

Book 5. Sleep

(1)

It could have been different.

Not the end of course. And not the beginning. But the middle, the part that is most important, could have been so much different if we had wanted it to be.

For my part I could have tried to understand her. I could have told her — I hadn't done it since my eleventh new year — how much she really meant to me. At any point I could have called — she didn't move around so much the last few years — and said, "Hey Mom, you know what? You were a terrible mother," — she knew this — "In fact you still are a terrible mother. But you're *my* terrible mother. And that means more to me than danger; more, even, than irony."

And when she attempted in her own way to do the same, I could have tried to see; I could have listened.

Now it was too late, the story's conclusion as much a given as gravity. *With one word, with one sound I could keep it all thousands of miles away; it was as easy as doing nothing. As easy as doing what I had done many times before. And all of it would stay there, which at that moment seemed so so far away from here...*

But something was troubling me. Something I had missed. Aunt Helen was waiting on the other end of the phone for my answer and as I listened to the distance rasping between us I tried to remember our conversation, something that had seemed so important but had been lost amid the words.

Was it something I had said? Was it something I had meant to say? Or was it something I had said but not meant... Or meant but never said?

And then I remembered. *The casket! Why had I asked about it? Could it possibly matter now that she was gone? Was it the vodka speaking? Or had I understood something in the question?*

My clock showed 3:15 a.m. It was Saturday.

The casket was still open. It would be open until Monday morning, and then it would close forever. It was my last chance...

Tuesday would be too late.

(2)

4:26 a.m.

Lying on my bed I fought the dry bitterness in my throat. My head was still pulsating to the sound of my heart and more than anything I needed to rest; it was the only thing that could help me now. But if my eyes were to close, they would not open in time: Aunt Helen had reserved a ticket on the very last Aeroflot flight and I needed to stay awake long enough to buy it.

You'll have other days to rest, I told myself, other weeks, months, years... But for these next few hours — for the hours that separate now from there — for this short eternity you need to stay awake!

But vodka can be as stubborn as a lock; and all my efforts could not keep my eyes from becoming heavier. *Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to take a quick nap? Just for a few hours, just enough to get rid of the headache and the bitter dryness in my throat. I'd wake up, wouldn't I?*

Wouldn't I...?

Angry at these thoughts, I forced myself to get up from the bed. My legs wavered. My head throbbed. As I rose so did the dry bitterness, and I staggered into the bathroom where I crouched over the edges of the toilet waiting for the nausea to pass. I wanted to throw up but could not. My stomach turned and twisted and I rested my cheek heavily against the cold rim of the bowl, a half-year of neglect carving into my sweaty skin.

I held my breath and checked my thoughts. Helplessly. I was afraid to move, afraid that if I did, if I made the slightest of movements, if I thought the wrong thoughts, something would happen. It might be vomit; it might be something even better. But in any case it would be like nothing I had known.

And so I stayed there. Nauseous. Crouching.

Motherless.

*

(3)

5:07 a.m.

When I was able to stand up, I made my way to the tub, where in a dazed state I lay fragily under a shower of hot water.

At first the water pulled my stomach from side to side. The alcohol boiled and bubbled inside me. But then, just when vomit seemed inevitable, it subsided. The nausea passed. The dry bitterness moved further down my throat to where it could be overlooked.

Outside, the city was between tomorrows. The sun had not yet risen. The night had yet to succumb. On the streets someone was scraping the winter from a sidewalk.

(4)

6:15 a.m.

An hour came and went. The scraping stopped. The sun was emerging.

Despite the lack of rest, my headache, the days spent drinking, and the news which was still somewhere very far from me, my mind seemed to take heart. To stay awake I made a schedule for the day:

1. 09:00 — Call Aeroflot/ confirm address (which metro?)
2. 10:00 — Go to institute/ pick up final pay (\$450 for Jan.)
3. 12:00 — Go to Aeroflot/buy ticket (Cost:\$795 —
CONFIRM!; must bring passp. & visa)
4. 14:00 — Home.
— Pack suitcase (toothbrush, jeans, etc.)
5. 18:00 — Bed. (Set alarm 5:00 for dep. @ 9:15 on Aeroflot.
— check-in two hours before dep.)

At about seven o'clock the effects of the shower began to wear off and I felt myself drifting away. But again I did not give in. I took another shower, this time a cold one.

(5)

9:00 a.m.

At exactly nine o'clock I tried to call Aeroflot to find out where I should pick up my tickets. But the phone was continually busy and when the call

did go through no one answered. I counted the rings to one hundred. Then two hundred. At three hundred I laid the phone's receiver on the bed to pick up later.

By now the effects of the second shower were wearing off and the blood was throbbing even harder in my head. A Russian friend had once insisted that the best cure for a hangover was a shot of whatever you were drinking the night before. Back then I had smiled incredulously. Now, I filled a teacup to its brim with cranberry vodka and drank it without smiling.

When it was time to leave I stood holding the door open. Something wasn't right. There was something I was forgetting. I tried to remember what it might be. A sickening vague feeling. *What was it?* I patted my pockets. I searched my memory. Once again I double-checked my list. Everything seemed to be in order. Still, the vague feeling...

I closed the door. Trying to ignore my premonition I left for the institute where, I hoped, my last month's salary would be waiting for me.

(6)

9:50 a.m.

My salary for January was actually due to be picked up several weeks ago but after I was fired I had told Erica Martin that she could keep her money and had even suggested a safe place for it — a place, I had told her then, where only trolleybus drivers would find it.

But now my wallet contained only three hundred fifty-one dollars and two kopecks; in order to buy my ticket I would have to ask for my salary.

The trolleybus drivers! ... They were the ones that would do me in!

Of my three supervisors, Erica Martin was the most feared. At birth Erica had been loud, pink, and painfully Canadian; since then she'd tanned slightly. During three and a half years in Moscow she'd managed to learn as many Russian words and wasn't interested in associating with anyone who knew more; she hated vodka; she stubbornly refused all cigarettes, especially the filterless Soviet ones; her two favorite phrases were "God I hate this country!" and "Damn Russians!" and for some reason — usually on Tuesdays — she enjoyed repeating them over and over and over.

With Erica it would be hopeless. She was not the type to forget offenses, especially those concerning trolleybus drivers.

Phil was the absolute opposite of Erica; he relished the role of "foreigner who *despite everything* loves Russia." He was proud that he loved the country and did so conspicuously; he spoke fluent Russian, even when other people

were speaking to him in English; he quoted Pushkin; smoked Primas; bragged about the Russian Soul as if it were his own; he laughed louder at Russian jokes than at English ones, and although his passport was blue, he seemed to respect poetry; *his* favorite phrase — which he had the habit of returning to on Tuesdays — was “God I love this country!” And so, as annoying as this love was, Phil represented my best bet to get my salary.

Whereas Erica and Phil were exact opposites, Dave — my third supervisor — was the exact opposite of them both; aloof and awkward, he criticized Erica for criticizing, yet at the same time could never forgive Phil for forgiving; he studied Russian, but poorly; he drank vodka with juice; he smoked Marlboros, but only when it counted; rumor even had it he was writing a biography of Gorbachev. At work Dave was widely misunderstood, partly because he had no favorite phrases, and partly because Tuesday was his day off....

In the midst of all this, I began to spend less effort at work and more time at home with my Russian friends, my books, and my bootleg vodka. In effect I fired myself. Everyone knew it. It was only a matter of deciding which supervisor would tell me. And when that long-awaited day was at hand — Erica volunteered immediately — the only person surprised by the news was Aunt Helen.

(7)

10:03 a.m.

When I walked into the office at the institute it was a little after ten. The Russian secretary, a prissy middle-aged woman who liked me exactly as much as did her boss — who was Erica Martin — raised her eyebrows as if to say *Well, look who's here!*

Good morning, I said.

A little early for you, isn't it? she answered.

I just wanted to show you that I can be an earlybird if I want to.

Your morning students might have appreciated some of that consideration.

The secretary had been working with Erica for all three and a half years and agreed with her in everything; sometimes — usually on Tuesdays — she would utter her two favorite English phrases which were “God I hate this country!” and “Damn Russians!”

Look let's not get into that, okay? I need to know who I can talk to about my pay for last month.

You'll have to talk to Erica. She handles those questions.

What about Phil or Dave?

No. Only Erica. She's in her office now if you want to talk to her.

As I walked down the long corridor I remembered the very first time I met with Erica in her office. She had explained the job to me and made it all seem so exciting. She had believed then that I would be a faithful employee and a good teacher and now for the first time I felt a pang of guilt.

I knocked on her door and walked in without waiting for a response.

Well look who's here! she said.

Hello, Erica.

To what do I owe this honor?

She knew damn well "to what"!

I just thought I'd drop by to see how *you* are, you know, shoot the breeze, reminisce about old times.

That's nice.

There was a pause, and it became clear that Erica was enjoying the moment. She was acting as if we actually would have a pleasant conversation about old times.

I looked at her. And she at me. Only one of us was smiling.

So how are you? I asked with mock interest.

I'm fine, thanks. And you?

Never been better, I said.

Good to hear it, she nodded and then: How's that friend of yours, the one that used to wait for you between the breaks... with red hair... what's his name?

The redhead? He's fine. I mean I guess he's fine. We haven't spoken for more than a year.

Is that right? What happened?

Marlboros.

Erica shook her head empathetically:

That's too bad, she said.

Yes it is....

There was a silence. I tapped my foot on her floor. She did the same.

Damn! She wasn't going to let me off the hook; she wanted me to ask for the money.

Look, Erica, I need to talk to you.

I'm all ears...

...Something came up. I need to have my pay for January.

Your what?

You know what I'm talking about — my pay for January.

Oh that! If I'm not mistaken you said you didn't want it.

Not exactly. What I actually said was...

Now it was Erica's turn to smile.

...Look it's not important. The important thing is that I need the money. I need it today.

Sorry.

What do you mean *sorry*?

It's too late. The payroll for January's already been sent back to Accounting. You'll have to wait until next month.

What are you talking about? You sent my money all the way to Accounting?

That's right. By trolleybus.

You bitch!

Erica smiled deeply:

That's not going to help you, she said.

Erica was staring at me coldly and for the first time I felt the hopelessness of the situation:

I'm sorry — I didn't mean it. It's just that I need the money. I need to buy a ticket to America. It's an emergency. I mean, you know it has to be important if I'm coming to you like this...

Can't help you. If you were still working here I could give you an advance, but since you're not...

Erica's words hit my heart like a fist.

...Since you're no longer an employee there's nothing I can do.

Wait a minute... What's an advance? I asked.

It's when you receive money ahead of time against *future* paydays. But you won't be having any more of those, will you?

Well no, but can't you give me the money as if it were an advance and then just pay it back when the next salary comes?

We don't do that.

Well, do you think that you could do it just this once.

With you it's always *just this once*. Why should you be an exception? You think that you can always do things your own way and everyone else will just bend over backwards for you! The students come on time but *you* can show up at your leisure. Like, Here I am: God's gift to teaching!

Look, I'm not asking you to bend over. I'm just asking you to give me the money you owe me for January. I earned it and you owe it to me.

Earned it? You call what you did "earning"...? You couldn't even explain the difference between *high* and *tall*!

Dammit Erica, can't you see it's important? Look at me — I'm practically groveling at your feet?

The room was still and in the silence she let out an exasperated sigh. Her pride had been satisfied. The trolleybus had been buried:

I'd need to talk to Dave. He's the one who gives authorization for advances....

Can you do what it takes, please? I have to buy my ticket today.

She looked at me distrustfully and so I added:

...I need to buy it by four o'clock... Today's Saturday and the Aeroflot office closes early.

(8)

11:05 a.m.

After I had received the cash, I stood in the lobby putting on my coat. Both Erica and the secretary were regarding me curiously, as if they wanted me to share my emergency with them. But I didn't have that much good will. Good-bye Erica, I said and thought, *Let them share that too*. Erica told me to have a good trip and without thanking her, I left.

Outside, the February air was rigid and bitterly cold. The merciless wind stung my dry eyes. Mercifully it forced me to wake up. On the street a snow blower moved slow and menacingly, flinging old snow to the side; bystanders on the sidewalk scurried to get out of its way.

I took a deep breath of cold air. My strength was almost gone. The blood which had pumped me through my discussion with Erica had now slowed. My body was tired. My breathing had quickened to take up the slack. But at least it was almost over: one final stop at the Aeroflot office — it would be open until four o'clock — and then back to my apartment, my bed, and a short but long-overdue rest.

(9)

11:15 a.m.

How much will the ticket cost? I asked.

Exactly seven hundred ninety-five dollars, the voice answered.

(10)

It was Aunt Helen who told me that my father was dying. She had taken me to the circus and afterwards when we sat down to eat our lactose-free ice

cream she broke the news. By then he lived in another state with his second wife, I hadn't seen him for years, and my memories of him were vague.

Even at that age I understood what death meant — that he wouldn't be *here* anymore, that from now on he would be *there* — but for me there was nothing unusual about it.

I don't see why people should be sad, I told Aunt Helen who seemed surprised by my reaction.

What do you mean? she asked.

Well when someone dies people should just remember all the bad things that he did to them when he was alive and then they won't be sad anymore.

Aunt Helen smiled wistfully:

But when a person dies, she said, It's not that easy to remember only the bad things.

You can try.

It's not fair to the person, she said, Being sad is a way of saying you love the person.

I thought about her words. In time, of course, I outgrew them. But three months after we visited the circus, when my father died for good, I was already old enough to remember nothing, big enough to feel little, and far enough away to be absolutely silent.

(11)

12:07 p.m.

By the time I found the Aeroflot office, a long line had formed outside the door. At irregular intervals a burly guard would stick his head out into the cold and bark at the next person. When the person had entered, the guard would close the door behind him and lock the door from the inside.

The other people — the ones who had been locked out — tried to warm themselves by hopping from one foot to another, their gloved hands stuck straight into their pockets:

I can't believe it, someone said.

Yeah, this isn't the Russia *I* was promised!

You got that right — It's worse!

And with this the discussion turned, as it always did, to politics.

Listening to the debate I began to feel for the first time how tired I really was. My eyes were dry from the cold; my legs were stiff; and worst of all, the vodka shot hadn't relieved my headache.

Just stick with it! I told myself: Don't quit now! You're almost at the front of the line...!

But this line was more dynamic than it should have been. While some people waited, others would bypass the line, knock on the door, slip something green to the guard, and enter immediately. Each time this happened the rest of us grumbled bitterly. But time after time, knock by knock, the line was bypassed. *At this rate would we ever reach the line's front? If so, would we make it before the lunch break? Would we make it before they closed at four?* Once when the guard had just unlocked the door a man who had become fed up with the line tried to open it himself and to force his way through. But this man was empty-handed, and the guard, with a sharp blow to the man's chest, shoved him back outside.

Seeing this, the other people in line shook their heads disapprovingly, some at the guard, some at the man.

I shook my head as well. It was 12:35.

(12)

12:56 p.m.

Finally, the guard opened the door and grunted at me. I entered. A heavyset woman motioned for me to sit across from her and I did:

Hi, I said, I need to pay for...

Lena! We're breaking for lunch, a voice yelled from behind: You coming?

I'm on my last person, she said and turned to me: What were you saying?

But again the voice: Should we wait for you?

Just give me a minute! said Lena, I'll be right there...

Impatiently, the woman turned to me:

How can I help you? she asked.

I need to have a ticket issued, I said, My Aunt reserved it in America, but I need to pay for it.

What's the date of travel and where are you going?

I told her.

And what's your name?

I told her.

Are you from America?

Yes.

Your Russian is quite good. An accent, of course, but really very good.

I didn't thank her.

The woman looked at her watch and then typed something in the computer.

Len-a...?! her friends summoned again.

I'm almost done... just give me a minute!

I did not say anything and the woman typed some more on her keyboard.

Should I pay here? I asked and took out the eight hundred dollars from my wallet.

Yes.

Raising her eyes, the woman noticed my money:

We don't accept dollars, she said.

What do you mean?

We only accept rubles.

I was told the price was seven hundred ninety-five dollars...

Well it is, but you have to pay that amount in rubles.

Since when?

It's our policy.

But I just called a few paragraphs ago... and the girl told me the price in dollars. She didn't mention anything about rubles!

We told you the price in dollars because that's what the computer shows, but you still have to pay in rubles.

I can't believe this! I made a special point of calling to confirm the price and I asked very clearly I said "How much does the ticket cost?" and your employee told me just as clearly that the cost is exactly seven hundred ninety-five dollars.

Yes, but in rubles.

In rubles? Seven hundred ninety-five dollars in *rubles*?

That's right.

What's right?

Seven hundred ninety-five dollars in rubles.

And if I don't have rubles?

Then you'll have to change your dollars at a currency exchange.

You're kidding me!

I looked at the woman but her expression was expressionless.

Where's the nearest exchange? I asked.

By the metro — about ten minutes' walk.

The woman had stopped typing on her computer and I noticed that the other people in the room were looking at us out of the corners of their eyes. I was beside myself; and the angrier I became, the more my Russian degenerated:

You mean that I have to go out in the cold and then wait in line for another hour just to get back in?

...It's not that far and I'll give you a special green pass so you won't have to stand in line again. Just slip it to the guard and he'll...

I want to talk to your supervisor! I interrupted her.

My supervisor?

Yes. I insist that your supervisor come here and personally explain to me why people tell me one thing on the phone and then something completely different... why you're telling me something completely different now.

First of all I don't have a supervisor...

The woman was turning red:

...And second of all she has nothing to do with the fact that you can't pay in dollars. All you have to do is go down the street and change your money into rubles.

I want to talk to your supervisor and I'm not leaving until I do.

The woman threw her pencil on her desk and walked away. The other people in the room were staring at me and I looked away to avoid their stares. After a few minutes a tall woman in a business skirt came up and Lena introduced me as the American who had brought dollars to pay for his ticket.

Sir you can't pay in dollars, said the supervisor, It's illegal to pay in foreign currency, We don't have the right.

Don't give me that — I pay in dollars all the time! Everybody does!

There's been some new legislation. We can't accept dollars anymore.

So why didn't you tell me this on the phone? I could have changed my dollars on the way here so that I wouldn't be wasting my time. Or maybe you *enjoy* wasting my time?

No, I don't. All I'm saying is that we cannot accept your dollars and that you will have to exchange them for rubles.

The woman looked at me sternly.

I can't believe this! I said and grabbed my coat, Okay That's what I'll do then, That's what I'll do. Sure, no problem. But I'll tell you one thing: this place is really messed up! *Really* messed up!

Everyone in the room was looking at me, but I couldn't stop. For some reason I had to say something else, something both meaningful and loud:

But how could I express what I was feeling at this moment?

Could I find the words?

Or had these last few years been in vain...?

And then they came together:

GOD I HATE THIS COUNTRY!!!

I had screamed it and shouted it and yelled it at the same time.

With that I stormed across the room, past the guard who opened the door for me. In the silence, the others were still staring at my words, curious but unimpressed.

As I exited I slammed the door behind me and then, back outside, heard as it locked from the inside.

(13)

I don't know how many times I realized that my mother loved me differently; it's not the type of thing that comes as isolated incidents. But even now I can remember the first time: it was our last birthday together before Aunt Helen came to take me.

My mother had been out late the night before and as usual I had waited to greet her, only to lose the time and drift off. In the morning when I went into the kitchen she was standing in front of our stove peering into its glass window.

What're you doing, Mom?

It's someone's birthday today, she said yawning and coughing at the same time, and today we're having cake.

Her hair was ragged and worn and dangled in front of her face. She rarely cooked and it was funny to see her in the kitchen.

What's your favorite topping? she asked.

Vanilla!

Okay, then, that's what we'll have. For your birthday we'll have vanilla.

While she baked the cake, I sat in the living room watching television. A cartoon mouse hit a cartoon cat with a cartoon hammer. From the kitchen the banging of pots and pans mixed with the sharp sounds of swearing. Then a silence. On the television a cartoon cat was now torturing a cartoon dog.

When the cake was finished and my mother had spread the frosting over its surface, I sat down to eat. The cake was lopsided, the frosting uneven. The candles leaned awkwardly against themselves. Sitting down heavily, she poured herself a cup of coffee and then a tall glass of milk for me. I ate the cake but didn't touch the milk. She did not eat, and instead lit up a cigarette:

Can you tell me how old you are today? she said blowing out a ring of smoke and wiping her eyes.

Four, I answered.

That's right. And what comes after four?

I don't know, I said.

Yes you do. Now think hard... one... two.....three.....four...

Five?

That's right! I think you're going to be a mathematician when you grow up. I think you're going to teach people to count. You'll make me proud, won't you?

Uh-huh!

My mother looked at me and holding the cigarette between her fingers brushed the hair out of my eyes with her palm. Her hand was cold. Her eyes were still black from the previous night:

So what comes next? she said, What comes after five?

I don't know.

Of course you do. You know just as well as anyone that there are more than just five numbers. Now try again from the very beginning: one... two.....three...

...four...

Good.

...five...six...seven...

Good...

...Eight... nine...

That's right... and then?

I don't know any more... I only know to nine.

Well, think about it carefully: ...seven.....eight.....nine...

...Eight!

You already said *eight*! Okay, I'll help you. Now listen: Seven...eight..... nine.....TEN!

Oh yeah! I forgot *ten*. I always forget *ten*.

You see? You're four now. Which means that you'll be five next year. Then you'll be six, then seven, then eight.

...Then nine!

That's right! And then ten. Eight... nine.....ten.

But why?

Why *what*?

Why do I have to be nine first? Can't I be ten and then nine?

No, you can't.

Why not?

That's just the way the world works: first you're nine, then you're ten.

Whether you like it or not. And whether we like it or not we can't be ten without being nine first.

But does ten always come after nine?

Yes it does. Ten always comes after nine.

Always?

Always.

I nodded.

My mother laughed and stroked my hair again:

How's the cake? she said.

I wish we could have it every day.

You probably do, don't you?

While I ate, my mother watched me intently, gazing tenderly, smiling each time I looked up at her. When I was finished with the cake, I licked the frosting off my plate, then fingers, and started to get up from the table:

Hey...!

I stopped.

...Your milk!

I sat back down:

I don't want it, I said.

Why not?

It's gross.

It is not gross. It's good for you. It's calcium and a growing boy needs calcium....

I hate milk.

Oh you do not either, now drink.

Why?

Because I said. Go on — it won't kill you.

I sat with my chin on my chest and my palms tucked sweatily under my thighs.

I mean it, she said, You want to be big and strong like daddy, don't you?

No.

What do you mean *no*?

I don't like it.

You always drank it before.

It makes me feel sick.

I'll give you *sick*!

My mother looked at me hard and I stared down at my empty plate.

Do you hear me? she said.

I started to cry.

And knock off that crying. Only girls cry, and you're not a girl.

My crying turned to sobs.

Do you want that? Do you want for all the other boys to say *Look at him... he cries like a girl!* Is that what you want?

No.

Do you want everyone to mock you for crying all the time?

No.

So why don't you stop crying?

My shoulders were heaving with my sobbing:

I... doo o on't ... kno o oow w...

Then suddenly she reached out for me. I saw her hand and shrieked away from it. Instinctively. My eyes closed for an instant, then opened to see my mother's hand moving toward me again, this time slowly:

Oh I'm not gonna hit you... You've got frosting all over your damn mouth...

And licking her thumb, she used the taste of her cigarette to wipe my cheeks.

For a few moments we both sat silent and then she said:

You know I don't ask a lot of you, do I? Do I ask a lot of you?

No.

I work all day and when I come home all I expect of you is that you listen to me when I talk to you. Is that too much to ask?

No.

Then why don't you ever listen to me? If your father tells you to do something you don't give him any backtalk. He sees you two weeks in the damn year, but for some reason you listen to him. I'm here every day, but if I ask you...

My mother stopped. She was shaking her head, apparently remembering something from our past:

You know you didn't used to be like this, she said, You used to be a good boy....

I had started crying again.

You used to listen... But now... Now I don't know what to do with you.

She was looking at me hard:

I shouldn't have to beg you to do things. Should I have to beg you?

...SHOULD I!

My shoulders were heaving.

Now I'm asking you for the final time... dammit stop that crying!... I'm asking you for the last time. Are you gonna drink or not?

No, I said in tears.

Fine. You made your choice. I wanted to have a nice birthday with you and all you can do is think about yourself...

And with that she left the table and went into the living room. I heard her snap the dial on the television, the cartoon voices became organ music and then a grating voice.

Not a sound from you until that glass is empty! she yelled from the other room, Do you understand?

The television voice became more pronounced. The organ started up. And then a choir.

...DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

For two hours — two child hours — I sat in front of the glass. In tears I stared at the milk until my eyes turned dim. Then dry. From time to time my mother would walk into the kitchen, look at the untouched glass, and without saying a word, without even looking at me, leave to the other room.

Each time I tried to speak to her she did not hear me.

I waited... and waited... until there was nothing else to do: I began to drink the milk. It was bland and pasty and warm like the room. Closing my eyes, I poured the liquid down my throat and felt it gurgle and bubble. As I forced the milk down — one swallow at a time — tears fell into the glass, and I drank them too. Holding my breath I drank as much as I could, felt the warm liquid churning sickeningly in my throat and then my stomach.

But the glass was so tall. The milk was so high.

At last I could drink no more. I stopped. The glass was half-full. Half-empty, but half-full. I had done the best I could.

Taking the glass of milk I walked to the kitchen sink. The sink was higher than I was and to pour the milk out I had to hold the glass over my head with both hands and stretch up on my tiptoes...

And that's when my mother came into the room. I seized up. The glass dropped from my hands and smashed on the floor. The white pieces mixed with the liquid at her feet. Even before she moved toward me I started crying:

No Mommy...! NO...!

But just as quickly she was over me, grabbing me by the wrist and yanking me. I fell to the ground but she was already pulling and as she pulled she dragged me across the kitchen floor over the broken glass.

NOOOO!!! I screamed. But seeing what had happened only made her madder:

...Now look what you did! she was screaming, *Now look...!* And she dragged me twisting and turning over the rough hallway carpet into my room....

When it was over I sat on my bed all cried out. Never again, I promised myself, would the tears get out. Never again would I make my mother mad. From now on I would be as good as God. From now on I would be as good as *she* was.

Just then the door opened. My mother was standing in the frame of light. She was holding cotton balls and tweezers.

Piece by piece she pulled out the glass from my skin, her eyes filling with tears and her hands shaking:

I'm sorry, she said, I'm so sorry....

And only then did I realize that she had something to be sorry for. Only then did I realize that I loved her too.

(14)

1:15 p.m.

Back on the streets I could not find a money exchange. There was one on every corner, but the first was closed, the second had no rubles, the third was being renovated, and the fourth wouldn't take my dollars because they weren't green enough.

At first I tried the main streets, but without luck, and soon found myself wandering among old forgotten sidestreets, through alleys and residential courtyards. What are you looking for? an old woman asked me. When I told her, her face lit up: Why didn't you say so! — Right around the corner is the best exchange in town — it's open all the time, has a good rate, and accepts any bill you give it. And, as promised, when I turned the corner I saw a sign for a twenty-four-hour exchange:

NEVER CLOSED!

But when I approached I found, instead of a line, two small crosses planted recently in the snow outside. Above the crosses a bullet had shattered the glass like a spider's web. A hand-written paper taped to the inside of the window said all it could:

CLOSED.

Without understanding, I continued on.

A few hundred meters from the bullet-rattled exchange, three policemen were standing idly and laughing at something that could not laugh back.

I walked up to them from behind. Tapping one of them on the shoulder I was about to ask — only later would I realize how naive my question would have sounded — I was just about to ask them where I could find the nearest money exchange.

But before I could even find the words, the laughter stopped suddenly and a husky voice roared in my direction:

Documents!

Was he talking to me?

Your documents! he repeated and the other two circled around me. The man who had spoken was tall and brawny with a full mustache. His eyes were windowless.

I just wanted to ask for directions...

Are you deaf or what? said another who was pulling sunflower seeds from his pocket and putting them in his mouth. One by one the sunflower seeds went into his mouth — and one by one they did not come out.

The third officer, who looked to be their adolescent son, simply stood silent.

I took out my passport and gave it to the man with the bushy mustache. His fingers were swollen and dirty and red from the cold. He fingered through the passport and spoke up in a rough voice:

Where's your registration?

My what?

Are you deaf? said the second man, again popping a sunflower seed into his mouth; again it did not come out.

The third younger officer looked back and forth at whoever was speaking but did not contribute.

Your visa with your registration, where is it?

Oh just a minute..., I said and opened my wallet.

This was not the first time the police had stopped me. Before it had always been enough to show them my blue passport. They would admire its color, ask a few questions about America, shake my hand, and let me go. But the times had changed: *our parents were returning home!* Now there was nothing unusual about my wallet: the yellow piece of paper was there; the filthy coin; my eight hundred dollars in cash....

But my visa was not.

The officer popped a sunflower seed into his mouth.

I again looked for the visa in the place where it should have been; but again it was not there. Watching this the officer stroked his bushy mustache in anticipation.

It couldn't be! I'd just had my visa... the last time I'd seen it was... well... actually I didn't remember when I'd seen it last. But it had to be here...

I checked places in the wallet where the visa could not have been; and so, consequently, it wasn't. The third officer followed my fingers with his eyes but kept his silence. Desperate, I emptied my wallet onto the ground, spreading the eleven yellow words onto the dirty snow around me. Seeing this, the officer popped another sunflower seed into his mouth. I put the coin on the snow in front of the officers; they winced at the sight of it.

This was absurd! This couldn't be happening!

When I laid the eight hundred dollars on the snow, all three officers stepped back: The first stopped stroking his mustache. The second, in a gust of steam-filled air, spit out a half-hour of sunflower husks onto the snow. The third officer, breaking his silence, muttered grimly: *Vot eto da!*

Still, the visa was not there.

I don't have it, I said dejectedly.

What do you mean you don't have it? grumbled the man with the mustache; when he spoke he looked not at me but at the dollars on the ground.

I didn't bring them.

You didn't bring your documents with you?

I couldn't help it, I said.

Why are you on the streets without your documents? Where do you think you are, home?

No. I'm far from home. Look here's my passport... It's blue.

I don't give a damn about your passport. Do you have your registration or not?

No.

The officer with the sunflower seeds had regained his composure but had seemingly lost interest in the sunflowers. The third officer, as before, was maintaining his silence.

Then let's go to the station, said the bushy-mustached man grabbing me by my elbow.

My heart was beating fast, I couldn't believe what was happening. *They were putting me in jail?*

You're making a mistake...!

Let's go!

My visa's at home. I swear on my...

What are you deaf? said the man with the sunflower seeds whose eyes flashed furious and who with a sudden violent motion grabbed my other arm.

Instinctively I yanked my arm away just as violently and had started to say something when I felt a painful blow to my side, the crook of an arm over my throat, and then the firm pressure of a knee in my back; and before I could do anything I was lying face-down on the dirty snow, my arms held tightly behind me, my cheek pressed coldly against the contents of my wallet, which were, in order of importance: the yellow piece of paper, the worthless coin, and eight hundred dollars that could not send me home without a visa.

(15)

Let's say — hypothetically, of course — let's say you live at the Yuzhnaya metrostation. It could be any metrostation on the gray line, but let's say it's Yuzhnaya. In Russian “yuzhnaya” means *southern* and because of this unfortunate coincidence you have to travel two hours each way between your home and your work which is located to the north.

Home for you is a small apartment that you have recently privatized. The apartment actually belongs to your mother who lives in the master bedroom while you and your first wife share the smaller room with the sagging fold-out bed.

The apartment needs new tiles, and wallpaper in the kitchen, and for some reason the plumbing always breaks on Tuesdays. Your wife reminds you of all this quicker than you are able to forget. You fix what you can; but her friends have husbands who earn dollars, or lovers who are good with their hands. If you only had a decent job..., she says.

But you love your wife. And besides: she's right. Your job does pay miserably. Inflation has made your salary laughable; it has demoted you.

Every day at work you see foreigners with their fancy clothes and their expensive suitcases. Or worse: rich Russians with their fashionable clothes and expensive foreign suitcases. And each — foreigner and Russian — with an emergency. Each of them with a matter of utmost importance which for you is merely the same urgent matter day in and day out. It is as stale and drab as the ten-year-old wallpaper in your kitchen.

But you are lucky: you work for a stifling beaurocracy. And your signature can save people time — crucial days, hours, or minutes. After all, Time is money — even in Russia! Time is money and money is wallpaper. And new wallpaper should have matching kitchen tiles. And matching kitchen tiles aren't as cheap as they could be. And if you only had a decent job...

Then one day — it is not exactly, of course, *one* day — your signature is requested. A man is standing before you, almost in tears. An emergency, of course. You can sign or you can refuse. Sign or not sign? On the one hand it is but a flick of the wrist for you; on the other hand you already bought tiles for the kitchen. On the one hand it is late and you are tired; on the other hand your wedding anniversary is approaching.

And so you listen, fighting back a yawn, as the person tells you more about his predicament than you need to know — after all, you've heard it all before. Honestly, at that moment you couldn't care less about signing or not signing, about this man who is almost in tears, about his emergency — for you it could go either way. And so what do you do...? What do you do to help you decide...?

You look at my clothes.

(16)

1:57 p.m.

The holding cell where the officers led me did not have windows. The walls were dirty; the floor stuck to my shoes. In the back of the small cell the toilet door had been left open and a well-defined smell permeated the room. Inside the cell a herd of detainees stood shoulder to shoulder in the cramped space; in shabby clothes they shouted back and forth, their speech harsh and strange. I stood as far away from it as possible — in the back corner — not wanting to lean against anything, not wanting to be seen, afraid to speak. As the others chided and jostled, they would look back at me and our eyes would meet; I would look quickly away, trying to look at nothing. But failing. One prisoner, a man with chafe hands and chapping lips was especially interested in me. And each time he stared at me, my eyes ran away. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he shouted in my direction:

Hey you!

I did not answer.

Hey! In the corner! I'm talking to you!

I pretended not to have heard him.

The man pushed his way through the crowd, moving toward me until his face was only a few inches from mine. As he spoke his gold tooth sparkled like a coin:

Did you hear me? he yelled.

The others in the cell had turned to watch us. But I said nothing.

Did you hear me? he repeated.

I said nothing.

Where are you from?

Again I said nothing.

What's up your ass?

I did not tell him.

Ohhh...! He doesn't wanna talk. He's *important*. He thinks that just because he has these nice imported clothes, he doesn't have to talk to us. That's what you think, isn't that right, pal?

The man slapped my shoulder so hard it unbalanced me. I tried to look for a guard, but the crowd of people served as a screen. Their shouts muffled the man's words. He continued:

What we have here is royalty. The king of England! Or even better the president of the United States!!

I gasped a third time.

The man's voice was becoming increasingly insistent:

What's your name, Mr. President?

The other people were now crowding around us to watch the scene; each of them hoping sadistically that I would not tell my name.

And so I did not.

Somebody's talking to you! he reminded me: *Somebody* asked your name!

I did not answer.

Did you hear me? Somebody asked you very politely what your name is...

I looked away.

At this offense, the man grabbed the collar of my jacket and shoved me back against the dirty wall. My ribs ripped from the pain. The man moved even closer into my face and pressed the knuckles of his clenched fist against the bottom of my jaw, tilting my chin up:

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

Again I did not answer. It would have been impossible anyway. Instead I closed my eyes. And waited.

What was my name? Where is my name? When would my name be?

With my eyes closed I felt only the aching in my head. My head was throbbing, as if to remind me of what was to happen....

Then in the distance the words sounded. All of them. My name. Someone was shouting it.

No!

I opened my eyes in time to see the heads turn around. The man let me go. Busily he brushed my collar back into place.

It was a police officer and he was waving my blue passport over his head. He shouted my name again through the crowd and I quickly raised my hand. The others looked at me. Slowly they separated to let me pass. As I walked the gauntlet to the front of the cell I could hear the others whispering about the color of my passport. The officer opened the cell door and I exited.

Follow me, said the officer.

And with my passport in his hand he led me down a long dark corridor with peeling tiles.

(17)

At the end of the long corridor was a small office where a man in uniform sat behind an old desk that was strangely absent of papers; the desk was black except for a palm-sized spot on its surface which had been worn gray. Judging by his uniform the man was a senior officer. He took my passport from the guard and looked at the blue cover, then turned it over to look at the back cover, which was also blue. His voice was the lowest bass:

So...!

I looked at him blankly.

So! You're from the United States of America?

His voice was slow and emphasized every syllable.

Yes sir.

What do you do?

I told him.

And how long have you been here in our country?

I told him.

So long? Are you enjoying your stay with us?

Was he joking? Was he sick?

I like your country very much, I told the man and then quickly added: sir.

The man looked at me long and deep. Then unexpectedly his face broke into a strange smile:

Ahhh... America...!

Yes.

America the beautiful!

Yes sir.

Land of milk and honey! Birthplace of freedom and democracy! Isn't that right?

I... suppose it is.

Oh, I'm sorry, I interrupted you... You were saying how much you liked *this* country?

I was?... I mean well, yes I do like this country.

Yes. Please do tell me what there is to like? Just between you and me... After all we both know this place is a dump.

A dump, sir?

Yes, one big stinking dump — that's all this country is.

Well, sir, I wouldn't say that it's a dump, exactly...

Oh you wouldn't? What *would* you call it?

I don't know.

Well, trust me. It's a dump. I mean, just take a look around. What do you see? What do we have here that's worth anything?

Well actually...

...Not a damn thing! — that's what we have.

Sir, I think you're being a bit hard...

Hard? You think I'm being hard? Name one good thing about this country... just one!

A good thing about the country?... I... I don't know... There are many things.

For example?

It's difficult to say there are so many...

Pick one.

...Well, for example Russian literature.

Literature!

Yes sir. I appreciate Russian literature very much.

Like what?

Like what, sir?

Yeah, what books?

Well, sir, I just finished *Anna Karenina*.

Anna Karenina?

Yes sir.

Never read it.

You would be good to read it, sir. I recommend it highly...

The man slammed his fist against the table. I jumped back but the man continued, staring into my eyes mean and deep. When he spoke he bared his teeth like a black bear:

What do I look like to you — a black bear?! I know better than you that life is better there. *There* people really live. There they don't have the chaos we have *here*.

Maybe so, but we have problems too...

Problems? What problems could you possibly have — deciding what color toilet paper to buy? Which brand of condoms? Here we have serious problems. *Real* problems. That's why everyone is leaving. That's why they're leaving in masses: to Europe, Israel, America, Canada. Leaving by the hundreds, the thousands, the hundreds of thousands. Anything to get out of here!

Yes, I know but...

And why do you think they're leaving — why, I ask you? — because this place is a dump, that's why, because it's just one big stinking dump that everyone's trying to get out of at any cost, and that's why there are so many emigrants — not that I'm justifying it of course, I mean I myself would never leave Russia for any other country, especially America, not even for all the money in the world, and to be honest I don't understand why anyone would want to leave — the damn traitors! — because say what you want about this place but dammit it's still my homeland and I still love it and it's still the best goddamned country in the world...!!!

Here the man stopped:

...Do you agree with me?

Did I agree with him? Did he agree?!

Yes sir, I said, I agree with you entirely.

You do?

Yes sir. Russia is without a doubt the best dump in the world.

The man slammed his fist against the table again:

What! What did you say?

Again I jumped back:

I... uh... I said that Russia is the most goddamned country in the world...

Excuse me!

...I mean what I really wanted to say is...!

Who the hell do you think you are?

Sir?

Who do you think you are, coming *here* from *there* and calling my country a dump? Who are you to damn it?

I...?

Who are you to say it stinks?

But I never...

You know, for the last couple years we've been up to our ears in America. We listen to your music. We see your movies. We eat your hamburgers....

My hamburgers?

...In the papers all you read about is America this, America that...!
But I'm going to tell you something, and I want you to listen real good.
Are you listening?

Yes sir.

Are you listening real good?

Of course.

You need to remember that this isn't *there*? This is *here*. And here you're nothing. Do you understand that?

No sir I don't.

You don't?

No sir. Not yet.

The man seemed to take offense at the sincerity of my answer and bared his teeth even more:

Do you understand where you are? Do you have any idea where in the hell you are?

No sir, not a clue.

What!

I'm not sure where I am, sir.

I looked at him naively and it threw him:

Where's your visa?

It's at home, I said.

Are you sure?

Absolutely, I said.

If you're lying to me...!

The man slammed his fist against the table. But this time I did not jump back.

I wouldn't lie, sir, I promise — my visa's on my shelf next to the German dictionary and my solar calculators the size of...

The man was looking at me suspiciously.

...a credit card.

A what? What did you say? What did you say it was?

A credit card. At home I have three calculators the size of credit cards.

Impossible! he said.

No no it's true, they're the latest technology — made in Japan — lightweight and convenient and especially popular among women who are intelligent and polite...

The man slammed his fist on the table:

That's enough!

I became quiet.
Listen up...! he said.
I became even quieter.
...This isn't Japan and I don't give a damn about your solar calculators.
I want to see your visa with your registration. If it's at home then you get it and bring it here. It's as simple as that. If not...
The man paused:
Do you understand? he said.
No sir, not entirely.
Just go home and get your damn visa and bring it to me.
What about my passport?
The passport stays here. You'll get it back when you show me your visa.
I started to leave. Without my passport I felt thin and insignificant. As I left the room I heard the man shout after me:
Hey...!
Yes sir, I answered not turning around.
I'm warning you — no funny business! You bring back your visa or else.
And I felt his shadow point back down the long corridor to where I had been, toward the man with the gold tooth who now knew both my name and the color of my passport.

(18)

As soon as I exited the police station I felt the need to sprint as fast and as far away as possible. But what if I were to be arrested again? *And this time without my passport!* Instead I walked calmly along the building past three cops, two of whom were talking, one of whom was not spitting out sunflower seeds. My heart beat fast. My head ached. I turned the corner.

Gathering every bit of strength, I began to run.

Slowly at first I forced my heavy legs up and forward, my irregular strides jarring my headache with each step, each contact with the icy ground a test in resilience *Would it hold me?* each forward movement awkward and uncertain, my steps then becoming shorter and more concentrated, my muscles pulling tight against themselves, at first resilient and fresh, then numbed, then aching, and finally succumbing to a sharp excruciating pain that ran all the way up my legs hindering me as I raced faster and faster weaving in and out of the heavily bundled pedestrians, each forward step both shortening and lengthening the distance between here and there, the

seemingly unbridgeable gap that not even I could understand. And so I ran with all my strength, not noticing what was in my path, not stopping, past people and cars and piles of snow and money exchange after money exchange, not realizing what I was doing, not worrying about where I was coming from, not caring if people were looking back over their shoulders at me; and as I ran, my lungs now hurting from the cold air and the unfamiliar contractions, as I struggled with every step forward, I realized that I would not make it, *I would not make it!* somehow I understood that this was not the way things were done, that it was too late, that I was too slow and all my running was for nothing, my watch was moving much faster than my legs could take me and that there was no sense in hoping for anything, because despite all my powers and exertions — I did not stop running — despite everything inside me I was too late.

I was too late!

And sure enough when I had reached where I was going — exhausted and out of breath — my watch confirmed what I had suspected all along.

I doubled over in pain.

It was 4:05.

(19)

4:08 p.m.

And that's how I stayed — doubled over. I couldn't straighten my body. Nor did I have any reason to: it was too late. My ribs ached. I was doubled over and only vaguely aware of the people passing me; the ones I had sprinted by only minutes before. Like soldiers they were crunching the ground beneath them.

I straightened up.

And that's when I stopped feeling my body. Just like that. My thoughts turned in against themselves and seemed to float away from me. My legs went numb. I could not feel where my hands ended and my arms began. The pain in my head had become so constant that it could not be noticed. The world around me seemed to spin, and at that moment it seemed that there was nothing.

It seemed that there could be nothing but nothing.

How clear it all was! How pointless and beautiful!

Just then the door rattled from the inside. *But now it was leaving...!* The door rattled again and then opened itself. *Now it was gone!* A man in green camouflage fatigues stepped out into the cold. It was the guard at whom

I had shaken my head. His face was flushed. He held an unlit cigarette in his hand. I started to speak but he interrupted me:

We're closed! he said rudely.

Isn't there anyone inside at all? I asked.

We're closed! and he held up his watch to show me how closed they were.

But my ticket. It's...

C-LOSED!!!

The man looked at me angrily. He put the unlit cigarette in his mouth which curled up around it; his eyes squinted. He shoved his hand in his pocket, feeling around for something.

Look! I began, I just ran two miles to get here, *Two miles!* and it seems that I've pulled a muscle and...

Do you understand Russian? I told you we're closed.

The man felt around in his other pocket.

I... Russian?... Do I... Russian language... for me... very difficult... very very difficult.

What?

I speak the Russian very not good. Very very bad.

Where the hell're you from anyway?

Where was I from? Where was I from?

There...!

We're closed!

Here...?

Closed.

What would make him see? Where could I go from here? How could I get to there? What was left?

Russia! I said, I'm from Russia...

But by now the man was not even paying attention to me. His attention had been thrust somewhere into his pocket. He swore indignantly.

I turned and started to walk away. It was hopeless. Everything was as hopeless as the hard ground crunching slightly beneath my feet.

Hey! a rough voice yelled after me.

I did not turn around. The voice sounded again, but this time softer than a ruble:

Excuse me sir, said the guard's voice, You wouldn't happen to have a light, would you?

A light?

I don't smoke, I said bitterly and started to walk off.

The ground crunched just as bitterly under my feet.

But wait a minute! Last week hadn't someone asked me for a light? And hadn't I apologized profusely? And after that hadn't I made a special trip to the kiosk...? ...That's right, I had! ...which meant that in my pocket...

There it was!!!

I pulled out the cheap disposable lighter.

(20)

4:18 p.m.

After taking my lighter, the guard led me into the eerie silence that is a room full of idle computers. The lights were half-dimmed. The guard told me to wait near the entrance and walked behind the plastic wall. When he returned there was a handsome young woman with him. Help him, will you Len? he said and left to smoke his cigarette.

Lena turned on the computer and hit some keys. The computer beeped and whirred and clicked. She asked for my information and I gave it to her.

Let me see your visa, she said.

I don't have it.

Well, then let me see your passport.

I don't have it.

You don't have your visa or your passport?

No I don't.

Where are they?

Well, I seem to have temporarily misplaced my visa. And my passport... I left my passport with... I left it with a friend so that I wouldn't lose it... I seem to be losing everything lately.

You realize you can't leave the country without your visa?

I know, but I'm sure I can get a new one issued in the airport.

The woman sighed:

You can always try, she said and then: Will you be paying in cash?

In dollars.

I'm sorry but we can't...

Look I know. I was here earlier today. Can you please take my dollars? Can you do it just this once?

The woman frowned but then checked her watch:

All right, she said, I'll do it this time. But *next time*...

What "next time"? Next time I bought tickets from her? Or next time my mother died!

Yes of course, I said, Next time everything will be different. Next time I'll do it the way it should be done.

Hey Lena! she yelled leaning over her own shoulder, Len! Come here please... he's paying in dollars, what rate should I use?

Lena came out.

It was the woman from before:

You're accepting dollars? she said.

Yes. Do you know what the rate of exchange is?

I'm not sure, Lena answered, you'd better ask Lena — I'll have her come out.

Without even looking at me, Lena went back behind the wall to get Lena. When Lena came out Lena asked her for today's rate of exchange and Lena answered without hesitation:

(1USD=1620RUR), she said.

Lena thanked her, typed some more on the computer, and handed me my ticket. I tucked it into my wallet — which now contained a mere six dollars and two kopecks — and stepped out onto the street. My body was tired but I had no time to pay attention to it. Ahead of me I had an hour-long metro ride to my forgotten apartment, where I was sure my visa could not possibly be.

(21)

5:56 p.m.

So it was not.

(22)

7:04 p.m.

And then an hour-long ride back to the police precinct where I would have to tell the officer that I had been wrong. That my visa had not been at home on the shelf next to the three dusty calculators at all. That in truth I had lied. Now at the end of my hour-long ride a man waited with chafe knuckles and chapped lips and a firm conviction that I was firmly convinced I was the president of the United States.

In the metro the stations passed by slowly and grimly. As if I were on my way to a wedding.

By the time I reached the police station it was already dark. Snow had stopped falling. The wind howled. I opened the door heavily and stepped inside.

*

(23)

For the first time all day I thought of my mother. Until now my mind had been logical but short-sighted: *Get the tickets!* it said, *Do whatever it takes to make it home! Don't stop until you are there...!*

But what would I tell her when I saw her? Aunt Helen would meet me in the airport and from there we would go straight to where my mother was already lying in her open casket. She would not look the same. She would not recognize me. She would not be able to hear me from the distance of her final resting place. Why was this last meeting so important to me? What would I say? There was nothing that I could say. There was, of course, nothing that she could tell me.

(24)

Where's your visa? said the guard.
I don't have it, I said

(25)

I would tell her that silence is not inevitable. That love is not conditional. I would tell her that in life there are too few things that really mean something, and that it is these things that fall away first. And she would listen to me, the most captive of audiences, and somewhere deep inside she would nod and smile and through silent lips she would say, I know, I know, I love you too.

(26)

So back I went into the dirty sticky holding cell. Into the crowd of prisoners.

But this time things were different: The American's back! they shrieked and looked at each other with childish glee. In my absence I had become the celebrity in the cell. The darling of the detainees. Now I commanded respect. I was, in a way, presidential. And in Russian oscillating between Φ and Π , my fellow lawbreakers asked me questions about the color blue, about democracy and love, about the complex relationship between black and white Americans....

In amazed voices they asked me how I had ended up in this hellhole

and I answered that I had just wanted to change money, had been turned away from several currency exchanges, had naively approached the police...

No no...! they protested, Not *this* hellhole... This *hellhole!*

What do you mean?

The country.

But it isn't a hellhole, I protested.

Yes it is, they said, Nobody comes here.

I do.

Why?

I don't know, I said.

You have to know, they said.

I don't, I said.

You do too, they said.

Okay, okay, I said and showed them the two-kopecck coin.

They did not understand:

We don't understand, they said.

I began to speak about irony. Then love. Then Love. And then about danger. When I mentioned marriage, the man with the fake tooth and chafe hands, who until this had been silent, came up to me and put his arm around my shoulders. His name was Morozov.

Boy..., he said and with his dirty arm around my shoulders shook me like a son. I shuddered, but in vain:

Boy, he said, I have some advice for you...

As he spoke I gazed at his sparkling tooth:

Are you ready for my advice?

Yes I am.

You're ready?

Yes.

Are you listening?

Yes.

Good.

Still with his arm around my shoulder, Morozov looked at me compassionately:

Give me some money, he advised.

What?

Do you have any money?

I opened my wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

Is that all you got? You don't have anything else in there...?

And I gave him the very last dollar.

Morozov put the money in his pocket and turned to me seriously:

Don't do it! he said.

Don't do what? I asked.

Marriage, he said, Don't do it!

And taking me into the very same corner he had thrown me against earlier, the man calmly and sadly told me the story of his existence, how life had killed him and marriage had condemned him to solitude:

"I wasn't always like this..." he began.

(27)

Although each was vastly different, my fellow detainees did share one common trait: to a man, they hadn't done anything. Guram, for example, was being held because he had not been born in Russia; Elena because she hadn't been born in Moscow; Dima had been arrested for not bribing a police officer; and Sasha had been picked up — literally — when he did not use a chaser with a liter of vodka. Then of course there was me: guilty of all of the above, in other words, of not doing a single thing. And now as I listened to Morozov's tale of lost love and misplaced marriage, I noticed that each of the detainees must have an interesting story to tell. In their own way, each of them was eager to explain their life to someone who could not understand it. But for the moment it was Morozov who was the lucky one...

"...And I say to her, Why the hell should I if it ain't even *my* kid? And the bitch says to me..."

(28)

Morozov...!

The man stopped his story at the shout coming from the other side of the iron bars.

Kashvili...!

Guram, hearing his name also jumped forward.

Let's go you two! the guard said rudely to them and then pointed at me:

You too!

The guard opened the gate. The three of us exited the cage and followed him down the long hallway. The guard knocked on the door, then opened it, motioning for us to stand in front of the large empty desk with a single gray spot: behind the desk, as if he had not moved since I last saw him, sat the uniformed senior officer:

Boys..., he began, ...things look bad — very bad indeed.

As he spoke the man massaged his hand which was poised above the gray spot:

You two don't have your passports..., he said pointing his meaty finger first at Morozov and then at Guram.

The two men nodded.

...And *you two* don't have your visa! he continued pointing at me.

Who? Why "we two"? Was he using the polite form of the verb with me? He wasn't using it with the other two prisoners!

All three of us nodded at his words and the officer continued:

That boys is very very *very* bad.

We nodded again.

You realize that don't you? You know what this means... Do you know what this means?

No sir, we said.

It means that you will have to stay here until we can get everything squared away. You, and you, and you two...

Morozov started to say something.

Shut up! said the officer and then motioning at Morozov and Guram ordered the guard: Take those two back to the cell! I want to have a few words with "*our American*" here.

The other two were led away and remaining alone with the officer, I felt that here in this room anything could happen — *anything!* — and I would be powerless to stop it. For the first time in my life I realized that I was nothing.

I have something I want to talk to you about, the man began.

Yes sir?

It's sort of independent of the situation at hand, but I guess you could say it's connected as well...

Sir?

Okay, I'll just come out with it...

I waited stupidly.

...You say you're an English teacher?

That's right sir.

Do you give private lessons?

Sometimes.

How much do you charge?

When I told him the man whistled:

Not cheap, he said and then: You see...

Suddenly the man was stuttering and it surprised me. I looked at him curiously. The man was wringing his hands nervously behind his desk:

...The thing is that I want my daughter... She's twelve... She takes English at school, but she can't... she's falling behind... She's slower than the others, she needs special help... I can't pay you but maybe if you need a good home-cooked meal...

I don't understand, sir?

Do you have a family? he said.

No, I answered.

A wife?

Not really.

Of course you wouldn't understand then, he said and hung his head.

I felt compassion for him.

He stayed that way with his head hung. Then he looked up at me:

I want you to teach my daughter to speak, he said and then after an ungainly hesitation added: sir.

He held out his massive calloused hand over the desk and not understanding what was happening, I took it. The man wrote down my phone number and thanked me.

Then, as if remembering something, his expression changed. He walked across the room, opened the door and motioned for the guard who came into the room. The superior looked at his subordinate abruptly and ordered:

Give him his passport and let him go. I think he's learned his lesson.

Turning to the side, out of the guard's sight, he winked at me and then in a rough tone added:

But remember that although I'm letting you go now, you can be sure that you won't get off so easy *next time!*

(29)

And with that I left. As I passed the detention cell, I saw Morozov and Guram looking at me sadly from behind the bars. *How long would they be in there? In how many ways would they have to suffer just because of the color of their passport?* Guiltily, I slipped out the door without acknowledging them.

Outside I was still trying to find words for what had just happened. Then I saw it: a single word written in white on the blue door of a small car. In the light of the cold winter night, the letters looked even more sinister than ever:

МИЛИЦИЯ, they said.

*

(30)

9:28 p.m.

From the police station it was straight to the airport. Having no money — I had given my last six dollars to Morozov — I snuck onto the bus, exactly the way the redhead had taught me. Now instead of money I had a ticket home; instead of bus fare, a filthy two-kopecck coin; instead of my visa, nothing but a blue passport and a naive to-do list. At the next-to-last stop a man got on, flashed identification, and began checking everyone's tickets. *After everything that I had been through — money exchanges and travel agencies and police stations and Canadians — would I be kicked off now? Would it end like this? Would it end so simply? So absurdly? No...! It would be too amazing, too incredible. Even for this day! No one would believe it....*

...And so I was not.

The bus arrived at the windowless airport and I stepped out onto the cold snow that led to the departure terminal.

(31)

10:05 p.m.

By the time I got to Sheremetevo it was late at night, the scheduled flights had already left. At the information booth the woman pointed down the long departure hall to where the visa section was.

The hall was strangely quiet and as I trudged from one end to the other my wet boots squeaked loudly in the empty hall. With each step forward the airport became emptier. And quieter. No travelers in sight. No workers. Even the police had seemingly disappeared.

At the end of the hall where the visa section should have been a sheet of paper pointed to a small intercom in the wall. The intercom itself was waist-high, so that I had to hunch over to speak into it. There were two buttons and so I pressed the one on the left.

The buzzer sounded but no one answered. I pressed the button on the right. Again the buzzer sounded.

Again no answer.

Frustrated, I went back to the woman at the information booth. Nobody answered the intercom, I told her. Try it again, she said. But are you sure they're working? I asked. I don't know, she said, Try it again.

For a third time I walked the length of the airport hall.

And for a third time there was no answer.
In silence I stood pushing button after button. Left. Right. Right. Left.
Finally, I heard an answer: a woman's voice from somewhere behind
the wall.

Excuse me, please, I began, I have a problem with my visa, Can you
help me?

The wall was quiet.

Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?

What's your name? the wall demanded.

I told her.

What's the problem?

I lost my visa and I have to leave tomorrow.

Tomorrow?

Yes, to America...

There was silence and then: Is it a business visa?

Yes I think so.

Just a moment.

With a click the intercom went dead. I was stooped over but continued
to wait for the woman's voice. After a minute or so the voice sounded again:

The person you need to talk to is on break. When he comes in I'll tell
him you're waiting.

But...!

Click.

I pressed the button again:

Miss I'm sorry to bother you but can you tell me when he'll be in?

I told you: as soon as he comes in I'll tell him you're waiting.

Click.

I held my finger to the button but did not press it.

On a bench a tall African man lay stretched out, an English-language
newspaper covering his face. One leg draped over the edge of the bench
and touched the floor. Off to the corner a woman was sweeping the floor
in slow regular strokes and in the quiet airport her wiry broom sounded
like a razor passing over thick stubble.

I pressed the button again.

No answer.

The other button.

No answer.

Where are they?

I pressed again and again and then stopped suddenly.

Wait a minute...!

My skin became cold.

...Wait just one minute...!

My skin became even colder.

...Why had the wall asked my name? Why did it need to know who I was? And what had made me answer so willingly? Sure, the voice had asked, but I could've refused to comment. I could've kept it to myself. This wasn't a holding cell. There I'd had to answer when the officer held up my passport, when he shouted my name through the bars. That couldn't be helped. But here... here in this windowless airport I had given it away as eagerly as if it were a painting. And now I couldn't take it back. Now the wall knew who I was and could use my name against me.

I took my finger off the button.

It was too late to take it back. This time it was too late. But never again would it happen! Never! From now on I would protect my name from everyone. From now on my name would be mine and mine alone, and I would use anything — evasion, deceit, even silence — to guard it.

I decided to wait a few minutes before trying again.

The African was still sprawled out on the bench but had turned on his side and was now lying with his nose in the back of the chair. The lady with the broom had moved closer and was sweeping the center of the floor.

I checked my watch. Ten minutes had passed.

I pressed the button.

No answer.

Why aren't they answering?

My finger was on the button and then static and: Hello?

Hello! Miss it's me again. I'm sorry. I forgot to ask... How will I recognize the person who's supposed to come? Can you at least tell me his name?

Just wait there. He'll see you himself.

But if he doesn't?

Click.

I stood there. Aside from the African and the cleaning lady the airport was empty of passengers. Moscow was home to between ten and sixteen million residents... and here I was alone.

The metro would be closing in less than two hours and I still had to get there by bus which would take forty minutes. I'm not going to make it, I thought.

I'm not going to make it.
I pressed the button.
No answer.

(32)

11:12 p.m.

I pressed again. Nothing. I continued pressing. Again and again and again. *I didn't care if they knew who I was, I didn't have time for this.* Again and again and again and again and...

Hello!

Ma'am I know you're probably sick of me, but do you have any idea when your representative might show up?

He hasn't come yet?

No and I've been here the whole time...

Well, I gave him the message. He should be there any minute now.

But when?!?

I don't know. Just wait there. I gave him your message.

I took my finger off the button before it could click. There was no sense in bothering the wall. I just had to wait until the man — whatever his name was — showed up. I could only hope that he would show up at all.

The airport was hauntingly still. Nothing was moving.

And that's when he came.

(33)

11:17 p.m.

When I saw the man my heart leapt, my soul jumped. He was young and smartly dressed and his eyes looked at me attentively when he spoke:

You called? he said.

I pulled out my passport quickly and clumsily as if I had not had time to prepare. When I spoke my voice stuttered:

I have a problem, I lost my visa and my flight leaves tomorrow.

Tomorrow!

Yes, can you give me some sort of form that will let me leave?

Let me see your documents...

The man smiled and for the first time all day I relaxed. I gave him the passport and my airline ticket. The man looked at the passport attentively, turning the pages until he found something.

I'll be right back, he said and walked to a door along the side of the wall. On the door was written "Employees only."

Hey wait! I called after him, Do I have time to go to the bathroom? I mean, before you get back?

The man laughed and when he did I realized how ridiculous my question must have sounded.

Sure, he said. Take your time. I just have to talk to my supervisor.

Okay, I said, Thanks!

The man laughed again and headed toward the room.

Moving away from the intercom, I felt encouraged and revived, as if this day had never even happened. At the bathroom the door was propped open, the cleaning lady was mopping the floor and so I stood outside until she finished.

It was 11:41. According to my schedule I should have been at home by now. *But who could have known that this day would turn to night the way it had? Who could have imagined?! Still, there was hope. If I could catch the last bus, then I'd be able to make it home. At least rest for a few hours! With my eyes open, of course, but rest nevertheless...*

But when I returned from the bathroom the man had not yet come out.

11:50.

11:58.

12:06.

Where was he? I only had a few minutes to make my bus.

At 12:15 I hunched over and pressed the button. But then, before the wall could even answer, the man came out of the door. He was holding my passport. He smiled kindly:

Where's your invitation? he asked.

My what?

The invitation that you received your visa with.

I... I don't have anything. I gave you everything I have.

You don't have your invitation?

No. I never did have it...

I need it to issue you a replacement visa.

Where am I supposed to get my invitation from?

You should have it.

But I don't, I never had it. I don't even know what it looks like!

I need your invitation. If I had your invitation then I could issue your visa right here, just a signature and you'd have your visa.

But I don't have anything...

The man was looking at me with concern. Everything was crumbling before me like black bread. I tried to gather myself together:

Okay, let me ask you this..., I said to the man, ...How can I get my invitation, I mean can I get another one? What do I have to do?

Well, there're two things you can do. You can either go to the agency that invited you and ask them if they have a copy of the original invitation. If they do then you can make a copy of it and bring the copy to me — make sure they put the company seal on it. With that I can issue your visa.

Back to Erica? At this hour! Buried trolleybus or no, she wouldn't do it. And I wouldn't ask! And even if I could find Dave or Phil, there wasn't enough time...

It's no good. That could take days. And my plane leaves in less than nine hours...

It does?

Yes. What's the second option?

The other option is to go to OVIR.

OVIR?!?

Those are the only two possibilities. OVIR won't be open until Monday. You could leave Monday evening...

It's impossible! I have to be in America by Monday morning. I have to be there for... I need to be there because... well you see... it's an *emergency!*

An emergency?

Yes, Tuesday will be too late. I'll miss it.

I'm sorry.

That's it?

That's it.

There's nothing else that we can do?

Nothing.

My heart sank six feet.

Then the man spoke up:

Well, there is one thing that I can try. I can't give any guarantees....

Of course, of course!

I have to ask my supervisor. It will take a few minutes...

I'll wait here!

The man left and went behind the wall. It was 12:32; I had missed my bus. The African had left and his place had been taken over by the English-language newspaper. The woman with the mop was splashing the floor in front of the intercom and so I stepped aside, walked over to the bench, and without moving the African's newspaper sat on the words.

What was happening? All I wanted was to go home, to close my eyes, to see my mother. And I couldn't...

At 12:55 the man came out of the room. His face expressed sympathy. He spoke slowly:

I talked to my supervisor and there is one thing that we can do....

What?

All you have to do is pay a fine and then I can sign the forms so that you can leave. In fact, if you can pay now, then you'll be able to make your flight tomorrow.

The man smiled again.

How much is the fine? I asked.

Three hundred thousand.

Rubles?!

Again my question was absurd. I stopped and then continued:

My wallet's empty. I don't have any money! Believe me, I would pay but I can't.

...Maybe you could borrow from someone and then pay them back after you return.

I... I don't have anyone.

I would lend you the money myself if I could but...

No, no, I understand. It's not your fault. It's not your fault at all. I shouldn't have lost my visa in the first place.

I stood there, suddenly tired and weak, as if my legs would buckle at any moment. Once again home seemed so far away.

Do you know why it's so expensive? I mean, maybe it's a mistake, maybe there isn't a fine?

If you want I can ask my supervisor...

No! No! Don't go anywhere, please! Just let me think. I need to think. I need to sit down and think and I'll come up with something. There has to be a way to get the money...

The man stood for a few moments, glanced at his watch, then at me:

I need to get back to my work. If you think of something, you can call on the intercom....

It was as if he had thrown a shovelful of dirt on my soul.

...Tell them you already spoke with me: they'll relay the message.

Yeah, sure. Thanks anyway.

The man started to walk away but I called after him:

Excuse me! What's your name? I mean so that I can ask for you when I'm talking to the wall?

It's not important. Just say you spoke with me regarding a visa, They'll know who you mean.

The man smiled a final time and then left.

I sat back down on the bench. The airport was empty. There was not a sound. It was dark. The African was still gone.

And that's when I broke down.

(34)

1:03 a.m.

At that moment I broke down completely. For the first time since I was a child I cried harder than I ever had before. Tears fell into my hands which I used to cover my face. My chest heaved with sobs. Somewhere I understood that I should have been ashamed of the scene I was making in the empty airport, somewhere my mind was telling me that this was not how emotions should be expressed. But my heart couldn't care less. My soul couldn't care less. At that moment, I didn't give a damn what people thought, what they might think; or say; or write. For me it didn't matter that others might point or snicker or condescend. At that moment I cried sincerely and thoroughly, like a widow, like a new child, like a person who is unable to say good-bye...

(35)

Don't cry... , said a voice, Don't cry...

When I looked up I saw the cleaning woman. She was holding her mop in one hand and extending a handkerchief with the other. Don't cry, she said, БУДЕТ, БУДЕТ.

I wiped my eyes. Liquid ran from my nose like spilled milk and I wiped it too.

You need to come back tomorrow morning. After six o'clock. Ivan Petrovich will be on duty.

It won't do any good, I said.

You need to talk to Ivan Petrovich. That one, the one you were talking to, he's always like that! Come back in the morning after six o'clock.

My watch showed one-fourteen. I hadn't slept in thirty-six hours.

I missed my bus, I said, I have nowhere to go.

You can't go home?

I don't have money for a taxi.

How much do you have?

I don't have any.

Nothing? How were you going to pay for the bus...?

But I couldn't answer.

You wait here, said the woman and left me alone on the bench.

When she returned she motioned for me to follow her and together we slipped past the lax security guards, along employee hallways, to a backroom closet that was dimly lit by one dangling bulb. A teapot was on the table, with a small dish of jam and three slices of fresh bread.

Eat, she said, Then get some rest. You need to wake up at six. You go ahead and rest. Tomorrow morning I'll wake you up.

She left, and without drinking the tea, without eating the bread, I let my eyes close for the first time.

(36)

It fits perfectly, said Aunt Helen, Just perfectly!

(37)

6:00 a.m.

Get up! Get up! said the woman: Have some tea!

I got up. The woman had changed into street clothes and I noticed that she was wearing two dangly earrings. Her face was made up. Two naked legs jutted out from under a long winter skirt.

We need to see Ivan Petrovich! said the woman.

I nodded numbly and let her lead me back through the employee hallways.

(38)

Ivan Petrovich was a slightly graying man of forty. His clothes were poor and his face was fixed in a scowl.

Ivan Petrovich, said the lady, This young man has a problem... Maybe you can help him?

I explained the whole thing. When I mentioned OVIR Ivan Petrovich cocked his brow:

He told you to go to OVIR? he asked.

Yes, to get my invitation.
Hmph! OVIR can't help you with that. Let me see your passport...
I gave him the passport. He took it and checked the pages. When he looked up, something seemed to catch his eye:
Your jacket, he asked, Is it real leather?
My jacket?
I think so, I said.
Did you buy it here or there?
I bought it there. I mean it was a gift from my Aunt.
Ivan Petrovich nodded, and without smiling went behind the wall.

(39)

6:26 a.m.

When I told the woman why I needed to go home she looked at me tenderly:

Poor thing..., she said, And how old was she?

Fifty-three I think. Maybe more.

What? You don't even know your own mother's age?

We weren't close.

Don't say that...! It's not true. A person is always closest to his mother. That's not a distance you can choose.

Maybe, I said, But somehow we managed to do it.

The woman stopped as if considering something very important, and then said:

She was very young, your mother.

She had me early, I said.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

No I'm an only child.

Well, that explains everything...

As we spoke, the woman told me proudly that she had two children of her own and even told me their names.

Really? I said when she had finished, I had a girlfriend by that name... she liked potatoes.

A Russian girlfriend?

Yes. It only lasted a few months though.

A few months? Shame on you!

Me?

Shame on you... did you leave her? Did you use her?

No, I just... nobody used anybody, we just sort of got to the point where we understood each other too well for a serious relationship.

It's a pity, she said and then: You know, if you treat them right Russian wives are the best in the world....

Just then Ivan Petrovich came out from behind the wall. His hands were filled with papers. He walked over to us and had started to ask something, but in mid-sentence his eyes caught my jacket again:

You say this jacket was a present from your Aunt? he asked feeling the collar with his thumb and forefinger.

Yes, I said.

Any ideas how much something like this costs?

I told him approximately.

How do you like that! he said, It's even more expensive here than there...!

Ivan Petrovich nodded and handed me my passport. A paper was tucked inside.

Okay, he said, You're ready to go.

I am?

You just need to sign this form here. Just sign right there under my signature....

And that's it? I can leave?

And you can leave.

What about a fine?

I waived your fine for you. But next time be more careful with your visa...

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say something to the man. To the woman. But I was too dumb; I took the visa without thanking them.

Without thanking the woman I left for home.

And only later, in America, when I was standing in black with my head bent and hands clasped before me, only then would I realize what I should give the woman who had helped me. At the least likely of moments I was already planning my return to her..

(40)

7:37 a.m.

But first I had to leave. And it was almost time. My mother was waiting for me. Aunt Helen was waiting. My mind was numb. My body was also numb. I had stopped understanding, but one more thing remained. My hand held the pen thickly as I did my best to fill out the faded Customs declaration:

Name:	NEVER
Citizenship:	BLUE
Country of Destination:	MY MOTHER
Arriving from:	?!?!?
Date:	(1USD=1620RUR)
Purpose of visit:	SLEEP
Luggage:	ZERO PIECES
Currency (U.S.):	ZERO PIECES
Currency (USSR)	TWO KOPECKS

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