

(3)

*“Zhdanovskaya”*

It is summer. Young women stand in flower-print dresses. Men wear starched collar shirts tucked into shrinking slacks that reveal socks tucked into worn shoes. The women’s hair is long and straight. Their shoes are old but well-polished. The men’s shoes are also polished, but *their* hair is parted on the wrong side. It doesn’t take long for a train to come — less than two minutes — and when it does the crowd enters the metro car in one sweating surge. It is the origin station and empty seats, for now, can still be found. Of course it’s easier to sit, but we prefer to stand even though it is a long way to our destination: it is a long way to Voikovskaya. Inside the car, people are taking out their reading material — Pushkin, Kharms, the novelist Lev Tolstoy — and beginning to read. And as we stand, intimidated and quiet, we feel inadequate and defenseless, our hands empty, our eyes forced to travel nervously over the length of the metro car. Although we are standing, we close our eyes, pretend to sleep — it’s better that way. *Tomorrow we will buy a fat book, any fat book!* The doors remain open for some time, the train humming in anticipation. Then they close violently with a loud crash. We are startled by the sound, shaken yet afraid to move. A few seconds later a mechanical voice comes over the loud speaker:

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Ryazansky Prospekt...”*

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After I was fired from my job at the institute I decided to offer private English lessons at my small apartment. The overwhelming majority of my students were young semi-professional women named Irina.

My first group was the hardest. Despite their shared name, the three women turned out to be as different as Russian women could be. Irina, on the one hand, was intelligent; her English was stronger than that of the others, and so I did my best to overlook her. Irina, on the other hand, was polite, her answers much softer than Irina’s and at times more sincere than my questions. Once, when asked to use the construction “the problem is...” she paused to think for a few seconds before responding wistfully:

The problem is that it's not his baby, she said.

Irina, unlike the other two, was neither intelligent nor polite; she was strictly business, writing furiously in her notebook and interrogating me on subtle grammatical points. To each of my answers she would stare distrustfully at the words before writing them down and proceeding to her next question. Dutifully, I did my best to appease her, and in fact everything went smoothly enough until one day she asked me to explain the difference between *high* and *tall*.

Well, I answered, Inflation is high but Gorbachev is tall.

I don't get it? she said.

Okay, just try to remember it like this: a building can be tall but not high; a bird can only be high.

What about a mountain?

Well a mountain is high. But it can be tall sometimes too, depending on the mountain. For example, if the mountain in question is taller than you, then it would be considered high. But if it were even higher than that, then it would most definitely be tall.

Irina had stopped writing in her notebook.

It was our last lesson.



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(5)

*“Ryazansky Prospekt.”*

The metro car is clean, shocking for its absolute lack of advertising. The seats are arranged in lengthwise benches along the windows so that the passengers can sit in long rows elbow-to-elbow and stare blankly across the aisles at each other. And that is exactly what they do. They stare blankly. Or they read — Boy, do they ever! Sitting, standing, eating, sleeping, just give a Russian a book and you can bet she'll read it. Give a Russian a poem and he will surely take it to heart. Noticing this, we pull out *our* book. It is fat but new; the words are already faded, though not yet wet. And as we stand there, it is our protection, our disguise, and our eventual downfall all wrapped into one. At this stop — the second — seats fill up quickly and passengers desiring to sit should do it now, or they will stand until their destination. Which for us is Voikovskaya. There are oh-so-many stations between here and Voikovskaya, but we will wait patiently. We will wait patiently because it is at Voikovskaya that something truly remarkable will happen, something so predictable and natural that it will shock us.