

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.

The first suitcase, though small, was filled with those bare necessities that I knew would be scarce: toilet paper and peanut butter. The larger suitcase held gifts for people I did not yet know: nylon pantyhose, Marlboro cigarettes, and six solar calculators the size of credit cards. The backpack — also a present from Aunt Helen — was empty and therefore did not contain lubricated condoms.

(3)

I had not been surprised when my mother did not see me off at the airport. It's strange, said Aunt Helen as we waited for the boarding call, She said she'd be here...

Yeah well she says a lot of things, I said.

It's probably the traffic...

I rolled my eyes but Aunt Helen continued:

...Or maybe something with the car.

You don't have to defend her, you know.

Nobody's defending anybody.

Yes you are. You're always trying to justify things for her. You're just as bad as she is.

Aunt Helen threw my name at me in shocked reproach. And as always I retreated:

Look I'm sorry — I didn't mean it. But can we please stop talking about her for once. For now can we just change the subject?

Aunt Helen became quiet, conciliatory. From her purse she pulled out a small wrapped present:

This is for you, she said.

The present was thick but hard, approximately the size of a Russian dictionary. I began to unwrap it.

In front of us a man had stopped suddenly and was worriedly patting the pockets of his coat one by one.

Thanks, I said and looked at the unwrapped present, But it isn't...

It has an inscription... , Aunt Helen added and pointed at the inside cover.

I read aloud: "Use this dictionary in good health. May you have the patience to find meaning in every word."

But it's not...!

Take it, she said, After all: words are the key to any language — you can't speak without them.

I know that... but the dictionary — it's not... I mean I can't...

Aunt Helen was looking at me. Her eyes were wider than a child's and it was more than I could do to tell her.

You're right, I said, Thanks.

Aunt Helen smiled and I put the dictionary away.

The man in front of us was now holding out one breast of his coat and with the other hand checking its inside pocket. Whatever he was looking for was not there. He tried the other pocket.

I glanced at my watch causing Aunt Helen to again speak up:

She really did want to come...

Who? I pretended to ask.

Your mother. The last time I talked to her she told me how much she wanted to see you before you left.

Well, I said, she's not here, is she? Is she here? Maybe you see her?

Aunt Helen could say nothing and so I continued:

You know I've waited my entire life to have a mother. All twenty-six years. And instead here I am sitting in this airport. And you know what? I think I'm old enough to have outgrown it.

Aunt Helen moved to object, but I spoke over her:

And you can tell her that... you can tell her that as of today things are going to be different...much different...

Oh stop being melodramatic, said Aunt Helen.

But I did not hear her:

As of today, I said, I don't have a mother.

Right at that moment the man in front of us stopped looking. He became as still as a staircase and looked as if he would be sick. In a few seconds he would turn around and walk back to the place where he had been before.

But for now he just stood there, silent and pale, and not knowing what to do.

(4)

It all began with an announcement in my local paper:

NEEDED: NATIVE SPEAKERS TO TEACH ENGLISH IN
MOSCOW (RUSSIA)
APPLICATIONS DUE MAY 1

My job at that time was stable and promised further stability; marriage was right around the corner; I had reliable friends who played poker on Tuesday nights. I cut out the announcement and tucked it into my wallet.

A week passed and then another week. My job became even more stable; my friends even more reliable. I remembered the ad. Hadn't I always dreamed of living in Europe? As an American didn't I use English without thinking? Yes, I had. Yes, I did.

I applied anyway.

(5)

My acceptance letter arrived with an unsigned contract for one year and an information pamphlet titled "Life in Moscow: Getting By." On the pamphlet's cover a circus bear stood upside down; it looked beautiful but disturbed. I began reading:

"1) If you are arrested and interrogated answer only in English, especially if you know Russian. Otherwise..."

For an instant I imagined myself handcuffed and seated in a windowless Russian prison: a man in uniform stands over me. He is pointing a bright lamp in my eyes, his accent is thick and hard like a German's: If you will sign now..., he says — here he holds up a document in Russian and pulls the lamp closer to my eyes, repeating himself for emphasis: If you will sign now you can to avoid the unwanted problems! *Is the document a confession? A waiver of my rights? False testimony?* I shift uncomfortably in my seat. His words smell of danger and I correct them without thinking: If I sign now, I say, I can avoid unwanted problems. A smile pushes its way onto my face, my sweating hand grabs a pen, and slowly, so as not to smear the ink...

I signed the one-year contract.

(6)

I read on:

"2) American dollars can be exchanged for Russian rubles at the approximate official rate of one dollar to six rubles (1USD=6RUR). In addition it is often more convenient to purchase rubles from men in black leather jackets who offer unofficial rates that are much more attractive; however, this can be illegal and therefore should never be attempted at night.

3) Some Americans have had problems with local conmen and petty thieves; when speaking to strangers say you are from Canada.

4) Remember not to attract unnecessary attention to yourself. When possible look and act as a Russian would. Do not talk loudly. Do not gesticulate beyond reason. And most importantly:

(7)

Do not smile.”

(8)

The pamphlet went on to say that although life in the capital was changing, Moscow’s streets, compared to those of any American city, were clean and safe.

I gasped. *Clean and safe?!*

On the last page was a list of items that were in short supply thereby making good gifts for Russian friends. Highly recommended were nylon pantyhose for women, Marlboro cigarettes for men and women. Lubricated condoms could also be given as gifts, especially to female friends, and if no such friends were available they could always be set aside for personal use. The logic was sound. But then it is not for logic that one moves to Moscow; and besides, as I learned later, Russian men rarely use condoms and Russian women tend to prefer solar calculators.

(9)

On the flight over I sat next to a mysterious German man. He was blond but short; his forearms were thick and hard. The man spoke excellent English and to each of my questions he gave cryptic answers which I later wrote down on yellow legal paper.

Asked where he was from, he answered: a country undivided.

Asked where he was going, he said: to the place where *here* meets *there*.

Asked if he had any use for a German-English dictionary he said that he had written it.

I complimented the man on his English. To which he simply shrugged his shoulders and paused without speaking. It was a significant pause, the kind that tremble with meaning. The man looked somewhere in the distance; his eyes became moister than I had ever seen them. And then slowly, word by word, he gave me eleven reasons to read attentively to the end of every story.

(10)

Six and a half years ago, between the baggage claim and Customs, in this no-man's-land that was not yet Russia which itself was not yet Russia, in a windowless corner of the second Sheremetevo Airport, something unremarkable happened: I found a two-kopeck coin.

It had been lying along a wall, but the other passengers had not noticed it. Or had not cared. The coin was thin and light, approximately the size of a lucky button. By then inflation was looming and the two kopecks were already worth slightly less than two kopecks. The metal was dirty and sticky. I tucked it into my wallet and headed on.

(11)

At Customs the uniformed officer pointed at my empty backpack. He did not smile. He asked something in Russian, which startled me. When I did not answer, the officer asked again. This time I was less startled and told him so in English. Hearing this he looked at me suspiciously and began rummaging through my things. His fingers were fat but deft. I sensed trouble. He rummaged anyway. I looked at his fingers again: now they seemed deft but fat. This did not help either. He held up a pair of pantyhose. Yours? he asked. I nodded but did not smile. It fooled no one. You are American, he said. It was not a question so I neither nodded nor smiled. I just stood there.

Like an unborn baby I waited helplessly, dumb and not smiling.

The man stared at me but I could not speak. I would not nod. And I most certainly did not smile.

And that was it: with an annoyed sweep of his arm he waved me through. To the windowless airport. To Moscow. To Russia which in all fairness had yet to become Russia.

(12)

Alone in my new apartment, I took out a sheet of yellow legal paper and wrote down what the German man had told me. I folded the words onto themselves until they were thick and hard, then stuffed them into my wallet.

When this was done, I stacked all the gifts in an old cabinet: pantyhose and Marlboro cigarettes on the bottom self; Aunt Helen's German-English

dictionary — the inscription could be scratched out and it could be given away as well — on the top shelf next to the five solar calculators the size of credit cards.

I was *here*. Which yesterday had been *there*. And which for six and a half years has been *here* but will soon be *there*.

Eventually this grammar would make me tired.

But that would be then. And this was now. And now more than anything I was elated to finally be in Europe. More than ever I was ecstatic at being in Russia and elated that I was ecstatic. For me Europe was elation and Russia was ecstasy and it was not clear whether I was more ecstatic at my elation, or whether I was more elated at my elation.

And then I walked into the dark kitchen.

The floor felt cold on my naked feet. Water dripped from a leaky faucet. *Was I really in Europe?* In the darkness I ran my hand along an unfamiliar wall looking for the light switch. *Was I even in Russia?* My hand coursed over crispy peeling wallpaper until it finally grazed the light switch. *And if I wasn't in Europe and Russia hadn't become Russia yet, then where exactly was I?*

I flicked the switch. The room flared.

In the new light I could see a million cockroaches scurrying over the floor, the counter, my opened jar of peanut butter. I froze. In a state of panic I stood shocked, my wallet in hand, trying frantically to chase away — there were so many of them! — trying to frantically chase away the doubts that were surrounding me.

Stay calm, I told myself, Don't panic now. After all, even if this wasn't Europe it was still Russia. *But it wasn't Russia!* And even if it wasn't Russia, well then it had to be something, didn't it?

Didn't it?

And besides, what was there to worry about? I had planned my journey so carefully and now, finally, everything was set: my gifts were ready to become gifts. *But when? And for whom?* I had eleven yellow reasons to stay. *But why had I come in the first place? What was I expecting to find?* My wallet contained... it contained... *Had I checked the bills to make sure they were small...?* My wallet contained exactly four hundred twenty-four dollars and two kopecks....

Kopecks?

The coin from the airport!

I lifted it to the light. I had expected it to sparkle, but in the dim kitchen light the coin itself reflected nothing — it was too old and too dirty. It was filthy. And gummy. And would soon be worthless.

Smiling to myself I tucked the coin back into my wallet. It stuck to the yellow sheet of paper.

(13)

“To master a language you must understand the people that created it, the culture that provoked it. To understand a people and its culture you must master the language that shapes them both. You must find inspiration in the eleven words that are not just words:

the word that regardless of context will surely bring laughter;
the single word that causes the ear to bleed with shame, and
the heart to burn with indifference, and
the eyes of men to moisten;
the word that is whispered in moments of passion, and
that is used to soothe the deepest despair;
the one spoken without reverence, and
the word that means absolutely nothing;
the utterance that at once expresses the soul of both speaker and
listener, and
the word that is not and cannot be in any other language.

(14)

But it is the eleventh word that is most elusive because you already know it. Unlike the others, it will change and be changed until it will seem to be hopelessly beyond your grasp.

Live for all of these words, but do not seek them; in time they will come themselves. And when they have come, when you have understood that you understand, when all of the words are yours — only then will you know that their story has been told.”

(15)

My earliest memory of Aunt Helen is also one of my most vivid: I am four or five, my mother, who at that time is still my mother, has people over. There is loud music and everyone is laughing and I laugh too because it's funny to see Mother smoking. At first I like all the new people and run between their legs and squeal when they chase after me with drinks

in their hands. Everyone is smiling and one man even gives me a cigarette and shows me how to hold it between my lips. Crossing my eyes to see the tip of the cigarette, I hear a woman say, It's just like a straw just like you're drinking a milkshake. Go on, adds the man, Try it! But when I do the smoke burns my throat. I cough it back out. Everybody laughs and I am jubilant. I put the cigarette to my lips again; this time the smoke does not burn but I cough anyway because I have learned that the people will laugh at this. Eventually the adults stop paying attention to me and return to their own conversations and I squeal and jump and run between their words.

But then my mother says that I am being bad, that I am bothering everyone and to go to my room and not to come out until she says so. I stomp off, slamming my door behind me. Through the thin walls of the room I can hear shouts and screams of laughter. But they are muffled, and although I put my ear against the cold wall I cannot make Mother's voice any closer. *Still, she's out there, I can feel her.*

Even at this age the toys in my room mean little to me. I want to go *there* to where the voices are. But I am here and Mother is even angrier than she was last week and it was last week that she...

I shudder and turn away from the door. The voices rise and fall. Slowly, my breathing slows. My eyes close. And while they are closed, the scene around me changes.

By the time I open my eyes, everything has changed entirely.

The room is dark. The house is quiet. Everyone has left and I am alone. Of course, it is not the first time, but I begin to cry. I am hungry and scared and cannot stop crying. *What if she doesn't come back? What if Daddy comes to kill me again?* He'll come when the lights are out, that's what Mother says, and now she's gone too. I bury myself under the blankets on my bed and sob in the warmed darkness.

Mother says that crying is for girls, but the tears do not stop. The sheets are wet under my cheek and it seems that this time I will cry forever, that not even the darkness can stop it. *She loves me. She'll be back soon. She won't leave me. She'll be back soon....*

Sleep comes first.

A restless absence of shape and sound takes me from dark to darkness...

When I awake I am already in Aunt Helen's arms. The room is black and then with a click it is a blinding red. I squint my eyes against the light until slowly, feature by feature, her face comes into focus. I smile; I must have known her even then. It's okay, she is saying, We're going home.

At her house cookies and hot tea are spread out on a table before me. The kitchen is light and warm. In the next room Aunt Helen is speaking to someone, her voice almost a whisper. I hear my name and smile; I like how Aunt Helen says my name.

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