make up for what happened. But then fascists started blackmailing him into giving them *more* secret documents. He was eventually caught.

The story in the newspaper is sensationalist and unnerving. It's the exact kind of story that encourages citizens to view each other with great suspicion. Even though Natasha and Sofia respect the director, the tense, paranoid political climate pushes them to assume that he must have done something wrong. Otherwise, there would be no way of explaining why he was arrested—unless, of course, Sofia and Natasha considered the possibility that he was wrongfully *arrested.*

Natasha says that what happened to the citizen in the newspaper article could easily have happened to Zakharov. In fact, Zakharov even traveled abroad, and now Sofia and Natasha remember the elevator operator telling them about how Zakharov gave his wife a beautiful piece of clothing from Berlin.

Sofia and Natasha are both quite fond of the director, but the fact that he was arrested throws their entire opinion of him into question. Suddenly, they view him as a potentially malicious, untrustworthy man. This complete shift in how they see him is a perfect illustration of how easy it is to get swept up into political hysteria and paranoia.

As Natasha is preparing to leave, the doorbell rings. It's Alik, who bursts into the house in a hurry. Sofia immediately assumes that Kolya has died of typhoid, but Alik won't say anything until they're all back in Sofia's room. Finally in private, he tells her to calm down. A few days ago, he says, Kolya was arrested. Having said this, he breaks into tears.

Much like the director, Kolya is a widely respected Soviet citizen. The newspaper even printed an article about him quite recently as a way of celebrating his ingenuity and his contribution to the Soviet Union's technological advancement. And yet, he has been arrested, illustrating (once again) that nobody is safe from the Soviet Union's culture of fear and paranoia.

CHAPTER 9

Sofia immediately determines that she must travel to Sverdlovsk to speak to lawyers, judges, prosecutors—anyone who might be able to help. But Alik informs her that this wouldn't be useful, since Kolya has most likely been brought back to Leningrad, where he'll be tried. Instead of rushing off, she should get a good night's sleep. In the morning, Natasha will tell the people at the publishing house that she's sick, enabling her to go see the prosecutor in Leningrad and figure out what has happened.

For Sofia, perhaps the most torturous part of Kolya's arrest is the uncertainty surrounding what, exactly, happened. She doesn't even know where to go in order to track him down, and the lack of concrete knowledge about why he was arrested and where he was taken only makes it that much harder to cope with this already devastating news.

All night, Sofia thinks about Kolya getting arrested. She knows it was a mistake and can even imagine what the authorities will say when they realize they arrested the wrong person. She waits all night for a telegram, thinking Kolya will surely return to the hostel and be confused about why Alik isn't there anymore. But a telegram never comes.

Sofia's confidence that Kolya will send her a telegram clearing up the entire matter of his arrest underscores how sure she is that he's innocent. She has every reason to believe that he doesn't deserve to be arrested, considering that he's a devoted Communist and a celebrated young mechanical engineer. And yet, what she fails to take into account is the possibility that the government has detained him on false pretenses.

The next day, Sofia doesn't go to the prosecutor's office—like Alik suggested—but instead visits the prison. A guard tells her that the prison doesn't start letting people in until nine o'clock and that she has to wait elsewhere, so she crosses the street and turns a corner, joining a large crowd of women waiting in the street. They look freezing, as if they've been standing there for a long time. She soon learns that they're all waiting to visit a loved one who has been arrested. She learns which building she should wait in front of. It's building number 28, and it's for people with last names between L and M.

The fact that there are so many other people waiting outside the prison doesn't bode well for Sofia Petrovna. The number of confused relatives with imprisoned loved ones is an ominous sign that the government has been making multiple arrests without giving the public much in the way of justification. Everyone, in other words, has to deal with complete uncertainty about why seemingly innocent citizens have been detained.

Sofia goes into building 28 and speaks with a woman lying on the first steps of a big staircase. The woman asks if she wants to put her name on a list, but Sofia doesn't know what she's talking about. She tries to explain that her son was arrested by mistake, but the woman cuts her off and tells her to lower her voice. Finally, Sofia gives her Kolya's last name, and the woman gives her a number: 344.

Everything at the prison seems disorganized. It's unclear why the woman with information about the prison is lying down on the stairs, but it's possible that this is a sign that she has been overrun by people seeking information about their loved ones. To that end, given that Sofia's number is 344, it's obvious that hundreds of people have been imprisoned—a good sign of the paranoia and political hysteria that has overtaken the Soviet Union.

Back outside, the other people waiting ask Sofia what her number is. When she tells them, they say she won't be let in today. As she speaks to them, a door opens and the whole crowd starts running. Sofia gets swept up in the commotion and runs along with the others, who all try to stuff themselves through a small door. She then finds herself in a little lobby, in which everyone lines up according to their number. As she looks around, she remembers that everyone is there because their husband or son is a saboteur. They all look quite ordinary, and Sofia thinks about how terrible it must have been for them to find out that their loved ones are terrorists.

Even though she's confident that Kolya's arrest was a mistake, Sofia still thinks that everyone else who has been imprisoned deserves punishment. Instead of recognizing that many of the people rushing into the prison alongside her might be in the exact same situation that she is, she assumes that their loved ones are criminals and saboteurs—an assumption that highlights the fact that she still thinks the government is just and fair. Her somewhat condescending view of her fellow citizens in this moment also hints that she has maintained a slight sense of moral superiority.

The people waiting in line talk about how long it has been since their loved ones were arrested. Some were taken quite recently by the police, but others have been gone for six months already. When Sofia finally reaches the counter, she asks if her son is there. She tries to explain that he was arrested by mistake, but the man behind the counter cuts her off and asks for Kolya's last name, telling her to be quiet while he looks. After a moment, he declares that Kolya is in the prison, but he won't say why.

Sofia learns that Kolya is, in fact, in the Leningrad prison, but she doesn't gain much more information. The circumstances of his arrest are still confusing and unclear, and this means she has to face the emotional difficulties that come along with uncertainty. And to make matters even worse, she has heard from other people that the government holds certain prisoners for a very long time. It might be a long while, then, before Sofia knows what happened to Kolya—in fact, she might never find out what happened to him.

Because she has seen other women hand over money to be relayed to their loved ones, Sofia tries to give the man behind the counter some cash. But he won't accept it. "Not allowed for him," he says, ending the exchange. Sofia has no choice but to go home. She collapses into a chair in her apartment, and though Alik and Natasha are eagerly waiting for her to explain what happened, she finds herself unable to say anything—she doesn't know how it's possible that she still doesn't know what happened to Kolya.

When Sofia first found out that Kolya had been arrested, she jumped into action by rushing to the prison as soon as it made sense to do so. Now, though, she has no choice but to sit with the uncertainty surrounding his case. With no path forward, she comes face to face with the torturous fact that she has no idea what will happen to her son.

CHAPTER 10

Sofia takes a leave of absence from work. Comrade Timofeyev is now the acting director, and he appoints Erna Semyonovna to take Sofia's place while she's gone. Sofia suggests that Natasha should be the one to fill her spot, since Erna Semyonovna makes so many mistakes, but Timofeyev doesn't listen, and Sofia drops the matter—she doesn't have the time or energy to think about such things. She spends every day waiting in line, hoping desperately to get more information about Kolya. When she's not there, Alik or Natasha waits in her place.

One of the most difficult aspects of Sofia Petrovna's current situation is that there isn't much for her to do—except, that is, wait. Still, taking a leave of absence from work allows her to be as proactive as possible, even if this just means standing in line in the hopes of learning more information about Kolya's case. The level of devotion she shows to standing in line each day spotlights how determined she is to lift herself out of the torturous uncertainty surrounding Kolya's imprisonment.

Sofia has learned that it's imperative to reserve a place in line each night at nearly midnight and that it's best to stay there the entire time, though it's possible to leave for two hours, as long as she returns for the "roll call." It's also helpful to wear extremely warm clothing, including a big scarf and felt boots. She has also learned that many of the people waiting with her in line end up receiving "travel vouchers," which are actually orders for deportation.

When Sofia first saw her old friend, Mrs. Kiparisova, in the aftermath of Dr. Kiparisova's arrest, she judged her for wearing unfashionable clothing. She specifically noted that Mrs. Kiparisova was wearing felt boots and that this seemed unnecessary, since the weather wasn't that cold. Now, though, Sofia finds herself wearing felt boots, suggesting that she has undergone the same transformation as her friend. In the face of loss, it seems, things like fashion quickly become irrelevant—even to someone like Sofia, who likes to think of herself as a respectable person of high status.

In the absence of any new information, Sofia frequently asks Alik to recount exactly what happened on the night of Kolya's arrest. They were both sleeping when a knock sounded on their door. In came the manager of their dormitory, the factory superintendent, and two law enforcement officials. They explained that Kolya was under arrest, but he wasn't frightened. He obediently got dressed and consented to go with them, confident that it was all a mistake. They told him to bring extra underwear and a towel, but he didn't listen—there was no point, he insisted, since he would be back within a day or two.

The fact that Kolya refused to bring extra underwear or a towel indicates that he had nothing to be guilty about. It also suggests that he still had faith in his government at the time of his arrest, apparently believing that the authorities would quickly recognize their own mistake and do what's right by letting him out of prison. This outlook might seem somewhat naïve, but it's mainly a sign of Kolya's complete commitment to—and faith in—the Soviet Union.


Sofia sometimes wonders if something might have happened to cast suspicion on Kolya. Perhaps he had a misunderstanding with a supervisor, or maybe he became involved in a romantic relationship with a woman who set him up. But Alik insists that none of this happened. While standing in line one day, Sofia overhears a woman saying that there's no use in waiting around for the government to release anyone—nobody ever returns from these prisons. Sofia strongly disagrees. The Soviet Union, she believes, doesn't hold innocent people in prison. People like Kolya—that is, "Soviet patriots"—will certainly be released.

Despite Kolya's unjust arrest, Sofia still believes that the Soviet government is just and reasonable. Again, her belief isn't a sign of naivety or gullibility, but rather an indication of her strong political allegiance to the Soviet Union. What's interesting, though, is that Sofia doesn't seem to care that much about communist ideals, as evidenced by her lack of interest in politics. Her allegiance to the Communist Party, then, is more a matter of conformity than anything else.



The newspapers publish a slew of confessions made by people who have been arrested. Sofia reads one of these confessions in an article while standing in line at the prison. The way the accused man talks about all the terrible acts of violence and treason he carried out against the Soviet Union enrages Sofia, who feels reaffirmed in her initial impulse to stay on her guard around the other people in line—these people, after all, are associated with dangerous criminals and saboteurs.

At this point in the novel, Sofia still wholeheartedly believes the propaganda surrounding her about the threat of terrorists and saboteurs. And it makes sense that she believes this propaganda, since the entire Soviet culture is saturated with stories designed to keep citizens like her in a state of fearful patriotism. What's more, the general uncertainty surrounding the many arrests makes it hard for anyone to dispute the government's claims about terrorism and sabotage.

CHAPTER 11

Alik returns to his job in the factory, and Sofia goes back to the publishing house. She has learned from the other women in line that there's probably nothing for her to do until Kolya's case reaches the prosecutor's office, at which point she should pay the prosecutor a visit. For now, then, she spends her days mechanically going through the motions of her job, all the while thinking of Kolya.

The trouble with Sofia's current predicament is that she's powerless to do anything about Kolya's arrest. As such, she's forced to continue with her everyday life, constantly dealing with the frightening uncertainty of her son's fate—which undoubtedly makes it quite difficult for her to focus on anything else.

Before he left, Alik advised Sofia against talking about Kolya's arrest. At first, she was offended by this suggestion and insisted that she doesn't have to be ashamed of her son, but then she agreed. The only person she talks to about the arrest, then, is Degtyarenko's wife, who finds her crying in the bathroom one day. She tells Sofia that Kolya will most likely return unharmed, though it has now been five months since he was first arrested.

Alik seems to understand that the Soviet Union is in turmoil and that the tense political atmosphere might turn ordinary citizens against one another. For this reason, it would be wisest for Sofia to refrain from talking about Kolya's arrest, since people might ostracize her for her association with an alleged criminal. In other words, Alik recognizes the hysteria at foot in the Soviet Union.

One day, Comrade Timofeyev tells Sofia to send Natasha to his office. Then, at the end of the day, Natasha tells her that she has been fired. Apparently, Erna Semyonovna showed Timofeyev an article that Natasha typed about the Red Army, in which she accidentally typed "Ret Army." As a result, she has been fired for a "lack of vigilance." The next day, there's a bulletin posted at work explaining that Natasha and another employee have been fired. The other employee is the director's former secretary, who is being let go for associating with an "unmasked enemy of the people"—that is, the director.

The firing of the director's secretary is a good illustration of how even the most arbitrary association with an alleged criminal in the Soviet Union can lead to ostracization and persecution. This, it seems, is why Alik urged Sofia not to talk to anyone about Kolya's arrest. Now, though, she's not only associated with Kolya, but also with Natasha, who has been fired. The walls are essentially closing around Sofia, as seemingly everyone around her comes under suspicion—which, in turn, increases the likelihood that the same thing will happen to her.

The publishing house holds a mandatory meeting for employees. Comrade Timofeyev outlines that Natasha was hired by the director himself—something Timofeyev thinks is proof of Natasha's wrongdoing. He also points out that Natasha is from a bourgeois, landowning family, and he accuses her of calling the Red Army the "*Rat* Army." He also insists that the director's secretary is guilty simply by her close association with the director himself. The publishing house should never have let Natasha nor the director's secretary continue in their roles, which is—Timofeyev claims—nothing short of "the criminal relaxation of political vigilance."

It's quite clear at this point in the novel that the political and social climate surrounding Sofia is getting out of hand, as everyone around her succumbs to a hypervigilant kind of patriotism that leads to hysteria and panic. Natasha's firing demonstrates how easy it is to attract suspicion, since she was let go for a small typo. And yet, the real *reason she's fired is that she originally comes from a bourgeois family. And though it's obvious that she has no lingering sympathies for her bourgeois roots, she gets fired anyway—a good illustration of the unreasonable paranoia at foot at the publishing house (and in society at large).*

When Timofeyev and Anna Grigorievna open the floor for questions, Sofia meekly raises her hand and points out that Natasha didn't mean to call the Red Army the "*Rat* Army." It was just a typo. Anyone might make such a mistake. Plus, Natasha is extremely devoted to the communist cause. There's a long silence after Sofia speaks, and then Timofeyev dismisses her point, saying that the typo Natasha made is an "obvious act of class hostility."

Though Sofia's objection may be honorable, it's not very wise. She wants to defend her friend's honor, but doing so only puts her in danger of falling under the suspicion of her peers and superiors, all of whom are quite eager to punish anyone who shows even the slightest sign of doubting the Communist Party. Still, though, Sofia stands by her principles, demonstrating that she has yet to recognize just how dangerous the social climate around her has become.

Sofia goes home in low spirits that night. When she arrives, she finds a note from Alik informing her that he has returned to Leningrad after being kicked out of the Komsomol. He was kicked out, he explains, because of his association with Kolya. He refused to denounce Kolya, so he was fired from his job. Sofia turns this over in her mind, remembering how angry Alik became when she asked him if Kolya accidentally said something to upset somebody in power—perhaps, Sofia thought, that's why he was arrested. Alik insisted that this didn't happen, but now Sofia wonders if he's wrong. Perhaps Alik himself lost his temper or said something ill-advised, and that's why he has been fired.

Sofia still hasn't come to terms with the fact that the Soviet government is unjust and corrupt. She thinks there has to be a valid reason that Kolya was arrested. After all, she still feels a sense of allegiance to the Communist Party, and in order to maintain this allegiance, she can't let herself believe that they wrongfully (but intentionally) arrested Kolya—she has to believe that there was some kind of misunderstanding. Similarly, she thinks Alik must have been kicked out of the Komsomol for losing his temper. In short, she's trying to make sense of the tense and chaotic political climate that is confusing and uncertain by design.

Sofia takes a bath and continues to think about Alik. He once lost his temper while standing in line with her, calling the governmental officials "damned bureaucrats." This is the kind of behavior that must have gotten him fired. As she lies there in the bath thinking about this, Sofia hears her neighbors talking about her in the kitchen. She listens as the mean-spirited nurse tells Degtyarenko's wife that she—Sofia—has been stealing her kerosene. It must be Sofia, the nurse says. If a family member is in jail, she claims, then the others must also have something to hide. After all, people wind up in jail for a reason. Innocent people don't stay in jail in the Soviet Union, she says.

The nurse now subjects Sofia to the same harsh, idealistic rhetoric that Sofia herself has privately applied to the people beside her in line at the prison. In the same way that Sofia silently judges the other people at the prison because they're related to criminals, the nurse now judges Sofia. For the first time, then, Sofia experiences what it's like to be on the receiving end of the political hysteria sweeping through Leningrad.

Horrified by the nurse's words about her and Kolya, Sofia sneaks down to the kitchen that night and collects all of her personal belongings. She moves them to her bedroom so that she won't have to cross paths with the nurse or anyone else in the house.

Sofia is a very proud person. She likes to think of herself as respectable and important, taking pride in the idea that she's someone with a certain amount of social status. Now, though, her association with Kolya has given people like the nurse cause to doubt her, and this is so mortifying to her that she would rather hide away in her room than have to face the nurse.

CHAPTER 12

Kolya's case has finally made its way to the prosecutor. Alik and Natasha get in line early for Sofia, who refuses to leave to rest once she gets there in the morning—she's too nervous to miss her opportunity to talk to the prosecutor and show him that Kolya is innocent. She plans to tell him about how Kolya was a member of the Komsomol and how the newspaper recently celebrated him for his ingenuity as a Soviet engineer.

Sofia's plan to reason with the prosecutor is unrealistic. There are hundreds of people trying to do the exact same thing, and nobody seems to have had any success in convincing the government to release their loved ones from prison. In fact, the whole idea that there's actually a legitimate judicial process in place is out of touch with reality, since the Soviet government has clearly begun to repress its citizens in a very authoritarian way. For Sofia to recognize this, though, would mean she'd have to give up her hope of freeing Kolya, which she isn't emotionally ready to do.

Once Sofia is there to stand in line, Natasha leaves. Alik explains to Sofia that times are hard for Natasha, who can't find anywhere to work because she was fired from the publishing house. Everyone sees her as an untrustworthy enemy of the Soviet regime. Alik, in fact, now faces the same thing, since he was let go from the factory. He speaks angrily about what happened, but Sofia tells him to watch his language—how could he be so foolish? His angry outbursts are clearly what got him in trouble in the first place. He needs to learn to control himself. She, for instance, managed to stand up for Natasha at the meeting yesterday, and nothing bad happened to her.

Sofia still clings to the idea that the Soviet Union is a fair and just place to live. Instead of recognizing that Alik's anger is legitimate, she warns him against voicing his frustration, insisting that his inability to keep quiet is what has landed him in trouble. She therefore overlooks the obvious fact that he was fired without just cause. She is, then, in a state of disbelief and denial, as she refuses to accept the harsh reality of her surrounding circumstances.

Sofia looks around at the many people waiting in line. She sees their exhaustion and notices that many of them are holding white pieces of paper. These papers are deportation orders issued to the family members of certain imprisoned people. As she thinks about this, she notices a little girl standing in front of her. The girl looks sad and tired, but she's also familiar. Sofia then realizes that the girl is the director's daughter, and the woman standing next to her is his wife. The director's wife explains that he was sentenced to ten years in a remote work camp. "Then he was guilty after all," Sofia replies, adding that she never would have suspected him of malice.

Sofia thinks that Kolya was imprisoned because of a misunderstanding, but she doesn't apply the same thought process to anyone else. She used to have great respect for the director, but she immediately assumes that the Soviet government was in the right by sentencing him to 10 years in a remote camp—after all, she reasons, if he was found guilty, then he must have done something wrong. Her simplistic thinking in this moment might seem naïve, but it's arguably little more than a mode of self-preservation, since acknowledging the director's innocence would mean accepting that the same thing could happen to Kolya.

The director's wife ignores Sofia's comment and says that she and her daughter are being deported to Kazakhstan. They will surely starve, she says, because she won't be able to work. Sofia can hardly believe her ears, wondering how the director and his wife will reunite after the 10-year sentence. The wife doesn't know how they'll find each other, but she notes that this isn't a unique situation—everyone around them holding "travel vouchers" (that is, deportation orders) won't be able to find their husbands.

Sofia is shocked by what she hears about the director's situation, but the director's wife isn't all that surprised. Whereas Sofia hasn't yet let herself admit the horror at play in the Soviet Union, the director's wife seems to have fully recognized the dire circumstances around her. Sofia, however, is still in a state of disbelief, clinging to the conviction that the government is just and fair—something the director's wife knows for certain isn't the case.

Sofia tells the director's wife not to lose heart and to remain vigilant in her attempt to track down her husband. Her comment infuriates the director's wife, who sourly tells Sofia to remain vigilant *herself* whenever they send away her son. But Sofia rejects this idea, insisting that Kolya won't be sent away because he's not guilty—a comment that makes the director's wife laugh.

Again, Sofia can't let herself see that it doesn't matter whether or not a Soviet prisoner is innocent—the government doesn't care. The director's wife knows this all too well, but Sofia refuses to grasp the idea because it would mean acknowledging that Kolya will most likely be sent to a work camp regardless of his innocence.

Finally, Sofia is called into a room where two prosecutors are waiting. The director's wife and her daughter go to one of the prosecutors, and Sofia goes to the other. The prosecutor working on the director's case is tidy and polite, but the one working on Kolya's case is disheveled and rude. He spends most of the time talking on the phone about other matters, and when he finally gets around to hearing what Sofia has to say, he hardly listens. She tries to explain that Kolya was arrested by mistake, but he replies by saying that he has already been sentenced to 10 years in a remote camp.

Sofia finally comes face to face with the injustice of the Soviet government during the Great Purge, when mass political hysteria led to thousands of wrongful arrests and convictions. The mere fact that she goes to see a prosecutor is little more than a gesture toward a fair judicial process, as made quite evident when the prosecutor informs Sofia that Kolya has already been convicted. Without any way of advocating for her son, Sofia is completely powerless, and Kolya is left at the mercy of a repressive regime.

Sofia is shocked to learn that Kolya's trial has already taken place. The prosecutor has already started talking on the phone again, but she waits until he's quiet again, at which point she asks what Kolya was found guilty of doing. As she begins to list his accomplishments, the prosecutor interrupts and informs her that Kolya confessed to his crimes. He even signed a document asserting that he is a terrorist and that he was involved in a plot to undermine the Communist Party. Sofia can hardly answer, but she manages to ask where Kolya will be sent. The prosecutor says this matter doesn't concern him, and then the conversation is over.

The fact that Kolya signed a confession goes against Sofia's unyielding belief that her son is innocent. And yet, it's very unlikely that the confession legitimately reflects the truth, since many Soviet prisoners during the Great Purge were coerced into signing confessions to crimes they didn't commit. Sofia, however, has not yet begun to question the government, so it wouldn't occur to her that Kolya might have been tortured until he agreed to make a false confession.

Outside the prosecutor's office, Sofia breaks into tears, explaining to Alik that Kolya confessed to engaging in "terrorist activity." Alik is beside himself. He doesn't believe Kolya would ever do such a thing, instantly recognizing that the government must have beaten him into signing the confession. But Sofia simply repeats that her son confessed, seemingly perplexed and unable to say anything else.

Sofia finds herself in a difficult position: she still trusts her government, but she's also convinced that her son would never commit a crime against the Communist Party. In this moment, then, she's forced to reconcile her political allegiance to the Soviet Union with her abiding love and support of Kolya.

CHAPTER 13

Sofia goes to work the next day in a daze. She hardly slept the night before, so she decides to get up from her desk during lunch in an attempt to avoid falling asleep. It's at this point that she sees a newspaper article on the bulletin board. The article is by Anna Grigorievna, who attacks Comrade Timofeyev for letting so many saboteurs go unnoticed in the publishing house. The next **article** is by an anonymous contributor, who writes extensively about Sofia's behavior at the last meeting. The author condemns her for defending Natasha, ultimately implying that she sympathizes with saboteurs.

Sofia's association with Natasha now comes back to haunt her, especially because she stood up for her at the last company meeting. She previously thought that she'd spoken well enough to avoid upsetting anyone or attracting suspicion to herself. Now, though, she learns that it doesn't matter how *she spoke: in the tense social and political climate of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, simply voicing support for someone who had been ostracized was a dangerous thing to do.*

When Sofia goes home that evening, she falls asleep and only wakes when Natasha comes to see her. She tells Natasha about the **article**, but Natasha doesn't respond. Instead, she informs her that Alik has been arrested.

The tense atmosphere in Leningrad has been slowly building for a while, but now things accelerate quite suddenly for Sofia Petrovna. Not only does she herself come under fire for defending Natasha, but she also learns that Alik has been arrested. Nobody, it seems, is safe from the Soviet government's persecution.

CHAPTER 14

Sofia is tense at work for the next few days, constantly wondering who wrote the **article** about her. She assumes it was Erna Semyonovna, though she doubts Erna can write so well. One evening, Natasha comes to her apartment and starts speaking very quickly, which is out of character because she's normally quiet and reserved. She tells Sofia that she must leave the publishing house as soon as possible. If she quits now, she can say that she left on her own terms. But if she waits to get fired, it will be impossible for her to find another job. She makes Sofia promise to resign the very next day, and she even writes a letter of resignation for her to sign. Sofia agrees and signs the letter.

Natasha wants to help Sofia avoid the same fate she herself has been dealt, knowing all too well how hard it is to get a new job after being fired from another. Any association a future employer might make between Sofia and anti-Soviet activity would surely make things quite difficult for her. Getting fired from the publishing house for standing up for Natasha would therefore be a nearly irreversible misfortune, since it would link Sofia to the suspicion surrounding Natasha.

Natasha wonders why Kolya confessed. She knows that it's possible for an adept investigator to "trip a person up," but only when discussing smaller details. And yet, all of the mothers and wives in line have been told that their loved ones confessed. Sofia, for her part, explains to Natasha that Kolya simply failed to provide a good alibi—after all, he's quite young. And Alik, she adds, was clearly arrested because he can't control his anger and his language. When their conversation comes to an end, Natasha goes to leave, but not before making Sofia promise her again to resign.

Sofia is still in a state of disbelief. She refuses to believe that Kolya is a saboteur, but she also *refuses to accept that she lives under an authoritarian, repressive government. In order to make sense of everything, then, she decides that Kolya signed a confession simply because he's young, thinking that his inexperience must have caused him to get confused during a lengthy interrogation. Of course, this is clearly not the case, but the story helps her maintain both her love of Kolya and her political allegiance to the Soviet Union.*

Sofia resigns the next day. Timofeyev accepts her letter and wishes her luck—a sentiment echoed by the women in the typing pool. On her way home, she decides to go to Natasha's apartment. When she arrives, though, Natasha's neighbor answers the door and informs her that Natasha poisoned herself. Sofia rushes to the hospital, but it's too late—Natasha is dead.

Natasha's suicide reveals just how hopeless she must have felt in the aftermath of her dismissal from the publishing house. She was a devoted citizen who strongly believed in the Communist Party's values, but the Communist Party itself never accepted her. To the contrary, she was fired from the publishing house on the suspicion that she wanted to undermine *the Soviet cause, and this ultimately made it impossible for her to find new work. The very thing she cared so much about, then, ended up causing her great misery by stripping her of opportunity and camaraderie.*

CHAPTER 15

The next time Sofia waits in line at the prison, there's nobody there to save her spot. Natasha is buried in a grave not far from where Sofia's husband lies, and Alik is in prison. She waits all night and then sees the sun rise, and by the time the prison doors open, she can hardly run toward the building. It takes another two hours before she finally gets to the window to inquire about Kolya. Until now, every time she gets to this window and tries to pass money along to Kolya, the attendant says, "Not allowed for him." Today, though, the answer is different. "Deported," the man says. When she asks where Kolya has been sent, he doesn't answer, instead saying that Kolya will write to her himself.

Once again, Sofia faces complete uncertainty regarding Kolya's case. The only thing she knows now is that he has been deported, but this is a torturous piece of news because it doesn't give her much information—except, of course, that he has been sent to a remote work camp, which is horrifying news. Without anything else to do, she has no choice but to simply sit with this disconcerting information and worry about her son.

Sofia goes home in a state of exhaustion. The only thing she can think about is receiving a letter from Kolya, but she needs to focus on finding a job. Everywhere she has applied has rejected her because she has an imprisoned family member. These days, she doesn't interact with anyone at all, making a point of avoiding the nurse and the other people living in the apartment. She has been replaced as the official apartment representative, and she's afraid to encounter any of the other residents.

Sofia took Natasha's advice and quit the publishing house before she could be fired, but she still *can't find a job, since she's related to someone who has been imprisoned. Her predicament illustrates the political frenzy and hysteria at play in the Soviet Union at the time—everyone, it seems, is wracked with paranoia, which causes them to ostracize anyone who's even remotely associated with an alleged criminal.*

The night before she died, Natasha told Sofia that she should send money to Alik in prison. But Sofia recently spoke with her friend, Mrs. Kiparisova, who warned her about giving Alik money, saying that the government would connect his case to Kolya's, which would only do more harm.

The culture of fear and paranoia in the Soviet Union is very strong. Sofia's own life is much harder because nobody wants to associate with anyone related to an imprisoned citizen. But Sofia is also subject to the same kind of fear, which keeps her from helping Alik, since she's afraid that doing so could decrease the likelihood of Kolya's release from prison.

CHAPTER 16

Six months pass. It has been a year since Kolya was arrested, and Sofia still has no idea where he is. He might not even be alive. She, for her part, has finally found part-time work at a library, where she speaks to nobody as she carries out her mundane tasks. She uses the small amount of money she receives to buy canned crab for Kolya. The cans are now stacked high on her windowsill, but she keeps buying more in case there's a shortage in the markets whenever Kolya is set free. She has written multiple letters to Stalin about Kolya's case, and she's unnerved by the suspicion that he has not read them himself.

Amid all of the torturous uncertainty surrounding Kolya's case, Sofia still clings to idealistic ideas about the government. The mere fact that she would ever think Stalin would personally read her letters highlights just how out of touch she is with the realities of her circumstances. She knows that things are dire, but she still has faith that the government will do what's right—a faith that is, unfortunately, misplaced.

One day, Mrs. Kiparisova bursts into Sofia's apartment and tells her that a group of prisoners have been released. The news gives Sofia hope. She lies in her room thinking about how the government is finally letting innocent people out of jail, which must mean that Kolya will be freed quite soon—after all, he's innocent, so there's no reason for him to remain in prison. She knows he was sent away, so she expects to receive a letter from him any day now, thinking that he'll write to say he's on his way home.

Again, Sofia demonstrates her enduring belief in the Soviet government's values and justice system. Instead of considering the possibility that the government released certain prisoners at random, she invests herself in the idea that they're letting all of the innocent prisoners free. Of course, what she doesn't *consider is that Kolya is guilty according to the government. After all, he signed a confession. But Sofia remains optimistic, refusing to believe that the Soviet government would let a good young man like Kolya continue to waste away in a work camp.*

Sofia runs downstairs to check the mailbox, but it's empty. When she returns to her room, the nurse and the new house manager throw open the door, and the nurse accuses her of hoarding kitchen supplies. She has, the nurse yells, ruined the "household order." She also points out that Sofia's son is in prison, which makes her untrustworthy and unpredictable. The house manager orders her to put the kitchen supplies back, and then they leave. Sofia obeys and then returns to her room, where she sobs loudly in defeat. Degtyarenko's wife hears her and creeps in to soothe her, telling her that her husband—a police officer—says that many prisoners are being released. Sofia just has to stay strong until Kolya comes back.

Sofia continues to experience social ostracization because of her association with Kolya. She herself didn't do anything wrong, but the mere fact that her son is in prison makes everyone weary of her. The nurse, in particular, jumps at the opportunity to cast Sofia as an untrustworthy person, ultimately acting morally superior to her and behaving as if Sofia's social status has diminished because of Kolya's imprisonment—which, unfortunately, it has.

CHAPTER 17

Sofia goes to sleep thinking about how Kolya will soon return. Both Mrs. Kiparisova and Degtyarenko's wife implied that he would be back soon enough. When she wakes in the morning, she remembers that the government is letting prisoners out and that Kolya will surely be one of them—and when he returns, he'll surely be given a medal of honor and a good job. She imagines him passing the nurse in the hall and not even acknowledging her.

Sofia's expectations about Kolya's return are out of touch with reality. Even if he were to be let out of prison, it's highly unlikely that he would be given a medal of honor, as the Soviet government isn't in the habit of publicly acknowledging its own mistakes. Nonetheless, she fantasizes about his triumphant return, basking in the idea of honor and status returning to her family name.

Sofia feels happy all day, even at work. When she cooks in the kitchen that evening, she sees Degtyarenko's wife and finds herself saying that Kolya has been released from prison. Degtyarenko's wife is thrilled for her, asking if Kolya sent a letter or a telegram. Sofia confidently answers by saying that he sent a registered letter and that it just reached her. After this conversation, she goes to her room and feels excited about the words she has just spoken.

It's not entirely clear whether or not Sofia actually believes what she has just told Degtyarenko's wife. Of course, she hasn't *received a letter from Kolya, but she seems oddly energized by merely saying that she has. Indeed, it's almost as if her unwillingness to accept Kolya's uncertain fate has grown into a bigger kind of disbelief—a kind of disbelief that borders on delusion.*

At work the next day, Sofia tells one of her colleagues the same thing, despite the fact that she has never spoken to her before. She also tells Degtyarenko when she passes him in the apartment that evening, saying that Kolya will first work at the factory for a couple of months and then take a short vacation before returning to Leningrad. She's surprised by how easy it is to say all of this, but she enjoys saying it. When she goes out later that night, she bumps into the accountant from the publishing house, who tells her that Comrade Timofeyev was arrested. But she hardly listens, quickly taking the opportunity to tell the accountant that Kolya has been released from prison. Upon reaching home again, though, she checks the mailbox and is disappointed to find it empty.

Sofia gets wrapped up in the story she's telling everyone about Kolya's imminent return. The more she says it, the more it seems as if she truly believes that he's been released from prison. To that end, her story becomes more detailed, as she claims that Kolya will first work in the factory before taking a vacation. She's so involved in her own story that she hardly registers the news that Comrade Timofeyev has been arrested, even though this news is significant because it underlines just how out of hand things have gotten in the Soviet Union. After all, Timofeyev was involved in casting suspicion on many other people, and his arrest therefore demonstrates that nobody—even the most politically overzealous Soviet citizens—are safe from persecution.

CHAPTER 18

The next morning, Sofia sits in the kitchen and goes on at length about how Kolya is coming home. Everyone listens attentively to what she says—even the nurse. She claims that Kolya was named assistant director at the factory, that the government has purchased him tickets for a vacation, and that he met a beautiful woman named Ludmila who's in the Komsomol. Kolya and Ludmila, she claims, are engaged to be married. Everyone is very impressed, and though the nurse doesn't respond at first, she makes a point of saying good morning to Sofia the next time they see each other.

Sofia's fabrications allow her to see herself as a respectable, enviable member of the community once more. She enjoys the attention she receives as she tells everyone about Kolya's achievements. The more she says, though, the harder it is to discern whether or not she actually believes what she's saying. She either has fallen into a state of complete delusion or has decided to save face in society by lying. Given that the lies bring her so much happiness, though, it seems likely that she has managed to trick herself into believing what she's saying (at least on some level).

Sofia spends the day cleaning her room for Kolya. She has yet to hear from him, but she wants everything to be in order whenever he comes home. She's in the middle of cleaning the carpet, then, when a letter from Kolya arrives. She tears it open and reads what he has to say. He explains that he's alive and that a sympathetic person agreed to deliver this letter even though it's not allowed. He was arrested because Sashka Yartsev—a boy he went to school with—claims to have persuaded him to join a "terrorist organization." It's untrue, but an investigator beat him into signing a confession corroborating the claims. He's now deaf in one ear from this beating, and he suspects that Sashka Yartsev was probably beaten into making the initial claim.

Sofia's false claims about Kolya's return are shattered when she receives a real *letter from him. She can no longer deny the truth, which he spells out very clearly for her: he's still in a work camp, and he's there because Sashka Yartsev—the boy who once called Alik an anti-Semitic name in school—accused him of terrorist activity. His letter confirms that he was beaten into signing the confession, thus clarifying once and for all that Stalin's regime is corrupt and manipulative. Because of this letter, Sofia can't delude herself anymore about Kolya's circumstances, meaning that she must finally face the harsh fact that he's at the mercy of an unjust government.*

Kolya says in his letter that Sofia is his only hope of survival. She must write to the government and insist that he's innocent. If she doesn't act soon, he's not sure what will happen—he doesn't think he'll last much longer.

Contrary to Sofia's delusional stories about Kolya's welfare, he now informs her that he's unlikely to survive much longer in the work camp. Presented with this horrifying information, Sofia can no longer trick herself into thinking that the government is just and fair. She now has no choice but to acknowledge the grim circumstances of her son's imprisonment.

After reading the letter, Sofia rushes to Mrs. Kiparisova's apartment. When she arrives, she finds Mrs. Kiparisova sitting with her daughter in the middle of an empty room. Kiparisova explains that they're being deported, but she agrees to take a look at Kolya's letter. When she finishes reading it, she tells Sofia not to write an appeal to the government even though Kolya has urged her to do so. If she writes an appeal, Kiparisova says, it will only cause more trouble. The appeal wouldn't do a thing to change Kolya's situation, but it *would* attract attention to Sofia. The government has clearly forgotten to deport her, so she shouldn't put herself at risk.

Many of the family members of imprisoned citizens have been deported, as this is the repressive government's way of getting rid of people who would have reason to revolt against the repressive regime. Thankfully for Sofia, the government seems to have forgotten to send her away, but that might change if she writes an appeal on Kolya's behalf. Plus, writing an appeal wouldn't do anything, as it has already been made quite clear that citizens like Sofia are utterly powerless in the face of Stalin's authoritarian, repressive regime.

Sofia returns to her apartment and puts the letter on the table. After a moment of consideration, she makes a decision: she fumbles through a drawer, pulls out some matches, and burns the letter.

Sofia's decision to burn Kolya's letter signals the first time in the novel that she fully recognizes the harsh reality that the Soviet government has become deeply repressive. Until now, she has managed to cling to the hope that the Soviet regime is fair and virtuous. But she has finally realized that it doesn't matter to the government that Kolya is innocent, so it would be futile for her to make an appeal on his behalf. By burning his letter, then, she faces the devastating fact that there's no way for her to help him.

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