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A Woman's Kingdom? Affect, Care and Regendering Labour

We sit in Galina Vilgel'movna's kitchen eating her borsch before she goes off for the evening shift at the Polymer workshop. Her blue-collar wage of 20,000 roubles a month ($540),[1] along with some state pension benefits, now has to support her retired husband, grown-up daughter Elena and her one-year-old son, as well as her senile mother.

Elena is tending to little Kolya, Galina's grandson, in the next room. Galina's husband Ivan Ivanych is boring everyone about his poor tomato crop this year.[2] Since the grandson arrived he has had little time to get on his moped and tend his allotment. That and the poor weather have stymied his plans. Elena used to work at the kindergarten, but since having the baby she has no intention of returning to work anytime soon. There is no father; as Ivan Ivanych approaches the age of 60, he now has a new role—filling in as babysitter and carer. Elena brings in more than

In the writing of this chapter I am highly indebted to Charlie Walker for the opportunity to discuss his work.

[1] The lower dollar value indicates the falling value of the rouble over time.

[2] We met these two informants in Chap. 1.

J. Morris, *Everyday Post-Socialism*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-349-95089-8_4

a few roubles from doing nails and cutting hair at home; she's so popular there is a stream of visitors to the roomy family flat and she has to rely on her father to look after the baby. Elena is a self-taught nail technician and disdains her competitors in the town who are enthralled by the latest teach-yourself books and the downloadable styles on the internet.

Ivan relishes his new role as carer for little Kolya, but he is constantly criticized by his wife. Ivan is a philosophical, if rather excitable and restless, person who has suffered a major heart attack brought on by the stress of his work in the oil terminal from which he retired early a few years ago. Galina's complaints about his poor nappy-changing skills are taken on the chin and he comments, smiling:

> This flat is her kingdom, but not the only one. The fabricating shop belongs to you too, Galina, doesn't it? She's as hard a taskmaster there as here at home. But you won't ever retire, will you, because you couldn't do without your second family there in the shop.

Ivan's assessment of his wife's relationship to her workshop echoes the analysis in Chap. 1 of the importance of the workplace as value in Galina's identity. It also restates the affective ties between her and her colleagues and the workplace. Work for Galina is an important space of self-affirmation but it is also a 'difficult love' that she compares to that of a parent to a grown up child (cf. Alasheev 1995: 77). Despite her giving everything to the enterprise over the years and more importantly putting part of herself into the enterprise—investing part of her personhood in the firm—the love is unrequited. Elements of her narrative are gendered in a way similar to how Elizabeth Dunn has characterized the maternal principles on the shop floor towards work by women in Poland after privatization of an enterprise (2004: 133). There are some kin metaphors used by Galina, but the affective relations towards work, while sometimes gendered in terms of the language used, are not always that different to those shared by men. The 'difficult love' is more appropriate to view in terms of the way both male and female workers were and remain socially bound to the enterprise and to fellow workers (the latter bonding of which is more often gendered). They were not 'asocial monads' at work under socialism. Equally now, invisible strings and cords that affectively link individuals, 'collectives' and the enterprise remain long after priva-

tization and major changes in production (cf. Dunn 2004: 172). The feelings of care for and responsibility to others and the nurturing of the sick body of the enterprise are as much parental as they are specifically maternal or paternal. Affective attachment and 'symbiosis' of worker and factory can be usefully aligned with accounts of Soviet industrial communities that stress the Latourian 'actant' significance of the enterprise in social life (Dimke and Koriukhino 2012).

As described in the Chap. 1. Galina makes use of both 'feminine' and 'masculine' performances of the blue-collar worker. She takes a lead in the 'feminine' roles when she helps maintain the gardens of the Polymer enterprise. There is so much downtime now and the management are often absent from the premises of the shop floor, meaning that the female technicians and even the blue-collar workers can devote time and appropriate 'care', as they see it, on the beautification of the workplace, an emblem of which is the 'cactus windowsill' seen earlier (cf. Morris 2014). There are also cherries and plum trees growing in the parking lot that Galina planted 20 years ago. Similarly, there is the strong thread of women's 'idle' gossip at work that runs through the histories of production in Russia, whether blue- or white-collar. However, here there is a hint of Galina's retreat from the feminine: 'I don't have time for all that women's [*bab'e*] chatter,' she remarks to me in the break room of the factory. By using a faintly derogatory adjective for 'women's', she marks herself not only as a first-class worker (she has risen not only to forewoman but to quality control inspector too) but as a person staking a claim to traditionally masculine characteristics of working-class subjectivity.

Elements of her understanding of 'care', while affective, owe as much to a masculine tradition at work as to a feminine one. It is both 'strategic' and in some senses paternal. Galina prides herself on seeing the bigger picture. She cares for what happens to the enterprise, not because she believes in the aims of the management (nor did she particularly subscribe to the 'aims' of socialism); through her care for the enterprise she expresses care for the people who work there. She talks of her excruciating eye for detail and exacting standards as both production leader (*smenyi master*) and quality control inspector (*nachalnik kontrolia i kachestva*).[3] A

[3] The significance of the 'masculine' linguistic gender of her factory roles as 'master' and 'chief' (*nachalnik*) is not lost on Galina.

lot of production gets rejected and this makes her unpopular with some of workers. Why is she being such a 'hard' unfeminine person? But as she explains: 'If the quality of production gets too low it is the workers who will suffer when they don't get the bonus or we lose the next contract […] Some people at work are their own enemies, but you mustn't blame them. They've been through so much that they don't know where they are sometimes.' Similarly, at home her daughter sometimes complains she is not affectionate to her grandson. Her treatment of her senile mother is headmasterly: 'Get back in your room. Who said you could come out? Don't encourage her, Ivan. If you let her in the kitchen, she'll just turn the gas on and forget about it.'

Once again this is a difficult love: you do what you can to care, but the recipient of that care, whether enterprise, worker or elderly relative, may not acknowledge or thank you for it. But care must go on, nonetheless. Indeed, the worse the situation gets, the more Galina feels that it falls to her. This is because so much of her working life—or more importantly, her sense of personhood—is invested. Vulnerability means that more intense—sometimes hard—love is needed at every turn. Is this a 'woman's kingdom'? Galina's shouting is that 'rich, powerful sound' characteristic of the noisy workshop (Alasheev 1995: 78). I nearly jump out of my skin, thinking her torrent of abuse is directed at me. No, it isn't: a male ancillary worker has forgotten to bring in plastic supplies. Ten minutes later back in the break room, Galina, flashing her upper set of gold teeth, laughs heartily at a joke and flirts shamelessly with a good-looking cutter in his late thirties, 'clucking' around him as the others say, while she makes tea.

As Sasha characterized his feelings of comfort in DIY practice as his *habitat*, Galina feels the workshop is homely, regardless of its parlous financial state, the incompetence of the Moscow owners, the poor production planning and worse pay. As she admits privately, the shop is more homely than the domestic sphere. Despite the loss of social services provided by the enterprise that were particularly important to women, female workers still feel a sense—not of loyalty—but of attachment to spaces of production. Another time, a few hours before her evening shift we sit in her kitchen drinking tea and I ask, 'What does it mean for you to say that you "love" work, Galina?' Normally voluble in her responses,

she pauses for a moment. There is a slightly pained, but resolute look away to one side:

> Love is love. I like the people. It's people as much as the place. I feel the need [*nuzhnost'*] of what I do and the social aspect [*obshchenie*]. Here at home it's not the same, I mean they don't value me in the same way. […] The spirit of the collective has remained, despite having three younger operators. Of course there's also the fact that we can't live on my pension of 9000 roubles. […] But there is something of the delight [*prelest'*] of the place that remains. There were always lots of worries without a doubt, sure. But we always had a good workshop and collective. I'll never forget how we sat and chatted after I came back from maternity leave [30 years ago]. My cheeks hurt from the laughter. Good people, and still are. Even now people come back to the place to work after trying out something else because it is near home and they are in their element [*svoia stikhiia*]. What we do isn't taught or trained anywhere. […] I never thought of leaving, I love my workshop a lot. Not just the collective. It is everything taken together. You can't take one thing out and say that is what I love […] We are stewing in our own juices [*varimsia v sobstvennom soku*].

First, Galina's case requires a restatement of Sergei Alasheev's point, which sometimes gets lost in debates about women and work: for women, just as much if not more so than for men, work remains the most important mediating site for a sense of working-class identity (1995: 80–81). Women's attachment was articulated and interpreted in multiple ways: to place, to the rhythms of work and machines themselves, as well as to the collective and enterprise (Ashwin and Bowers 1997: 28, 30). For older blue-collar workers like Galina work remains a site offering a sense of psycho-social relief from narrow traditional gender roles even as it reinscribes in femininity normatively male roles of provider and protector. Just as in the Soviet period, in some respects going to work is experienced as 'relief' from other aspects of life that are equally, if not more, intractable than labour (ibid: 29). Work is the threading of social and professional, economic and psychological habitability. It is more than a deriving of 'comfort' in an absence of insecurity (c.f. Kay 2012: 66); the contingencies that a worker faces in a declining enterprise are real and yet it remains a home from home. In particular there is loving fatalism in

the comment about 'being in one's element' and bitter-sweet wistfulness when Galina firmly but emotionally ends with: 'stewing in one's juices'. This echoes Sasha's reflection on the impossibility of escaping the particular 'habitat' of the town, and the imperative of finding some way of improvising habitability wherever a person finds herself.

There is also the sense of work as a place that women have a 'right' to ownership of given the lack of meaningful management or direction in the enterprise. Galina frequently makes reference to the absence of the enterprise's guiding hand. After all, why is she both the shift forewoman and responsible for quality control? And then she has to write the next month's shift work plan. But that should be management's job. It isn't democratization of the labour regime; it's the absence of control. A sense of ownership is intensified by the progressive diminution of skilled workers, down from 70, ten years ago, to 40 now. Many younger workers have left to the informal economy or to the technically similar processes at the Broiler combine. The current situation of decline is different from the heyday of growth and expansion, but the narrative of responsibility rhymes for Galina. The workers had to make sacrifices to get on with 'finishing with our hands' the town themselves in 1983, as no one else would help them with the incomplete housing blocks. So too now, in the shadow of the firm's insolvency, the workers have to take the responsibility that the bosses and municipality seem incapable of taking.

Such narratives of 'keeping on' also coincide with gendered and non-gendered qualities of stoicism: the endurance or patience that Ashwin identified more generally among workers (1999) and Caldwell highlights among marginalized Muscovites (2004: 34). Similarly, Galina's care(ful) navigation of the insecure situation of the workshop recalls the 'small agency' highlighted by Honkasalo. People who face everyday difficulties 'suffer' and 'endure', but take small steps of action even in circumstances where they know such action will not result in wider amelioration; this is 'practical quotidian acting, without a visible aim to change anything' (Honkasalo 2009: 53, 62). Care may be without result; the love of production is unrequited but integral to identity. However, for Galina and others like her, the town and the enterprise still represent a space, literally and metaphorically, of value. Their care shows that they find value, and in turn this valuing 'in spite of' the contingencies of life is itself generative

of the habitability such persons seek and clearly find in the everyday existence of the town.

Given this, it is worth reflecting on Nanette Funk's argument about women's work in Russia: that it 'provides some benefits and satisfactions, such as friendship, solidarity, relief from boredom at home, some economic goods, and a degree of respect and autonomy' but that it inevitably involves 'gender alienation', and offers little autonomy. In addition, 'given low salaries … in spite of the benefits, the harm it generates is above any acceptable threshold' (Funk 1993: 322, in Ashwin and Bowers 1997). While the case of female blue-collar workers in the town would illustrate the first supposition, the second should not be seen to automatically follow. Ashwin and Bowers' analysis was important in critiquing the accepted wisdom that postulated that postsocialism would reveal women's lack of commitment to waged work. Similarly they questioned Pilkington's assumption that women's saw 'work as materially necessary but undesirable, and thus to favour options to "return to their womanly mission" in the home' (Pilkington 1992: 200, in Ashwin and Bowers 1997).

Galina and the older cohort of male and female workers are able to think about work and place in terms of 'difficult love' in a complex, but in some respects simultaneously 'natural' way. This sees her working and caring identities as mutually reinforcing and socially embedded. But for every 'blue-collar' woman like her there are five other women in the equally poorly paid service and social sectors of employment in the town. Her daughter Elena is one example. These workers are towards the bottom of the scale in terms of the economic value of their work in the community. They may find value and pride in their work in a similar way that Galina does, but how do they reconcile that to the 'lack' of value ascribed to their labour?

Elena, like many young women in caring professions, found value in her job through care for others in the absence of society's valuing of her work in terms of a money wage (cf. Skeggs 1997). But over time, as with many men in the town, the compensatory mechanism of an internal system of value proved insufficient. Similar to Skeggs' young working-class women in the UK, respectability and care went hand in hand as the only available resource for Elena to valorise her professional positioning.

Respectability through enacting care has been seen as historically as much of a burden as a resource for working-class subjectivity (Skeggs 1997: 3). Elena was implicated in the construction of her own position at the bottom of society economically as a kindergarten worker and therefore complicit in her own marginalization (with the typical markers of passivity, non-sexualized and maternal femininity). However, this positioning also offered key resources that could then be leveraged in terms of carving out a habitable space (cf. Skeggs 1997: 41). Respectability that came from care work meant that Elena was able to negotiate single parenthood more 'easily'. She was also less susceptible to the narratives that hailed her as a feminine subject of neoliberalism and called on her to remake herself in order to become a flexible subject of the new labour market.

Elena rejected as irrational her continued work in the kindergarten for poverty wages when alternatives for making life habitable were available. Getting pregnant 'knowing that he'd run a mile' was a calculated 'practical action', echoing Honkasalo's framing of small agency. No one ever found out who 'he' was, nor were her immediate kin and friends particularly bothered, vindicating Elena's own thinking. As in Utrata's (2015) research, single motherhood was relatively normalized. Elena had already made a mental decision that care work was something that acted as a source of value for her as a person when she fell pregnant. But her commitment to the 'care' within her own extended family was then understood by her as a resource, not a burden in exiting formal work. This is somewhat in contrast to what I interpret as a more middle-class frame of analysis in Utrata's research (2011).[4] While I agree that there is a crisis in the older woman carer role generally (Utrata 2011; Zdravomyslova 2010), single mothers like Elena do not necessarily re-create youth privilege to the extent Utrata found in her research in more metropolitan families. Some of this is for practical reasons. Many potential older female carers like Galina still work. But more importantly, Elena values autonomy, dignity and care as a reciprocal, familial-affective category. While making use of caring services from her parents, this demands recognition of their own claims to care and a full life. 'I would never dump the little one on

[4] Utrata's mothers are mainly white-collar or upwardly mobile in the sense of Katya, Polina and Julia in this chapter. They also live in the Region capital.

Dad all day,' she says. 'If I need to I will use the kindergarten, not Mum and Dad.' However different from the masculine framings of dignity and self-worth, a parallel feeling for working-class propriety lies behind these words.

Making full use of the maternity payments at the kindergarten, Elena had no intention of returning, and in the first year of her son's life, built up a very loyal clientele in her hairdressing and nail work conducted from the family flat. She looked with some bemusement at her sister Julia's struggle as an 'independent' career woman. 'Why bother to work in the call centre just to get a degree. That's worse than cleaning up baby poo for 400 roubles a day.' Care and respectability were meagre and marginalized resources for Elena no doubt, but they embedded her 'comfortably' in her kin and social network. At the same time they were deployed in an extended manner to make life positively habitable. It was with some sense of conscious irony and pride that Elena, with no property or formal income, gave her sister Julia hand-me-downs for her own baby. Julia had a degree in child psychology, a tiny flat with a mortgage and a husband earning twice the average blue-collar wage. 'But what's the difference? Our children are both loved, and I am always here, with granddad, with people around,' commented Elena. The upward mobility of her sister was viewed ambiguously by Elena. There was little 'comfort' or habitability in her sister's life that she could see.

Elena's story of work at the kindergarten reveals well-trodden narratives of identifying traditionally 'female' employment as congruent with an 'appropriate' form of gender enactment (Walker 2015: 112). However, increasingly in the service and social sectors in Russia, a more 'emphatically' feminine subject, resembling that in the West, is being created for women workers to emulate (ibid: 113; Otis 2011). For Walker, drawing on a long tradition of symbolic interactionism, a performance of 'passing' as a subject of worth in service work becomes increasingly important for women in Russia, particularly in order to derive social and economic capital from such jobs. Performing various white-collar, or more often simply non-blue-collar feminine identities in work, is seen by women as essential in accessing—and perhaps even becoming—a middle-class subject of value. However, actual translation of symbolic capital to economic power is problematic. This was exemplified in Elena's sister Julia,

a woman in her mid-twenties married to Petr, the car production line worker introduced in the previous chapter.

Julia and Polina: Social Mobility Versus the Claims of Caring Femininity

Julia had only recently started dating Petr when we met at one of the parties in the House of Culture, or *DeKa.* The *DeKa* was an important hang-out place for young people in a particular informal social 'set' or *tusovka*.[5] This vast and partly derelict building was once the pride of the town with many cultural events taking place on its stages and screens. It still houses a public library and the municipality administrative office, where Sasha's mother Masha works. The municipal budget also pays for a number of ancillary technicians and odd-job semi-manual workers like Nikita. Because of the maze-like spaces of the *DeKa* and the frequent absence of the Director, young so-called cultural workers like Nikita would make the place a space of leisure and sociality. Drinking parties with an even gender mix take place most weekends, especially in the winter. Included in proceedings are around six permanent *DeKa* employees who include genuine cultural workers like Dasha, a 24-year-old drama instructor and youth worker, and music teacher Tanya, in her late twenties, as well as the manual and technical male staff. Their ex-school friends also come to drink, smoke and listen to music in the *DeKa*. Even after some of the men got jobs on the car production lines in Kaluga they still come from time to time. Julia is part of this social network of around 20 young people and met her future husband at one of these parties.

Julia was working in a call centre in Kaluga doing nightshifts while studying for a degree in child psychology. Polina, her close friend, worked more or less permanently in Moscow as a merchandiser selling electronic cigarettes from a stand in a Moscow shopping mall: 'No, not a sales assistant, I am a merchandiser. I don't work in a shop with a blue apron like locals. That's why I couldn't work in Izluchino.' Walker's female respondents also expressed this kind of value distinction based on creativity

[5] While the term *tusovka* originally had a narrower meaning referring to more exclusive subcultural youth groups, it now has a less specific meaning relating to any 'informal gathering of like-minded people' (Rayport 1995: 59).

and individuality (2015: 114–115). Polina's and Julia's narratives were also marked by feelings of shame and sometimes disgust at their spatial and classed origins. Their sense of 'distinction' in their striving towards a putatively middle-class femininity through white-collar work was also anchored to a negative assessment of all blue-collar work, even that done by spouses or family. Sometimes this negative judgment of manual work in the town bordered on a pathologization of all kinds of elements of male working-class life, as the women saw them.

Julia made a point of stressing her feelings of intellectual and social distance from the core group. So did her school friend Polina. Polina had been teetotal since falling in with a Slavic cultural revival youth group in Moscow (a telling hint of her desire to remake herself), but Julia drank as much as the rest of the group, often large quantities of spirits. At one point a group of men, including her future husband, were engaged in very drunken horseplay. The main *DeKa* technician Filipp, a quiet thoughtful man in his early thirties kept out of it and continued to talk about music with Julia. Julia remarked: 'How disgusting it all is. They're like children. Can't you control yourselves?' Leaving the 'boys', we went out to the back of the building to the 'smoking hall': an enormous empty space that had once been a dance hall but which was now closed due to the dangerously leaking concrete roof for which there were no repair funds. In greater privacy, Julia and Polina discussed the antics of the young men in more disparaging terms. Julia saw the men as infantile. That is what life in this place does to men. They behave themselves at work in the factory but they are like children when they are relaxing. This is a measure of their inability to make something of their lives. All they can do is horse around. Work and drink and then work, it shows their mindlessness. 'And me too?' said Filipp, offended. 'No, you at least have a technical education.'

Polina's perspective was a little different. Speaking about one of the men disparagingly, she said:

> He isn't independent [*samostoiatelnyi*],[6] he's a big baby. He eats, drinks at home and them leaves, he isn't a provider [*dobytchik*], that's his father. But

[6] The Russian word 'samostoiatelnyi', while translated as 'independent', is derived from the root meaning 'to stand oneself' and thus contains within it the sense of being 'self-sufficient' and self-supporting.

> his father is smothering them. He's father and housewife to his children. […] That's why I came to Moscow; I lived with a man and then on my own, I can't live with mother. I need my own place [*svoi ochag*]. I have to make my own way [*samobytnaia*]. Life teaches and pushes you on to become independent, tease out some kind of life experience from those [experiences]. Then you need to grow; you grow bored of an environment. Not within a company but as a person [*lichnost*]. […] He doesn't have any horizons. He can't see beyond this place.

Polina raised her cigarette to indicate the dance floor, broken tiles and a large pool of water almost shrouded in darkness in the windowless room.

The women's talk about male working-class inadequacy was a rather common and sometimes understandable pathologization (cf. Kay 2006). It was a simple task to identify as 'diseases of the will' the easy-going living in the present that the young man described by Polina displayed (Skeggs 2005). Such cross-gender judgement of value was common in the town among younger women like Polina but less evident among older women and strikingly absent in judgements between women. For example, while Elena chose a route out of formal employments as a badly paid kindergarten worker and made do on her home hair cutting and nail work, her sister Julia applied a different kind of judgement: Elena was unsuited to the harsh conditions and poor pay of formal care work in the kindergarten; why shouldn't she stay in the bosom of her family if they supported and cared for each other? Julia's and Polina's attitudes to the man in question was completely different: he was a drain on his household's resources; his job choices were a mark of his inadequate masculinity. On the other hand, the limited options available for 'self-improvement' to men without education are grudgingly admitted. Nonetheless, the 'urge' for developing the self is acknowledged as intrinsic to women's experience, but not to men's. Overall then, the gendered assessment of men and blue-collar work remains contradictory.

Julia, Polina and others emphasized their own pursuit of further and higher education as a mark of distinction, setting them apart from other women in the town, but more importantly men. However, despite real educational achievements their trajectory into the actual white-collar hierarchy of work remains uncertain. Eventually Julia was able to get

work as a child psychologist in the town. Polina continued to work in Moscow coming home less and less frequently every couple of months. Nonetheless their networks of friendship and kinship changed little; they remained largely 'horizontal' and marked by the women's blue-collar family origins (Dunn 2004; Morris 2012; Walker 2011). Later I sit with Polina and her latest boyfriend in a park in southern Moscow, admiring the autumn scenery, and she remarks: 'We couldn't do this with the boys in Izluchino. They wouldn't know how to behave. They don't know how to act around women in a respectful solicitous way.' Indeed, I could imagine them climbing the walls of the reconstructed tsarist palace, getting into all kinds of scrapes.

Back in Julia's cramped kitchen in the town she and her husband Petr, now a production line operative at a car plant in Kaluga, make me tea using a fancy cast-iron Chinese teapot they bought in the region capital. Julia gives me a Russian translation of an American book on child psychology and parenting. She is due to give birth soon and we often talk about child care. Her husband leaves for his work shift and with a tired look in her eyes Julia complains that when she tries to have an 'intelligent' conversation there is no one in their circle to whom she can talk to. 'But Petr is a smart guy,' I counter. I was impressed by his self-taught English when I met him, a skill that has come in useful in Kaluga at the plant. 'I don't mean at home, I mean in general, like when we are in the *DeKa*,' she says. 'People here are so mindless.'

It is worth following Walker (2015), in looked at classed personhoods—particularly aspirational forms of femininity—as a kind of performative activity. The compressed social geography of the small town sees the kind of 'passing' attempted by Julia as fraught for want of a 'middle-class' audience that shares the values of enacting educational self-improvement in everyday life. This is not the same thing as saying that education is not valued. There are plenty of examples of relative social mobility related to technical educational achievement in the town. Polina too was less unequivocal in her talk. As time went on in Moscow while she made more friends in the Slavic culture revival circle, the weight of her attachment to her home town grew heavier. She missed her mother, her only living relative. At work she was treated badly, given the worst mall locations far from public transport and after being wrongly accused

of theft she was summarily sacked. Her latest relationship failed, perhaps partly due to her only being able to afford to live in a shared room and having no real disposable income. The cost of accommodation and living in Moscow meant that her mother started sending her money and provisions from her meagre pension, which she kept secret from her friends back home.[7]

Polina's case is similar to stories of other women seeking migration as an answer to the difficulty of social mobility at home. They show the difficulty of the third but most crucial element of self-work for working-class people: the expansion of social networks. Not only are neoliberal subjects supposed to work on their skills, competencies and flexibility, they also need to have enough social capital to begin with to grow networks in order to succeed (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Polina's Moscow experience was similar to that of other informants, such as a group of Belarusian young women Polina knew who had given up work in garment factories at home to also work as electronic cigarette merchandisers in 'glamourous' Moscow malls. These women were a particularly depressing example of the way more or less desperate labour migration to the capital filled jobs at the very margins of paying work. This work was almost entirely based on commission which meant that often the women could not afford to eat properly or even use public transport (some slept in warehouses behind the malls).

Sveta, a woman in her mid-thirties who desperately missed her brother and mother in Vitebsk, had shared a bedroom with four compatriots in a communal apartment half an hour by bus from the nearest metro station, well beyond the city limits. She had never used the metro system itself but relied on informal transport that exposed them to constant sexual harassment from drivers. These women had undertaken a rigorous remaking of themselves in neoliberalism's image, but had failed to 'pass', in a number of senses. As they entered the space of opportunities within the globalized economy of the largest city in Europe, at every turn their lack of an established social network away from their horizontal class

[7] Because of the shame experienced by both mother and Polina at the financial 'failure' of the daughter's Moscow life, they used me as an outsider to bring the money and food on the bus to Moscow for a time. Their relief at being able to hide this activity from others was clear.

links back home meant that they experienced more marginalization. A sign of their frustration and desperation saw them rely more and more on equally marginalized people, such as Central Asian migrants, with whom some of the Belarusian women started relationships. Some of these women's strategies will pay off, most won't. In most cases these women acknowledged the fundamentally precarious nature of their existence.

Suvi Salmenniemi and Maria Adamson propose that narratives of self-improvement in self-help books in Russia involve a particular domestication of 'labour' in the way femininity is reconstructed locally (2015). Self-improvement books are a familiar element of neoliberal discourse globally, encouraging the individual to see herself as an object of value that can be leveraged through work on the self. In the West this often involves a postfeminist imagining of woman as a 'sexually empowered, maximising and optimising possessive individual who seeks to accrue value for herself through continuous labour' (2015: 90; see also Skeggs 2004). However, in Russian self-help books women are 'effectively called to inhabit two contradictory subject-positions: the position of an autonomous and self-sufficient woman, and the position of a maternal care-taker responsible for the emotional support of her male partner' (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015: 95). This is the nature of the particularly 'laborious' translation of self-improvement into Russian culture. It was notable that Polina's and Julia's talk of self-improvement was very clearly articulated in terms of access to self-help literature and the 'insights' it gave them into life. This was coupled to their achievements in further and higher education.

At the same time, their frustrated attempts at passing into the realms of being that they imagined as constitutive of a middle-class personhood could not be reconciled with deep seated convictions about the difficulty of self-realization beyond care for others, particularly kin. The further they appeared to move beyond their grounded origins, in a working-class habitus embraced by Elena in terms of 'family and friends first', the more their talk and actions revealed their inability to escape such ethical dispositions which demanded of femininity the putting of others before the self. Julia remarked both bitterly and with a sense of sincerity of her sister: 'It is easy for Elena; she was made to care for others. I have to work at it; it doesn't come naturally to me.' For Julia, even 'caring' was reinterpreted

as another aspect of improvement of the self. In contrast, Polina complained of the 'weight' of home and her sense of obligation to her mother.

> It weighs down on me that I am here in Moscow and she is alone there. Well, she's not completely alone because my niece is there. She's a legal orphan and so it gives meaning to Mum that she can care for her while I work here in Moscow. The reason I am here is so that I can make something of myself, but that's only because I owe it to my Mum so that she will be comfortable and I can provide for her.

Julia and, to a greater extent, Polina show that women, more than men, are willing to uproot themselves from a blue-collar sociality in which they have grown up. But at the same time their attempts at 'passing' are highly fraught, whether they move away or stay in the town. In both cases, the attempts at passing are risky: on the one hand, both women speak of their 'different' personhood—their values as setting them apart from those of their peer group. On the other hand, their self-invention as newly arrived white-collar women of 'distinction' is weighed down by a lack of acknowledgement, both from society generally but, more importantly, from significant others. At the same time the moral anchor of kin and care is equally heavy. Women's movement and self-invention may be symbolically successful at least in part, but materially it remains incomplete (Walker 2015: 120), psychologically it is clearly burdensome (Walkerdine 2003).

Salmenniemi and Adamson see the creation of a valuable feminine subject that treads a line between these positions as involving significant 'labour' in postsocialist Russia. The sense of struggling to attain the unattainable—femininity as located in impossibly contradictory positions—is an endless difficulty that the self-help literature aims to smooth. The trope of labouring to achieve a successful postsocialist, postfeminist femininity is clearly related to neoliberal capitalism, but also links to long standing socialist-era registers (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015: 101). The lives of Julia, Polina and other women in Izluchino are partly illustrative of this double-bind as well as supporting the peculiarly Russian register of laboured femininity. This also links to age-old, yet enduring, cultural tropes of the need for suffering and sacrifice as an authenticating

experience of the self in Russia (Ries 1997: 83–160, Zigon 2006: 71). The suffering trope is clearly articulated both in pre-Soviet cultural religiosity and in the familiar narratives of personal sacrifice in building communism. There is also a semantic (in the verb *perezhit'*) and cultural link between patience, endurance and suffering in Russia (Pavlenko 2002: 234). It may be pertinent to compare male and female blue-collar workers' endurance and passive 'suffering' of transition (Ashwin 1999) with the double-bind of the achievement of 'successful' postsocialist femininity as laboured. In the present, suffering for the sake of an ideal becomes particularly attached to 'successful' femininity, which then negates itself when the woman's kingdom is found to be lacking in values of care. In addition, suffering, as Jarrett Zigon argues in relation to religious believers in Moscow (2006), comes to be linked with authenticating narratives of self-improvement and the project of oneself. In Julia's and Polina's cases this links a particular feminine form of suffering to self-governmentality in the newly neoliberal sphere of gender and labour more specifically.

'Crying into the Waistcoat': The Double-Bind of Ultra-Flexible Femininity

The final story of this chapter—about Katya—illustrates this double-bind in a particularly vivid way. Katya came to the town as a teenager with her parents who worked at the factory. In my second period of fieldwork I began living with the family and spent much time in kitchen-table talk with the father, mother, brother, Katya and her (soon to be) ex-husband. This was a large, warm-hearted family that also included a bedridden grandmother and Katya's young daughter. There were also two elderly grandparents living elsewhere in the town and dependent on the family for near-daily care.

Ten years previously Katya had aspired to become a 'manager' and to achieve success she left to gain a higher education in Kaluga. Returning to the town her educational achievements were crowned by getting a job in one of the smaller factories as an accountant, a relatively well-paid and prestigious white-collar job. Later she would become the deputy director

of another significant enterprise in the town and the main breadwinner for the entire family of seven dependents (after her parents had retired). At the age of 20 she had married a lime-kiln operator in the town who was eight years older than her. They had a child (another essential 'achievement', one which Katya often spoke of in such terms), lived for some years in her family flat but then split up and divorced. I watched as Katya was blamed for the failure of the relationship and withdrew somewhat from social life in the town, having previously been much in evidence in the *DeKa* parties and the young group of friends associated with it. People spoke of her overreaching personality and inability to compromise her professional ambition for the sake of her marriage and child. At various times over the years Katya spoke about her professional life history. In our first long talk in 2009 she talked about her educational achievements and how very quickly her ability saw her taking on more and more responsibility in the enterprise—from organizing accommodation for newly arrived foreign workers and dealing with the infamous Russian tax police, to taking on tasks related to managing production and planning:

> I got the job because I am a smart one [*umnitsa*]. With each new experience, I learned to do something; I want these new tasks, new responsibilities. I might be scared but that's good. It pushed you on. Like when the production manager was drunk and didn't come in and we were due a call from the company supplying a new spot-welding machine. Now I know nothing about how it works but the Director comes in and says I have to deal with them on the phone. I look up the spec on the internet and just deal with it. And they phone and say they want to talk to the production manager and I say it is me and we talk and I ask them all these practical questions like about maintenance and spare parts and training and wear and tear and at the end of the conversation the sales rep says that he's never had such a demanding or thorough customer. We buy the equipment and naturally the production manager comes back and says that I am useless, but he goes quiet after that and the Director is happy.

These stories of usually more minor 'victories' in the male-dominated space of the company were a regular fixture of Katya's arrival at home after work. Typically her father or husband would be preparing dinner and Katya would arrive and jokingly announce in her confident and smil-

ing tone: 'Greetings to the country! I have a boast to make [*ia budu khvastat'sia*]! Today I put together the marketing campaign for the new model we're producing.' Katya would then take over the management of the making of dinner while telling us how resourceful she had been in teaching herself how to use some graphic design software to create marketing materials, or how she's managed to get an advertising opportunity in the region newspaper or even in Moscow.

Later in the same talk Katya hints at the reasons for the failure of her marriage by talking about the distance between her 'mentality' and that of the local blue-collar workers, like her soon-to-be-ex-husband:

> Most people in Izluchino don't want to grow and improve their educational level. Like at work when we have a production operative who ignores the training or instructions and I have to ask, 'Why did you break it', and they answer, 'Well I just tried all the buttons until it broke.' […] The majority don't want to study and increase their self-education [*samoobrazovanie svoe*]. It's pretty obvious when we get someone who can only work for a few hours and then they leave off working because all they need is a bottle of beer.

The conversation continues as Katya talks about the mistake of management in trying for a more 'human' approach to production relations. She had previously worked in Kaluga in a firm that rented out industrial vehicles and equipment where the female boss had organized social events at which management and workers mixed:

> How did they understand that this was a mistake? This was a few years ago, mind. The thing is—the workers just stopped working completely. You can only be friend or worker, not both. It is not worth mixing work and private life. […] After each festivity people got sacked. The lack of social distance was tearing the place apart. Everything is a test in work, even a party. The person drinks and can't control himself. The next day I have to call him in and explain that he needs to find another place of work. If he can't control himself to a small degree then how will he work on himself? A woman in particular has to be tough boss, it's a rule.[8]

[8] Compare Kesküla's account of the increasing separation of sociality and kin relations from work in an Estonian mine (2014).

Finally, echoing her earlier story of pretending to be the production manager, Katya talks of women's ultra-flexibility in the workplace and the necessity of having a chameleon-like approach to work identity. At the same time, following on from the story of having to sack workers who fail to adhere to a 'new' sense of propriety and discipline at work in contrast to the late-Soviet tolerance for drinking, she signals a sense of how her role damages her sense of regard by and for others even while taking on 'caring' roles in the enterprise:

> Very little of my work is accountancy. I call my role dealing with everyone's problems, 'crying into my waistcoat'. They come crying into my waistcoat and I am expected to drop everything and fix it. A woman has to do her job and wear the waistcoat: to look and sound strong enough to pretend to be able to do anything: architect for the new storage silo, replace the chief mechanical engineer, have a hangover cure for the Director, advise him on how to deal with his wife. Anything. […] But then this itself means I cannot have friends at work, and even beyond work I sometimes feel I can't trust people, like I am cut off from everyone because of leaving my husband. I try not to get to know people too much so as not to have to take part in rumours. But then I am more alone without anyone to support me.

The final quote here reveals that even in adopting more 'masculine' traits in the workplace, care remains a salient category for the female worker, even in management. While the phrase 'cry into the waistcoat' is a non-gendered vernacular, meaning 'complain about something in search of sympathy', Katya gives it a particular gendered interpretation as a symbolic–literal marker of the white-collar woman's incomplete arrival (it isn't a business suit, rather a 'uniform' of the lower-status managerial woman) and reinforces a sense of traditional sexualized femininity (typically worn over a blouse, the waistcoat emphasizes the feminine body).

Much later Katya speaks more at length about her decision to leave her husband and ask for a divorce. This description—just like her narratives of leaving the town, return and achievement in work—is characterized by an emphasis on necessary sacrifice. Striving without suffering is not possible. This discourse is inflected by a consistent emphasis on her maternal role, not only to her child, but to her parents, sibling and employees.

Katya often feels trapped between the two positions outlined above: the good flexible subject of neoliberal discourse (her latest joyful achievement was a higher degree in finance that resulted in a pay rise) and the ethical obligations of care for her partially disabled brother (whom she partially financially supports, secretly loaning him money) and care for her daughter. Feelings of guilt often come to the surface when the offer to go dancing in Kaluga or drinking in the *DeKa* comes from potential suitors or friends: 'No, I couldn't do that,' she says as we sit in her parents' kitchen. 'I have to prepare for next week's tax return, and then check supply schedule, and phone the delivery drivers to make sure they will turn up tomorrow.' Eventually she starts dating one of the workers in the underground uPVC workshop described in the previous chapter. One evening four years after her divorce we all gather in the *DeKa* without Katya. Her new boyfriend is already a little drunk and his words are unguarded:

> She will find any excuse not to be happy. She will never give herself any free time. I almost never see her. It is like she is punishing me and everyone else just to prove she can be a success. But really she is just punishing herself. Sometimes I think she will just burn herself out eventually.

Katya's brother also thinks in similar terms of his sister's personality. We sit one evening drinking beer in the family BMW parked in the guarded parking lot on the edge of town. This car is a hugely significant status symbol that Katya's labour alone had brought to the family. No men in the settlement would be able to 'put up' with her individualistic and ambitious character, the brother thinks. 'She's just an egoist who pretends to care,' he says uncharitably. Little does he realize that I know the extent to which she financially supports him uncomplainingly, and he is seemingly oblivious of the irony of saying this while sitting in the vehicle bought by Katya that he so often makes use of. Here is a kind of reverse pathologization of that observed in Polina and Julia. For him his sister's focus on achievement and professionalism are part of her inauthenticity and lack of a 'genuine' warmth and sincerity valued as part of the *DeKa tusovka*. His measure of authenticity is firmly predicated on prioritizing regard for others over professional achievement. But in that sense its emphasis on 'care' echoes Katya's own more private concerns

about how her 'front' of stoic resolve means that she had no legitimate outlet for emotional connection or, unlike Galina, the balancing of more traditional gendered expressions of care.

As much as Katya articulates an individuated and at times ruthless focus on white-collar success in work and financial gain, she remains entwined in equally strong imperatives for self-sacrifice, as seen in the preceding paragraphs, and care for others. In this way her search for a habitable femininity is split along irreconcilable lines that at times seem to threaten complete physical exhaustion, if not mental illness. In that sense her story recalls Walkerdine's (2003) psycho-social portrait of upwardly mobile women as suffering a particular psychopathology similar to 'survival guilt'. They experience their success ambiguously: they have both gained and lost, particularly in the distance they now experience between their professional lives and their social origins.

Similarly, the 'domestication' of neoliberal femininity described in research on Russian self-help books is apt, but in terms of lived experience it is also appropriate to talk of an endless and impossible juggling of the postsocialist demands of 'successful' femininity. It is often remarked that the making of Soviet femininity was based on a similar fundamental contradiction: while there was a strong imperative for women to enter the labour market, traditional expectations of the domestic care role were not removed. The 'double burden' was the result of women similarly juggling domestic responsibilities with professional ones (Morvant 1995). This is often the source of the argument for Russian women's cynicism about feminism generally, and their readiness to embrace 'postfeminism' (Posadskaya 1994; Ashwin and Bowers 1997).

Because this is the only chapter to deal with the people who make the leap into white-collar professions, the effects of gender seem hard to disentangle here from those of class. The experiences of Julia and Polina represent conflicting dispositions that remain unresolved. On the one hand, strongly held norms of care conflict with upwardly mobile aspirations. These cut across gender and class origin. On the other, the 'achievements' of postfeminist femininity and upward social mobility seem particularly linked and possibly mutually reinforcing.

Although working-class men in Izluchino are increasingly involved in care and domestic work, the double burden remains significant in wom-

en's lives in Russia. However, more and more salient is a different kind of double burden, the one experienced by Polina, Julia and Katya. It is difficult for young women to distinguish between the traps and snares of upward mobility and their entry into white-collar professional life, and its offer of a cultural, social and economic capital that was largely inaccessible to women before. Nonetheless, all three women's narratives show clear awareness of the fine line between 'success and failure, hope and despair' entailed in the new 'positioning of the female worker as the mainstay of the neo-liberal economy' (Walkerdine 2003: 237–238).

Coda: The Women at the Bottom, Holding Up the Top

But what of the majority of women in Izluchino whose lives remain untouched by the dubious privilege of negotiating success and failure, hope and despair as upwardly mobile women? These are the women in the lowest-paid service work who have neither the educational opportunities of Julia, Polina or Katya, nor the familial support of Elena. They typically work in care, shop work or at the bottom end of factory drudgery as cleaners or technical staff monitoring industrial processes. They cannot be compared to Galina, who in comparison occupies a position more akin to a particularly gendered aspect of labour 'aristocracy' (Tkach 2008).

As in the West, women's employment is increasingly divided between those who have 'education and skills to enter the professional and managerial sector and those who leave school with little or no qualifications and enter a labour market defined mostly by poorly paid, often part-time work, little job security and periods of unemployment' (Walkerdine 2003: 241). In Izluchino this situation is compounded by the kind of precarity in and outside formal blue-collar work experienced by men like Sasha. This means the most marginalized women have to deal with irregular household income from husbands and partners who are still nominally considered breadwinners. Indeed, the worse the opportunities for traditional blue-collar male breadwinning in the town, the stronger the tradi-

tional gender norms are 'enforced' in terms of women's role as 'supporting the man'. Elena as a single mother enjoys the support of her family, never having been in a relationship with the father of her child. But Katya suffered considerable social approbation for having left her husband. Walker notes a 'retraditionalization' of the Russian male breadwinner's role in his interviews with young working-class and lower middle-class women (2015: 119). However, in Izluchino, blue-collar women often find themselves de facto breadwinners for significant periods of time.

Particularly for the men who change jobs frequently or get by on irregular earnings in the informal economy, the tiny wage women earn becomes more important. In this sense it is the most economically marginalized women who bear the highest burden of economic insecurity within the household. This was borne out by the example of Sasha's wife, Tanya. She was frequently confronted with the sudden loss of her husband's income as he moved between waged work and the uncertain informal economy. For many of these women traditional feminine roles and homosociality are the only possible spaces of habitability. Craft and hobbies that are more comparable to masculine DIY practices in terms of activity for its own sake also emerge as important. Thus for Tanya, watercolour painting on her balcony is fundamental to her sense of well-being. Like the more 'practical' garage work practices of the men, women even at the very bottom of the pile in Izluchino strongly value craft practices embedded within sociality such as DIY, art from natural materials or even scrap metal. These 'meagre' activities bring incommensurate satisfaction into what would otherwise be the most uninhabitable existence of any of Izluchino's denizens.

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