

Book 10. The Wedding

“...I never bothered about happiness, I was able to get by without it. And now I need it for two...”

— Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin
My Lot is Cast... I'm Getting Married

(1)

The wedding begins on a cold December morning. A Tuesday. On the streets the snow has been piled up in graying banks of ice. Cars have frozen. Plans have been changed. Even the ground is too hard to crunch... as if the air has decided to make its presence felt.

A call from Vadim rattles me from my sleep:

Put on your clothes and meet me downstairs, he says.

Do you know what time it is?!? I curse into the phone.

It's nine o'clock. Come on, let's go.

Nine o'clock? Are you crazy?!

I need your help.

Why? What's the matter?

Vadim pauses for a second then speaks up:

It's Olga... she's been kidnapped.

(2)

Let's say — this shouldn't be hard — let's say you have a client whose name begins with the letter Z. It's a matter of chance of course — you could be working for any letter of the English alphabet — but let's say his

name is Z. As any schoolgirl can tell you, Z follows Y alphabetically, and since Y is the penultimate letter of the English alphabet, that means that Z is the ultimate. Z is the very last letter of the English alphabet and *that* means that someone owes your client a large amount of money.

But your client is soft. Instead of calling you, he's tried to do things himself: reminding, requesting, then relenting. He's persisted only to pardon. And when that didn't work he demanded, then damned. Only to acquiesce. He has been overly reasonable. He is half-hearted. He is too sympathetic to the answers he receives: "I can't right now... I'm working on it... I need time... if you'll just wait a little longer..."

Time is money, you know. And money talks. And when it comes down to it, talks take time....

And so, for the past year you've been chomping at the bit. Just give the word, you've been saying, and you'll collect. After all, you are a professional. You are an expert in your field. One talk with you and your subjects will do anything to pay up. One question and answer session and your subjects will beg you to take their money. In dollars. In prestigious automobiles. Those who are lucky in second apartments. The less fortunate in *first* apartments!

Home for you is a small apartment that you earned a few years back at a "discount" from a drunk man whose hand could barely hold the pen as he signed the apartment over to you. It was a difficult night of work; as if to commemorate the deal, the man coughed up chunks of pickles all over the finished agreement, the notary's seal, the small packet of money that you had promised him in his stupor. A minor — if pungent! — inconvenience. Unpleasant, of course, but now the apartment can be resold for its real value at a handsome profit. And besides: money doesn't smell... even in Russia.

And then one day you get the call. The moment has come. Now your client is being squeezed by someone else's clients and has given you the nod, the go-ahead, and even the green light. Collect, he has told you, at any cost. Ask the questions that need to be asked. Get the answers that please.

But how?

That, you smile to yourself, is where your expertise comes in. Asking the difficult questions is your job, getting answers is your specialty. You have worked hard to get where you are, and now you have a reputation to maintain. You have a career to protect. You have a family to feed and a future to foster.

You also have a set of brass knuckles in the event that somebody disagrees with you. A false passport should someone question your identity. Six

hundred dollars of cash just in case you need six hundred dollars in cash. You have four scarred colleagues to take your commands. You have the address of the twelve-story building where you will make your appearance as soon as you get the call.

And now the time has come. Now you will finally have the chance to ask some serious questions. Now you are sure to get the answers that please. Today is Monday and so you go to bed early.

Tomorrow is the day you've been waiting for. The day of questioning and atonement. The day for long-awaited answers.

(3)

Sitting with me in the backseat of the taxi, Vadim seems to be in the best of spirits. He is tapping his thumbs on his thighs to the rhythm of his favorite song. He is bantering with the taxi driver about the cold snap that has paralyzed the city. And when we pass a four-car pileup on a slick patch of ice, Vadim simply laughs and shakes his head.

How can he be so calm? His bride has been kidnapped before she can even become his bride!

Shouldn't we call the police? I say to him.

For the pile-up?

No, for Olga.

Vadim looks at me with an amused expression:

Sure, he says, that's all we need. Haven't you learned anything from your six and a half years here?

What do you mean?

Have your six and a half years been entirely lost on you?

I hope not.

Well then what police could you possibly be talking about?

Maybe you're right.

Of course I'm right!

Still, there's just one thing... I mean... what do you need *me* for? Don't get me wrong... I'm willing to help and all, but I just don't see what I'm supposed to do.

You're going to be my voice. You're going to answer their questions.

ME!

Yes. Otherwise they won't let me see Olga. You'll have to speak on my behalf.

Why me...?!

You see, these people — the ones asking the questions — are ruthless and mean. Their goal is to squeeze money from me. As much as possible. And they'll stop at nothing to do it: they'll yell, they'll shout, they'll lie, they'll try to trick you, to make you stumble on your answers. It won't be easy...

...Get to the part about me... what've I got to do with anything?

That's the beautiful part. Since you're a foreigner they'll go easy on you. I'm sure of it. They'll go easy on you and that means that you'll save me money. That's important because I don't have a lot of patience for things like this.

Things like this?!

Why do you think they'll go easy on me just because I'm a foreigner?

It's a natural. Russians have a strange respect for foreigners... they treat them differently for some reason, as if they were better... you know that!

Maybe so, but...

...Of course you foreigners like to dramatize things — about how difficult it is for you to live here in Russia... but we both know how convenient it *really* is.

Well yeah, but how am I supposed to answer their questions if I don't even know what they're asking me about?

That's the difficult part. They could ask anything. The important thing is to stay calm and to answer as best you can.

Why don't *you* talk to them? It's your fiancée.

Russian tradition doesn't allow it. It's better if someone does it for me...

Traditions? Russia has traditions about kidnapping?

...That's right. Besides, the whole thing will be over before you know it... just do your best to answer their questions and everything will be fine.

Our taxi stops in front of a twelve-story building that is exactly like our twelve-story building. The elevator takes us to the tenth floor. Without hesitating, Vadim makes his way to an apartment, rings the bell, and waits, looking at his watch and fighting back a yawn. Inside, there is a pause then the clicking and snapping of metal locks. The door opens.

Vadim walks into the apartment. A young woman is standing in the hallway and he kisses her on the cheek:

Take me to my bride! Vadim demands and peers over her shoulder. But the woman blocks his path:

Oh no you don't! she says: Business first!

Vadim sighs and begins to take off his shoes. He motions for me to do the same:

This is James, he says, He'll be doing the talking.

Olya..., she says to me and extends her dainty palm in my direction.

I am nervous and distracted, and don't immediately realize why she is extending her palm at me. Finally, I hand her my boot.

Oh! she says.

And so I hand her the other boot as well. Olya stands for a few moments with the dripping footwear and then sets them down in front of me:

You two want some tea? she asks.

You know very well that I hate tea! Vadim says and moves into the living room where he plops himself heavily onto a couch.

I wasn't asking *you*... I was asking James.

That'll be fine, I say and look at Vadim.

Where is everyone? he asks and Olya answers from the kitchen:

They had some car trouble. They're trying to find a taxi. This weather...!

When Olya comes into the room she is carrying a tray with tea and biscuits. She pours out two cups and adds steaming water to them. She offers Vadim a can of instant coffee and he stirs a spoonful into his cup:

So you're James! Olya says as she hands me my tea.

That's right.

Olga's told me all about you...

Everything?

...Well maybe not *everything*, but at least the most important things...

And which most important things did she tell you?

She says that you teach English... that you're a very good friend of Vadim's.

That I am....

That's all. Those are the things that I know.

Well those are the most important things all right.

It must be rewarding helping people to speak?

What?

It must be nice knowing something well enough to teach it... I mean... being a teacher?

Well now that you mention it... yes, it does have its moments.

You know..., Vadim says proudly, ...James here doesn't just speak English like you and me Olya... he speaks it *fluently*!

You don't say, she says.

...That's right, he can speak without accent...!

I'm very impressed.

...Without even thinking!

That's quite an accomplishment.

In fact, Vadim says, he speaks English almost without mistakes!

Oh it's nothing..., I blush.

But Olya continues:

You should be very proud. Your Russian is good too. You know when Olga told me how well you speak Russian I didn't believe her... and now I see that she was right.

Thanks.

No really. I'm not trying to flatter you... your Russian is excellent. In fact, I wish my English were that good.

You study English?

Well yes... I mean not exactly... I mean I'm embarrassed to admit it...

She knows it about like I do, Vadim explains, In other words she can read but can't listen or speak.

Yeah, but for me it's especially embarrassing given the fact that... that I had the chance to learn it firsthand.

How's that? I ask.

Olya used to live in America, Vadim explains.

Yeah, I moved to the United States a few years ago... you know when things were unsettled here. I was young and stupid then. I thought I was leaving forever... but returned after a year.

Why'd you come back?

I don't know...

You didn't like it?

It's not that... it's just that it wasn't what I'd expected.

What were you expecting?

I don't know... I guess... well let's just say America has pipes too.

I nod wistfully and take a sip of my tea.

So that's why my English is so poor. I've forgotten everything. Perhaps if I'd stuck it out, I'd be fluent by now.

Of course it's difficult to learn a language without the help of native speakers, I say.

You know maybe if you have some free time I'll become a student of yours...

Yeah..., I lie, ...maybe.

Just then the doorbell rings, Olya jumps up and points at Vadim:

Into the kitchen! she screams, Quick!

Olya pulls Vadim from the couch and ushers him into the kitchen. You too, James! she says and closes the door after us:

And don't you dare come out until I tell you!

Vadim laughs:

Is this your idea of hospitality? he yells from the kitchen but Olya doesn't answer.

In the other room we can hear a group of women being let into the apartment. The sounds of lips kissing zippers. Laughter. Dripping boots being removed. Someone's loud voice complaining about the cold....

That's them..., Vadim says, Your interrogators have arrived.

But they're women!

Don't let that fool you... they may be women but they're as cruel as Customs officials.

Vadim puts a kettle on the stove to boil, then sits to wait for it. Olya's kitchen has been renovated and Vadim can see that I am admiring it:

Nice isn't it? he says, Olya's done well for herself since she came back from America. She has a good job. She remodeled the whole apartment. You should have seen the place before... there were pipes *everywhere*.

What does she do for a living?

Vadim is rummaging around in a cupboard — he obviously feels at home here — and pulls out an unopened can of instant coffee:

She's some professional type.

A director?

No, she's not a director. She works in a western company.

It's strange... her apartment — I mean the layout — is exactly like yours Vadim, just backwards.

Yeah, these twelve-story buildings are all the same... they're as common as a Russian comma.

When the water is boiled Vadim pours each of us a cup of coffee and lights a cigarette. We talk about nothing in particular... first superficially, then in great detail. After a few minutes Olya opens the door:

Okay guys, she says, You can come into the other room now.

Is everything ready?

Almost. Your future wife is getting dressed. But there is a certain matter of business that needs to be taken care of if you want to see her...!

Olya smiles.

I know I know, Vadim says and looks at me seriously: It's time James.

For what?

He laughs at my words:

For the worst...!

Without finishing our coffee we leave the kitchen. In the other room three women are sitting on a couch and Olya introduces each of them to me:

This is Olga...

...and Olga...

...and Olga.

The girls nod and smile at me. And Vadim introduces my name:

And this is James, he says, He'll be my *spokesman*.

I nod, and the women look at me politely. For some minutes we look back and forth at each other but say nothing. Finally, to break the ice they ask me some questions about America's black-white problem and I launch into my standard explanation.

Okay, says Olya appraising the situation, Let's get started...!

She has interrupted me in mid-explanation and I am grateful to her. When Olya speaks her manner is theatrical and emphatic:

...Here are the rules. Hey... is everybody listening?!

Olya pauses to wait for the room to quiet and then begins again:

Vadim, as you know, your bride has been captured and hidden away. Your bride has been stolen before she can even become your bride. Her captors are ruthless and mean, but, at the same time, they are intelligent and polite, and so they are willing to give you a chance to win her back. You have chosen James to speak on your behalf and that means that you, James, will have to answer our questions... you will have to answer one question from each of us: from me, from Olga, from Olga, from Olga, and lastly from Olga, your groom's prospective bride who is waiting, as we speak, to be unhidden....

Get on with it! Olga yells from the other room, I don't plan on being in here all day!

...Each of us has written down a question, and I will be reading them to you. If you answer the question right, then we move on to the next one. If you answer wrong, then the groom will have to pay a fine of...

One hundred rubles! Vadim jokes.

No..., says Olya, ...your ransom will be fifty thousand rubles for each incorrect answer.

What! Are you trying to bankrupt me?

No...but those are the rules. That is, if you want to see your bride again....

Racketeers!

Olya laughs.

Racketeers, all of you!

Olya laughs again:

When you have answered all of the questions successfully, James, then the bride and the groom can be reunited....

So that's what this is all about...! Why did I think...?

...So James are you ready to answer our riddles?

What?

Are you ready for our five riddles?

I suppose so.

Do your best to answer them correctly. Remember that the future of our soon-to-be newlyweds depends on your answers.

Olya pauses importantly:

Your first riddle is from Olga — so listen carefully.

Olya clears her throat dramatically, and reads in a low exaggerated drawl:

“A man was put in a windowless prison for twenty years,” she begins. “Every day he ate nothing but dried bread. Not once did he leave the cell during his incarceration. But when they finally took him out of his cell they found a sack of bones under his bed. So the obvious question is... where did the bones come from?”

Wait, I say, You spoke so quickly... could you repeat the question just to make sure I got it all?

Sure, she says and once again reads her riddle — this time just as fast... but louder:

“A man was put in prison for twenty years. Every day he ate nothing but dried bread. When they finally took him out of his cell they found a sack of bones. Where did the bones come from?”

I stop to think. *If a man eats nothing but dried bread for twenty years... first of all, that's impossible... but assuming that it were possible, then it would mean that the bones had to come from something other than his food because there are, of course, no bones in dried bread... now if the bones weren't already there when the man was put into the cell then that would mean that... but what if they were already there... in other words, the bones didn't actually appear during the twenty years that the man was incarcerated...*

Were the bones already in the cell before the man was put there?

No, Olya says, The cell was empty. They fed him nothing but dried bread... and after twenty years there was a sack of bones that had appeared from somewhere.

Okay... so the bones weren't already there. That means that the bones had to come from somewhere outside the cell, in other words, from something that could get into the cell from the outside world... but what?

Did the bones belong to some rats?

No.

Mice?

No.

Cockroaches?

Not likely.

Then maybe they were the bones of the man? In other words, he himself was a *sack of bones*?

No.

I don't know then.

You give up?

Yes, I give up.

Vadim slaps his thigh:

You can't give up! he says.

Do you know the answer? I ask him.

Sure, he says and shakes his head, It's a children's riddle.

Olya laughs:

Well, before you two give up, I'll give you a clue. The answer is in the question. Now listen carefully... I'll read it to you again:

"A man was put in prison for twenty years. Every day he ate nothing but *dried bread*. When they finally took him out of his cell they found a sack of bones. Where did the bones come from?"

Olya smiles deviously. All the Olgas are looking at me and waiting for my words. In my mind I try to imagine an answer. But can't. Logic has failed me again:

I don't know, I say, I've thought of everything: the bones weren't already there... they didn't belong to any animals that might have crept into the cell... and he didn't eat anything but dried bread which, of course, doesn't have any bones... I don't know what to say.

You don't?

No, I say, I don't.

Then in that case that'll be fifty thousand rubles!

The girls cheer.

Racketeers! Vadim moans.

The girls cheer again.

Racketeers!

So what's the answer? I ask, Where did the bones come from?

The answer, Olya says, is that the bones came from the fish soup that he had been eating.

What fish soup?

The fish soup that he ate every day.

But you said he only ate dried bread!

No I didn't.
Yes you did.
No I didn't. Here I'll repeat it... listen carefully:
"A man was put in prison for twenty years. Every day he ate nothing but fish soup and bread...."
See? Olya smiles.
The Olgas laugh.
So that's how far I've come? Six and a half years of studying Russian, and I can't even answer a children's riddle?
You should be ashamed of yourselves! Vadim says to Olya.
Why?
Taking advantage of James like that.
How am I taking advantage of him? He knows Russian. And besides, it's a children's riddle, and he is, after all, no child.
No? Then what would you say he was?
He's our age... I mean he's an adult just like you and me.
Adult? He's no adult!
He's not?
No he's not.
I'm not?
No, James, you're not... you're a foreigner!
Olya stops:
A foreigner? she says.
Yes, says Vadim, A foreigner.
Maybe Vadim's right, says one of the Olgas sheepishly.
Yeah, says another, Maybe James's knowledge of Russian isn't as good as he thought it was.
Olya puts her index finger against her lips to think. Finally, she pronounces her verdict:
All right all right, she says, If you insist... in deference to our foreign guest, we won't count that question...
And Vadim smiles and winks in my direction.
...But don't expect any more breaks!
Olya stares at me seriously:
Are you ready? she asks.
For what? I answer.
Your second riddle. Are you ready for it?
I guess.
Okay, this one is Olga's:

“It is a well-known fact,” Olya reads from her paper, “that Russia is not in the West. So the question to you, James, is this: if Russia is not in the West, then where is it?”

In the East! I say instinctively.

As soon as the words come out, I realize that I have spoken too quickly. That I should have taken more time to consider the question. *But haven't I had the last six and a half years to consider this question?*

Wrong! says Olya.

How can it be wrong?

It's wrong... Russia is not the East!

Then where is it? You yourself admitted that it wasn't in the West...!

That's right it's not in the West... but it's not in the East either!

I turn to look at Vadim, but he just shrugs his shoulders.

Pay up! Olya says.

How much?

I already told you: fifty thousand rubles!

What if I give you twenty-five thousand instead?

You know Vadim bargaining at this point is inappropriate.

Okay... thirty.

Vadim... I'm disappointed in you! Just remember how beautiful your bride is... how intelligent, how polite.... Do you really want to say that she's not worth a measly fifty thousand rubles?

Olga's voice can be heard laughing from the other room.

Well... of course she is. She's worth all the money in the world.... All right, thirty-five!

Fifty!

Forty...?

Fifty!

Forty-five... and that's my last offer.

Vadim, do you want your future bride to see that you are so cheap as to bargain over five thousand rubles? Is that what you want?

Forty-five....

Fifty.

Fifty?

Fifty.

Vadim takes out a fifty-thousand-ruble note and hands it to a smiling Olya:

Racketeers! he says.

Olya pretends not to have heard him:

Do you see how this works James? she says.

Yes. Unfortunately I do.

Good.

Olya clears her throat once again:

And now for *my* riddle, she says and taking out the next piece of paper begins to read her riddle:

“This scene takes place in the Moscow metro...”

Where? I interrupt her.

“The metro... where else? As usual, it’s rush hour. The metro car is packed. There are people sitting, standing, leaning, crouching. But something is terribly wrong, in other words, something is not right: one of the passengers is an American spy! That’s right... an American spy! Right there in the midst of a carful of unsmiling metrogoers. But which one is it? How can we pick him out? None of the passengers is dressed conspicuously. Each of them speaks Russian perfectly, without accent. But at the next stop, a KGB officer enters the car, walks right up to the American spy and says, ‘Next stop Lubyanka.’ The man hadn’t even said anything, he was dressed like a Russian — no brighter no worse — so how did the KGB officer know that he was the spy?”

I smile to myself at the riddle. I look at Vadim knowingly and he nods back. Still, I am careful to pretend that I have not heard it before, pause for a long time, as if weighing all options. Finally, I speak up in a voice that is falsely uncertain:

Maybe it’s because... let me think... could it be that... that the spy was black?

Vadim smiles at my answer.

Olya claps her hands:

Wrong! she says.

What do you mean *wrong*?

Your answer is wrong. The spy wasn’t black... he was whiter than winter!

No he wasn’t! Vadim says, He was black!

How do you know? Olya says, Were you there?

No but...!

Don’t try to get out of it, says one of the Olgas.

Yeah, says another, Pay up the fifty thousand rubles!

But...!

A crash of female voices drowns him out. Hopelessly, Vadim takes out a fifty-thousand-ruble note.

But wait a minute..., I say, ...What’s the right answer ...How did they know ...what gave the spy away?

Olya smiles broadly:

The KGB officer understood that the spy was not Russian because he was reading *Anna Karenina*!

What! That's not how the riddle goes... you changed it! You tricked me!

Your answer is wrong! Next question....

Wow, these women really are ruthless. They really are mean! In fact, they're even meaner than...

Olya's voice snaps me out of my contemplation:

Whose question haven't I read... ah yes... Olga's. It's a good question because it is simple. You're probably ready for a simple question about now, aren't you?

You can say that again!

Good, then all you have to do is tell me where the sixth calculator went.

What?

Remember, you came to Moscow with six solar calculators. You gave three of them away. You threw one against a wall. That leaves two. In theory you should have two calculators left. But if you look in your wallet right now you'll see that you have...

One!

...That's right. So your question is this:

"Where did your sixth calculator go?"

Sixth calculator? I'd forgotten I even had a sixth calculator!

I don't know, I say, I don't even remember having it, let alone losing it.

You don't know?

No I don't?

Jeez! says Vadim, How can you not know? Why did you bother bringing six calculators if you don't even know what you did with them... Most normal people would have settled for five... but not *you*... nooooo... five isn't enough for you... you had to bring *six*. And now you can't even say where they all went!

Look, Vadim, you don't really expect me to spend my time keeping track of calculators, do you? With all the important things that are happening in my life I've got better things to do than to waste my precious time, energy, and attention on...

Do you two know the answer or not? Olya interrupts us.

What answer?

Do you know where your sixth calculator went?

No. I don't.

Okay, says Olya, Then pay up...!

Vadim looks at me in mock annoyance. Without protesting he takes out another fifty-thousand-ruble note:

You women are severe! he says and shakes his head.

Love ain't cheap! says Olga.

And neither is *Love!* Olga says.

I know... I know... but this ain't love... this isn't even *Love*: this is *marriage!*

The girls laugh at Vadim's joke.

All right everybody! Olya says, It's time for Olga's riddle.

Olya pauses and waits for the room to become quiet.

I am still confused, trying to remember where my sixth calculator went, but before I can remember, Olya turns to me:

And now, she says dramatically, you will hear the final riddle which has been chosen by the bride-to-be herself. It is the fifth of five questions, and honestly speaking you haven't had too much success with the first ones...

The girls laugh. Olya's face is in a big smile. She is apparently delighted by the question that Olga has written:

Quiet everyone! Quiet!! I'm going to read the fifth and final question to James. It's a complicated one... easy but complicated. Are you ready?

Yes, I say.

Okay, then here goes. Listen carefully:

"Olga — our beloved bride-to-be — is driving a trolleybus..."

Olya stops:

Are you listening carefully? she says.

Of course, I say.

Good..., she says and continues her riddle:

"...Olga is driving a trolleybus. It's a cold winter day and so at the first stop seven people board the bus. Three of them are wearing fur hats. The trolleybus moves on and at the second stop one of the hatless passengers gets off and four people get on. They are foreigners so all of them are wearing fur hats..."

Olya is speaking quickly and my mind rushes to keep count.

"...At the third stop two hatted passengers get on along with two passengers without hats; five people get off, but none of them are wearing fur hats..."

I tally them. Olya pauses and then continues:

"...At the fourth stop three people get on and four people get off... Then at the fifth stop..."

Wait a minute!

What?

Wait just one minute!

Why?

You didn't mention the hats.

What hats?

How many passengers were wearing fur hats at the fourth stop?

Hats? Oh yes, hats... it doesn't matter. Now where was I...

"...At the seventh stop three people get on and three people get off..."

It doesn't matter?

"...And, at the eighth, ten people get off and four people get on..."

Wait a minute...!

"...But then at the next stop nobody gets on and six people get off. The bus moves on and at the next stop..."

Wait another minute... she must have made a mistake!

"...at the next stop everyone gets off!"

Olga smiles broadly:

"Everyone gets off and seven people get on. The doors begin to close, but at the last moment they open... and up steps former president Mikhail Gorbachev with two bodyguards..."

Hey! says Vadim, Former presidents don't ride trolleybuses...!

Gorbachev does, Olya replies.

And they don't need bodyguards...

Gorbachev does!

Vadim laughs.

Stop interrupting! says one of the Olgas.

Yeah, says another, You'll ruin Olya's train of thought!

Yeah..., says the third.

Okay okay... sorreee...!

And Olya continues:

"...Anyway, the trolleybus is lighter now but plods on just in case... At the next stop one person gets on and two people get off... Then one person gets on but changes her mind, only to change her mind again and then once again..."

How many times did she change her mind...?

"The doors close violently before she can change her mind a fifth time. At the next stop, nobody gets off and seventy-eight people get on, most of whom are wearing fur hats..."

Fur hats?!

"...So seventy-eight people get on, but right before the doors can close

another seventy-eight people try to get on, cramming themselves desperately into the doors. It's too crowded in the bus, a fight breaks out and as a result former president Mikhail Gorbachev is punted out of the trolleybus, along with one of his bodyguards... "How many people boarded the bus? How many bodyguards did Gorbachev have? Where were the ticket collectors when you really needed them? Were they wearing hats? And where... WHERE could I find someone to take my German dictionary?!"

But here Olya stops. A smile lights her face:

Have you been listening carefully? she says.

I tried, I say.

Have you been keeping track of the passengers?

As best I could.

Good... here's your question... Are you ready...?

Olya pauses dramatically, her voice becomes softer, almost a whisper:

Your question, she says, is as follows:

(4)

"...How does the bus driver like her tea?"

(5)

What?!

Olya laughs:

How does the trolleybus driver like her tea? she says again.

Twenty-four! I blurt out.

No no... listen to the question: how does she like her tea... how does *the trolleybus driver* drink her tea?

Sixteen! I say desperately.

No no, says Olya, The question is *how does Olga — our bride-to-be — like her tea?*

I gasp once again.

Wait a minute! Vadim jumps in: Olga doesn't even drink tea... she drinks coffee. How is James supposed to know how she likes her tea if she never even drinks tea... I mean, *I* don't even know how she likes her tea!

It just so happens that your future wife *loves* tea... that is to say when it's made a special way, that is to say when it's made to please her...!

Vadim moves to speak, but Olya interrupts him:

...*And*, she says, if James can tell us how she likes her tea, then you, Vadim, can see your bride... for free!

Vadim turns to me helplessly, his face pinching against itself. But this time I have the decency to lie:

I can't say for sure, I say, but most likely she likes it burning hot... As dark as darkness... Stronger than sex.

Olya laughs loudly:

Are you sure?

Absolutely, I lie.

Wrong! she says.

It can't be... it can't be...

Wrong!

But I'm sure that she likes her tea hot and dark and bitter...!

Wrong!

Again a burst of female voices fills the room and covers us in excited words. Everyone is yelling and shouting. Olya is shaking her collected ransom at Vadim and screaming something about sugar. Vadim, in response, is shaking his finger at Olya, and swearing something about coffee. The Olgas are laughing and coercing at Vadim to pay up.

And then we stop.

Suddenly, as if a breeze has swept over us, the room falls silent. We all turn our heads to see that Olga, in her wedding gown, is standing in the doorway: she is dressed whiter than late autumn. Layers and layers of lace and silk flowing from the top of her head to the floor. Her face is slightly adorned, more beautiful than I have ever seen it. Her smile is radiant.

In the quiet room I am not the only person to gasp.

Olga stands for a few seconds in the silence that she has created:

I like my tea cool and sweet, she says, As cool as a salted cucumber. As sweet as a suture.

I nod.

Therefore your answer to my question is wrong.

I nod again.

The three women laugh. Vadim swears and peels off another fifty thousand rubles. Olya looks at Olga and smiles.

Triumphantly, Olga walks over to Vadim and kisses him on his wrinkled forehead. They embrace.

Everyone is happy.

*

(6)

After Vadim has paid the two hundred thousand rubles, he grabs his coat: Now I'll leave you girls alone to do your girl thing, he says, We men have an appointment of our own...!

He motions for me to put on my coat and I do. For several minutes he stands in Olya's hall making detailed arrangements for the girls to meet us later at the registration hall where the ceremony will be held.

When that is done the two of us leave for home.

Back in my apartment I choose my whitest shirt, my least-wrinkled pants, and do my best to arrange a tie around my neck. I take the stairs down to his apartment — *when will they ever fix the elevator?* — where Landlady, in her soiled apron, lets me in. She is preparing the food for tonight's dinner banquet, and looks both exhausted and blissfully needed.

How did the ransoming go? she asks.

Two hundred thousand, I answer and am amazed to see that without a calculator she has quickly and correctly converted that amount into kilograms of butter.

Vadim! she yells through the apartment, James is here!

I'll be right out!

I take off my shoes and walk into their living room where several tables have already been set up for tonight's dinner. Chairs have been pulled from every room of the house, from the small kitchens of kind neighbors, from the larger kitchens of unkind neighbors, even a pair of old wooden stools from my apartment...

I take one and sit down.

In the other room Landlady is banging pots and pans in the sink. There is the hissing of running water. The opening then closing of an oven door.

While I wait I try clumsily to straighten my tie which has been knotted too tight around my neck.

I pull and twist and finally decide to take it off and tie it once more from the very beginning.

Suddenly, a doorbell sounds. Landlady, wiping her hands on her apron, hurries from the kitchen to open the heavy metal door which Vadim had installed somewhere between *V* and *W*. Without looking through the peephole, she twists and turns the locks until the door is openable. When she opens it I see a short stocky man in an old trench coat.

Boris! she says, Come on in!

The man walks in with a toothless smile and a handful of flowers, both of which he gives to Landlady:

These are for you, he says.

Landlady thanks him and leads him into the living room where I'm already sitting with my tie in my hand:

Have a seat, she tells him, Vadim's getting dressed... Do you know James?

No, he says, Although I've heard a lot about him...

James, I say and extend my hand.

Boris, he says, I'll be Vadim's best man.

Nice to meet you, I lie.

Likewise, he exaggerates.

Pick a chair Boris! Landlady says, Vadim'll be out in a few minutes.

Landlady returns to her kitchen preparations. Boris picks one of the wobbly stools from my kitchen. For a few moments the two of us are left to sit in squeaking silence and then finally he speaks up:

I really have heard a lot about you, James... Vadim's told me that you live in his Dad's old apartment... that you are extremely lucky in cards...

That's right.

He says you have a blue passport.

I do.

That must be nice, huh...?

Having a blue passport?

No. I mean being lucky in cards.

It's okay... it saves on lubricated condoms.

Yeah.

Not to mention solar calculators.

Yeah I suppose it has a lot of advantages...

Boris pulls out a cigarette:

You smoke? he says.

Sure, I say and we light up.

As we talk, I notice that although Boris is short and stocky his voice is low and strong and for some reason commands respect:

You know James, he says from behind his cigarette, Vadim and I go way back... I've known him forever...

Is that so?

Yeah, since the days when he believed in our government.

That long?

Yeah... in fact I remember him when he couldn't even give an opinion.

It can't be.

That's right, we go way back. But nowadays we don't get the chance to see much of each other. It's a shame: both of us have jobs and a family, you know, commitments...

Boris pauses thoughtfully.

That's too bad, I say.

Yeah, he says, Time's a strange thing...

We become respectfully silent. Then as if remembering something, Boris smiles:

I hear you answered riddles for Vadim, he says.

I tried.

How'd you do?

I got them all wrong.

All of them?!

Yeah, all of them. Especially the one about the bus driver.

And how much did they take you for?

Two hundred thousand.

Racketeers! Racketeers, plain and simple. Especially given Vadim's financial situation. Oh well I guess it doesn't matter. You only get married once, right?

I guess.

And besides, it's not like the money'll go to waste: I'm sure the girls will use it to buy vodka for the dinner tonight.

I'm sure.

Did they ask you the question about potatoes? You know, which is heavier: a kilogram of potatoes or a kilogram of potatoes purchased from an old woman on the street?

No, they didn't.

They didn't? That's strange... they usually ask that question.

You seem to know a lot about this whole process... I mean the wedding process.

I should: I've been to enough of them.

Really, how many?

Well, let's see... this will be my one... two... three... four... *fifth!*

You've been to five weddings?

That's right. And that's not including two of my own.

Seven weddings! You're like a specialist or something!

You could say that.

It's my first. I've never actually been to a wedding...

In Russia?

No, period.

So how do you like it so far?

The wedding?

Yeah. How do you like it?

It hasn't begun yet.

Sure it has... this is all part of the process. Everything that happens today can be considered crucial to this wedding. You see in Russia a wedding isn't just the ceremony... for us it's a state of mind. It's an important and festive occasion in the life of everybody connected with the marrying couple. The important thing is that the day be different from all others. And that's why on this day anything can happen... and usually does.

You mean to say that it's magical, or something?

Well yeah, magical.

Boris stops:

See this...? he says and points at a large gap where a tooth normally is.

Yes.

...Well, there used to be a tooth there many years ago. I lost it during my first wedding celebration. My best man knocked it out.

He did?! Why?

Aw... you know how it goes... too much revelry... But he didn't mean anything by it...

Boris smiles a toothless smile:

In America do you celebrate weddings like this, too?

You mean by fighting?

Well no... I mean *unconditionally*?

I doubt it. But then again I don't know... like I told you I've never been to a wedding.

You seem concerned about it.

Well, you know, for a long time now I've had this strange premonition that I would embarrass myself if I ever went to a wedding... I'm not sure why, but something tells me I'll make a series of wrong decisions and become the laughingstock of the party... Something tells me that that's what's going to happen today.

Why?

I don't know.

Then don't think about it. Put it out of your mind. And if you're worried you might accidentally do something egregious, then just remember this simple advice: watch what everybody else is doing and follow their lead. You can't go wrong that way...!

That's the same advice Vadim gave me last chapter.

Well, there you have it!

Do what everybody else is doing? How simple that is! How logical!

Yeah, I say, You're probably right.

Of course I'm right!

I should just watch what everyone else is doing and follow their lead.

Absolutely!

I nod happily:

So, I say, what types of things are going to happen... specifically, that is?

You mean today?

Yeah, what can I expect from this whole wedding process?

Well the agenda basically looks like this... first, we need to mark the passing of Vadim's independence. As we speak, the girls, for their part, are mourning what will soon be the loss of the bride's virginity — ha-ha! — and we men need to do the same thing for Vadim. The three of us will wash down his ugly past... that is if he ever comes out of that room...

Boris checks his watch and yells toward Vadim's room:

Hey in there... hurry up! We don't want to be late, now do we?!

I'm almost done! Vadim answers.

...So anyway, after we wash down his past we'll go to the actual ceremony...

What will that involve?

Ah ...it's nothing too spectacular. First you wait around with some other wedding parties, then you go into an adjoining room, an orchestra strikes up, the ceremony happens for about ten to fifteen minutes, the orchestra strikes up again, and the wedding party leaves with the bride and groom who are now — for the most part — married.

Sounds magical!

It is.

So then what?

So anyway, after the ceremony we'll go for a ride... we haven't decided where yet. Probably the Kremlin. Maybe Vorobyovy Gory. And after that it's back home for the dinner banquet.

Food and drink?

Yeah, that's the most important part. That's where we actually celebrate the wedding. We'll talk and talk and talk... ! It should be lots of fun... in fact Vadim says they've got all the makings for an unforgettable celebration: twenty bottles of vodka, eight bottles of champagne, ten bottles of red

wine, ten bottles of white wine... not to mention all the food... plates and plates of it... I hear Vadim's mom is even making her special dish...

Boris stops in the middle of his thought:

Have you ever tried Olga Mikhailovna's special dish?

No, I haven't.

Wow! You don't know what you're missing! She promised to make it tonight in honor of the occasion. The last time I had it was twelve years ago... and I still remember the taste.

Boris pauses to remember the taste of Landlady's special recipe:

Yeah, he says, This day should be a day unlike any other...!

A day unlike any other? A day unlike any other... A day unlike any other!

When Vadim comes out I am surprised to see that he is not dressed formally, but is wearing a sweatsuit and old house slippers instead.

Let's get started! Boris says, We're already behind schedule because of you!

Vadim tightens the string around his sweatpants:

Let's do it! he says.

Wait a minute! I say, You're going to your wedding dressed like that?

Of course not, Vadim says.

Boris laughs at my words:

Remember James... before we go to the wedding we need to wash down his ugly past...

My past, Vadim protests, wasn't *that* ugly!

It was ugly enough.

Vadim laughs.

...And that means that there's one more thing that we need to do before the actual wedding ceremony can begin...

I look at them blankly and so they both answer in one voice:

Vodka!!

(7)

While the three of us are sitting in her living room, Landlady continues to prepare for the dinner banquet. She actually started months ago with her shopping, then a week ago with the last-minute preparations, and then two days ago with the finishing touches. She has already made her purchases, and now she is in her element. Like an author struggling painfully toward a conclusion, her time has come at last. And like an author she is cutting, and trimming, and adding, and mixing, and salting, and sighing, and discarding...

(8)

There you go! Vadim says pouring our vodka into plastic cups that Landlady has recently recycled.

Oh no you don't! Boris objects, I'm driving!

Oh you can have a little bit..., Vadim pours.

A little bit? Even a little bit can cost me my license!

You won't lose your license from one shot of vodka.

How do you know?

Experience.

Experience? This from the man who totaled a brand new BMW!

I was sober then... thank you very much.

That's right, I say, He was as sober as a scientist.

Boris grunts.

Actually, I say, Scientifically speaking there's no reason why you can't have a drink. In fact, I just read an article about alcohol tolerance... it said that there's a certain amount of pure alcohol that your organism can absorb without it affecting your coordination at all.

How much?

Well for my weight it's seventy-eight grams.

See! Vadim says, So for you, Boris, it's probably twice that much!

Well all right all right... I'll drink... but only symbolically!

Vadim nods deeply and pours him one hundred fifty-six symbolic grams.

Holding our cups, we sit in silence:

Ah...! Boris says finally, This is the life!

You got that right! Vadim says.

Aren't you going to miss it?

What do you mean? Vadim says.

Well you do realize that after you're married you won't be able to spend time the way you spent it before... you realize that everything will change.

Ah, that's rubbish!

No it's not... take it from me my friend: your bear-hunting days are over.

Vadim laughs and holds up his cup of vodka:

I'm no bear hunter, he says, But I can say without a doubt that my future will be no different from my past, no worse than my present.

He stops importantly:

So let us drink to the future! he says.

And to your ugly past! Boris adds.

The three of us drink aggressively, chasing the vodka down with pickles that Vadim has brought from the kitchen. After we have downed our first shot, the process of male bonding begins: our conversation becomes livelier.

You know, Vadim says, I've always wondered who it was that thought to think up vodka?

Vodka?

Yeah, who ever invented it?

Russians of course!

Well yeah, but who specifically?

I don't know.

Actually, I lie, It's a proven fact that Americans invented vodka...

Americans?!

No really it's true... I read that Americans were the first to actually...

But before I can even finish my sentence I am drowned out in an uproar of objections:

Americans?! says Vadim.

Vodka?! adds Boris.

They both are looking at me fiercely:

Invented?! Vadim says again.

Vodka...?! Boris adds.

Okay okay, I concede, It was a joke... it was just a joke!

Not funny, Vadim says.

Yeah, says Boris, There are some things in this world that you just don't joke about!

That's right, says Vadim, Just think how you'd feel if we told you that Russians invented peanut butter.

I see your point.

Or, says Boris, if we said that American democracy was conceived in Russia.

But actually, I say trying to save the situation, vodka was invented by an American who had moved from Russia.

From Russia?

Yeah... an immigrant to America.

Immigrant?

Yeah.

In other words, a Russian?

Well, an American from Russia.

Ah... well, that's a different story altogether...!

I laugh and take another pickle.

...You should have said that to begin with.

And with that the conversation turns — as it always does — to politics.

At some point Boris looks at his watch:

It's almost time to go, he says, The girls will be waiting.

Lazily, Vadim gets up from his chair to change once again, this time into his wedding clothes. Landlady has not stopped preparing for the dinner banquet, even though she has exchanged her apron for formal wedding attire; as she chops beets, her dangling earrings jangle back and forth from her ears.

While waiting for Vadim, Boris helps me to re-tie my tie. And when Vadim is dressed in a black coat and tie of his own, and Landlady has washed most of the purple from her hands, Boris pulls out the keys to his car and looks at us seriously:

Are we ready? he says in a voice splashed with vodka.

I am, Landlady says.

So am I, I second.

Let's get this over with! Vadim says.

And with that the four of us set out in Boris's Zhiguli for the local ZAGS — the others will be waiting for us there — where the ceremony is due to take place.

(9)

Arriving at the registration hall, the four of us pile out of Boris's small car. Another Zhiguli of acquaintances has just arrived and is waiting for us inside. When Olga smells the alcohol in Vadim's words, she isn't even surprised, doesn't even ask how he has spent his last few hours: she simply reaches up and kisses him lightly above his bushy eyebrows where his hairline used to be.

We move inside.

The government building is dark with cold corridors and peeling floor tiles. Not noticing the small signs on the walls, our wedding party — led by Boris, Vadim, and Olga in her billowing white wedding gown and veil — makes its way through the dark halls, boisterously, laughing and joking, loud and joyous and celebrating the moment...

...Gaily and loudly we barge into a room that we have taken to be the wedding room. But as soon as we enter, we realize our mistake: a room full of divorce petitioners looks up in surprise from the documents they

are signing. For an awkward moment we stare across the room at each other: they at us nostalgically; we at them naively.

Oops! Boris says, Wrong room!

Wrong room! Vadim repeats.

Yeah..., I add, ...This isn't France!

You need the last door on the right..., says one of the people in the room and goes back to filling out his form.

Vadim grabs Boris playfully and pulls him out of the room. And we again make our way — more carefully this time — back down the hall to the last door on the right.

(11)

Behind the last door on the right we enter a waiting room where everyone is dressed like us. Approximately five couples and their entourages are standing around in the small room waiting to be summoned to the “wedding chamber,” in other words, the small adjoining room next to the large wall map of the Soviet Union. Laughter can be heard from all sides and the gaiety is so infectious, so pervasive, that it isn't even dampened by the fight that almost breaks out between two brides, each of whom has worn the other's gown. The festive mood is not even tempered by the old woman who is running around from couple to couple, asking them, telling them, at times yelling things that are important now but that will be forgotten in just a few short years.

In the small room the wedding parties do not mix. Grooms do not congratulate grooms. Best men do not compare their statures. In fact, only the brides bother to notice their fellow brides-to-be.

Couple by couple the process gets closer. And closer. One by one the people ahead of us are swept into matrimony. Now it is happening to a thin groom and his thinner bride: happily, the couple and their entourage enter the adjoining room where an orchestra strikes up; after a long pause of about ten or fifteen minutes the orchestra strikes up again, the doors burst open, and the entourage exits behind the bride and groom who are now — more than ever before — married.

I gasp.

In the small room the anticipation builds. The minutes pass slowly. Everyone is bursting with expectation: Vadim is telling jokes that everybody has heard and although he is no comedian, everyone laughs anyway; Landlady is engaged in a conversation with her friend Olga Ivanovna —

heatedly, they are comparing cures for the common cold. Olga, her future daughter-in-law, is not laughing but looks beautiful anyway, and as she stands in a corner talking to Olya the three Olgas gaze at her with pride, admiration, and envy, respectively.

I smile.

With his video camera in hand, Boris is moving from person to person, entreating each of us to record our wishes for the soon-to-be-newlyweds. Word by word he films our congratulations until the only people left are the three Olgas and I:

Hey you guys! Boris says, Say something for the bride and groom!

Boris points the camera at the Olgas:

May you enjoy all the best in life..., says the first Olga.

...May you love each other forever..., says the second.

...And may your family be happy..., says the third.

Boris aims the camera at me:

Your turn James! he says and I look reluctantly into the camera:

Give me please four kilograms potatoes, I say.

Boris looks at me strangely.

I shrug my shoulders.

But before he can say anything a man from a competing entourage taps me on my shrug. I turn around to see a sweating hysterical groom:

Excuse me, he says, Have you seen my bride? She was supposed to meet me hours ago, but she didn't show up... I thought she might come here, but I don't see her.

I don't know, I say, What's she look like?

The man tells me.

And what's she wearing?

The man tells me.

Well, actually, I say, I did see someone fitting that description... Is that her?

No, the man says, That's not her.

What about that girl over there ... the one dressed in white ... is that her?

No, he says, that's not her either.

The man looks as if he's going to cry.

I don't know, I say, She might have had some problems with the roads. This weather...

But the man, not waiting for my consolation, has already moved on to ask other people if they have seen his missing bride-to-be.

Just then another person, apparently noticing my explaining to the unfortunate groom, taps me on the shoulder and asks if the orchestra takes requests.

I don't know, I explain, This is my first wedding. Ask that woman over there.

And when he does, the old woman explains from the very beginning: "First," she says, "you and your entourage will enter that adjoining room over there. An orchestra will strike up. The ceremony will last about ten or fifteen minutes, after which the orchestra will strike up again and you will walk *slowly* and *calmly* — no bursting! — out the doors followed by your bride and groom who will now be married."

Is that it? he asks.

That's it... if you have any other questions just watch what everybody else is doing and repeat after them. If you follow everyone else's lead you can't go wrong.

Thanks, says the man.

No problem, the woman sighs.

(12)

Standing in the small waiting room Vadim seems to be especially upbeat. I walk over to him:

Hey Vadim, I say patting him on the back, Are you nervous?

Naw.

Honestly?

Of course, what's there to be nervous about?

In about thirty minutes you're going to be a married man!

So?

So aren't you afraid that things will change after this?

Change? What can possibly change?

Well your relationship with Olga, for one — just remember what Boris said this morning. Not to mention your life in general.

Vadim laughs at my words:

Look, he says, Do you see Olga over there?

Of course.

What color is she wearing?

White.

That's right. Now take a look at me... what color am I wearing?

Black.

Right.

So?

So...!

I don't get it.

Not even a little bit?

No, unfortunately not.

And here Vadim smiles:

I'm no fortune-teller, he says, but I can say with certainty that nothing will change... that this day will be no different from any other.

No different from any other?!

But Vadim, I protest, Everyone knows that a wedding stands for... that it represents change... or at least the prospect of change. Otherwise, why would anyone bother?

Vadim smiles at me and shakes his head like a father:

You my friend are as naive as the letter Q!

Just then Olga, who has been mingling with her friends, walks up and puts her arm around her soon-to-be-husband:

What are you two talking about? she says.

About change, Vadim says.

About the color gray, I lie.

Really? says Olga, That's my favorite color...

But once again a voice interrupts our conversation:

Excuse me? it says, Have you seen my bride? She was supposed to meet me here, but I don't see her...

I don't know, Vadim answers, Ask that woman over there...

But the man, not listening to Vadim's answer, moves to ask another wedding couple

What's the deal with that? Vadim says.

The old woman told us that he's a regular here, Olga says.

A regular?

Apparently, a few years ago his bride stood him up at the altar... left him waiting with his wedding party, his family, their friends... and since then he's been coming here to look for her. Every Tuesday he dresses up in his faded suit and tie and comes here just to ask wedding party after wedding party if they've seen her...

Strange.

Yeah. Oh...! I almost forgot to tell you Boris needs your help with something... he asked you to help him over there...

What for? Vadim asks.

I don't know. He said something about a signature...
Vadim leaves to help his friend and Olga and I are left to talk alone.
When we are out of everyone's earshot, she addresses me:
How'd you like my question this morning? she smiles.
Nice touch.
I thought you'd appreciate it.
Very much so.
Oh don't worry... No one suspected anything. I was just testing you...
you know, to see how you'd answer.
That's not very nice.
I know. But now I can be sure that you won't open your big mouth
during the ceremony.
My big mouth?
Yeah. Now I know you won't make any silly toasts during the dinner
tonight.
Are you so sure?
Of course.
Just because I covered for you this morning that doesn't mean that I
won't — as you put it — *open my big mouth* during the ceremony. Maybe
I'll decide to object after all...
You won't.
Or even better — maybe I'll make a toast during the dinner... “Let's
drink to Olga,” I'll say, “the girl that I've been having orgasms on!”
You won't do it.
Are you sure?
Of course... you're not strong enough. You're too mild to make a toast
like that.
Well I guess we'll just see about that, won't we?
...James you're too weak to make any bold decisions... In fact, *that's*
why you're still here... that's why you're still in Russia...
What? What did she say?!
Hey everybody...! Boris's voice interrupts her.
I start to say something to Olga but Boris's voice again interrupts:
...Hey everybody... it's our turn!
Without looking back at me Olga goes to where Boris and Vadim are
standing. The rest of our party gathers excitedly around them.
What did she mean that's why I'm still in Russia? That's why I'm still
here?
It's time! Boris says.

Olga tucks her arm into Vadim's and together they head for the adjoining room, followed by the rest of the wedding party.

And with that, the ceremony begins:

(13)

We enter the adjoining room, an orchestra strikes up, there is a long speech of about ten or fifteen minutes, the orchestra strikes up again, and our entourage exits — bursting wildly through the doors — followed by Vadim and Olga who are now — was there ever any doubt? — married.

(14)

After the wedding ceremony we pile into three cars and set out, for some reason, for Red Square. The four of us — Olga, Vadim, Olya, and I — have squeezed into Boris's car. Olya is sitting in the passenger seat next to Boris and the two of them are laughing about all the strange and interesting things that happened during the ceremony. In the backseat Olga is sitting next to me on her husband's lap and kissing him romantically — as if for the first time, as if for the last — and I am sitting tangled in their love, wading in the white lace of her flowing wedding gown. Along the way Boris pulls over to buy some cigarettes, Olya goes with him, and the three of us — Vadim, Olga, and I — are left in the backseat.

But they are so involved in their kissing that they do not notice that I have not exited, that I am helplessly lost in Olga's wedding dress. By the time the front doors open, the three of us are so intertwined that it is not clear who is kissing whom. And who is not.

Knock off the affection! Boris says to us, You'll have the rest of the week for that!

Olya giggles slightly. Vadim straightens his tie and asks me to take my fingers out of his ear, which, of course, I do:

Sorry, I say.

After starting the car, Boris opens a pack of cigarettes and offers it around. The newlyweds refuse. I refuse. Olya accepts and pulls out her lighter.

Boris throws the car into motion and our excursion begins.

From the backseat I can hear Boris and Olya trading their impressions about the unusual wedding ceremony. Next to me, Olga is whispering sweet nothings into the hair of Vadim's ear; and each time she does, I try not to listen — but fail.

So that's what she thinks in moments like these! So that's what she hasn't been saying to me all this time. Oh, how much difference an "s" can make... how different nothing is from nothings...!

Being driven through the city, I see the landscape flashing by my window like each of my six and a half years. So much has changed. Even the drab lifeless buildings that formed my first impressions have been miraculously transformed by the neon signs that now spread from them like suspended cranberries. Colored billboards line the road. Expensive foreign cars weave in and out of traffic quicker than a drunken conversation.

Hey James..., Boris says to Olya as he lights another cigarette, ...I wanted to ask you...

He cracks his window and blows a large stream of smoke into the cold.
...your passport's blue, right?

That's right.

...And that means that you're from America, right?

Right...

So how's life there?

Life?

Yeah, life. How's life in the United States of America?

What do you mean?

In general... how do people live there?

Fine, I suppose. I suppose they live fine.

Not like here, huh?

Well...

I'm sure you don't have all the problems we've got in our country!

Well, actually we have most of them...

Nonsense!

No, really... there are many issues that the U.S. has yet to resolve...

You mean to say you have problems, too?

That's right.

You have problems that are serious but unaddressed?

That's right.

Boris pauses to consider my words:

Maybe so, he says, But we've got *more!*

I don't know about that...

It's true.

I'd beg to differ...

But here Boris looks at me with a pronounced expression of superiority: There's not a country in this world, he boasts, that is as hopeless as Russia!

To the side of the road a traffic policeman is flagging down passing motorists.

Boris slows his car to the speed limit, and approaches the policeman. But luckily the policeman pulls over the car immediately behind us.

Whew! Boris sighs, That was close!

After a few minutes, he resumes his conversation:

You know, James, this may sound like a strange question... but I was wondering... maybe you know... just out of curiosity, how much wallpaper costs in America?

Wallpaper?

Yeah. You see, my second wife and I are redecorating our first kitchen...

That's nice.

Yeah, and that's why the question is relevant for me.

I don't know, I say.

You don't have any idea how much a meter of wallpaper costs?

No. I don't.

Actually, Olya says, it depends....

What does?

In America the price of wallpaper depends on several factors.

How do you know?

I lived there.

There?

That's right. For a year. You see, in America everything depends on something....

In great detail Olya elaborates on this dependence, and as he listens Boris either shakes his head or nods, depending on what is depending on what. Outside our window the scenery is changing: we are getting closer to the center of the city — in other words the neon signs on the drab buildings are becoming bigger and brighter. Colorful billboards proclaim proudly:

NORTH-SOUTH BANK:
SERVING YOU FOR FIVE LONG YEARS!!!

To the side of me, as before, Vadim and Olga are wrapped violently in each other's arms, rolling over the backseat of the car, covered in layers of lace, completely enthralled in their kissing. It is impossible to make out their bodies in the pile of white. Without noticing, they have pinned my leg under them, and as I try to take part in the conversation, I am working to free it.

Hey James! Boris says, How much do cigarettes cost over there?
Cigarettes?

Yeah, in America how much do Marlboros cost?

I don't know... it's difficult to say because I haven't been back for a while now, in fact, since I started smoking...

You didn't smoke when you lived in America?

No. I started here.

So you don't know how much your cigarettes cost?

No.

It's funny..., Olya says, When I first got there and saw the price of cigarettes I thought I'd drop dead! But then after a while I sort of got used to it... in other words, I quit smoking...

And she explains in great detail about the cost of cigarettes in America.

Hearing this, Boris is amazed:

Poor people! he says, How can they live like that?

They have higher salaries, Olya explains.

How much higher... I mean what's an average salary?

It depends on the occupation, Olya says.

Well, for example, let's take my profession... let's say a person working as a Customs official in an airport located north of the city... how much would I be able to get... what would my *official* salary be?

She tells him.

And what about my *unofficial* salary?

They don't have unofficial salaries.

They don't?

No. It's considered illegal.

Poor things...

Boris seems lost in reflection and sympathy:

Hey James... did you hear that! You don't even have the possibility to earn "on the side"?!

Strange, isn't it? I say.

Boris shakes his head:

And they say America's the land of opportunity...!

But before I can agree, a Mercedes goes screaming by us. It is loud and Boris is barely able to swerve his Zhiguli out of the way to avoid a collision. The three of us — Boris, Olya, and I — lunge heavily to one side.

Vadim and Olga are too busy to lunge — they are now completely consumed by their display of affection and are sprawled out over the backseat.

After the Mercedes has passed Boris cusses and then, in retaliation, cuts in front of a beat-up Zaparozhets:

Outta the way! he swears.

Olya smiles.

What was I saying... oh yeah... I was asking you about America...

You were? I ask.

Yes, he says, I was....

And so, one after another, Boris eagerly asks me questions about America — How much do cars cost? How much do small apartments cost? How much do policemen cost? — and just as eagerly, and in the exact same order... Olya answers them.

Finally, when we are near the Kremlin, Boris parks his car and he and Olya exit from the front doors. In the back Vadim and Olga are now so heatedly entwined — and I with them — that none of us exits. They have not noticed that the car is stopped, and although I have, I am still helplessly caught in the white lace. For some time Boris and Olya stand outside the car waiting for the three of us to exit.

Hey...! they finally say.

Hearing them, I try to raise my head, try to push away a heavy weight that is grinding into my shoulder. But it is too heavy. I am hopelessly swamped in white.

Listen up... all three of you...!

I can hear Boris's voice, but am helpless to do anything.

Hey..., Boris finally says exasperated, ...Are you guys coming or not?

There is a long pause that lasts for several seconds. Finally it is broken by Olga's emphatic answer, half-scream, half-whimper:

ΔΑ!!! she says.

(15)

Wrong: In America everything depends from something.

Right: In America everything depends on something.

(16)

Meanwhile, Landlady has returned home to continue preparations for tonight's dinner banquet. Olga's mother is helping her and together they are chopping vegetables. Boiling potatoes. Baking chickens. Carefully, they are slicing coldcuts to be folded and neatly overlapped. Proudly, Landlady

is making her special dish, a dish that is so special it is served only on days like this, a dish so delicious that no one can refuse....

Like a gypsy in a restaurant, Landlady is singing gaily as she chops and slices and folds and bakes and fries and rinses and...

(17)

When we have exited the car, the five of us, accompanied by a second carful of Olgas, proceed through Red Square toward the eternal flame. Olga, whose own jacket cannot fit over her padded shoulders, has been given a large *telogreika* to put over her wedding gown. As she walks, Olga does her best to lift up her dress slightly above the ground. But it is no use: by the time we reach Lenin's tomb, the bottom of her white dress is grayer than a shattered ashtray.

As we stroll through the cold square our wedding party laughs and jokes. Vadim and Olga are walking hand in gloved hand and Boris is ahead of them, shuffling backwards and filming them with his video camera:

Say something! he yells at the newlyweds.

Vadim smiles and waves at the camera.

Olga looks admiringly at her husband and gives him a kiss on his mustache.

Behind the newlyweds, at a respectful distance, I am walking with Olya who is telling me about her job.

Say something to the camera! Boris yells at us.

Like what?

Some sort of wish for the newlyweds.

Olya looks into the camera:

Well, she says, I'd just like to wish the newlyweds all the best.

That's perfect! he says and still shuffling backwards aims the camera at me:

Hey James!

Yeah?

How much do video cameras cost in America?

I don't know.

You don't?

No I don't.

And so Olya tells him.

Boris shakes his head at the price and runs ahead to film the whole procession in wide angle. When he has left, Olya returns to her conversation:

...Where was I...? Oh yeah... I was telling you about the company where I work. So anyway, above me is my boss, who is from Australia. He's a nice enough guy, but he swears all the time. He's having a *liaison* with my friend Tanya even though it's officially against company policy and both of them could be fired for it...

As Olya tells me about her job I notice that in almost every sentence she is using one of my eleven yellow words. And as she says it over and over again, I try my best to ignore it.

Without success.

...I mean Tanya always says that the real reason is that foreigners, I mean even Australians, are way more respectful of women than Russian guys. I told her that's not necessarily true... I mean for example Russian guys will bring you flowers and help you put your coat on, but the guys from America don't. I mean it's like they've never even seen it done before! Can you imagine... I mean...

(18)

...and splits and dices and sets the table. Carefully she is arranging plates and silverware and chairs around the long table in the living room. Wiping the bottles of wine. Wiping the bottles of champagne. Wiping the bottles of vodka. Placing each of them at arm-length intervals on the table. Excitedly, she is waiting for the wedding party to return.... Happily, she is peeling and grating, re-tasting and re-testing, salting and sugaring, dipping and sprinkling...

(19)

In theory *значит* means *it means*, which means it means both *it means* as well as *значит*. But that is in theory. In practice *значит* not only means *it means*, but also *doesn't mean it means*. In fact, *значит* doesn't mean *it means* as much as it doesn't mean *it means*; and this means that although it means *it means*, *значит* doesn't really mean anything at all. In fact it means nothing.

Although it's as frequent as *finally*, it is, at the same time, as meaningless as *I mean*.

Значит...

*

(20)

We move on.

Surprisingly, ours is the only wedding party in Red Square. But because Olya and I are now walking apart from our married couple, we are hounded by vendors peddling photos, fur hats, and excursions around the city.

No thanks! we say.

Not expensive! they insist.

No thanks! we say again and hurry to catch up to the rest of the wedding party.

Can you imagine going on an excursion of the city... *now*? I laugh.

Have you ever seen the city on an excursion? Olya asks me, It's really quite beautiful.

Actually, you know it's funny... I haven't. Although I did have to give an excursion once.

You gave an excursion?

That's right.

You were a guide?

That's right. A very good friend of mine came to visit me and I showed him around the city for a while.

Your very good friend?

Well, actually now that I think of it, he was more of a good friend.

And you showed him around?

That's right... he was a friend of mine and I promised to show him my Russia and so he came to visit me...

(21)

"And this..." I said pointing with all my arm, "is St. Basil's Cathedral. Do you recognize it? No? Well, I'm sure you've heard about it... No? Well, anyway, it's famous. And over here we have Red Square... that's right the world-renowned Red Square... what... no, it's always been that small... I mean it's never been any bigger... well, it's just that on television it looks bigger because there're usually tanks going through it or something. You know I have to tell you that this is one of my favorite places in Moscow... I love Red Square because here you can feel the culture of Russia, the history, the... what... I'm not sure, I think it's over there by the hill... no, no... no problem... I'll wait..."

When my friend came back I continued my excursion:

“And around the corner here...” I said proudly, “...we have the Eternal Flame in memorial to all the cities that suffered during World War II. Poignant, isn't it? What... I don't know, I don't think so... I mean I guess it's possible if it rained real hard...”

A week later I was happy to escort my acquaintance to the airport.

(22)

After paying our respects to the Eternal Flame, we get back in the car and set out for Vadim's apartment where the celebratory dinner is waiting.

(23)

But Boris has forgotten not to drink. And along the way a traffic policeman standing to the side of the road randomly waves a nightstick at him to pull over. Boris starts to open the door to exit, but Vadim stops him:

Don't get out, he says.

What?

Don't get out.

Why?

Just trust me — stay in the car.

Boris settles into his seat:

Shit shit shit shit shit! he mutters as he sits in the car waiting for the policeman to approach. When he does, the officer bends down to take a look into the car, introduces himself with a limp salute and asks for Boris's documents.

Boris hands them to the officer. For several minutes the officer examines the documents then walks back to his car. When he has left Boris looks back at Vadim:

How much for speeding? he asks.

At least a hundred thousand...

What about alcohol?

You're looking at between two hundred and two fifty... it depends.

On what? I ask.

On when his wife's birthday is.

Boris takes out his wallet and prepares the money just in case, hiding it under his thigh. After a few moments the police officer returns and again looks into the car:

A wedding? he says.

That's right, officer! Boris answers, We were on our way to the marriage hall and didn't want to be late.

U-hmm...

Did we do anything wrong?

I guess not. But *next time* be more careful.

What?

You didn't do anything wrong... but next time be more careful...

Sir?

...My wife just had her birthday, but who knows about the next guy who pulls you over...!

And the officer hands Boris his documents, salutes again, and without taking any money, goes back to the side of the road.

(24)

...and serving and greeting and seating...

(25)

When we finally arrive Landlady is washing and drying:

What took you so long? she asks Vadim as he comes into the apartment, Have you forgotten that the most important part is still to come?

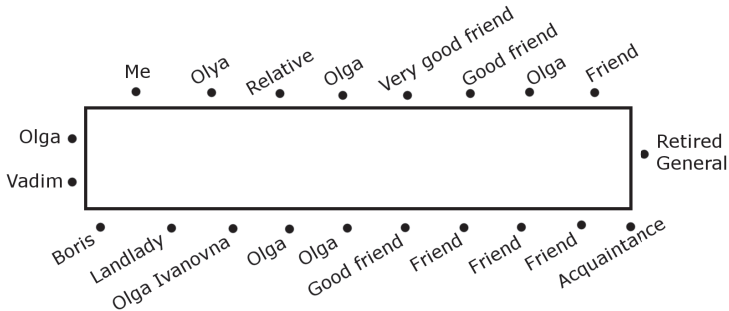
Behind him the rest of us are waiting to take off our shoes and jackets. Some friends and relatives have already been seated at the table.

Traffic! Vadim says and makes his way to the table where he accepts everyone's congratulations with a proud smile. After him, the rest of us take off our jackets and move into the small living room with the long table.

Expertly, Landlady shows us where to sit. It is not an easy task given the twenty-odd guests, but she does it masterfully:

Olga! she says, You sit over here next to Olga. And you Olga across from Olga over there. Now as for Olga... let's have you sit at the fourth seat from the front between Olga Ivanovna and...!

After about ten minutes, we are seated as follows:



The arrangement is amazingly effective: Vadim is the man of the hour and so he is sitting at the head of the table to the right of Olga, who is now his wife. Boris — who will be expected to be the life of the party — is within an extended arms reach away from him. Landlady has positioned herself nearest the kitchen — this way she can more easily serve the guests — next to her longtime friend Olga Ivanovna.

Because I am from *there* I am also seated near the front of the table between Olga — who is now married — and Olya who is just as unmarried as I am.

But will I be able to tell them apart during this dinner? Olga, the bride, on my right; Olya, the non-bride, on my left... Olga Mikhailovna — Landlady's real name — across from me, and Olga Ivanovna, her friend, next to her... Sure it's easy now, but what about when I've had too much to drink?

Finally, everybody is seated. The food is ready. The drink is ready. The guests are seated and ready to begin the dinner celebration. Shyly they are sitting with their hands below the table waiting for someone to take the first piece of *seledka*.

(26)

As if understanding this, Boris grabs his glass of champagne and stands up: I'd like to make the first toast! he says in his deep commanding voice. Dutifully, the room becomes quiet.

...I'd like to make the first toast to our married couple!

Everybody nods.

...To Olga and Vadim!

Everybody nods again.

...You know I've known the groom here for a long time — since before he started drinking, before he started smoking — and knowing him as I have, I've seen him go through a lot of different women...

Here Boris stops:

...Hey Vadim... remember the one with the purple hair?!

Vadim laughs embarrassedly.

...Anyway, I've seen Vadim here with many different women and so I can tell you honestly that of all the women he's been with, Olga is by far the best!

The wedding guests murmur their agreement.

...And I'll tell you why: It's no secret to anyone that our bride is beautiful... that goes without saying. But what you may not notice from a distance — it comes when you know her more closely — is how intelligent she is. How intelligent and how polite...

The wedding guests smile their agreement.

...So I'd like to drink to her beauty, her intelligence, her politeness. Vadim, I know you're smart enough to realize what you have in Olga. May the two of you have the best of everything... May your family be joyous and happy... May you live and love as long as you see fit... May you have as many friends as you need... As many children as you can manage... And as much money as you choose to deserve. And most importantly: May everything in your life happen when it should... no sooner, no later!

Boris raises his glass:

To Vadim and Olga! he says.

For the next few seconds the sound of toasting fills the room as the guests touch their glasses to as many other glasses as they can reach. Happily, they swallow their champagne.

Boris also swallows his champagne happily.

But then, suddenly, Boris makes a distorted face as if he has consumed something toxic. Looking suspiciously at his emptied glass he yells out:

It's bitter!

Yeah! somebody else yells, Bitter!

Soon everybody is chanting in unison: Bit-ter! Bit-ter! Bit-ter!

Taking his cue, Vadim grabs Olga and kisses her long and passionately: One...! the crowd chants, Two.....! Three

Vadim and Olga remain embraced, kissing heatedly.

...Four.....! Five.....! Six.....!

I look at my watch and shake my head:

Here we go again! I think.

...Twenty-two.....! Twenty-three.....!

(27)

Seventy... Seventy-one... Seventy-two...

By now everyone is a bit weary of this tradition, but continues to count anyway.

Finally, at one hundred twenty-two the newlyweds come up for air, and each and every guest — even those who have lost count — suddenly shouts and cheers approval.

Olga sits down at the head of the table, and Vadim, who has remained standing, holds up his hand until the room is quiet:

You know, he says, I'd like to thank everyone for coming... Everyone! And since we have a lot of guests tonight and not everyone is acquainted with each other, I'd like to introduce you all...

And here Vadim begins to introduce the guests one by one. In turn they either stand or wave their hands to acknowledge the introduction. When it is my turn he presents me as follows:

...And this is James... he likes vodka.

The other guests applaud.

When everyone has been introduced, Vadim sits down. But then, as if remembering something, he stands back up:

Oh I almost forgot! There's something that I've been saving for a long long time... for a special occasion... And now, I would say, the occasion has arrived...!

Vadim leaves the room to the surprised murmurs of his guests:

What could it be? says one.

I don't know, says another, but it must be important if he stood back up like that!

And sure enough, when he returns Vadim is holding something behind his back out of view of his guests:

I've been waiting so long for the chance to enjoy this..., he says.

And slowly and dramatically he pulls his arm from behind his back:

There it is! he says and with a loud clink sets a dusty bottle of French cognac on the table.

(28)

And with that the dinner banquet begins.

*

(29)

At first the conversation is sluggish and self-conscious, like a foreigner offering a bribe. But in no time at all the guests relax, words come faster and freer, and the temperature in the small room begins to rise.

For me this party will consist of those people within a word's distance away, in other words the ones that I can talk to, in other words, the following six people:

Vadim, the groom;
Olga, his wife;
Boris, the life of the party;
Olya, my possible downfall;
Landlady, the hostess;
Olga Ivanovna, just in case.

So these are the people that will be my companions this night? So these are the six people that will help me meet this most remarkable of days? Here we all are! After so many years, after so much time, after so many pages we have finally been brought together unto one place...!

Hey James...! Vadim's voice interrupts my thoughts. Strangely, he has put his forefinger to his mouth. He looks around to see if anyone is watching and then leans over across Olga and whispers in my ear. I strain to understand.

Do you see that elderly woman over there? he asks me.
Which one?

The one sitting across and to the left of you... with the veins in her neck... do you see her?

Landlady's friend... Olga Ivanovna?

Shhhh!!!! She's not deaf, you know!

Who's not deaf?

Olga Ivanovna.

I didn't say she was deaf...!

I didn't say you said she was deaf.

Vadim, I say, What was your question?

Do you see that woman over there with the veins in her neck... the veins like purple worms?

Of course I see her.

Well, I need to tell you something about her.

All right.

Are you listening?

Yes.

Are you listening real good?

Geez Vadim what are you getting at?

You see she's an old friend of the family...

Okay...?

She's an expert in Russian literature...

That's fine.

...She reads voraciously... sitting, standing, sleeping... you can ask her about any book ever written and she'll tell you everything you could ever want to know about it. If not *more!*

All right...

You can talk to her if you like, but there's one word that you must never say in her presence.

Why?

It doesn't matter. Just promise me you won't mention the word.

Sure. What's the word?

Do you promise me you won't mention it?

I said I promise. What is it?

Here Vadim leans even closer to my ear and his voice becomes even softer.

When I hear the word I laugh:

That's it? I say, *That's* the word?

Don't you dare say it!

But why?

Look we all have our idiosyncracies.

I know but...

Shhhh!!!! Just don't say the word and we won't have any problems, okay? If it were *your* wedding I wouldn't say anything to *your* guests.

(30)

Of the people sitting around me — that is to say, the six people that I can have a conversation with — the only one that I have not met before is Landlady's friend, Olga Ivanovna, the woman Vadim has just warned me about. *How bad could she be, really? How important could a single word be to her? Surely he was exaggerating?*

Careful not to say the forbidden word, I decide to introduce myself:

My name is James, I explain, I'm a friend of Vadim's... and of Olga's.

James, huh? I've heard a lot about you.

You have?

Olga Mikhailovna says you're renting the apartment upstairs for one twentieth its real value... that you have a lot of free time during your afternoons...

That's right.

She says you discard bread...

Well, yes, it's happened. But nowadays I try to be more conscientious. I'm sure.

Olga Ivanovna pauses and then continues:

Where are you from again?

America.

North or South?

North.

And you came *here*? From *there*? Weren't getting enough excitement in your *own* country?

Well...

Thought you'd have a little fun at our expense?

Well I...

I take it you're planning to write a book?

What?

You're probably going to write about your life here — the usual bit, I'm sure: poor rich foreigner comes to Russia with dreams of finding a Russian wife, but instead leaves with one.

Actually, I never...

Of course you're going to write a book like that! All foreigners want to tell the world about their *experiences*, as if they have something pertinent to say!

But...

Olga Ivanovna! Vadim rescues me, Olga Ivanovna how are you today?

Hearing Vadim's voice, Olga Ivanovna turns to him without enthusiasm:

I feel like hell, she says.

That's fine, Olga Ivanovna. Just fine.

But what was she talking about? Books? Wives? Experiences? Why was she so certain that I cared enough to become a writer? That I was that indulgent? How did she know to insult me like that?

Vadim stops, as if trying to think of something to say:

So how are Seriozha and Tanyusha? he says and then to me: Those are Olga Ivanovna's two children, James.

Same as always, she answers, Curious and devoted.

Why didn't you bring them? We were hoping they'd come with you tonight.

They weren't interested.

Why not?

The age. When you were sixteen and twenty-one did *you* want to spend time with your mother?

Sixteen and twenty-one! Wow, I haven't seen them since they were... well since Seriozha's fourteenth birthday party.

That's right. You spilled juice all over my table cloth.

I ...uh... well yeah I did...

After you left I spent two days getting the red out.

Vadim blushes. Watching the conversation between Vadim and Olga Ivanovna, I am surprised to see Vadim flustered by Olga Ivanovna's brisk tone.

It was an accident... I was just reaching out for a piece of cake...

The largest one, probably. You always take the largest piece of cake.

Just then Landlady comes into the room from the kitchen and whispers something into Olga Ivanovna's ear and they exit together.

When she has gone Vadim smiles and looks at me:

What did I tell you? he says.

I see what you mean!

You know she really is a nice lady. Did I mention she has a thorough education in Russian literature? I did? Well, she does. In fact if it hadn't been for all the changes here, she probably would have become a lecturer or a critic... for the longest time she had dreams of becoming a literature professor... but her dreams were shattered...

She doesn't work as a professor of Russian literature?

No, unfortunately not.

Why? What does she do?

It's a sad story... you see, Fate has been unkind to her and so she's been forced to earn a living in an unrelated field... for the last ten years she's been working as...

...As a cashier selling potatoes?!

Worse... as a school teacher. She teaches Russian poetry to eleven-year-olds.

Vadim shakes his head. I nod sympathetically:

Poor thing, I say.

*

(31)

Gradually, the conversation becomes warmer. Olga, who is sitting to my left, and Olya, who is sitting to my right are talking to each other about love and fidelity, and as they speak their words go right through me. Vadim is listening to them and nodding naively. Boris who is sitting across from me, is still fascinated by my citizenship, and as I fill my plate with appetizers — potato salad, vinaigrette, coldcuts — he is once again asking me questions about America:

...What about wine? he says, How much does a good white wine cost in America?

I'm not sure.

...What about red wine? How much does that cost?

I don't know.

Well then what about vodka... you have to know how much vodka costs!

I'm not sure... let me ask Olya...

When Boris hears the price he smiles and shakes his head:

That much? he asks.

That much, Olya answers and goes back to her conversation.

Boris shakes his head again and then turns to me:

You know, he says, it's funny... Just a short while back it used to be a real occasion to meet a foreigner. A few years ago it was something special.

And now?

Well now things have changed. Nowadays in Moscow there are more foreigners than cockroaches.

I laugh.

No offense or anything... I mean I have nothing against cockroaches... In fact we have a lot of them where I work. They're disgusting when they gather to form crowds, but in small numbers they can be quite tolerable.

You mean *cockroaches*, of course?

Well now that you mention it, I suppose the same can be said for cockroaches...

Boris stops to consider the coincidence.

Have you known many foreigners? I ask him.

Are you kidding me? I've known them by the wagonful! In fact I even had an American friend from New York. He was a great guy... spoke Russian perfectly. Alex was his name. Alex Podkolesin.

Does he live in Moscow?

Not anymore. He was killed.

Oh?

An ambulance ran him over while he was trying to cross the street.
Crushed his chest like a cardboard box.

I gasp.

...That's right and here's the real kicker: the son-of-a-bitch didn't even stop to pick him up!

I gasp again:

You know, I say, It's strange — I also had a friend who was run over by an ambulance.

A friend?

Well yeah, a friend.

While crossing the street?

That's right.

What about his chest?

Crushed it like a cardboard box.

Boris becomes somber. But then he shakes his head:

Hey enough talk about cardboard... this is a wedding, not a funeral!

I nod.

Boris pulls some appetizers onto his plate and looks at me:

So, what's it like being from *there*? he asks.

Sorry?

What's it like being an American?

I don't know... I've never thought of it... myself... in those terms.

Never thought of it?

That's right.

Let me get this straight... You were born in America, right?

Right.

You lived there your entire life, right?

Right.

And you've never thought about what it means to be American?

Well, actually it's not that important to me. And besides, I've only been an American for six and a half years.

What are you talking about? How can it not be important! It's your culture... your traditions... your language.

I know but...

Do you smile in public?

Yes...

Do you respect peanut butter?

Well, yes...

And you speak English without thinking, don't you?

I do...

There you go!

Where?

That's what it means to be American!

Boris stops to shove a spoonful of food into his mouth. As he chews, he seems to be thinking about something that is at once pleasant and unpleasant. Finally, he speaks up:

Yeah I studied English in school, he says, I used to know it pretty good, but now I've forgotten it all. No practice.

That's too bad.

You can say that again, all that effort... But you know how it goes... other things come up that are more important and the next thing you know it five years have gone by, then six...

Then six and a half...

...Yeah, and you look up one day to see that all this time has passed and what do you have to show for it? Nothing. As if you never had anything in the first place.

I know what you mean.

Hey can I ask you to do something...?

Why not.

You speak English, right?

I try.

I'm just wondering... Can you say something for me?

In English?

Yeah, just so I can hear how it sounds from the lips of a native speaker.

Like what?

It doesn't matter... anything.

I don't know...

Just the first thing that comes into your head.

Well, I'll do my best....

Boris looks at me excitedly, but I remain silent:

Go ahead! he says, Say something!

I don't know what to say. I can't think of anything.

Just say the first thing that comes into your head.

That's no good... it should be something more significant.

Okay then say the first significant thing that comes into your head.

That'll take too long. I need you to give me some sort of topic...

A topic?

Yeah a theme of some kind...

Well okay... what about... what about reciting a piece of poetry... you know a piece of English verse?

I don't know any poetry in English.

You don't read poetry?

Not in English I don't.

Oh... that's too bad. Well then what about something like...?

Boris stops to think:

...What about some words of wisdom... a piece of advice, an English saying, you know... something that will help us better understand the world we live in?

Huh?

Give us some words that will amaze us with their depth and profundity... something that will provide a unique insight into the intricate labyrinth that is the human soul!

I'd rather not.

What?

I mean, I can't.

Why not?

Because to offer someone words of wisdom you yourself have to be wise... to provide insights you have to be insightful... and as far as helping others to understand the world... well, in order to help *others* understand... you have to understand something yourself.

I don't understand.

And I don't either... that's the point. How can I help others find meaning when I myself don't even know where my sixth calculator went?!

I see.

You do?

Yes, I think I do.

You have to keep in mind that I'm not an omniscient narrator, and therefore it would be silly to expect any sort of meaning out of me...!

So I guess insights into the human soul...they're beyond you, as well?

I'm afraid so.

That's strange. You don't know any poetry in your own language. You don't have anything to tell the world. Well then what about something like... let me think... for example, do you have a favorite phrase?

What?

Most foreigners in Moscow have a favorite phrase that they like to repeat over and over. You probably have one, too?

Well actually now that you mention it... I have *two* of them...

There you go!

Boris stands up at the head of the table:

Hey everybody! he announces, James is going to say something in English!

At this, the entire table becomes attentive:

That's right! he says, It's Tuesday and so for those of us who've sort of studied English he's going to say his two favorite phrases...!

The other guests turn to look at me in anticipation and so I clear my throat.

Well, go ahead! Boris says.

Nervously, I clear my throat again and then, switching to English, I say the first of my two favorite phrases:

"God I love this country," I say, "but damn I hate it, too!"

Boris looks at me blankly:

One more time! he says, Say it one more time!

And so I repeat the phrase:

"God I love this country... but damn I hate it, too!"

Everybody looks at me blankly. Both Vadim and Boris have a confused expression on their faces. Olga and Olya are smiling dumbly. After a respectful silence, it is Boris who finally breaks it:

What did he say? he asks.

I don't know! Vadim answers, I can't understand him when he speaks fast like that... When he speaks slow I have a chance... but when he speaks fast I can't make out a single word!

Yeah, says Olya, me either... you know, that's how all Americans talk... it's like they have peanut butter in their mouths or something.

Let's hear the other phrase! Boris says, That one was too hard... so let's hear the second one. Maybe we'll have more luck with it.

Again everybody becomes quiet, as if awaiting an elusive riddle. And in the silence I pronounce my other favorite phrase, this time so slowly and so distinctly that I myself understand it's full meaning for the first time:

"Damn I hate this country..." I say, "...but God I love it, too!"

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But again nobody can understand me.

Wow! says Vadim, That's depressing... you study English for years and years and then when you need it... POOF! you can't understand a damn thing!

Yeah, says Olya, It makes me wish that I'd studied harder...

It makes me wish I'd studied *English*, Olga says.

You didn't?

I studied French, remember? And what did it get me? Nothing! No one needs it.

What do you mean, no one needs it? Of course I agree with you that it has no practical value... but French is a beautiful language, nevertheless. Just think of all the expressive words it's conceded to other languages: *nostalgia, liaison, cognac*...

Yeah, Olga says, maybe you're right...

Maybe, says Vadim, But that's nothing compared to all the words that have come into Russian from his language, I mean from English... words like *business* and *drink* and *racket*...

...Not to mention *okay*..., Olya adds.

...And *boyfriend*..., Olga reminds.

...And don't forget *Marlboros*! Boris brags.

I nod.

Hey James..., Boris says, What about in English? Do you have any words adapted from Russian? Are there any of our words that Americans use without thinking?

Well we have a few... like *vodka*... and *kiosk*... and...

I rack my brain to think of another one. *Vodka*... *kiosk*... Finally it comes to me, and before I can stop it the word slides off my tongue:

...And *perestroika*...

Hearing the word, the other guests let out a collective groan. Vadim looks at me with a pained expression.

What was that? says Olga Ivanovna who until now has been merely watching our discussion with vague interest.

Nothing! I lie.

What did you say?

I...uh... I didn't say anything.

Yes you did. You said something about *perestroika*!

No I didn't! No I didn't... I said something else entirely...!

But it is too late: she is already speaking...

I have said the forbidden word.

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And so for the next forty minutes Olga Ivanovna told the wedding guests the truth about *perestroika*.

And for each of these forty minutes the rest of us sat helpless, like Aeroflot passengers, unable to change the subject.

On and on she went. And just when it seemed that she had exhausted her knowledge of the subject... she would begin again. About the perils of western democracy. About Jewish anti-Semitism. About black American spies infiltrating the Moscow metro...

“They’re so insidious they disguise themselves as white people...!”

On and on and on and on... until finally we felt — each of us felt — that we would be sick if we heard the word *on* one more time.

And still she continued. Again and again. And again and again she continued... stopping only to continue once again.

On and on and *on*...

Finally when I’d saved up enough courage I interrupted her:

But Olga Ivanovna! I said, Look at me... *I’m* American... and *I’m* not black!

That’s what *you* say, she says, But can we really be sure?

What!

Can we really be so sure that you’re not black?

Well yeah, we can... I mean just look at me... my skin isn’t black so... well, that means I’m not black!

Hah! she says and then: Hah!

What do you mean?

That doesn’t prove anything!

What?

Just because your skin’s not black... that doesn’t mean that you yourself aren’t black!

It doesn’t?

No, it doesn’t!

And so for the next thirty-nine minutes I tried to convince Olga Ivanovna that I wasn’t now — nor had I ever been — black. But each time without success. Look at my hands! I would say, Look at my ears! But no matter which body part I offered as proof, Olga Ivanovna remained unconvinced.

Everything you’ve just said, she explained, each of your body parts just demonstrates that you’ve been brainwashed by *them*!

What?

That’s just part of *their* plan... that’s exactly what *they* want us to think.

And before I could ask who *they* were, she had already begun to explain:

They, she said, were old democrats, new communists, leftists, rightists,

bankers, prostitutes, journalists, intellectuals, beaurocrats, immigrants, emigrants, trolleybus drivers, Mafia...

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Eventually, when our patience has run out, we leave Olga Ivanovna to her monologue and return to a discussion of our own:

Speaking of Mafia..., Boris says, Did you hear they killed another banker yesterday?

Another one? Vadim asks.

Yeah. It's the third one this month. Shot him when he was entering the stairwell of his apartment building. How do you like that?

What for? I ask.

What do you mean *what for*? In this country you don't need a *what for*! There had to be a reason... I mean you don't just kill someone for nothing...

He owed the wrong people money.

And so they killed him?

And so they killed him.

How much money was it?

Boris tells me.

And they killed him for that amount?

That's right.

But it's so little... I mean that's less than the amount Vadim owes...

Suddenly, I realize where this conversation is leading. But before I can change the subject, Boris has already unchanged it:

That's right. Nowadays you can make a few calls and order a hit on somebody. It's very simple... and not that expensive...

So that's how much a human life is worth?

That's right.

Boris stops to reflect on what has been said. His voice becomes serious:

Hey James, he says, How much does human life cost in America?

But before I can even not answer him Olya has interrupted our conversation:

Hey look! she says, James is sitting between me and Olga!

What? I say.

That's right! says Olga, I didn't even notice.

Notice what?

Today's your lucky day James.

Why?

You're sitting right in the middle of the two of us.

So?

You see, in Russia we have a belief that if you're seated between two people with the same name, then you can make a wish and it'll come true. And look, you're sitting between Olya and me!

Hey James, Boris says, I bet you don't have these kinds of beliefs in America!

No, I say, In America we have a lot of names for women.

So make a wish! Olya says.

A wish? A wish! What could I possibly wish for? What am I lacking? What do I need?

It's funny, I say, but there's honestly nothing that I can think to wish for.

There has to be something? You don't mean to tell us that you're absolutely happy, do you?

Well, no but...

Then make a wish!

But...!

Go on... make it while you still can!

Olga is waiting to the right of me. Olya is waiting to the left. Boris and Vadim are also looking at me:

A wish? I say, All right, I guess I can make a wish...

But what should I wish for? What do I want at this point in my life? What do I need more than anything? Is there anything in this world left for me to want...?

And then it comes to me.

That's it! That's what I want more than anything! That's what I need...

Closing my eyes, I make my wish.

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Wrong: From the one side, this day seems like any other...

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When I open my eyes, Olya is looking at me with a big smile:

Well...? she says.

Well what? I answer.

Well, what did you wish for?

I can't tell you.

Why not?

Otherwise it won't come true. Everybody knows that.

Well well, Vadim says, Look who's turned superstitious all of a sudden! For the last two years you've been telling me about how a person can determine his own life... and now here you are making wishes on silly superstitions!

Well of course I know my wish won't come true, but...

Then why did you make it?

For the same reason you believe in God, Vadim ...just in case.

Yeah but you're the one with the I-can-do-anything mentality... you're the one who believes in self-determinism as opposed to non-self-determinism.

What does he believe in? Boris asks.

Oh James here has this simplistic theory that a person can do anything he wants... that each person is the master of his own destiny...

Vadim let's not get into that again...!

Not get into what? Boris asks.

You see, Vadim explains, James here has a theory that a person can control his future — in other words he is in direct control of everything. In his opinion everything is determined by individual choice... and therefore fate doesn't exist.

That's right, I say, And therefore fate doesn't exist.

But it *does* exist! Vadim says.

No it doesn't, I argue.

It does too.

Does not.

Does too....

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...No it doesn't Vadim.

Yes James it does. And tonight I'm finally going to prove it to you.

Oh yeah? How? How can you prove that fate exists?

Well let's take something that everybody accepts... something that is a given...

For example?

Well, for example there are things that everybody knows... no one will argue that ten comes after nine... that the Russian alphabet begins with *A* and doesn't end until it reaches *Я*... that death is impossible without life...

First of all, I say, Ten doesn't *always* come after nine... secondly, not everyone knows that *A* leads to *Я*.

Vadim stops to think:

But you have to agree, he says, that death is impossible without life...?

Not necessarily! *In most cases* it is, but not in all of them...

Okay then what about this: if I throw something in the air... what will happen? It will fall back to the ground, right? It's gravity. Logic and science have proven that it will fall. You can't choose for it not to fall!

Maybe it will, and maybe it won't. Science can prove gravity a million times, but it can't actually predict that it will always hold true.

What?

You can't be certain that this time it won't stay suspended just because every other time it has fallen.

Yes you can.

No you can't.

Yes you can.

No you can't

Yes you can....

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No Vadim, you can't.

Landlady, who has come into the room from the kitchen, places a bowl of salad next to us:

Are you two arguing about gravity again?

But Vadim doesn't pay attention to her:

So let me get this straight... he says, You're telling me that if I throw this spoon in the air you actually believe that it won't come crashing down?

Vadim has grabbed a heavy soup spoon from the side of his plate....

That's not what I'm saying. I'm only saying that it's possible that it *might* not fall down. There's a chance that it could stay in the air.

Are you sure?

Absolutely... I mean I'm absolutely sure that it's *possible* it might not fall down.

Are you positive?

Well, in a way, yes.

Then let's make a bet on it!

A bet?

Yeah! If you're so sure that it won't fall...

Well... I...

I say that if I throw this spoon into the air it will fall back to the floor.

Of course it's possible but... you know there're times when things don't fall... there exist certain conditions under which things don't fall the way they're supposed to... the way we're used to them falling.

Oh yeah? Like when?

For example, you could throw that same spoon on the moon and it wouldn't drop.

Maybe so. But this isn't the moon. This is Russia. And in Russia the spoon falls.

Vadim is holding the spoon and thumping it heavily against the palm of his hand:

So what about a bet? he says.

A bet?

Yeah. We should bet on whether the spoon will stay up in the air or whether it will fall down.

I don't want to bet... I'm not the betting type.

Well I'm no gambler, either...

But here Vadim is interrupted by a cackle of voices:

You? says Boris, You'll bet on the weather!

Yeah, says Olya, There's not a casino in Moscow that hasn't taken your money!

All right all right..., says Vadim, That's not the point... the point is that I say the spoon will fall while James here maintains that it will stay in the air...

You're all missing the point..., I try to explain but am interrupted by Boris:

Hey! he says, I know what the bet should be!

What? says Vadim.

The bet should be as follows: if Vadim wins the bet, in other words if the spoon doesn't stay in the air, then James should have to do a dance of some sort... do you like to dance James?

I hate dancing... I don't know how...

Perfect! So the bet should be as follows: if James loses, in other words, if the spoon doesn't stay in the air, in other words it actually falls, then he has to do a dance in front of everybody... yeah... I like that...!

Here? Olga objects.

Of course. Why not?

Because there's not enough floor space with all the guests in the room.

We can just clear off a place on the table.
But what should we do for music? Vadim asks.
Do you have a guitar?

Sure.

Well there you go... we'll just pick a song and I'll play it on the guitar and James will dance to it right there on the table!

Wait a minute! Vadim says, Who'll choose the song?

You of course... any song you want.

Any song I want?

Yeah Vadim... your favorite song.

His favorite song?

Oooohhh no you don't! I say, If you think I'm going to get up in front of everybody and dance to Vadim singing "Yesterday" then I'll just remind you that you have another think coming...!

Let's not forget one thing..., says Olya who until now has been watching our discussion silently.

What's that?

You're forgetting that Vadim may just as well lose the bet... you haven't even mentioned what he should do if he throws the spoon up and it doesn't fall!

Yeah...! I say.

I mean you guys are acting as if it's a foregone conclusion that the spoon will fall... but that's not an equal bet, now is it! Here's what I propose for the case if the spoon stays in the air, I mean, if the spoon doesn't fall... I mean, if Vadim loses...

What what? I say eagerly.

...If Vadim loses the bet, in other words, if the spoon stays in the air, then Vadim you will have to give up drinking for the remainder of this party... in other words, while the rest of us are drinking and celebrating you won't be allowed to consume anything with alcohol in it!

No wine?

No.

No champagne?

None.

What about vodka?!

Out of the question.

You mean to tell me that if I lose, in other words, if I throw this spoon up and it stays hanging in the air, then I'll have to abstain from all alcohol during my own wedding party?

That's right! Olya says and winks at me.

Vadim stops. It is clear that he didn't expect this turn of events. Gravely, he weighs the options, first to himself and then aloud:

Okay, he says, On the one hand I know that the spoon will fall and so there's no way that I can lose the bet... it's a sure thing. But, *on the other hand*, if I *do* lose the bet... if I lose the bet then I'll have to spend my entire wedding night sober...!

Vadim looks to Boris for help, but he just shrugs his shoulders:

It's your wedding... your call, he says.

Come on come on! Olya pressures him, Are you in or not?

Vadim holds the heavy spoon up to the light, as if examining it for clues. Finally, he looks at Olya:

No, he says.

What?

It's too risky. I mean of course I know the spoon will fall... but if it doesn't it'll ruin my entire wedding...

Olya is smiling.

...And I can't chance it. The bet's off.

I sigh fully.

Olya beams.

Olga, who has been watching this whole scene, laughs at her husband and kisses him lightly on the large mole on his cheek.

Hey, says Boris trying to save the situation, There's no reason why we can't throw the spoon up anyway... you know without a bet. We can throw it up anyway just to see who would have lost the bet... in other words whether James would have had to dance, or whether Vadim would have had to stay sober.

Vadim is still holding the heavy spoon between his fingers and flicking it in his hand:

So you think this spoon won't fall? he says to me.

Honestly Vadim I don't know.

You don't?

No, I say, I don't.

Well I do...

And with that Vadim tosses the spoon into the air.

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Like a bald eagle, the spoon sails higher and higher over the table,

end over end, sailing toward the ceiling until it can go no higher. Like a miracle it stays suspended in the air, hanging over the table of wedding guests, who are staring at it as if at an apparition.

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And then it falls. Straight down onto the table landing with a crash against my plate and catapulting my knife, which has been resting unsuspectingly on the side of my plate, over my shoulder onto the ground.

I am amazed.

Landlady is less amazed and simply holds out her hand for me to give her the dirty knife. For an instant she looks at Vadim reproachfully... but then, as if remembering that this is his day, she stops.

Realizing that his hypothesis has come true, Vadim looks at me sadly: See, he says, In Russia *everything* falls.

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After Landlady has taken the fallen knife to the kitchen, the conversation recedes, and I can begin to enjoy the food on my plate. The pork is good, the fish is good, the salads are green and good....

You know James, Vadim finally says, When you write your book about Russia...

What?

...When you do get around to writing your book about your experiences here...

What's he talking about? What book? Why does everyone think that I'm just itching to write a book about Russia?! Why are they so sure that I haven't got anything better to do...?!

When that finally happens, have you thought about how your book is going to portray all of us?

Vadim... I have absolutely no intention of writing anything...

Have you given any thought to how you're going to show Russians?

Absolutely not...

Well you should start thinking about it right now. Before it's too late! You see, it seems to me that if you're not careful you may give people the wrong impression.

Of Russians?

That's right. You should be very conscientious... otherwise people may

not understand you correctly. I mean, I know you... I know that you have nothing interesting to say, so I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But strangers, people who haven't met you, won't be so forgiving. Especially Russians... they'll think you're just another ignorant foreigner. Or even worse: that you actually do know something!

Vadim I don't want...

Don't take this the wrong way!

Of course not.

I'm just trying to help you...

Of course.

It's just that people trust words they can see and touch more than those that they can't. Like it or not, people believe what they read.

Well that's *their* problem...!

And therefore you should avoid the clichés about Russia... you know the obligatory observations that all we do is drink... that we never smile... that we only have five names for our women... I mean, you should avoid the cheap and convenient themes like those.

Well I...

I mean there are some themes that are so obvious, so common, that it's best to leave them alone. Just think — you'd never think about writing something as hackneyed as... as... well, you'd never write about something as cliché as a love triangle, now would you? Of course not... because it's already been done a thousand times!

Well actually...

And besides... it's not true... you know, about us drinking, not smiling, and having only five names for women! It's not true at all! We smile *sometimes*!

I never said you didn't...

You've *implied* it.

No I haven't!

Okay then you've *insinuated* it.

If I did it's because I didn't mean to. Honestly! In fact, I find that Russians smile quite often. It's just that for some reason it tends to be in vain. Truthfully, I'd say that Russians don't smile any less than Americans... that we smile about the same!

Well I wouldn't go *that* far...

It's true! And as far as Russia only having five names for women... well...

Hey! says Olya, What's this about us having only five names?

Yeah! says Olga, We have a lot of names...

That's right, Vadim says, don't forget that we have Katya, Svetlana, and Marina!

I know but...

And Anya!

Yeah but...

And Nadya and Alla!

But Vadim... I'm not interested in... I mean you're missing the point. Even if I were to write something... I wouldn't be interested in making conclusions about Russians. Or Russia. It may look that way, but that's the last thing on my mind. For me the most important thing is...

Wait a minute! Are you trying to tell me that everything you've been telling us all this time... that everything you've been leading us to believe is nonsense? That all of it is... that it's all... *arbitrary*?

Well... yeah. And frivolous. You see, Vadim, for me the most important thing isn't the meaning. For me the most important thing is...

Hold on! Are you saying that all this time you've been misleading us? I'm hardly the first...

You've been deceiving us?

Sort of. You see, for me the most important thing is...

I expect to be interrupted, but am not; gratefully, I finish my sentence: ...At this point in my life the most important thing is *irony*!

Vadim nods.

Olga nods.

Olya smiles and nods.

When Landlady comes back into the room she is holding a clean knife for me and two large bowls filled with white:

Could it be?! Boris says excitedly and then: It is!!!

Landlady puts one of the bowls on the table next to my new knife.

There it is James! Boris says to me, There's the dish I was telling you about!

Landlady nudges the pot closer to me:

It's my special recipe, she says proudly.

I've heard a lot about it, I say.

Try it... I'm sure you'll like it.

Looks good. What is it?

It's simple: garlic, mayonnaise, cheese...

Cheese?!

That's right... finely grated cheese, mashed with garlic and mayonnaise. It's everyone's favorite... no one can refuse!

Mom! Vadim says, James can't eat cheese... I've told you that a million times!

Oh a little bit won't hurt him...

No really I can't..., but Landlady has already put a heaping serving on my plate:

There you go..., she says, I'm sure you can try a little bit!

But I...!

I stop. Landlady is looking at me with the absolute best of intentions, and I cannot bring myself to offend her.

Disgusted, I look at the sickening mound of lactose on my plate:

Thanks, I lie

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As everyone eats and drinks, our conversations twist and divide, weaving in and out like a drunk driver:

Boris and Vadim are talking about driving drunk. Landlady is explaining once again to Olga how she should peel potatoes. Olga Ivanovna is still railing against *them* — *they*, of course, being:

...Centrists and tax inspectors and rich foreigners in blue jeans and non-Muscovites with dark accents...

Here, Olya says, Let me help you...

What?

Let me take that off your plate...

And taking her fork she scrapes the pile of cheese onto her own plate.

Thanks, I say.

It's nothing... I love cheese.

And thanks for helping me get out of the bet... I owe you one.

No problem. Vadim and Boris are nice guys but sometimes they don't know the limits of their impulsiveness.

Olya sets my empty plate back in front of me and begins to pick at the cheese on her plate:

Try the *seledka*, she says, It's excellent.

I pick up a piece of dripping fish and place it on my plate:

Hey Olya? I say.

Yes?

I was just wondering...

About what?

About you.

Can you be more specific?

You know I was just wondering why you made the decision to leave America? This morning when I asked you, you just sort of mentioned pipes... but I know that there must have been more serious reasons.

Why do you ask?

It's a personal thing, really. You see, lately I've sort of been considering leaving Russia.

For a change of pace?

No, forever. You see, I've been here for almost six and a half years, and now I've begun to think that the time has come to leave.

Why?

I don't know. I guess I've changed. I'm a different person from the one that came here six and a half years ago.

You are?

Yes. Russia has changed me.

How so?

It's small things, inconsequential things: I gasp more than I ever did in America. I smile less. I've learned the difference between *high* and *tall*....

You have?

Yes, I say proudly, I have.

Can you explain it to me?

Of course... you see, something is *tall* if it's connected to the ground. If it's not, then it's *high*.

What about a mountain?

Well you see a mountain can be both... if you're talking about the whole mountain then it's *tall*. But if you're talking about just the top part... ..Then it's *high*!

I nod.

It's so simple!

That's right.

Here Olga takes a forkful of cheese and places it in her mouth:

How else have you changed? she says.

I don't know... in the beginning I was full of optimism, but now I've sort of lost hope.

In what?

In everything... Before I actually believed that I could measure the Russian Soul... I was convinced that I could find someone to love my last solar calculator... I even believed naively that there might be at least

one person in this country — *one person!* — who would actually want my German dictionary...

Sounds like you really are ready to leave.

That's what I keep telling myself... but no matter how many times I decide to leave, I can't bring myself to do it. I'm still here.

You lack decisiveness, that's all. When the time is right, you'll leave. The fact that you haven't just means that there's still something you're looking for... it means that something deeper is keeping you.

Did you know when the time had come to leave America?

Of course. I knew it from the very beginning. As soon as I stepped off the plane.

How's that?

It's a long story.

I'd be interested in hearing it.

Well, I wouldn't want to get into it.

Why not?

I just wouldn't?

Was it something personal?

No.

Then why don't you want to tell me?

It wouldn't be polite.

What?

It wouldn't be in good taste for me to complain about a country that was gracious enough to welcome me, to host me for a year.

But...

It wouldn't be right for me to start listing all the things that I didn't like about it.

Why not?

It's impolite and unintelligent. I mean there's nothing worse than a person who goes to a foreign country, lives there, then comes back and dissects it.

But I'm asking you... I'm truly interested. You're the first Russian I've met who's lived in America and I'd be interested to hear what you have to say, what made you leave.

I don't want to talk about it.

Why?

Because I don't want to.

Why not? What's the big deal?

Well obviously for you it's not a big deal... but for me it is.

What is? I don't understand.

You see I hate those kinds of people who feel that they... the kind that write about cultures they themselves don't belong to. It's disgusting. There's nothing worse than a person who tries to explain something... as if he himself understands it. There's nothing worse than that!

Well, yeah but...!

Listening to Olya, I am overcome with respect and affection for her. And despite her objections, this respect and affection only strengthens my desire to hear her speak of America. Finally I resort to a different approach:

Olya..., I say.

Yes?

There's something I need to tell you...

What's that?

Olya...?

Yes?

I'm homesick, Olya.

What?

I miss my country.

I don't understand.

Please tell me why you didn't like the United States. At this point in my life it's something I need to hear.

But Olya is too polite:

No way, she says.

And so I try a different approach:

You see Olya, I lie, It's just that I can't understand why you would want to leave America to come back here?!

Oh...?

How could you possibly prefer Russia over America?

Well...

I mean given that this place is just one big dump.

Well it's not a dump, exactly...!

It's not?

No, it's not... And besides, you have problems, too...!

Problems? What problems?! In America we don't have problems...!

You don't... you don't have problems? I could spend an hour talking about all the problems in America...

Will you?

...Is that what you really want...?

It is!

You want me to tell you what I didn't like about America...?

That's right.

Are you sure you want to hear?

Absolutely.

Okay then I'll tell you...

Olya pauses to collect her thoughts:

...But afterward don't say I didn't first try to be intelligent and polite...

No no... of course not! You are intelligent and polite in any case!

And with that, Olya begins intelligently and politely to share her impressions. Intelligently and politely, she explains why she didn't like America:

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First of all, she says, I should start by explaining what I was expecting when I left...

Okay.

You see for many many years we were constantly told about each of the problems in America... about the economic problems... about the political instability... and of course about all the social injustices and meteorological mishaps... I mean, we didn't put much stock in any of it... but nevertheless, that was the official version...

Okay...

Right. And then, suddenly, the iron curtain came up and we were flooded with a backlash of information saying the exact opposite: about how great everything was in America; how peaceful; how prosperous; how freely everybody could live... I mean, it was like the other side of absurd. Of course that wave also passed eventually and nowadays we understand that it's just as overstated... but for a few years *that* became the official line. Unofficially. And you see, in my case it was a question of timing; because just when all of this new propaganda was appearing... just when it seemed that a new truth had emerged... that America really was heaven on earth... at that exact instant...

Something happened?

My pipe broke. In the middle of winter. And for me that was the last straw. I decided to leave. I applied for a tourist visa, by some act of God received it, and after borrowing a large sum of money from a relative, I bought a ticket to America.

It was brave of you.

Well of course I hadn't really thought the whole thing out... but how could I go wrong, right? I would be in America, and America was, after all, the best country on earth...!

I laugh.

A month later I was on the plane to the United States. During the flight I was ecstatic... no that's not the right word... I was *elated!* Here I was on a plane to happiness... here I was flying through the clouds to a new life... here I was eating as many free peanuts as my heart could stomach...!

You thought you were leaving forever?

I thought it was forever.

So then what happened?

So anyway I step off the plane and what do you think I see?

I don't know.

The first thing I see when I step off the plane is a smiling Customs officer. In uniform and just smiling away as if he's known me for thirty years... as if he's my very best friend and lifetime companion: Where are you going? he says. To America, I answer. What for? Tourist purposes only. Not to work? No, to study English. Can I ask you a question? Of course... I mean, you already are. Why aren't you smiling? *What?* Why aren't you smiling... this is America, and in America everyone smiles — whether they want to or not...!

Olya shivers from the recollection:

Can you imagine? He wouldn't let me into the country until I smiled!

It's strange.

Yeah, and what do you think I saw when I stepped outside the airport? Ten smiling porters. So I choose one and he smiles all the way to the hotel... all the way to reception... all the way to my room with my heavy luggage... and then he stops. He's panting like a dog and smiling at me. I'm looking at him: Thank you, I say but he doesn't leave. I think maybe I've said something wrong: Thank you, I say again but again he just stands there smiling like a jackass....

He wanted a tip.

Now I know that... but back then I didn't... back then I was...well let's just say that when he finally left my room he wasn't smiling!

I laugh.

...Yeah, and so I get to my room and I think, At last! Now I'll have a drink and a smoke... and what do you think? That's right... I'm in a non-smoking room! Okay, I think, no problem... I'll just go downstairs. But when I go to the hotel bar it's closed. I go to another one and the

bartender there asks for my identification... which I've left in my room and by the time I come back the same guy tells me they're closed now, that hotel rules forbid them to serve alcohol after one o'clock and that now it is exactly one-oh-two, and I say you've gotta be kidding... and he says no, there are cameras, and he would if he could... but he could lose his job... and so I go to another bar which is open and which doesn't mind if I buy a glass of vodka, but there the waitress can't make heads or tails of my passport, then can't understand when I try to order — nobody there speaks Russian, of course — and then to top it all off after serving me a few rounds she has the nerve to tell me that I've had enough to drink... that she could lose her job if she serves me anymore, that the bar could lose its license...

As Olya is telling me this, I notice that she is losing all traces of her previous intelligence and politeness.

...For me it was like a slap in the face. I mean in Russia you can always reach some sort of agreement... you know... slip the bartender a few bills so that he'll serve you liquor, or to the policeman so that he'll let you off the hook, or to the Customs official so that he'll issue you a replacement visa... In Russia you have a chance to beat the system. But there you can't do that... If the bar closes at one o'clock it means it closes at one... and that's that. Our system is more humane.

More humane?... I've never thought of it that way!

...So those were my first impressions... But I was still optimistic... Just have a good night's sleep, I told myself, and everything will be better tomorrow... So the next morning I go to a park — you know, just to take a look at the people — and I'm horrified!

Why?

I'd always thought that Americans were a healthy and fit nation, but sitting there in the park I couldn't believe how many fat people I saw. I mean, really fat. Sickeningly fat. Grotesquely fat. Not to mention old people and handicapped. And all of them walking around the streets in broad daylight without being ashamed of it... without even trying to hide it...

Daylight? Hide it? Why would they be ashamed?

And the women! Fu! In your movies American women are always attractive — but the women I saw were plainer than prose! They're nothing compared to Russian women!

Olya stops as if remembering herself:

Should I continue? she says.

Please do...

Olya has taken a forkful of cheese from her plate and raised it to her lips. But just as she is about to put it into her mouth, she remembers something else that she didn't like about America, specifically, that...

...Americans are such big patriots!

I am?

Yeah, you are. For you everything is democracy this, democracy that... as if America is the only birthplace of democracy! As if America really is the best country in the world. You are too proud of yourselves. You love your country too much. You are too patriotic...!

Patriotic? Americans? Doesn't she realize that Russians are... that they're the ones... I mean I've never seen people trying so hard to be patriotic...!

...And this despite the fact that Americans don't read anything!

We don't?

No. I mean just go to any American's house and what will you see: a few detective novels, a bible, some how-to books if you're lucky... I don't think I saw a single piece of literature the whole time I was there that could challenge an eighth-grader in one of our schools.

Well, actually we read, but...

And another thing...

Why was I so insistent about her telling me all this? What was I thinking?

...Americans are so insulated... they don't have any clue about what's happening in other places of the world. Ask them to name five French actors... or ten British poets... Yeah right! Most of them can't even name their own poets...

Well, just because we don't read them, doesn't mean we can't *name* them...

...And you know what surprised me? Americans have absolutely no clue about Russia. None. I mean you can ask any schoolboy in Moscow and he'll tell you that today's rate of exchange is fifty-nine twenty (1USD=5920RUR)... any schoolgirl can tell you the price of Marlboros... But in America nobody knows anything about Russia... I mean they still think that bears run loose around the streets of Moscow!

Actually...!

...And what really starts getting to you after a while is all the questions... you know when they find out that you're from Russia they start asking you questions. Which wouldn't be so bad if it weren't the same question over and over and over and over again... I mean no matter who you talk to they always ask about the same thing... after a while you just feel like puking!

What do they ask about?

Take a guess... what do you think they ask about?

I don't know.

Go on, take a guess!

I really don't know.

You don't?

No I don't have any idea.

Gorbachev!

What?

That's right! No matter who you talk to they always ask about Gorbachev! *What ever happened to Gorbachev?* or *How about that Gorbachev?* or *Why don't you Russians like Gorbachev?* or *Is Gorbachev really as good as everybody says he is?*... you know, stupid questions like that...!

Really?

Yeah... after a year I got nauseous just hearing the word!

Olya stops as if remembering herself:

Should I continue? she asks.

By all means, I lie.

Olya moves to eat the forkful of cheese in front of her mouth, but again forgets:

But you know what was probably the most difficult thing about living there?

What?

Strangely enough, the little things, the things you can't explain.

Like what?

I don't know... people are people no matter where you go, I guess... but they think differently nevertheless... they have different norms for socializing...

I've noticed that too.

...They eat differently.

I agree.

...They drink differently.

You can say that again!

...They have different senses of humor...

Senses of humor?

I don't know Olya... I mean I'd agree with you that Russians and Americans eat and drink differently... that they have different norms for socializing... But as far as humor, I'd have to object!

It's true.

I'm not so sure. I think Russian and American humor is actually rather similar... I mean I can appreciate Russian humor.

But that's because you've lived here.

Not only.

Well all I know is that I lived in America for one year... eventually I learned to smile... but not once did I laugh!

Do you really think Russian humor is all that different from American?

Of course... In America your humor is — how should I put this? — stupid.

Stupid?

Well yeah... it's not witty like Russian humor... it's slapstick.

What do you mean *slapstick*?

You know... base, simplified humor.

Can you give me an example?

Well off the top of my head...

Something from an American movie or book?

Let me think...

Slapstick? Stupid?! How can she say that Russian humor is better? Doesn't she realize that American humor is the best in the world...?!

...I've got it, Olya says.

What?

I've thought of a good example.

Okay...?

Well for example, remember this morning at my apartment...

Of course.

Well remember how I offered my palm daintily and you didn't know what it meant and so you handed me your boot? Well, I didn't want to say anything at the time — I'd just met you — but *that's* a perfect example of stupid American humor.

I start to argue but can't; and so instead I offer a series of improbable excuses:

It was early in the morning... I was confused... I was worried... I needed to show the alienation of the situation...

But it is too late. Olga has made her point splendidly:

So, she says, after a year of people smiling at me, and asking me about Gorbachev, and when I began to miss Russian humor, when all of this finally got to me... I knew that America wasn't for me. And that's when I decided to leave.

Olya stops.

Did I answer your question? she asks.

Yes, I say, you did.

Good.

Olga smiles politely and puts the forkful of cheese into her mouth.

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“...and policemen, and teenagers, and drug addicts...!”

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Hey! Vadim says suddenly breaking into our conversation, Are you two talking about humor?

He has apparently become tired of his own conversation, and decided for some reason to join ours.

That's right, says Olya, I was just telling James here that every country has its own humor, that American jokes and Russian jokes are different.

Well that goes without saying, Vadim says, Everyone knows that the best jokes in the world are Russian!

You can't say that Vadim... American humor is every bit as intelligent... our jokes are just as funny as your anecdotes!

You're crazy! Vadim says.

No I'm not... In fact they're better!

They are not.

Are to... And I can prove it!

How can you prove that American humor is better than Russian?

Well, I mean I can't *prove* it exactly... but we can do an experiment...

What do you mean?

We'll do an experiment. I'll tell some American jokes and you can tell me some Russian ones. We'll go back and forth and see whose humor is more humorous.

It's a good idea.

Thanks.

But wait a minute... who'll be the judge, you know, who'll decide which jokes are funnier?

Well, I guess it's up to each person to decide for himself... that's why you should pick the very best joke that you know... your very favorite.

But there are so many!

Yes, but pick the best. The very best Russian joke... the most representative... and I'll do the same with an American joke.

You're on! Who should go first?

It's up to you Vadim... you're the groom!
Okay then I'll go first... I'll tell you my clever Russian joke... and then you can tell me your stupid American one!
Hah! We'll see whose joke is funnier...!
By now Boris and Olga have stopped their conversations and joined Olya to listen to Vadim and me being humorous.
Here goes! says Vadim, Is everyone ready?
Of course! we say.
Vadim clears his throat and begins to tell his favorite Russian joke:

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"Okay," Vadim says, "Three friends — a Georgian, an impotent rabbit, and Ivan Susanin's mother-in-law — get drunk and are trying to find their way out of the woods... when suddenly they are run over by a Mercedes and taken to a doctor whose wife is having an affair with a golden fish..."

Vadim stops:

Have you heard this one? he says.

Of course, I say.

You have?

Of course. Many times.

Oh, well in that case we won't count it. I'll tell you my second-favorite....

Wait!!! everyone else screams, *We* haven't heard it...

You haven't?

No, we haven't.

And so Vadim tells them the joke. Everyone laughs.

After he is finished, he looks at me:

Your turn, he says.

All right, I say, here is a typical American joke...

Vadim moves closer to me to hear better.

I start my joke:

"How many electricians does it take to change a lightbulb?" I ask.

Vadim looks at me:

I don't know, he says, How many?

"One!" I laugh, "Just one!"

But the others look at me blankly.

"Just one!" I repeat.

Olya chuckles politely:

Vadim clears his throat.

I stop:

Well, in America it's funny...

Hey Vadim! Boris prompts, Let's hear another Russian joke.

Okay!

Vadim looks at me:

Are you ready for another anecdote? he asks.

Sure, I say.

All right then, here goes...!

Vadim pauses seriously and then begins his second-favorite Russian joke:

"Once upon a time there lived a farmer, his wife, and two children. This farmer was an honest and hard-working man and every day he toiled from sunup to sundown to feed his family and provide a roof over their heads. The farmer had always dreamed about having a large brick house and so one day he started to build it, working at night under the light of the moon. Piece by piece he built his sturdy brick house: first the sturdy brick foundation, then the sturdy brick walls, then the sturdy brick roof. Story by story, he worked to build the house until one day — ten years after he had started — it was finally built. All the neighbors came to look at his house and admire it. And the man was *proud* that he had built such a sturdy brick house. But then, not long after the house was completed, an earthquake shook it down, killing his wife and leaving him to raise his two children by himself. The man was devastated but not deterred. He worked especially hard to sell his crops, scrimped and saved to buy new materials for a wood house. By the light of the moon the man began to build his wood house. Every night he worked. Piece by piece he built his reliable wood house: first the reliable wood foundation, then the reliable wood walls, then the reliable wood roof. For fifteen years he worked to build the house and then one day it was finally built. All the neighbors came to look at his house and to approve of it, and the man himself was *happy* that he had built such a reliable wood house. But then, not long after it was completed, a fire ravaged the house, burning it to the ground, and taking one of his two children. By now the man was older, his strength had been expended on better days. But still, the man was not discouraged. Ardently, he began to build a modest straw hut. Working by the light of the moon, he built his modest straw hut: first the modest straw foundation, then the modest straw walls, then the modest straw roof. For twenty years he built and built until one day it was finally finished. By now the man was too frail to move. Still, looking at his modest hut, he was *satisfied*. But then, not long after it was completed, a strong wind came along and blew the

hut to the ground, killing his last surviving child. By now the man was too old to move, too blind to see, and there were no children or relatives to take care of him. And so the man went out to an open field, lay down in the grass and died under the open sky.”

Here Vadim stops.

There is a hush in the room. Finally, it is Boris who breaks the silence: I know an even funnier one! he says.

But it is too late — the room has exploded with laughter. Olga is laughing. Landlady is laughing. Boris is laughing. Even Olga Ivanovna is smiling at Vadim’s joke. Vadim, seeing that his joke has been appreciated, is laughing so hard that tears are rolling down his eyes:

Ohh... that’s funny! he says.

Wait a minute! I say, Wait a damn minute here... That’s it? That’s the joke?

You don’t get it?

Get what? Where’s the punchline?

That’s it! That’s the punchline... You see, after everything, after all his efforts the farmer dies!

It’s not funny Vadim.

What do you mean *not funny*?

It’s not funny... it’s tragic... look Olya, explain to him... tell him it’s not funny!

But Olya is too gripped by laughter to listen to me.

Vadim...! You of all people should understand how unfunny that joke is!

James, do you really mean to say that you don’t get the joke?

No I don’t!

Well that just goes to show that you haven’t lived in Russia long enough to understand the things that Russians can laugh at!

But I...!

When the laughter has subsided Boris begins to tell his joke:

“Two Jews are buying *saló* from an Azerbaijani...!”

But I’m not listening to him. I’m still trying to see the humor in Vadim’s joke.

After struggling and striving his entire life, the farmer loses three houses, his wife, and his two children... and then, after all of that, he dies! In Russia that’s funny?

A burst of laughter tells me that Boris has finished his joke. I look at Vadim:

I don’t like your joke, I say. Tell me another one. Tell me one that *I’ll* think is funny.

Okay... let me think... well, I heard one the other day...!

Vadim clears his throat again and begins to tell another Russian joke:

“Okay,” he says, “Four men are flying in an airplane — a German, a Frenchman, an American, and, of course, a Russian...”

Vadim stops:

Have you heard this one? he asks.

Not so far....

Good....

“So anyway. Four men are flying in an airplane. Here are their reactions to the following situations:

1) A beautiful stewardess comes walking down the aisle:

The German: ‘Excuse me miss... did you know that I’m
unhappily married?’

The American: ‘Wanna be my seventy-*ninth*?’

The Frenchman: ‘Let us go, my love, to the aft lavatory...’

The Russian: ‘Hey you, got any more of those free peanuts?’

2) Ordering drinks:

Frenchman: ‘I’ll have your most expensive cognac.’

German: ‘I’ll have your thickest beer.’

American: ‘Money.’

Russian: ‘Yes, thank you.’

3) The plane begins to fall:

American: ‘My business...! Who’ll take care of my business when
I’m gone?!’

German: ‘I knew I should have bought *economy* class...!’

Frenchman: ‘Where’d that stewardess go...?’

Russian: ‘*Oi, blyu...*’

4) In heaven:

German

(to American): ‘With a little tidying up this place could be quite nice...’

American

(to Russian): 'Yeah, with the right foreign investment, it could really be something...'

Russian

(to Frenchman): 'Maybe so... But *I'd* never immigrate here!'

Frenchman:

(to himself): 'This isn't heaven... all the women are American!'

5) In heaven (back-up variant):

German again

(to American): 'With a little tidying up this place could be quite nice...!'

Russian

(interrupting): 'Don't look at *me*, you son-of-a-bitch!'

American

(to Russian): 'See! I *told* you I had a soul!'

Here Vadim stops:

So how do you like it?

It's cute... I mean no one doubts that Russians have a unique ability to deprecate themselves... and others.

That's right.

But you didn't finish the joke... what about the Frenchman? What did the Frenchman say in heaven?

I don't remember...

You forgot?

Yeah... but I'm sure it was something funny.

I nod.

So do you think you can do better than my jokes?

Vadim... I will tell you an American joke that is so funny you will fall down to the floor from laughter!

It's that funny?

It's that funny.

Funnier than the joke about the farmer?

Well... yes, funnier. It's my favorite joke... And I think it sums up the American approach to humor. Are you ready for it?

Do you think we'll like it?
I'll be surprised if you don't.
Well then we're ready!
Okay here goes...
I start to speak and then remember something:
...Oh, and pay special attention to the end — that's the funniest part!
Everybody nods. And when I see that they are listening attentively I
begin my favorite American joke:

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“A bus driver is driving his bus down the street when a drunk man staggers on, fumbles with his fare, and sits right behind him. The bus driver doesn't pay any attention to him and drives on. But after a while he hears the drunk mumbling to himself: 'You know what the problem is nowadays?' the drunk is mumbling, 'The problem is that nobody has a sense of humor! That's right: everybody's so serious all the time... nobody can appreciate humor anymore...!' The bus driver listens to the drunk go on about this for a while and being in a good frame of mind himself, decides to engage him in his conversation: 'You know,' says the bus driver, 'You're not exactly right about that. After all there are a lot of people who can find humor in any situation. In fact, I'll show you...' The drunk, of course, is very interested. 'Just watch,' the bus driver says, 'what I say to the next beautiful woman who boards the bus...' The bus moves on and at the next stop a woman gets on. She is paying her fare. The bus driver looks at her. The woman looks back. The bus driver smiles. 'Tickle your ass with a feather?' he asks. The woman can't believe what she's heard. 'What did you say?' she says, 'What did you say?' But without missing a beat the bus driver looks at her again and says, 'Particularly nice weather?' 'Oh,' says the woman, 'Yes it is... the weather today is just fine!' When the woman has walked past them, the bus driver looks back at the drunk: 'So how'd you like my joke?' 'It's great!' says the drunk, 'Tickle your ass with a feather... Particularly nice weather! It's great!' The bus driver smiles: 'So you see... you shouldn't say that nobody has a sense of humor. You're wrong assuming that people have forgotten how to laugh.' The drunk thinks for a minute and then says 'Let me try it! Let me try it! I want to do it too!' But here the bus driver turns serious, 'Don't even think of it,' he says, 'You're too drunk... you'll say the wrong thing.' But the drunk is adamant: 'No I won't... I can do it too... Tickle your ass with a feather...'

Particularly nice weather... Let me try!' The bus driver tries to argue with the drunk but then finally relents. 'All right,' he says, 'I'll let you try... but first I'll show you one more time. Now pay close attention to what I say so that you don't screw it up.' And at the next stop, when an even more beautiful woman boards the bus, the bus driver asks her the same question: 'Tickle your ass with a feather?' and when in outrage she asks him to repeat himself he follows with, 'Particularly nice weather?' And again the drunk is beside himself with glee. 'My turn! My turn!' he says, but the bus driver looks at him seriously. 'Repeat after me... Tickle your ass with a feather... Particularly nice weather... Tickle your ass with a feather... Particularly nice weather... Got it?' The drunk is bursting with excitement. 'Sure I've got it: Tickle your ass with a feather... Particularly nice weather... Tickle your ass with a feather... Particularly nice weather... I'm ready!' The bus driver looks at him cautiously: 'You sure you won't mix it up?' 'Not a chance!' says the drunk, 'Tickle your ass with a feather... Particularly nice weather... I've got it!' The bus driver looks at the drunk seriously: 'All right then,' he says, 'the next woman is yours...'

The sound of a doorbell interrupts me.

What's that?

Someone's at the door.

Are you expecting anyone?

No.

Me either.

Dutifully, Landlady gets up from her seat and goes to open the door, snapping the locks on the heavy door.

Well...! says Vadim turning back to me, Don't leave us in suspense... how does the joke end?

And so I continue:

"All right so anyway the bus driver pulls up to the next stop and a beautiful woman gets on. She's extremely beautiful... and sophisticated. She's standing and counting out her change. The drunk, meanwhile, has sort of stood up and is staggering in the aisle waiting for the woman to board. But he is stone drunk and can barely stand up by himself. The woman steps up into the bus and is paying her fare when suddenly she notices that the drunk man is staring at her. She tries to look away but feels that the man is watching her. Trying to ignore him, she pays her fare 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. But 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, but then finally they come out all at once. As the woman looks at him in surprise, the drunk man says...”

Vadim!

What?

Vadim, says Landlady, Some friends are here to see you...

Friends? I'm not expecting any friends.

So what did he say... what did the drunk man say?

Vadim!

When we look up, we can see that Landlady is standing by the entrance to the room next to five large men. They are wearing dark coats. Their heads are closely shaved.

What the hell! Vadim says.

Silently the five men walk into the room. The first of them has a scar on his cheek. The second on his forehead. The third on his neck. The fourth is scarless, but with a mashed nose and boxed ears. The four men walk into the room and stand around the table above the wedding guests. Each of them is husky and dense. But it is the fifth man who does the speaking:

Remember us? he says.

Who the hell...?

But Vadim's protests are in vain: it is Tuesday; the knife has already fallen; the moment has come for atonement...

In other words: you have arrived.

(48)

Remember us? you say to Vadim, Or have you forgotten your friends?

Vadim doesn't answer.

Vadim, you say, I asked you a question...

Hey guys...! Boris says and moves to stand up... but before he can, you swing violently at him. With a loud crunch your fist crushes the side of his face and sends his body falling to the floor next to the table. Like a sack of potatoes it crumples heavily onto a shriek of women's voices.

You think we're joking around here? you say to the rest of the guests, Is that what you all think?

No one dares to speak.

Do you think this is a big joke?!

Boris is lying on the floor, groaning and holding his head in his arms.

Seeing him, Landlady moves to help him. But before she can, one of your men grabs her by the shoulder... and she slaps him. Amazed, he stands motionless for a second and then, with the full force of his open hand, slaps her across the face, sending her — all sixty-six years of her — to the ground.

Again the women shriek.

Sit down! you scream at Vadim who has stood up, Sit down!

He sits.

That's enough! you yell at the wedding guests, That'll be enough!

The room becomes silent. Only Boris can be heard convulsing on the ground. Landlady has half-raised herself onto one knee, and is groping blindly for her chair.

Help her up! you tell your men and one of them walks over to Landlady and pulls her onto the chair. Her wrinkled cheek is red where she has just been struck. Dazed, she is looking blankly at the wall across from her.

Now listen up, everybody... We're just paying a friendly visit to the groom here. We're just here to ask a few questions, that's all. All we want is to get a few answers...

Look, Vadim says timidly, maybe we can go into the other room...

Shut up! you yell, You just sit your ass right where you are and shut the hell up!

Vadim looks down to the ground.

Is that clear? you say bending down into Vadim's face.

He nods.

Is that clear? you say to everyone else.

They answer with silence.

Now Vadim... there are some questions that it's time you answer... Look at me, dammit, when I'm talking to you!

Vadim looks up into your eyes and when he does you can see how frightened he really is:

Now Vadim I'm going to ask you some questions and you are going to answer them... do you understand?

Vadim nods.

I said DO YOU UNDERSTAND?!

I understand... I understand... I just... I just don't know what you want from me...

What we want? What do you think we want Vadim?

I don't know.

Well, think... think real hard... what could it possibly be that we might want?

I don't have it... I'm doing my best but I can't get it to you now... You have to believe me!

No Vadim I can't believe you... That's not my job, to believe people... There are people in this world who are paid to believe people... I have a different job.

Vadim is looking up at you and you slide your heavy palm over the back of his head, stroking it tenderly:

No Vadim, you say, I'm going to ask you some questions and I want you to give me some straight answers, understand?

Yes.

Now are you going to answer my questions like a good boy or are you going to give me the same answers you've been giving my client for the last two years?

I don't know.

You don't know?

I can only say the truth...!

Well that's a good start...

Vadim is sitting nervously in his chair and as you speak you look down at him:

...So tell me the truth Vadim: Did you take the money?

I...

Vadim the question is very simple: Did you take the money?

It's not that simple...

Did you take the money Vadim?

I borrowed some money, yes that's right.

Vadim you're not listening to my question. The question was: Did you take the money?

Here you stop stroking the back of Vadim's head:

Well... yes, I mean... yes I took the money.

You took the money?

Yes, I did.

Good. Now we're getting somewhere... Now my second question is as follows... Are you ready?

Yes.

Are you ready for the second question?

Yes.

You took the money, right?

Well... I...

Vadim did you take the money?!

Yes... I took the money...

Are you sure you took the money? It seems to me like you're not real sure... that there's some doubt in your mind... Think real hard... Did you take the money or not?

I took the money.

You took the money?

Yes.

So when are you going to give it back?

As soon as I can... I promise.

No no no no no... That's not an answer. Listen to the question again: When are you going to give back the money that you took.

As soon as...

NO! you scream and slam your heavy fist against the table; the wedding guests jump in their seats. Vadim is looking up at you, scared, and you tilt his chin with your hand:

That's not an answer... Now let's start from the very beginning... Vadim did you take the money?

Yes.

You took the money?

Yes.

When are you going to give it back?

I'm doing everything I can! I've tried to do everything I can...!

Whoa whoa whoa... Vadim... you're getting away from the issue... I asked you a simple question:

I know, but...

Now did I ask you a question or didn't I?

You did?

That's right. And do you remember what question I asked you?

You asked me when I'm going to give the money back.

That's right Vadim when are you going to give the money back?

I can't tell you... I'm trying!

You can't tell me when you're going to give back the money?

No I can't.

You can't tell me when you're going to give the money back?

No.

Then why did you take the money in the first place?

What?

Why Vadim did you take the money if you can't tell me when you're going to give it back?

I don't know... I don't know...

Okay, then let's start once again from the very beginning...

Here you stroke the top of Vadim's head like a loved one:

Vadim, you say, Did you take the money?

(49)

By now you are standing so close to Vadim's face that his eyes cross to look at you.

Yes I took the money... I took the money and I promise that I'll do everything I can to give it back.

When?

I can't tell you when.

Then how can you promise?

I do. I promise. I just need time... I just need some time to get the money...

No Vadim. You've had enough time. Time is money. And so my question to you is very simple: When are you going to give the money back?

I don't know!

You don't know?

No, I don't know... I'm trying to be honest with you... I'm not lying to you!

Vadim you've been lying for the last two years... And that's why I'm here. You see, you've been taking advantage of my client's kind heart... You've been using the generosity of his soul... And that's why he's come to me... you see, I'm not quite as nice.

Vadim says nothing.

Do you understand me?

Yes.

What did you say?

I said I understand.

Good. Now where were we? Oh yes, you were telling me when you're going to give back the money...?

(50)

I was?

You weren't?

I don't know.

You don't know?

No... I don't...!

Vadim looks like he is about to cry.

Then why did you take the money? Why Vadim did you take the damn money in the first place if you can't tell me when you're going to give it back?

I don't know...!

What *do* you know?!

Hey! says one of your men — he is right on cue — Our boy here doesn't seem to be too cooperative!

Yeah, says another, He's not answering the questions.

But I...!

Let's take the son-of-a-bitch outside...

No! Olga screams.

But Vadim puts his hand on hers:

It's all right, he says.

What did you say! one of your men yells at Vadim, You think everything's all right? Did you hear what he said? He said everything is all right! To me that means he has no intention of giving the money back... why should he give the money back if everything is *all right*?

Let's take the son-of-a-bitch outside!

Damn, your men are well-trained! Now their professionalism is showing... the timing... the teamwork... the use of repetition for dramatic effect...!

But here you object:

Now don't be so brash boys, you lie, I'm sure that Vadim here is just a bit confused... he's not a bad guy, are you Vadim?

No.

That's right... he just needs to think a little bit about the situation and then he'll be more cooperative.

Vadim says nothing.

He's not a bad guy, but he just needs to do some thinking in order to best understand the situation at hand.

Vadim says nothing.

Isn't that right, Vadim?

Yes.

What?

I said yes.

Good.

The room is silent.

Hey Vadim? you say.

Yes?

Are you thinking...?

(51)

Eventually, your attention begins to wander. Words flow over you, but at this point they have ceased to interest you. Vadim is straining to justify himself, and as he does you nod without listening.

How long has it been? Twenty minutes... twenty-five...? By now it's been a good thirty minutes and this character — what's his name... Vadim? — hasn't said one worthwhile thing! Over the last thirty-five minutes he hasn't lied. Hasn't promised the impossible. In fact, he hasn't done anything at all to incite you or to hold your attention...

I know I know, Vadim says, But I can't...!

...To be honest you expected much more from this encounter... you thought it would be a challenge... that maybe it would be different from all the others you've been witness to... as if it might provide you with a new perspective, something unlike anything else you've seen... You thought that it would be unique... or even better: convincing...!

I told you... I'm trying... I just need time... Give me another chance...!
...What a letdown!...

Please...!

How much longer will this last? Hasn't it already been forty minutes? Hasn't it been forty-five?... And besides, maybe he's had enough? Maybe fifty minutes really is enough to get the point across? Maybe this would be a convenient time to leave? Maybe this is the lull you've been waiting for? Maybe now's the excuse you've needed to bring this whole thing to an end?...

But I...!

Yeah, he's gotten the message... time to wrap this up... time to call it a day. Time to conclude this scene with your standard ending... the one that you have become infamous for.

And so, fighting back a yawn, you interrupt him in mid-word:

(52)

Look Vadim..., you say, I hope you don't take all of this personally. I have a job to do just like anyone... I mean just imagine that you were in my place. What would you do? Can you answer me that? What would you do if you were wearing my shoes?

I don't know...

How would you feel if I owed *you* money? Would you like it if I'd been leading you around by the nose for two years? Would you respect me if that were the case? Would you?

No.

That's right... so I'm just asking you to try and be a little more understanding... You're not the only person in this world who has problems... I think you need to try and put yourself into the position of other people more often....

Here you stop. You have spoken these words so often that they have been inscribed into your mind like an inscription. And so, once again, you start in:

Let's speak hypothetically, you begin, Of course I realize it's difficult for us to crawl out of our narrow points of view... but let's try...

Vadim is staring up at you, and as he does you drive your point home with a voice that is teeming with certainty:

Let's speak hypothetically — Vadim are you with me on this? you are? Good! — Let's speak hypothetically. In other words, let's say...

(53)

Let's say your name is Olga. That's right — let's say your name is Olga. Of course it could have been any one of the five names that Russians give their daughters, but as long as we've come this far let's say it's *Olga*.

Home for you is a small apartment with one bedroom where you and your new husband will sleep. It is not a big bedroom, but it's the only one aside from the one where your mother-in-law lives and which you avoid like a serious conversation. There is a living room of course but it is cramped, especially when the table is brought out for special occasions. Especially when it is cluttered with chairs from other rooms, other apartments, other floors of your twelve-story building.

You actually have another apartment, but it is being rented out for one-thirtieth — *or was it one-sixtieth?* — its real value. The money, though small, comes in handy. Still, it cannot make the small rooms any larger...

And then one day you have guests over. Special people on a special day. And on this special day one of the special people gets so drunk that he passes out on your floor. Of course he can't go home in his condition — he can barely stand to be rolled over, let alone carried past the broken

elevator up four flights of stairs. And it is decided that he should stay the night. Here. In your small apartment.

But where? Where should you put him? Where should he be put?

The living room is full. Your bedroom has only one bed. The kitchen is cold with roaches. Even the bathroom — the last resort — is currently and constantly occupied by the rest of your special guests, those who are still able to celebrate. Of course there's your mother-in-law's room, but unfortunately it is being used by your mother-in-law who has gone to bed long ago.

And so the question is as follows: Where do you put this special guest who has passed out on your floor?

Where will you put him?

What can you suggest?

What would *you* do in this situation?

(54)

I don't know what I would do, Vadim says.

You don't? you ask.

No... but I promise I'll try to be more understanding of the situation.

You will?

Yes I will.

That's good Vadim. That's all we want... You know I'm happy that we had a chance to talk like this. I feel like I know you better. I feel like we understand each other. What do you think?

I understand you, Vadim says.

You do?

Yes. I understand completely.

That's good.

You stroke the back of Vadim's head once more and then take your hand away.

Vadim lets out a relieved sigh.

Boris, meanwhile, has risen to a sitting position on the floor and is holding his jaw:

Look buddy, you say to him and offer your wieldy hand.

Boris winces away from it.

Look, you repeat, I'm sorry about that... but you have to understand how it must have looked when I came in and you started getting up at me... I hope there're no hard feelings?

Boris grunts.

Good. That's good that you won't remember us badly. And as far as grandma over there... well, she sort of asked for it, now didn't she?

Bastards! Boris mutters.

But you don't have time for niceties:

Let's go! you say and your men rush to the door ahead of you. Olga fumbles with the locks and finally after some difficulty, opens it.

One by one, your men leave the apartment. Quickly, you follow them. The stairwell is cold and from the outside you listen with a satisfied grin as the apartment door is locked from the inside.

(55)

As soon as the door is closed, Vadim rushes over to Landlady:

Are you okay? he says and holds his mother's face in his hands.

I'm fine, she says, I'm fine... I've lived through worse things than those thugs... and I'll live through *them*, too!

Almost in tears, Vadim embraces her:

I'm so sorry, he is saying, I'm so sorry!

Hey! says Olga, Bring me a cold rag!

She is leaning over Boris and pressing his bleeding cut together. When the rag has been handed to her, she pours some alcohol on it and begins to dab at the wound lightly:

How do you feel? she says.

Aside from my bloated scrotum I think I'm okay.

Olga nods and again dabs at his wound, this time firmly.

TSSSSSS!!!! Boris hisses.

Trust me, Olga says, I'm almost a doctor.

Boris looks at her strangely:

Almost a doctor? he says — his lips curling up in a painful grin.

Olga laughs.

Seeing Boris grin, the entire wedding party lets out one collective sigh of relief.

Landlady is okay. Boris is okay. The metal door is tightly locked and everybody is okay!

There is a moment of grateful silence, and then the room explodes:

*

Quick! Somebody call the police before they get away... somebody call the police... We all saw what they looked like... the first one had a scar on his cheek... the second had a scar on his forehead... or was it the other way around? And which one of them was the leader? Probably the one who did all the talking... the one with the angelic face and brass knuckles! But what if they're waiting outside? No, of course we shouldn't call the police. We shouldn't call the police because this is Russia. But can you believe they almost took Vadim outside? And did you see the punch that Boris faced? And can you believe... can you believe they had the nerve to slap Olga Mikhailovna? At her age! Can you imagine? But wait a minute... how did they know that today was the wedding... or was it a coincidence? How did they get the address of this twelve-story building? Who gave it to them? And how did they get into the apartment in the first place? Who let them through the heavy metal door? It must have been Olga Mikhailovna. That's right... but why did she let them in? She must have thought that they really were Vadim's friends. But does Vadim have friends like that? He must if Olga Mikhailovna let them into her own apartment...!

For the next half hour the apartment is abuzz with people running from room to room. Some phoning their relatives with the details. Some standing and gesticulating wildly and trading exclamations with other people who are standing and gesticulating wildly. Some guests approaching Boris to ask how he feels. Some approaching Landlady.

In fact, in the ensuing chaos, there is only one person sitting apart from the rest, as if the others are afraid of him: Vadim.

Seeing this, I walk up to him:

Are you all right?

You and your stupid American questions! Do I look all right?

I don't know how to take this and so Vadim helps me:

It was a joke... I'm fine.

Were you expecting this? I ask him.

In general yes... but not tonight.

I nod.

...No way was I expecting this to happen tonight.

And so what now? I ask.

What do you mean?

What do we do now?

You sit down... that's what. You sit down and finish your *seledka*.

Is he crazy? After the scene we just had... he expects me to eat seledka? After all of that he wants to continue the wedding? Doesn't he realize that everyone's mood has been thrown out of balance? Their concentration has been betrayed. Doesn't he understand that nobody will be able to focus on the scene at hand... that it will require at least ten pages to get the party re-started?

Maybe we should call off the celebration? I say, Maybe we should leave you alone?

Not a chance... I'm not going to let those thugs spoil my wedding... I'm not going to let them ruin the second-most important day of my life!

Well yeah, but maybe we can come back another time... you know when the atmosphere is more conducive...

James! Vadim says.

I stop.

Sit down! This celebration will end... over my dead body!

(57)

And so once again Boris stands up:

Everybody! Attention everybody!!! Can I ask you to return to your seats, please!!

The wedding guests are still talking wildly.

ATTENTION!!! Boris says, PLEASE TAKE YOUR SEATS... THIS WEDDING ISN'T OVER YET...!!!

Gradually, the people return to their seats, at first continuing to speak as before, but eventually becoming quiet enough to hear Vadim's voice, which is still trembling slightly:

My friends..., he begins, I know that we've just been witness to an unexpected, unjustified, and extremely unpleasant scene...

The guests mumble in agreement.

...I realize that the atmosphere we worked so hard to create... has been rudely violated by what took place here minutes ago...

The guests mumble again.

...I realize that many of you are considering leaving...

Everybody is silent.

...But now I'm turning to you with a humble request... now I'm asking you to forget about everything you just saw... What happened tonight *had* to happen... it was inevitable. I expected it. James expected it. The entire English alphabet expected it. But now it is over and so I ask you to please put it out of your mind. My wedding party is now in

your hands... either you can forgive me for the scene that happened and we can move on...

Vadim stops importantly:

...Or we can call an end to the whole thing and go home.

The guests are silent.

The choice is yours, Vadim says, Either you can give up now... I won't hold it against you... or we can continue all the way to Я...

(58)

After a moment of hesitation our decision is made:

(59)

I don't know about the rest of you..., says one guest, but *I'm* staying!

Me too! says another.

As if on cue, Boris grabs a bottle of vodka from the table:

Hey, he says, There's one thing I can't figure out: Are we drinking or aren't we!?

The guests cheer and begin to fill their glasses with vodka.

You're damn right we're drinking! says one.

Yeah, says another, We're not Americans!!

Yeah! I say.

But what about a toast? somebody says, Who's going to say the toast?

Let's have James say the toast!

Why me...?

Yeah! somebody says, Say a toast James!

I can't... Vadim, you know I don't know how to say toasts!

What! says Boris, What do you mean you don't know how? Have your six and a half years been completely lost on you?

No, but...

Have you spent the last six and a half years in vain?

...Well no...

Then make a toast!

But...!

The other guests are looking at me. Encouragingly. Sympathetically. Meticulously.

But how can I make this toast? Any other toast, maybe... but this one... this particular toast will be one of the most important so far. This toast is

crucial because it has to serve as a transition. After the unpleasant scene with Vadim's friends, this toast will have to re-establish the mood! It will have to persuade everyone to forget...!

I'll make a toast! a woman's voice says and each of us looks around to see who it is.

Who could be brave enough to make a toast at this critical point?

I'll make the toast, says Olga Ivanovna, since our American over here doesn't seem to know how...

Olga Ivanovna? Vadim says, Yes yes... please do make a toast! What are you drinking?

I'll have what you're having!

Vadim pours Olga Ivanovna's cup half-full with vodka. But she looks at him severely:

I *said* I'll have what *you're* having!

Vadim blushes and fills her glass to the rim.

Olga Ivanovna waits for the liquid to settle in her glass, then speaks up confidently:

"I don't know what kind of toast you're expecting from me... but if you're expecting me to praise the newlyweds... if you're expecting my toast to be some sort of convenient transition, then you're sorely mistaken! I have no intention of toasting these two... I want to make a toast to the groom's mother... Olga Mikhailovna!"

Landlady, who has just come in from the kitchen, smiles modestly at the mention of her name:

Me? she says, Why me?

I'll tell you why..., Olga Ivanovna says, I'll tell you exactly why:

"You see *you* Olga Mikhailovna are a true hero!"

Landlady waves off the suggestion, but Olga Ivanovna continues:

"I've known this woman here for thirty years and she is a true hero. It's no secret that during her short lifetime she has survived war, starvation, dictatorship, communism, stagnation, *perestroika*, a putsch, rebellion, inflation, the failure of reforms, and *now* deep into her sixty-sixth year, she can say that she has suffered through what would have broken a lesser person... on this night, she has managed to survive *gravity!*"

Everybody nods.

"But that's not why I want to drink to her. What is most remarkable about her is that no matter what happens she is always there for *other* people. When my husband left me it was she who let me cry on her shoulder; and when he died it was she who came over to console me just in case. And

during the most difficult time — when my daughter was sick... when she was incurably ill...”

The room is silent.

“...And when my daughter died it was Olga Mikhailovna who helped me get through it. And all this despite the fact that she herself has suffered through so much. All this despite the fact that her life has been far from easy. But no matter what she has been through, she is always there to help other people. And so I want to tell you two newlyweds... you Vadim should give thanks every day that you have such a mother... and you Olga should do your best to be a worthy daughter-in-law because she deserves nothing less!”

The two nod.

The other guests wait for Olga Ivanovna to continue, but she does not. Instead she sits back heavily in her chair.

To Olga Mikhailovna! Boris says.

To my favorite mother-in-law! Olga seconds.

To Landlady, I say, My second aunt!

Vadim is sitting with his glass of vodka in his hand. It looks as if tears are forming in his eyes once again. Finally he speaks up:

To the woman, he says, who despite the disposable containers... is still my mother!

(60)

After Olga Ivanovna's toast, the party slowly gets back on track. The conversation revives itself. The scene with the five unexpected guests comes up less and less until eventually the issue stops being an issue at all.

Landlady, after acknowledging the toast in her honor, has gone back to serving the guests, and now she is shuffling back and forth between the living room and the kitchen with plates and bowls:

So how was it? she says looking at my empty plate.

How was what? I say.

My special dish? How'd you like it?

I didn't actually... I mean well, yes... Thank you... I enjoyed it tremendously... it was the most delicious lactose I've ever eaten.

I knew you'd like it... here have some more...

And Landlady slops another heaping portion of cheese on my plate:

But...!

I knew you couldn't refuse my special recipe.

But I can't... it's delicious, really!... but I already ate so much the first time!

You can make room for another portion... after all, this is a wedding!

Again Landlady is looking at me, and again I thank her:

Thank you, I say.

Sitting at the table I look back and forth at the conversations enveloping me: Boris and Olya are talking about gauze. Vadim and Olga Ivanovna are discussing the number eleven. And in the center of it all, as silent as soup, sits Olga, who is now — *at last it's beginning to sink in!* — hopelessly married.

What can she be thinking at this moment? About her husband? About me? Or can it be that she's already married enough to have forgotten? Can it be that I was wrong in thinking that her silence means more than it really does?

But Olga's face seems peaceful. Her expression looks no different than if we were celebrating my wedding. Even now she seems as if she knew that everything would end up right here, right now, exactly like this. *Could it be that she never really doubted it? Could it be that she never once thought that we... that she and I... that the two of us...?*

Hey..., I say, ...Why so quiet?

Olga seems to barely notice my question, lazily turns her head to look at me:

What am I supposed to do, she answers, Cry all night?

I don't understand.

You don't?

No.

Well, it's not important.

Vadim is already involved in a heated explanation concerning the color yellow, and after looking at him, Olga turns back to me with a devious smile and a hushed tone:

So why didn't you say a toast while you had the chance?

What?

You know you've been "promising" to say a toast... but when you were given the chance you refused.

Yeah well the timing wasn't right. After the unpleasant scene and all... you know it wouldn't have been a good transition.

You're such a liar.

What?!

I'm not sure if you lie more to yourself or to others.

I don't lie, I say.

Yes James you do.

Well that doesn't prove anything.

It doesn't prove anything... but it means the world. You're not going to make any toast tonight... and you know it!

Oh yeah...?

But before I can finish my sentence Vadim has interrupted me:

What's that I see?

Where?

On your plate... cheese!

What? Oh, this! Landlady offered me seconds.

Here, he says, Give it to me.

And looking around to see that Landlady isn't watching he quickly shovels the cheese from my plate onto his own.

Thanks, I say.

No problem.

Vadim takes a big bite of the cheese and then looks at me:

You know, he says, Olga Ivanovna and I were just talking and I was telling her about your search for the eleven yellow words... about how you've been trying to find them.

Actually I haven't been trying to find them... I've been waiting for them to find me.

How's that? Olga Ivanovna asks, How do you *wait* for words?

Well, I just sort of live. I mean that's all I do, I live. And while I do that, they sort of come by themselves.

That's right, Vadim says, And now he just has the eleventh word left. But it's the hardest to find, isn't it James?

That's right. It's the hardest.

What's the hardest? Boris says.

I was just telling James that I was telling Olga Ivanovna that for the last six and a half years he's been trying to find eleven Russian words. He's found all of them except one.

All of them?

All except one.

Except one *what*? Olya jumps in.

Except one of the eleven words.

What eleven words?

Well, Vadim repeats, like I was saying I was just mentioning to Boris that I was telling James that I was explaining to Olga Ivanovna about how he — James, that is — has been trying to find eleven Russian words.

And he's found all of them but one?

That's right.

What's right? Landlady asks.

But thankfully Vadim doesn't hear her:

And so James has been actively not seeking these words. Instead he has spent the majority of his time living. In other words, he has been waiting for the words to come themselves.

Everybody nods.

But why am I telling this story? Let's have James tell us in his own words... you know, about what the German man told him during the flight over.

Yeah James... tell us what the German said to you!

I tell them.

Wow! they say, And where was he going?

I tell them.

...And how would you characterize his forearms?

I tell them.

...And tell us again how he described the eleventh word!

I clear my throat:

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

What?

What does that mean *change and be changed*?

Nobody knows. That's all he told James. He said the word would change and be changed.

Like the weather? Boris says.

No Boris, Vadim says, Not like the weather. That's not tricky. You see it should be something beautiful and surprising... that's why it's the most difficult.

Maybe we can help him find the word! Olya says.

Yeah, says Boris, Maybe as a group we'll come up with something...!

What did the German man say again? What were his exact words?

Once again I repeat myself:

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

And that's all he said?

Yes that's all.

Damn Germans!

Well let's think... what could it be?

Do you have any ideas, James?

No.

None?

Honestly, I try not to think about it... you see, if I think about it I won't be able to find it. I just need to wait... I just need to read carefully and patiently, in other words, I have to force myself to live long enough to...

I know what we should do! says Vadim, We should take the German man's clue, examine it piece by piece, and see if we can help James find the eleventh word...

Now you're talking! the crowd answers.

...Let's look at his clue carefully...

Yeah! the crowd seconds, *Carefully!*

...The German man said that the eleventh yellow word is *the most elusive*.

That's right! the crowd cheers.

...So what is elusive? What are some things that can be considered elusive?

Well for one, Boris says, democracy is elusive....

That's right, says Olya, as is Love....

...And danger!

...And don't forget about logic!

The crowd cheers again.

That's all fine and well, Vadim says, but the German man said that the eleventh yellow word is the most elusive because *he already knew it*... So maybe we should look at those words that James already knew when he came to Russia. In other words maybe the eleventh word isn't one that was waiting for him here... maybe it was one that he already knew?

Now you're on to something!

So James... what other words did you know before you came to Russia?

What?

What Russian words did you know before arriving into the windowless airport?

Well that's the thing: I didn't know any.

You had to know some?

Not really... although now that you mention it... Well yeah, I guess I did know a few... I mean I knew the three that had already come into English from Russian. The ones I told you about earlier. You know, like all Americans I knew words such as *vodka*, and *kiosk*, and, of course the most important Russian word ever to enter the English language...

Olga Ivanovna is looking at me with interest.

What? the crowd prompts, What is the most important word to enter the English language? What Russian words did you know?

Nothing, I say, Just those two: *vodka* and *kiosk*.

Vodka and *kiosk*?

That's right.

Vodka and *kiosk*!

Right.

You only knew two Russian words before coming here?

Well yes.

Those are no good. *Vodka* doesn't change! *Vodka* is *vodka*!

That's right. And kiosks aren't beyond your grasp — there's one on every corner.

So the word has to be something else.

You know, says Olya, Maybe we've got this all wrong... I mean maybe we're going at this whole question from the wrong angle. Maybe the important thing is that the eleventh word is *unlike all the others*.

So...? the crowd reacts.

So... if we know what the other yellow words are, then by deductive reasoning we can arrive at the word that is *unlike* them. In other words, we should try to find a word that is different in some way from all the others that you've already found.

Yeah! says the crowd, Tell us the words you've found James! Which ten yellow words do you already know?

One by one I list them. As I do, my fellow wedding guests do not laugh; nor do their ears bleed; in turn, their hearts do not burn, and their eyes are not caused to moisten. Passionately they listen, soothingly they nod, but even when I have finished saying absolutely nothing, my words are still in vain:

Have I been wrong all these years? Could it be that these ten words mean nothing to other people? Could it be that they have value for me alone?

So *those* are the ten words?

That's right.

It's strange....

Why?

I was expecting something a bit more... how should I say this... universal!

But no! These are the ten yellow words! No matter what other people say! These are my ten yellow words!

Sorry, I lie.

It's not important... it's not important... the important thing is that those are the ten words that James found... and so those are the words we have to work with.

Well what do they have in common?

Nothing.

Yeah, unfortunately they're absolutely different.

I know! says Boris, I know what they have in common!

What?

They're all Russian! I mean, all the words he listed were Russian. So maybe that means that the eleventh yellow word isn't Russian at all... maybe it's a foreign word.

Good thinking! the crowd agrees.

Way to go! someone else seconds.

Yeah, says Vadim, I'm no linguist or anything... but I'm sure that each of those ten words were Russian!

So, Olya says, maybe the word he needs is from another language?

Yeah, but which one? the crowd answers.

Hey James which foreign words do you know? Which non-Russian words do you like?

There are so many...

What's your favorite?

My favorite non-Russian word?

Yes... there has to be a foreign word that you rely on constantly, like a crutch?

Well, I like the word *naive*. I use it an awful lot. It's French.

No no no! says Vadim, It can't be! James didn't come to Russia to learn French words!

He didn't?

No, he didn't.

Well okay then what about English?

He didn't come to Russia to learn English, either!

Actually, I say, I've learned a lot about English from being in Russia...

See! So which *English* words do you know?

There are so many...!

Try to pick one!

Well I can't just... I mean off the top of my head...!

Just list the first English words that occur to you!

Yeah... just tell us the words that mean the most to you!

But it's so difficult... well, all right... for example there's *finally, hopeless, inevitable...*

Good...

...*Dutifully, instead...*

Okay...!

...I tend to *make my way* a lot...

You sure do!

...Then of course there's *understand, besides, after all, wistful...*

'Atta Boy!

...*eventually, which, silence, really, beaming, flustered, but, violently, desperately, reluctant, disappointingly...*

Whoa! says Vadim, Not so fast... keep in mind that we can't understand you when you speak fast like that!

Yeah, says Boris, Just because you're familiar with those words doesn't mean that we are!

Sorry.

It's okay... please continue...

...*relentless...*

Wait a minute! says Olya.

I stop.

Wait a minute...! We have it all wrong again. The eleventh yellow word can't be an English word!

Why?

Because that wouldn't be *beyond his grasp*. Remember? How can it be beyond his grasp if he knows it without thinking!

She's right.

Yeah, it can't be an English word...

So what does that leave us?

Yeah, what do we have left?

German!

German?!?

And so over the next couple minutes I list every German word I know. Then Italian. Then Spanish:

...and *tequila*, and...

But wait a minute... this isn't Spain!

Finally, Olya interrupts me:

Hey! she says, I have an idea of what the word might be!

You do? everyone says and turns to her.

I'm not sure, but... it seems to me that the most important part of the clue is that the word *changes and is changed*...

Okay...?

Well, let's remember back to when James arrived. The year was 1991. It was before the putsch. Before Gorbachev became ex-president. Before currency reforms and advertisements for pantyhose. I mean let's not forget that he arrived long before people started using lubricated condoms or combing their hair on the right side...

We remember... we remember! the crowd shudders.

So that's it!

That's what?

That's the word that *changes and is changed*!

What is?

The word is *Russia*! I mean, just think... since James has been here Russia has changed greatly. The last six years have brought one change after another.

That's right... and then it brought even more change.

That's right... but these changes are for the worst!

Maybe so... that's a different question entirely. But from a purely linguistic standpoint we can say without a doubt that Russia has changed tremendously during the last six and a half years.

Okay, granted it *changed*. What about it *being changed*? What does that mean?

I don't know... maybe it means that the country has on the one hand changed *by itself*. And on the other hand it has been changed because of *outside influences*.

Like it has changed actively and passively? Internally and from without? Deliberately and against its will?

Something like that!

What do you think, James?

I don't know. Anything's possible.

Possible?!

Yes, possible.

Why is it only possible?

I don't know... it's just possible, that's all.

But you yourself say that in this world everything is *probable*!

Yeah James! Why do you think *Russia* isn't the eleventh yellow word?

Well because...

Hey! says Vadim, You know what else just occurred to me? You know what else it might be... I mean if we're talking about things changing and being changed?

Vadim has interrupted me before I can answer:

What? everyone asks.

Vadim looks around the table at each of the faces surrounding him:

The *ruble!* he says.

What!

The *ruble.*

The *ruble?*

No, the *ruble.* Just think: it changes... in other words its form has changed from old to new notes... remember 1993?

How can we forget!

...And soon it will change again... you know when they drop the zeros from the banknotes!

They're dropping the zeros?

You haven't heard? Inflation has been banished for good. And so by the beginning of next month prices will be in *rubles*... instead of *thousands*.

Everyone smiles at the news.

...So, says Vadim, Maybe that's the word? Maybe the word is *ruble?*

It's possible..., I say.

But what about it *being changed?* the crowd demands.

That's simple. Like any currency it is changed in money exchanges! You know, for dollars!

Hey that's good! everyone says.

That's real good! someone else says, What do you think James? Do you think the eleventh yellow word is *ruble?*

I don't know. Maybe.

Maybe?! they ask.

Yeah, I answer, Maybe.

The crowd roars:

We did it!

We helped James find the eleventh yellow word!

Uraah!!! The eleventh yellow word is *Russia* and *ruble!*

Uraah!!!

But..., I say.

Uraah!!! Uraah!!!

But there's one small problem....
 Slowly the cheering subsides.
 You've all forgotten one thing... those two words can't be the eleventh...
 for one simple reason.
 What do you mean?
 There's one obvious reason why these two words can't be the word I've
 been looking for all this time.
 Why not? Both words are *beyond your grasp*... they both *change and
 are changed*... and you had to have *already known them* before you talked
 to the German man!
 That's true... but you all are forgetting one important fact.
 What's that?
 Assuming that you are right... that the eleventh yellow word really is
Russia and *ruble*, then why is it that they are written... why are these words
 written using English letters...?
 The guests look at me in silence.
 ...Why, I say, aren't these words written in Russian?

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If you want my opinion, Olga Ivanovna says, *all* of your answers are
 wrong!
 What?
 If you ask me, it's obvious what the eleventh yellow word is...
 Everybody waits expectantly.
 ...The eleventh yellow word, she says, is *dusha*!
Dusha?
 That's right. It changes... it is changed... and it is hopelessly beyond
 your reach...!
 Hold on..., says Boris, Why do you say it's beyond his reach?
 It's beyond his reach because ever since he's been here he's been trying
 to measure the Russian Soul... and has failed miserably.
 He's been miserably measuring the Russian Soul?
 That's right.
 That's crazy... everyone knows that it's not for the mind to understand
 Russia! Everyone knows that the Russian Soul can't be measured!
 You're not exactly right, says Olga Ivanovna. The Russian Soul can be
 measured... if you take time to learn the *soul of Russia*.
 What do you mean Olga Ivanovna?

I'll explain...

Olga Ivanovna stops to look at me:
James, she asks, What have you read?
Excuse me? I answer.
What do you read? she asks again.
In general or specifically? I answer.
Both, she asks.
I don't know..., I answer.
You have to read something...?
Well yes... different authors.
Like what?
Well like Kharms.
Okay, and what else?
And Tolstoy...
Tolstoy! Olya interrupts, Fu!!!
What do you mean *fu*?
Olya looks at me as if I have offered her something bad to eat:
I hate Tolstoy! He's a terrible writer!
Olga Ivanovna tries to continue her questioning, but I interrupt her:
Wait a minute, I turn to Olya, You mean to say that the novelist Lev
Tolstoy is a terrible writer?
That's right.
Why?
Because he was mean to his wife.
What?
He was mean to his wife and so he was a terrible writer.
Have you read his works?
I read *War and Peace*. We had to read it in school. It was long.
Did you read *Anna Karenina*?
No.
Why not?
Because he was mean to his wife.
Well look Olya... You're not being fair to *Anna Karenina*... You're not
being fair to Tolstoy as a writer...
Why should I be fair to him when he didn't even treat his wife fairly?
Olya you shouldn't confuse Tolstoy the author with Tolstoy the person...
in other words, the life of the author with his works. You have to keep
them separate. A piece of literature is self-contained. You shouldn't judge
it by the life its *author* leads.

Why not?

Because they're unrelated.

They're the same. You can't write about that which you don't know. Authors don't live in a vacuum, you know!

No, unfortunately they don't. It would be better, of course, if they could. Nevertheless, a character in a story is just a character. The author is a person. Just like you... Just like me...

Here I expect that somebody will object, but nobody does. Enheartened by this, I continue:

You know let's take an example...

An example? Olya says, Haven't we had enough examples for one night?

Yes yes... but let's look at one more just in case.

Olya sighs.

I continue:

Let's say, I admit, that I decide to write a story about Russia — the usual bit, you know, about a delicate foreigner who comes to Russia to find the Russian Soul and instead learns to drink vodka — let's say I were to write a story like that...

But you're not a good writer! Olga says.

I know I know... this is just to make my point! Anyway, let's say I write my little story about Russia and finish it...

Okay?

...Right. So I finish my book, take it to the publishers, and on my way back home — trying to cross the street in front of the metro — right there in broad daylight... I'm run over by an ambulance. Boom! I'm dead. My book gets published with a posthumous note about my life in Russia... people feel sorry for me, buy my book quicker than a condom, and in no time at all it becomes a bestseller!

A bestseller?

This is all hypothetical, of course...

Okay okay. Your book is a bestseller. You're dead. What about the ambulance?

What ambulance! The ambulance crushes my chest like a cardboard box and doesn't even stop to pick me up. The end.

I don't get where you're going...?

Right. Now let's imagine a different scenario! Let's say I publish the book and then, instead of getting run over by an ambulance, I leave for America where I open a quaint flower shop specializing in roses....

Roses?

Yes, roses. So in this case my book is published, but I'm still alive. I'm still breathing. I'm still walking around.

In other words you're alive?

Exactly! And that's bad enough... but the worst part is that I've left Russia for America. And in the book there is a pre-posthumous note that says that the author of this book has left Russia and is currently selling flowers in America. In *this* case nobody will take my book seriously because number one I'm selling flowers, number two I'm in America, and number three...

I get it! I see! I think what you're trying to say is that...

...What I'm saying is that I don't want to be run over by an ambulance, and so I'll be damned if I write any books about Russia!

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I stop triumphantly. But my triumph does not last long:

...And number *three*..., Olga Ivanovna says, ...Your conversation reminds me of eleven-year-olds trying to discuss poetry. I mean are you two listening to yourselves? Neither of you is making a bit of sense!

We stop.

Two toasts and already *ambulances... roses... bestsellers...!*

Olya looks at me embarrassedly and I do my best to reassure her:

Don't worry, I whisper, When I write my book I'll make sure to leave that last scene out!

Olya nods gratefully.

Olga Ivanovna clears her throat:

As I was saying, she says, before that digression into publishers and ambulances... In order to understand the power of Russian words you have to read Russian literature. This isn't America, you know. Here we have a proud literary tradition.

What do you mean?

Well in America what's the most important thing? What's the thing that Americans treasure more than anything else?

Toilet paper, I say.

No.

Marlboros, Vadim offers.

No.

Marriage? Olga suggests.

Close... All right I'll tell you... In America the most important thing is Democracy. That's all you hear about... democracy this... democracy

that! Well in Russia we've never had democracy... and so we have literature instead!

I don't understand?

You know what they say... when in Rome do as the Romans do. In other words, when you are in doubt you should look to see what everyone else is doing and follow their lead. You should look to see what everyone else is doing and do as they do.

But Olga Ivanovna... this isn't Rome!

That's right, it isn't. This is Russia... and in Russia we *read*.

I don't get it?

If you can't understand the Russian Soul it's because you haven't understood the soul of Russia... in other words, you haven't done justice to our literature.

Olga Ivanovna! Vadim objects, James reads a lot. He's read all the classic Russian authors.

Oh yeah... like what?

Well, I say, Like Kharms and Tolstoy and...

Kharms isn't a classic. And Tolstoy was mean to his wife!

But...!

What about Pushkin?

Pushkin?

Yeah, Alexander Sergeivich Pushkin. The greatest Russian poet ever...

I know who Pushkin is!

I'm sure you do. But what have you read by him?

I'm sure James has read many things by Pushkin! Vadim says.

You know it's funny...

James...! Vadim says, You have read Pushkin, haven't you?!

Well, I repeat, It's funny...

AHA!!! Olga Ivanovna yells, You've never read Pushkin!

Well no I haven't. I've been meaning to, but...

You've never read Pushkin!

Well I've wanted to for some time but I've never...!

You've read Kharms and Tolstoy but you've never read Pushkin?!

Well no...

What do you mean you've never read Pushkin? Vadim says, What about the citation about getting married... you know about needing happiness for two people? Where'd that come from if you haven't read anything of his?

I saw it in the metro.

In the metro?

Yes, next to one of those new anti-abortion posters. I thought it might come in handy so I jotted it down... But I've never actually bothered to read an entire work of Pushkin's.

Olga Ivanovna points at me significantly:

See! she says, That's my point exactly: you, James, don't read Pushkin. And because you don't read Pushkin, you can't understand our literature. And because you can't understand Russian literature, you can't understand the Russian Soul. And because you can't understand the Russian Soul, it remains beyond your grasp. And because the Russian Soul is beyond your grasp, I suggest that it is the eleventh yellow word.

I stare at her blankly.

In other words, she says, the eleventh word is *dusha* because it is beyond your grasp because you don't read Pushkin.

Hey! Boris says, Are you guys talking about Tolstoy?

Tolstoy?

Until now Boris has been watching our discussion of literature without interest, and now he is eagerly grabbing his chance to say something literary:

You know, he says, I heard something funny about Tolstoy — of course I'm talking about the *novelist* Lev Tolstoy. I read somewhere that Tolstoy was Russian *on his mother's side!*

Yeah, says Olga Ivanovna, A lot of people have been saying that lately.

Really? I say, You mean to tell me that the great novelist Lev Tolstoy was Russian only on his mother's side?

You've never heard that? Olga Ivanovna asks in amazement.

No, I say, I've never heard that!

No one ever told you that Tolstoy was Russian on his mother's side?

Never.

How long have you been in Russia?

I remind her.

Six and a half years? And you've never once heard it said that Tolstoy was Russian on his mother's side!?

Well, yeah... I mean maybe I heard it somewhere...

It can't be that a person living in Russia for six and a half years didn't once hear that...!

Well I guess... I mean I probably have heard it, but I just didn't pay attention... you know...

You didn't know that Tolstoy was Russian on his mother's side?

I can't say that I didn't know... I mean I always suspected...!

NONSENSE!!!

What?

It's all nonsense, says Olga Ivanovna, Tolstoy was Russian on his father's side too!

I say nothing.

All those people who maintain that Tolstoy was Russian on his mother's side... they're only giving half of the story...

But you said...?

Hey! says Boris, You wanna know something else I read about Tolstoy?

Wait a minute... I must have missed something... Was Tolstoy Russian on his mother's side? Or on his father's side? Or was it both? Or neither?

That's right, says Boris, I read something else interesting about Tolstoy!

The rest of us wait for him to continue and so he does:

We're all familiar with *Anna Karenina*, right?

The guests are silent.

All of us sitting here *are* familiar with *Anna Karenina*, aren't we?

Actually, Olga admits, To be honest, I've never read it...

Well yeah yeah... me either. But nevertheless we're *familiar* with it...

Everybody nods.

Well anyway, the other day I was reading an article... you know about Tolstoy, and it said that while Tolstoy was still alive he had a practice of writing letters to his friends — it was some sort of hobby, I guess — and in one of his letters he wrote something about a book that he was then working on. He said something to the effect of “Now I'm going back to work on my boring and mediocre book *Anna Karenina*. All I want to do is get it out of the way so that I can move on to something else.”

Boris stops.

Can you imagine?! he says, While he was in the middle of writing *Anna Karenina* he was already looking ahead? In the middle of his story he was so sick of it that he just wanted for it to be over as soon as possible... Can you imagine that?!

Can I imagine? Can I imagine?! At this point in my life I can imagine nothing better!!!

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And so Vadim stands up:

Enough of this discussion about literature! he says.

I breathe a sigh of relief. The other guests grumble their agreement. And with that our discussion of Russian literature ends.

Vadim continues:

Let's not forget that we're drinking...!

Vadim stops to wait for the cheers to die down:

...This will be our third toast. Thank you Boris for making the first toast... and you Olga Ivanovna for making the second...

Everyone begins to fill their glasses with alcohol.

...And now I'd like to take my turn. And for this third toast I'd like to pronounce one of my favorites... It's a toast that I heard a long long time ago — in fact, right after I'd finally given up on our government — and once I heard the toast I swore that I would remember it for the rest of my life!

Vadim takes his wife's hand in his own as he pronounces the toast:

“Once upon a time there lived a farmer...”

No!!! I scream, We've already heard this one... everybody dies. Everybody dies. *Everybody* dies!

Relax James, Vadim says, This is a different farmer.

I sit back down.

The other guests are looking at me sympathetically.

Sorry, I say.

And so Vadim continues his toast:

“Once upon a time there lived a farmer who had four young daughters. The first one was intelligent, but not very polite. The second was polite but not very intelligent. The third was neither intelligent nor polite... but as beautiful as freshly baked bread...”

Vadim stops to kiss his bride on her forehead:

“But it was the fourth daughter that the farmer loved most: she was neither intelligent nor polite... but, at the same time, as ugly as an uninvited guest...”

Vadim stops to make sure that everyone is following his story. Of course each of the guests has heard this particular toast several times, but listens with rapture anyway:

“So anyway, the farmer had four daughters. And it was time to marry them off. The eldest daughter, because she was intelligent, was wed to a tax inspector and together they had five children — only one of which was declared officially — a handsome summer cottage outside Moscow, and of course a small apartment. The second daughter was polite but not intelligent and so she was given away to a trolleybus driver and together *they* had three children — all daughters — whom they named Olga, Olga, and Olga, respectively. The third daughter, though neither intelligent nor polite, was beautiful and so she married a foreigner and together they lived

like clockwork, although they never did have children — largely because the husband insisted on using condoms — until one day while trying to cross the Garden Ring against the light he was run over by an ambulance.”

Vadim laughs.

Hey Vadim! Boris yells out, Did the ambulance stop to pick *him* up? I don't know... but I doubt it.

Boris laughs.

And Vadim continues:

“...So anyway each of the daughters was married off except for the fourth one who was unintelligent, impolite, and far from beautiful. The farmer searched for a long time for someone to marry his daughter. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find anyone to take her. Then finally, it occurred to him. *It would be ideal!* he thought. *It would be a match made in the heavens!* And to his delight, when he offered his daughter to the prospective groom, his offer was immediately accepted...”

Vadim pauses:

“...and to this day Mr. and Mrs. Gorbachev live in blissful matrimony!”

The guests laugh.

Vadim laughs even louder:

“And so,” he says dramatically, “for this toast — our third — I'd like to raise our glasses... *To Women!*”

The men grunt their approval.

“To all of the women at this table... each of you are special in your own way. And so I'd like for us to raise our glasses to your uniqueness, your individuality, and your intricate and complex personalities!”

The men sitting around the table raise their glasses.

To women! Vadim repeats.

To women!! we confirm.

Happily, we touch our glasses and down our vodka.

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After Vadim's toast, the conversation takes off like an unstranded Aeroflot flight. Vadim is doing some explaining about the color purple. Olga is listening intently. Olga Ivanovna has finally explained that by *we* — not to be confused with *they* — she means everyone seated at this table. Boris, using his newfound authority, is making claims to have successfully measured the Russian Soul:

The Russian Soul, he has read, measures exactly seventy-eight cubic inches.

Olya tells us how much a soul of that size would cost in America.

I thank them both.

Landlady, who has not stopped for a minute to enjoy the atmosphere, comes into the room periodically to place cheese on my plate...

...And just as periodically, I spoon it off.

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But by now the emphasis has shifted. Whereas before our conversation was interspersed with toasts, now our toasts are interspersed with conversation.

Shot after shot, we swallow the occasion. Slowly, my reactions slow. The vodka takes hold, and my mind relaxes.

As the night progresses, we learn each other's opinions of the Gorbachevs. We compare literary tastes. Eventually, we learn that none of my fellow guests has read *Anna Karenina*. But that each of them has known at least one foreigner who was maimed by an ambulance.

With time our discussion becomes softer and less defined, like a piece of black bread in vodka. The room warms. The light dulls. Things that are square seem rounded. Things that are rounded seem round.

Then Olya stands up:

I want to make a toast! she says.

Olya is holding a half-glass of champagne that she hasn't finished from the last toast.

Easy for her to say! She's drinking champagne... and she's not even drinking that... she's half-drinking it!

I'd like to make a toast, Olya says.

The other guests fill their glasses.

And when she has made her toast we drink it down.

Then Boris makes another toast... and we drink it down too.

We have barely swallowed our vodka when Landlady walks into the room with a pan of food:

Is it my turn to make a toast? she asks.

Of course! we lie.

Okay then, she says and makes a toast.

And we drink it down....

(66)

By now, the toasts are coming faster and faster:

“To the future of the newlyweds!”

(vodka)

“To the bride’s mother!”

(vodka)

“To the irrigation of Uzbekistan!”

(vodka)

“To Russian humor!”

(French cognac)

“To American humor!”

(Russian vodka)

“To our health!”

(red wine)

“To us!”

“To *them!*”

“To whom it may concern!”

“To be or not to be!”

“To my mind!”

“To understand why Russians don’t smile!”

“To be continued...!”

(67)

With each toast, the party livens. One after another we down the alcohol to consummate the idea expressed.

And as I drink I feel the alcohol backing up in my throat as it has thousands of times before. But by now I am experienced: I have made sure to layer my insides with oil. I have made sure to flush the vodka with water. I have made sure to eat pickles with each swallowed dose.

Once, when I am in mid-swallow, Boris looks at me, amazed:

You drink like a Russian! he says.

Thanks, I gasp.

No really... I’m not just saying that... You really know how to drink!

Thanks, I say.
Boris takes my glass to pour me another shot.
Hey! says Olya, What are you doing?
I'm offering James some more vodka.
What for?
What do you mean *what for*? So he can celebrate Vadim's wedding like everyone else.
But he's not *everyone else*!
He's not?
No he's not.
I'm not?
No James, you're not... remember!
Oh knock it off! Boris says, James here can hold his liquor! Isn't that right, James?
I nod.
See?
No I don't see! All I see is that for the last hour James has been matching you shot for shot.
So?
So... you're Russian.
So...?!
So, aren't you afraid that he's just drinking in deference to you... that he really doesn't like vodka?
Of course not. All normal people like vodka!
But he's not normal.
He's not?
No he's not... he's a...
I know I know... I'm a foreigner!
That's right! says Olya, And foreigners don't know how to drink... no offense, James...
None taken.
But here Boris objects:
You're no foreigner, he says.
I'm not?
No you're not.
He's not?
No he's not... he speaks Russian... he reads poetry... he likes vodka... any way you look at it, he's "*ours*."
I blush from the compliment.

...But if you still have some doubts, Olya, about whether his drinking is sincere then why don't we ask him?

Okay, says Olya, Let's ask him.

Okay, says Boris, Let's ask him!

Okay...

Olya turns to me:

Hey James, she says, You don't like vodka, do you?

But before I can answer Boris objects again:

What kind of a question is that?! he scolds Olya, You're phrasing it all wrong. Here let me try...!

Boris turns to me:

Hey James, he says, You *do* like vodka, *don't* you?

(68)

When I was younger I had a friend who would give his dog beer. The dog would lap wildly at the foam and the rest of us would laugh and laugh because it's funny to see a dog drinking beer.

(69)

Of course, I say.

Boris smiles broadly and pours me another shot of vodka.

By now each person has pronounced at least one toast — many have already said their second. And each time a toast comes up, the others implore me to contribute. With each shot of vodka, I feel my body relaxing, becoming weaker. Like it or not, my defenses are coming down. I have forgotten my fears. I can ignore my inhibitions.

Hey! I yell out suddenly.

The other guests look at me, surprised.

I just remembered... I just remembered a piece of English poetry! I just remembered a poem that I like a lot... some people wouldn't consider it serious poetry, I suppose, but I like it anyway...!

And when the other guests are listening attentively, I recite it with feeling:

Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear..., I say.

But Boris interrupts me:

Not so fast... not so fast... I want to see if I can understand it myself!

And so once again I begin to recite my poem — this time just as fast...
but louder:

Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear.
Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair.
Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't fuzzy, was he?

But again nobody can understand.
Do you have any idea what he said? Boris says.
Not a clue, says Vadim, When he speaks fast like that I don't understand
a thing...

Yeah me either... but it sounds beautiful.

It is! I say and translate the poem for them:

You see, I explain, Fuzzy Wuzzy used to be a bear... but because he
doesn't have any hair we can't really continue to call him *fuzzy*, now can we!

There is an awkward silence. Then, suddenly, my fellow wedding guests
bristle, as if I have insulted them:

Maybe so, Boris says, Maybe so... but you just wait and see... one
of these days Russia will rise up... one of these days Russia will be a
superpower again!

(70)

And with that the conversation turns — as it always does — to politics.
But even when someone suggests drinking to Mikhail Gorbachev, I
refuse to make a toast.

C'mon James, someone says, Make a toast for us!

Yeah, says someone else, You're in Russia now and now you have to
play by our rules!

But I refuse.

Go on James, says Olga, Make a toast! We're all interested in what you
have to tell us!

But again I refuse.

*Why is she baiting me? Could it be that she really wants me to make a
toast? Or is she just trying to prove something? Can it be that she knows me
that well? I myself don't even know whether I'll make a toast or not! But for
some reason she seems to know...!*

And each time I refuse, someone else assumes the toast for me.

At some point Vadim comes out with a guitar:

Here! he says to Boris, Play us something.
Boris grabs the guitar and twists the strings until they are more or less
in tune. Instinctively, he fingers an A-minor chord:
What should I play? he says.
Something about women, Vadim answers.
And so Boris starts into his favorite song about women:

How many women fair,
How many tender names!
But only one of them can touch you,
Disturbing even rest and sleep,
When you're standing in love so deep....

As he sings, the rest of the guests sing along in drunken voices that sound
even better than they would have had they been sober. Those who have
forgotten the words hum along to the melody. Those who have forgotten
the melody mouth the words. Those who know neither — in other words,
me — sit and smile happily at the makeshift chorus:

I love you, Russia,
Our Dear Russia,
Unspent power,
Unseen sadness.

Sweepingly boundless,
Without end,
For centuries beyond the reach,
Of foreigners with yardsticks.

Many times *they* tested you,
For Russia to be or not to be,
Many times they tried and tried,
To kill the Russian Soul in you.

But you can't, I know,
Be broken or intimidated,
You are dear to me, my homeland,
For your unconditional nature....

*

(71)

One after another, Boris plays traditional Russian folk songs and the other guests sing along drunkenly, until the room is louder than lactose. In fact I am the only one sitting quietly. And when Boris notices this he pokes over at me:

Why so quiet James?

Oh no reason... I just don't know the songs you're singing.

What songs *do* you know?

Well, can you play anything by Vysotsky?

Can I...? Can I play anything by Vysotsky?! Who do you think you're talking to?!

And Boris squeezes the guitar a little harder and slams his fist against the strings. The guitar hollers out in pain:

If your friend suddenly turns out to be,
Neither a friend nor an acquaintance,
If you can't make out whether he,
Is "good" or "very good" then take him at once to...

Here, I join in singing with all my voice words that I memorized years before:

...My neighbor's wedding banquet...

Vadim, who has been sitting relatively quiet, suddenly joins in in a voice that would be horrifying if it weren't a Vysotsky song:

...My neighbor drank another liter,
Then sat with glazed eyes And wanted me to sing.
Did I think the drinks were free, or something?!

In time, all of us are doing our best to sing Vysotsky:

...And then came the fish soup and dried bread,
And then someone grabbed the groom,
And thrashed him thoroughly.
The guests danced in the small room,
And bludgeoned each other without malice...

All of us are singing at different times, as if we are singing different songs entirely:

...For what is a wedding without roses!
Just a drinking binge, that's all!...

As we sing, I can feel my heart losing all sense of control. My voice becomes louder. My eyes close so that I can scream out the words:

...But why is it that things aren't the way they should be?
Everything, it would seem, is as always:
The same sky — light blue once again...

With each line I feel my soul being released. The words come faster and louder until I am screaming them from the very depths of my lungs:

...I'm gone. I've left Russia forever!...

I'm singing without thinking. I'm feeling without words. I'm living without trying:

...And I'm laughing, I'm dying of laughter:
How could they believe all the madness that they've read?!
Don't worry — I haven't left!
And don't get your hopes up... I won't!...
...For it isn't night yet. It isn't night yet....

Vadim, who has had his share of vodka, is singing especially loud, belting out the words as if they were a rug. And although I am singing just as loud, it is Vadim's harsh voice that is heard above all the others:

It isn't night yet... he sings, It isn't night yet!

Boris strums the guitar a final time as we sing the very last words of our song:

It isn't night yet... *It isn't night yet.*

*

After we have finished singing Vysotsky, Boris plays his favorite Russian folk songs one after another:

My Wound will Never Heal

Snow, Snow, and Even More Snow!

For Some Reason I'm in Love with a Gypsy Girl

Moscow City Lights (Burn Brighter in Moscow)

Your Naive Jewish Eyes

And one after another we do our best to accompany him with words. And when his Russian has been exhausted, Boris turns to songs he knows in English. Specifically, the wedding party—in four-part solidarity—begins to sing Negro spirituals:

We Shall Overcome

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

*Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child
(A Long Way from Home)*

Go Down, Moses (Let My People Go!)

Hey! says Vadim finally, Play my favorite song!
But Boris acts like he doesn't know what Vadim is talking about:
Which favorite song? he says.
You know which favorite song! Vadim says.
All right all right... I'll play your favorite song!
The room becomes quiet.

Boris steadies his fingers and gently picks out the first few chords of Vadim's favorite song. The rest of the guests listen to the music silently. Vadim closes his eyes. When the introduction is finished, he begins to sing softly to Boris's accompaniment:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away.
Now it looks as though they're here to stay.
Oh I believe in yesterday....

Suddenly, I stand up. Scooting back in my chair, I make my way to an open space in the crowded living room. And just in time for the next verse, I begin to dance to the music. Twisting and turning... stepping and swaying... I do my best to dance to the song.

It isn't easy.

I'm not half the man I used to be.
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh yesterday came suddenly.

Awkwardly, I try to find an appropriate step to the music. Right foot... left foot... right foot... again right foot... left foot... again left foot... left foot... left foot... again left foot... left foot... left foot...

Right foot, James! someone yells.

But it is too late. My feet — both of them — are pointing in different directions. I have lost track of which foot is which and which direction it should go.

But it doesn't matter. Boris is playing guitar. Vadim is singing. I am drunk and dancing. It is a moment that is difficult to describe. It is a bond that goes beyond words.

Finally, the music stops playing.

Then Vadim stops singing.

And then I stop dancing. Proudly I return to my seat where I am congratulated on my performance.

Nice job, they say.

Thanks, I say, Believe it or not that's the first time I've ever danced in public.

They nod.

In fact, that's the first time I've ever *danced!*

They nod again.

I smile proudly and look at the table in front of me: like clouds on the horizon soon to collide, there is a glass of vodka and a mound of uneaten cheese.

*

(73)

“To err is human!”

(74)

But something about this night really is different from all others: the vodka. On this night it tastes even more bitter than normal. On this night it is even drier. And no matter how many pickles I eat, I can't reconcile the taste...

For six and a half years I've been able to swallow the taste of vodka. But now for some reason, it has begun to taste foreign. Now, at the worst possible time, its bitterness has lost its charm...

I down my shot of vodka.

But why? Why am I losing my taste for vodka? For six and a half years I've drunk with both vigor and determination, with both vinegar and determinists... for the best years of my life I've drunk it with salted pickles and seledka... with anyone and everyone who asked me to. But now... now something is different.

But what? Is it the taste of the vodka? Or am I the one who has changed? And if I really have changed, then maybe that's why I can no longer savor the dry bitterness of vodka? Maybe I really have changed? Maybe I've changed more than even I realized...?

I down another shot.

But how? And when? And for what reason? Where was I when it all happened? Was I here? Was I there? Not so long ago everything was fine... everything could be swallowed in easily measured doses... everything was as predictable as prose... everything was as it always was... it was, as it always was, that is, until now.

I choke down my glass of vodka

Until now it was all so simple. It was natural and beautiful. Until now I could drink and be confident that I was drinking not just for the sake of drinking... but for other more noble reasons. Until this day I was able to savor the taste of vodka as if it were my own. Until today I truly and honestly believed that it was mine. That it could be mine. That it would be mine.

Until today.

I raise my glass to my lips but do not drink:

But what are you worrying about?! This day is just like any other. So just drink and be thankful that you are drinking... just hold your glass up to the window over there... just hold it right up to the light blue sky... to where

the sun is still struggling to shine on this cold December day! Just look out the window at its warm rays... just let them warm you...!

I hold my glass up to the window.

But it's too late: it is already night.

(75)

Hey wait a minute! In the midst of all the drinking I almost forgot... I almost forgot to give my friends their wedding present! It's still sitting upstairs in my apartment... it's still propped against the wall! In all the revelry I forgot to bring it down. Should I get it now or should I leave it for later? But no... I've already swallowed too much vodka... if I wait for later it's quite possible that there won't be a later! I won't be able to get it... I can still make it... If I leave now I can still get it....

Carefully, I stand up from the table.

Where you going James? someone shouts at me.

I... what... my wedding present... it's in my apartment... it's in my apartment so that's where I'm going....

Now?!

I nod.

In your condition?!

I nod:

It's upstairs in my apartment... I'll just... I need to get it now... while I can still walk....

As I stand I feel my knees buckling and I have to grasp on to the edge of the table to keep from falling. But luckily nobody is paying attention to me. Diligently, I push the chair behind me and squeeze my way out. The vodka is backing up in my throat and I can feel it surging to the top of my throat... *Just a few more steps... past the guests... along the wall... into the dark corridor... okay, there's the metallic door... just a few more steps...!*

James!

What?

Hey James... where are you going with that? Landlady asks me.

My hand is already turning the handle of the door:

Where am I going with *what?* I say.

With that shot glass! Why are you going to the bathroom with your shot glass?

Bathroom?! What bathroom?! I'm going upstairs to get my gift...

No James... you're going to the bathroom...

Bathroom?!?

Yes, bathroom. Where did you *think* you were going with your shot glass?

I thought it was the heavy metallic door. I thought I was taking the shot glass out into the cold stairwell.

No James... it's the bathroom. It's the bathroom and you are holding a shot glass. In other words, you are holding the plastic doorknob of the bathroom in one hand and a shot glass in the other. In other words, James, you are very drunk.

Yes I am... it's clear... it's clear to everyone... but could you... could you just open the metallic door for me so that I can go up to my apartment... just open the door for me...?

In your condition?

Could you please open the door?

Are you sure you can make it?

I need to get my painting... it's upstairs....

You don't look so good.

I'm fine... could you just open the locks on the heavy metallic door for me?

Whatever you say... but put on your jacket... it's cold.

Landlady takes my empty glass while I twist and struggle with the jacket.

The sleeves... somewhere behind me there should be two sleeves... but for some reason there's only one... where's the other?... the other sleeve has to be there too... but it's not... okay one more time...!

Luckily, the arm slips into the sleeve.

Landlady fastens the buttons on my coat:

Here..., she says and hands me the shot glass.

Quickly, she unsnaps the locks on the large metallic door, and as I exit I listen in despair as it closes from the inside.

(76)

The stairwell is cold and dark. Silent and still. Through the heavy metal door I can hear the low hum of voices and then a burst of laughter. But that is on the other side. That is there. And I am here. I am alone and drunk and still holding my empty shot glass. Slowly, struggling to move my feet in front of me, I begin to approach the elevator. Step by step. One after the other I coax myself to the elevator. *Okay... it's up ahead on your left... just a few more steps... just a few more steps.*

I push the button and wait.

But nothing happens.
 I push again. But again nothing happens.
How long have I been waiting here next to the elevator? How long will it take to reach me?
 I push and push. And wait and wait.
How long will I have to stand here between floors? How long will I have to stand here in the middle of these twelve cold stories?
 I push again. And again. And again and again...
 But the elevator never comes.
The elevator works eleven months of the year... but when you need it more than anything...!
 I give up and set out along the stairs.
 One step at a time I try to find my apartment:

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

 Slowly I climb the stairs:

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

 One after another I climb and climb and climb:

 up.....up...

(77)

But these stairs are unlike any other: one after another they come and go... and as soon as one has gone... another comes to take its place. I climb and climb, but the more I climb the more I have to climb. Like a drunk on an escalator, I am stepping and stuttering — left foot then right foot then left foot — straining helplessly between two diametrical opposites: below me, marriage; above me, love. Climbing and climbing, I continue to climb. Like a spoon. Like a price. Like a foreigner who has not yet learned to give up....

(78)

The dry bitterness backs up in my throat.
 But I can't stop.

(79)

...And so I continue to climb. Just as hopelessly. Just as helplessly. Just as painfully. And hopelessly, helplessly and painfully, I try to see something that reminds me of where I am going. But I am climbing so slow that all I can see are the shadows shifting reluctantly under my feet. Climbing and climbing and climbing, I feel only the flickering buzz of the dim lights above me. *But why aren't I stopping? Shouldn't I have reached something by now? Shouldn't I have found what I am looking for? Shouldn't I be where I am trying to go...?*

Naively, I continue to climb.

(80)

But how many steps have I conquered? How many more are there to go? It's always easier when you can see the end in sight... but now I can't see anything. I can't feel anything. I can't hear anything but the sounds of my shoes on the cold concrete steps:

.....up.....

How many steps? How many steps are left? How many? And who are those unknown people going into my neighbor's apartment... Who are these teenagers with joints... why are they closing Olga Alexandrovna's door behind them? Why are they looking at me so strangely? And who is that man I just saw stumbling past me up the stairs... why was he holding his throat?

Finally, I reach my door.

I take out my key and put it into the lock but it doesn't turn this time either. I try again, but again it doesn't turn. I try again and again. And then again. And again.

But the lock doesn't turn.

Almost in tears, I bang on my door.

Open, damn you! Open!

Somewhere in the distance something crashes against the hard concrete.

But the lock doesn't open.

Defeated, I slump with my back against the door and fall onto the floor.

The hall is so cold. And so dark. The concrete below me is so cold. And so dark.

Is this all there is?

I am sitting on the cold cement, both hands palm down on the ground,
my chin resting heavily against my chest.
Tired and confused, I sit there.

(81)

“To no avail!”

(82)

And then I close my eyes.

(83)

(84)

When I wake up Vadim is standing over me. Olya is next to him.
There you are! she says.

I don't answer.

James! Vadim says, What are you doing *here*?

My key... my key doesn't work.

What key?

The key to my apartment... it doesn't work.

Vadim and Olya trade glances:

James what floor do you live on?

The twelfth.

Right. And what floor are we on right now?

The twelfth.

Are you sure?

Of course.

We're on the tenth floor James. You've been gone for forty-five minutes
and now you are sitting in the dark on the *tenth* floor of our twelve-story
building.

*What tenth floor? What are they talking about? Do they really think I
can't recognize my own floor? My own door? Do they really think that I've*

never sat slumped against this very wall a hundred times before? It's just the key... the damn key is failing me again... and the lock... these treacherous Russian locks...!

Vadim leans over to pull me up.

There you go...! he grunts.

I grab on to his shoulder.

What should we do with him? Olya says.

I'll take him up to his apartment... he's in no condition to join the party...

What? My apartment? They can't! My apartment's empty... it's dark and there's no one there! There's nobody to drink with! In my apartment there're no songs... no food... in my apartment there's no wedding!

Vadim, I mumble, I want to go back to your apartment.

James if you could see yourself you wouldn't be saying that.

I'm fine. Really.

You can't even stand up.

I'm fine Vadim.

You can't even speak clearly.

Trust me... I'll be okay.

Vadim is looking at me skeptically:

Are you sure?

I'm sure.

Vadim throws my arm over his shoulder and with his hip torques my weight onto himself.

Step by step Vadim and I head back down the cold dark stairwell:

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

(85)

“To and fro!”

(86)

When we enter the apartment Boris smiles widely:

Wow! he says, We thought you'd been hit by an ambulance!

I'm fine, I say.

You don't look fine!

Boris gets up to help Vadim carry me to my seat.
You don't look fine at all!
I'm fine I say.
Are you sure?
Boris, I lie, I'm fine.

(87)

When I am finally seated, I look in front of me. A new shot glass has been placed in front of me. And next to it, as warm as the room, my plate of cheese.

The conversation dulls. Boris and Olga are talking about themselves... but neither of them is listening. Vadim is retelling a joke about three men and a Frenchman.

But what about this cheese on my plate? What should I do with it? Who will take it off my plate this time? Everyone is talking around me. Everyone is busy with their own problems. For now my cheese is not important to them...!

I push the plate away from me.

But wait a minute! What am I worrying about? Why am I struggling against the flow? Why am I trying to separate myself from the others. After all, when in doubt a person should do what everyone else is doing... you can't go wrong that way! You can't go wrong if you watch what everyone else is doing and then follow their lead... and everyone else is enjoying the party to its fullest... everyone else is drinking beyond their limit... everyone else is eating cheese...!

I pull the plate back to me.

Everyone else is eating cheese!

The cheese is as warm as the room. As white as early spring. With my fork I scoop a large mound and hold it before my eyes. My hand is shaking and by the time I put it into my mouth most of it has fallen back to my plate. When I have swallowed the first bite, I take another one. And then another. And then another and another until my plate is as clean as a carpet.

And then I wait.

It really is delicious! It really is as good as everyone has been saying!

I wait.

How long has it been since I ate cheese? What was I so afraid of? What was I worried about? Since I was five I've turned down anything that smelled like milk, anything that resembled lactose... and now, after all this time it turns out that all my fears were unjustified! Now, it turns out that I was wrong all this time. But how many times did I deny myself? How many times did I

convince myself that it was in my best interest. But no more! From now on I will eat every piece of cheese that is forced upon me! From now on I will eat every glass of milk that is set before my eyes...!

So what did you wish for?

What?

Olga's voice has woken me from my contemplation.

Have you forgotten... you made a wish earlier this evening.

What wish?

Remember... you said you made a wish because you were sitting between Olya and me.

I don't remember.

You can't remember what you wished for?

No I can't... it must not have been important.

Do you believe it will come true?

I don't know... but I want to believe.

What?

I want to believe. And maybe that's the most important thing. Maybe I've been making a mistake all this time... maybe I've been trying too hard. For six and a half years I've been trying so hard to measure the Russian Soul. For just as long I've been trying so hard not to try to find the eleven yellow words...

What are you talking about?

It's not important. It's not important. Hey Olga... will you be honest with me?

I don't know.

Olga please tell me the truth... Are you married or aren't you?

Yes, James, I'm married.

Irreversibly?

And irrevocably.

Irretrievably?

And hopelessly.

Olga...?

Yes?

Congratulations.

(88)

“To love, honor, and obey!”

(89)

Olga is silent.
No really... I'm... I'm happy for you.
But she says nothing.
Olga... hey Olga... can I ask you to... can I ask you a favor?
What?
Can you just... can you just say something to me?
What?
I've had too much to drink and it just occurred to me: I don't even know you... I feel like you haven't let me know you...
What are you talking about?
Can you just tell me about yourself, something that nobody else knows...
can you please do that for me?
James! You're acting ridiculous.
Please Olga...!
But she has already stopped listening to me.
Olga...?
She is not listening.
Olga...?
And that's when I understand how married she really is.

(90)

"To little too late!"

(91)

And so I hold up my glass to consummate the toast. Rocking slightly in my seat I hold my glass up:
Clink! it says, Clink! Clink! Clink!
Four times.
But there are five people within arm's reach... and that means that someone has snubbed me... that means that one of them has not noticed my glass.
Olga!
I offer my glass to Olga. Leaning over the table, I hold my glass in her direction. But she is not looking at me. She is kissing her husband on the curly part of his dense beard.

But why? Why is she moving away from me? Why does it have to end like this? I've known my role. I'm not demanding anything more from her than she can give! Surely she sees that I haven't touched her glass? Surely she knows that I have been left toastless?

Say a toast James!!! someone is yelling.

I can't, I say.

Why not?

I don't remember why... but for some reason I just can't...

What do you mean you can't? Have your six and a half years been lost on you?

But again Olya steps in to make a toast.

And when she is finished we drink.

And when we have drunk she turns to me:

You know James, she says, You really don't have to drink every time... you can take a break if you want...

I'm fine...

You're drinking as if you're trying to prove something. As if it means more for you than simply being drunk.

I'm fine...

James...?

Olya has put the flat part of her hand on my upper arm, and for the first time since I can remember I feel a flutter in my heart.

Do you feel all right?

What do you mean?

You seem sullen and despondent... You haven't smiled since you danced to Vadim's favorite song... as if you're afraid of something.

I'm not afraid of anything.

Are you sure?

I'm just doing my best not to make a fool of myself... that's all I want. All I want is to get through this wedding... all I want is to last long enough to make it through Customs with dignity...

You know, Olya says, You shouldn't worry what other people will think... you should just be yourself.

Who?

Yourself. Don't try to follow other people's example.

But...!

You shouldn't worry about what other people are doing... you should do what *you* think is right.

Olya strokes my arm again and then lets go.

What did she say? What is it supposed to mean? And why did my heart flutter when she touched my arm? When was the last time that happened?

I smile at Olya.

It was... it was when she was telling me about why she disliked America... it was when she had cast aside all remnants of politeness and intelligence and was insulting me with the truth... that's the last time my soul jumped from joy... that's the last time my heart moved!

She smiles back.

Wow! I knew it! I knew I could find someone like her! Someone who is intelligent enough not to be intelligent. Someone honest enough to be impolite. She's beautiful, of course, but it doesn't matter... we all have our faults. The most important thing is that she is neither intelligent nor polite!

I smile again. She does the same.

She's perfect!!! That's right... she is neither intelligent nor polite... and so she's perfect! Could it be that she...? Could it be that she and I...?

Hey Olya...? I say.

Yes.

I was wrong about you.

What?

I thought you were like all the others... but you're not.

What are you talking about?

You're not polite at all.

Excuse me?

And you're not intelligent either!

What?!

You know, you're beautiful — no offense, of course! — you're beautiful but you're neither intelligent nor polite... do you know what I'm saying?

No.

You don't understand? I just said that you're neither intelligent nor polite!

James you're drunk.

No I'm not. I've never been more sober.

That's what I've heard...

Olya... I want to give you something...

What?

You see Olya there's something I want you to have... I should probably tell you the story behind it... but no... I won't! It's self-explanatory.

What are you talking about?

Olya, I want to give you something, but you have to promise me that you'll take it!

What is it?

Olya, do you promise me that you'll take it?

I don't know...

Promise me, Olya.

I don't know...I mean, I guess I promise.

Thank you! Thank you, Olya!

I reach into my pocket for my wallet:

Olya, I say, I want you to have this...!

With heavy fingers I separate the wallet.

...Just a minute... I can't... it's too thin... I just need to...

James! What are you doing?

...I just need to pull it out... but it's the size of...

Olya is looking at me fighting with the wallet:

There! I say, There it is... Please take it! Please take it... don't refuse me...!

Olga is holding out the palm of her hand.

There it is! I say and place the two-kopecck coin in her hand.

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What is it?!

It's a two-kopecck coin... from me to you!

But...

Olya I want you to have it!

But...

I want you to have it as a souvenir.

A souvenir?

Yes... something to remember me by.

But it's filthy... and sticky!

Olya tries to give the coin back, but I push away her hand. Again she tries to offer me the coin and again I push away her hand. Again she offers, again I push.

Then she offers enthusiastically. And just as enthusiastically I push her arm away...the coin falls out of her hand and with a plop lands in my glass of vodka.

I watch the coin settle lazily to the bottom. *There it is. Even now gravity has won out! Even now it is night.*

Through clouded eyes I look at Olga who is sitting next to me: but she is not looking back. She has not taken her eyes off her husband since the last time she talked to me. She will never again look back. She will never again look at me.

...But should I say a toast, or not? On the one hand everyone is begging me to say a toast... they are pleading with me. On this same hand, it's Russian tradition... after all I would hate to think that my six and a half years in Russia really have been lost on me! But on the other hand... on the other hand... wait a minute... what was the other hand?! There was some reason that I'd decided not to make a toast... something that I'd been afraid of? But what was it? And why am I not afraid now? That must mean that it wasn't anything important...! It must mean that it isn't all that important after all....

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I stand up:
A toast! I say.

(94)

Sit down James, Olga says.
Olga!
Look... he's absolutely drunk... he can barely stand up. Boris why don't you make a toast instead...?
Olga! Vadim says, What's come over you?
Look at him...
Olga! I for one want to hear what James has to say.
Yeah, says Boris, So do I...
As I stand swaying, my glass of kopeck vodka in hand, I hear the voices brushing by me.
He's too drunk! Olga says.
Oh let him give a toast! Vadim says.
But...!
After all, James is a person too... so let's hear what he has to say... let's give him a chance to express what's on his mind!
Olga looks as though she is going to cry:
But he's not a person... he's not...! No matter how well he knows Russian... no matter how much he likes our literature... no matter how many glasses of vodka he can drink... he'll never be Russian... he'll never be one of us... no matter what, he'll always be...
Vadim holds up his hand:
That's enough Olga, he says, Now dammit... James *is* a person.

But...!

Vadim turns to me:

Okay James, he says, Go ahead with your toast...!

And so I do:

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“My toast?” I say, “Oh yes... my toast... I guess that’s what I stood up for. I stood up because I wanted to make a toast and so that’s what I guess I’ll do. I’ll make a toast because I’m standing up and I’ve got my glass in my hand. I’ll make a toast because everybody is expecting it from me. So my toast goes like this... I mean, I should start at the very beginning and for me the beginning began at the beginning... in other words at the windowless airport... that’s right... but then some other things happened — in some order or another — and the next thing you know it... here I am! That’s right... here I am. After six and a half years here I am standing in front of you. Believe me it wasn’t easy... you have no idea how many toasts I’ve consummated, how much vodka I’ve swallowed over the last few hours... over the last few years. But nevertheless, here I am standing before you. And since I’m here, and as long as I’m still standing, I guess I might as well make a toast of some kind...”

(96)

“...But what should I say? What can I tell you? You know when I came here six and a half years ago I was... can you believe it?!... six and a half years younger. I was naive then. I didn’t understand Russian. I didn’t understand Russians. I couldn’t even have told you whether Russia was even Russia. Or whether it wasn’t. Back then I didn’t know your beliefs or traditions, I couldn’t understand your customs or your Customs, and to be honest I hadn’t even heard of Mr. Pushkin. But that was six and a half years ago. And a lot has changed since then. Now, at the very least, I’ve *heard* of Pushkin. Now, fortunately, I am familiar with your customs... and, unfortunately, with your Customs. Now, I understand where to put the new metallic strips in the metro turnstiles, and how to peel a potato so that it sparkles, and why it is that Russians smile so rarely. Now I know that the Russian Soul is too Russian to be measured... that mushrooms are more plentiful in the fall... and that BMW’s are neither as hard nor as thick as an oncoming trolleybus. Now I know that the novelist Lev

Tolstoy most likely had some sort of familial ties to Russia. I've learned all this. I've been lucky enough to be able to learn. Luckily, I have been taught. And I have taught..."

(97)

"...But you know during all this time I never once stopped to let people know how grateful I was. Not once did I stop to tell the redhead that it was he who taught me Russia. Not once did I thank Vadim for being my best friend. Not once did I let them know what they really meant to me. The people who make up my Russia. All of them: friends and acquaintances and students and co-workers and policemen and lovers and trolleybus drivers and cashiers and poets and politicians... and everyone in between. There're so many people I never had time to thank. So many people I had time to thank, but never did. So many people who have helped me during the last six and a half years. And all of them are worthy of a toast. You, Landlady, for showing me how to suffer, and how to generalize, and how to eat bread; you, Boris, for being my best friend's best friend; you, Olga Ivanovna, for making the second toast; you, Olya, for touching me on the upper part of my arm when I needed it more than anything. For six and a half years I have lived with all of you... and yet I never once told you what I really feel about you..."

(98)

"...And so, now, I'd like to thank you all. Now I'd like to drink to all of you. Vadim, Boris, Olya, Landlady, Olga Ivanovna... Now I'd like to drink to you all. To all of you. And to all the other people who have comprised my life for the last six and a half years. All the people who have helped me out of the kindness of their hearts... who have opened their souls to me... who have passed me on the opposite elevator, and in the crowded metro, and with whom I have scurried to get out of the way! Now I want to drink to all of you! To each and every person who helped me find a building... or conjugate a verb... or understand the meaning of a word. To all of you I owe more than I can ever say. Words are poor substitute for ideas. But nevertheless, I want to try. Nevertheless, I want to raise my glass to Tanya... but then again, no... I *don't* want to drink to Tanya; actually, I want to drink to Tanyas, to *all* of them! And to all the Lenas! And to every single Natasha that has ever lived... In fact, what

the hell... let's even drink to Irina! Let's drink to all of them at once... to all of you because you are all so beautiful... all of you, every single one! Tanya, Natasha, Irina, Lena... and Kirill and Evdokia... You are all so beautiful... As beautiful as... as beautiful as... as a newborn baby... as pure as a soul. As a Russian Soul..."

(99)

"...And so let's not forget to drink to the Russian Soul and while we're at it, to the American Dream — they're the same thing, aren't they? — and to all the Russian immigrants who invented America and the American inventors who invented the Russian Soul. And to smokers and trolleybus drivers who don't invent anything at all; and to non-smokers and non-trolleybus drivers who most likely don't invent anything at all... and to black bears and white snow... to yellow words and red flags and light blue skies, to snow and vodka and both blacks and whites and the number three, and eleven, and six and a half and to the letter *И* and the letter *Ф* and to all the other letters from *А* to *Я*. (Except, of course, for *X*.) But on second thought... no!... *including X*! But no, that's not right either... *especially X*!!! After all, the expressivity of a language is measured by the amount of words that begin with *X*... and so let's drink to the Russian language, the most logical, the most romantic, the most expressive and beautiful... To Russian! To Russian!! To Russians!!! All of them! And to all the Russians who invented Russian, in other words to Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin! And to Kharms for teaching me that Pushkin is fallible... and to the engineers of the Moscow metro for teaching me how to fall! Of course I have to drink to Lev Tolstoy for showing me how to read Russian... and to a very special married... I mean separated... I mean dead woman who taught me how to love... and to each of my Russian girlfriends — all three of you — with your accents and your whispering voices and your calculators and red painted lips and nyloned legs and cold cold hands... Even I understand that it's over... even I can see that it is all coming to an end: my friendships, my loves, my story in Russia... all of it is coming to an inglorious end. But not before I make a toast: not before I make a toast to this country... that's right! For six and a half years I lived without saying thanks and now it's time to make a toast to this country that is... that was... I don't know what she *is*, or what it *was*... all I know is that she is not Canada and I want to drink despite it. All I know is that it was not America and I want to drink because of it. All I want to do at this

moment is drink to this country which is neither East nor West... neither Europe nor Asia... neither *it* nor *she*...”

What the hell am I saying?

“...My dear friends, let’s drink to this country, to this beautiful beautiful country... a place which for six and a half years I called home; a place that you call many things but that I will forever call mine; let’s raise our glasses to the land which, for lack of a better word, we call Russia!”

(100)

I sit down.

(101)

And then I stand up.

That is to say, I continue my toast:

(102)

“But I almost forgot... I almost forgot about Olga! I almost forgot about the most beautiful woman in this room... in this world! There’s a lot that I could say about her: About her mellifluous voice... about her virtue... about... well there are a lot of things I could say about her. But what I really want to say is as simple as a suture, as lonely as luck. What I really like about her I can express in one simple word. That’s right... one word! And that one word is... *toes*. Let’s drink to Olga’s beautiful glorious toes! Yeah, I know what you’re thinking... you’re thinking that I’m going to say something like, ‘Hey everybody let’s drink to Olga — the girl that for the best part of my life I have been having orgasms in...’ You’re probably thinking that I’m going to say that in front of all of you... but I’m not! I just want to drink to Olga’s toes! Nothing more. Even *I* understand that it’s over. Even I understand that my relationship with Olga is finished... even I know when to give up...”

(103)

I stop. Everyone is looking at me. My toast is finished. I have said everything I wanted. Everything I needed. But no... there is something else I should say. I need to say something profound so that they will remember

me after I have left. I need for them to understand me when I am gone. Now is my chance to cleanse my soul so that they will forgive me...

But I can't. Instead I lift my glass up weakly and mutter the following words:

"That's it..." I mumble. "That's my toast."

I look at them helplessly.

But nobody responds.

Why is everyone so silent? Why is everyone looking at me so strangely? Don't they speak Russian? Don't they realize that my toast is over and that we should be drinking? Haven't they understood my words? If so, then why is everyone looking at me as if I am speaking in a foreign language? Why aren't my fellow guests drinking my toast in their glasses? Could it be that I said something wrong? Could it be that I used the wrong words? Why the strange, blank faces? Why isn't anyone drinking? And how was I able to translate the word "girlfriend"? And "fun"? And "toes"? Where did I find these Russian words? Or could it be that I... Could it be that these words were... Could it be that...

I sit down.

(104)

Here Boris raises his glass to me:

What the hell did he say?

I don't know, says Vadim, When he talks slow I have a chance, but when he talks fast like that...

Yeah, me either! says Olya, The only word I understood was *okay*.

It seemed like he wanted to tell us something!

I've never seen him so animated!

It must have been important...

Is he finished?

I'm not sure.

Me either... but let's drink anyway...!

And they do.

(105)

The last time I saw Aunt Helen she was looking out of the curtains of our house, watching me get into the taxi. She'd had enough of the airport ordeal, she'd told me, and so we agreed that this time I'd take a cab.

It was three years ago.

Even then her hair had begun to turn gray. Wrinkles were appearing in places where they hadn't been before. Her smile was becoming thin and brittle. Even then she was learning to give up.

Since that time I have only seen her words. Rarer and rarer. Less and less demanding. Since then I have been busy with things that seemed important. For the last three years I have been getting by without her. For the last three years I have been living here. For the last three years I was living here.

For six and a half years I lived *there*.

(106)

After my toast the conversation degenerates even further. By now everyone is speaking without understanding, and the conversation floating around me mixes together like a mixed drink: the men are talking about politics... while the women are telling me about their unwanted pregnancies:

Of course it's not an easy decision, they say, It never is... but then why should we have to carry the burden for nine months...? For the rest of our lives? Why should we have to pay for the mistakes of a handful of Communist leaders? But we're still paying! You can see it in the tax system... you can see it in the stifling beaurocracy... You can see it in the organized crime. But do you know what this country needs? Do you? I'll tell you... What this country needs is a good suction cup... I mean just take a look around... what do you see: cockroaches running over the examining table... old women in dirty medical gowns... a flickering lamp above our heads... and standing there in surgical gloves and a mask over his face... Mikhail Gorbachev! Can you imagine that? I mean I'm no anesthesiologist or anything, but how can you expect a country to function when its doctors go unpaid and its nurses have to be bribed to pay any attention at all to the ailing economy? Yeah sure you can take the zeros off the ruble, but is that going to ease the sick feeling in your stomach? Sure you can drink prescription medicine by the flask, but what about the *next* elections? Do you see what we mean, James? James can you see what we're trying to tell you?

Do I see? Do I see? I can barely see my hand in front of my face... and they're asking me if I see?!

But in fact six and a half years have not been lost on me. In other words, my six and a half years have not been spent in vain; in other words, I can speak Russian while drunk:

I see, I say, I see.

But what about this dry bitterness building up in my throat? And what time is it? How long will this wedding last? How long should it take? How will I know when it really is over? Will it be clear to me... ?

Hey! says Boris, What are you thinking about?

Me? Nothing.

Yeah me too.

Boris stops:

James...?

Yes?

Are you drunk?

No.

You're not?

No. Are you?

No.

You're not?

No.

Me either.

Good.

Boris stops again:

James... hey James... I have a question for you.

All right.

Can I ask you a question?

All right.

Now James I want you to answer honestly...

I'll try.

Are you listening?

Yes.

Are you listening to my question?

I am.

James, tell me the truth... do you respect me?

Boris I respect you tremendously.

That's good. I respect you too.

I'm glad.

But there's only one thing that I can't understand... there's only one question that I'd like to ask you.

Go ahead.

It's something that I've been wanting to ask you all evening... but haven't.

Okay...?

It's something that's always interested me.

I'm all ears.

I'm not sure if anybody's ever asked you...

What?

I doubt if anyone's ever asked you this before... but I was just curious...

Boris looks at me:

James... what's the deal with the blacks in America?

(108)

#975. And that's when it happens. At that moment my wish comes true: Before he can finish his sentence, I am vomiting.

* * * * *