Seventeen Years after 
the Fall of the USSR

Why, why, why, he answers, just let me rent out my room for seventy rubles, then I won’t need anything from you.
—Ludmilla Petrushevskaya. The time—night

My name is Anna Ivanovna Rudenko, I am of Ukrainian heritage, I received Russian citizenship thanks to my last husband who is now deceased.

This is a 147-square-meter apartment and 4 families live here, or 16 people in total. Currently, in 2008, we’re 11 permanent residents, the 5 other inhabitants are registered here but don’t live here.

As for me, for more than 20 years I’ve been living in this 22-square-meter room, I’m living here “illegally,” that is without being registered in Moscow since 1987, and for eight years I’ve been the owner. I bought it in exchange for another room that I had elsewhere.

I share this room with my daughter, my son-in-law, and my grandson Andrei who’s 12. I sleep on the sofa that you see over there, my daughter and son-in-law on the balcony, and my grandson on a bed that we converted under the little desk where he does his homework. Right now he’s at his English lesson, he’ll be back shortly. We try and keep him occupied after school as much as possible because he’s very active and hates this room where the four of us live, as well as the wardrobe and the refrigerator because we are not allowed to have a refrigerator in the kitchen, each family has one in its room. Andrei also does karate.

P. Messana, Soviet Communal Living
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Lida, the neighbor, who you saw just now in the kitchen has lived here since 1976, she and her husband have one room and her mother-in-law has another, they’re lucky to have two. There’s another room that is 16 square meters, which is shared by a family of five.

In the mid-1990s, there was a lot of housing commotion, many developers threw themselves into privatizing communal apartments, at the time they were buying them for very little, $5,000–$10,000 maximum, I heard talk of a case where they succeeded in grabbing a room in exchange for one or two cases of vodka, that’s without even mentioning the rumors, true or false, of killing retirees in order to get their rooms.

Once all of the rooms were bought up, the developers renovated and rented them, the big apartments in the center of the city rented for up to $10,000–$15,000 per month to expatriates or to rich Georgians or Armenians who came to do business in Moscow.

At that time obviously we too, we were fair game for developers who one after another tried to privatize the apartment, sure we were on the ground floor and people don’t like the ground floor, but the building is extraordinary with all the molding and exterior sculptures, and then it looks out on “Chistye Prudi” “clear ponds,” it’s one of the most prestigious areas in Moscow’s historical center, not far from the Kremlin.

But at the time there was a woman who didn’t want to leave, and it was enough to have one refusal to block everything, the apartment could not be privatized unless everyone accepted the exchange or the proposed amount of money. This woman died four years ago, but now we have very few offers, it’s true too that in our area the price of a square meter is up to $14,000–$16,000, nobody’s bought out for a case of vodka and who’s going to pay $1.5 million for an apartment where everything needs to be redone, developers aren’t crazy!

Me, I’m fine here, I’m 75 years old, and I often receive friends in my room, I play the guitar and also I’m quite well known for my herbal medicinal skills, I bring herbs from Poltava in Ukraine, it’s 14 hours by train from here, and I practice homeopathy. I help certain teachers prepare mixtures, but I don’t like to work, me I like to sleep, to rest, go out, take a walk. I don’t like the Internet, I like to read, and I try to prevent my grandson from spending too much time in front of that computer when he comes back from school. My son-in-law is an allergist, they just opened their little clinic with my daughter, but they don’t make enough money to buy an apartment.