

Book 4. The Russia Years

(1)

Ask any child in America and they'll tell you: the English alphabet is so well-organized it rhymes. In fact they will probably sing it:

A B C D E F G,
H I J K L M N O P,
Q R S T U V,
W X Y and Z.

But Russian words look oppressive when written with English letters and so an entirely separate alphabet was created. Like its English counterpart, this other alphabet starts out simply enough:

А Б В Г Д Е Ё ...

Then along the way it gets flustered:

... Ж З И Й ...

Gathers its composure:

... К Л М Н О П Р С Т У Ф ...

Only to lose it completely in the end:

... Х Ц Ч Ш Щ Ъ Ы Ь Э Ю Я.

The result of this is that even Russians are hard-pressed to remember the correct order of their own alphabet. In frustration some letters have been cast away; others remain, though they are seemingly irrelevant.

Fortunately, an alphabet is not about its parts, but about how it works as a whole. The important thing is that all the letters are there — in some order — and that if you start with *A* and progress slowly and patiently, letter by letter, and if you don't let the disorder discourage you, then you will eventually end up at *A*.

(2)

A lot of important things can happen in six and a half years. For example:

#1. I find an old Russian coin which I tuck into my wallet. I decide that it will be my link to this new land and vow that as long as I am here the coin will stay with me. In less than a week I have lost my wallet, and with it, the coin.

#17. Although I do not smile or gesticulate, men in black leather jackets accost me with offers to buy rubles, fur hats and, sometimes, black leather jackets; instead, I buy a Russian-language edition of *Anna Karenina* which I carry conspicuously in public and which I conspicuously do not read.

#53. A man shows up at my apartment with my lost wallet. All the money is gone, but the coin is still there as are my passport and the yellow piece of paper. It is the last time I will part with the coin. I offer the man a reward, but he refuses. His nose is red, his breath smells of swallowed vodka. He is about my age and he is unmarried. His name is Vadim.

#78. Turning down a side street not far from the Kremlin I am surprised to meet a black bear lumbering along the sidewalk. Traffic has stopped; a policeman with a whistle is trying to maintain order by yelling and pointing. Suddenly, the bear rears up on his hind legs and roars angrily; bystanders on the sidewalk, in a fright, scurry to get out of its way. But I do not panic. Instead, I walk right up to the bear. I smile at him and toss him a jar of peanut butter which he paws clumsily before smashing open. Gratefully, he eats the contents, his jaws chomping loudly, his lips smacking. I pat his head. He licks my hand. I stroke his tongue. This continues for some

time. Then as if nothing has even happened, he lumbers back through the traffic away from me toward the place where he was before.

#80. One day a female student from the adult group corners me in the hallway after class; she insists that I explain the difference between *high* and *tall*. Her question takes me by surprise — I have never thought about it! — still, I have the presence of mind to lie. There is no difference, I say. Are you sure? she asks. Absolutely! I say. I smile at her. She winks back. I invite her over for dinner. She accepts. I ask what her favorite food is. She tells me. We agree on a time and I am surprised that everything has happened so easily. She is intelligent and polite, though her English is not yet fluent. Later that night I set aside a solar calculator for her. Soon I will fall into deep love. With time her English will improve. Eventually we will break up. These months will fly by like a wounded eagle. But for the moment I have a more immediate problem: Tomorrow is Sunday, the stores will be closed, and by seven o'clock I need to find four kilograms of potatoes.

#91. I get drunk and pass out at a New Year's party.

(3)

In truth it was the redhead and his wife who taught me Russia. From them I learned how to buy potatoes. And how to eat them every single day. The redhead taught me to sneak onto a trolleybus, and that this, for some reason, was a good thing to do. Tanya, who worked for the government, was compelled to disapprove: You kids should live it up while you can, she would warn, because sooner or later your parents are going to come home!

(Tanya, it should be said, was a tax inspector.)

Between my morning and afternoon classes, while his wife was working, the redhead would show me the correct position of the elbow when drinking vodka, and how to sniff a pickle after swallowing to make it smoother. And how, the day after, to chase the bitter dryness of vodka from your throat by swallowing even more vodka.

If only he knew the word that changes and is changed! If only he could help me vomit!

Eventually I began to spend as much time at their small apartment as I did at my own. With time my Russian improved, and we began to speak

less and less English, until finally we spoke none. And in return, I did my very best to explain the fundamentals of democracy; I fielded questions on America's race problem; at their whim I demonstrated my blue passport for inspection....

Time passed. The seasons came and went. Like passengers in the metro they blended together. In the spring we looked for mushrooms; in the fall we found them. In summer we took warm showers at each other's small apartments; and in the dead of winter we swam outdoors in what was then the pool that used to be a cathedral, and which is now the cathedral that used to be a pool.

Happily, we bought bread in stores named "Bread."

We played cards without a full deck.

We tossed kopecks into canals and made naive wishes for the future: the redhead for harmony between black and white Americans; I for democracy in Russia; Tanya for a blue passport.

Sitting in our crowded kitchens, my friends and I talked. And talked. And talked.... About Love. And marriage. About Kharms and Pushkin and the novelist Lev Tolstoy. About the country they had thought America to be. And the one that Russia was so inevitably becoming.

But most of all my friends taught me that I had not been taught. Things that I had known for years were suddenly called into question, and things that I had never known before now seemed worth knowing. Ideas that had once been so simple became impossible to explain. Things that I had never even thought about were forced before me for painful, scrupulous, tedious consideration. *Why did danger smell so good? Why had I so dreaded marriage? Was Gorbachev really as bad as everyone said he was? And was it my imagination or did Russians tie their shoes backwards?*

(4)

#136. I have Russian friends now who tell me that it is not my smile that makes it absolutely clear I am a foreigner; it is the well-thumbed *Anna Karenina*. I put the fat book back on the shelf next to the German-English dictionary and the three solar calculators the size of credit cards.

(5)

As it turned out, the redhead, despite his calm demeanor, was an artist; for months he had been working to finish a larger-than-life-size oil

painting which — except for Tanya — nobody had been allowed to see. The painting had been guarded like a grave, its frame covered in a large sheet and propped up against a wall; it looked both imposing and heavy, and in the small room its size portended a masterpiece.

Tanya, unlike the redhead, was female and fiery, pretty but fiercely passionate. The painting, she told me, had been commissioned by a soon-to-be-opened bank that needed thematic portraits for its lobby. The bank would be called East-West Bank and had promised to pay the redhead a handsome sum upon completion.

My friends had been married for six years when I met them. They lived on the fourth floor of a twelve-story building and although their apartment was small, their marriage seemed to be steadier than most.

(6)

#170. My Russian is still weak and people speak faster than I can listen; with difficulty I can follow a conversation meant for me, but when Russians speak to Russians I understand nothing. To express my ideas, I convert English phrases word for word into Russian that is not really Russian. My friends listen patiently, and when I am finished they shake their heads and tell me that my problem is I know Russian from A to Z. For practice I begin reading Daniil Kharms in the original.

(7)

One day Tanya invited me to dinner. It would be a *special occasion!* she had hinted by telephone, and so I brought an extra bottle of vodka. When I entered the apartment I noticed immediately: the painting had been hung, still covered in the sheet, on the entire breadth of one wall.

It was finished!

Tanya had sent her husband out to buy something, and while we waited for him she addressed me seriously:

As you can see, she said, my husband finished his painting.

That's great.

He wants to show it to you.

Okay

Yeah, but there's a problem. You see he wants you to see his painting but he doesn't want you to know that he wants you to see his painting.

What?

You see, he's very modest and so he can't bring himself to offer to show it to you even though he really wants you to see it.

I see. Well, what if I ask to see it... you know if I'm the one who initiates it?

Oh no! If you ask he'll say no.

Why?

Because that would mean that he wants you to see it. And remember he's modest and doesn't want you to know that he wants you to see it.

It's complicated... he wants me to see his painting but doesn't want me to know that he wants me to see it and so he won't offer to show it to me, and if I ask he'll refuse?

That's right.

So what should we do?

You have to convince him that by showing you his painting he will be doing you a favor, some sort of good. In that case he'll feel that he *has* to show you the painting, that he doesn't have a choice. Do you see what I mean?

Not really.

What you need to do is sort of drop a hint that you're a bit homesick for America...

Homesick! Why?

Just trust me... when you get the chance, try to mention that you are homesick... that you miss your country.

On the other side of the door a key could be heard turning in the lock. With a click the lock snapped open. In walked the redhead:

Hey! How are you! he said.

I'm homesick, I said.

What?

I miss my country.

The redhead stood for a few seconds trying to understand and then, assuming that I had made a mistake with my Russian and being too polite to dwell on it, he simply set his sack on the table:

That's nice, he said.

During dinner the redhead's tone was even more serious than usual. He did not even look toward the painting, let alone speak about it. Nor did I ask. As we ate, we did not talk about art, or work; carefully, we avoided speaking of things that could be considered heavy or imposing. For the most part, our discussion centered around how homesick I was, around

how much I missed my country. But no matter how many times I subtly mentioned it, the redhead didn't react.

You know... I would say, ...I sure am homesick!

Outside, the snow could be seen falling onto the ground. Gently it was covering itself in layers of white.

Well..., Tanya finally prompted.

Well what? the redhead pretended to ask.

Well...! she insisted.

The man crushed out his cigarette and looked at me: My painting's finished, he said.

Really?

Yes, I finished it yesterday.

Can I see it?

No.

Why not?

Because it's not very good. It's finished but it's not very good.

Well you have to show it to someone, don't you? I mean that's what paintings are for, right?

Maybe. Or maybe not. I paint for my personal satisfaction. For the sake of painting.

You're a liar! said Tanya.

I'd really like to see it, I said, Can I?

No.

Please?

No.

Pretty please?

No.

Tanya had been right... he really was modest!

Have I mentioned how homesick I am?

Homesick?

Yes, I miss my country terribly.

Well in that case....

Tanya clapped excitedly. The three of us moved into the living room and the redhead showed me where to stand in front of the picture — where the lighting was best, Tanya explained — and I dutifully stood in that exact spot. As I waited, the man watched my every motion, his silent stare broken only by Tanya's persistent questions:

Are you ready? she asked me.

I was.

Can you see all right? she said.

I could.

Should I get a camera? she asked.

For heaven's sake! the man answered and with a quick downward tug he removed the sheet from the canvas.

I gasped for a second time:

On the right side of the painting was a Russian flag and across from it an American flag. Both were red, white, and blue. But protruding through the Russian flag, as if it had torn its way through the cloth, was a pinkish hand; this pink hand extended out and clasped a black hand which had seemingly ripped through the American flag. The two hands clasped each other in friendship, a very evident display of harmony and reconciliation between us and them; here and there; black and pink. I stared respectfully but silently. Both the redhead and Tanya were looking at my reaction. At last, the man spoke up:

The flag on the left represents America, he told me.

It usually does, I agreed.

The black hand, he explained, stands for the ethnic diversity of your society.

I see, I said.

Tanya beamed.

Can I ask you a question? I said.

The man nodded.

It's about the black hand. I understand that it represents the ethnic diversity of our culture and all, but why...I mean...what's with the wrist shackles?

Obviously the man had thought this through:

The shackles, he said, are slavery and oppression. Slavery of the past and oppression of the modern day.

I see.

Do you like it?

Of course, I said.

Would you like to have it?

I smiled.

I want you to have it, he said.

Me?

Yes. A souvenir from my country to yours, from me to you.

Thank you, I mean I'm honored but I can't... I mean I couldn't...

No, really. I want you to have it.

Thanks, but... what about the bank that was supposed to buy it?

The damn bank, said Tanya, decided to change its name to North-South Bank!

So they don't want the painting?

That's right.

...And that's why I want to give it to *you*.

It's thoughtful on your part, but where would I hang it?

On your wall.

I'd have to move the rug that's already there...

Well, then, on the other wall.

It won't fit.

How do you know?

Because it's way too big.

Look do you want it or not?

I smiled again.

The man looked at me and then suddenly became silent and I understood that my smile had slighted him. I started to say something to right the situation, but didn't know what to say. Awkwardly, neither of us said a word. He could not move, and I did not know how...

It was Tanya who broke the silence:

A toast! she said and handed each of us a shotglass of vodka: To friendship between nations and peoples of the world!

...Black and white! I offered.

The redhead and I touched glasses. For the first time since I had known him, he smiled. His teeth were sparse and misshapen. Hideously deformed. And despite everything, they meant more to me than any teeth that I had ever seen.

That night it took all three of us to carry the painting to my apartment, first by metro, then by bus, and then the last few feet by foot....

(8)

#205. A passerby with an unlit cigarette in his mouth stops me to ask for a match; I apologize for not smoking and continue on.

#236. Whenever I drink vodka a dry bitterness backs up in my throat. Each time this happens I would give anything to throw up; but I cannot and the poison gurgles precariously and sickeningly between my throat and stomach. I persevere, drinking insistently and with determination.

*

(9)

(10)

After we had hung the painting in my living room, the redhead went to buy more vodka; Tanya and I sat in my kitchen talking. Tanya began the conversation by asking me about my family, if I had anybody waiting for me back home.

Well, I told her, There's Aunt Helen — but aside from that I really don't have anyone.

No wife?

None.

No girlfriend?

No.

What about your parents?

My father died when I was small...

Oh, I'm sorry... And your mother?

I don't have a mother, I said.

Tanya looked at me strangely, started to say something, but then changed her mind. Grabbing a worn pack of Marlboros, she tapped out a final cigarette and lit up:

Do you miss your Aunt?

Of course.

Do you talk to her often?

Well, yes. Although not as much anymore. We mostly write letters. She calls once a month.

I'll bet she misses you a lot.

She does. She's just waiting for this year to end so that I'll come back home. To stability, green vegetables, things like that.

Tanya laughed:

Just imagine — most Russians are trying to get to America, and here you are doing the opposite!

And at that moment I felt extremely proud: Proud of my poor knowledge of Russian; proud that I had emigrated the wrong way; that I was getting by; proud that I was *here*, which meant that I had so distanced myself from *there*.

I'm not like most people, I lied.

Tanya was holding her cigarette in between her fingers and with her thumb lightly tapping away flakes of ash:

You know I've been wanting to ask you what ever made you decide to leave America for Russia?

I don't know.

How can you not know?

I'm not sure... I just like the idea of being here.

Yes but there has to be something that brought you...?

*Irony... Danger... The Russian circus! She couldn't possibly understand...
I myself didn't understand any of it!*

...There has to be something that's keeping you?

It's hard to say, I told her, There're a lot of things...

Can you give me an example?

Sure. In fact, I can give you all eleven...

And here I pulled out the sheet of legal paper from my wallet. As I dictated the eleven yellow examples one by one Tanya listened with interest, then asked:

So you're trying to find these words?

No I'm not. The German man said that I shouldn't seek them, that they would come themselves. So I guess I'm just waiting for them to come.

How long do you think you'll wait?

I don't know — as long as it takes I suppose...

Have you found any of these words yet?

Only one.

Really — which one?

When I announced the word, Tanya laughed. Then she flicked another piece of ash from her cigarette:

You should be careful, though.

How do you mean?

You can't express the Russian Soul with words — you can't understand it using logic.

What's that?

Logic?

No, the *Russian Soul*. What is it?

You've never heard the term before?

No, I haven't.

It's difficult to explain...

Can you try, please?

Tanya propped her chin in her hand. She thought deeply and took a long drag of her cigarette. Then, without exhaling, she gave expression to her Russian Soul, the words wispy and white. For a second it swirled in the air, then disappeared.

It's beautiful, I said.

Yes, she said proudly, I guess it is...

Our conversation lulled. Finally, I broke the silence:

Hey Tanya, I said, You know Russian, right?

Of course, she said.

You see I heard a word today and I couldn't find it in the dictionary...

Which word is it?

I'm not sure if I heard it right... just a minute... I wrote it down...!

While I fished through my pockets for the paper, Tanya spoke up:

You know, she said, your Russian has improved noticeably.

Thanks.

No really it seems like you understand most of what we say.

I try, I said and with that I pulled out the paper from my pocket:

There it is! I said, That's the word that I couldn't understand. I'm not sure I spelled it adequately. In any case it wasn't in the dictionary...

And unfolding the crumpled piece of paper, I handed the word to Tanya:

ХУЎІТВОЮМАТБЯЦІ

For some time Tanya stared at the paper without reaction. When she looked up at me I noticed that her ears had turned redder than a balance sheet:

Where did you hear that word? she asked.

Standing in line for potatoes. Did I spell it right?

Almost...

Can you tell me what it means?

I can try, if you really want...

I'd appreciate it.

Tanya, after a few moments consideration, crushed out her cigarette in her ashtray:

Okay, she said, Answer me the following question — what do Americans say when something goes unexpectedly wrong?

You mean when something bad happens?

Well, yes. When something goes wrong unexpectedly. What do Americans say in these cases?

I told her.

Good, now what do they say when the exact opposite happens — in other words, what do Americans utter when things go *expectedly* wrong?

What?

What do you say when things go wrong *expectedly*?

I don't know.

Well, Russians do. And so we say x... x...

Хуёптвоюматбляц?

Well, yeah.

Right then the door opened, in walked the redhead with a new bottle of vodka. Brushing the snow off his coat, he set the bottle on the table along with a strange pack of cigarettes and a crumpled wad of rubles.

It's cold out there! he said happily.

We nodded.

The redhead looked at the table:

Has Tanya told you the "terrible" news yet? he asked.

No, I said, she hasn't.

You haven't?

No, she said, I haven't.

Then, what *have* you been talking about here without me?

Nothing..., said Tanya.

...We've been discussing the Russian Soul, I agreed.

The Russian Soul?

But here Tanya waved off the suggestion:

Oh we were just saying that it's impossible for a foreigner to understand the Russian Soul. That is, without having things go *expectedly* wrong first.

The redhead nodded compassionately.

Tanya nodded in agreement.

I also nodded:

So what's this "terrible news"? I asked.

News? What news? Oh yes, *news*...!

And without speaking the man pointed at the table.

(11)

#255. The ruble begins to lose all value versus other currencies (1USD=125RUR). My salary is only one hundred fifty dollars a month but it is paid in dollars; as inflation soars the population around me sinks into poverty. I buy tickets to the Bolshoi Ballet for five cents, to the circus

for ten. I have more money than I can possibly spend and flush with shame when passing rows of old women pawning cheese in two-hundred-gram wedges.

(12)

The terrible news was that after many months the Marlboro cigarettes had run out.

The redhead returned to the cheap Prima cigarettes that he had smoked before he met me. He didn't seem to mind the change, but by then Tanya had become used to Marlboro and couldn't bring herself to smoke the filterless Soviet cigarettes. Unfortunately, Tanya's salary was barely enough to live on, so Marlboros were out of the question. The redhead continued to paint pictures but at that time the country didn't even collect taxes... let alone *art*.

I have an idea! I said and before anyone could object I had my scarf on and was out the door. When I came back I put three packs of Marlboros on the table:

How much do I owe you? said the redhead grimly.

Nothing, I answered, I just happened to find these on the street along with a two-hundred-gram wedge of cheese.

You *found* them? Tanya looked at me suspiciously.

That's right, I said, Right there in the middle of the street. And since I don't smoke you might as well take them off my hands.

What about the cheese? said Tanya.

You can keep that too. I'm lactose intolerant! I get violently ill from milk products.

Tanya laughed.

It's true! I reassured her.

Thanks anyway, said the redhead, But I'll smoke these....

And he took the Soviet cigarettes into his hands and looked at me with a look that I would understand only when it was too late.

As we sat around the table, our conversation rose and fell until it settled into a long drawn-out silence. Tanya was smoking a Marlboro. The redhead was smoking Prima. As I did not smoke, my hands were conspicuously free and so I smiled emptily. The awkward stillness lasted a half-minute. Then Tanya's face lit up:

Do you know what we say about these types of silences?

I shook my head.

When there's a long silence like that, you know like the one that we just had... when that happens we say that it means a policeman is being born.

The redhead didn't laugh:

I've heard the same thing about tax inspectors, he said.

Tanya didn't laugh.

Again the conversation died. And again a long drawn-out silence.

Another pause. Another awkward stillness. Maybe she was right? Maybe that's why there were so many policemen here...?

The silence lasted an entire precinct, until at last the redhead spoke up:

While I was gone did Tanya ask you the question?

No, I said, she didn't.

You didn't?

No, she said, I didn't.

Should we ask it now? he asked.

Don't ask me, she said turning to me, Ask him...

The man turned to me:

Can I ask you something? he said.

Sure.

Do you mind if we ask you a question? he said.

Of course not, I answered and smiled unsurely at the question.

If you don't want us to ask you the question, Tanya said, just say so.

No really — no problem.... Fire away.

The couple looked at each other cautiously and then back at me. I continued to smile as if to encourage their question. It was the redhead who expressed the words that they, apparently, were both eager to scrape off their chests. As he spoke his eyes sparkled tenderly, but the force of his words knocked the smile from my face:

(13)

#280. I am amazed as old women one after another fall from an apartment window. They fall and fall and when they have stopped falling I take the well-thumbed *Anna Karenina* from the upper shelf of my cabinet. A solar calculator comes with it hitting the floor with a thud. After checking to see that it is working properly, I put it back on the shelf next to the other two calculators.

#285. The ruble continues to fall (1USD=150RUR). By now the monthly salary of a tax inspector is less than the price of a carton of Marlboros.

Circus tickets cost between two and three cents but are still considered a luxury. Fifteen-kopeck coins go for three rubles a piece and are sold by men in black leather jackets, leaving old women to pawn cheese in one-hundred-gram wedges. By day I am a rich foreigner frolicking self-consciously in the spoils of inflation. At night I buy cheese that I cannot eat; when my Russian friends talk about politics I try to change the subject.

(14)

Why is it that you smile so much? he said.

What? Me? That's your question?!

The redhead continued:

I think we've known you long enough to be honest with you, he said.

That's right, said Tanya, We wouldn't bring this up if we didn't know you and like you...

That's right, said the man, We were just wondering if you could explain why you smile all the time.

Why I smile? I don't smile all the time.

Actually you do.

No I don't!

Yes you do... you're smiling right now!

I am?

You are.

That's right. You see it's just that sometimes when you smile it makes us feel a bit uncomfortable because we can't understand why you're smiling. It seems false to us.

False?

Yes, as if you don't really mean it. As if that's just the natural condition of your face — a smile. We've been wanting to ask you for some time.

How long was a long time?! How many months had I been smiling in vain?

I don't know, I said, I never really thought about it, I mean I just do it when I think it's right to do it, I mean when I feel like it. I guess it just happens by itself, when I want it to happen.

Do you ever *not* want to smile?

Well, of course I don't smile then. I mean usually, although I guess sometimes I smile then too.

Okay let's take the metro for example. *Nobody* smiles in the metro! But for some reason you do. It's strange for us. Not to mention a bit embarrassing.

It's strange, well, yes it would be strange for people who have never ever smiled at anything in their lives...

Now, don't take this personally, we're just trying to understand your position. You see, if you smile all the time then how is it possible to express true happiness, that is if there's already a smile plastered on your face? How can you express your true emotions through that smile if it never goes away?

I had surprised myself with my own outburst and this made me even more awkward.

But this time I knew how to save the situation:

Where's that vodka? I said.

The man pulled the bottle from the table and filled my glass. Tanya went to the kitchen to get some pickles. When she came back the man raised his vodka, but before we could touch glasses, he stopped:

You know I'm always the one who says the toasts. I think it's about time that you try.

But I don't know how! I protested.

Just say whatever comes to your head.

Whatever comes to my head? Are you sure you want to hear whatever comes to my head?

Absolutely. Just say the first thing. If you think too long then it won't be sincere.

And so sitting there with the glass of vodka in my hand, I said the first sincere words that came into my head:

To vodka! I said.

We touched glasses. And as he knocked back the hundred grams I thought I saw tears form in the redhead's eyes:

TO ВОДКА! he said.

(15)

#292. It is the single happiest day of my life: no one seems to notice that I am a foreigner; no one seems to care; in a store a salesgirl smiles at me for no reason; a friend compliments me on my poor knowledge of Russian; but he does not ask me about blacks; he does not pose any questions that begin with "Have you read...?"; when I return home the sun is shining; the elevator has been fixed; the lady next door has conceded to take her jars out of the common area; and on my kitchen table there is an unopened bottle of bootleg vodka. And after they are finished — when I have swallowed

and re-swallowed the happiest day of my life — I ask myself the question:
In America would I have appreciated such a day?

(16)

By late winter Tanya had become tired of watching us drink day in and day out:

Why don't we do something different tonight, she said.

Like what? we asked.

Something unusual. Something that we haven't done before.

Like what? we asked.

I don't know. Something we've never even thought about doing.

We could drink *wine*, I said but at this suggestion the redhead looked at me disapprovingly.

We could look for mushrooms, said the redhead.

We've already done that, I countered.

Not at night!

I'm serious, said Tanya, All you guys do is drink.

That's not all, said the redhead, Sometimes we fall down.

But Tanya was not even listening to us: I have an idea..., she said

What's that?

The circus!

The what?

Remember how you once said you'd always wanted to see the Russian circus? Well let's go tonight!

Sounds fine with me, I said.

But the redhead objected:

It's too expensive, he said.

I know, Tanya persuaded, but then how often do we go to the circus?

We never go, he answered, because it's too expensive.

Hey let it be my treat, I offered.

No! said the redhead, We can pay for ourselves: under my bed is some money I've been saving to buy the color white...

Tanya jumped up and down and clapped her hands giddily — Tanya, it should be remembered, was a tax inspector — and excused herself to change clothes. Putting on my jacket I noticed that the redhead wasn't moving:

Aren't you coming? I asked him.

Take your time, he said, she'll be in there for at least a half-hour.

And he poured out another round of vodka.

(17)

#301. My first year in Russia is over: my contract ends. Aunt Helen eagerly makes my flight arrangements back home. She informs me that she has talked to my ex-boss about getting my old job back; he promises three-and-a-half percent more stability. Even my mother has mentioned wanting to see me. But as usual Aunt Helen has been unlucky with her timing. *After yesterday, how could I return?* And besides, I have only found three out of eleven words. My shelf is Marlboroless, but full of pantyhose and lubricated condoms. Not to mention the German-English dictionary! Aunt Helen cries when I try to explain all this. The institute extends my contract for another year on the condition that I will be more conscientious toward my work. That night I mark the milestone alone in my room with a bottle of vodka and a married woman who is finally beginning to speak to me.

(18)

An hour later Tanya came out; the redhead and I had already finished off half the bottle.

Let's go! she said.

Let's go, we said.

(19)

#306. Over coffee a friend asks if I am bothered by the smoke from his cigarette; I smile falsely and say, no.

#311. The ruble falls (1USD=250RUR)...

#335. A passerby with an unlit cigarette in between his fingers stops me to ask for a match; I apologize profusely for not smoking and continue on.

#340 ...and falls (1USD=480RUR)...

(20)

By the time Tanya had changed clothes, it was early spring and the entire city was covered with wet. Rain rolled through the streets and into the underpass near the circus, filling it with water.

Tanya's mood had changed as well, and now she was obviously frustrated. Her makeup had been smudged by the rain. Her evening dress was sprinkled with brown mud. Standing in the ankle-deep water, she held up the sides of her dress above her high-heels and looked at the redhead angrily. She started to speak, but he knew her well enough to anticipate her words:

How was I supposed to know? he said and pointed at the flooded underpass.

You're always taking me the wrong way, she answered, Always...!

The redhead groaned:

In America do you have impossible women, too?

Yes, I said no longer smiling.

Tanya brushed off a slice of mud from her dress:

Oh so *I'm* the one who's impossible!

The redhead shrugged his shoulders but didn't smile.

You know I read an article, said Tanya, that in America seventy-eight percent of all women are feminists. Is that true?

I'm not so sure, I said, that figure seems awfully high...

But I *read* it!

When she spoke Tanya looked at me convincingly.

Well, if you read it then I guess...

In our country, she continued, we don't have feminists but women often make more money than their husbands. In America is that normal, that is, for a woman to earn more than her husband?

It's not unheard of, I said.

...And then for her to come home and take care of the children? Do American wives have to take care of the children after working all day?

We don't have children, said the redhead.

I shifted uncomfortably once again. Tanya shook off the muddy water from her shoes:

You are absolutely right, she answered, But that is no thanks to you. When's the last time you even *thought* about using...

She did not finish. A voice had interrupted her from behind:

What a nightmare! it said.

The voice belonged to an old woman who had approached the puddle and was looking at the collection of water in disbelief. Shaking her head, she sighed hopelessly:

What a nightmare! said the woman and looked at us, What a nightmare!

Just then, from behind, a man came up to study the puddle. He looked at the water deeply and seriously, stroking his beard, appraising the situation:

What a horror! he said.

The old woman agreed with him but objected anyway:

It's a nightmare! she said.

A horror, he answered.

A nightmare!

Horror!

Nightmare...!

I turned to my friends. In the background the woman and man could be heard sighing at each other:

Maybe we should leave, I suggested, You know we could go back up and try to find another way. I'm sure there has to be an underpass that's not so flooded.

But before they could answer, a second beardless man came up and getting a good look at the scene, sighed deeply at the redhead:

What an absolute lack of light!

The redhead shrugged his shoulders at the man. Tanya picked at the mud on her dress. I stood deciding whether to smile. Only the heated words of the arguing couple could be heard.

Standing there, each of us tried to cope with the situation as best we could. The second man was the first to give in, shrugging his shoulders sadly and setting off dejectedly for home. The old woman shook her head. The other man suggested laying rocks and boards across the water, and left to find some. But as soon as he returned, we recognized his attempt to be futile: the water was too deep, and although the man did his best, the boards floated away and the large rock simply sunk like a stone to the bottom of the puddle, slowly, until it was wet and out of sight.

Maybe we could just leave and find another way, I said but no one was listening to me. The old woman least of all; she was busy coping in her own way:

What a nightmare! she offered, What a nightmare! Things didn't used to be like this in *the old days*.

First of all, objected the man, it's not a nightmare it's a horror. And second of all, what "old days" are you talking about?

The good old days. Before... before...

Disgustedly, the woman swept her arm around to indicate what, in her opinion, had come after *before*: the puddle, the mud, the dejected back of the man who had remained circusless, the foreigner in expensive blue jeans.

Before *what?* the man insisted.

Before... before...

The woman seemed like she would burst, but then she drove her point home:

Before Gorbachev! said the woman, Before that bastard and all his ideas! He's the one that sold our country. He's the one that caused Russia to become Russia...

Tanya could stand it no more and again jumped in:

If you could be so kind, she said angrily, as to tell me exactly what it is that he ruined? What thriving country did he spoil? At your age, grandma, you should know better than anyone — Just remember how things used to be. At least now we can say that we have food in the stores. Now we can travel. Now our children have a future....

(21)

#359. I lose my visa.

(22)

Future? said the woman, What future? In the old days we knew better than to talk about the future — there was no future, but I always got my pension. And that was all I needed. And then next thing you know reforms here, reforms there. Gorbachev this, Gorbachev that. And what did it get us in the end? What does a poor pensioner like me get from it? Not my pension — that's for sure — I haven't received that for three months. And I'll be lucky to get it at all. And even if I do get my pension, what can it buy me? a few small wedges of cheese? a head of cabbage? If I weren't still healthy enough to plant my own potatoes outside my yard, if I didn't grow my own carrots in the vacant lot across from my apartment building, if it weren't for the jars of marinated cabbage under my bed... then what would I have? What other alternative would there be but to just lay myself down quietly and...

She did not finish because suddenly from the other side of the tunnel we heard a loud echoing voice shouting, Wait! Wait! and watched in amazement as a man came running at full stride through the water. In the dim light we could see his silhouette expanding. He was trailing something behind him and as he ran, raising his knees up to his chest, chunks of water splashed around him. When he got closer, he slowed to a walk and swung a small wagon into view:

The man was wearing waterproof boots and for a fee, he said, he would transport us in his wagon dry and happy to the other end of the underpass.

When the old woman heard the price she shook her head:
What a nightmare! she said.

The man next to her also shook his head, but took exception to her words:

What a horror, he said.

As the two argued, I reached into my pocket for my wallet, which at that moment contained approximately two hundred fifty dollars and two kopecks.

What are you doing? said the redhead.

I want to pay him.

Did you hear how much he's charging?

It's not a lot.

He's a swindler!

But he has water-proof boots.

He should be ashamed of himself asking for so much money.

Look It's no big deal. I can pay for it, It's really not a lot of money.

Maybe where you're from it's not a lot of money, but here...

...Let me pay, I said and opened my wallet....

Don't let him! Tanya told her husband, Don't let him pay!

But why?! I have dollars. It's not a lot of money for me. It's nothing....

Out of the question, said Tanya, Paying is a man's job.

I looked at her inquisitively.

He's not a man? the redhead protested.

Well no he's not.

I'm not?

No, she said, you're not — you're a foreigner.

I felt puzzled for my masculinity, and slighted that she had called me a foreigner. The redhead felt even worse; reluctantly he opened his wallet as if to pay.

But when he separated the wallet it became clear to everyone that he did not have even close to what the man was charging.

I'll get it, I said decisively and handed the man in boots a worn one-dollar bill.

The man's eyes lit up.

...And keep the change! I said to make my point.

The man thanked me profusely.

And with that Tanya climbed into the wagon. She did not thank me. The redhead thanked me weakly, but then became silent; he did not utter a single word the rest of the evening....

At the circus the three of us sat in silence. The performance was tense and seemed to last forever. Clowns ran after each other. Big men lifted big things. Black bears stood upside down.

(23)

#402 ...and falls (1USD=820RUR)...

(24)

Back at their apartment, Tanya went straight to bed — it was late and unlike the two of us she had a job that she could not be late for. In her absence the redhead grew sullen. Our conversation went from pink to gray, and then ultimately, to black. Sitting in the small kitchen, he lit cigarette after cigarette — always Prima — picking the stray pieces of tobacco from the tip of his tongue.

You know what I think sometimes? he asked and didn't wait for me to answer: Sometimes I think about getting out of this place.

Yeah me too, I said, that damn faucet...

No, he said, I don't mean *this* place, I mean this *place*.

What do you mean?

Leaving Russia.

What!

The man blew out a cloud of smoke.

But why? I asked.

There's no future here. Not for Tanya. Not for me. Who needs tax inspectors in this country? Who needs artists?

Don't be silly, I said trying to comfort him, There's not a country in the world that doesn't need tax inspectors.

The man winced.

Besides, where would you go?

Where would I go...

The redhead was squinting his eyes from the smoke. After a long pause he took a deep drag on the cigarette and answered in a soft voice, his words as gray as change:

I'd go *there*.

I looked over my shoulder but *there* was not there:

Where's that? Where *is* there?

What difference does it make? There is *not here*. There is... *there!*

And the man smiled again, this time hopelessly. As if to show how far this distance really was, he smiled in a way that I never could.

Hey don't think about it, I said.

But the redhead was inconsolable. Through the smoke forming between us, I looked at the man who had shown me so much:

Really, I said, It's not so bad. It's not as bad as it seems. Just remember everything that's right with the world, just be thankful for everything you have to be thankful for...

And I held up my glass of vodka.

Again it seemed that tears were welling up in his eyes, but this time of a different kind:

The bottle's empty, said the man and put it on the floor.

It is, isn't it. Not a problem... I'll go get some more.

If it's okay I'd like to be alone for a while.

No that's all right, I'll be fine. I have a bottle at home...

And with that I took my fat book, my sunglasses, and my overflowing wallet, and stepped outside into the warm summer night.

(25)

#410. For Russia 1993 was a turbulent year.

Inflation continued to ravage the savings of many Russians, turning pensioners into paupers and liberals into conservatives.

In the summer of this year (1USD=1050RUR) it was announced that currency reform would be implemented under the auspices of former president Mikhail Gorbachev's successor. In other words, the money now in circulation would soon be worthless. *This time* officially. Fearing the loss of their savings and desperate to obtain tangible goods before it was too late, people resorted to drastic measures. Some bought live chickens for ten times their real value. Others, meanwhile, were less fortunate and had to buy live chickens for fifteen times their real value. Still others — those high-ranking officials with political clout and reliable connections in banks — were able to reap huge profits by *selling* live chickens for ten to fifteen times their real value.

The city was in a panic. Chickens were everywhere. Thousands of people lost their life savings. Hundreds lost their savings *again*. Again the unrepeatable was being repeated.

A crisis was inevitable.

In October of that year, tanks were ordered into the center of Moscow. This time they were Russian tanks. But they were just as formidable. And this time they did not remain silent. Sadly, the country was divided. *And just when it seemed that Russia had finally become Russia...!*

By now I had Russian friends, most of whom did not have blue passports. Danger, I realized then, was not a game. It is as serious as slavery. As irreversible as emigration.

This time I did not grin. There was nothing to savor. I had lived in Russia too long to be smug.

And now I had something to lose.

(26)

...On the *other* hand, weddings and tanks have the same basic purpose: that is, to force change; or at least the prospect for change. For six and a half years it seemed that I might never have to attend a wedding. But now I understand that like everything it was only a matter of time.

(27)

#421. At a fancy hotel the Russian guard at the door assumes that I am Russian and stops me before I can enter; refusing to smile, I flash him the thumb-worn *Anna Karenina* and enter unimpeded.

#430. A passerby with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth stops me to ask for a match; I light his cigarette with a new disposable lighter.

(28)

Once outside, my thoughts rambled and I found myself wandering lost among *the* and *a*, somewhere between Primas and Marlboros, but still closer to the American Dream than to the Russian Soul.

But what was the Russian Soul? And where could I find it? And why were Russians so convinced that they were the most spiritual people in the world... that they were the smartest? Didn't they realize that Americans were the smartest? Granted, Russia had invented vodka; but it was America that had invented peanut butter! Sure, they had a rich tradition of poetry; but we had an even richer tradition of toilet paper. And for raw ingenuity, could the Moscow metro — even though it was the world's finest — really be compared with the feat of engineering that produced American democracy...?

The soles of my shoes burned as I walked on the blazing sidewalk. In the distance I saw a kiosk that looked to be open.

...But maybe I was wrong! Maybe Russians really were the smartest people on earth? After all, it had been proven statistically that all important inventions had been created either by Russians, or — in the few remaining cases — by Americans who had immigrated from Russia. And that despite what I had been told for years it wasn't America that had played the decisive role in all world wars; now I was learning that it was Russia who had suffered relentlessly, thereby forcing the enemy under its own weight to become soft and thin. In truth it was Russia, not America, that was responsible for western civilization...

I stopped before a kiosk:

Two bottles of vodka, I told the man behind the metal bars and he handed me a tall bottle whose label slipped off when I grabbed it.

(29)

#456. Between lessons a Russian student asks if she may smoke; I laugh without smiling and say, Go ahead I'm used to it! I light her cigarette with my disposable lighter.

(30)

I shoved one bottle in each pocket and started back.

But wait a minute..., I thought, *Russia isn't even in the West...!*

I stopped in my tracks. Something had occurred to me. I went back to the man who had given me the bottle of vodka:

Do you have any cigarettes? I asked.

The man pointed at the half of his display that was filled with cigarettes. In my haste I had only seen the half filled with alcohol.

Primas? he asked.

No no that's the whole point. I need Marlboros. Only Marlboros. He can buy Primas himself.

And counting out all the money in my wallet, I bought forty-eight packs of Marlboro cigarettes.

(31)

#460. I watch with horror as a married woman throws herself in front of a moving train. I have lived in Russia long enough to understand what

it means, and the image stays in my mind for many months. Then I start *War and Peace*.

#463. At home my future ex-landlord asks me why, if I don't smoke, do I carry a lighter at all times; the question strikes me as logical and within a week I have begun smoking.

#533. But I still can't get used to vodka. The bitter dryness backs up and I do not fight it as much as encourage it. As if to spite me, it remains in my throat. I vow that I will learn to love vodka even if it injures me. I drink relentlessly. I disappear for days at a time. My teaching job is in jeopardy, and still I cannot make myself vomit. I drink anyway, stubbornly and persistently.

(32)

The redhead's apartment was a ways from the metro, and walking the distance I began to notice how short the days had grown. How cold it now was. How badly underdressed I had become: the end of my second end of summer. *Why had the redhead mentioned leaving? Was it a joke? Or was he serious? It did seem that his frame of mind had darkened lately. That during the last few months he had become as icy as a summer shower. For some reason his eyes had stopped sparkling altogether. He hadn't smiled since he'd smiled hopelessly. He hadn't smiled hopefully since we toasted his picture. But why? What had happened during the last year, aside from knowing me, to make him so discouraged...?*

(33)

#544... and falls (1USD=1510RUR)...

(34)

...It was as if he were bearing some sort of deep-seated grudge. Against me. Against everything. Hadn't he told me once that he resented America with its blue passports, green money, and black problems? Hadn't he stopped painting? Hadn't he begun to grit his teeth when speaking about the number three? But most of all, it seemed, hadn't he grown to hate the country that Russia was becoming. Even more — it turned out — than

the country it had once been! Could that be it? Could it be that some part of him had said farewell to the country that we had all naively believed it would become....?

(35)

#560. On the way home I am passed by a wedding procession — three ticker-taped Zhigulis filled with laughing teenagers in black and white. I remember the superstition that this will inevitably bring misfortune.

(36)

When I arrived back to the redhead's apartment it was a gray autumn morning. Tanya had already gone to work and I found the redhead sitting alone in his kitchen. When I put the pile of cigarettes on the table, the redhead did not thank me. He just picked through them distractedly and listlessly. He had lit a cigarette of his own but had seemingly forgotten about it; its ash crept toward his unfiltered fingers and I waited for it to fall. As he spoke he tapped the ash into an old coffee can:

Why do you always bring us cigarettes?

I know that you like them.

If you wanted, you could bring Primas.

But I know that Tanya...

Take them back! We don't need them, Take them back.

With a swipe of his arm he flung the cigarettes off the table onto the floor.

Then without warning the man's voice became calmer than I had ever seen it, his words slow and carefully chosen, as if he had spoken them many times before:

You think you're better than me because you have money, he said.

It was not a question, so I did not answer. Through the window a light rain could be seen settling over the city and I was thankful that I had brought my umbrella.

In truth, the man never actually pronounced these words; and the words he did pronounce were spoken over the course of several months. But the result was the same: the man never called me after that; Tanya never called. Suddenly and unjustly, I had lost my first Russian friend....

I had lost my first friends because of Marlboros.

*

(37)

#561. In the middle of winter I leave unexpectedly for America. Two weeks later I hang up the phone, still ringing, still unanswered.

#590... and falls (1USD=2040RUR) ...and falls (1USD= 2810RUR)...

#613. Strangers compliment me on my Russian, saying that my accent is almost undetectable. Now I know Russian from *A* to *Я* with the exception of *X*. In other words, my speech is correct but dull, sickeningly proper, and unnecessarily cumbersome as if I were the novelist Lev Tolstoy struggling to carry an oversized mattress; for practice I buy Vladimir Vysotsky's cassettes and memorize the lyrics.

#636 ...and falls (1USD=3780RUR)...

#697. A letter arrives from America postmarked more than three years earlier. No one can believe it when I tell them. Some Russian students suggest that it is unprecedented, but I remind them that there have been cases when letters were received up to twenty and thirty years after they were mailed. They laugh and say, Those letters were probably mailed to Russia, too!

#732. The ruble falls and falls then holds steady then falls then holds steady then falls again before holding and then falling (1USD=4850RUR). Prices climb so high versus the dollar that I have forgotten that they were once cheap. The price of a red rose rises to almost ten dollars. A taxi ride can cost up to fifty if it's from the airport. A cab *to* the airport is almost as expensive and so most people prefer to take the metro.

(38)

The calculators were my downfall.

(#80; #89; #661; #662)

I gave the first one to a student of mine from the adult class. She was intelligent, polite, and loved to talk in English about a wide range of subjects: everything from Russian literature to American literature. Sitting in my cold kitchen, she would confide to me in English the deepest darkest secrets of her Soul. In English that improved daily, she would pour out

her heart and like a trolleybus driver I would offer my cup. We talked and talked and talked... our conversations sometimes carrying us through the night and into my morning classes. Of course we would do other things. But mostly we would talk, that is to say, she would talk in English and I would correct her mistakes without thinking. In return she would talk some more, and ignore my shortcomings in *the other things*. This continued for several weeks until one day when it felt just right she whispered, Okay!

The months passed, or more truthfully, they flew by like an eagle. It seemed that it would last forever. And in fact everything went smoothly until she became fluent and stopped making mistakes. I stopped correcting her. She stopped coming over. I stopped inviting her. She stopped accepting. Not long after that we realized something was wrong. Not long after *that* I realized we had broken up.

Alone in my room I became obsessed with the loss. Gone were the conversations in English — the forgotten article here; a dangling participle there; a “Sit please, here...”; a “go to there”... Holding an inverted calculator in my hand, I typed 5507 and pondered the letters until the night erased them.

And in the morning, disgusted with myself, I threw the calculator against a wall that was still blank but would soon look heavy and imposing...

A long time passed before I could even think about solar calculators.

But then, just when everything seemed as hopeless as history, it happened: I fell in love again (1USD=4920RUR). This woman was also intelligent and polite and loved her solar calculator so much that I gave her another one which she loved even more. I loved her. And she loved me. She also loved restaurants. And taxis. Not to mention European clothes and red roses that were longer than my salary. By now prices were rising fast. But, thankfully, the dollar was keeping pace. Spring was just beginning. I was in love with someone who was in love with someone who was in love...

It seemed that it would last forever.

But then without warning the inevitable occurred: *the ruble stabilized!* Everyone was in shock. The dollar lost its value versus the ruble... It's complicated, something about a corridor, something about... I don't understand it myself! All I know is that right after this she left me for a man who had a thick wad of hard currency and whose accent was stronger than mine — in other words, a German.

I was despondent. Desolated. I waited anxiously and desperately for the ruble to drop. But to no avail. I was lost. I was newly poor. And now, once again, I was alone. My world — the one that I had known — had been turned upside-down like a cheap solar calculator....

It would be years before I smiled again.

(39)

#756. My life in Russia (in order of importance):

<u>1991</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1993</u>	<u>1994</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>1997</u>
1.Democracy	1.Love	1.Danger	1.(tie) Irony	1.Love	1.Democracy	1.Irony
2.Danger	2.Democracy	2.Irony	Love	2.Irony	2.Irony	2.Marriage
3.Irony	3.(tie) Irony	3.Love	3.Danger	3.Danger	3.(tie) Love	3.Democracy
4.Love	Logic	4.Democracy	4.Logic	4.Logic	Marriage	4.(tie) Danger
5.Marriage	5.Danger	5.Marriage	5.Democracy	5.Marriage	5.Danger	Love
6.Logic	6.Marriage	6.Logic	6.Marriage	6.Democracy	6.Logic	6.Logic

#831. During tea a Russian acquaintance, after crushing out her cigarette, looks at me blankly without saying a word; I grab the heavy glass ashtray and throw it crashing through my apartment window.

#850. I wander along Tverskaya ulitsa by myself. The street has been cleared so that a million people can surround me. Some are laughing. Others are laughing and kicking empty cans along the emptied street. I look at the faces of the people approaching. Now and then they look back. They are beautiful faces but I will never know them. They pass behind me and I do not look back. The faces, the people, the voices offering words that have kept me for six and a half years, they are all fading fast. And by the time I reach the Kremlin they are already gone.

(40)

It was early one winter morning when I stood outside my apartment door fumbling with my keys. Inside I could hear the phone ringing. My hands were trembling and I could feel my body swaying from the bitter dryness in my throat. The key was so small and at that moment my hands were so large. I forced the key into its hole but it would not turn. Inside the phone was still ringing.

Standing in the quietness of the empty hallway, I felt my head pound. I had been drinking all night and had stumbled home from somewhere. Somehow. It seemed like I hadn't slept for days, and at that moment my one wish in the world was to lie on my bed and to fall into a deep forgiving slumber.

The door would not open.

With absurd concentration, I focused my eyes on the key that was in my shaking hand. I took it out and tried it again. But again it would not open the lock. Once it fell to the concrete floor and it seemed the noise would wake every one of my neighbors. I looked around guiltily but no one came out. Still, the key would not go into its hole. And the more I tried to make it fit, the more it would not go in.

Disheartened and heavy, I slumped against the door. But the key was just as stubborn.

How long had I been standing here? How many times had I dropped the key? How much longer would this scene continue?

Mercifully, the lock turned, the door clicked open and I walked into the lifeless apartment. I took off my hat and threw it on the floor. The phone was ringing loudly, almost pleadingly. I unwrapped my scarf and took off my jacket, dropping them where they fell. In the darkness I walked to the window and opened the curtains to let the moonlight in.

The apartment was just as it had been.

I fell onto the bed and only then took the phone's receiver in my hand. It was Aunt Helen; her voice was cracking:

Where the hell have you been?

Fine thank you. And you?

Don't get smart with me. I asked you where you've been?

Out, I said.

For three days? You've been *out* for three goddamn days?

Aunt Helen had never spoken to me like this. Ever. Her voice was hoarse. Something was wrong.

What do you mean three days? I asked.

I've been calling you every hour for three days, that's what. And all you can say is that you were out!

Had it been that long?!

So I was gone for a while. What's the big deal?

I'll tell you what the big deal is. The big deal is that you disappear for God knows how long and... and don't give a damn if someone has to... I mean... I called your landlord but no one there speaks English... I called the institute and they say you don't work there anymore... I even had the operator try to call you...

All right, all right, I'm here now. I'm listening.

Aunt Helen started to cry but all I could think about was my splitting headache and the dry bitterness in my throat.

I'm sorry, she said, It's not important, I'm sorry I yelled at you. It's just that...

It's okay

I didn't want to yell, but I've been calling for three days...

If you're calling to ask about vegetables you'll be happy to know...

She's gone.

What? Who?

Your mother, she died. Last week. I've been trying to call you for three days...

How? I asked, but could not have heard the answer over the deafening sound of my thoughts. *My mother died which means she is dead My mother is dead.*

On the phone the static rasped between us.

The funeral's on Monday, said Aunt Helen, You are coming aren't you?

I was as silent as sleep.

This Monday..., she repeated, ...As in: the day after your tomorrow.

Is it open casket? I asked.

Yes, said Aunt Helen.

Inside my apartment the stale air circled onto itself, lazy and forgotten. It was last week's air. I set the phone on the bed and walked over to the window. The metal latch felt cold on my fingers and gave with a loud click. The window groaned open, curtains flew up to the ceiling. I had forgotten to shut the front door and the wind blew right through the apartment, sending papers curling into the air. Light flakes of snow washed over my face like good news.

In the distance I heard the front door slam shut. Everything settled back into place.

When I picked up the phone Aunt Helen's voice was no longer hoarse. It was composed and tender like my mother's had once been:

The funeral, she said, is on Monday. Are you coming?

(41)

#976. Finally, after six and a half years, it takes a wedding for me to realize that I will never truly love vodka; not long after this I leave Russia forever.

* * * * *