

Book 3. Book 2 (cont.)

(1)

Ask any Russian and they'll tell you: six and a half years ago the winter came harsher and larger than it does nowadays. In *those* days the dry air would freeze; the ground would crunch like bones beneath your feet; and everything that mattered would lie covered in layers of white, like a virgin on her wedding night. It is all very Russian, that is to say, beautiful and unconditional and, at times, hopelessly inevitable.

But that was an eternity ago and a lot has changed since then. Even the seemingly inevitable. Many Russians still blame Mikhail Gorbachev for this even though, in truth, global warming preceded *perestroika* and by that time the country had already lost all remnants of her virginity anyway. Of course some changes are for the worst, but some are for the better. Or maybe: some for the better but some for the worst.

Is vodka forty percent alcohol or sixty percent water?

I have a friend now who drinks without asking. He says that in life there are only three things that never change. And that the last of them is White.

(2)

In the early morning of December 26th, Aunt Helen called: Merry Christmas! and then: Gorbachev's out you know and Get the hell out of that country while you still can!

I listened impatiently and then said: Hold on, someone's at the door...!

(3)

I opened the door: it was the redhead. He was holding a Three of Diamonds and laughing. Remember me? he asked and handed me a bag

of potatoes. I had been taking a shower when the doorbell rang and so I accepted them with one hand:

Of course, I said.

What are your plans for New Year's? he asked.

I don't have any, I said, None at all.

If you want, you can celebrate with us.

I thanked him.

And feel free to bring someone...

No, I said, I'll be alone.

I apologized for my appearance and invited him to my dinner which was already on the table: peanut butter toast and lukewarm coffee.

(4)

From the very beginning I found my job to be — Isn't it the way with most jobs? — a job.

In the morning I taught the beginners to distinguish *a* from *the*. In the afternoon my intermediate class reviewed the difference between *a* and *the*. Evening classes with the adult students were devoted to discussion of more advanced themes: for example, *another* versus *the other*.

(5)

When I had remembered to take the phone I told Aunt Helen: Hey, I gotta go, I'll call you later. No, no, everything's fine... I'll call you later. Merry Christmas!

And after hanging it up I went back to my lukewarm coffee and our unfinished discussion of American slavery.

(6)

Time passed. Like an Indian Summer. Like peanut butter in winter. At work, the semester ended just as my English was beginning to improve. Snow began to fall around mid-October and just kept falling. My kitchen sink continued to leak. My supply of toilet paper ran out. And despite *all this*, the German dictionary remained on the shelf, thick but hardly touched, next to the three solar calculators the size of credit cards.

And the weeks passed. And the snow fell. And in time it became a wonder that I had ever used articles at all.

Then a few days before New Year's, a horrible panic gripped me: never before had I been to my first Russian New Year's party. *How should I dress? What about a gift? Would the other guests speak to me? Would I understand them? If so, would I understand them correctly?*

Worriedly I drew up special flash-cards with key phrases. Staring deep into my mirror I congratulated myself repeatedly; repeatedly I praised my knowledge of English. On the mirror's surface, the words condensed and then dissolved.

Outside, the snow was continuing to fall. I tucked up the collar of my coat and set off unsurely for the redhead's apartment.

(7)

My first year here (in order of importance):

1991

1. Democracy
2. Danger
3. Irony
4. Love
5. Marriage
6. Logic

(8)

By the time I arrived at the New Year's dinner, the other guests were already seated tightly around the table in the cramped living room. An empty chair stood at the far end of the room and as I picked a path toward it, squeezing awkwardly between rows of knees and the table, the seated guests tucked their legs into themselves to let me pass. In all, there were six people — three couples — and on my way to the empty seat I scraped against most of them. Embarrassed at this inconvenience, I tried to be profusely apologetic. But these words were too much for me. Instead I smiled stupidly:

Congratulations! I said.

KHELLO! they said.

Your English is very good, I told them.

KHELLO! they said.

At this point, my host, who had been watching this scene silently, laughed loudly but without smiling and introduced me by name:

This is “*our American visitor*,” he added proudly.

Everyone nodded enthusiastically: the year was old and they were still very impressed.

Once in my seat, I could not believe my eyes. The table was decorated with small plates of neatly overlapping coldcuts and beautifully arranged salads of red, orange, and kilograms of green. In the middle of the table stood a single bottle of semi-sweet Sovietskoye Champagne, its label partially unglued; three bottles of Georgian wine surrounded it; and, somewhere in the near future, six liters of the purest Russian vodka. To all this I added a bottle of French cognac which I had purchased at a hard-currency store, but it was quickly snatched from the table by the host.

As it turned out, each of the men had worn black to the party; that is to say, black slacks with black buttoned-up shirts. The women, in contrast, wore dark gray. Surprisingly, the men felt no qualms about this coincidence. Not surprisingly, the women were all named Tanya.

Sitting festively in my white pants and yellow polka-dotted shirt, I remembered all the black clothes that I had left at home. In my apartment. In America. All the black turtlenecks that I had wanted but never thought to buy...

It was exactly nine-thirty. The new year was only hours away.

(9)

After introducing me my host began a captivating story about potatoes. When I heard my name I realized that he must be recalling our first meeting. As the story unfolded his eyes sparkled more like vodka than champagne and the other guests laughed in unison, even when he held up three fingers.

I sat silently.

Then my friend pulled out a Marlboro cigarette. The others looked at him enviously and Tanya, who was sitting on my left, even asked me if I was married. At that particular moment I was more embarrassed than married and when I shook my head, Tanya, who was sitting to my right, asked me why not. I responded by shrugging my shoulders and experimenting foolheartedly with their language:

Irony, I told them, is more important.

It didn't pass. The other guests looked at me blankly. There was an awkward silence. A throat cleared. Then the sound of a Sovietskoye label peeling. In sympathy, Tanya, who was sitting across from me, offered a plate of pickles and I accepted; the vegetable crunched timidly in my mouth.

Seeing all this, my friend filled my glass. Russian vodka! he said.
I nodded.
This was at nine thirty-seven. The New Year was fast approaching.
But ever so slowly.

(10)

In my family there were two informal traditions connected with New Year's Eve.

The first was that each year Aunt Helen and I would count down the New Year starting with my age. We would look at the clock's second hand until the time was right and then scream: Ten! Nine! Eight...! and then the next year: Eleven! Ten! Nine...! In truth it meant only that another year had passed, no more no less. But Aunt Helen understood. She knew that for *me*, it was tangible and true, something to guide me when I had nothing else to count on.

The second tradition was also the only one that I had ever shared with my mother: each New Year's Eve, on that one night only, I could expect to hear from her. For months at a time she would disappear without a trace, missing my birthday, Christmas, other holidays. But on New Year's Eve she always called; for some reason she had made it our holiday.

Once when Aunt Helen and I were waiting for midnight — tonight we would count down from twelve — the doorbell rang. We had not been expecting anyone.

When Aunt Helen opened the door I saw an unfamiliar man and then, next to him, my mother. Her face was covered with makeup and she was stamping out a cigarette. Happy New Year, she said.

When they came in I was sitting on the floor in front of the television. The man stayed by the door in his coat. He looked around without interest and checked his watch. My mother handed him a plastic sack; her face was flushed.

Hi Honey, she said and held out her arms to me.

I did not move.

The man smirked: Looks like he doesn't remember you...!

Shut up! she snapped and turned to me: Well, don't just sit there...
Come give your mother a hug!

The room was silent and then Aunt Helen said: Go on, It's New Year's.

Slowly I got up from the floor and walked to the woman who should have been my mother. When I was close enough she pulled me to her so

that my limp body sagged against hers. Her clothes smelled strongly of perfume and when she spoke her words reeked of alcohol. She kissed my cheek and then with a handkerchief wiped away the lipstick:

This is my son, she announced to the man.

No shit, he said and looked at me blandly.

How's school?

Okay, I answered her.

Do you like your teachers?

They're okay.

My mother held me in front of her at arm's length.

You're so big! she said and then: What are you now, twelve?

He'll be thirteen next month, said Aunt Helen and quickly added: But then I guess you would know that, wouldn't you?

The man laughed and started to say something to my mother...

Shut up! she cut him off, Just shut the hell up!

The man yawned and checked his watch.

My mother turned to me: I think about you all the time, you know that, don't you? You know that I'm always thinking about you?

I nodded without listening.

Isn't he big for thirteen? she said to the man.

Huge, he answered.

My mother pressed me to her again and then asked:

Are you doing all right in school?

I'm doing okay, I said.

That's good: school's important, you know. I wish *I'd* done better...

The room became silent again.

Hey, I brought you something...! said my mother and motioned at the man who then swung the plastic sack at me.

I barely caught it. Inside was an unwrapped toy, the kind that Aunt Helen had given me the year before.

Thanks, I muttered.

Do you like it?

Uh-huh.

Really?

I said I liked it. Didn't I already say I liked it? How many times do you want me to say it?

Hey! said Aunt Helen but I had stopped listening to her too.

The room became as still as a stalled elevator. Then my mother spoke up:

You know honey, she said, No matter what happens I'm still your mother.

And even though I may not be around that doesn't mean that I'm not with you. I am. Please remember that. And no matter where you are, I'm there too. Even when I'm not. Even when it seems like you're alone you still have a mother. You still have your mother. You still have me.

I said nothing.

Do you promise you'll do that for me? Do you promise you'll always remember?

I said nothing.

Honey?

I said nothing.

And at that Aunt Helen pronounced my name as she always did when I forced her to be my mother: severely, distinctly, articulating the whole name from beginning to middle to end:

Are you listening to what your mother's telling you? she added.

I'm listening.

And what do you have to say for yourself?

Whatever. Whatever she says is fine with me.

Once again the stillness of the room was all that could be heard.

The man shifted nervously. Then he cleared his throat. We gotta go, he said holding up his watch, We'll be late.

My mother looked angrily at the man and began to say something. Then she turned to me. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped. Inches away from her, I could see her lips move. I saw them trembling. There was so much to be said. It wasn't too late yet. There was still time. A few words. A few sounds could make it right. But when she spoke her words were transparent. She wanted to speak but couldn't.

Instead she kissed me again. Then, letting go, she whispered after me, her words as familiar as a dial tone:

"Tell Mommy you love her..." She said it every New Year's Eve.

But this time I stood silent.

Everyone was completely still. My mother waited for me to answer. Aunt Helen waited. The man looked at his watch and then down at me. I could hear him tapping his foot impatiently against our floor.

I closed my eyes. Without saying a word. I closed my eyes until the muscles in my cheeks hurt. So tight that no one would ever be able to open them.

I stood silent and alone, blinded by my own darkness. And when I opened my eyes to see nothing but light, she was gone.

*

(11)

Sitting silently at the table I tried to follow the conversation by studying the expressions of the faces surrounding me. Strange words swirled in front of me like fluttering snow. Because I could not understand, I smiled and smiled and smiled...

But my laughter rang false and slightly out of rhythm. Sometimes I would misread a cue and laugh alone, my voice cutting naked and weak into the unsuspecting conversation. And each time this happened I withdrew even further; my answers to questions became shorter, my laughter less certain, and my silence even more silent.

It was Tanya who first tried to involve me in the conversation; but each time she spoke her enunciation was poor. At first I did my best to make out her words:

What did you say? I asked in Russian.

Tanya looked at Tanya and then back at me. Then for my sake she repeated her words, but this time in English that was admirable though strangely inflected:

Excuse my English... It is very bad.

What? I asked in Russian.

My English is very bad. I am teaching English for two years but *without* possibility for practice...

Your English is fine, I said in Russian.

Here she giggled shyly and thanked me in Russian, then continued in English:

Where do you live? she asked.

I answered her in Russian: In Moscow, I said.

But again she continued in English:

Yes, I know, but I want to say in America, *Where* do you live?

I told her in Russian.

Do you like Moscow?

Yes, of course.

It is my *dream* to go in America! It is very interesting country.

It's okay (I had reluctantly switched to English.)

Do you know, I very love America. I love the American movies. American music. Even the American language. Yes, America is *very* good country.

Thank you.

Please.

Tanya moved her chair closer to mine:

But..., she said, ...In your country there has problems, too.
I'm sorry?

I want to say that America is good country, but you too have problems.
Well yes we do...

...America has very big problems because of neggers.

I choked on my slice of pickle. Excuse me? I said.

I know it is many neggers and that is why many problems.

At this Tanya interrupted her in rat-a-tat Russian; Tanya, for her part, responded just as quickly. The two began arguing back and forth and had seemingly forgotten about me. On the other side of our conversation, the three men were speaking Russian and laughing. Tanya, who until now had watched our conversation silently, also joined the fracas. The three spoke heatedly for some time. Finally Tanya waved her arm, first at Tanya, then at Tanya, and then turned to me:

Will you stay long in Moscow? she asked.

One year, I'm working as a teacher at the institute.

And *do* you like Russian women?

I... Yeah, sure.

To my mind American women are *not* so beautiful.

I... It's difficult to speak in general, really, but I guess...

And *do* you have the blue passport in America? I heard that in America your passports are dark blue!

Was she even listening to me?

Well, yes, as a matter of fact, our passports are blue...

Dark blue is my favorite color. Unfortunately, in our country all passports are *red*.

Again Tanya jumped in and again they began arguing. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. My mouth was dry from the pickles and my head was beginning to ache from the warmth of the small room. When their argument had subsided, Tanya once again turned to me and said: Tanya tells that I must speak in Russian for your practice, She is very evil woman!

She glanced playfully at Tanya and laughed in Russian. Tanya also laughed, as did Tanya.

I tried to laugh but failed. Nevertheless, I felt relieved to have the spotlight out of my eyes.

The women fell silent and with this the two conversations were free to merge into one big conversation. But this larger conversation was in Russian and so I smiled and smiled and smiled...

At nine-forty the redhead stood up and wordlessly raised his glass until slowly and gradually it overwhelmed the other voices.

A toast...! he said and paused for emphasis. The room was breathless. I held my glass up to the light, the vodka sparkled like a fake tooth. And in its glow I strained to understand:

...To the and absolute that make May they in the of the New Year!

It must have been profound.

Leaning forward the man held his glass out over the center of the table and all at once, from all possible angles, a collection of arms shot out and everyone began clinking their glasses to his and then to the glasses of their neighbors, first across and then to the side — left and right or right and left — leaning and twisting with hands stretching out farther and further until one by one the sound of glass touching glass had consummated the toast.

I offered my glass too and compared its light chiming to the sounds around me. Confident and clear, it was the perfect echo.

(12)

According to Russian tradition, drinking without toasting is just plain drunkenness:

9:44 (vodka): “To the of our two great countries for years and cooperation and and!”

I had never been a drinker and as I drank, my head began to reel and I felt a dry bitterness backing up in my throat. I waited for it to settle but it did not. The conversation was becoming quicker just as my mind was becoming slower. But the sound of glass against glass bolstered my spirits:

9:53 (wine): “To the future of and Perestroika Mikhail Gorbachev with Иван Сусанин hopefully because at last Russia!”

Everybody laughed. The ice had been broken. The party was gaining momentum. I also laughed.

By now there were only two hours until the New Year! Tonight I would count silently from twenty-six and then loudly from ten — after all, Russians count down from ten, don't they? *Twenty-six years!* And on my twenty-sixth new year, I was *here!* What would all my childhood friends have said if they could have known? What would my father have said if he could have lived to see this? That I would someday teach others to speak.

That I could possibly make it beyond the U.S. My own mother had never even left the country, except to buy tequila...

When I looked down, my glass was already full.

9:55 (vodka): "When I was younger....."

...And now the New Year was coming and I would count down from twenty-six and what a glorious new year it would be! I did not understand anyone, but they could not understand me. I was different from everyone else; but in a good way. And if I did things right, maybe I could fit in. If I could learn to love the country, if I could find all eleven words, then maybe this new place would love me back. Oh, when would the New Year come? And what would it bring for me...?

10:15 (vodka): "To love!....."

Somehow I noticed that my glass, which before had been filled before toasts, was now being filled *after* toasts.

...What would the new year bring me? *Something good, of course! I could have lived in the safety and convenience of America if I had wanted to.* But instead here I was in... I was here in... what was the name of this country? And what time was it? And why wasn't anyone celebrating? The glorious New Year was coming! And I needed to know when to count down... I needed to know twenty-six seconds before midnight so that I could welcome another year... *Could it be that I missed it? Could it be that I would miss it for the first time in my life?...*

?(wine): "Whose turn.....Sasha.....toast!.....Goddamn!"

My head was spinning. The Tanyas had blurred into one. But she was three times normal size. And dressed in orange! My thoughts raged. I resolved to make at least five friends who could not understand my English. I resolved to call Aunt Helen at least once a week. And if I couldn't call, to write letters instead. I resolved to find all eleven yellow words. *But what could the eleventh one mean?* I resolved to wait under every rain, to not quit on this country no matter what. I resolved to love vodka....

I held up my glass and heard it ring somewhere in the distance.

?(?): "To all the beautiful people sitting around this table and to this glorious country with all its coldcuts and colored vegetables and to all six liters of the vodka that is backing up in our throats, and to the sound of glass touching glass and sticky filthy worthless coins and to the snow which, as we sit, is falling so beautifully outside our window and..."

Perhaps the speaker did not actually say this. But at that moment I knew that's what he *meant*; and sitting there I pondered his words. Of course, I would not make it to this new year; there could be no doubt about that.

But it didn't matter. Everything was so beautiful: the toasts, the salads, each of the Tanyas — there were now six of them — the snow that was falling as softly as I would and the redhead with his cigarettes and the vodka that was already in my glass which was already in my hand and the heads that were now turning to look at me and the chair that was falling backwards to the floor behind me. God it was all so beautiful!

I stood up.

A toast! I said.

(13)

And then I fell down.

That is to say, I passed out.

(14)

(15)

When the dryness in my throat woke me, I was lying in the dark on my side, my cheek was pressed to a cold and unfamiliar kitchen floor. Somewhere a clock ticked. Next to me slept the redhead; his neck craned awkwardly against a stove.

As I lay there I felt the bitter dryness welling up in my throat. But I could not vomit. Nor would the dryness settle; it just lingered cruelly between two resolutions. Only the kitchen floor was cold solace against my cheek.

I turned over.

On the other side of me, lying face down in a puddle of food, was another man. A luminescent string extended from his mouth to the floor. *Lucky bastard!* I thought. Helplessly, I listened to the clock ticking away my chances one at a time. With all my strength I cursed its sound until at last it fell asleep.

(16)

Later that morning, with the dry taste still in my mouth but not in my throat, I thanked everyone for a wonderful time and set off for home.

It was a gloomy January day, too cold to be white, but too white to be black.

Once outside, the wind whipped my face. The ground crunched. I could hear shovels scraping the sidewalk behind me. Falling snow scattered across the tops of my boots like thrown rice.

At home I drew the curtains against the light and lay heavily onto my bed. On the streets people celebrated the long-awaited New Year. But in my condition I could not join them. Outside a new shade of snow was falling but I could not see it through the darkness of my room.

My friend says that Black is like White in that it can never change...

Or can it?

Lying there with my boots on my pillow I did not even notice. I could not vomit, let alone mourn the red and gold that would snap no more. I was too tired to celebrate and too sick to vomit. Instead I would sleep away the entire day; I could mourn later. But with your eyes closed you cannot see colors. And when you need it more than anything else, vomit can be as elusive as democracy. And that's precisely why I missed it. That's how I did not even realize that after years of uncertainty and disappointment, when it seemed as if change had forgotten its duty, that arms would never rise and bones would forever lie frozen, after all this, the moment had finally arrived: Russia had finally become

Russia had *finally* become...

(17)

The phone. The phone was ringing. *Who would call me at this hour?* I ignored it, but it did not stop. It would not stop. Meekly I lifted the receiver to my ear. There was a click then a pause then a voice:

Hello? it said. Despite the distance, the voice was as familiar as silence.

I held the phone to my ear.

Hello? the voice asked weakly.

I set the receiver in its cradle.

When the phone rang again I did not answer. It continued for some time and then, when it was no longer needed, the sound died away forever.

(18)

...As of the new year Russia had finally become the "former Soviet Union."

Or was it the "Commonwealth of Independent States"?

Or the "USSR and Successor Republics"?

In actuality, it wasn't clear what it had become; or where in the alphabetical listing we should look for it. All we knew was that the New Year had arrived and that we had deftly set aside a bottle of cognac to be enjoyed later.

Russia would never be the same.

Of course it would be years before all the signs in the country agreed. But by now no one gave a damn. We had waited too long to call it anything else!

* * * * *