

Moscow
January 1, 1998

Book 1. Eleven Yellow Words

(1)



At last I can say that Russia is neither here nor there, but less hopeless than inevitable.

Her people are never high, sometimes tall, often white, but *always* concerned about blacks in America. Seventy-eight percent of them are intelligent and beautiful; the other seventy-eight percent are unconditional and polite.

Kharms was Russian. So is Vadim. The novelist Lev Tolstoy was Russian on his mother's side. And although Alexander Pushkin's grandfather was not Russian *per se*, he did not sing in restaurants. Vladimir Vysotsky, despite being Russian, may very well have sung in restaurants though it is unlikely that he sang very well. Either way, students of history are best not to attempt these songs but should remember that Ivan Susanin, who is more amusing than Mikhail Gorbachev, achieved his glory in the middle of a forest. Then died. Unfortunately, cars of the past century had not yet become accustomed to Russia's roads and would not have been very useful in a forest anyway.

(Gorbachev himself has two cars but when traveling through wooded areas he prefers his cherry-red bicycle because it goes faster than the black one.)



(2)

Six and a half years ago, before I understood all this, before Russia even was Russia, I arrived into Moscow's second Sheremetevo Airport with two suitcases, an empty backpack, and a German-English dictionary that my Aunt Helen had insisted I take.