

Ivan Ilych—A Cautious Life

James R. Elkins

■

A man can easily miss his life if he doesn't know who's living it—if he thinks a lawyer is living it or a professor of biochemistry or the head of a dry-cleaning plant or a mechanical engineer. He can wake up in his forty-fifth year and realize that it isn't he in bed but the treasurer of the Second National Bank.

—Archibald MacLeish, *A Continuing Journey*¹

■

A story is told among Orientalists of the pious rabbi of Cracow who traveled far to find a treasure that in a dream lay buried under a distant bridge. Finding the bridge, he was told by the captain of the guard that in his dream the treasure was to be found, not under the bridge, but in Cracow, in the house of the rabbi. Returning home, the rabbi discovered the treasure in a neglected corner of his house. The treasure had been very near all the time. But it could be discovered only in a journey to a distant region and in an encounter with a stranger.

—Richard Quinney, *Journey to a Far Place*²

Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is a literary case study of a lawyer who sets out with high hopes, follows a well-worn path, and is upended by bitter disappointment and existential despair.³ Ivan Ilych is "an intelligent, polished, lively and agreeable man," a lawyer in his mid-forties. Dying of an unknown cause, he finally realizes as death approaches that his life has gone

¹ Archibald MacLeish, *A CONTINUING JOURNEY* 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967).

² Richard Quinney, *JOURNEY TO A FAR PLACE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS* 99 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

³ Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," in *THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH AND OTHER STORIES* 95-156, at 105 (New York: New American Library, 1960)(Aylmer Maude & J.D. Duff trans.).

astray: “In the loneliness of his pain Ilych understands at last that his life had been trivial and disgusting.”⁴ Simply put, his life has been a mistake.

Tolstoy’s evocative story allows us to follow the progression of Ilych’s life, a life of interest to us because Ilych was a lawyer, and had gotten, by most measures, what he sought in life. Ilych pursues his legal career with dedication, compartmentalizes his professional and personal life and has a strong sense of rectitude that he is right to live as he does. The problem is that he has cast himself into narrowly-defined roles of career and marriage without reflecting on these roles. He works assiduously to insure that nothing in his personal and family life interferes with his work. One commentator notes that Ilych “puts his petty pleasures and ambitions before the question of the meaning of his life.”⁵

Even in his days as a law student, Ilych was “capable, cheerful, good-natured, and [a] sociable man,” though strict, even as a student, “in the fulfilment of what he considered to be his duty.”⁶ Upon completion of his studies, Ilych dresses himself in the fashions of a gentleman, “all purchased at the best shops.”⁷ He finds his first position with the help and influence of his father, a position where he “performed his official tasks . . . and at the same time amused himself pleasantly and decorously.”⁸ He “performed the duties entrusted to him . . . with an exactness and incorruptible

⁴ “The Death of Ivan Ilych and Joseph K.,” in Philip Rahv, *IMAGE & IDEA: FOURTEEN ESSAYS ON LITERARY THEMES* 111-127, at 118 (New York: New Directions, 1949).

⁵ Ronald Victor Sampson, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POWER* 138 (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

⁶ “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” at 105.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 106.

honesty of which he could not but feel proud.”⁹ There were, however, indiscretions: an affair, visits to “a certain outlying street of doubtful reputation.”¹⁰

In his first professional position, and in each that followed, Ilych was competent in his work. As an examining magistrate, he was a “decorous” man, “inspiring general respect and capable of separating his official duties from his private life.”¹¹ Ilych had “a method of eliminating all considerations irrelevant to the legal aspect of the case, and reducing even the most complicated case to a form in which it would be presented on paper only in its externals, completely excluding his personal opinion of the matter, while above all observing every prescribed formality.”¹² Ilych used his narrowly-defined professional role to avoid difficulties in his work and to make his life more comfortable. The harsh edge of Ilych’s legalistic perspective was moderated by the fact that he “never abused his power; he tried on the contrary to soften its expressions,” an effort that “supplied the chief interest and attraction of his office.”¹³

As a magistrate, Ilych makes connections and takes up “an attitude of rather dignified aloofness toward the provincial authorities”¹⁴ In his circle of friends, he “assumed a tone of slight dissatisfaction with the government, of moderate liberalism, and of enlightened citizenship.”¹⁵

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 107.

¹² *Id.* at 107-108.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 108.

¹⁵ *Id.*

He grew a beard and learned to play bridge. Ilych becomes an insider, an establishment man, a professional success.

Ilych meets and marries Praskovya Fedorovna Mikhel. She becomes pregnant and jealous. Ilych tries to ignore his wife's difficult moods and continue to enjoy the comforts he had worked out for himself before marriage. To deal with the discord with Praskovya, Ilych spends more time at the office. "As his wife grew more irritable and exacting and Ivan Ilych transferred the centre of gravity of his life more and more to his official work, so did he grow to like his work better and become more ambitious than before."¹⁶ Marriage and family life became a useful facade to enable him to maintain the pretense of family life. "He only required of it [married life] those conveniences—dinner at home, housewife, and bed—which it could give him, and above all that propriety of external forms required by public opinion."¹⁷ Whenever things went badly with Praskovya, he "retired into a separate fenced-off world of official duties where he found satisfaction."¹⁸

Ilych and Praskovya have more children, and the marriage continues to deteriorate, a situation to which Ilych is "impervious."¹⁹ After seven years as magistrate Ilych is appointed Public Prosecutor, a more powerful position. The new position "gave him pleasure and filled his life, together with chats with his colleagues, dinners, and bridge. On the whole Ivan Ilych's life continued

¹⁶ *Id.* at 110.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 110-111.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 111.

to flow as he considered it should—pleasantly and properly.”²⁰ His pleasant life is spoiled by continued disputes with Praskovya, and Ilych becomes, over time, more aloof.

His aim was to free himself more and more from those unpleasantnesses and to give them a semblance of harmlessness and propriety. He attained this by spending less and less time with his family, and when obliged to be at home he tried to safeguard his position by the presence of outsiders. . . . The whole interest of his life now centered in the official world and that interest absorbed him.²¹

In his personal and professional life, Ilych establishes different identities:

In official matters, despite his youth and taste for frivolous gaiety, he was exceedingly reserved, punctilious, and even severe; but in society he was often amusing and witty, and always good-natured, correct in his manner

The pleasures connected with his work were pleasures of ambition; his social pleasures were those of vanity²²

Ilych is passed over for a judgeship and he takes it badly. He “experienced *ennui* for the first time in his life, and not only *ennui* but intolerable depression”²³ The depression lifts when he secures a long-coveted higher rank with commensurate salary. The change suited Praskovya; the future again looked bright.

Following the pattern established in his previous official positions, Ilych, in his new position at the Justice Ministry attempts

to exclude everything fresh and vital, which always disturbs the regular course of official business, and to admit only official relations with people, and then only on official grounds. A man would come, for instance, wanting some information. Ivan Ilych, as one in whose sphere the matter did not lie, would have nothing to do with him: but if the man had some business with him in his official capacity, something

²⁰ *Id.* at 112.

²¹ *Id.* at 111.

²² *Id.* at 119.

²³ *Id.* at 113.

that could be expressed on officially stamped paper, he would do everything, positively everything he could within limits of such relations, and in doing so would maintain the semblance of friendly human relations, that is, would observe the courtesies of life. As soon as the official relations ended, so did everything else. Ivan Ilych possessed this capacity to separate his real life from the official side of affairs and not mix the two, in the highest degree, and by long practice and natural aptitude had brought it to such a pitch that sometimes, in the manner of a virtuoso, he would even allow himself to let the human and official relations mingle. He let himself do this just because he felt that he could at any time he chose resume the strictly official attitude again and drop the human relation. And he did it all easily, pleasantly, correctly, and even artistically.²⁴

Ilych makes an art of official aloofness, and relishes the compartmentalization of his personal and professional life. This compartmentalization allows him to do what his official duties require and ignore everything he chooses not to contend with, everything he doesn't want to bother the easy course in life he pursues with devotion.

There are disappointments and setbacks. Working on a ladder in his study, Ilych takes a fall, but finding no visible signs of injury, he assumes that he hasn't badly hurt himself. Later, the family has a party, and there is a quarrel with Praskovya about forty-five rubles she spent on the confectioner's bill. "It was a great and disagreeable quarrel. Praskovya Fedorovna called him 'a fool and an imbecile,' and he clutched at his head and made angry allusions to divorce."²⁵

The quarrel is settled, and his life goes on: "They were all in good health. It could not be called ill health if Ivan Ilych sometimes said that he had a queer taste in his mouth and felt some discomfort in his left side."²⁶ Ilych begins to consider the possibility that he may in some way have injured himself in the fall from the ladder. He sees a physician whose concern is less about the

²⁴ *Id.* at 117-118.

²⁵ *Id.* at 119.

²⁶ *Id.* at 119, 120.

possible seriousness of the illness but more with the physician wants to think is the “the real question”: whether Ilych’s problem is “a floating kidney, chronic catarrh, or appendicitis.”²⁷ The pain grows worse and “the taste in his mouth grew stranger and stranger.”²⁸ The taste becomes “loathsome” and Ilych realizes that he cannot deceive himself: “[S]omething terrible, new, and more important than anything before in his life, was taking place within him of which he alone was aware.”²⁹

During an evening of bridge, Ilych experiences “gnawing pain,” overbids a hand, and becomes upset at his friends. When the friends leave, “Ilych was left alone with the consciousness that his life was poisoned and was poisoning the lives of others, and that his poison did not weaken but penetrated more and more deeply into his whole being.”³⁰ He begins to feel “all alone on the brink of an abyss, with no one who understood or pitied him.”³¹

One evening, a brother-in-law visits, and Ilych sees by the look on his face that he is in worse shape than he has been willing to admit. He retires to his room to read and tries to focus on the pain, but is overtaken by the reality of his situation: “It’s not a question of appendix or kidney, but of life and . . . death. Yes, life was there and now it is going, going and I cannot stop it.”³² Ilych’s ruminations about his vexious pain at times take on a poetical quality: “There was light and now

²⁷ *Id.* at 121.

²⁸ *Id.* at 125.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.* at 126-127.

³¹ *Id.* at 127.

³² *Id.* at 129.

there is darkness. I was here and now I'm going there!" But "where?" he asks as "a chill came over him, his breathing ceased, and he felt only the throbbing of his heart."³³

Ilych realizes that he is dying and that he has an acute fear of death. In his fear, he is flooded with questions: "When I am not, what will there be?" "Then where shall I be when I am no more? Can this be dying?" "How is one to understand it?"³⁴

Ilych struggles against these persistent thoughts of death and attempts to subdue them and regain the happiness he has for so long taken for granted. He returns to the law courts and

enter[s] into conversation with his colleagues, and sit[s] carelessly as was his wont, scanning the crowd with a thoughtful look and leaning both his emaciated arms on the arms of his oak chair; bending over as usual to a colleague and drawing his papers nearer he would interchange whispers with him, and then suddenly raising his eyes and sitting erect would pronounce certain words and open the proceedings. But suddenly in the midst of those proceedings the pain in his side, regardless of the stage the proceedings had reached, would begin its own gnawing work. Ivan Ilych would turn his attention to it and try to drive the thought of it away, but without success. *It* would come and stand before him and look at him, and he would be petrified and the light would die out of his eyes, and he would again begin asking himself whether *It* alone was true. And his colleagues and subordinates would see with surprise and distress that he, the brilliant and subtle judge, was becoming confused and making mistakes. He would shake himself, try to pull himself together, manage somehow to bring the sitting to a close, and return home with the sorrowful consciousness that his judicial labours could not as formerly hide from him what he wanted them to hide, and could not deliver him from *It*. And what was worst of all was that *It* drew his attention to itself not in order to make him take some action but only that he should look at *It*, look it straight in the face: look at it and without doing anything, suffer inexpressibly . . . [N]othing could be done with *It* except to look at it and shudder.³⁵

As Ilych continues to fight the thought of death, he is angered by friends and colleagues who try to act as if nothing is wrong with him. He begins to see the "falsity around him" and that this

³³ *Id.* at 120.

³⁴ *Id.* at 130, 131, 132.

³⁵ *Id.* at 133.

falsity is also “within him,” a falsity that seems to poison his relations with everyone in his life.³⁶ (The exception is his servant Gerasim. “Gerasim alone did not lie”³⁷) Neither Ilych nor his wife have the ability to respond to each other outside the narrow roles they have adopted for themselves and that they expect of others. No one in Ilych’s life is able to talk with him about what is happening. He realizes that others care no more for him than he does for them.

In his loneliness and despair, Ilych finds, perhaps for the first time in his life, a need for truth. Consumed by thoughts of death, he haltingly begins to question his life. There was a time, Ilych remembers most clearly his childhood, when he enjoyed life. Of that time, he realizes that the real pleasure of those early days has been lost. “It is as if,” Ilych says, “I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.”³⁸ - Ilych captures his present sense of his life in an image: “a stone falling downwards with increasing

³⁶ *Id.* at 138. Ronald Sampson finds this falsity that surrounds Ilych’s life central to the psychological and moral dimension of the story. Sampson puts it this way:

The way in which human beings customarily deal with facts that are painful or otherwise unacceptable is to deny them or, if this is not possible, to ignore them. The painful fact to be assimilated and managed in this instance is the forthcoming decease of Ivan Ilych, a fact on no account to be admitted or alluded to. Thus does Ivan Ilych find himself enshrouded in a world of protective falsehood and pretense. Everybody knows he is going to die; he knows he is going to die; they know he knows he is going to die; but the polite fiction must be maintained to the last that he is temporarily sick and in process of being cured. It is this enveloping, stifling aura of unreality and deception that tortures Ivan Ilych more than all else.

Sampson, *supra* note 5, at 128. Sampson links Ilych’s self-deception to the roles that Ilych and those around him have adopted.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 148.

velocity”³⁹

Ilych finally asks himself the question to which his reflections now lead him: “What if my whole life has really been wrong?”⁴⁰

It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend.⁴¹

“Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done,” it suddenly occurred to him. “But how could that be, when I did everything properly?”⁴²

‡ ‡ ‡

We may be firmly convinced that we are living a particular story and it turns out, with the help of a friend, a heart attack, an accident, a divorce, a bout of depression, or a dream, that we are confused about the story we claim to be living. We are often not the best observers of our own lives. Given the possibility that we are knee-deep in self-deception, we are in need of stories that help us see more clearly how we’re living, what confinements and maladaptive roles we have accepted, and the nature of the possibilities still open to us. Teachers are forever trying to tell us, “Education would

³⁹ *Id.* at 150.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 152.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.* at 148.

not be necessary if things were as they seem.”⁴³ Where in the law school curriculum do we find an invitation to study the troubled, quarrelsome lives we live as lawyers? “The Death of Ivan Ilych” is a cautionary tale: Law can entice us into a story and a life we might, on reflection, choose not to live.

⁴³ Parker J. Palmer, *TO KNOW AS WE ARE KNOWN: A SPIRITUALITY OF EDUCATION* 19 (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).