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Getting By (Part One): Apartment-Hunting on Bath Lane

Since December 20th three of us have been living in our apartment on Friedrich Engels Street: my husband Volodya, our newborn daughter Kira, and I. Our assigned housing is a standard Soviet one-room apartment, measuring about seventeen feet by eleven feet.

The living conditions are not as grim as they sound at first. "One-room" in Soviet terminology means a living-working-sleeping room, usually with a sofa that folds down at night to become a bed; but it also includes a small kitchen (stove, sink, refrigerator) and a bathroom. In our case, the three of us rent these quarters, furnished with a sofa bed, two wardrobes, two tables, four chairs, three stools, a bookcase, and an enormous color television, for twenty-three rubles a month (\$32.20), including utilities.

By Moscow standards, three in one room is considered tough going, but not unusually tough. The standard rule-of-thumb cited by many Soviets is as follows: the number of people living together, minus one, equals the number of rooms those people might reasonably expect. Thus, a family of four—mother, father, and two children—might hope to be assigned a three-room apartment; a family of three (such as ours), a two-room apartment, and so forth. I hasten to add that the number of exceptions nearly exceeds those that fit the rule, and the wrangling for more living space can occupy all one's waking hours, as well as one's dreams, unless that urge is consciously controlled. While the official housing measurements are tallied in terms of space—the official minimum standard is nine square meters per person—ordinary Muscovites speak of their quarters in terms of walls (one room, two rooms), a more vital component in mutual coexistence. Even those of us who are not concerned with changing our assigned housing find ourselves making a mental note of the number of rooms a new acquaintance has when we are first invited to visit. If in New York the neighborhood is a guide, however inaccurate, to social status, the number of rooms in an apartment is the Moscow analogue.

Assigned housing can be upgraded in a number of ways. The quickest and least cumbersome of them, as always here, is the unofficial one. On the corner of Peace Prospect and Bath Lane—a strange intersection of the noble and the mundane—is a vacant lot where Muscovites congregate and engage in the endless struggle to ameliorate their living conditions. Like local birds, their number and species vary with the season and the weather conditions, but they come throughout the winter, a fact I discovered by chance in mid-February as I stood about with the others in the zero temperature, trying to figure out why we had all

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gathered together.

Those searching for living quarters far outnumber those with rooms for rent, and the crowds gather quickly at the first signs of an intense conversation between strangers. Because such unofficial housing arrangements are, strictly speaking, illegal, although tolerated by the authorities due to the acute housing shortage, participants in the arrangements are ill-at-ease and suspicious. Rudimentary information about the flat is given out sotto voce: the number of rooms, the location, furnished or unfurnished, with or without a telephone, distance from the metro, the neighbors, the price. At an indefinable moment in the litany, one of the listeners asks the potential landlord to go off for a walk. The two move away from the others, heads together or arm in arm, co-conspirators in a plot to get by.

The price of getting by is not cheap. As I stood there in the crowd, one woman attracted interest with her offer of one room in a two-room apartment, located near the center of town. The other room was already occupied by a single woman with a child. For sixty rubles a month (\$84.00), maximum six months, the tenant could have an unfurnished room with a telephone. Another woman was asking one hundred rubles a month (\$140.00) for a conveniently located, furnished, ^{one-room} apartment without a telephone, but with a large television. The price was steep when one considers that the average monthly industrial wage here is 180 to 190 rubles (\$252.00-\$266.00). "The apartment has everything," she claimed, "even dishes." "How about a bed?" asked one petitioner wryly. "There's something to sleep on," the woman hedged. A short distance away, an elderly couple was offering a place to sleep on a one-night basis for five rubles a night (\$7.00). It was clearly not the Hospitality Center for European Russia. "Up off the sofa and out, first thing in the morning," the woman droned, "and back not too late at night." No one was interested; if you knew enough to come to Bath Lane, you had more long-term dreams.

Three women students opted for the one-room flat without the telephone, and were conditionally accepted, with the understanding that they would have no male visitors. The three young women nodded solemnly, eager to make it clear that men were the last thing they wanted. "The first sign of men and out you go," the future landlady warned. "Even if it's me?" volunteered one self-confident young man from the crowd. "What? Do you girls know him?" asked the landlady, sensing that her rules were already coming unstuck before her eyes. "Not yet," smiled one of the young women. The crowd approved.

One expensively dressed woman of around sixty, whose calm exterior immediately identified her as the possessor of extra living space, insisted coyly to those around her that she had no room for rent. The more she insisted, the larger the crowd around her grew. Then suddenly her answers began to change. For one questioner, she did have space to rent; for another, she did not. For a third, she replied coquettishly, the apartment was one-room with a parquet floor; to a fourth she claimed there was no apartment at all. For a fifth, the apartment had a newly reinforced door, a telephone, and cost one hundred and forty rubles a month (\$196.00). To a sixth, she replied that the apartment was already occupied. All those who asked were witness to these contradictory answers, and no one challenged the multiple truths. This elaborate mating ritual continued until she finally agreed to go off for a walk with someone to her liking, a respectable-looking man who lamented as they left that he had been standing in the cold for some five hours.

If anyone has an edge among the apartment-seekers, it is single women and military men. The former tend not to drink and carouse; the latter can be tracked down if they cause trouble or skip out. Lowest in the pecking order of desirable tenants are couples with children, a harsh fact given that children are a chief reason why adults find themselves in need of more living space. Even married couples without children were not desirable: "A husband and wife means noise, screaming, endless conflicts," an elderly woman explained, dismissing two newlyweds. "Who wants to live with that?"

Spotting the ideal tenant at Bath Lane sometimes requires a group effort. Two stout women, one a mustardy blond, the other with hair an unlikely shade of red, stood side by side like condiment bottles, dispensing information about their available apartment. As I joined the crowd, the usual catechism was being recited: "How much?" "How long?" "How big?" "How many rooms?"

Getting into the spirit of the enterprise, I plucked up my courage and asked brightly, "How far from the metro?"

The blond woman looked at me fixedly. "Masha!" she hollered over her shoulder. "Hey, Mash! Get over here!" A third woman, tightly buttoned into her purple wool coat, surged through the crowd.

"Mash, how about this girl, huh?" the blond woman asked Masha while reeling me in. "You like her?" And to me, taking me firmly under the arm: "We want a nice girl student. You a student? Want to go have a look at the place? We're sick of this. Hey, Masha!"

I realized I was in it over my head. To my relief, a number of other women immediately announced themselves to be "nice girl students" and were eager to argue their candidacy convincingly. I ducked out.

Set a short distance from the vacant lot on Bath Lane is a small storage hut belonging to a nearby apartment building. Covered on all four sides from top to bottom with fluttering, ink-smudged slips of paper, the hut serves as a bulletin board for those who are trying to swap apartments, both within Moscow and between Moscow and other cities. The swaps fall, roughly speaking, into two categories: "s"ezd" (the combining of separate living arrangements into a single one) and "raz"ezd" (the splitting up of joint living arrangements into separate ones). Like pages left out of Iurii Trifonov's story "The Exchange," these paper notices imply major upheavals: young people marrying ("Two communal-apartment rooms to be exchanged for a single one"), married couples divorcing ("IMMEDIATE raz"ezd!!! One-room apartment for two rooms"), and so forth.

Petitioners offer all kinds of assurances: military family, cleanliness, prompt payment, no children, white-collar profession, orderliness guaranteed. Proffered arrangements range from the arcane to the indecipherable. One notice offered living space in a summer house (dacha) to any carpenter with no grandchildren who would repair and glass in the dacha porch. Another announcement offered to swap a car for a room. A third slip of paper advertised a room very near to the metro, available only to someone with a driver's license.

No Moscow gathering place is complete without its eccentric, and Bath Lane that day had its very own. Near the hut stood a stooped, wasted man with four plastic shopping bags. He was offering a one-room apartment for fifteen rubles a month (\$21.00), an impossibly low sum. Chastised by his listeners for not gouging them properly, he defended himself in a long harangue, delivered at the rooftop of the adjoining apartment building.

"Why should living space be expensive?" he roared at the television antenna above our heads. "If other people cheat you, why should I?" The crowd warmed to the topic, muttered its approval and began asking him questions. He lived on Avant-garde Street, he said, and slept at night on a folding cot in the kitchen of his one-room apartment. The apartment stood empty during the day, while he was away fighting thieves and speculators at a major Moscow store. He had therefore come to the decision to put it up for rent, with the understanding that he would return from time to time to sleep in the kitchen.

A young military man with a small child immediately expressed interest, but was rejected ("only a single person"). An elderly, kerchiefed woman with two teeth tried next. She had an apartment near the Demidedovo Airport, but it was too far for her to come home each evening. The eccentric turned to her with all the wrath of an Old Testament prophet. "Live in your own apartment!" he boomed, "You live in Demidedovo! Go and live there!"

The military man quickly intervened, and within thirty seconds had agreed to sublet the Demidedovo apartment from the woman.

"Now I have no apartment anymore! It's gone!" she cried, holding up her arms like a magician, "Now let me have your one-room apartment. I'll cook you lunch; you'll eat well. The military man can live in my apartment."

The eccentric refused. "No! I eat in the cafeteria! And besides, he has a child! I won't rent to him! Only a single person!" The crowd, alternately delighted and frustrated at this confused twist in the negotiations, broke into a chorus of explanations, but the eccentric would have none of it. With a wave of his hand, he stopped off.

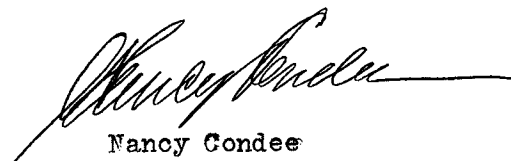
Thus, our own one-room apartment, despite the crowded conditions, would have been considered a good find at Bath Lane. Beyond the initial questions of size, privacy, and location, other considerations are important as well. Our apartment, as I learn the longer I live here, has distinct advantages in particular for a couple with a small child. In front of the building is a small play area with benches and swings. The building has a push-button entry code, which cuts down access to thieves and drunks, and two elevators, so when one breaks down, the other might still work. The apartment itself is on the third floor, high enough to be away from the street, but low enough to be accessible by foot if both lifts break down.

Most importantly, however, the apartment has a balcony, that open-air room so vital to daily life here. Depending on the occupants' age and on the pre-

vailing weather conditions, the balcony serves as a storage area for skis, a laundry room for drying clothes, a walk-in (or, I suppose, walk-out) refrigerator in the winter, an outdoor living room in the summer, and a baby's room all year long. What is considered loving care in one culture could justifiably be considered child abuse in another, and the balcony is a case in point.

Most afternoons, winter and summer, our Russian neighbors put their babies out on the balcony to sleep. In winter the babies are swaddled in layer upon layer of blankets, scarves, and shawls, covering everything but their little faces. The cold puts them to sleep, their mothers claim, and helps them sleep better at night.

I myself was a little edgy about putting our infant daughter out on the balcony in February. I tried to imagine how I would explain any mishap to friends and relatives back home. If generations of Russians turned out to be wrong, I could easily spend the rest of my life in a home for the criminally insane. At the coaxing of my next-door neighbor, however, I began to put Kira out on the balcony for several hours each day, and found that, whether she slept better or not, the size of our one-room apartment--that so coveted possession of Rath Lane--became for a brief period blessedly spacious. The balcony is indeed an important aspect of Moscow life.



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