

## Book 12. Тocka

(A)

Sheremetievo-2 airport was designed by people who lived in small apartments. Its ceilings are low. Its lighting is even lower. There are round metallic things on the ceiling. And although there really *are* windows, if you ask anyone who has been there, they will insist with both arms that the airport is as windowless as a Soul.

That's where I am now. My flight leaves in just a few hours. I have come early so as not to miss my flight. I have checked both my passport and my visa which are tucked safely into my wallet. I have made sure to make sure to be sure.

And so that's where I am. Sheremetievo-2 Airport. Here I am waiting for the plane that will take me home. Waiting for these hours to pass as quickly as have the last six and a half years of my life.

Here I am waiting...

(B)

...But before I can be here, I need to be there... back on the twelfth floor of my apartment building. Back in the place that was home. Back in the past tense. Before I could leave for the airport I had to gather my things, to clean my ex-apartment, to give back the keys.

But most important I needed to go back because I had to say good-bye; after six and a half years I couldn't leave just like that, now could I?

(B)

"Hi, it's me... James... look I'm calling because... I mean I know I should be telling you this in person, but... well, you see, it all happened

so suddenly... I mean I've been thinking about it for a long time now, but now that the time has come it's all happening so quickly... you see, Lena, I'm leaving... I'm leaving next week, I've already bought my ticket... no, I won't... this time I won't be coming back... I know, I know, we were supposed to read O. Henry after the holidays... but you know, Lena, you've made a lot of progress over the last four years... I'm amazed at how well you can read and speak and listen... Lena, you're my best student... and you know, I just want to say that after I leave... after next week, you have to promise me that you'll stick with your studies... you have to promise me that you'll continue with English. You can continue on your own, I'm sure of it. It's important. Trust me... you'll be surprised at how fast the time can pass... five years, then six years, then six and a half... and I wouldn't want you to... I mean I wouldn't want for you to give up... do you see what I mean? Do you promise me you'll stick to English when I'm gone... huh, Lena, do you promise? You do? You promise! Okay. That's a good girl. I knew you wouldn't let me down... I knew I could count on you, Lenchka..."

## (F)

And so I stood in my apartment. Cleaning it for the last time, I felt a cold sense of loss. *No other apartment would ever be like this one. This apartment where I'd learned four yellow words. Where I'd been explained the difference between coffee and tea; silence and marriage; loving and getting by. Where I'd learned to play tysacha. And then, later, how to play it and be lucky...*

Cleaning my apartment for the last time, I collected the remnants of my past: a Three of Diamonds; a dusty calculator; my fur hat; the tattered copy of *Anna Karenina*; my mother's letter; the German dictionary...

Now it was time to leave. Now there was nothing to keep me here. Now I could leave without contrition:

I had given away the two-kopeck coin.

I had given up on the eleventh yellow word.

And saddest of all, ever since the wedding my Russian had dissolved. Like an antacid tablet it had fizzled and popped until there was nothing left of it. Now I was misusing words that for many years I'd spoken without thinking. Now I was confusing grammar in ways that I never had before. As if I were already saying good-bye. As if I had already begun to forget.

Carefully, I placed my six and a half years into my suitcase.

(D)

My doorbell rang loudly, echoing through my apartment. When I opened the door I saw Vadim:

Hi, he said, are you all packed?

Almost....

Well everyone's waiting downstairs.

I'm almost ready.

Here let me take your suitcases... the elevator's broken again.... just these two?

That's right. Just two.

Well, give me that big one over there...

Vadim picked up the larger suitcase and disappeared out the door.

A few minutes later he returned for the small one.

For a few moments I stood without leaving. *Again it seemed that I was overlooking something. But what? What could it be? But no... I'd checked everything. I had everything that I needed to leave Russia forever. It was all right there in my wallet.*

I sighed sweetly and bitterly at the same time. My life in Russia was ending; this chapter of it, I knew, was over, and after it there would be no more.

I closed the door tightly and made my way for the stairwell.

(E)

It is New Year's Day.

It is the beginning of a new cold year.

But it is raining. Instead of a thick white snow, the city is covered in rain. And nobody is surprised. Nobody is surprised, and nobody is surprised that nobody is surprised. But why? Why isn't anybody surprised at the rain? Perhaps because we have come to accept the weather as an inevitable yet unpredictable part of our lives? Perhaps because rain is as unavoidable as change? As inevitable as fate? Perhaps because it rained the day before?

But no! It's nothing like that. Surely, it has something to do with the last six and a half years... surely, it has something to do with the years that I have spent here. Surely, it means something more significant.

(Ė)

Landlady let me in.

Vadim had already left my suitcases to clutter their hall. Carefully, I

took off my shoes and put on my pair of slippers. When I walked into the kitchen Vadim and Olga were waiting for me.

Hi James, Olga said, We missed you last night.

Last night?

At the new year's dinner. Everyone was here.

I was... well, you know, with my flight today and all I didn't think that I should risk it.

Olga waves off my words:

It's not important, she said, It's just that Olya was here... she asked about you....

I cringed.

...She said to tell you hi.

That was nice of her, I said and took my seat at the table.

As we sat together for the final time, each of us could feel that this conversation really was our last; and each tried to ignore it: we discussed the weather; and politics; and the problem of blacks in America.

As we sat I learned from Olga that today's rain was really tears being shed at my departure. And that Vadim had finally managed to pay off his debts... by borrowing once again. And that it was highly unlikely that America would solve its black-white problem in the near future.

At some point Landlady came into the room with a recycled plastic sack for me to take back to America: inside were the collected works of Alexander Sergeivich Pushkin — Olga Ivanovna had left it for me — and a large jar of black currant jam.

For an instant we all sat silently.

Finally, Vadim turned to me:

So what now? he said.

What do you mean? I answered.

What are you going to do when you get back to America?

Oh that. I'm not sure... I haven't decided. My aunt's been looking for a job for me... she says she already has an offer to work in a flower shop.

A flower shop?

Yes, selling roses. I have an interview after I get back.

What about your book?

What book?

The book you're going to write about your experiences in Russia. Have you started it?

No... I haven't. I mean, I'm not planning on writing any books.

Well, in any case, when you finish it, make sure to send us a copy.

Yeah, said Olga, With an autograph!  
But...!  
I stopped:  
Okay, I said, I'll send you a copy.  
And James...?  
Yes?  
When you write your book... remember what I told you... don't forget  
Katya, and Sveta, and Marina...!

**(Ж)**

Of course, I said.  
Vadim smiled but then, as if remembering something, his expression  
changed:  
Oh... I almost forgot! Olya asked me to give you this.  
Vadim reached deep into his pocket and fumbled around for something:  
She didn't want you to leave without it...  
Clumsily, Vadim rummaged in his pocket and pulled out my two-  
kopeck coin:  
Here! he said, She wanted you to have it... she knows how much it  
means to you.  
I smiled and took the coin.

**(3)**

And when our conversation could go no further, the four of us got up  
from the table. Back in their hallway, I put on my winter hat. Then my  
boots. Slowly, I buttoned my jacket.  
For a moment we stood there.  
Let's sit, Vadim said.  
And the four of us squatted on whatever was available: Vadim on my  
large suitcase. Olga next to him. Landlady on my small suitcase. And I  
next to her.  
In silence we sat in the cramped hallway next to the heavy metal door.  
For a minute of silence we sat looking at each other. Vadim. Olga.  
Landlady. For a silent minute they were all right there in front of me. They  
were close enough to touch... or to thank.  
And then Vadim stood up:  
All right, James! he said, It's time to show everybody what you've learned!

## (И)

And so I stood up:

Thanks for everything, I said in Russian.

Everyone nodded.

Expertly, I unsnapped the locks on the large metal door. Grabbing my suitcases and the recycled packet I turned and walked into the cold stairwell.

One last time I turned around to look at my friends: Vadim, Olga, Landlady. And having looked at them a final time I turned back toward the cold stairwell.

Hey James! Vadim's voice called after me.

I looked over my shoulder to see his words.

Hey James! he said, Be careful on that escalator!

## (Й)

I walked down the flight of stairs and out into the cold air. Purposefully, I found the bus stop where I caught the bus to my metrostation. Inside the metro, I handed the uniformed attendant three plastic metro tokens and along with my two suitcases passed through her turnstile unscathed.

The platform was not crowded. And when the train had screeched fully into the station, and the passengers had exited, I entered.

No, I explained, I'm not getting off at the next stop.

And kicking my suitcases up against the far-side doors I cleared a path for the exiting passengers.

Across from me an old woman stood squinting at a metro map:

Can you tell me how to get to *Taganskaya*? she asked me.

And I told her.

## (К)

One by one the stations flew by. For the last time the metro was taking me from there to here. From *K* to *А*. From past to present tense. For the last time I was looking at the people who had made up my life in Russia. My fellow travelers. My friends.

One by one the stations flew by until there was only one left.

And as we approached my destination, I stood waiting. I stood waiting for the final words that I would ever hear the mechanical voice say to me,

the final words that I would ever hear in the past tense. And sure enough, the words came loudly:

*“Rechnoi Vokzal. Terminal Station.”*

**(J)**

I exit the car.

I set out along the platform for the short escalator.

I go from bottom to top without injury.

I exit onto the street.

In front of me people are hustling and bustling and so I walk to where bus number 517 will take me to the airport.

On the streets people are slushing through the falling rain. Banners announce the coming year. Billboards congratulate passersby on yet another year of prosperity:

HAPPY NEW YEAR!  
FROM NORTH-SOUTH BANK

Under these billboards old women are selling bottles of vodka from wooden crates. A plaque in an exchange window announces today's rate of exchange:

(1USD=6RUR).

Stupidly, I stand in front of the sign. Blinking and confused, I try to understand it.

**(M)**

And that's where it could have ended — that's where my story could have come to its untimely end:

From my blind side an ambulance hops over the median and cruises along the sidewalk. Bystanders on the street scurry to get out of its path. But I have been caught looking for the zeros, and do not see it.

*Could this be the end! Could it be that my story will end right now... right here in the middle of a crowded sidewalk? In the middle of the Russian*

*alphabet! Truthfully, the end is only inches away. Just a few more centimeters and my story will end prematurely... before it even begins!*

Without even noticing me the ambulance comes screaming in my direction... but just in the nick of time I step back, the ambulance goes blaring by... leaving a dirty streak of mud on my clothes.

I gasp for the final time.

## (H)

Breathing heavily, I stand there.

Thankfully, I have been spared.

My bus comes. The people enter. And I with them.

## (O)

I stamp my tickets and wait.

When the ticket controller approaches me, I show him my tickets. And he walks by.

But the man next to me hasn't paid his fare and when the controller asks him for his ticket the man justifies himself as follows:

I didn't buy a ticket, he says, because I'm only going one stop.

Well then, the ticket taker points out, if you're only going one stop then there's no reason why you can't walk that one stop!

But the man doesn't lose heart:

Sure, he says, I can walk... of course I can walk... but why should I walk when I can ride for free?!

The ticket taker stops to think this over. And then moves on.

One by one he checks tickets until he reaches two teenage boys who haven't stamped their tickets.

And here, I am witness to an ugly scene:

## (II)

Tickets! the ticket taker tells the two teenagers.

Tickets? they tremble, Tickets?

Tickets! Tickets! the ticket taker tells them.

Truthfully the two teenagers thought that this time... *this time...* they'd trick the ticket taker; truthfully, they thought that this ticket taker took the trolleybus toward town, that they'd therefore travel trouble-free.



The... the tickets... they're...  
Tensely, the teens try to trick the ticket taker.  
Tell the truth..., the ticket taker tempts them, Tell the truth...  
The truth?  
The truth! The truth!  
They try to think this through.  
*The truth? That they tried to travel ticketless? That they thought they'd  
trick the ticket taker?*  
Truants! the ticket taker thunders, Teenage truants...!  
Together they try to turn the tables:  
There! the taller teen tries to talk, There're the tickets!  
The ticket taker takes the teens' two tattered tickets, tears them to ticker  
tape, then throws them toward the teens.  
Terrified, they turn tearful.  
The ticket taker terrorizes them:  
Take that! the ticket taker tells them, Take that!  
*That'll teach them! the tyrant thinks, That'll teach those two to try to travel  
ticketless! That'll teach them to try to trick this ticket taker...!*

**(P)**

Wow! says one of the people standing next to me after the ticket taker  
has exited with the two teens:  
That sure was unpleasant! says another.  
Yeah, I agree, even *I* thought that scene would never end.  
The things some people won't do to make a point! the first person says.  
I hope we'll never have to suffer through anything like *that* again...,  
says the second.  
We won't, I say, We've already passed *II*... in fact, the next stop, if I'm  
not mistaken, is...

**(C)**

Standing in the bus, I watch the Russian countryside pass me. *How  
many times have I seen that same countryside without noticing it? How many  
times has it skidded by? And now that I'm leaving, I see it for the first time.  
Isn't that the way of it... isn't that how we live our lives... not realizing what  
we've left behind until we've passed irretrievably through Customs. Isn't that  
how it always is? Doesn't the fallen snow seem infinitely more beautiful from*

*an airplane window than from the naked viewpoint on the street? Aren't people more exotic and beautiful when they no longer exist for you?*

**(T)**

Mile after mile I pass open fields of green flaked with white. Wooden shacks. A tall building with a ninety-foot Marlboro man. Mile after mile I watch the countryside turn from city to suburb to pasture. Stop after stop the bus carries me toward my destination.

**(Y)**

*But is this really forever? Can it really be that I will never return to this place that has been my home for so long? Why is it that this final bus ride seems so final? Why does it seem so permanent? Somehow I expected the ending to be more glamorous, more significant. I guess right until the very end I expected more conclusions to be made. More meaning to be given.*

At the next stop the bus grinds to a halt. The doors open.

**(Φ)**

The doors open and a woman steps up into the bus. She is sophisticated. She is taking out her ticket and looking for a place to stamp it. Suddenly, a man approaches her. He is wavering — he has obviously swallowed too much vodka — and staggering with each step forward, he approaches her. The drunk's eyes are fluttering and he is opening his mouth as if he wants to say something. The woman, cautious, hesitates by the doors. It is clear the man has something he wants to tell her, or maybe ask her. The man slumps up to the woman. The woman tries to look away but feels that the man is watching her. Trying to ignore him, she punches her ticket and steps forward... but the drunk man blocks her way. The woman moves to the right to step by him, but the drunk slumps that way too. For a few awkward moments the two of them — the woman and the drunk — stand there looking at each other in silence. Then, finally, when it seems that he has forgotten what to say, the drunk man opens his mouth to speak. At first his words evade him... they will not come. And then in one instant they arrive... As the woman looks at him in surprise, the drunk man screams into her face...

(X)

F U C K Y O U!!!

(II)

The woman steps back. But the man is not finished. He stops for a moment to think, and turning his eyes to the sky, then adds: Can you believe this rain?

(Ч)

After the man has been thrown out the doors onto the street the bus arrives at the terminal.

I exit.

I walk the short path to the airport.

The doors open and I enter.

(III)

Two hours ago I arrive into the second Sheremetievo Airport with two suitcases, a disposable sack, and a German-English dictionary that nobody in this country seems to want.

The larger suitcase is filled with junk: pens and papers, clothes and hats. The smaller suitcase contains each of my six and a half years — in other words, *Anna Karenina* and a solar calculator the size of a credit card.

The disposable sack, a present from the woman who was my second Aunt, contains a book of Pushkin and a large jar of blackcurrant jam.

In my pocket, filthy and sticky, is my two-kopeck coin — a coin that is as worthless as a word...

...and just as priceless.

(III)

I walk to the tables where the Customs declarations are lying scattered. But there are none in English. There are none in Russian. There is only French and German.

Without thinking I open my suitcase and take out my German-English dictionary. It is as thick as my tongue. Harder than a hard sign. In time I have translated the form and filled out my declaration as follows:

(b)

ZOLLDEKLARATION

NAME AND VORNAME:	JAMES
STAATSANGEHÖRIGKEIT:	AMERICAN
ABREISELAND:	RUSSIA
BESTIMMUNGSLAND:	USA
SOWJETISCHE RUBEL:	TWO KOPECKS
ZWECK DER REISE:	OTHER

After I have finished with my Customs declaration, I start to put the German dictionary back into my suitcase. But stop. Instead I leave it on the tables next to the scattered forms.

And from there I head toward Customs.

(b)

At Customs the uniformed officer looks at my suitcases. But he does not rummage. He does not ask me questions. He does not even scrutinize my Customs declaration. Without smiling he simply hands me back my passport and motions for me to pass.

And I do.

(b)

And so here I am. Nowhere once again. In the departure section. Too soon to be *there*, but too *there* to be here. My passport has been stamped. My ticket has been checked. My luggage has been checked and re-checked.

Here I am between Customs and the flight that will take me home. Sitting next to me are twenty or twenty-five foreigners. Three of them are working on rough drafts of their books about Russia; the rest are polishing up the final versions.

I wrinkle my nose in disgust and look away.

But before I can, an announcement comes over the loud speaker: our flight is being delayed. Aeroflot is having technical problems and that means that our flight will take off later than expected.

I have some time to kill.

(3)

But what should I do with these extra minutes? How should I spend these last few hours between *here* and *there*? What should I do until I leave?

And then it occurs to me: I'll write something!

Nothing too serious or meaningful, of course. Just the usual bit: naive foreigner goes to Russia, lives there for six and a half years, then leaves forever.

Even I can write something like that!

But how should I start it? The beginning is the most important part. The beginning is the part that will set the tone. Lay the foundation. Attract or repel!

This morning, in his apartment, Vadim said that I should show everybody what I learned. That's it!

After all, my six and a half years in Russia haven't been lost on me... and so I should tell the world what I have learned!

*But what have I learned? What do I now know? What can I possibly say about this large country that for the last six and a half years has been my home?*

I take out my pen and begin to write. Furiously and carefully. After a half-hour I have a page that looks as follows:

~~Finally...~~

~~(No good... By now I've already overused the word finally)~~

~~Now I know that Russia is Russia.~~

~~(Too logical)~~

~~Now I know that Russia isn't anything else but Russia. She doesn't smile.~~

~~(An unsubstantiated generalization...)~~

~~Now I can say that Russia is neither East nor West, but...~~

~~(Confusing and misleading!)~~

~~Now I can say that Russia is neither here nor there, but...~~

~~(Too obvious!)~~

~~Now I can say that Russia is neither here nor there, but less hopeless than inevitable...~~

~~(Terrible, of course. Pretentious and contrived. Blunt and stilted. But if I want to finish this sentence sometime before my flight leaves, I'd better leave it! Besides, I can always change it later...)~~

At some point I look at my watch. I have been sitting for over an hour. I have been writing for more than sixty minutes.

*How much longer will I have to wait for my flight? How much time will I have to write my story? How far will I get into it before my plane takes me away forever? Don't think about it! Just write and write until you are no longer here! Write until your plane has come to take you there!*

“At last I can say that Russia is neither here nor there, but less hopeless than inevitable. Her people are...”

**(IO)**

But still I haven't found the eleventh yellow word. The word that changes and is changed. The word that is unlike all the others. The word that is neither *Russia* nor *ruble*. The word that has been, and still is, hopelessly beyond my grasp.

Still, I haven't found the word that will dot the *i*. That word that will allow me to place the final period on my story. Still it has remained beyond my grasp.

*But maybe, just maybe, it's better that way? Maybe there's something to be said for wanting and dreaming? And for having something to elude you? Maybe I am happier for not having found it. Richer for not diminishing its beauty by claiming to understand. Perhaps it really is better to hope than to seek. To live than to love. To fall than to be elected.*

*Maybe there is something to be said for these six and a half years of silence punctuated by words. Or words accentuated by silence. Or both silence and words overwhelmed by fifty grams of clarity.*

*Well, yeah. It's probably like that.*

**(Я).**

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