

## Book 6. "Next Stop, Voikovskaya"

### (1)

To understand why Russians don't smile in public we need to experience their metro turnstiles — the ones that stay open until the last possible moment only to slam violently shut if you haven't paid your fare correctly, and, at times, even if you *have*. To understand why Muscovites are as proud as second parents we need to rejoice in the regularity of their system of underground transportation — the world's finest and most efficient. And without riding a twelve-story escalator, without falling repeatedly, how can we even begin to understand the relentless complexity of emotions that hinders decisiveness?

It has been said that it is not for the mind to comprehend the Russian Soul; its width, its breadth cannot be measured. Especially by people who smile. But if we can pass uninjured through the narrow turnstile, if the woman behind us will stop pushing on us, and if we can just make out what the mechanical voices are trying to insist, then we can, at the very least, say that we've *tried*.

Carefully, we place a metal token into the slot of the metro turnstile and listen as it falls heavily into its stomach. We walk through the open gates which this time do not close on us.

And with that our journey begins, slowly and inauspiciously, at the Zhdanovskaya metro station.

### (2)

That year spring arrived on Aeroflot: late but well-received. And the birds sang. And the people forgot. And the winter melted like nylon pressed lightly against a Marlboro.

(3)

*“Zhdanovskaya”*

It is summer. Young women stand in flower-print dresses. Men wear starched collar shirts tucked into shrinking slacks that reveal socks tucked into worn shoes. The women’s hair is long and straight. Their shoes are old but well-polished. The men’s shoes are also polished, but *their* hair is parted on the wrong side. It doesn’t take long for a train to come — less than two minutes — and when it does the crowd enters the metro car in one sweating surge. It is the origin station and empty seats, for now, can still be found. Of course it’s easier to sit, but we prefer to stand even though it is a long way to our destination: it is a long way to Voikovskaya. Inside the car, people are taking out their reading material — Pushkin, Kharms, the novelist Lev Tolstoy — and beginning to read. And as we stand, intimidated and quiet, we feel inadequate and defenseless, our hands empty, our eyes forced to travel nervously over the length of the metro car. Although we are standing, we close our eyes, pretend to sleep — it’s better that way. *Tomorrow we will buy a fat book, any fat book!* The doors remain open for some time, the train humming in anticipation. Then they close violently with a loud crash. We are startled by the sound, shaken yet afraid to move. A few seconds later a mechanical voice comes over the loud speaker:

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Ryazansky Prospekt...”*

(4)

After I was fired from my job at the institute I decided to offer private English lessons at my small apartment. The overwhelming majority of my students were young semi-professional women named Irina.

My first group was the hardest. Despite their shared name, the three women turned out to be as different as Russian women could be. Irina, on the one hand, was intelligent; her English was stronger than that of the others, and so I did my best to overlook her. Irina, on the other hand, was polite, her answers much softer than Irina’s and at times more sincere than my questions. Once, when asked to use the construction “the problem is...” she paused to think for a few seconds before responding wistfully:

The problem is that it's not his baby, she said.

Irina, unlike the other two, was neither intelligent nor polite; she was strictly business, writing furiously in her notebook and interrogating me on subtle grammatical points. To each of my answers she would stare distrustfully at the words before writing them down and proceeding to her next question. Dutifully, I did my best to appease her, and in fact everything went smoothly enough until one day she asked me to explain the difference between *high* and *tall*.

Well, I answered, Inflation is high but Gorbachev is tall.

I don't get it? she said.

Okay, just try to remember it like this: a building can be tall but not high; a bird can only be high.

What about a mountain?

Well a mountain is high. But it can be tall sometimes too, depending on the mountain. For example, if the mountain in question is taller than you, then it would be considered high. But if it were even higher than that, then it would most definitely be tall.

Irina had stopped writing in her notebook.

It was our last lesson.

## (5)

*“Ryazansky Prospekt.”*

The metro car is clean, shocking for its absolute lack of advertising. The seats are arranged in lengthwise benches along the windows so that the passengers can sit in long rows elbow-to-elbow and stare blankly across the aisles at each other. And that is exactly what they do. They stare blankly. Or they read — Boy, do they ever! Sitting, standing, eating, sleeping, just give a Russian a book and you can bet she'll read it. Give a Russian a poem and he will surely take it to heart. Noticing this, we pull out *our* book. It is fat but new; the words are already faded, though not yet wet. And as we stand there, it is our protection, our disguise, and our eventual downfall all wrapped into one. At this stop — the second — seats fill up quickly and passengers desiring to sit should do it now, or they will stand until their destination. Which for us is Voikovskaya. There are oh-so-many stations between here and Voikovskaya, but we will wait patiently. We will wait patiently because it is at Voikovskaya that something truly remarkable will happen, something so predictable and natural that it will shock us.

It is Voikovskaya that will give meaning to it all. At Voikovskaya we will begin to understand...

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Kuzminki...”*

(6)

My self-unemployment did not last long; the next day I received a call from a woman named Irina who, along with two other young semi-professional friends, wanted to improve her English once a week. The first lesson we spoke about their names. The following week we discussed America; the week after that, slavery and oppression.

This group of students was unique in that each knew English from A to Z, and would have spoken fluently if not for articles: It is so difficult, they complained. I know, I said. Can you explain it to us? they asked. I'll try, I said. Can you try again? they pleaded. I just did, I said.

*But we still don't understand!*

Patiently, I tried to be patient. Understandably, they tried to understand. But it was hopeless. The mistakes continued. The three women struggled, then despaired, then eventually accepted their fate, each coming to terms with it in her own way: Irina used *the*; Irina used *a*; and Irina, the laziest of the three, simply omitted articles altogether.

And a time passed. And the English improved. And like King of Clubs I led our discussions through forests of grammar, often becoming lost, but never once dying. Our fourth lesson was devoted to the color blue; the fifth to red; the sixth to measuring the intricacies of the Russian Soul. It was Irina who started the conversation:

A Russian Soul, she explained, is a very root of our society.

That's truth, Irina agreed, It is very important concept.

Have you heard about it...? Irina then asked.

Vaguely, I answered, but I still don't understand what it is specifically.

It's a...

It's the...

It's...

I can tell you in the Russian..., said Irina.

Out of the question, I said, These are English lessons so you should speak English.

Okay, It's when the... it's when the person... no no that's not right... It's when the *Russian* person... well, that is to say... no... okay... it's like this...

She stopped:

May I use the dictionary? she asked.

No, I answered.

Russian Soul, Irina blurted out in flawless Russian, etc...

I held up my finger: English only!

Irina stuttered over some English words, looked around for support, moved to grab her dictionary, but then as if realizing that there were too many words there, simply sat helplessly:

I can't say it in an English language, she said.

You can too, I lied.

I can't.

Try.

It's hopeless.

I know what you can do! said Irina attempting to be helpful, Try to explain it using gestures!

*English* gestures, I reminded.

But she doesn't know gestures in the English, said Irina.

Well in that case, Irina suggested, Use gestures that don't mean anything....

And so using meaningless English gestures Irina explained the intricacies of the Russian soul. I thanked them for the information. They thanked me for the lesson, paid in dollars for my time, and left for home. See you next Tuesday, they said. See you! I said.

But when they had gone I realized that I still couldn't measure the Russian Soul. I couldn't feel it... I couldn't see it...

...I couldn't even smell it.

## (7)

*"Kuzminki."*

Are you getting off at the next stop? someone asks us from behind as the train grinds to a halt. With time we will grow accustomed to Russians' prying questions, but for now the words catch us off-guard and we stutter over our answer: Actually, we say, we're going to Voikovskaya because it is there that something remarkable will happen, it is there that... The crowd behind us listens to our long answer impatiently. Smiling, we ask them to tell us about themselves: And where are *you* getting off? we say. But it is too late. The doors have opened and before we know it the people have

pushed rudely by us without even saying good-bye. As they exit, we watch their backs move away from us and feel slighted for some reason. It is clear that we will never see their faces again and we feel an inexplicable loss. But then the mechanical voice shocks us back to reality:

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Tekstilshchiki...”*

**(8)**

Eventually, Aunt Helen stopped writing. Unanswered letters became answers to unanswered letters. Then in winter her letters stopped arriving. The care packages continued to not arrive, until finally they stopped not arriving as well. We still talked on the phone, but our conversations had become at once more expensive and less interesting. At length she would describe her weather; in short I would announce my rate of exchange. Neither could grasp the importance of these things for the other. Whereas before I had been curt and annoyed when speaking with her, now I spoke respectfully and without interest. My words smiled falsely even though my face no longer did. And Aunt Helen, in return, demanded less and less of me during our conversations. She stopped asking questions. She did not mention vegetables. Not once did she cry.

And then at some point I noticed a change: her voice became weak and controlled. Her laugh subsided. During our telephone conversations, her eyes no longer sparkled. As if she had resigned herself to the situation. As if she had understood fully and correctly her new place in my life.

Silently she just sort of faded. Like a husband who loves his wife enough to accept her lover; or like a lover who knows not to expect love.

**(9)**

With time, I came to understand the mistakes that Russians make when speaking English and jotted them down on papers which I quickly lost. This system worked well enough and in time I was able to conduct lessons without thinking.

**(10)**

Wrong:       At last I have begun to feel myself at home.  
Right:        I have begun to feel at home in Russia.

(11)

*“Tekstilshchiki.”*

It is winter. Passengers in worn jackets continue to sit, stand, crouch; books in hand, they sway and waver to the motion of the metro car. Now, with relish, they read politically opinionated newspapers. Revisionist history. Archives. Banned books. Western detectives. They read that in the United States the average American has seventy-eight sexual partners during her lifetime. Doesn't smoke. And can't even name Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin's most famous novel. In these texts they see a new world opening up before them. Words that have been around for many many years will soon disappear. New words are rising to take their place. In these black and white texts some often-heard words will be seen for the first time. Like all words they will fall short of their purpose. Though at times some will persuade. And others will offend. And still others will change and be changed.

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Volgogradsky Prospekt...”*

(12)

One day, after putting on her shoes, a student came up to me and asked in English:

I'm sorry to trouble you, she said, But can I ask a favor?

Of course, I said.

If it's too much of a problem you can just tell me — I'll understand.

Ask me anything, I exaggerated, Anything at all.

Are you sure?

Absolutely, I lied.

Well you see... There's this person... Actually, it's my friend... And she has... I want to say... She is...

What's her name? I mean your friend.

Irina. Her name's Irina — like mine. You see she has a problem and you're the only person I know who might be able to help her.

Really? What's the problem?

Well you see she's young and attractive and extremely polite...

Poor thing.

Yes, but the problem is that she's unmarried, I mean she doesn't have any sort of husband...

A husband?

That's right.

Wow that really is a problem! But you see I can't help. My last name...

No no! That's not the problem. The problem is that she can't get an American visa. She wants to go to America. She's applied four times, but has been refused each time.

A visa?

Yes, do you know anything about how she can get one?

Not really, but I can probably find out.

Are you sure?

In life everything is probable.

Will you help her?

I'll try.

Can I give her your phone number?

Sure.

Can she call you?

Of course.

What time is comfortable for you?

I held up my finger without thinking, but Irina had already realized her mistake:

Convenient! she said.

And at that I laughed:

Any time, I told her, You can have her call me any time.

### (13)

*"Volgogradsky Prospekt."*

The doors open and in barrels a broad-chested old woman. In her right hand she is holding a large bag. In her left hand she holds another large bag. Using the bite of silver teeth, her mouth is gripping a cage full of live chickens. Both hands are calloused and worn; both bags contain cheap smuggled clothes that she has bought for seven and will sell for eight. The clothes are quickly sewn and poorly made; they come complete with emblazoned texts:

GENUINE QUALITY FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

or:

AMERICAN STANDARD OF QUALITY OF THE FASHION IN  
EVERY TASTE AND COMPLEXSION



or:  
THIS GARMENT WAS PRODUCED FOR YOUR COMFORT  
IN DAY-TO-DAY SURROUNDINGS WITH COMPLETE FIT  
AND EXTERNAL QUALITY

or simply:  
HELP ME, I AM AN AMERICAN SPY

Once during a long ride a friend asks us to translate the jacket across from us. We struggle to grasp the depth of its meaning, but we are far too shallow. Luckily, we have the wherewithal to oversimplify: In English, we tell him, this combination of words means *Made in Asia*. Our friend stares at the letters blankly. As do we. In fact, we stare harder. But as we have learned, this is not Asia. It is most definitely not Asia. So why the imported jackets? Why the relentless influx of Chinese clothes, Japanese calculators, and Indian ideology? The country, it seems, is lost in its own reforms. Nothing is being done. Even less is being made. Old women no longer pawn cheese. Taxes go uncollected. Paintings are bought from time to time, but almost never sold. Even the yellow numbers on the escalator steps have begun to chip away. The nation is at a standstill; as if everyone is too busy discussing why nothing is being done, why even less is being made. And here, in the middle of this, an old woman has taken the initiative to buy for seven and sell for eight, thereby clothing a country. It is tenuous at best. But it is all we have, and for now it works. And so despite all this the train plods on... Forward, it seems. Onward, it would seem. But then, really, who knows? After all, we are in a tunnel, in the dark, and in the synthetic light we can only assume that we are really going somewhere. A hundred feet below the ground we can only turn the pages of our book and trust that we are any closer to being *there* than we were a paragraph ago.

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Proletarskaya...”*

(14)

Irina's friend called early the next morning. On the telephone her voice was flustered, her words came faster than a metro station. She was calling from Irina, she said, And thanks for helping her and had she woken me? and you see the problem was that she was not married and didn't work and had talked to a lot of people and been told that it was impossible for a young single unemployed woman to go to the U.S. because she wouldn't

get a visa, but it was oh-so-important, that is to say, she just had to go, she just had to visit America because...

No, I said sleepily, You didn't wake me. I've been awake for hours.

(15)

*"Proletarskaya."*

Something is wrong with the mechanical voice. First it speeds up excessively, announcing the stop like a shrill cashier. Then it groans to a slow halt, becomes as low and gruff as Vladimir Vysotsky's. When it can speak no more it goes on strike. Without its guidance it seems that we may have missed our destination. We try to remember what the last stop was, what the next one should be. Naively, we look through the humming window for a signpost. But all we can see is the black that is rattling by. Black, black, and more black. We are reminded of a saying that we have recently heard: Black is black, say Russians, even in Africa. And even in Africa two kopecks equal two kopecks. Even in Africa Russia is Russia. Even in Africa. Even in *Africa*...! But this train, *our* train, is not in Africa. This train is headed north. From purple to green. From there to here. From summer to winter to summer... From Zhdanovskaya all the way to Voykovskaya...

(16)

Where should we meet? she asked.

Where are you coming from? I answered.

Aviamotornaya, she said, And you?

I live at Vykhino.

We can meet in the metro.

All right. Where exactly?

Where do our lines cross?

I don't think they do, wait, let me get a map...

They don't?

Let me see... no they don't.

Well, I'll be changing to the ring line. And you're on the purple line, which means that we can meet at... what station do they cross at — the ring line with the purple?

Taganskaya.

Okay. Let's meet at Taganskaya.

Okay. Where specifically?

We can either meet at the first car, the last car, or the middle car coming from the center.

But the ring line doesn't come from the center.

Then let's meet in the middle of the platform.

Fine.

Tomorrow at Taganskaya, ring line, middle of platform?

That's right.

Great! I'll see you then...

Wait a minute! How will I recognize you — Can you describe yourself?

Sure... I'm tall, well-dressed, good looking, I'll be wearing a short sexy skirt with nylon pantyhose and a red scarf.

What color?

Red — like a long-stemmed rose. Pantyhose and a sexy skirt. I'll be carrying two books: in one hand a collection of poems by Pushkin, and in the other hand a textbook called *English For Semi-Professional Women Named Irina*. Did you get all that?

Yes, I lied.

And what about you? What do you look like?

Me? I don't know... I'm of medium height. Medium build. My hair is medium length. I have no scars or warts.

How old are you?

I guess you could say that soon I'll be middle-aged.

Will you be smiling?

No, I said, Not any more.

Then how will I recognize you?

Easily. I'll make sure to be holding my old copy of *Anna Karenina*.

### (17)

*"Taganskaya. Change to the Ring Line and Marksistskaya station."*

The problem, she explained over dinner at her small apartment, was that she had been trying for over a year to receive a tourist visa. Her first application had been denied because she had never been to America; the second was declined because she had already been refused the first time; the third application was returned without explanation; and after turning her down for the fourth time, the consular officer, smiling kindly, simply shrugged his shoulders and advised her to try again at a later date.

That was a month ago.

I don't understand what I've done wrong, she said, I try not to take all this personally — I really do — but I don't know how I'm supposed to take it when all a person really wants is to travel to the U.S. for tourist purposes and in order to do that you need to have a visa, which is fine, but then when you come to the embassy with all your documents and wait and wait and wait and then when you finally get to see the counselor all he does is ask you personal questions that have nothing to do with anything at all, I mean, is it any of his business who I live with? — I would say not! — and how would *you* feel if someone that you've never met before just out-of-nowhere asks you if you're married? Can you imagine — “Are you married?” I mean how would *you* answer that question if I asked you, not, of course, that I would ever ask you because I realize that it's none of my business and even if it were my business I still wouldn't ask because...

Actually, I told her, I'm not married. I'm not married at all.

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Ploschad Nogina. Exit right side...”*

(18)

And then I noticed a strange thing: suddenly my life had become inextricably linked to my lessons. My failures became confused grammar. My betrayed hopes became forgotten articles. I lost track of where my own life ended and when the lessons were beginning. I explained grammar using incidents from my childhood: “...*But the glass was so tall. The milk was so high...*!” To show future tense I spoke of weddings; to illustrate the past I described my mother. And as for the present, I explained, condoms were *uncomfortable* whereas love was *inconvenient*. To my surprise I began to laugh sincerely. I stopped not thinking. I drank vodka to wash down the vodka; and still, even in the face of all this, I couldn't make myself throw up....

(19)

*“Kitai-Gorod. Exit right side. Change to the Kaluzhsko-Rizhskaya line.”*

What was that? People look at each other, confused. Is it some sort of mistake? Where are they? Where are they going? The passengers are at

a loss. Some rush out the door, only to rush back in a few seconds later. Others exit never to return. The majority remain in their seats annoyed but unshaken. They grumble instinctively and return to their reading material as if to say, It doesn't matter where we are — it doesn't matter where we're going because sooner or later we'll get there anyway. This is not the first place that has been unnamed; it will not be the last. For a long awkward moment the doors stay open and then close violently, dividing those on the inside from those on the outside... Unperturbed, we look up from our fat book, which by now is dry and just starting to get interesting, and lean expectantly into the future. *But at this station the platform is on the right!* And when the train begins to move against our expectations we are caught leaning the wrong way and go running through the train — from here to then — with our fat book in hand. The train gathers speed, rattling and sputtering, but most importantly, moving, running forward at the same speed as we are, but in the opposite direction.

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next Stop, Kuznetsky Most...”*

(20)

The next day I went to the U.S. Embassy to find out why Irina was having problems obtaining a visa and what could be done to help her. After showing my citizenship to the Russian guard, I entered a small waiting room where an American consular officer sat behind a window. It was off-hours — I had been admitted due only to the color of my passport — and so I walked up to his window without standing in line.

The man was cordial and answered my questions dutifully. The problem, he explained, was that the officers were responsible for weeding out possible immigrants, that is to say people who travel as tourists with the real intention of staying. This, he explained, was especially prevalent among young unmarried women with no employment and so during her interviews Irina must have come across as a possible immigrant. The best thing to do, he advised me, was to collect as much documentary evidence as possible in order to convince the counselor that she had strong enough ties to Russia, in other words, that she didn't want to stay in America. There were no set documents for this, but she would be good to bring a copy of her marriage certificate; birth certificates if she had children; proof that she owned property — a small apartment or car; a document from her place of gainful employment....

...Listening to the man my eyes began to cloud. *Was it really this difficult just to go to America?*

What if she's not married? I asked.

If she's not married.... Has she been to America before?

No.

Has she been to any other English-speaking countries?

No.

Then it's a problem.

Why? I mean, what does she have to do to receive a visa — get married?!

It would help.

What about her refusals, could they play a role in her not getting a visa?

Maybe. A lot depends on how many she's had.

Four.

Ouch. She can go ahead and try. In her situation it can't hurt.

I thanked the man and started to leave:

Oh and one more thing..., he said.

I stopped.

...Whatever you do, don't lie... if the counselor catches her lying during the interview then you can bet that she'll never get a visa...!

That night I called Irina and explained what the man had told me. Although it was not news for her, she became enraged: How dare they think that just because I'm not married and have no job and no property I need to move to their country and who do they think they are anyway with their fake smiles and their broken accents because I've lived here my entire life, and do they really think that all Russians are just dying to go to America, as if that's the only thing we can think about, as if the only thing that anybody in the world wants is the honor of immigrating to America...?

## (21)

*"Kuznetsky Most. Change to the Lubyanka Station."*

Changes! Changes! What's the deal with all these changes all of a sudden! Before the way was straight but simple, and now at every step there is an alternate route, at every stop a decision. Mikhail Gorbachev had disappeared from the political scene. Like an exiting passenger. Like bad literature. Like anything that has been around longer than too long.... Now the metro cars jerk and bang against each other. The

passengers look around, annoyed. The driver is obviously new and his inexperience snaps their necks and throws them slightly off-balance; they stumble instinctively but hang on. With the oily overhead bar in one hand and their words in the other, they simply relax their bodies to the gentle shaking of the ride — never even seeing who is really driving — and wait for the mechanical voice and the escalator that will take them home. Then the car starts into motion, the train smoothes itself out, the passengers straighten themselves, and with a whoosh of air the windows turn black....

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Pushkinskaya...”*

(22)

With time Irina and I became closer. She stopped referring to me in the plural. She bummed my cigarettes. She told me about her failed loves and successful abortions. At times, she even let me get a word in edgewise. Eventually, she began to trust my words, and only then did she admit the real reason for needing the visa so badly:

In truth she wanted to immigrate to America.

Life here, she told me, is too depressing. In times like these who needs people like me? Who needs young unemployed poets?

It's not the times, I comforted her, Strictly speaking there's not a country in the world that needs poets.

Except for America. America needs them badly. And so that's where I'm going if I get my visa.

I see.

But you know it really is a pity.

What is? About the oppression of blacks in America?

No, no, it's not that.... It's just that I've always wanted to be married.

I said nothing.

Do you know what I mean?

Again I said nothing. Irina looked at me strangely and then spoke up:

Can I ask you a personal question? she asked.

Go ahead, I said.

Why didn't you ever get married?

I don't know, I said.

Do you want to get married?

I don't know. I guess so.

So why didn't you?

I suppose because nobody ever asked.

(23)

And that's when Irina proposed to me: Marry me, she said. But I can't, I said. Marry me anyway. But I don't have any money. You can find work in America. But I don't want to live in America. You won't have to. I won't? No, I'll live there by myself. Without me? The distance will be good for us. Distance? Yes, it will help you forget....

*Forget...?*

*Like hell! Not after all we've been through...*

It's just that if I had an American husband, she explained, They would *have* to give me a visa.

But I hate weddings.

Have you ever been to one?

No.

Then how do you know you hate them?

I just know.

You shouldn't say that you'll never go to one.

Why not?

Because it's inevitable.

Nothing in life is inevitable. Everything is probable.

Marriage is inevitable. Death is inevitable. Life, in most cases, is inevitable....

*Why "in most cases"?*

What about taxes? I prompted her.

Taxes? Are you kidding me? In our country only communists pay taxes. And even *they* don't pay them!

(24)

*"Pushkinskaya. Change to the Tverskaya and Chekhovskaya stations..."*

Are you getting off at the next stop? we ask the person in front of us and she nods. The doors open and we exit. Tripping over boxes of newly purchased televisions and home computers, we exit into the swirling mass of metrogoers. Spinning, twisting, bumping into women with bags and cages. Up the stairs. Going the wrong way against the flow. Fighting



through the pushing crowd to get onto the escalator which carries us to the verge of the Tverskaya station. Past semi-musicians, past old women selling Russia, past advertisements for nylon pantyhose and lubricated condoms. Then a staircase. And back once again into the spinning, twisting surge. Down the steps. Turn to the right. Proceed to where the first car will be. *It's been exactly one minute and forty seconds since the last train. One-forty-one. One-forty-two.* And then a horn sounds. A light in the end of the tunnel. A rumbling that becomes louder and louder until its brakes are screeching by us. The train comes to a stop, the doors open, people spill out. We let them pass and then we enter. Once inside we see that the faces are different but the same. Unsmiling and severe, they no longer surprise or terrify us — we are no longer interested or interesting. And neither are they. We are as similar to them as they are to us; like them we are not as young as we used to be, and for the first time ever we think seriously about sitting. It is a milestone of sorts. Gone are the naive principles that have kept us upright. Gone is the patience that helped us to stand and withstand. And besides, after the change, everyone is a little wearied. But for the moment it is rush hour and there are no empty seats. *Don't worry!* we tell ourselves, *It's not so far now. The hardest part is behind us.* And it's true. For better or for worse, the danger has passed for good. Now Voikovskaya is just a matter of reading what has been given us, it is only a matter of waiting patiently....

*“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Mayakovskaya...”*

(25)

Let's say — thank God it's not true! — let's say you don't know a word of English. In truth, it could have been any language of the world, but let's say you chose to not learn English. Of course it's impossible not to know a single word of the most mispronounced language in the world, and so, as a result, you know words like *good*, and *shit*, and *love*, and *cowboy*. Like most humans you can enunciate the letters *o* and *k* with only a slight accent, and feel at home with phrases as diverse as *happy end*, *step-by-step*, and *it's a pity*...

Home for you is a small apartment with pipes everywhere. Pipes in the kitchen. Pipes in the bathroom. Pipes behind the television and above your bed. You've been dreaming of a renovation for as long as you can remember. Nowadays, you've heard, it's possible to hide the pipes. Zip-zap

and they're a memory. Problem is that renovations cost money. And to earn money you need to work. And to work you need to find a job... and to find a job... to find a *good* job you need to know English.

And so you put off the renovation. Make a promise to study English, even borrowing your friend's old textbooks from not-so-many years ago: "The Great October Socialist Revolution," you read aloud to yourself, "was great."

Surprisingly, your English does not improve. You still cannot speak. You cannot understand. And this means you cannot find good work. Which means you cannot earn decent money. Which means you cannot depipe your apartment.

In fact your English is so bad that there are no prospects in the job market, all of which require at least a minimal understanding of English. Without English, you can go nowhere. In fact, you can't go anywhere. And this means one thing. This means that there is only one option left to you given your dim future. There is only one place where you can flourish even with your poor knowledge of English:

America.

Why not? Why not immigrate? After all, there's really nothing to keep you here. Just your parents, your friends, your traditions, your culture, your language, and everything else that you have ever been taught... But how important is all of that, really? In America, you've heard, they don't have pipes. In America, you've been told, they have to manufacture problems for themselves. In America, you've read, the average household salary is seventy-eight thousand dollars...

*...per month!*

And so you fill out your application. Married? No. Employed? No. Been to America? Never. Reason for leaving? To learn English. Shrewdly, you do not apply for an immigrant visa; these, you have been warned, take years to receive. You apply for a tourist visa which, if you receive it, will enable you to leave immediately. Where will you live once you are there? What will you do? How will you feel once your decision has been rendered irreversible? How will you communicate without knowing English?

In your mind the answers are simple:

You will live *there*;

You will earn seventy-eight thousand dollars per month;

You will feel yourself *okay*.

And as for communication, how hard could it be? With your salary how can you not be understood? After all, money talks. Especially in America.

Loudly and eloquently. Fluently and beautifully. Money talks anytime, anywhere, and for anyone.

Money talks in any language...

...Any language, that is, but Russian.

(26)

Before going to her interview, Irina and I needed to coordinate our stories. She made a list of all the questions she had been asked in previous interviews and together we concocted fail-proof answers to them, as well as to those questions that she would likely be asked this time:

**Q: What were our relations?**

A: We were good friends. Our relationship had begun by mail while I was still living in America. A two-year exchange of letters. Then when I came to Moscow I called her and we met in the middle of the Taganskaya metrostation. Since that day we had dreamed of going to America together. We had become the best of friends. We had looked for mushrooms. She had read me her poetry. I had repeatedly explained the black-white problem in America. She had listened. I had explained again. And again. And again and again until just when it seemed that it would never happen... we at last found some mushrooms. In time we became closer than a climax until at last we could honestly say that we were the very best of friends.

**Q: What would be the purpose of her forthcoming visit to America?**

A: Now as a gesture of international goodwill I was inviting her to be my guest in America. She would be staying with me and I would be proudly showing her my home. After that I would show her the rest of the city. And then, time permitting, I would show her America. Color by color by color I would introduce her to all of it. To the country where passports are blue, and democracy, in most cases, comes easier than abortion.

**Q: Why had she applied so many times for a tourist visa? Why was she applying now? Was she desperate to leave? Didn't she really want to immigrate?**

A: Not really. What she was trying to do was to visit America. Nothing more. But her mistake had been not fully grasping the application process:

the first time she applied she had not realized that in order to receive an American visa an applicant has to have already been to America; the second time, she had applied so that she could travel to America, which, in her understanding, would help her to satisfy this first requirement and thereby receive a visa which would mean that she could travel to America.... As for the third application, it wasn't clear why she had been denied. And after refusing her for the fourth time, hadn't the consular officer, smiling kindly, advised her to try again at a later date?

**Q: Where did she work? For how long? What type of company was it? What was her position?**

A: For the last two years she had worked in a friend's company as a secretary-referent. The company dealt in international trade — in other words Cuban vodka and Korean Marlboros.

**Q: What was her salary?**

A: This would be determined by Irina's friend, the one who had agreed to give her the fake work slip.

**Q: What sort of personal ties did she have to keep her in Russia?**

A: Her mother and her father and brother all lived in Moscow. Two aunts and one uncle as well as a host of cousins and friends lived nearby.

**Q: Yes, but what sort of *close* ties did she have? In other words, was she married?**

A: No. Not even a little.

**Q: Where was the money coming from for the trip?**

A: She was paying for the airfare out of her salary. I was responsible for everything else.

**Q: Did she have any property?**

A: A small one-room apartment.

**Q: What documents did she have to validate everything that she had said?**

A: A letter from me, the date forged three years earlier. A picture of her family. A fake work slip.

**Q: Did she have an official invitation from her host?**

A: Of course she did.

And so, diligently, I sat down to write it:

(27)

“Dear Irina!

I’d like to take this opportunity to invite you to the United States of America for *two weeks only*. As you know, my country is a great and proud nation which welcomes people from all over the world, regardless of their race, creed, religion, occupation, age, marital status, or other such unforeseen circumstances.

During these *two weeks* you can live with me and my Aunt Helen, who has been eager to meet you for all three of the years that you and I have known each other. I realize that you have gainful and stable employment that you would not give up for anything in the world, and that you would in no way be a burden to our society while you are here. Nevertheless, I am prepared to assume all responsibility for any and all expenses that may arise during your stay, including medical and dental.

I know that you will miss your beloved homeland during your brief stay with me, but just remember that it will only be for *two weeks*, after which you will undoubtedly return home to your spacious one-room apartment and to the many people in Moscow who love you and who would be shattered if you were to emigrate. If these loved ones should complain about missing you during your trip, just remind them that this will be a *once-in-a-lifetime* opportunity for you to practice your English, and that, rest assured, after the *two short weeks* are up you will be coming back home.

Yours truly,

(28)

I looked at the words. And then paused. Completely satisfied with their eloquence, I signed my name to the letter.

(29)

*“Mayakovskaya.”*

The doors open and in straggles a woman wrapped in dirty cloths. Her skin is crusty and blackened; her face has been burnt by the sun. In her arms she holds a baby whose skin is even dirtier. The passengers look at the woman in amazement. For them, she is the first, but not the last and not even the only person who is asking for alms in this way — in the neighboring car a five-year-old gypsy boy is playing an accordion, and in the car next to him a legless man looks up pitifully from a wooden cart. The doors close and the train jerks into motion. Dear passengers! the woman begins in a plaintive voice, Please excuse me for turning to you like this. My husband and I have come from another city that is very far away. Our documents and our money were stolen. Now we’re living at the train station and don’t have enough money to pay for our way back home. Help us please! Please help us by giving within your means.... By now the train is roaring in the tunnel and the woman’s last sentences are less heard than felt. The woman and her baby make their way down the aisle. The other passengers give what they can — here a hundred rubles, there a green plastic metro token, here and there a fistful of worthless coins — and the woman gathers the money with her head bent humbly. Gratefully. Slowly she drags her burden toward us, bringing with her as she goes the eyes of our fellow travelers. Watching her approach, we become mesmerized. Colors become muted. Sounds fall away. Meekly the woman approaches until she is directly in front of us. Head bent, hand outstretched, she is waiting — as are the rest of the passengers — for us to give within our means....

(30)

Irina and I agreed to meet outside the U.S. Embassy on Tuesday at exactly 6:00 a.m. No Fuzz! I said. Go to hell! she said.

\*

(31)

*“Belorusskaya. Change to the Ring line.”*

I took out my wallet. It contained exactly three hundred dollars and two kopecks — three one-hundred-dollar bills and a single two-kopec coin. *Why hadn't I broken my dollars into smaller denominations? Why hadn't I brought rubles?* The train was grinding to a halt. The other passengers were looking at me. *Three hundred dollars and two kopecks! Would I really give away one hundred hard-earned dollars just like that? Or could it be that the time had finally come to part with the coin?* The outstretched hand was waiting, the other passengers were looking at me: I had to give something. I had to. *Here* things were different. Here in this tunnel; in the synthetic light that was illuminating my Russia. Reluctantly I looked at the money in my wallet. Expectantly, the other passengers looked at me looking at the money in my wallet. *What would it be? How much should I give? How much did I have to give?* The train was grinding to a halt. It was either here or never. *How much must I give?* And then suddenly I remembered something. A scene from a fat and favorite book. A scene that had not made sense to me then, but which now made all the sense in the world. *Why had I hesitated?* I took the money from my wallet. And bending over deeply I placed the three hundred dollars in the hand of the legless man on the wooden cart....

*“Caution — the doors are closing. Next stop, Dinamo...”*

(32)

When I arrived at the embassy it was a little after six. The American flag hung limply under the cold drizzling rain. A few people had already begun forming a line outside. With their documents in hand, they stood waiting for the doors to open. Off to the side amateur photographers offered instant photos to applicants who had forgotten them.

Standing there, I felt a dry bitterness in my throat. But the longer I waited under the rain for Irina, the wetter my bitterness became. *Who was doing a favor for whom, anyway? And how did I always get involved in things like this? And why didn't anybody in this country want my German dictionary... ?*

After an hour, Irina showed up. She had dressed wrong. I knew it immediately. A sexy mini-skirt. Lipstick the color of a long-stemmed rose. Hair combed to a frizz. I started to say something, but she interrupted me. Her voice was accusatory:

You could've shaved! she said.

*What!*

You might've shaved! she repeated.

I ran my hand over my face; the whiskers bristled like a broom. *My God she was right! When was the last time I'd shaved? Judging by the stubble it must have been at least three days ago... but no more than five — in other words, the worst possible amount! But why? Granted, there was a weekend, but I always drank on weekends. Sure there was a birthday party of a friend of a friend, but when you have bottles of soon-to-be-swallowed vodka, every day is a birthday of somebody's friend...*

...And that wouldn't be so bad, Irina continued her rebuke, But Jeez I can smell the vodka on your breath from a meter away...!

*Now I remember... there had been some sort of Russian holiday mixed into the weekend. One of the new ones without its own traditions and so everyone simply drank. That's it! That's the reason for the dry bitterness; that's why we hadn't met at the embassy yesterday; that's why today was Tuesday....*

I... I was going to shave, I told her, but decided not to. Besides it won't mean anything you know. In America the most important thing is to be natural, to be yourself.

Really? she said suspiciously.

Of course, I said, Trust me: the Americans will appreciate it. They'll realize that I'm one of them and you'll be guaranteed to get your visa.

Are you sure?

Absolutely. The most important thing is to make a good impression on them. You have to demonstrate that you're one of them. You have to play on the "us versus them" mentality.

And which are you?

I'm *us*.

And what would that make me?

You, of course, would be *them*. But because you're with me you automatically become one of *us*! See, it's all very logical.

Whatever, she said.

Look just give me your documents.

Irina pulled out a folder with the documents that she had collected.

Did you get the work slip?



Sure, she said and handed it to me. I took the paper and unfolded it; what I read made me gasp yet again: “This is to certify that Irina Priklonskaya has worked as a secretary-referent in this company since August, 1992. During this time her net salary has averaged three thousand dollars per month.”

I read the words again, but again they said the same thing: “...*three thousand dollars per month.*”

Are you crazy? I said to Irina, You put a monthly salary of three thousand dollars!

Yeah, so?

Do you have any idea how much that is?

Well of course by your standards it’s not much...

Three thousand dollars?!? Per month?!? For a secretary?!? Do you realize that the average salary for a secretary right now is two hundred dollars?

Not just a secretary. A secretary-referent.

What the hell is that?

It’s like a secretary, but better.

Twenty-eight hundred dollars better?

Newly disheartened, I took stock of the documents we had to work with. They were as follows:

1. Two unsmiling photos.
2. A work slip stating that her salary is three thousand dollars per month.
3. My invitation.

Hey Ira, I said to her, What will you do — hypothetically, of course — if they refuse you again?

Irina stopped suddenly, as if she had not considered this possibility:

You know, she said, The first time they turned me down I cried for days. In fact I cried right up until they turned me down the second time. But you know this time I don’t think I’ll cry at all. I don’t think I’ll feel anything.

That’s good, I said, It’s probably better that way.

When the doors opened, we shoved our way inside, paid our non-refundable application fee, and moved to the small waiting room where the interviews were to be held.

### (33)

The waiting room where the interviews were being held was small, stuffy, and without chairs. The visa applicants, standing awkwardly in

the crowded room, prepared for their interviews like schoolchildren before an examination: memorizing dates, checking figures, honing their conviction, practicing their smiles, repeating answers to standard questions: *I have worked as a Commercial Director in the company which deals in food products...*; in turn they cleared their throats and shuffled through stacks of papers, making and re-making sure that each and every document was in order: *My business card! Where's my business card?* Nervously they waited for their names to be called over the loudspeaker by the American counselors:

“Will the following people please proceed to Window Number Two: VOB-lina tatee-AN-a; ee-VAN-ov a-LEX-i; PER-ova NAT-ina; POP-ova OL-ga; YASH-tchlzknttrklkchg di-MEET-ry...”

The lucky ones, hearing their name, snapped to attention and rushed promptly to the window. The others, hearing something vaguely resembling their name, looked around at each other with baffled expressions on their faces. *What was that? What did they say? Was that my name?*

“...SMIR-noff SE-men; JOOK-ovsky BOR-is; Please report to Window Number Five...”

One by one, the people approached the windows for their interviews with the clean-shaven counselors. And as they did, the others in the room — those who had not yet heard their names — eavesdropped on them, listening nervously and answering the counselors' questions in their minds. Instinctively, they huddled together to compare notes: *Did you hear what they asked the woman at window number three? They asked her how many people worked in her company! I don't have a clue how many people work in my company and I'm the director...! Does that mean they won't give me a visa...? And what was that... at window number one they asked the girl where her husband is! And how much money he makes. And where they met. And again how much money he makes. And why he isn't planning to travel with her... and again where they met...!*

Each interview lasted between thirty seconds and ten minutes depending on the person's marital status. When the interview was over, the applicant either received a light blue slip that meant the visa had been issued, or, if the person had been refused, she received her red passport back with a stamp that said: “Documents Rec'd.”

Those who were given visas reacted similarly: Thank you! Thank you! they said. And greedily took the blue slip that meant — for them — America.

The reactions of the rejected varied as much as human character itself: some cried; some accepted their passports in proud silence; a few argued heatedly with the counselor — *What do you mean, immigrant? I just want*

*to visit!* — while others asked for rational explanations, to which they were hastily given photocopied form letters with a form explanation: “Unfortunately your application for a non-immigrant visa has been rejected because you have not met one or more of the following criteria...”

These rejections did not go unnoticed by the people waiting for their interviews; with each refusal their mouths became drier, their hearts beat louder: *Sure the others were being refused, but it couldn't happen to me, could it? After all, these counselors were experts, weren't they? Surely for them thirty seconds would be enough to see that I honestly don't intend to immigrate...!*

“Would the following people please proceed to Window #6: ZELD-ner na-TAL-ya; ...”

(34)

*“Dinamo.”*

It is late at night. The train is virtually empty except for a drunk man sprawled out on the length of an entire bench. The train is rocking us slightly. We have been standing for years, and now our legs are tired. Our body is numbed from the ride. *Haven't we stood long enough? Is there anything more that anyone could expect from us? Haven't we earned the right to sit? After all, it's late and our train is emptier than an escalator at night...!* And so we take a seat. Our eyes close in weary resolution. Our muscles relax. Our hands, which no longer hold anything fat, also relax. Sitting there, we slip into a peaceful restfulness. Finally, we fall asleep.

*“Caution has no place in an aeroport when you are flying above, quietly, softly...”*

(35)

This is my first time! said a voice.

When I looked up I saw that an old woman was standing in front of me and smiling blatantly; in the tension of the room her smile seemed all the more out of place.

I'm going to see my daughter in America, she said.

Really, I said.

Yes. She lives there now. Sent me an invitation!

The old woman took out a piece of paper and waved it proudly in front of my nose:

My daughter works in a bank. Makes good money! I haven't seen her in three years but she sent me this invitation. I can't understand a word of it but she said to take it to the embassy and so that's what I'm doing.

Do you have a lot of supporting documents? I asked her.

No. Don't need them. All I need is this invitation my daughter sent me. I haven't seen her for three years. She has an American husband and a baby. I'm going to see my grandson!

How's that working out? I mean how does your daughter like being married to an American?

They have a nice house. He has a good job. She's happy. She says she doesn't even miss home. Doesn't even want to come back. That's why I'm going to see her.

Irina, who until now had been absorbed in the two books that she was now reading — *Yevgeny Onegin* and *How to Meet the Provider of Your Dreams* — closed both books and looked at the woman intently:

How did your daughter find this American husband of hers? she asked, Was it here in Moscow?

Yes..., she answered.

She's very lucky, said Irina, How did it happen?

And using Irina's invitation, the woman told us the story of how they met:

### (36)

The woman's daughter, after receiving her doctorate from a physics institute, and after trying to find work in her field and failing, had been forced to work full-time in a flower stand by the Alekseevskaya metrostation. Every day at work she would see a man in a coat and tie and with a briefcase: in the morning on his way to work, and in the evening on his way home. He worked as a consultant then, teaching Russian companies how to do something. He knew Russian well enough to explain that he didn't know Russian, and at first he could only stop to look at the flowers. But luckily, the woman's daughter had a master's degree in English and with time their relationship became more complex: he soon took to buying roses, first one at a time, then in pairs, and then by the dozens. Everyday like clockwork, he would present her a dozen roses which she would accept shyly. In time he found the words to ask her out, and she found the gestures to accept; they went to a Georgian restaurant by the Park Kultury metrostation. The

weekend after that they went there again. The weekend after that they did this a third time, then a fourth, until at last it had become a sort of tradition: on weekdays he would buy roses from and for her, and during the weekend they would eat Georgian food like clockwork. This continued for several months. Finally, he asked her to marry him and she refused. Undeterred, he asked again but again she refused, this time categorically. In truth she was waiting for the third proposal, which in her understanding would mean that his love was sincere. A week passed. Then another week. He began taking an alternate route to and from work, he stopped stopping at the flower stand. At about this same time, she began to stop receiving roses, and the alarm bells sounded. She called his apartment but he did not answer. She left messages at his work but he did not return them. She looked expectantly for him both morning and night but he could not be found. Desperately she left a message with his secretary: "Please come to my apartment on Tuesday at eight o'clock." She had not indicated whether it should be in the a.m. or p.m. but they had long been on the same emotional wave length and that evening at exactly five minutes to eight, like clockwork, he showed up at her apartment. She opened the door. Without speaking they stood looking passionately into each other's eyes. This lasted for several awkward minutes; outside a police siren could be heard. Then, just as silently, he pulled out from behind his back — he had been hiding it from her view, waiting for the right moment to present it to her — from behind his back he pulled out a large bag of potatoes. I can't accept them, she said and invited him inside to where she could accept them. They were married not long after. Predictably, he stopped buying roses. Just as predictably, she stopped selling them. Eventually, when his contract ended, they moved to America where to this day they live like clockwork...

It's so romantic...! said Irina holding her how-to book to her breast.

"Please proceed to Window Number Three: ku-LEAK-ova yeLEN-a; av-DE-yev VLAD-imir..."

What was that? said the woman, What did they say?

Are you Elena Kulikova? Irina asked her.

Yes I am, she said.

You have to go to window number three, said Irina, It's over there...

No fuzz! I added.

But in her haste the woman forgot to tell me where to go.

\*

(37)

*“Aeroport.”*

Hey! Get up off that seat! Hey you! You heard me! Don't pretend like you're sleeping when there's a woman twice your age standing in front of you. Do you hear me? GET UP! *What's going on? Why is this old woman in front of us poking us with her umbrella? Is it raining outside? Or is it snowing? Wasn't it summer when we left? Where are we? And when? What month will meet us when we finally reach our destination? What year?* Okay, okay! we say to the woman who has taken our seat on the crowded bench. But the woman is beside herself. Can you believe it? she says to the other passengers, I'm standing there and this grown man doesn't even offer his seat! The nerve! The lack of manners! And dead drunk to boot. In the middle of the afternoon, dead drunk. It didn't use to be like this in the old days. Back then we had order! Then people respected their elders. In those days — in the days before Kitai-Gorod became Kitai-Gorod — we had a future. Back then we could....

*“Caution — the doors are closing. Next stop, Sokol.”*

(38)

Irina was tall, good-looking, well-dressed. She wore panty hose year-round and was especially fond of short sexy skirts which, I learned later, she bought in expensive boutiques. Her hair was originally black but had been died blonde for some reason. Her lips were redder than a long-stemmed rose and just as moist...

*How long had it been? How far had Love fallen down my list? And speaking of falling, could it be that I was... Was it possible that the time had come for me to...?*

What are you looking at?

What?! I said.

Why are you looking at me like that?

I... I wasn't looking at you.

Yes you were. I could feel you staring at me.

I... I didn't mean to... it was just...

You were staring at me.

I... my eyes were just sort of... by themselves...

It's okay.

I won't do it again...  
It's not a problem.  
I don't know what came over me... I just...

(39)

*“Sokol. Dear passengers, while exiting the car please do not forget your belongings.”*

At this stop a man in uniform passes through the car scaling the empty spaces for something that will hopefully not be there; tapping, patting, checking under the seats with his nightstick, the uniform travels the entire length of the car and then exits before the doors can close on him. By now everyone is afraid to sit. They're not even sure what there is to be afraid of but stand nevertheless with their reading material in hand. *But who is really accompanying us on our long journey? Whom will we thank when we have finally understood? Who will be left to answer us? Who will say, Please? Will it be the young boy studying his history book? Or the man across from him reading Gorbachev's memoirs? Or the woman across from both of them turning the pages of a Russian romance novel and using a thousand-ruble note as a bookmark? Or maybe the African student standing with an English-language paper, absolutely cognizant of the teenage girls who are giggling at him behind his back. Or maybe the girls themselves, one of whom is pretending to read the pages of a fashion magazine, while the other looks over her shoulder? Perhaps we owe it all to the poorly dressed old woman — the one holding a communist periodical with an ironic title. Or the young thug in sunglasses and music in both ears who is thumbing through naked women. Or maybe the frightened couple with matching copies of a Russian-language book that is both thick (*foreigners!*) and in hard-back (*Germans!*). For now we are between stations, between bottles, and completely occupied by a man who is trying in vain not to reach the Kursky train station. But when this journey is over, when we have reached our destination and he has not reached his, when we have understood that we understand, when this moment has finally come, to whom will we raise our glass? Who will be left to thank? Perhaps we should drink to each of them? Or maybe to them all? — our fellow travelers! Our would-be companions! The people who at this moment of our life make up its girth. The words that fatten us. The characters that make us turn the page...*

*“Caution — the doors are closing. Next Stop, Voikovskaya...”*

(40)

“Please proceed to Window Number Five: gribo-YED-ev alekSAND-er; priklon-SKA-ya eye-REE-na...”

(41)

*A few paragraphs from Voikovskaya*

It is late afternoon. The passengers stand in the aisles, packed tightly against each other like detainees in a cell. And like detainees they are reading their newspapers and their novels and their books of poetry, all of which are nothing but words, the exact same words but in varying orders and fonts — page after page of tension and release, conflict and resolution, exclamation and ellipsis, climax and anticlimax...

Suddenly, the train slows; the passengers lean themselves sharply against the stop. With all their effort they oppose the unexpected force. Then just as suddenly the train leaps forward out of the slow-down. The passengers are caught leaning the wrong way and find themselves hopelessly off-balanced. They are leaning and hopelessly off-balanced.

And then something amazing happens and we are witness to it. Here we see a truly remarkable occurrence, the type of thing that others will never believe, the type of improbable incident that is too incredible for newspapers, too profound for poetry, the type of thing that can cause our book to be flung violently against a wall...

The train slows suddenly, then lurches forward and the people standing in the aisles fall to the ground. One after another. One by one until there is not a Soul left standing.

Without exception they fall.

They fall without exception.

All of them.

Every single one.

(42)

*“Voikovskaya.”*

(43)

Irina and I stepped up to the window.



The consular officer was a middle-aged woman in a plaid business suit and reading glasses that hung from a thin chain around her neck. Her graying hair was combed simply. She did not smile. She was not wearing make-up. When she spoke her dry lips pursed in what promised to become a scowl:

What's your name? she said at Irina.

Irina told her.

And who are *you*?

I told her.

Are you the one inviting her?

That's right.

Wait over there. I'll talk with her first. If I need you I'll call you.

I stepped back. Irina looked at me pleadingly, but there was nothing I could do. She would have to answer the questions alone. In terror she turned to face the counselor who had already begun to ask her questions....

Standing awkwardly between the American behind the glass and the Russian crowd to my rear, I suddenly felt lost. Where did *us* stop being *them*? And if *we* and *us* were the same then did that mean that *they* would not understand? And where was I? — all this time it had seemed that I was making progress, that I was moving slowly but surely from there to here. But now here I was again...! Here I was standing awkwardly in the embassy and in the embassy *here* wasn't even *here*. In this crowded room *here* was there, and *there* had suddenly become *here*. This place, I had been warned, wasn't *there*. But could it be that it wasn't *here* either...?

I took a look around at the other visa applicants: at the first window a woman in a short dress was explaining that she wasn't a prostitute; at window number two a businessman was exaggerating; at window number three the old woman, in tears, stood collecting her passport: What about my daughter...? she was sobbing, ...What about my grandson?; at the fourth window an American was carving Russian names into a microphone...; and at window number five Irina was now telling the consular officer about how she and I had met, how we had spent the last three years together, how we had gradually become the very best of friends, and how after a long period of mutual indecision we were now planning to be married...

*What!!!*

...That's right, she said, It was love at first sight. I knew it the minute I saw him step out of the train at Taganskaya....

*What was she talking about? What about the answers that we had so carefully prepared? Was she crazy?*

...And then we went looking for mushrooms, she was saying, And it was then that we made love for the first time. Right there in the forest... it was great! Right there under the open sky... it was wonderful — he's more sensitive than he looks...

The counselor raised her eyebrows to look at me; I smiled sensitively.

...it's the best place for love, right there in nature, under the vast Russian sky, it's not like anything that you can find anywhere else. In America you don't have sky like this...

*What was she doing? Why was she talking incessantly? She would ruin everything!*

...Yeah I love him! And he loves me. In fact, he buys me flowers every day, by the dozens, brings them to me in big boxes. Not just any flowers, long-stemmed roses, the expensive kind...! And you know what's funny? The funny thing is that at first I didn't even like him! I didn't like him at first because well, he's not much to look at... but after a while I warmed up to him. And now I love him. And he loves me...

*What was she talking about? What had come over her?*

...And that's why I support him the way I do... that's right... almost all of my money — did I mention I make four thousand dollars a month? — all of my salary goes to support him. After all he doesn't work, doesn't have a dime, not a penny, and I can't let him starve... what? Roses? I don't know, I guess he probably steals them.... You know he would do anything for me because he loves me more than love itself, more than Love, more even than democracy...

In the middle of Irina's words the counselor held up her hand:

That's enough! she said.

What...? That's all? But I've only been speaking for thirty seconds...

I've heard all I need, the counselor said and then pointed at me: I want to have a few words with your fiancé over there....

#### (44)

I stepped up to the window.

The woman took a long hard look at me but did not smile:

What's your name? she asked.

Why are you asking? I answered.

Protocol, she said.

And so I refused to answer:

Next question, I said.

Okay, she said, Where are you from?  
I told her.  
How long have you been in Moscow?  
I told her.  
How do you like it?  
It's all right, I said, And you?  
I don't know. I'm new here.  
Do you have a favorite phrase yet?  
My favorite phrase? Well, if I had to choose one it would probably be something like "God I don't know whether to love or hate this country!"  
It's good, I said.  
Thank you.  
Please.  
The counselor did not laugh.  
Where do you work? she said.  
At home.  
What do you do?  
I teach people to speak.  
Does it pay well?  
*Aha... a trick question...!*  
It... well actually I do mostly volunteer work... I don't charge for my lessons. I mean I sort of charge but not really... actually I have a sort of agreement whereby my students pay by barter...  
Barter?  
Right. That way I don't get in trouble with the tax authorities. It's a good system. For example I have a student who works in a chocolate factory and so he pays me in chocolate; another student works in a perfume store and so she pays in perfumes; I have a third student who works at a... she works at a flower stand and so she brings me red roses, you know the expensive long-stemmed kind that women like... Another student of mine is a tax inspector...  
So that's where you get the roses? You get them from barter. That's how you can afford roses without having any money.  
That's right.  
Barter, huh?  
That's right.  
Hey wait a minute...  
What?  
What about the tax inspector?

The what?

You were saying that you had a tax inspector for a student?

I was? I mean... that's right, I do.

Well I don't understand. What can she offer? As far as the flowers and the chocolate and the perfume... well that I can understand, but the tax inspector...?

I can see that you really are new to Moscow! The tax inspector, you see, brings me all three — flowers, chocolates, and perfumes.

I don't get it....?

Hang in there. Sooner or later you will.

The counselor looked down at some notes that she had made on Irina's application:

So when's the happy day? she asked.

What?

The wedding day. Have you set a date yet?

A date...? Well we were thinking of maybe having it on the first of the month.

Which month?

We uh... haven't decided yet. Maybe January. Or April. Then again, maybe May...

Romantic.

Thank you.

But you know I can't understand one thing. First your girlfriend said that it was love at first sight, but then she said that in the beginning she couldn't stand you...

Well actually she didn't say she couldn't *stand* me...

So which is it?

Which is what?

What's the true story on how you met?

The counselor looked at me carefully and so, using her invitation, I carefully told her the true story of how Irina and I had met:

### (45)

After being fired from my job at the institute and after looking unsuccessfully for a job on a non-barter basis, I had been forced to work in a flower stand at the Taganskaya metrostation. Each day at work I saw a woman in an expensive business suit; in the morning on her way to her high-paying job — did I mention that her salary was five thousand

dollars a month? — and in the evening on her way home. For me it was love at first sight, but for her it was a complex mixture of apathy and punctuality that kept her from even noticing me. Meanwhile, I knew perfectly well that she was my destiny, and every morning, every evening, I would watch wistfully as my life passed before me without buying a single flower. This continued for several months until I could stand it no more: now was the time to make my move. One morning I picked out the moistest rose, the longest and reddest, and when she walked by I yelled after her in my best Russian, Hey Miss a flower for you! But she just kept walking — she had confused my accent for that of a Georgian. The next day I again picked out the most beautiful rose, along with the second-most beautiful and held out the two flowers shouting, Two beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady! but again she ignored me — this time she had confused my accent for that of an *insistent* Georgian. The third day when she tried to walk by I held out a dozen long-stemmed roses — I had chosen the absolute moistest and reddest — shaking them like a ruble and screaming at the top of my lungs, Dammit I'm not Georgian! My passport's blue!! It's blue! blue!! blue!!! Hearing this, she stopped. By the time she turned around, her attitude toward me had changed completely. What color? she asked. Blue, I answered and then, ...Want some flowers? Here she nodded and smiled. From ear to ear. And what a beautiful smile it was! I invited her to dinner and she accepted. Unlike my last girlfriend, she did not like potatoes. She did not like to eat at home and I did not like the idea of taking her to the Georgian restaurant — she might get the wrong idea — and so I did the only thing that I could, that is to say I fed her pilfered chocolates. Finally she asked me to marry her and I refused. She asked again, and again I refused, this time categorically. This also lasted for some time until about five minutes ago when, apparently, I said yes....

I stopped. *What the hell had I said? Where had all of that come from? Had I really made it up? Or was it some latent wish that I was only now putting into words?*

How beautiful! said the counselor who had taken off her glasses from her nose and was wiping away the tears from her eyes, How lovely! How poetic!

The woman was tearing off a light blue card and handing it to Irina. Congratulations!! said the woman.

Thank you, said Irina but the woman was still gushing emotion:

Congratulations to you both! May God bless you in your future life

together... May you find the happiness that you both deserve... May your love last forever...!

I looked at the woman:

Thanks, I said.

Then, suddenly, as if remembering something, the woman stopped. Her expression changed. Inexplicably it became as cold as concrete:

Wait a minute..., she said.

Irina had barely taken the blue card when the Counselor took it back, literally ripping it from her fingers.

Wait a minute! said the counselor, There's something you said that just doesn't ring true!

*No! Why had I mentioned the flower stand? Why had I blurted out her salary? Did they even sell roses at the Taganskaya metro? Why had I mentioned marriage...!*

You know, said the woman, I haven't lived in Moscow for that long and so you probably think that you can just pull the wool over my eyes... that I'll believe anything you say...

No no..., I began to say.

...But even I've been here long enough to know that what you just told me... that it couldn't have happened. Even I know that Russians never smile!

*What?*

I'm afraid that I don't believe your story and so I'm going to have to refuse your application. Maybe next time you'll be more careful with the stories you tell...

But... but..., I tried to say, ...But it's true! She really does smile. She smiles all the time! She has a beautiful, I would even say...American smile!

I don't believe you.

It's true!

Well, then, let's see it... Let's see her smile like an American!

Irina, whose English was helpless, was tugging at my sleeve:

What's she saying? she said.

She wants to see you smile. She says she won't give you a visa unless you smile.

Hearing this, Irina's face turned downward into a deep frown and it looked like she would cry — *she had been so close, had even felt the blue card in her hands!* — but then, just as suddenly, her face transformed; unexpectedly, even for me, Irina raised her head proudly and smiled as I had never seen a Russian smile: beautifully, brilliantly, falsely.

And that was that. The counselor, with a nod of her head and a smile

that was just as false, offered the blue card to Irina once again:  
Welcome to America! she said simply.

(46)

After we had received the blue card, we made our way to the window to pay for the visa. Irina had only brought rubles:

Hey, do you have a calculator? she asked.

A what?

A calculator so that I can see how many rubles I need to pay.

Well yeah sure... here.

Wow! This's a nice calculator! So small and convenient!

Do you like it?

It's great.

You can have it.

I can?

It's all yours.

I couldn't.

No really. Take it. I have two more at home.

You have more at home?

That's right.

Then can I have another one?

Sure.

Irina seemed touched:

You really are special! she said and then without warning kissed my words. So long and so deep that it seemed that this time it really would last forever...

(47)

Irina never did use the visa. For three months it stayed in her passport until finally it expired helplessly and inevitably like the moisture that moistens lips, or like the red of a red rose.

(48)

Wrong: Yesterday my friends came to me.

Right: My friends came over... and they brought vodka.

\*

(49)

(50)

*“Vodnyi Stadion.”*

For me, life in Moscow had gone from being a constant struggle to being simply inconvenient. The danger disappeared and disappointment began to sink in. My life had become a story without a plot, a series of unconnected events without structure, without purpose, and leading to nowhere in particular. *When would I discover something that meant something? What would make this long while worth the while? Or had I been wasting everyone’s time?* I was discouraged and disoriented and now, as if to add injury to insult, women with dirty bags in both hands are rubbing their dirty bags against me. My legs are pinned and sullied between the bags. I feel suffocated and frustrated. I can’t move and when I try to kick my way out, the women yell at me with all their voice. My job had stagnated. My answers to questions became curt. Nothing was changing. I had stopped moving. And despite all my efforts to the contrary the bags are being piled onto each other once again, reaching up to my thighs, dirty and filthy, muddy and dusty at the same time, until they are up to my waist, then shoulders, pinning my arms to my body. *My God! Could it be that we were going backwards?* The girls that had intrigued me yesterday seemed boring today. It was late autumn. Of course I still drank, but with each passing day it required greater and greater amounts to forget about these bags that are now up to my neck; in greater quantities I drank and drank and still I cannot breathe through the dirty bags, still I could not throw up. And worst of all, there was no one to help me. With one didactic leap, all my friends had suddenly become acquaintances; the latest love of my life was living in Munich; the dollar had dropped; literature no longer instructed me; I had lost my momentum. My Russian deteriorated. And through these damn bags that are almost up to my neck and dirty and pressing me against the wall of the metro car I can’t even see the faces of the other passengers. If I could just somehow climb out! If I could just learn a few more words. If only something would happen to pull me away from all of this...



And that's when it occurred to me: *the moment had come.*

At last my time here was up. It was time to leave. There was nothing here for me anymore. *But these bags are so heavy! If I can only throw off the one that has been put on the top of my head, then maybe I can squeeze my way out!*

And so it was at that instant that I decided to leave Russia forever. There was nothing to consider. I was fed up. Irreversibly. I was tired. I was confused. I am covered in muddy, dusty bags. I would leave immediately. And that was that.

That is that.

Period.

End of story.

\* \* \* \* \*