

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