

Mushrooms?

Yeah, I'm no meteorologist, but I'm sure the weather will be perfect for them....

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Of all my students, my favorite is also my youngest. She is the weakest and, at the same time, my most improved student. Her name is Lena. She was twelve when we began studying; she was having problems keeping up with the other students in her class and so her father asked me to help her. For the last two years we have met twice a week at my apartment. She brings me food that her mother has wrapped carefully in porcelain dishes; after each lesson she picks up the dishes from the previous time.

For two years we have studied like this.

In the beginning, Lena would sit nervously at my table. Her voice was unsure, her pronunciation terrible. For her the lessons were torturous, and as we read from her outdated school textbook, I could see why: the majority of texts were about Lenin; most of the others were about schoolchildren in western countries who admired Lenin; the remainder were about potatoes.

At some point I realized that Lena was answering my questions mechanically, without thinking, groping blindly with her answers until she stumbled onto the right one. She was so lost, so scared by the language that she couldn't even think to answer.

One day when she was reading, I interrupted her. All right Lena, I said, That's enough for today. Lena looked at me in horror, almost in tears. I'll see you next week, I said.

The next lesson, instead of her textbook, I gave her a text with English fairy tales. She was completely lost, but when I explained the words she memorized them immediately. From then on, we didn't touch her textbook, working instead with special texts that I would select for her. At school, she still lagged behind, in part because I had abandoned her textbook. But eventually, she began to show a sincere interest in English; in time she would bring her own texts to our lessons. Her pronunciation improved. She remembered words. From her parents I learned how disappointed she would become when we had to miss our lessons. Eventually her grades in school improved.

Then one day after a lesson as she was wrapping her scarf around herself and getting ready to go, she stopped suddenly:

Oh I almost forgot... I wanted to ask you one thing...

Sure, I said.

Can you explain the difference between *high* and *tall*?

NO!!!

It's... uh... getting late, Lena... We'll talk about it next time.

Okay, she said and left.

The next day I called some old acquaintances at the institute to ask them to explain the difference. But none of them could. I began to ask around among Russian friends who had studied English:

Hey what *is* the difference between *high* and *tall*? I would say.

You're asking *us*? they would answer.

I'm serious... I mean for me it's instinctive, but maybe somewhere you were taught the difference.

Well, our teacher in school used to tell us that Lenin was tall but coal output was high.

I don't get it, I said.

Okay, it's like this... a regular person, if he's lucky, is tall... but a beaucrocrat will be higher than you in any case.

What about a mountain?

Well, if I remember correctly, a mountain is tall. But it can be high too, depending on the mountain...

And so I went to the library in search of books on the subject. To no avail. I bought countless grammar books in all imaginable languages, but there were no specialized treatments of the matter. Finally, I created a list of all possible nouns, ordered them in columns depending on the adjectives that described them. Maybe, I reasoned, I could find some sort of rule or pattern:

<u>High</u>	<u>Tall</u>	<u>Both</u>
wounded eagle	glass of milk	mountain
red flag	flag pole	
inflation	Gorbachev	
eighth-floor apartment	twelve-story building	
red white & blue flag	escalator	
taxes	tale	
painting	statue of Lenin	

For hours I sat with the paper before my eyes trying to make some sense of the words, trying to find some correlation. Then, strangely enough, it occurred to me one night after I had fallen asleep with the paper on my

chest. In a dream I saw a man with greased hair, dressed out of fashion, with long nails and curled sideburns:

The difference between *high* and *tall*..., he began.

...is that *tall* describes things that are connected to the ground, whereas *high* describes things that are not! Do you see?

Lena shook her head. And so, for the next half-hour I explained the difference. I explained it over and over, until she had understood it several times. Until I myself understood it. Never again would I have a problem with this distinction. Never again would I feel uncertain in its usage...

...And hopefully never again will she....



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The next morning, Vadim and I take several of Landlady's recycled disposable bags and go hunting for mushrooms.

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It is late autumn. The leaves have fallen and camouflage the mushrooms which are scarce anyway. We walk slowly, our eyes scanning the ground. But we find nothing. Now and then Vadim bends over to examine a mushroom. After an hour our bags are almost empty. When we come to a clearing, we sit on an old rotting log. Vadim pulls out a small bottle and takes a swig. He offers it to me and I accept.

It's funny..., I say, ...the first time I ever went looking for mushrooms it was kind of like this... except it was spring. I was with my friend... my first Russian friend...

I stop.

The redhead! How long has it been since I last saw him? Where is he? What is he doing now? Is he still married to Tanya? Does he still not paint? How does he feel about the number three? Has he forgiven me since then? Has he forgotten? After all, so much time has passed...!

I notice that Vadim is waiting for me to finish the sentence:

...he's the one who gave me the painting. But it doesn't matter... there weren't any mushrooms then, either.

Vadim is wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

You know, I say after a long silence, I've been thinking lately...

Vadim is leaning back against the old log and staring up into the vast light-blue sky.