

Book 7. Falling Down the Up Escalator

(1)

But first things first. After all, the metro can take you only so far. Quick and reliable as it may be, it will still leave you far from home. Underground. Half-there.

And so I stumble from the metro car. It is the farthest one from the exit and now somehow I will have to make it through the crowds of people to the other end of the platform, from the darkness to the light, from A to A , out of the past toward my future, past Customs all the way to the wedding...

By now I have begun to understand that nothing is as easy as it would seem. That exiting can be six and a half times harder than entering. By now I understand that this is turning out to be a long ride after all...

Squinting my eyes against the synthetic light, I head for the end of the platform.

Please, God, please let this be the day. I have waited so long for it. For the last years of my life I have asked and begged and prayed for that which comes so easily to others... Please, do not forsake me... Do not refuse me in this... Whatever may be Your will, do not doom me forever to vomitlessness!

I stop in the middle of the platform and wait for the nausea to pass.

(2)

Ahead of me there is a group of schoolgirls, aged eight or nine, smartly dressed with bows in their hair and ribbons sewn onto their collars. They

are holding hands and waiting at the base of the escalator. Their teacher is counting them. In all there are thirty or thirty-five. Maybe forty. They are all named Natasha and their teacher, who is trying to organize the procession, is having a terrible time. Natasha! she yells, Stop pulling Natasha's hair. ... And you Natasha... is that any way to treat Natasha...? But wait a minute: ...thirty-six... thirty-seven... thirty-eight... Someone's missing! Who is it? Who isn't here? she asks and the girls answer in one joyful voice:

Natasha!!!

Where is that girl? the teacher stresses, Where's Natasha?

She was here just a minute ago, says Natasha.

I saw her when we exited, Natasha adds.

Natasha...! Natasha! they all begin to shout and cast their eyes around the metro for their missing schoolmate.

Natasha...! Natasha...!

Then from the back rows, barely audible, a fragile voice belonging to a girl who until now has been standing with her hands clasped in front of her:

Natalya Vladimirovna... Natalya Vladimirovna..., she says shyly. As she speaks she twists the braids of her hair, each of her words as soft as skin:

Natalya Vladimirovna... *I know where Natasha is!*

Where is she, Natasha? answers the teacher, relieved and worried at the same time: Tell me where Natasha is!

Natasha opens her mouth to speak...

But before she can, a horn sounds, a train roars into the station, and the girl's voice is muffled: The teacher leans in to hear her words which she is twisting into her hair. And again the train is more eloquent:

..... !!! says the girl and points with her tiny finger back over the teacher's shoulder in the direction of the long escalator.

And there, standing higher and taller than her schoolmates, is a little girl with braided hair and a ribbon pinned to the collar of her dress. She is small and smiling. Beaming and ribboned....

Her name is Natasha.

Exhausted, I move around the children, past the sleeping attendant, and step onto the escalator. My leg skids forward and I almost fall, but somehow manage to grab on to the moving handrail in time. Standing there, I feel my body being lifted over the noise of the metro platform, over the screaming children, over the distance that I have spent so long traveling. Helplessly, I am being shuffled diagonally: up and out of the metro at a speed that is faster than fast. Faster, even, than black. The Moscow metro, we are reminded by a mechanical voice, is the best and most beautiful in

the world. Its tunnels the steepest. Its escalators the most efficient. And we should be proud of it. Of course at this moment, I have swallowed far too much vodka to be proud, even though I am riding the world's fastest escalator in the world's deepest metro system. Now all I can do is hold desperately on to the moving railing which is carrying me up.

up...up...up...

As always, the mechanical voice was right: this escalator *is* fast! Relentlessly, it is ferrying me past the people on the opposite escalator who are descending in single file. A million of their faces looking at a million and one of ours. Years and years of turning heads and fleeting glances. Stories rising or falling away from me, flashing for a moment only to be lost forever. Some dressed in old summer dresses. Others in ultra-fashionable winter furs. Each of them alone. A few with friends. The newly married holding their partners and kissing ambitiously on the uneven escalator steps. *These are the people that make up my Russia!* Here they are passing by me one by one. With red umbrellas, red passports, and red flags. With unborn children. With cheap reading material that they have already taken out of their pockets and briefcases: newspapers, romance novels, English textbooks, and, cheapest of all, semiautobiographical novels set in exotic foreign places.

up...up...up...

Struggling to hold on, my senses fill with the shrieking of coins raining down the handrail; the acrid smell of burning rubber; cool breezes from nowhere; the dry taste of bitter vodka...

And as I am being carried, I feel that I am moving relentlessly. Hopelessly. That I am being taken against my will to a place that is waiting for me and that I have been waiting. Behind me, I know, there are metro cars with their bustling passengers; there are Natashas; and Tanyas; and even Irinas; in back of me there are cigarettes without filters; pickles without compunction. But all of it is disappearing somewhere behind my shoulder. Now I am moving both quickly and slowly, up the long narrow tunnel of the deepest metro system in the world. Like vomit through its throat, I am being forced relentlessly up to the surface.

up...up...up...

Then about halfway to the top I notice something illogical: My hand is moving faster than the rest of me: it is running away. *Why? How?* I release the rail — almost fall — pull my hand closer to me, but again it begins to creep up the handrail. *Am I going crazy? Could it be that even my hand is leading me home? But no! ...it isn't my imagination — everybody's hands are*

running away from them. It's just that I'm the only one who's noticed it! The other people don't even realize that the handrail is moving faster than they are. They don't see. They are as unsuspecting and as helpless as tax inspectors...!

up...up...up...

But will my hand stay with me long enough to reach the top? Now I'm closer to a resolution than I was a few paragraphs ago. I'm closer than I've ever been. And my hand is even closer than I am. The end is near. It is in sight. It's only a few more moments... I'm almost at the top...

But then, when there are only a few words remaining, my balance gives out. The hand has been moving too fast and to keep from falling forward I have to release my grip of the railing. I pull my hand away and lean back. But it is too much. I am too drunk and have leaned too far back. My arms flail wildly and I can feel myself falling backward. *It can't be!* I grasp desperately for something to hold on to, but even without the dry bitterness it would be useless...

Before I can do anything, I am falling backward out of control down the escalator.

down...down...down...

Head over heels I am tumbling down the escalator heavily, painfully, clumsily, hitting my back then my head then my feet, then my back then my head then my feet, then my back then my... The world is swirling around me. And I am falling heavily and helplessly...

down...down...down...

Then suddenly it hits me: first in my back then on my head then against the tops of my feet: this fall is not like the others. This fall is not like any other because I am not stopping! I am falling further and further, but as I fall the escalator pushes me back up. And the more I fall, the more the escalator pushes me back up. I am tumbling head over heels, but I am no closer to stopping than I was a paragraph ago. *How long have I been falling? How long will I fall? And why in moments like these do I always think about grammar?*

down. down... up... down. down...up...

(3)

Despite my efforts I can't understand the subtleties of perfect and imperfect verbs.

In frustration I decide to leave Russia forever...

(4)

But I don't leave.

(5)

And so I am falling. But like never before; this time I am not falling down — I'm falling up. Gravity pushing me down, the escalator pushing me back up again. And the further I fall, the further I have to fall. Like clothes in a dryer, I am hurling and flinging against myself — heels over head over heels over head — spinning helplessly between two diametrical opposites: at the bottom, logic; at the top, irony. Falling and falling, I continue to fall. Like a spoon. Like a ruble. Like a foreigner who has not yet learned to drink vodka...

(6)

The dry bitterness backs up in my throat and still I cannot make myself vomit.
In despair, I decide to leave Russia forever...

(7)

But I can't leave.

(8)

And so I continue to fall. Just as hopelessly. Just as helplessly. Just as painfully.

And hopelessly, helplessly, and painfully I try to grab on to something to break my fall. But I am falling so fast that I don't even know which side is up and whether there is even anything to grab at all. Falling and falling and falling, I feel only the rush of colors and sounds and the blows landing one by one against my back then my head then my legs, then my back then my head... *But why aren't I stopping? Shouldn't I have come to rest against something by now? What about all the people who must be riding the escalator below me? Won't their legs stop me? Or could it be that I am falling right by them, that they are avoiding me, stepping over me like a puddle, dodging me like a draught? If so, won't somebody in a uniform notice me and put a stop*

to it? Won't the attendant whose job it is to disapprove of such things, flick a switch or give a command, or do something to bring my fall to an end?

I can't fall forever, can I?

Naively, I continue to fall.

(9)

A Russian friend informs me that English words look naive when written in Russian.

Insulted, I decide to leave Russia forever.

(10)

But not yet.

(11)

And so I am back to falling.

By now I am falling in turns: hopelessly, helplessly, painfully, relentlessly. What should have been a simple escalator ride has turned into a bad tumble from up to down and back again. Everything that once seemed so simple has become an awkward fall from one story to the next, from the heights of naivete to the depths of marriage, airport to airport and back again. By now I have fallen both down and up. Onto and into. In and out. For and from. I have fallen every way imaginable and for every imaginable reason; at times I have fallen for the sake of falling. But until now, I have managed to get up. And down. And off of and out of. Out and in. Despite and to. I have gotten both there and here any and every way I could. Inevitably, I have reached where I am by falling, and where I am is on the up escalator — the world's fastest escalator in the world's deepest metro system — in a city that is capital to a country that isn't. Where I really am is closer to *there* than *here*, somewhere between up and down, the fraction of an instant where *what was* meets *what will be* and goes by the name of *what is...*

Again grammar...!

(12)

Despite my persistence, I cannot understand the logic of Russian grammar.

Worse, I cannot understand the logic of *English* grammar.
I decide that this time I really will leave Russia forever...

(13)

...just as soon as I learn the word that changes and is changed!

(14)

But what will stop my fall this time? Will it be the leg of a stranger? Or the bag of an old woman? Or will it be the old woman herself? *In my day*, she would complain, *drunks didn't fall down escalators...!* Or maybe I will come to rest against something that is itself rest: like sleep. Can it be that there is no hope for me? Can it be that I will never be able to grab on to something to break my fall...?

And as I fall, I begin to notice a strange phenomenon: the dry bitterness has left my throat, my thoughts are beginning to clear up. *I have fallen for so long that I am now sober!* And you know what?... after all these years, I've sort of gotten used to falling; and it isn't really so bad... as long as you have a good thick leather jacket to absorb the blows, as long as you have a sense of humor and an understanding that what is happening is still better than what *will* happen, both of which cannot be avoided no matter how much you scurry out of the way...

(15)

I have given away my calculators in vain.
When there is only one left I decide that there is no reason for me to
stay in Russia....

(16)

I meet Vadim.

(17)

But then it occurs to me. Whereas before I hoped to slow my fall — to decrease my speed so that the escalator would carry me to the top — now it hits me again and again that my hope lies in the absolute opposite: to

let my weight carry me down to the bottom. Here I am tumbling, caught helplessly between two relentless forces: on the one hand, gravity; and on the other hand, the ingenuity of the Moscow metro whose escalators are the fastest in the world. *That's it! That's the answer! Inertia will come to my rescue! Gravity will save me!!!*

And so I relax.

My muscles cease to resist and I begin to tumble faster, even as the escalator continues to push me back up. Faster and faster, head over heels over head, I am tumbling toward the bottom of the escalator where the sleeping attendant will be waiting for me.

And as I relax, I notice that I am making progress. The steps are hitting me quicker; so rapidly that my limbs are now numb to the blows. My body is gaining momentum. I am tumbling so fast that I have forgotten that I am tumbling. My mind sighs and relaxes as well. *How lucky I am to have Aunt Helen's leather jacket to absorb the blows! How lucky I am to have someone who loves me! How lucky I am that Aunt Helen is my aunt...! But when was the last time I wrote her? When was the last time she wrote me? I can't even remember the last time I talked to her... In fact it was... it was when she called to announce that Gorbachev was running for re-election! Gorbachev is running for re-election...!*

Now I am tumbling so fast that for the first time I begin to feel hope. Between the spinning sounds and rushing colors there is a place with synthetic light that is becoming closer and closer and closer and closer...

And still I am falling and falling and falling...

It is only a matter of time before it ends. A few more seconds. A few more minutes.

A few more paragraphs.

(18)

I am sick of tumbling and tired of falling.
I decide to leave Russia forever.

(19)

But what about the wedding?

* * * * *

Book 8. Vadim's Story

(1)

Our relationship begins precariously:
Can I offer you some tea? I ask and set a plate of cookies in front of my guest.

Got any coffee? Vadim answers.

Actually I don't. Only tea.

That's all right. I'm not that thirsty.

Vadim rummages through the plate of cookies, pulls out the largest one, and pops it into his mouth:

What was your name again? he asks while chewing.

It's not important, I say but before I can finish he has noticed it on some stray papers.

You're very observant, I say.

In my business you need to be.

Really? What's your business?

Food products.

Vadim stretches out confidently on my small couch and looks around:

Nice painting, he says.

Thanks. A friend of mine gave that to me.

I take it the wrist shackles symbolize America's complicated relations with its black population?

Something like that.

Oppression and slavery?

That's right. How'd you know?

I used to be a history student. My major was American slavery.

Do you like it?

American slavery?

No, the painting.

Sure. Why not. I mean I'm no artist or anything...

The man turns his head and looks at another wall:

What about that? he says.

The wall?

No, the rug.

Nice, isn't it...? I brought it from America. The wall looked so bare without it.

Vadim doesn't laugh. His voice becomes serious:

I wasn't sure you would still be at this address — so much time has passed.

As a matter of fact, I won't be here very long. I'm supposed to move out.

Vadim seems surprised:

Why?

When I moved in I told my landlord I didn't smoke.

You lied?

Not really. I didn't smoke then.

And now you do?

Right.

And he's kicking you out because of that?

You got it.

Vot eto da!

And Vadim throws his booted leg over his knee:

What happened to your arm? he asks pointing at my bandage.

This? It's just a sprain. I had an accident in the metro... on the escalator.

As I retell my story, Vadim listens to me intently, either nodding or shaking his head, depending on the direction I am falling. Finally, he speaks up:

Do you know why I'm here? he asks.

No, I don't.

It's about the wallet that I returned to you four years ago. Do you remember if there was any money in it?

I don't know. It was so long ago. Besides, it was my own fault that I lost it — even then I wasn't so naive as to expect to get any money back.

Well that's the thing, you see when I found the wallet there was money in it, I mean your money was still there.

It was?

I took it. And now I want to pay it back to you. That's why I came.

Don't worry about it — it was so long ago, I'd forgotten the wallet even

had money. For me the most important things were the yellow piece of paper and the two-kopeck coin.

Still, I want to ease my conscience, I want to give you back the money.

It's really not necessary...

I insist...!

And without waiting for my consent Vadim takes out his wallet, peels off seven one-dollar bills and holds them out for me to take.

Seven dollars? I laugh, That's all there was?

That's all.

I laugh again, but for Vadim this is a serious moment:

You have to understand, he says, The times were difficult — it was an extreme time.

Don't worry about it, I say.

It's not like me, it's really not, but it was the times. We had to... all of us had to do things that we're not proud of... I did... Everybody did.

I understand, I say.

Vadim is still holding out the money and finally I take it. He seems relieved. We need to commemorate this occasion, he says and reaching deep into his coat pocket he pulls out two bottles — *but I thought he said he wasn't thirsty?!* — of mineral water.

(2)

“Not much is new with me,” said Aunt Helen, and then: “The weather's nice, about eighty, not a lot of humidity which is rare for this time of year. For a while there we were having ninety-degree weather almost every day. And you know how our cooler works! But other than that not much news... Oh! I remember what I wanted to tell you: I just got a new pot for the geraniums in the kitchen, you remember how the old pots were so dirty and the cats kept going to the bathroom in them. Well, last week I decided to get some new pots and boy you should have seen me at the store trying to find just the right pot! I had to ask four salespeople before one of them could point me in the right direction. And they were way in the back of the store next to — of all things — the gardening supplies. And get this: there was a sale and I saved more than thirty percent off the original price! The geraniums look completely different from how they used to look, and most of the cats have stopped using them for a bathroom, although sometimes I still find poop half-buried in the dirt. I have a feeling it's Bopper: she always liked the geranium pot and she's the hardest to get

out of the habit. I rub her nose in it like they say you're supposed to do with dogs, but I guess cats aren't dogs. She just sort of shakes her head and sneezes and looks at me — you should see how she looks at me! — and I feel bad and so I just let her do it. I talked to my friend Pierre and he told me that what she really wants to do is eat the flowers because all animals need to eat green vegetables so that they can vomit it back up... which reminds me, did you get the package I sent you yesterday...?"

(3)

With the money from my wallet, Vadim invested in his first business: using personal connections in a Russian bank, he bought seven dollars worth of fifteen-kopeck coins at face value. For hours at a time he would stand near the metro exits, reselling them to passersby. Initially business was brisk, but his inexperience showed: to increase profits he raised his selling price from sixteen kopecks to one ruble; soon he was selling them for two, then four, then seven rubles apiece. The profits were converted back into dollars which were stored at home under the planks of his wooden floor, while the remainder went toward more fifteen-kopeck coins... By the time the public phones were changed to a token system, Vadim had accumulated more than seventy dollars.

He could have stopped there...

But Vadim was persistent. Taking the dollars that he had carefully tucked away, he invested in fur hats, combing the Arbat and Izmailovsky Park looking for buyers. "Maybe you like fur hat," he would explain and then, "Not expensive!" His customers were mostly foreigners desiring to look Russian. Soon the money was coming in so steadily that he could travel to other countries — first by train and then later by plane — for cheap clothes which he bought for five and sold for twenty-five.

Business was good. Life was good. He wore authentic American blue jeans. He ate fruit. He had a girlfriend with purple hair and a credit card from North-South Bank. At home he smoked Marlboro cigarettes but did not use lubricated condoms. In time he began to comb his hair on the right side.

For Vadim all of this meant a new life, a clean break from the past, from the future that could have been his for the taking. Over his parents' objections, he dropped out of the history institute where he had been studying. Fearlessly, he invested everything he had — all seven dollars, all seventy dollars, all seven hundred dollars — in words without precedents,

trading classics of literature for modern economics texts. He had already given himself fully to the hope that from now on — starting with his generation — things would somehow be different, that somehow life would be better. He began to trust his government. He stopped smoking. He realized he believed in God. He even gave up vodka, drinking it only when his job required it. At times he smiled in public...

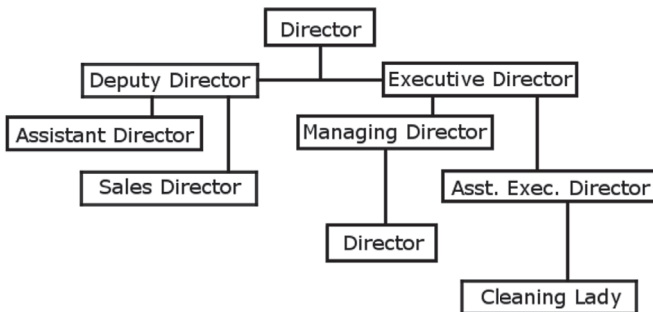
And then came currency reform. Vadim lost everything. He had been caught with his money in rubles. Even now currency exchanges were on every corner, but when he needed one more than anybody there were none to be found, and after running through the streets looking for live chickens, he was stuck with the old worthless rubles. In disgust, he threw the papers out the window.

That too could have been the end...

But Vadim was resilient. By now he had contacts who could lend him enough money to get back on his feet. Within a few months his business was restored and within a year he had paid off the loans with interest. He still believed in God, still read economics texts without smoking, still abstained from vodka except during important business meetings...

...But never again would he trust his government.

Time passed, money accrued. His next project was to buy a little kiosk where he sold Marlboro cigarettes and bootleg vodka whose alcohol content ranged from twenty-two to thirty-eight percent. Business was so good that he bought a second kiosk and then a third. In time he had ten kiosks that he consolidated into a single organization called Klamagup. Not knowing what to do with his profits, he bought an office to accommodate himself and his staff of seven office workers and a cleaning lady. Each had a partitioned cubicle and a plaque with his title:



(4)

“...Well you should! I just read an article that in Russia there’s a shortage of vegetables. Gorbachev has promised to import it from abroad but there’s some kind of problem and they’re worried that there won’t be anything green by the end of the winter. You know I really don’t see why those people can’t get their act together. I don’t understand why they can’t solve their problems. But then I’m sure you’re doing all right. Oh, your mother called the other day...”

(5)

For Vadim it was a prosperous time. Stores were filled with imported goods. Dollars had become commonplace. Vadim had made his fortune before I’d even turned thirty — and boy was he loving it! His business was thriving. He drove a new BMW. He ate in overpriced restaurants. He had a phone that he carried with him. Now he could afford tours around the world and in no time at all his passport was overflowing with stamps from *there*.

But most amazing of all was Vadim’s apartment: it was huge! And airy. Five rooms in the center of the city. A doorman at the front entrance to inconvenience his guests. A balcony overlooking a courtyard and with a view of another balcony overlooking a courtyard....

Vadim had never been one to spare expense, and when decorating the apartment his extravagance showed: black-vinyl sofas; transparent tables; crystal chandeliers in each room; a miniwaterfall with plastic rocks; phones that beeped when you dialed them; a television that was bigger than necessary and with a smaller television sitting on top; three state-of-the-art security systems; two pure-breed dogs with American names; a large piece of endangered coral; toilets with water; matching fireplaces — guarding the first, a hundred-kilogram knight in armor; protecting the second, the skin of a sprawled-out black bear, its open jaw offering a roll of outdated rubles....

By night Vadim slept soundly. By day he avoided the tax inspectors.

Life was good.

And just when it seemed that things couldn’t get any better, his father died. Vadim was left an inheritance that included a second apartment upstairs from his mother’s. He used it as a library for books that he no longer read: Kharms, Pushkin, the novelist Lev Tolstoy. The apartment

was small. Both rooms were dusty. Eventually, when he learned that I was being evicted, he offered to rent it to me at half its value.

But that would come later. For now his conscience was troubling him. Sitting in his spacious apartment, he began to trace everything backwards. Through Klamagup. Through the small kiosks. Back to the fur hats and fifteen-kopec coins. Back to the seven dollars. His dubious beginning. Me. For some reason, the incident with the wallet had left its mark on him, and Vadim made it his mission to find me and return the money he had taken.

It wasn't easy. Vadim had long forgotten my address, only vaguely remembered the region where he had walked to deliver my wallet. Now in his BMW, he drove the streets searching among rows of identical buildings for my small apartment. A week passed. But the buildings were too identical, and so another week passed. Every day he drove through the neighborhoods looking for a sign that would spark his memory. After the third week, he realized it was hopeless.

He could have given up...

But Vadim was virtuous. Instead, he redoubled his efforts: He placed ads in foreign-language newspapers that I avoided. He called language schools that had fired me. He left notices at expensive supermarkets that I could not afford. He went to the U.S. embassy to inquire about me, but had forgotten that he could not remember my name. As a last resort he again returned to my neighborhood, asking neighbors if they had seen anyone smiling in the vicinity. No luck. He offered a reward for any sighting of *Anna Karenina*. Fat chance! When these attempts proved unsuccessful he put up fliers in the neighborhood that read:

NEEDED: NATIVE SPEAKERS TO TEACH ENGLISH
WILL PAY \$100/ HOUR

The fliers were ripped down as quickly as they went up. Before I could even see them. Not surprisingly, his phone rang off the hook. Nevertheless, he investigated all false leads, met with more than two hundred smiling people claiming to be Americans. His English was too weak to verify their citizenship, but he was experienced enough to demand their passports which, as a rule, were far from blue. This continued for almost five months. Then, unexpectedly, somebody gave him the lead he needed — There's a Canadian guy down the block, an old woman told him, Maybe he can help you...

When Vadim showed up at my door he recognized me immediately.

*

(6)

“...She asked how you were and I told her that you were still working at the same job. She asked when you were coming home and I told her. She’s looking forward to seeing you. She says she really misses you, and she said to ask you to call her sometime. Maybe you should. I mean, I don’t think it would be a bad idea if you called her. She doesn’t move around so much these days, you know. Of course you can wait until you get back, but that’s months away. I know you have a lot to hold against her, but you should realize that you can’t keep those things inside forever. Of course I can’t insist that you call her, but I do think it would be a good thing to do. She does love you, you know. And I’d hate for you to continue to hurt her. Anyway, I won’t belabor the dead horse. Not much is new here: the weatherman says that the snow should let up by the beginning of next week...”

(7)

Moving out of my apartment, the small apartment where I have spent my formative years in Russia, I feel a strange nostalgia. *No other apartment will be quite like this one, even though every other apartment will be quite like this one! This apartment where I learned six yellow words. Where I first felt the power of a whisper. Where I was explained the difference between friend and acquaintance; Love and love; living and getting by. Where I learned how to smile sincerely. And then, later, how not to smile at all...*

Cleaning my apartment for the first and last time, I find the residue of my past: a peanut butter lid; two bottles of vodka; a student’s ungraded essay; a smashed calculator; discarded butts from old Prima cigarettes; a metal metro token; a plastic metro token; an expired visa; newspaper articles filled with underlined words... *Can it be that these words — the ones that I now use everyday — can it be that they were once foreign...?!*

I sigh bitterly and sweetly at the same time. My life is changing; this chapter of it, I know, is over and another one is beginning. I close the door softly and make my way for the elevator.

(8)

“...But you know how much I trust weathermen, so I’m going to take my umbrella anyway. I tried to call you yesterday about eight in the morning

your time, but you weren't there, I guess you were probably at work. I just want you to know that I support your decision, even though of course I wish you would have chosen something else. Something closer. And safer. It's difficult for me because you're the only person I have, and now to think I'll have to wait *another* year for you to come home...! Another three hundred sixty-five days... it doesn't seem possible! Of course I want you to do whatever you feel is best. But I just... I just wish that..."

(9)

Spending time with Vadim, I have begun to see a side of Russia that I never saw before: the side that moves. Vadim is as active as an article. He drives fast. He lives fast. He loves money.

The funny thing, he once tells me, is that all of this is in complete contrast to how he was raised.

What do you mean? I ask him.

Vadim is driving me home in his BMW and has skipped over a curb onto a busy sidewalk; outside the window I can see pedestrians on the street scurrying to get out of his way. People curse and wave their arms at the back of our car, but Vadim has not even noticed them:

It's how my mother raised me, he says, It's how our mothers raise us.

How do you mean?

You wouldn't understand.

Try me.

Well when I was small my mother taught me habits that even now I'm trying to get out of.

For example?

Okay for example she... let's see... well for example she always told me that when I'm at someone's house and they offer me candy or cookies, I should refuse...

So...?

And if they offer again, then I should refuse again...

Okay..?

But if they offer a *third* time, then I can take it, but I should take the smallest piece. If it's meat, I should make sure to choose the piece that's burnt. If it's bread, I should eat the end piece — you know, the one that nobody wants.

Why?

So that *other* people can eat the good stuff.

But why shouldn't you be the one to eat the good piece?

I don't know!

I mean *somebody* has to eat the good piece...?

I know, I know! And you know what else? — and this is the crazy part — She drilled it into me that if *I'm* the host, I should offer my guests the very best of everything. And if they refuse, then it means that I am a bad host. How do you like that? Damned if you do, damned if they don't!

Well, I tell him, It is a bit strange for me.

That's Russia for you..., says Vadim: This is not a good place to want the bigger cookie. This is not a good place to dream about middle bread...

As if he senses something in his own words, Vadim becomes a bit somber.

Just then his favorite song comes over the car radio; his expression changes. Vadim turns up the radio, taps his thumbs on the steering wheel, presses harder against the gas...

"Yesterday... All my troubles seemed so far away..."

(10)

Can you believe our roads here? Vadim asks me as our car ruts into a hole in the asphalt. Luckily the bottom of his car is thick and hard and accepts the scrape without damage:

What a nightmare! he says and then: You know there's a book... it was written by two Russians who went to America, and they say that in America there isn't a single *good* road... there isn't a single good road because all the roads are *excellent!*

What book is it?

Vadim tells me the name of the book and even explains on which dusty shelf I can find it:

...But *Russian* roads..., he continues, ...you know we have a saying that our country is cursed by two things... have you heard this?

No.

We say that this country is cursed by two things: roads and policemen. Policemen and roads? What about tax inspectors?

Well yeah, them too. But they're not a part of the saying.

Unfortunately, there is another silence. To break it I change the subject:

Hey you know what I heard? I say, I heard that Gorbachev's thinking about running for president again in 1996. Can you believe it?

Who told you that?

My Aunt.

Well I'm no political analyst or anything... but it's completely ridiculous. He doesn't have a chance. Everybody hates him. He's guaranteed to lose.

Maybe so, but sometimes people do things that are illogical... I mean he could run for president even knowing that he will most likely lose.

Out of the question! No way. Absolutely not. It's just not going to happen. Everybody knows that...

Here Vadim pauses. Then he continues:

...There's not a chance in hell that Gorbachev will run for president in 1996! Of course, I'm no political analyst or anything...

(11)

Wrong: Gorbachev's chances of winning the election are one in seventy-eight millions.

Right: In truth, they are only one in seventy-eight million.

(12)

Vadim is making a right turn off onto a sidestreet:

You know, he says, There's a lot of money to be made here nowadays. You just have to know where and how.

Where? I ask, How?

Have you ever thought about going into business?

Business?

Yeah. I mean just think: you've been doing the same thing since you got here, and what do you have to show for it?

Not much I guess.

That's right. If you wanted, you could find something that paid well.

I don't know what I could possibly do...

There're a lot of things. Especially for you with your expansive and thorough knowledge of...

What expansive and thorough knowledge?!

...With your knowledge of English you're guaranteed to make money. English?

Sure. The last few years English has become a hot commodity here.

Yeah, but I don't see where the money is.

Well, it's there. You just have to look for it. The most important thing is to enjoy what you're doing. Do you enjoy teaching?

It's okay. I mean I enjoy helping people to speak.

But there's no money there.

Right.

Well then you need to find a good compromise between interesting work and work that pays well. What are some things that you like to do?

Me? I don't know... I like to read.

Reading? There's no money in reading. But you might be able to find something *connected* to reading.

For instance?

For instance have you ever thought about writing something? Maybe a book or something? I have a friend who's a publisher — if you wrote it he could print it.

A book? What kind of book?

It doesn't matter... any kind!

I'm not a good writer.

So...?

What do you mean *so*?

You don't have to be a good writer to write.

You don't?

Of course not... it just means you need to pick something that's simple to write, that's all... it doesn't have to be *War and Peace* or anything. Something simple.

Like what?

I don't know, something easy. Something like... memoirs! You know when you remember important things that happened to you and write about them. I mean I'm no expert on literature, but memoirs have to be easy enough because... because you can't be wrong about anything... If people don't like what you write then you just say, hey that's what really happened, take it or leave it!

But I...

Just think... you could write about your experiences here... about how you came to Moscow and everything was strange and scary... blah blah blah... you know, the usual bit: poor sensitive foreigner lands in Moscow expecting poetry and black bears but instead... bread lines... toilet paper shortages... people yelling and shouting... I'm telling you people would buy it up... it'd go faster than Marlboros!

First of all, you have it all backwards.

Why?

Because I came expecting toilet paper shortages... and instead discovered poetry.

Vadim stops to ponder the significance of my words.

And secondly, I've never stood in a real bread line... they were almost non-existent by the time I got here.

So what?

So... people will read and say that it's unrealistic, you know, that I couldn't actually have stood in a bread line...

Well then change it... instead of bread, make it a line for potatoes.

But I never waited in any lines for potatoes, either.

That's not the point... the important thing is that it *could've* happened. You see? And besides, if you think people will remember... well okay there will be people who nit-pick about the dates, but in general no one will remember... I mean five years from now do you think anyone will care whether something happened in this year or the next? Do you think they'll care about whether it even happened at all? Of course not! As a matter of fact that whole period has already started to blur...

Really?

Yeah. And as far as people believing you... you know I just read a statistic... it was from an American study about credibility... it showed that seventy-eight percent of all people believe everything they read.

How many?

Seventy-eight percent...

So many!

Yes. And the other people, the other seventy-eight percent, well, who cares about them! I mean, just look at me! Do you think people would believe that I could become so successful starting out with a mere seven dollars worth of fifteen-kopeck coins? Is that believable? Absolutely not. They'd say it was too unrealistic. But I did it... here I am!

But this is life, Vadim. It's not the same. In literature, everything should be logical... it should be more interesting, and at the same time, more believable than life... it should be plausible...

Vadim dismisses the idea with a wave of his arm, but I continue:

...And besides I don't think Russians would appreciate something like this.

What do you mean?

A book about Russia written by a foreigner... Russians would have a hard time accepting it.

What Russians? You'd be writing in English for other foreigners.

Nah... You see, if I did write something — even if it were in English — I'd still hope that it'd be interesting for Russians too. I know it's naive...

Vadim stops to consider my proposal. Then he pronounces significantly:
Nope. No way. It wouldn't pass. Russians are too sensitive... they'd never make it past the scene with the potatoes... in fact, we even have a special term for when foreigners write about things like that.

About potatoes?

No, about Russia. We have a term that means a foreigner is writing superficially about Russia.

You have a term to mean that specifically?

That's right.

What is it?

And he tells me the term.

Now Vadim is weaving in and out of traffic; as he passes, he curses the cars that are less expensive than his, and yields deferentially to those that are more prestigious:

Ogo! he says pointing at a large imported car: Now that's an automobile!

And Vadim lets the car cut in front of him. For some time we drive in silence until his favorite song comes over the radio. Vadim's English is vigorous but unpracticed. He's no singer, but sings loudly nevertheless to the rhythm of the music:

"Yesterday," he sings, "All my troubles seemed so far away..."

(13)

It is rush hour and we are stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Outside, men without legs are hobbling between the cars asking for alms. Without hesitating, Vadim rolls down his window and hands a man in army fatigues a ten-thousand-ruble note:

Okay, so memoirs are out, he says rolling the window back up: Well then what about something else? What about a how-to book... for example one to help foreigners in Moscow... you know, useful advice like where to put the token in the metro turnstile, how to drink vodka effectively, the number of red roses you should never give, how best to measure the Russian Soul — you know, practical things like that...

I'm not good at giving advice... especially if it's practical.

What's so difficult? You just write: *in the slot; with your elbow parallel to the floor; twelve...*

No. No. It wouldn't work. I couldn't do it.

Why not?

I don't know. I just couldn't.

Vadim groans:

Now I see why you've stayed a teacher all this time!

What's that supposed to mean?

You can't do *anything*.

It's not that.... It's just that I would need something that suits my personality.

Suits your personality?

Yeah. You see, Vadim, writing is the purest form of self-expression and should therefore be undertaken as cautiously as if you were choosing a wife. In fact, even more so. After all, once you're married you're the only one who'll see your wife naked...

One can hope!

...But if you write something, it's like the whole world is gawking at your imperfection.

Wait a minute. I don't understand where you're going with all this nakedness? What type of imperfection *would* you want to write?

I don't know. But I do know that it would have to be something that reflected the longings of my heart, the twitchings of my soul...

Twitchings?

Yes, twitchings.

Okay, well then what about... I've got it!

What?

I know how you can express your soul!

How?

You could write a dictionary!

A dictionary?

Yeah, for example a Russian-English dictionary... or even better a Russian-English—English-Russian dictionary. Everybody needs English... you can't get a decent job without it... I'm telling you, a good dictionary... it'd sell faster than vodka.

I don't know Russian well enough.

Yeah but I do! We could do it together. You see, we just have to find an old Russian dictionary and take all the words there — I explain what they mean and you translate them into English. How hard could it be? You just start with *A* and go slowly and patiently all the way to *Я*...

It's impossible.

Why?

It's impossible to give meaning to words.

In a foreign language?

No, in general. You see Vadim... words are rebellious. If you try to restrict them they can be as defiant as a detainee...

Well I'm no linguist or anything, but I'm sure we could do it. For example let's take the letter *A*... let's see... what words begin with *A*...?

Vadim has stopped his car at an intersection where the traffic light is flashing yellow in both directions; but the traffic perpendicular to us has taken the upper hand, passing in front from left to right and not letting us go.

I know...! says Vadim as he swivels his neck back and forth looking for an opportunity to cross the intersection.

What? I say.

I've thought of a word that begins with *A*...

What?

...*Abort*.

What about it?

How do you translate the Russian word *abort*? How do you say it in English?

We say *abortion*.

See? See how convenient it is to translate words!

Yeah, but that was an easy one. Usually... I mean, *in most cases* it won't be so simple...

Vadim is sticking his head over his steering wheel, trying to see around a large truck that has pulled up to his left and blocked his view of the passing traffic.

Damn...! he says, I can't see anything!

He edges the car forward to improve his view; the cars are now whizzing by at irregular intervals, only a few feet from our bumper.

Like I was saying..., he says, ...it's not difficult. Well all right let's try another word that's at the beginning of the alphabet... Let's take another word that begins with *A* like... like... *avantyura*... do you know how to translate that?

Sure, it's another easy one.

See!

Yeah but you're picking words that have common roots.

I didn't mean to.

Well you are.

Okay okay, then what about... damn these cars!... what about a word like...

Vadim racks his memory for Russian words that begin with *A*:

...What about a word like... *Авоць*?

Avos?

No... *Авоць*!

I don't know this word.

You've never heard it before, or you don't know what it means?

Both. What is it?

Well, it means... it's when you want to do something but... damn these cars!... It's when you make a decision that...

Vadim's foot is inching off the brake pedal, but the cars are still passing in irregular blurs before us and not letting us cross.

...well, okay, think of it this way... you're deciding whether to... well, for example, you're deciding whether to use a condom or not to use a condom... Logic would tell you to use it... but you decide not to use it despite the risk... That's *АВОСЬ*!

One by one the cars pass in front of us. Finally Vadim can take it no longer:

Hold on...! he says.

And without looking he slams his foot on the gas. The tires screech wildly, our car jerks forward and then goes flying out blindly into the traffic. Cars are buzzing by us like bees, horns sound all around and in all possible directions....

Flying out into the intersection, we are as vulnerable as poets. And like poets we watch through the glass of our windshields as the outside world streaks by. Within seconds we will see our publishing career end. Suddenly. Logically. Loudly.

(14)

"...But it really has been such a long time. Almost two years. And I hardly ever talk to you any more. I know you come home once a year but it's not the same. That's not a family. I'm not trying to pressure you, but I just wish that you would try to think about everything as a whole. But you have to do what you have to do... How's the weather there...?"

(15)

Let's say — don't laugh, it could happen! — let's say you sell Marlboro cigarettes. Nowadays it could be any number of imported products, but let's say they're Marlboros. Foreign cigarettes, after all, are relatively inexpensive

and can be resold quickly, easily, and with a profit margin the size of a new home. The system is as true as a triangle, as proven as a percentage: buy for two, sell for five; buy for five, sell for twenty-five; buy for twenty-six, sell for fifty-one. It is, you like to say, as elementary as air; and like air, your money has come to you from nowhere, from nothing.

Home for you was a small apartment that you shared with your mother. Two small rooms with peeling brown furniture; wooden planked floors; a red-weaved carpet on the wall. This *was* home, that is to say, before you began selling Marlboros. But now, thanks to people with a habit, you have a new apartment in the center of the city. A new car that you paid for in cash. A new office with a European design and brass plaques.

And so life is good.

Every Tuesday you come to your office where your smiling employees assure you that everything is in order. The right people have been paid. The wrong people have also been paid. Confidently, your directors show you graphs and charts with numbers and percentages and words that do not speak to you. What really speaks your language is the manila envelope with a stack of unofficial dollars. This, you understand, is what really means something. This is what really matters.

But money can't buy love. Money can't buy health. Money can't buy happiness... especially in Russia. Sometimes — usually when you need it more than anything — money can't even buy *money!*

Gradually, you begin to lose touch with your company, leaving it to be managed by people who are not you: your salespeople, your directors, your two Chief Accountants — one black, one white. Let them have their chance, you think. After all, you're no economist, but what could possibly go wrong? And besides, you've paid your dues. And now it's time to reap the rewards of your hard work. Now you can relax. Now you are rich enough to search for your spiritual side, to count your money with your blessings.

Then one day your Deputy Director quits, followed soon after by your Executive Director. You call their homes but they do not answer; and nobody knows where they are. It's strange. To fill their spots you hire a Personnel Director. But it is too late: money, you are learning, really is like air; and like air, it is much easier enjoyed than managed.

With each passing Tuesday the envelope becomes smaller and smaller. Stability has retarded your growth. The company needs money to meet its debts and so you borrow against your past. First seven thousand dollars. Then seventy thousand. Luckily, you have business acquaintances who

can spot you this kind of money... Luckily they give you enough to get by. Luckily, you are still able to borrow...

(16)

When we come home, Vadim sets two bottles of vodka on the table.

Today, he says, we're going to get down to the bottom of things.

What do you mean? I ask him.

Today we're going to bare our souls!

He opens one of the bottles, pours each of us a shot:

But I thought you didn't drink? I tell him.

I don't, he says and without explaining he lifts up his glass of vodka:

Make a toast! he says to me.

I can't... I don't know how.

What do you mean you don't know how?

I don't know how to make eloquent worthy toasts. In America I never drank. And besides, even when we do drink we don't really say toasts. We get by without them.

Without toasting? Drunkards!!

Vadim holds up his glass of vodka to the light:

Well, then I'll say a few words, he offers: To America!

I nod:

...And to Russia! I add.

We clink glasses and then, in two large swallows, begin to get down to the bottom of things.

You know, says Vadim — he is not wasting any time — I've come to the conclusion that in life there are only three things that can't change.

What's that?

Black. White. Gray.

Why only those three?

I don't know. That's just the way it is.

Why not blue? Why not green?

Hah! You can tell *you're* American!

(17)

After the first toast our conversation begins to take off. One by one, we discuss topics and themes that were beyond our comprehension only a few minutes, a few paragraphs, a few swallows ago. After toasting, our words

heat up, the themes becoming livelier, the progressions between them as natural as nylon, as smooth as a stop. Bottle after bottle, we discuss:

fate vs. self-determinism
democracy vs. danger
Kharms vs. Tolstoy
love vs. marriage
black vs. white vs. gray
here vs. there
Prima vs. Marlboro

(18)

When the two bottles are finished, we buy three more. And when *they* are gone I make a trip to a kiosk, returning with six bottles of beer.

But I have forgotten one thing: Russian tradition insists that drinking beer without vodka is like throwing money at the wind. To save the day, Vadim pulls out an old bottle of vodka that he has been saving for a day like tonight. Now, he warns, we will drink *ersh*. *Uh-oh!* I think, *I know what that means!* And just as I feared our conversation turns deeply philosophical; inevitably, it turns to the discussion of language itself, or more precisely, to English vs. Russian:

You know, says Vadim, Russian is the best language in the world.

It is? I say.

That's right, he says, It is.

I look at Vadim expectantly — and seeing this, he continues:

You see, he begins, there's a well-documented case of how three linguists, a Frenchman a German and a Russian were sitting around debating whose language was the best... have you heard this? No? Good. So first the French guy stands up and says — this is a true story by the way — so the French guy says something like, You know *mon amis* — that's French for *respected colleagues* — In truth, he says, French is the most beautiful language in the world because we have so many words that enable us to speak about love and passion and sex....

Wait a minute... which one was this...? Who was saying this?

The Frenchman, who else...? Get it... love and passion? Anyway, after the Frenchman, the German guy stands up... the Frenchman of course is very pleased with himself, but the German stands up and says, I'll grant

you that French may be good for speaking about women, but you have to admit that German is the best language in the world because it is...

...The thickest?

No.

...The hardest?

No. No. German is the best he says because it is the most logical... I guess compared to other languages German is logical.

Okay okay, let's get to the Russian. What did the Russian say?

...Okay, so then it was the Russian's turn and he listened to the others patiently and then said something to the effect of, Comrades — this is a true story, by the way — comrades, he said, I don't want to insult your fine languages but only in my language, only in Russian is it possible to write an entire story — from beginning to end — using words that begin with the same letter...!

The same letter?

The same letter.

An entire story?

That's right!

Which letter?

П.

P?

No... *П.* I saw it myself, I mean I read the story with my own eyes.

What's it about?

I don't remember, it's been a long time. Something about women.

Hmm... well you know listening to your story one thing comes to mind... of course it's a good anecdote — don't get me wrong — but there's one question that has to be asked: what about English? Where were the English and American linguists?

Unfortunately, they weren't able to attend the conference because they were preoccupied... the English linguist was writing a thank-you note, and the American was busy counting his money...

Okay, fine, then I have another question... these linguists, the Frenchman, the German, and the Russian, when they were debating these ideas... I mean, not to cast doubt on your story, but what language were they speaking? What language did they use to be mutually understood?

I don't know.

Then how do you suppose these linguists were able to communicate their ideas?

They probably spoke a language they all knew.

Which language?

I don't know... English, I guess.

See!

Yeah, but that was only because the German and Frenchman didn't know Russian. I'm sure that if they had known Russian, they would have preferred to speak in it...

Well, Vadim, I was also too busy counting my money to take part in this conference... but if I had been present I would have argued that English is the richest language in the world. And do you know why? No? Well, I'll tell you why: synonyms. That's right — synonyms. Pick any English word and I'll show you at least ten synonyms: let's take for example words that mean to "walk without purpose." In English we have: *wander, saunter, roam, meander, stroll, stray, rove, amble, ramble...*

Vadim stops to count on his fingers... Then his eyes light up:

That's only nine! he says.

...*drift!*

He stops for a second then speaks up:

Big deal! he says, Big deal... the reason you have so many synonyms in English is because all your words are made of compound words. For example in Russian we have the word *kamin*, right? It's a good word. And what is it in English? *Fireplace*. See? *Place for the fire* — two words. You need two words to express what Russian can say in one... I can give you a million examples like this: In Russian *kiosk*, in English *bookstand*; or Russian *prodavets* compared to English *salesperson*; not to mention *oboi* and *wallpaper*, *nevestka* and *daughter-in-law*, *kovboi* and *cowboy*...

By now Vadim has finished pouring the mixture, which sits on the table waiting for us to dare to drink it. Vadim's point has been well-made. But I do not back down; instead, I go straight for the jugular:

Maybe so, I say, but how can you consider Russian a complete language given that it doesn't even have... it doesn't even have any articles?

Articles? Fu! Who needs them? Who needs articles!

You may not realize this Vadim but articles are crucial to a language.

Oh yeah? How! Pushkin didn't need articles... Tolstoy didn't... Even I've spoken Russian for thirty years without using a single one and I've managed to live a normal healthy life thank you very much...

Here Vadim stops:

...Hey, pass me one of your cigarettes, would you...?

But I thought you didn't smoke?

I don't, he says and lights the cigarette with my lighter.

I look at him curiously and then continue:

What was I saying... oh yeah I was saying that articles are important because they add shades of meaning to your language. For example how would you translate the phrase “a cowboy offered a salesman a Marlboro cigarette”?

Vadim translates it reluctantly.

That’s right, I say, Now how would you translate “the cowboy offered the salesman the Marlboro cigarette”?

Vadim translates it again, this time even more reluctantly.

See! Don’t you see! They’re exactly the same. But in English they’re different!

Yeah but...

Let me finish... now how would you translate “cowboy offered salesman Marlboro cigarette...”?

Vadim doesn’t bother to translate.

You see? That’s Russian! That’s what Russian sounds like...!

Okay, okay, he says, So in English you can distinguish *a* cowboy from *the* cowboy... don’t get me wrong, I mean this, of course, is extremely important... but Russian has so many words that English simply doesn’t have...

Is that so?

Of course. In English you waste all your time thinking up synonyms for the same word. But Russian has so many ideas that can’t be translated into English...

Like what?

Well, for example, do you have a word for *khalyava*?

I’m sure we do...

What about *khaltura*?

There has to be something...

And what about the word *toska*?

Toska? Well... we... it’s... okay okay I have to admit that we don’t; we don’t have a word for *toska*...

You don’t have a word for *toska*...? says Vadim smiling victoriously.

No, we don’t.

...А зря!!!

Well, at least my language has a word that means *girlfriend*.

Girlfriend? That’s not an important word.

It is too, important!

No it’s not. *Wife* is important, but *girlfriend* isn’t... and besides ...and

besides, we don't need it because we have words like ...like ...well, for example, like *mrak* and *uzhas* and *koshmar*...

Yeah but...!

...not to mention both *drug* and *znakomiy*...

Wait a minute! English has those too. We have them both. We say *friend* and *acquaintance*.

No you don't. When do you use the word *acquaintance*?

What? We use it all the time. We use it to mean people who are not friends, in other words, people we hate.

And another thing... Can I see your passport?

My passport? It's been years since anybody asked to see my passport. And now of all possible times!

I hand Vadim my passport.

Right..., he says holding it against the light of the window: Now, what color is it... what color is your passport?

Blue.

Good. Now what color... look through the window over there and tell me what color the sky is?

Blue.

There you go.

Where?

There's your proof that Russian is the richer language.

Why?

Because we have *siniy* and *goluboi* and English doesn't.

Yeah well in English we have *fingers* and *toes*. In Russian you just have *fingers*... *fingers* on your hands... *fingers* on your legs... And that's not all! You know what else you don't have...?

What?

...You Russians don't have *fun*.

I pause triumphantly, but Vadim doesn't acknowledge me:

Another unimportant word, he says.

What do you mean, "unimportant"?

Fun is a word of course, but it's not... how should I say this... it's not a *serious* word. Now if you take Russian, then you'll see what serious words are all about.

Like what?

Well, like *mrak* and *uzhas* and *koshmar*...

You already said those! You're repeating yourself.

Fine, then let me say this: you Americans don't have *dusha*!

To *girlfriends*..., I say, ...and to *toska!*

Again we touch glasses:

You know, I'm no diplomat. . . , Vadim offers diplomatically, . . . But let's drink to English: a language that many consider to be the greatest in the world. . . !

I pause.

Vadim is holding his alcohol in the air, waiting for me to reciprocate. I am surprised by his diplomacy and touch my glass to his words. But my tongue is still stinging, and unlike Vadim, I am no diplomat:

And let's drink to Russian. . . ! I say, . . . a language which is rich enough to be widely regarded as the second greatest!

(19)

“Where the hell have you been...?”

(20)

But soon after I moved in, things began to change drastically. Vadim had forgotten to pay the right people. Or had remembered not to pay the wrong people. Or maybe both. Whatever the case, he was being squeezed from all sides. First he sold his car. Then his apartment. In despair he began to frequent the city's casinos, climbing further into debt. He pawned his knight. He hocked his bear. He borrowed from *B* to pay off *A*, then from *C* to cover the interest of *B*. From *D* he took money to pay off the rest of *B* and a part of *C*. With the money that *E* lent him he tried to win back his losses in the casino. When this failed he turned to *F*, who gave him a fraction of what he needed and advised him to ask *G* and *H*. . . By the time he got to *Z*, not a single loanshark would lend him money. No friend could help him. The alphabet was exhausted. One day his newly appointed Finance Director came to him with a stack of papers, plopping them on the desk:

It's over, said the accountant.

What is? Vadim asked naively.

Klamagup, said the accountant, The company is bankrupt.

And it was. The plaques were chiseled from the doors. The office was sold. Even the furniture was repossessed by the creditor with the biggest “directors.”

Vadim returned to live with his mother in the apartment where he had outgrown his childhood. In his haste to the top, he had overlooked

his mother's apartment, and now he had no money to redecorate it. The apartment was exactly as he had left it. With peeling brown furniture. Wooden planked floors. A red-woven carpet on the wall.

It didn't have to be the end...

But Vadim was tired.

He still owed money left and right, but for now his creditors did not trouble him. He needed time to straighten out his affairs, they told him, and besides he was worth more to them alive than dead. And so they seemingly ignored him; not once did they come to his apartment; no one called....

(21)

...But sometimes when we are sitting in his kitchen and an unexpected noise is heard outside his door, Vadim will jump and look back over his shoulders. He knows, and I know, and the entire English alphabet knows that it's inevitable: sooner or later Vadim will be receiving a *visit*.

(22)

And so Vadim stayed at home. He lived with his mother. He stopped going out. Now he had no reason to read economics texts, and although he still believed in God, he soon rediscovered vodka. In time his ex-girlfriend became his ex-girlfriend, taking with her as she went both pure-breed dogs. His acquaintances began to shun him. His business associates avoided him like an income tax. In despair, Vadim drank even more than he had before he believed in God. What little money he had hidden under his floorboards quickly ran drier than a bitterness. While his mother worked to make the family's ends meet, the rent from my apartment became Vadim's primary source of income, and no matter how many times I tried to offer him more, my friend insisted on charging me the amount that we had agreed on at the outset, an amount that was now one-tenth of what he could have received from renting it out to someone else.

Vadim had risen high enough to fall spectacularly. He was penniless. He was kopeckless. He was BMWless.

And through it all, Vadim just seemed to take his fate in stride, resigning himself to the small room where he had left fearlessly only to return, as if everything had settled back into its rightful place, the place where everything had been and should be. He'd had his share of struggling, of striving, of

wanting. For him, these last few years had been a dream, in both senses of the word, and now, having lived that dream, he was able to accept the smaller cookie gracefully and with dignity. With time he returned to literature, became increasingly philosophical about life in general and about his situation in particular, and through our discussions I at last began to make progress toward understanding my first Russian Soul.

(23)

Olga Mikhailovna is the name of the woman who reminds me to pay my rent; Vadim calls her “Mom” and although she has become a second Aunt to me, I still refer to her as I have from the beginning of our relationship; affectionately I call her “Landlady.”

Landlady was born sixty-four years ago in Leningrad. She is silently heroic, slightly tragic, energetic, and honest to a fault. At any given moment she will either be laughing or cleaning. Usually both. During her short lifetime she has survived war, starvation, dictatorship, communism, stagnation, Gorbachev, a putsch, rebellion, inflation, and now the uncertainty of reforms; her life has not come easy and that is why she, like other women of her generation, maintains a large collection of disposable containers and sacks.

Landlady is old but optimistic, out of date but not out of touch; it was she who taught me how to peel potatoes thinly; from her I learned not to discard bread; by her example I found the value in explaining complex ideas using generalizations. Russia’s gypsies, she once informed me, are like the blacks in America: absolutely nobody likes them but for some reason they all sing in restaurants.

(24)

Wrong: There are many heroes in this story.
Right: There is one main character, but even he is no hero.

(25)

Sitting with Vadim in his kitchen behind a table of vodka I decide to turn our conversation toward a serious topic: I ask him about his debts, about how many people he owes money to.

Well, he tells me, the debts are consolidated into one lump sum that is owed to a certain individual. In one sense it’s easier that way — less phone calls.

How much is it?

Vadim clears his throat, his words scraping against themselves. When I hear the amount I am stunned:

What are you going to do? I ask him.

I don't know, he says, They've left me alone so far but sooner or later they're bound to become more *insistent*.

What do you mean by insistent?

It's difficult to say. It could be anything. In our country we don't have laws. I don't know what they'll do....

Why don't you go to the police?

It's not an option.

Are you sure? I have a student... her father works in the police force. He's a high-ranking officer. Maybe I could talk to him...

It's out of the question.

Why?

Because this is Russia.

Well, isn't there some way that you could earn the money, start from scratch, maybe?

Not anymore. Things have changed. Back when I started, you could make money on anything. But now it's a different world. That's one of the drawbacks of stability. Sadly, nobody much needs fifteen-kopeck coins nowadays....

Does Landlady know that you owe so much money?

Not really. She knows that I'm in debt, but she doesn't know how serious it is... Please don't tell her... I don't want her to worry...

No, of course... But aren't there any other options, anything else you can do?

In my situation there are only two possible ways out: either I can shoot myself or I can go to my creditor and say, Look I can't pay you and so I'm at your mercy. It's a risk.

Which will it be?

I don't know... I'm still deciding. I've been deciding for the last three months.

What about leaving?

What do you mean?

Leaving Russia.

Are you kidding me? Where would I go?

What difference does it make? Anywhere... for example... well for example, you could go *there*...!

Where's that?

Where's *there*? *There* is not here. *There* is there.

I know that, but where specifically?

Well America for example... Just think... you could get a new start... in no time at all you could be chasing the American dream. You could...

Out of the question. For me leaving isn't an option. I can't imagine myself anywhere else. Call it my destiny. Call it the Russian Soul... I'm not sure what it is, but I know that I can't live anywhere but here....

And here my friend becomes quiet. I raise my glass of vodka:

A toast, I say, to your Russian Soul!

And to your American Dream! he adds.

But before we can conclude the toast, Landlady has come into the kitchen with a two-liter plastic bottle:

Don't worry, she says, I'm not going to ruin your scene... I'll just rinse out this bottle and leave you two alone... it'll only take a second.

Mom...

Landlady turns on the kitchen faucet, running the water noisily into the sink.

Mom! What are you doing, Mom, for Christ's sake?

I'm rinsing out this plastic bottle.

Why? Why are you rinsing out this bottle. It's disposable. Disposable! You don't rinse out disposable bottles... you... you dispose of them.

Landlady is holding the plastic bottle under the water. As she scrubs it, the plastic folds into itself and then snaps back with a loud pop.

There's no sense throwing away a perfectly good bottle, she answers, It's sure to come in handy some day.

Mom, this isn't the Soviet Union anymore. These are meant to be thrown away. You don't need to wash them! You don't!

Vadim walks across the kitchen and yanks open a cupboard door; the cabinet rattles in response and from within the dark shelves a half-dozen sterilized plastic bottles fall out and bounce onto the floor, then roll into the center of the small kitchen.

There! says Vadim, There are your bottles! You have enough already and still you're washing them....

(26)

"...Hi it's me. Am I interrupting something...?"

(27)

Your generation, says Landlady, just doesn't understand.... You think that everything is so simple... you'll see....

...Mom!

You think that...

Mom, do we have to go through this again? Do we?

Landlady has stopped smiling. Her voice is cracking with age:

I suppose I should just throw these bottles away? she says: I suppose I should throw away the end pieces of bread, too?

No, Mom, you shouldn't throw them away... you should give them to your guests... and if they turn them down then you should be ashamed... and if they accept, then you should be ashamed that you don't have anything better to offer them... and if they accept and like it, then you should be ashamed because it means that somewhere someone is starving and dreaming about eating this dried piece of bread and here *you* are depriving them of it....

Vadim stops. His outburst has surprised me and, I think, himself as well:

...Look I'm sorry I brought it up... let's just drop it, okay? he says.

And with that Vadim throws the sterilized plastic bottles back into the cupboard and slams it shut.

...Let's just drop it...

(28)

After Landlady leaves the room, Vadim shakes his head:

I don't know what's come over me lately, he says, It's like I'm always on edge — I guess it's the debts.

You need to get out more. You need to relax.

Where?

I don't know. Someplace quiet. Outdoors, maybe.

Yeah. You know I've been in this damn city forever.

Vadim stops to think:

Hey! he says, Let's go to the country! I have a friend who can let me use his summer cottage.

But it's not summer.

Well then I'll ask a different friend. I mean, we just have to go... now's the perfect time... before winter comes... and if we're lucky we'll even have a chance to look for mushrooms... What do you say?

Mushrooms?

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

(29)

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....

(30)

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

(31)

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.

...I've been thinking lately that it might be time for me to leave.

What do you mean? says Vadim.

Leave Russia.

What! Why?

I've been here for a long time now... a lot longer than I'd planned. To be honest I'm not even sure why I stayed *this* long.

What are you talking about?

It's strange, I say, But I just seemed to have lost interest. I mean everything started so well. Everything was new and interesting. There was so much promise. And now... there's nothing new, it's as if it's the same old thing over and over, day after day, page after page. Now I'm just going through the motions.

But what about your promises... the eleven yellow words?

I've already found nine of them. There're only two more to go... and I've begun to think that it's not too bad... that maybe it's enough.

What about measuring the Russian Soul?

I give up.

What do you mean?

I've realized that I'll never be able to touch it or see it, or taste it... let alone smell it. And besides, it's not even that important for me anymore. It used to be, but now it's not.

When did this happen? You were always so determined to stick it out, not to leave until you *understand*... until you *understood*. I mean do you have any idea how many times you've used those two words!

I know, I know. Counting your last sentence... ninety-six times.

See! And now, after everything, to just up and leave... to leave just like that?

It's not *just like that*. I've been thinking about it for a while now. It's hard to explain, but the more I live here, the stronger it gets. In fact, I'm not even sure why I'm still here, what's keeping me.

I stop:

Did I tell you what happened to me last week?

No.

Well, you remember how I told you about the two-kopeck coin... about how I promised to keep the coin as long as I stayed in Russia... in other words, I wouldn't give it up until I was ready to leave...?

Yes, so?

So anyway, the other day I was having a terrible day... I mean it must have been the single worst day of my life: during the entire day no one seemed

to notice that I was a foreigner; no one seemed to care; an acquaintance had complimented me on my knowledge of Russian, but didn't bother to pose any questions beginning with "Have you read...?" On my way home the sun was shining right into my eyes...

I get the point... what happened?

Okay, so at home I'd just finished off an opened bottle of vodka and decided to get some more. When I went out for the second time the elevator was working but busy... again the sun was shining right in my eyes...

Get to the point!

I am, I am... So I finally get to the store and I'm buying a bottle of vodka and I've taken out my wallet to pay for it when suddenly I feel someone tapping me on the shoulder. When I turn around a man is standing in front of me and holding out his hand at me. Is this yours? he says. At first I don't understand what he's getting at, but then I see that in his hand he's holding the two-kopeck coin.

You'd dropped it?

That's right. Can you imagine? He picked up a filthy worthless coin from the filthy worthless floor in order to give it back to me... as if he sensed it.

Sensed what?

You know, that I wasn't ready to leave yet... somehow he knew that it was too early. And so he gave me back the coin, in other words he gave me a reason to stay in Russia.

I see.

Strange, isn't it?

Maybe. But there's one thing I don't understand: why don't you just leave if you feel like leaving?

I don't know. I have a lot of ties here... it's not easy to just... I mean I've been here for four and a half years, and that's an awful long time...

Vadim is looking at me sadly.

I guess I'm just waiting for an excuse, in other words, for the moment when I'll know fully and finally that the time is right...

Vadim hands me the bottle and I take it.

...I guess I'm just waiting for something to bring change... or, at the very least, the prospect for change.

(32)

Later, we hike back to the electric train which takes us to the metro station which takes us to the elevator which takes us to the light...

When I reach home I look for the redhead's number. I have forgotten it, but at last find it on an old playing card. An unfamiliar voice answers:
Hello? it says.
Hello? I answer, Tanya?
You must have the wrong number.
Excuse me... is this the Three of Diamonds?
Yes the number is right. But there's no Tanya here. They don't live here anymore. Good-bye...
Just a minute! ...Do you know how long it's been?
What?
Do you know how long ago they moved out?
I don't know. I've lived here for two years. I can't tell you when they moved out... At least two years ago.
Two years ago.
Sadly, I put the phone down:
Thanks, I say.

(33)

Some call it a dream; others a nightmare. Often their accents are flawless and their grammar impeccable. But no matter what they call it, one thing is sure: it will end as everything does, and most likely it will end — no matter how long we've been expecting it — unexpectedly.

For Erica Martin it ended under the wheels of a Russian ambulance which, after crushing her chest like a cardboard box, didn't even stop to pick her up.

It was not the first such incident.

When I heard the news I was shocked in triplicate: first, that Erica was dead; second, that she was dead because of an ambulance; and third, that it had happened — that *it* had come to its end — in Russia, that is to say, in the country that she had spent so much of her life hating. *What would she have thought of that?* I wondered in her absence: *Did she have time to curse her fate? Or had she lived here long enough to appreciate this irony?*

(34)

Do you like riddles? Vadim asks me unexpectedly one day.

Not really, I answer.

Well I heard a good one the other day. Wanna hear it?

Not really.

Okay it goes like this..., and Vadim begins to tell the riddle:

An American spy, it seems, landed in the middle of a Russian countryside, buried his parachute, and after changing into traditional peasant clothes hiked to a village where he came upon a house and an old woman sitting on its porch. The woman looked at him suspiciously, but the man approached her anyway, addressing her in flawless, accentless Russian:

Babushka, he said, Give me some water!

The old woman, listening to his request for a drink, looked at him severely and said:

I won't give you anything, you American spy!

The man's accent had been flawless, his grammar had been impeccable. So, says Vadim beaming at his riddle, How did she know that he was an American spy?

I don't know, Vadim.

Take a guess!

I don't know... he probably used the familiar verb instead of the formal.

No no! He said it perfectly...!

He probably mistook the perfective for the imperfective... you know, like I'm always doing.

No no! His grammar was perfect!

I don't know.

You don't?

No I don't

And Vadim smiles a conqueror's smile:

(35)

The spy was black.

(36)

Vadim is very pleased with his riddle. In fact he has been in particularly good spirits the whole day. I haven't seen him in such a good mood for more than half a year. Finally, when I can take it no more, I ask him:

Hey! what's the deal? Why are you in such a good mood. I mean you're smiling from ear to ear!

I am?

Yeah, you are.

Well actually there is something...
 What is it?
 I've met the girl of my dreams!
 You have? Congratulations!
 Thanks.
 What's her name?
 Olga.
 Olga?
 No... Olga.
 Well of course it is. Of course her name is *Olga!*
 ...What?... Why? Why do you say *of course?*
 It had to be Olga!
 Why *had to?*
 Because by now I've already met Tanya, Natasha, Lena, and Irina!
 I'm in love, says Vadim, ...she's the most amazing Olga I've ever met...
 and *that's* saying something!
 Well, tell me about her...?
 You see, she's unique... she's unlike any other girl!
 How so?
 Well, she's beautiful, intelligent, polite...
 Intelligent *and* polite?
 That's right! And beautiful!
 She sounds perfect.
 She is!
 Does she speak German?
 I don't know. Why do you ask?
 I'm still trying to get rid of this damn dictionary.
 Vadim laughs for the first time since he started taking the metro:
 I'll ask her, he says, but I think she studied French...
 Just then Vadim's favorite song comes over the radio, and he closes his
 eyes to appreciate it:
 "Yesterday... All my troubles seemed so far away..."

(37)

For Vadim, Olga was a godsend; she helped him forget about his debts, about the impossible sum of money he owed to a certain individual who by now was becoming impatient with him. Vadim and Olga's relations quickly went from new to serious, and with this change, Vadim changed

as well: for the first time since spring he began to leave his apartment regularly; now he had a reason to look after himself; he drank less; his state of mind improved; eventually, a friend of his found him a modest job at the history institute where he had once been a student, and every morning he would go to his unglamorous job by metro and return in the evening. He still lived with his mother in the apartment downstairs from mine; but now he spent less time with me — during the day he worked, during the evenings he stayed with Olga...

(38)

...and I am absolutely glad for him.

In fact, if you don't know about his enormous debts, you would say that Vadim is living a normal life. His salary is modest, but paid more or less regularly. He stays busy. It even seems that he has managed to put the letter Z out of his mind.

For now our conversations have become as rare as a rose, and somewhat less philosophical. But I know that this is exactly what he needs.

And besides, I still have my students; I have my vodka; I have all twelve chairs and one story of America...

Or is it one chair and twelve stories...?

(39)

But according to Russian tradition it's a sin to leave an unfinished bottle of vodka. And so before moving on, Vadim and I walk dutifully back into the kitchen to finish it off.

In the other room, within my view, Landlady is trying to mend a disposable plastic sack whose handle has been ripped off by too many trips with potatoes. The bag is in full color and shows a barechested Russian woman with a flag wrapped around her shoulders. The flag, of course, is American, but does not cover her nipples, both of which stick out proudly — pink and red, respectively. As Landlady holds the bag, her wrinkled fingers course over the woman's breasts, bending, then folding them. Seeing this, I am reminded of a discussion that we started several weeks ago, but never finished:

Fate, I say to Vadim, does not exist.

What do you mean it doesn't exist?

It doesn't exist.

Yes it does.
No it doesn't.
Yes it does.
Does not.
Does too.
Does not.
Does too....

(40)

Aw forget it..., says Vadim, It's not important anyway...
And here he holds up his glass. By now our tongues have become heavy
and our words paradoxical:
What should we drink to? he asks.
To Russia! I say.
And to America! he answers.
To Russian! I say.
And to English! he says.
To the Russian Dream! I say.
And..., he says, ...to the American Soul!

(41)

Olga is blonde now but manages to be both intelligent and polite.
Her outward appearance, like that of most Russian women, is especially
striking in spring. Olga has completed five years of medical school along
with two years of residency and if all goes well — if there are no unforeseen
cataclysms to ruin her plans — if everything goes per schedule then in
approximately three weeks — nothing could happen in three weeks, could
it? — in approximately three weeks she will finally become, that is to say
in a little over two chapters Olga will finally become....
She will *finally* become....

(42)

“It rained today...”

* * * * *