

JOHN JACKSON

THE NAIL FACTORY

REAL NAILS WERE INCREDIBLY VALUABLE—so valuable that men risked years in jail to get them and people dared not trade them directly. No one knew this better than Arkady, who worked in the state nail factory, where scandalously substandard materials were pumped through wheezing, dilapidated equipment to churn out splintered, deformed atrocities. The entire operation was a sham, as it produced only a very small number of decent nails that were reserved for official inspections, when they were certified by stern, white-coated ministry officials as if they represented true plant production. The decent nails were then siphoned off for the use of the Director and other lofty bureaucrats. Just the other day, an influential bureaucrat, who had built a cottage with some real nails, returned for his summer vacation to find that the entire structure lay dismantled in a heap with all its nails removed. The fool! Arkady thought, shaking his head. Did he really think that thieves could keep their hands off something as valuable as that? Everyone knew that almost all of the nails the plant produced were useless, although no one would officially recognize this. They couldn't, for any official who dared to admit that this socialist utopia was riddled with deceit, corruption, and incompetence was immediately censored, punished, and slated for political re-education. Everyone was only concerned with the pretence of things, like the pretences surrounding Arkady's rehabilitation and the quality of the factory's nails.

As Arkady searched his apartment for a missing bottle of vodka, he stumbled past a poster showing a team of smiling, muscular workers—or, more accurately, state weightlifters with bulging biceps and rippling forearms—enthusiastically forging nails with an anvil and hammer beneath a caption that read “We Are As Tough As Nails.” What a scam! he snickered, although he took good care to see that the edges of the poster had not curled. You never knew when somebody might report a lack of enthusiasm. You had to nod solemnly when the ministry declared that “all nails are good.” You

had to nod in agreement at the pep rallies, the lectures by admiring experts, and the hard-hitting pieces of investigative journalism that exposed the “myth” of shoddy workmanship. The official state school song even included the line “We are the strong nails upon which our future hangs,” which pupils sang every morning.

But no one really believed the propaganda, and the factory’s product remained a national joke. In fact, one of the worst insults was to say that someone was “as useless as a ministry nail,” although other industries were scarcely better: the concrete factories produced cement that immediately crumbled, the shoe plants made shoes that didn’t fit, and the pharmaceutical facilities churned out drugs unfit for a horse. The only worthwhile thing they turned out was vodka, and you needed a ration voucher for that, Arkady thought ruefully, fumbling through his kitchen cupboards. Not that he had much to worry about. The opera-loving Director had arranged to get real nails to Arkady so that he could trade them to a black marketeer named Max for a forbidden foreign stereo system. His position was too delicate to become directly involved in the transaction, so he left the dirty work to Arkady in exchange for the promise of vouchers galore.

Arkady was desperately waiting for Max’s arrival, but when he heard a knock at the door he suddenly grew frightened and hesitated. Although he had met Max before, he knew that the thing he was about to do was illegal and that the kind of people who engaged in such activities were gangsters, capitalists, and profiteers. School children were taught to loathe these unscrupulous exploiters of honest workers, ravagers of the environment, peddlers of influence, oppressors of the disadvantaged, destabilizers of currencies, and manipulators of prices. But thirst eventually got the better of Arkady’s qualms, and he opened the door with trembling fingers.

“Arkady!” Max’s voice cheerfully boomed out, as his broad, peasant face broke into a lop-sided grin.

This burst of extroversion disconcerted Arkady. He backed up as Max and two burly henchmen entered the apartment.

“How are you doing?” Max asked, clapping Arkady stoutly on the shoulder and then pulling him forward in a gruff, conspiratorial hug. His eyes twinkled with warmth and merriment.

“I’m fine,” Arkady replied, a little too timidly for his own liking.

“Good! Good! We must take care of ourselves,” Max declared, releasing his grip and striding into the apartment. “Because God knows no one

else will, eh?” He looked back at Arkady with a wink and motioned with his hand. “Those are the nails?” he asked.

Arkady nodded, and Max quietly signaled the two henchmen, who sprang over to the boxes.

“Yes, what a world we live in,” Max continued, inspecting Arkady’s apartment while his cohorts busily inspected the nails. “Are you comfortable here?”

Arkady looked around the apartment as if it were someplace new, and he was struck by the shabbiness of the place. The walls were moist and dingy, the floors were worn and cracked, the kitchen sink leaked, the toilet didn’t flush properly, and the rooms were separated only by curtains. But without any paint, plumbing supplies, or proper doors, what more could you expect?

“As comfortable as the rest of us, I suppose,” Max commiserated. “We are all comfortable. We have enough to eat and a roof over our heads. We have no cause to complain, do we, as long as we are content to do, wear, and eat the same thing every day without hope of any change or improvement, eh?”

Arkady nodded ruefully.

“But I’m forgetting myself,” Max rejoined, pulling a bottle of vodka out of his coat. “We have some comfort here.”

He poured generous tots of vodka into two glasses, offered one to Arkady, and plunked the bottle onto a table.

“Hey, Evgeny!” he called out. “Watch the side of that box!”

Evgeny looked up anxiously.

“We don’t want an accident on the sidewalk,” Max muttered to Arkady. “Last week we dropped a bushel of apples off the back of our truck. Can you imagine? Dozens of fresh, hard, beautiful apples rolling all over the street! It nearly caused a riot!” Max chortled exuberantly. “God, it was embarrassing! A good thing we have the police chief in our pocket!” He rubbed his thumb and forefingers together.

“Can we drop these nails off today?” he called over his shoulder. “Yes? Good! Have you got the stereo? Well, bring it up!”

Evgeny returned with a bulky package and peeled back its covering to reveal a glittering stereo covered with knobs and dials.

“What do you say? Beautiful, eh?” Max enthused, handing Arkady another glass of vodka. “Cheers!”

They drained their drinks to seal the pact. Then Max held out the bottle, clapped Arkady on the shoulder, and grandly announced, "We're off!"

As the door shut behind him, the gloomy silence of the apartment reclaimed its realm and Arkady found it difficult to believe that Max had ever been there at all. At least he left the bottle, he thought, pouring another stiff one to brace himself for the next stage of the operation. Now he had to wait for Pavel to drive him to the factory. He didn't want to chance using public transportation. The stereo was bulky, and the rickety busses were jammed with hordes of jostling workers who could knock the concealing cover from the precious bundle. And, unlike Max, Arkady didn't have the police chief in his pocket.

Pavel arrived soon after, and Arkady welcomed him at the door. As he entered the apartment, however, Arkady began to grow acutely self-conscious, for it occurred to him that he must look terrible. His mouth felt dry, his eyes felt bleary, his body felt clammy, and his clothes were horribly rumpled. It was also obvious that his dishevelled state was apparent to Pavel, who tried to look discretely away and mute the pity in his eyes.

"Well, you are here already," Arkady said idiotically, striving for some appropriate way to break the silence. "How time flies! I must get my things. We don't want to be late for the meeting."

"Oh, yes, yes," Pavel agreed, clearly at a loss for where to put his eyes.

Arkady then hustled about, fumbling for things. He had trouble finding his keys. A drawer on one of the cabinets refused to open, and the handle on another suddenly came off. He felt that he was making a fool of himself, and things grew worse when he looked in the mirror and tried to comb his hair, which bounced back to its wild, dishevelled state no matter what he did. And all the time he sensed the pressure of Pavel's insistent presence, waiting for him like some indefatigable commissar waiting for a confession.

He had to have another drink—he couldn't face the trip without it—but he didn't want Pavel to know. In an effort to calm himself, he attempted to sneak the bottle into the kitchen by making a show of clearing the table where it was sitting. Once in the kitchen, however, he realized that he had forgotten to bring his glass and that there were no clean glasses in the cupboard. He tried to fish a dirty one from the tangle of dishes on the counter, but it refused to come free. Frustrated, he unscrewed the cap and violently pulled the bottle to his lips, but the gesture caused the dishes to totter and crash to the floor in shards and splinters.

When Pavel came running to investigate, his eyes took in the debris on the floor and the bottle in Arkady's hand before turning down to hide his knowledge and disappointment. Both men froze for a moment, but this painful stasis was impossible to sustain, so with averted eyes they stooped to clean up the mess. Each of them busied himself with the task, intent on never looking at the other, until at last—inevitably—their eyes met again and Pavel could no longer hide his pain.

“Oh, Arkady!” he mournfully exclaimed. “What happened to you? You were the most promising of us all!”

“And therefore the most frustrated!” Arkady shot back. “It's all the stupidity . . . and lies . . . and inefficiency,” he tried to explain, fumbling for words.

“Yes,” Pavel cooed, “but nothing is inevitable! You can change! The factory can change! Look at the meeting today! Look at my plans!”

Arkady sighed. It was true that Pavel had invented some wonderful machines and proposed some new processes that could multiply the production of real nails a thousandfold. Moreover, the changes would be relatively inexpensive and quick. They were so simple and obvious that even an idiot could see their advantages.

“You disagree?” Pavel asked incredulously. “You think that my plans are flawed? You don't believe that they'll allow us to create mountains of real nails?”

Arkady shook his head.

“Then why do you sigh?” Pavel asked.

Arkady hesitated. How could he explain? Both of them sat on the same committees, like the one that would meet this afternoon, but Pavel couldn't understand how these faceless bureaucrats thought. He couldn't see their cruel hostility or their smug indifference toward anything that had been conceived outside of their incestuous committees, perpetual seminars, and embedded assumptions. It didn't matter that the official proposals were inane or that the unofficial proposals were common sense; it only mattered that they had been filtered through the approving ranks of presidents, directors, chairs, consultants, coordinators, secretaries, undersecretaries, department heads, ministers, administrative assistants, and chief executive officers. And even the simplest and most innocuous proposals were impossible without a multitude of bribes, which left you open to accusations of criminality. The application was doomed either way, and it was impossible to explain

how the process worked because the explanation itself was political heresy. Pavel, in other words, was an innocent and a fool, although Arkady could not bring himself to say so in the light of his wide, bright eyes.

“Your plans are sound, Pavel,” he replied placatingly, “but I don’t know about the red tape. You know the problems you can have.”

“I know, I know,” Pavel agreed. “The process is long and . . . and . . .”

He paused awkwardly, and Arkady understood why. Pavel was suddenly conscious that he had backed himself into a trap, for no one dared to criticize the establishment—even in front of a meaningless dissolute like Arkady. Comments had a way of drifting back to inconvenient people. Everyone had to watch his back, his hands, his eyes, his mind, his associates, his reading list, and, above all, his tongue.

What was he about to say? Arkady wondered. That the process was long and . . . what? Stupid? Corrupt? Inefficient? Tedious? How far would Pavel go to sterilize his criticism without losing its meaning? How could he tell the truth and yet remain politically appropriate?

He couldn’t. And so—after forming his mouth to say first one word and then another—he choked on his utterance and let it die.

Yes, Arkady thought, and so he swallows the truth. It’s not surprising. We are socialists; we say one thing, we think something else, and we do something else yet again.

“But everything is complete!” Pavel suddenly exclaimed, eager to reclaim the initiative. “It’s taken a great deal, but at last I have it—the Engineering Committee, the Supply Committee, the Finance Committee, everyone. All that’s left is this one last approval from the Political Committee! Can you imagine?”

Arkady looked at his friend’s intent, hopeful face. “Well, perhaps,” he conceded, for in truth he had never seen anyone pursue a plan so diligently and so far.

“Besides,” Pavel gently jibed, “I have you on the committee to champion my cause.”

Arkady didn’t have the heart to assail his friend’s optimism. Besides, maybe the Director would feel so grateful to him that he would be generous with Pavel. So he shrugged, picked up the stereo, and followed his buoyant friend down to his car.

When they reached the factory, they were ushered into the senior committee room, where the meeting had already begun, and a dozen grim, pale-

faced bureaucrats turned their humourless eyes upon them.

“Please come in and be seated, gentlemen,” the Director smoothly intoned. “And so, Madame Secretary, the meeting of the 24th . . .,” he prompted, without missing a beat.

“Yes, er, the meeting of the 24th . . .,” the Secretary said. “Adopted the 7th and 8th articles of the 53rd Session of Congress, as amended by resolutions of the 13th directorate on October 22nd, last. All those in favour . . .”

On cue, a dozen hands shot up and a dozen voices grumbled “Aye.” The Secretary peered over her glasses and grimly wrote something down.

“Recommended also,” she continued, “investigation of the 14th protocol of the Resource Confluence Accord, as delineated in the 18th meeting of this committee on September 14th, last. All those in favour . . .”

Again, a dozen hands shot up and a dozen voices grumbled “Aye” while the Secretary peered over her glasses and grimly wrote something else down.

Arkady and Pavel, like tardy schoolboys, found their seats under the watchful gaze of the Director and listened as the dour-faced assembly raised their hands and chanted their “Ayes” in response to the Secretary’s incantations. The chanting bludgeoned Arkady’s exuberance, as it seemed like he was facing some infallible machine that thumped along relentlessly to its own dreadful rhythm under the omniscient and faintly sardonic gaze of its master.

Thankfully, this stage of the meeting soon ended and the sedate participants began to discuss the numbing minutia of the factory’s operations. Like conscientious schoolchildren, full of petty self-importance and anxious to avoid mistakes, they filed in front of the Director one by one to make their dry reports. One of them presented a report on transportation costs, and another detailed recent production numbers. All of them used a multitude of facts, figures, charts, and graphs to buttress their presentations and walk the bureaucratic tightrope, for they wanted to boast without appearing boastful and defend their departments without appearing defensive.

Beneath their smiles and dry façades of objectivity, Arkady sensed their ruthlessness and their jealousies. There was such a contrast between them and that other conscientious schoolboy, Pavel, who sat quietly before them, pale and virginal, until the Director rose to speak.

“The last item on the agenda,” he declared, “deals with the modifications to our production facilities proposed by our comrade, Pavel Ilich. Before we

proceed with the application, I would like to state as a general principle that it has always been the aim of this committee to encourage initiative, creativity, and progress. Without these qualities, stagnation would set in and society would simply become impossible.”

The other committee members nodded sagely and puckered their faces in approval.

“That being said,” the Director continued, “the Political Committee cannot and will not condone the manner in which this application has been made.”

At this, the committee members glanced at each other with wounded dignity and self-righteous indignation.

“Pavel Ilich,” the Director called out. “Are you aware that Dimitri Ulanov, a clerk in the Ministry of Supply, swore in a public deposition that on the 16th of December, last, you attempted to offer him a substantial sum of money in return for a favourable processing of your papers?”

“Well, uh . . .” Pavel blubbered, flabbergasted.

“And are you aware that we have no less than 15 similar depositions from reputable government employees detailing your attempts to offer them explicit bribes?”

“Well . . . well . . .” Pavel mumbled, stalling to find a way out of this trap. “I was just trying to help. I mean, with more nails we could build so much more! And these new machines could be installed cheaply and make us so much more efficient!”

“Are you saying that we are not efficient?” the Director asked with deadly calm.

“Well . . .” Pavel blubbered again, while the committee glared at him with disapproving eyes, evidently wondering which indiscretion he would own up to: being foolish enough to try to perfect the already perfect or being stupid enough to impugn the factory, the committee, the state, and the entire society?

“There is one last problem with the application, which is perhaps the most important of them all,” the Director added. “This committee is absolutely shocked by the proposal’s callous disregard for the social consequences of such modifications. It is all very fine and well for you to dream up these mechanical wonders, but who would be left to operate them? The average worker couldn’t be trained for such complexities, so the job would fall to the more highly-skilled. This would result in a class system of rich and

poor, skilled and unskilled. Surely, Mr. Ilich, you are not advocating unemployment, poverty, and inequality?"

Pavel gaped at the Director, thunderstruck, while the latter paused to fix him with a disapproving stare.

"No, Mr. Ilich, I'm afraid this committee cares more for people than it does for nails."

The committee members broke into tittering and self-righteous smirks.

"In light of your callous disregard for the common good," the Director concluded, "we, the committee, have no alternative but to consider certain remedial steps."

Pavel turned to Arkady with alarmed and pleading eyes, and Arkady felt a nauseating wave of helplessness sweep over him.

"Yes, Mr. Ilich," the Director continued, "there comes a time to face the music . . ."

Arkady suddenly stood up with a burst of inspiration. "Ah, the music!" he exclaimed, reaching for the bulky package at his feet. "I have the music right here!"

The rest of the committee turned to him in shocked bewilderment. "No! No! That's all right!" the Director recoiled in terror. Then he turned to the others. "Ladies and gentlemen," he offered in his silkiest tones, "I'm afraid that our colleague, who as you know has been recuperating from a lengthy illness, may have had a relapse."

"But the music!" Arkady objected.

"Yes, yes," the Director agreed, motioning with his hands, palms down, as if he were attempting to soothe a raving lunatic. "In light of the circumstances, I don't see any reason to prolong these proceedings any further."

The rest of the committee nodded in approval.

"Mr. Ilich," the Director quickly rapped out, "we thank you for your application, but we must unfortunately turn it down. Is there any other business? No? Shall we adjourn?"

With that, the committee members stumbled to their feet.

"But the music!" Arkady persisted.

"Not now!" the Director hissed menacingly under his breath. Then he turned to the committee and spoke more loudly and politely. "No need to stand on ceremony, ladies and gentlemen. I will take care of our friend."

As the bewildered committee began to filter out, the Director remained

standing next to Arkady with an expression of pleasant concern on his face. “But . . . the music!” Arkady persisted, now more gently.

“Yes, of course,” the Director said once they were alone together. “I’ll take the . . . ah . . . I’ll take it now.”

Arkady picked up the stereo and began to unwrap it, but the Director placed his hand on the package.

“I’m sure it is fine,” he said smoothly. “Would you like your card?”

“Yes, please!” Arkady replied.

“Good, good,” the Director mumbled, passing over the voucher.

We are such good socialists, Arkady thought, licking his lips at the prospect of so much vodka.