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Beyond the Threshold: Life in the New Russia

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ABSTRACT

Amanda Sprang spent nine months, from September of 1995 to May of 1996, studying at Colby College's program in St. Petersburg, Russia. Through contacts made during previous trips to Russia in middle and high school, Amanda was able to quickly rekindle her old friendships and make new ones with many young Russians from different backgrounds.

The following work is a collection of twelve essays about life in the New Russia. The essays are framed by a foreword and an epilogue that help place the entire work in a historical context. Although the theme of each essay emerges from a particular incident, within every story Amanda has addressed numerous topics relating to Russian life in today's changing society. Her first essay, "Art Klinika," takes place in an avant-garde night club in St. Petersburg, and includes a brief, yet impressionable, encounter with three young Russian men. "The Birthday Party" recalls a wild evening at the home of her close friend, showing how the Russians greet special occasions. Both the third and fourth essays take place in Moscow, where Amanda returns to visit old friends. These two essays portray the lives of the new economic elite in comparison with the average citizen, as well as show how young Russians face the new challenges that greet them. "Politics Russian Style" recalls a political rally in St. Petersburg, and attempts to shed light on the wacky political world of an infant democracy. Chapters Six through Ten take place away from the western cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, as Amanda brings us to the cold, mysterious land of Siberia in the dead of winter. She recounts her five day train ride with a retired, high-powered, Communist party official, her experiences in the provincial city of Irkutsk, and a brief trip to a Buddhist monastery and, later, an excursion to Lake Baikal. Back in St. Petersburg, Chapter Eleven gives a humorous account of a ski trip with several Russian friends. Amanda finishes her work with her final chapter, "The *Dacha*," which describes a weekend spent at a Russian country home with her friend's family.

Beyond the Threshold:

Life in the New Russia

by

Amanda Sprang

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholar's
Program**

COLBY COLLEGE

1997

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page iv</i>
Foreword	3
1. Art Klinika	7
2. The Birthday Party	22
3. The Heart of Russia	29
4. An Old Friend	45
5. Politics Russian Style	58
6. The Journey East	70
7. On the Banks of the Angara	82
8. In a Strange Land	93
9. Lake Baikal	106
10. Hospitality	116
11. The Ski Trip	124
12. The <i>Dacha</i>	132
Epilogue	144

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FOREWORD

In Russia it is bad luck to greet a person across the threshold of a doorway. You must wait to be invited in from the outer world--from the cold, dirty street where smiles are rare and the mood inhospitable--to the warm, tender nucleus of the inner world. Sometimes the journey through the symbolic doorway of Russia is a long one.

The first time I visited Russia in 1986, it was the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev had just come to power. Our group from Lakeside School in Seattle was involved in the first trip of American middle and high schoolers ever to visit the Soviet Union on an official exchange. The culture of fear and suspicion was still deeply ingrained in the minds of the Russians; nobody wanted to take the step and invite us into their homes--across the threshold. I saw Russia from afar, admiring the architecture and beauty of the land through a twelve year old's eyes. I remember the beautiful churches, their glittering golden domes that contrasted with the gray sky, and the creepy feeling I got when we solemnly filed by the embalmed Lenin, who was guarded in his tomb by stone-faced, goose-stepping soldiers. But I did not get a feel for the people, for the much discussed "soul" of Russia. I returned home impressed, yet ambivalent, as though I had looked at a beautiful picture book but not read the words. Russia was in my mind, but not my heart--I had come up to the doorway, peered in, and left.

I wanted to return to that strange land with more perspective, so I jumped at the opportunity to go to Russia again as a senior at Lakeside in 1991, five years later. There could not have been a more exciting time to visit. The hard-liners had taken over the Russian White House and held Gorbachev captive just two days before we were supposed to depart. Our trip was postponed for two weeks, until the US State Department could ensure our safety and allow us to leave. When we arrived, the mood in Russia was euphoric--Yeltsin had emerged as a hero when he stood on a tank in front of the White House, declared his solidarity with the people, and asked the military leaders to ignore orders to fire on the people and follow him.

If before I had experienced Russia on this side of the threshold, on my second trip I was invited in. Young Russians were eager to show the part they had played in defending their White House from the tanks--especially those who helped build the barricades and had status over those who watched from the sidelines. My host sister, Nina, lived across the boulevard from the barricades in front of the Russian White House where all the excitement took place. She and her friends had witnessed the beginnings of the death throes of the Soviet Union. Now the Russians could speak to us with pride about their country's new political path, whereas in earlier times political talk could have driven a wedge between kindling friendships.

The winds of change blew in my favor, and my young Russian friends spoke candidly about their hopes for the future. Nina and I became inseparable, as though we had known each other all our lives. I made two other close friends, Tanya and Vova, and found myself in the midst of Russian life. I had made it across the threshold, though still a silent observer, since at the time I knew only about twenty words of Russian. When the time came for us to leave, I tried to stay in the country longer, sensing the vitality of the times. But the old Soviet bureaucracy made it impossible for me to change my visa. I knew, however, that I had already planted the seeds that would make my return a reality.

After that trip, I understood that Russia was not only in my mind, but in my spirit. I could feel Russia. Everything I heard or read about the country stirred my senses and excited me. Without that trip during my senior year of high school, I would probably never have made the decisions I subsequently made. After I graduated from high school, I tried to look for work in Russia, but as an eighteen-year-old not knowing Russian, I did not have much to offer. I reconciled myself to the fact that I would have to wait and went about making my preparations.

Consciously I got ready to return by choosing a college with a good Russian program, but unconsciously I helped prepare myself for the think-on-your-feet, rough, extemporaneous existence of everyday Russian life by ski racing and fighting forest fires. From the age of five, I had been a ski racer--traveling around the western part of the country, living out of a suitcase in motels with glitter ceilings, shag rugs, and mass-produced art on the smoke-stained walls. I trained for months and tested myself on the unforgiving mountains. Although I never got to the international level, the knowledge

gained exceeded the race results—I learned that in life, nothing ever goes as planned. Following my first knee injury in the Junior Olympics at age sixteen, I had to take the injury in stride, and looked at it as another adventure--another frontier to cross. After my recovery, I decided to continue racing during the ski season after high school and to postpone college. In the summer and fall, I was able to join a small fire engine crew in the forests near Seattle, which eventually led me to the world of fire fighting.

Fighting fire in the woods seemed to be a natural progression from ski racing—the nomadic lifestyle is similar, as are the rough-and-tumble people who love to work hard and play hard. As a member of a twenty person Interagency Hotshot Crew, my mental and physical limits were constantly tested. And as in skiing, all of us lived for the adrenaline, the fear, and the sense of accomplishment when the work was done. Bombing down a mountain at seventy miles an hour prepared me well to handle the exhilaration and danger of executing a back firing operation in southern California chaparral. Timing, patience, and perseverance all played key roles--expanding my sense of adventure and ultimately helping me to return to Russia.

After two years of Russian study at Colby College in Maine, I was finally able to take the trans-Atlantic flight back to Russia. Starting in September of 1995, I was to spend nine months studying at Colby's overseas program in St. Petersburg. This time I was ready.

Russia had changed. Already the elation over the end of the Soviet Union had worn off. Times were hard, and people were struggling. But they were free, and, as always, persevering. If I had, five years before, been welcomed through the doorway of Russian life to look around, this time I slowly would become part of it. At first, when I still couldn't express myself as well as I wanted, I observed and let the aura of the land sink in. Soon, like a child learning to speak, I was able to show my true self—my thoughts, feelings, and ideas. At times I felt like screaming out, "Why doesn't anyone understand me?!" But instead I let my frustrations pass, looking forward to the next breakthrough in communication with my Russian friends, without whom I would never have been able to experience the finer aspects of Russian life or understand the nuances and subtleties that make the culture deep and bountiful.

It is for my Russian friends that I wrote this collection of essays. Today there is an entire generation of young people who have been omitted from media's coverage of the new Russia—and they are the hope of their country. Old enough to remember life in the communist Soviet Union, yet young enough to adapt the course of their lives to the rapidly changing world that has opened up to them, this generation is rising to the challenges of their times. However rough the going may be, young people are forging for themselves normal lives that will eventually provide a backbone for civic culture in Russia. This generation is truly the hope of the Russian nation. Today all we hear about are the politics of Russia and the dire situation of the average worker and, particularly, the elderly pensioners; we know very little about the hopes and dreams of young Russians, let alone their daily interactions.

What I have written today may already seem dated tomorrow, but I am not writing to unequivocally comment on Russian culture. After spending almost a year talking, laughing, and living with Russians, I feel a sense of urgency to provide a glimpse into the lives of people I met. These following essays are a snapshot, taken during a transitional time, for future comparison. For almost a year I was lucky to live in a place not everyone has the chance to see. I lived beyond the threshold.

Chapter One

Art Klinika

Rain fell as Tanya and I walked along Nevskii Prospect. She was telling me, in her animated way, how she and other secretaries in the shipping company where she worked had to rearrange the account books for an audit. By the time we turned off Nevskii, she was on to another topic. I love to listen to Tanya speak Russian, watching her facial expressions which usually end in her sincere smile that shows her straight white teeth contrasted against the bright lipstick she always wears. As I walked beside her looking down, I was surprised by her height. She has the kind of big personality--expressive laughter that lights up her perfectly round face, poetic use of words, and vivid descriptions--that makes me expect to be looking up to her when she speaks. I'm surprised every time I notice that she's five inches shorter than I am.

Before we turned off the street into the black courtyard where the door to the club Art Klinika is hidden in the darkness, we stopped at one of the ubiquitous kiosks to buy drinks and a pack of cigarettes for Tanya. Kiosks are one of my favorite features of Russian society today. On every street, in all Russian cities, towns, and villages, stand these one room stores, just big enough to hold the vendors and their wares. In open-air markets, people are in constant motion around the kiosks. I used to listen to the dilapidated olive green delivery trucks rumble up the street on which I lived in the outskirts of

St. Petersburg. Every morning at five, spewing diesel smoke, these trucks would arrive, bringing bread, milk, eggs, cheese, and all the products to the various kiosks that are needed for the day's business. Quickly, men wearing overalls and boots would unload the goods before the trucks roared away a few minutes later.

There are different types of kiosks--those with the standard fare: beer, vodka, cognac, cigarettes, candy, gum, condoms, and plastic bags bearing pictures of cars or scantily clad ladies. Other kiosks have produce: tomatoes, apples, oranges, cucumbers, bananas, watermelon, grapes, even kiwis and mangos--exotic fruits that were unheard of in the Soviet years. Some of the kiosks by my apartment sold meat and dairy products, sides of beef, pigs' heads, big slices of cheeses, and tubs of butter. I never trusted the meat that had sat sweltering in the sun all day. Other kiosks sell clothes, shoes, household items--anything a person could need. The most common kiosks, however, offer only alcohol, and cigarettes.

Along with a large selection of vodka in aluminum cans, people can buy a generous single shot of vodka, sold in a yogurt container-like cup with a peel-off lid. Kiosks sell mixed drinks in cans--piña coladas, gin and tonics, rum and lemonade. Beer is sold in bottles and cans, along with wine and all the other hard alcohol one could imagine. The quality of the liquor is often questionable, since kiosk owners can easily fill the bottle with rot gut and pass it off as name brand alcohol. Along with the liquor, there is a wide array of cigarettes--import and domestic. For a dollar, the American brands can be purchased, for seventeen cents, the Russian *papirosi*. These Russian cigarettes, however, are only for those who need a nicotine fix. *Papirosi* are made of two types of paper--the flimsy paper wrapped around the tobacco, and the cardboard for holding between the lips. There is no filter. I've only seen

street and construction workers, bus drivers, and drunks smoke *papirosi*, though often these cigarettes are not purchased for their tobacco. With the rise in popularity and accessibility of marijuana and hash (*anasha*) since the early 1990's, young people in Russia have begun to smoke plants other than tobacco, too. The easily emptied *papirosi* provide a convenient shell for smoking grass (*trava*). Besides alcohol and tobacco, snack foods are also sold--chips, cakes, and candy bars. These deregulated kiosks provide Russians convenient (and sometimes twenty-four hour) access to satisfy any taste.

There is also the occasional fish to be found at kiosks. I'll never forget my first experience with *vobla*, the Russian version of fish jerky. Two of my friends, Denis and Sviatoslav, asked me if I liked to eat fish with my beer. Thinking they were referring to the tasty canned fish sold in Russia, I answered, "Of course," and off we went to a late night kiosk. They marched from kiosk to kiosk, looking for *vobla*. Eventually they found it, and pointed to what looked like a frozen fish--eyeballs and all. But when Sviatoslav dropped it on the cold pavement, it bounced and some of its scales flaked off. I saw then that the fish had been dried. Once back at Sviatoslav's, Denis spread newspaper on the kitchen table and we sat down to clean the scales and skin off. There is something very pleasant in the baseness of ripping apart a fish, cracking off the head, peeling off the sides, and eating the salty, slightly fishy meat. After that night, *vobla* became one of my favorite Russian foods.

Tanya and I headed into the dark courtyard after purchasing the essentials. A few alternative types were milling around, wearing big Doc Martins (the British work boots that are a fashion hit among the modish, punkish, and trendy youth of the world) and army jackets. We quickly moved into a side courtyard and up to what looked like a back door. Besides the faint thumping of a bass, the only indication that a *koorazh* (party) was brewing

beyond the steel door was a timid glow of light ebbing out from under the door onto the wet, pebbled cement.

Once we opened the door and stepped out of the dark cold, we found ourselves standing in a warm room surrounded by swirling colors. Tanya insisted on paying the cover charge, an act of generosity typical of her and her friends. For the last four years, Tanya has worked at a Finnish shipping company. Even though she is the most senior employee, and handles all the records, finance, and public relations, she had received the same salary of \$200 a month since she began. Four years ago, such a salary was good; but in 1995, after a five-fold increase in the price of living, two hundred dollars did not go very far. Fortunately, Tanya's company has been marginally able to keep pace with the inflation; in the fall of 1996 she got a fifty percent pay increase, and again, in the following January, her salary jumped to \$400 a month. Through privatization, her family owns the apartment in which they live. Her mother and father both work, so after helping out with food and basics for the family, Tanya spends her money on her friends and herself.

The decor motif for the evening was medical, with white sheets, red crosses, bandages and stethoscopes. A flying life-sized nurse-doll hung suspended from the ceiling. The whole room was dark and sinister, though not without humor. We looked around for a place to sit, but there were few seats in the small main room. Couches lined one side, while makeshift bleachers rose out of the floor in the back. Anti-Soviet art by a local, well known avant-garde artist, Kirill Miller, decorated the walls. Kirill Miller's art can be seen in Fish Fabrique, and several other trendy clubs and exhibitions in the vicinity of Art Klinika. Ghoulish Lenin and Stalin portraits, painted in an Edvard Munch style, stood with warped bodies and heads in front of a bloody Kremlin. Black, white and red dominated the room, with patches of yellow

streaking violently from some corners. Tanya and I chose one of the couches as our perch for the evening.

Leaving Tanya to save our seats, I walked around the stage, squeezed past several pretty women dressed in black, and went to buy drinks. The bar conformed to the medical motif of the front room. Two characters behind the counter were wearing white doctor frocks and operating caps. One of these young men, Sasha, is a regular fixture as a bartender at two other clubs in St. Petersburg: Fish Fabrique and the new Griboyedov (an old underground bomb-shelter that was turned into a techno dance club in the fall of 1996). The drink menu at Art Klinika was listed as "medicines" in both English and Russian. By the time I got back to our seats, the room had started to fill.

At eight every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night, Art Klinika puts on "shows." It always surprises me how early events get underway in St. Petersburg. The explanation, however, is simple. The *metro* (subway) closes every night between midnight and five. Social events must either end at eleven-thirty or go on through the night until six in the morning. Russians have incredible staying power when it comes to gatherings. Often after leaving a function that ends before midnight, the restless move on to the nearest night club where they can continue their drinking, talking, and dancing until the daylight hours.

That night in Art Klinika was a Friday night, and people were coming in ready to drink and greet the weekend with a bang. The couch that Tanya and I occupied became crowded as young men and women squeezed in next to us, clutching their cigarettes and bottles of alcohol. As the lights dimmed, loud music began to play and people cheered. Abruptly the music stopped and into the crowd rushed a small woman with unnaturally large breasts, dressed in a tight nurse outfit. She dramatically ran from person to person in the

audience, asking them about their illnesses (psychological and mental) and making them sign a patient register before she hurried off to the next one.

After checking the "health" of the audience for several minutes, she asked if there were any foreigners in the audience. People couldn't tell I wasn't Russian until I opened my mouth. I preferred only to speak to friends, or in small groups, since I could observe people much better if they didn't know that there was a stranger in their midst. Unfortunately, that night my cover had already been blown. One of the three young men sitting next to us had asked me a question, and my answer had made no sense. When the nurse was searching for foreigners, he and several others pointed to me. She skipped over and asked where I was from. The three men beside us seemed surprised when I answered "America."

It is by no means rare to find foreigners at Art Klinika. Germans, British, and Americans frequent the club, since Art Klinika is one of the "hip" places listed in the St. Petersburg Times, one of the only weekly English language newspaper in the city. Usually, though, foreigners come in groups, stick together, and speak English. After my "exposure," the nurse accosted several other laughing people and ran out of the room. On stage a man began to speak, telling a long and humorous story with colorful expletives. Soon he was joined by musicians dressed in white. They began to play guitars and drums, each one hamming it up to the audience in turn. The woman in the nurse outfit performed a "surgical" procedure on a "patient." They then switched roles, and he proceeded to pop the balloons that had made her breasts so large. The audience whooped with laughter, yelling wise remarks and calling out encouragement, "*Davay, davay!!*" ("Come on, come on!!")

The art in Art Klinika, both performing and decor, shows how quickly norms have changed since the fall of the Soviet Union. As recently as the

1980s, underground art was a forbidden fruit, exhibited furtively in private apartments or unmarked studios. Artists can now openly critique their government as desired, with humor and wit. The artists at Art Klinika make a sharp statement about the sick condition of Russia today. The nation's economy, education, military, and health care are in desperate need of reform--and soon. With humor and not much tact, the group at Art Klinika tries to show the ludicrous situation their country is facing through brash, honest performances and the satirical decorations of the club.

While Tanya and I were checking out the audience, my neighbor again turned to me and asked in English where I was from. I tried to avoid conversations with Russians in English: one foot on the slippery language slope and you find yourself at the bottom, always speaking English in a foreign country. Answering in Russian, I told him I came from the state of Washington and live in Seattle. He then introduced me to his friend Ruslan and his cousin Kirill.

Alyosha, Kirill, and Ruslan had arrived together. It's not untypical for Russians, especially men, to travel in a threesome. Three is an important number in Russia. The *troika*--a three horse sleigh--often appears as a symbol of Russia. Occasionally Russian men can be seen hanging around kiosks looking for drinking "companions." However, the reason that Russian men prefer the *troika* has more to do with Soviet economic history than with any romantic tradition. Hold up three fingers, and it is understood that you need a *troika* to go in on a bottle of vodka. Throughout the Soviet era, up until the end of Brezhnev's rule, a 0.75 liter of vodka cost three rubles plus twelve kopecks for the bottle deposit. Men used to go in for a an even ruble each, quickly drink the vodka, and redeem the bottle. Even though the price of vodka is now about 35,000 rubles, the tradition still remains. Ruslan, Kirill,

and Alyosha, however, were not drinking straight vodka. They had their own *troika*: cognac, rum, and vodka. Taking swigs on the sly, they chased down the liquor with big gulps of orange soda from a two liter bottle.

Once the young men had mixed their potent cocktail with the remainder of the orange drink, Alyosha made his introductions. Like many first meetings in Russia, this had to be sanctified by drink. After a month in Russia, I had come to the realization that it is a major faux pas to turn down a drink. Alyosha poured their mixture into our empty bourbon and Coke glasses. They toasted, "*Za vstrechu*," ("to our meeting"). We drank. The orange concoction made me shiver and gag, but in suffering we all became closer. Ruslan and Alyosha moved a little nearer to us so we could speak over the blood thumping music. Kirill hung back, not looking very comfortable with the whole scene. He dressed unlike the rest of the people at Art Klinika. With a stylish leather coat, turtle-neck, and tennis shoes, he marked himself as the type that would prefer a discotheque to this avant-garde scene. He left the socializing to Alyosha and Ruslan.

Our conversation turned to literature. As soon as I mentioned Pushkin, Alyosha asked me if I'd read "The Bronze Horseman." Set in St. Petersburg during the great flood of 1824, the poem paints a vivid picture of the strength of nature, the inhospitable environment of the city, and the insignificance of man. The planned city of St. Petersburg has often been called an impersonal and cold city. Dostoevsky's character in Notes from the Underground pities those with "the fatal ill-luck to inhabit Petersburg, the most theoretical and intentional town on the whole terrestrial globe." This literary "take" on St. Petersburg hardly keeps the residents from loving their city. At once Alyosha began to quote "The Bronze Horseman," only to move on to quote his favorite Wordsworth, reciting verse that was almost

indiscernible through his thick accent. I thought to myself, "Would this be happening in an American nightclub?"

Both prose and verse are so much a part of Russian life, that no one thinks it strange to recite famous pieces. Russians rattle off lines and stanzas of poetry—even substantial passages of prose—with none of the self-consciousness Americans often feel when quoting literature. To Russians, nothing could seem more natural. Lines from Pushkin, Bulgakov, and Petrov dot the everyday speech of the intelligentsia. On stage a rough looking guitarist was bent over his instrument coaxing out a squealing rift, while the singer hiked up her skirt and climbed on a table to sing. In front of the stage a few people were dancing—some slamming into each other, some gyrating, some rocking back and forth, eyes closed, heads bobbing. Up against the far wall a drunk couple was kissing, unaware of the people around them. And there sat Alyosha, quoting Wordsworth.

As we listened silently to the new band, I began to think about how connected Russians are to the literature of their country. When Americans are asked to name a favorite American poet, our answers vary widely. We do not associate poetry with a city. Our cities are too young, and our population too mobile to feel attached to a single city. Russians from St. Petersburg, however, have a great wealth of literature from which to choose. The city plays an important role in much of the nineteenth and twentieth century poetry and prose. Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Tiutchev, and Nekrasov integrated St. Petersburg into their works. Even today the places frequented by Dostoevsky's characters in Crime and Punishment are known by most locals. On the staircase leading to the room Raskolnikov is said to have rented, graffiti covers the walls. "Rodya lives!!" wrote one of his

admirers. Peterburgers know the literary history of their city and take every opportunity to point it out.

Ruslan and Tanya sat watching the band play. I smiled at Tanya, who winked back at me and tossed her thick, long, dark hair over her shoulder. She seemed glad we had made the acquaintances of these two young men. Her eyes were shining as she bravely drank the orange cocktail Ruslan had just refilled. The guitarist finished playing his last note, and the band disengaged themselves from their instruments, leaving the stage. Silence. Now we could talk without yelling. I asked Alyosha how they all knew each other. It turned out that Ruslan and Alyosha worked together at Stockman's, a famous Finnish grocery store with prices only the entrepreneurial "new" Russians could afford. They were stockers, working in the fruit and vegetable sections. Alyosha grimaced when he told us this, and Ruslan shrugged his shoulders. This job was only to keep money in their pockets until they could work at what they really wanted. Alyosha had gone to school to become an engineer, and like many educated Russians after the crumbling of the Soviet economic structure, had to make his living doing manual labor. Ruslan plays the bass guitar in a well known band in St. Petersburg, Kamikaze, but was waiting for the lead singer to return home from France. Neither of them liked their jobs, in fact they hated them, but they felt lucky that they worked for a foreign company that paid decent wages.

The plight of the Russian worker took a turn for the worse in the years following the end of the Soviet Union. During Communism, the wage discrepancy between a doctor and a subway driver was small. A doctor might earn 400 rubles and month and a driver 275, but it was the perks that made the difference. In the Soviet days, access to western goods was only for those officials in power. But this "wealth" was hidden behind the securely bolted

doors of elite apartments. Under Communism, the rank and file lived poorly, but fairly equally. One didn't have to worry about having enough food, a place to live, and clothes to wear, though the nutritional value, or comfort, or quality of these items was often poor. By 1996 things had changed significantly. With the disintegration of the USSR and the sudden availability of western goods to all Russians who could afford them, the rich and privileged no longer had to hide their wealth. The obvious differences between those with money and power and those without showed now on the street. This ostentatious show of wealth made the have-nots acutely aware of their status.

In 1996, the salaries paid to teachers, doctors, laborers, and those working for the state were ridiculously low. Teachers made 120,000 rubles a month, equivalent to fifty dollars. Doctors earn perhaps eighty dollars, and it was not uncommon for city workers to wait six months before receiving any wages. In order to survive, people look for ways to supplement their income. Skilled engineers with Ph. D's become chauffeurs for newly rich Russians. The father of the family with whom I lived—a mathematician and physicist—was forced to quit his position at the university and take a job driving a Mafia boss's woman around in a fancy Mercedes to make enough money to support his family. His wife made him quit when the henchmen of a rival Mafia family put bullet holes in the side of the car when he was driving. He now drives an ambulance for a private hospital, working up to thirty hours without a break. Russians have had years of experience with horrific circumstances, yet the years in the post-communist Russia are the most trying for many.

Ruslan, Alyosha, and Kirill are part of the young generation that has known nothing besides this economic turmoil during their working lives.

They were raised in the communist school system, never imagining that they would be tossed into the hard world of fend-for-yourself infant capitalism. Yet it was not their resilience that so impressed me, but their undaunted sense of humor. Here before me sat three young Russian men, well educated and "modern," interested in new styles and good music. They were not ashamed of their work, because they knew that in the new economic world of Russia they had to work in menial jobs in order to realize their hopes of a better future. This sounds something like the American dream, but for one major difference.

Many Americans have the false idea that Russians want to imitate our styles, music, and way of life. Honestly, many Russians pity us and believe we have an empty culture, devoid of great literary works and appreciation for art. Contrary to the popular belief of most Americans, young Russians in general don't want to emigrate to our country. They adamantly insist on a future in their native land, surrounded by friends and family. Unfortunately, the people who work in our embassies and consulates in Russia are convinced that Russians will take advantage of any possibility to live in the land of opportunity, and they grant visas only to those who have strong family ties or invested capital in their motherland. It saddens me to know that most of my young friends can't explore my country the way I can theirs.

People were starting to leave Art Klinika as we were finishing our conversation about Stockman's grocery. The orange drink was gone. We decided to head for the alternative music club around the corner, Fish Fabrique. I had been there before, and remembered its strange location. The owner had bought a flat on the fourth floor of an apartment building, torn out the walls, and redecorated in an urban grunge style. The walls are painted black, and decorated with street signs (stolen from Germany, England, and

Russia) that symbolize toxic waste, stop lights, and no parking zones. The music is always loud, and the chairs, tables, and various couches usually filled with hip, artistic young people. Fish Fabrique is the place most often frequented by foreigners - usually exchange students from Germany, England, and the States. The drink menu hangs from the wall on an electric chalk board, and the bartenders, much to my annoyance, always answer in English to anyone with an accent.

When we arrived at Fish Fabrique, a band was just beginning to play. We listened to the band, drank, talked and danced. Soon, though, it was time to leave. Kirill had been standing against the wall nervously looking at his watch for twenty minutes, and gesturing to Ruslan and Alyosha that they needed to hurry if they were going to make the *metro* before it closed. Quickly we threw on our coats and rushed out.

Rain was still falling when we exited onto the sidewalk. Though the street was quiet, my ears were ringing from the night of loud music. Tanya and Ruslan walked ahead a little, talking about bands and the voice lessons Tanya had been taking. Alyosha wanted to know if I knew about the St. Petersburg siege. I was surprised, wondering why he asked, but answered anyway, saying, "Yes." Alyosha nodded approvingly as I told him what I knew about the Nazi blockade of Leningrad in 1941. Around one million citizens had died of starvation, and anyone alive in the city at that time had suffered terribly. Alyosha said that many foreigners didn't realize how important the siege was in the history of St. Petersburg. He went on to tell me about his grandparents who had lived in St. Petersburg at that time. His voice grew deeper and more thoughtful as he told me about his grandfather. He had been a mechanic and had helped repair vehicles that were used to ward off the Germans during the siege. The Germans never penetrated the city, but

blockaded it for 900 days. Alyosha's grandparents lived off a ration of two hundred grams of bread a day. Bringing his hands into the shape of a small rectangle, Alyosha showed me how much bread that was. He looked sad and proud at the same time. I was moved that he would tell me this, thinking how hard it must be to understand that the world knows so little how your nation suffered at the hands of the Germans. After all, there are many young Americans today who think that Russia was allied with Germany in World War II.

The shops on Nevskii Prospect had closed already in the early evening and the streets were quiet. A few other people were heading towards the metro, occasionally breaking the quiet with drunken yells. The rain blended with the street lamps, blurring the smooth, pastel buildings. Soon we reached the subway. Since we were all going on the same line, we headed down the escalators together. As St. Petersburg has the deepest *metro* in the world, the escalators are long and this left us a few last minutes to talk. Alyosha was quiet for a while, and then asked me if he could have my phone number. He then reached in his pocket and took out a small notebook. It wasn't the address book that many Russians carry with them; the pages were filled with tiny writing. As he carefully tore out a small section of paper for me to write my number on, I asked him what the book was for. He answered, "My thoughts."

The escalator ended, and we all parted ways. The four of them, including Tanya, lived in the northern part of the city while I lived two stops west. We said our good-byes and headed home. I was tired from the strain of speaking Russian, but happy to have met two young Russian men.

I saw Ruslan at Tanya's house several weeks later. She had invited him to her birthday celebration. He greeted me like an old friend, and we

talked as we toasted Tanya. We did not see each other again until April, when we met accidentally at a music club where his reunited band was playing. It wasn't Ruslan who I first saw there, but Alyosha. Even though he hadn't called me and we hadn't seen each other since that night at Art Klinika in October, he greeted me with a smile and a hug. I had not been mistaken when I realized I had made a friend.

Chapter Two

The Birthday Party

Party. The word conjures up many images in the minds of Americans: a small gathering of friends, a birthday cake and presents, a kegger at a frat house, a wine and cheese event. But for Russians, a party has a much more unified meaning. Of course there are different levels of parties, from the gathering of a few friends to an all out rager, but the driving force behind the parties is the same—to be with friends and make merry. There are several words for “party” in Russian, the most innocuous of them being *prazdnik*, which means “holiday.” There is a Russian joke about an alcoholic who says, “I never drink except on holidays.”—a quip with special resonance in Russia, where Orthodox Church holidays once took up almost a third of the year, and every other day in the twentieth century was an official Soviet *prazdnik*. Soviets celebrated Workers’ day, Teachers’ day, Students’ day, Miners’ day, Astronauts’ day, Women’s day, Men’s day, Peace Day, and on and on. However, of all the parties Russians have, the birthday party is the most celebrated; a party where you know you are in for a long night of feasting, toasting, laughing, and most likely dancing.

My first extensive experience at a Russian birthday party did not break me in lightly. I had only been in Russia a month and a half when Tanya invited me to her 23rd birthday. Just a “few” of her friends would be coming over; Sviatoslav and Denis would pick me up in the Jeep. I knew it was a

fancy occasion when the two young men met me clad in suits. En route they bought Tanya a little cactus at a flower shop and a kitchy card displaying kittens. By the time we arrived, Tanya's small flat was full of people dressed in their finest. Young women were wearing dresses, the most stylish of them in tight black outfits or flashy skirts. The men wore nice shirts and ties. As is customary, we all shed our shoes at the door and put on whatever *tapochki* (house slippers) fit—usually a mismatched pair. Sometimes in America we take our shoes off when our host has a brand new white carpet. But in Russia where the streets are often muddy, exchanging street shoes for *tapochki* is required. (And no bare feet allowed—most Russians believe that walking on hard wood floors will cause a person to catch a cold.) The slippers are usually old, with holes in the toes, or soles that are beginning to peel off. You are lucky to find a matched pair that fit. It doesn't matter who you are (young or old), or what you're wearing (suit or dress), you are required to don these house slippers. Most of the time the host or hostess handed me the nicest pair of feminine *tapochki*--usually dark pink and five sizes too small. (There is no better way to ruin a carefully planned ensemble than to shuffle around in a pair of awkward, matronly slippers.)

Tanya had invited friends from work, school, and a few other random places. Ruslan, whom we had recently met at Art Klinika, was just one of the many characters. Tanya's parents had transformed their bedroom into a party room with one big dining table. An odd assortment of chairs had been brought in; the couch served as a bench. Besides the decorative plates and crystal wine and shot glasses that always seem to materialize out of nowhere for such occasions, a huge spread of food filled the entire table--cheeses, fruit, pickles, marinated family-picked mushrooms, smoked salmon, and several salads of diced and mixed vegetables, potatoes, and meat. Some people had

already seated themselves, others were milling around the small kitchen where Tanya's mother was delegating various tasks. I offered to slice the bread, and was set up at the end of the big table with a knife and a basket.

Once all the guests had arrived, we gathered around the table for our first few toasts. Tanya's parents were leaving us young folk on our own for the main part of the evening and wanted to be present for the important beginning, so we stood and held our glasses up to Tanya (not an easy task since the chairs were packed so closely to the table and walls). "To friendship and a happy life," came the first toast. By custom we could not wait long before the second toast, so the next was, "To all my friends and my loving parents." With that, Tanya's mother and father said their good-byes and wished us a jolly evening.

I had already begun to feel full by the time the piping hot potatoes and the *kotlety* (meat patties made with egg, beef or fish, and bread) appeared from the kitchen piled high on huge trays. By the fifth toast I realized I would have to pace myself if I wanted to make it to ten o'clock. Unlike social gatherings involving food in America, the Russian meal/party is an intense event. Americans usually have a meal that, while it may go on for a couple of hours, usually has a finite end in sight—or we have appetizers that can be nibbled on at will. In Russia, guests are held captive at the table and there is no escape.

For three hours we ate, ate, and ate some more, while the shot glasses and wine glasses were filled and refilled. I finally came to the revelation that I didn't have to finish my glass every time, and I reached that conclusion just in the nick of time. There was an odd assortment of drinks: wine, Martini, sickeningly sweet cognac, and, of course, vodka. The shots were chased at first by juice, and then, as the night progressed, by virulent and ominous generic orange and red soda. Bottle after empty bottle was placed on the floor,

forming a standing army of thin-necked soldiers. Russians always put empty bottles of alcohol on the floor as soon as they are finished. I never did find out the origins of this tradition, but I imagine it has always been depressing to stare at a bottle that no longer holds any liquids of pleasure.

At the beginning of the evening I was seated next to Misha, an artistic body-builder, the son of the woman who runs the famous museum of the Peter and Paul Fortress on the Neva. He has many artist friends, and a sharp sense of humor. At the time I was convinced he thought I was an idiot, because the first time we had met I had only been in Russia a week. Tanya had invited me to join her at his birthday party, and for me his party was a mass of confused and mixed messages. At his party he had tried to speak with me in Russian, but my language skills at that time were too poor to carry on any conversation at an intelligent level.

At Tanya's, however, Misha was much nicer, though still solicitous. He did compliment me on the improvement of my Russian, but lost little time in correcting every one of my mistakes. He, however, was an exception, and almost all the other guests were much more sympathetic about how it feels to understand very little. Yuta, one of Tanya's close friends, was the most understanding, since she teaches Russian at the university to foreign students. She herself is Korean and has lived in Russia for five years. There are many young people like Yuta who were born in countries considered "friends" of the Soviet Union. In the large cities there were usually students from places like Cuba, China, North Korea, and several African states that were supported by the USSR. Often, like Yuta, these students decided to stay in Russia.

As we began to put a dent in the food, it was evident that, while there was a little slowing in the pace of consumption, the end was nowhere in

sight. The battalion of bottles on the floor grew with every passing hour as the quality of the liquor that was left grew poorer and poorer. Soon people started to get up from the table and stretch their weary legs and distended stomachs. Tanya had gone into the stairwell to smoke a cigarette with Sviatoslav and Masha, and I joined them to stretch my legs and breathe the cool, fresh air.

Once we returned to the festive voices of the party room, Tanya decided it was time for music. Someone fetched the boombox from her room and turned the radio on. Chairs were pushed out of the way and people began to dance. Misha stole the stage with his slow strip-tease, egged on by the girls yelling (in a thickly accented English) "Come on ! Come on!" He got down to his underwear and stood there flexing, while every one laughed and clapped. More dancing and the occasional toast ensued. After few minutes, Sviatoslav slipped out of the room and mysteriously closed the door behind him. Few of us noticed him leave, but we all saw him return.

The door swung open and there stood Sviatoslav covered by an overcoat, wearing diving flippers on his feet and ski goggles on his head. Once we recovered from our hysterical laughter, the strip tease began. Sviatoslav has a little pot belly, and nowhere near the rippling muscles that Misha flaunted before us, but he definitely stole the show. Under his overcoat he was covered only by his red and white Mickey Mouse boxers. He got many more shouts of "Come on! Come on!" than Misha did, since his efforts deserved appreciation. I think Misha was a little miffed that he'd been upstaged, but he took it in stride. In a last attempt to show his muscles, he danced around the room with Sviatoslav.

The dancing continued for hours, though I wasn't there to observe all the antics. Full of food and drink, and strained from talking Russian and listening too hard, I lay down for a nap on Tanya's bed. "Yeah, sure, a nap,"

they all said, thinking the poor American had been overtaxed by their Russian merrymaking. They figured they would see me the next morning. I, however, am never one to give up easily. I woke up an hour and a half later, just in time for dessert. They were still dancing when I reentered the room, and I was greeted by much cheer and hurrah.

Dessert was accompanied by coffee and tea to keep us awake and going for the two more hours until the metro opened at five-thirty. All of a sudden I was hungry again, and the sweet, thick cake gave me new energy. By this time the bottles on the floor had crept out from their place against the wall, looking like they were about to go AWOL. Only some sweet cognac remained, and a corner of vodka and tequila. The formerly beautiful table looked like a war zone. Vanya, Misha, and Sviatoslav busied themselves clearing the table, while the girls sat around and talked. I nearly fell off my chair. Never before had I seen a man in Russia do domestic tasks without being asked. Perhaps the regiment of glass soldiers on the floor had something to do with their eager willingness to help.

After dessert, the music was turned down and people started fading and dropping off to sleep in their chairs. I had caught my second wind, and by the time people started leaving I was in the kitchen with Misha washing dishes. Tanya had since laid down on her bed next to Denis, who had gone to sleep while I was still taking my nap. Denis, I would find out later, usually went strong until he reached his sleep time, and that was it. He would lie down not to be seen until the morning. I will never forget the time Denis woke up after a long night of drinking with Tanya, Sviatoslav, and me. He had to hurry to work because a chauffeur cannot keep a client waiting too long. Denis slipped on his shoes, ran his fingers through his rumpled hair, looked in the mirror and muttered, "*Koshmar!*" ("Nightmare!")

A happy but sleepy Tanya came into the kitchen while Sviatoslav and Misha were finishing off the last of the tequila. Only Denis was still deep in slumber, so all four of us thoughtfully awoke him by pouncing on the bed. By the time we left, the apartment was clean, her parents' room back in order, the table folded, and the dishes washed. I was exhausted but proud. I had survived a true Russian birthday party.

Chapter Three

The Heart of Russia

The rivalry between Moscow and St. Petersburg has a long history. Ever since Peter the Great decided to move the capital of Russia, building St. Petersburg in 1703, there has been tension between the two cities. For over two hundred years, until the end of the tsarist reign in 1917, St. Petersburg was the capital of the Russian empire. High society flourished, as did architecture, the arts, and culture, though to some, Moscow was still regarded as the more traditionally Russian city. Many people today (including residents of both cities) call Moscow the heart and St. Petersburg the brain of Russia. With the end of Imperial Russia, and the return of the capital to Moscow at the beginning of the communist era, St. Petersburg became a barren city, losing one third of its population as the aristocracy fled persecution. In the 1940s the city was devastated during the Nazi siege of World War II, or as the Russians say, the Great Patriotic War.

Not only did enemies attempt to level the country's infrastructure, but the Bolshevik regime set out to destroy churches and, in particular, any structures that represented the old bourgeois way of life. In the place of historical buildings, great monolithic imperial style skyscrapers were erected in Stalin's time, changing the flavor of Moscow from Russian to Soviet. St. Petersburg, however, was spared this architectural desecration, because the new Soviet government wanted to make Moscow (not Leningrad) an

example of communist pride and power. With money a scarcity, the Soviets could not focus their energies on demolishing the buildings of the old St. Petersburg. Today the center of the former capital looks much as it did two hundred years ago.

When St. Peterburgers talk about Moscow, they laugh derisively and immediately begin to make fun of how Muscovites talk. The Moscow accent might be equated with an American New Yorker accent. Peterburgers pride themselves with speaking "proper" Russian. Even some words are different. The word for a loaf of white bread is *boolka* in St. Petersburg. In Moscow there is no such word, since they use the French word *baton*. Bread is a staple in Russia, and the name discrepancy is the subject of many jokes. The residents of St. Petersburg think of Moscow as an overgrown village, governed by no order or logic.

When our group of three students from Colby College was preparing to depart for a visit to Moscow, we were bombarded with horror stories about the city from our St. Petersburg friends. Russians take great delight in making the worst of any situation, using dramatic anecdotes to express their points. Only my friend Tanya, in her usual animated style, said she wished she could come with me, since the night clubs in Moscow are the best she's been to. She gave me a wink as we said good-bye before I left for Moscow.

I was looking forward to seeing two Russian friends I had met when I was in Moscow in 1991 on a three week trip with a group from my high school in Seattle, Washington. Nina was my host sister for those weeks, and we became good friends, sharing our views on life, friends, and boys. I met my other friend, Vova, while he was selling lacquer boxes in front of a church in Vladimir, a city on the Golden Ring (the circle of medieval cities that surrounds Moscow). In all honesty, I think I owe a large part of my

infatuation with Russia to Vova. After I met him I became convinced that it was my destiny to study Russian. When I first saw Vova outside the thirteenth century church, our eyes met and my young, easily moved heart skipped a beat, my stomach did somersaults. He smiled at me—his blue eyes sparkled and his nose crinkled. He approached me, and in stilted English asked if we could meet later in the day. When our group was scheduled to have dinner, my girlfriend, Gillian, and I feigned illness and pretended to go to bed. Downstairs in the lobby we met with Vova and his comrades and together we went out to a restaurant. Gillian and I were bedazzled by the champagne, caviar, and handsome young men. Later, assisted by Nina who helped make the cloak-and-dagger style arrangements over the phone, Vova made two trips to Moscow so we could see each other again. Looking back with a little more perspective, it all seems rather silly. Nonetheless, to a seventeen year old it was thrilling. Vova and I stayed in touch after I left Russia through a series of letters and faxes. Miraculously his English improved, but later I was to learn that it was his helpful teacher, Tatianna Andreevna, who transformed his rudimentary letters into grand literary works. Regardless of who the actual author of the letters was, Vova and I remained friends.

The sun was barely glowing over the horizon when we arrived in Moscow and stepped out of the train into the fog. Train stations are one of my favorite places in Russian cities. At all times, day and night, people sell their wares, gypsy children run about, drunks yell at each other, and people warm themselves next to bonfires. The surreal scene is like a circus - everyone involved with their own act, their own song and dance. Even the colors are different from the rest of the city--fruits and vegetables, assorted liquors and candies, magazines and newspapers are bright yet slightly obscured by the

steam rising from the hot, fresh *piroshki* (meat wrapped inside dough) sold from carts by old women.

After we had settled into our hotel, Alyosha (our Russian student assistant) and I dodged cars as we walked from our hotel to Red Square. I had thought the drivers in St. Petersburg were crazy until I tried to cross the busy street by our hotel. Usually in the big cities in Russia there are pedestrian underpasses. But in Moscow those pathways, like the rest of the city, were under construction. Scaffolding covered the sides of almost every other building, boasting the names of foreign construction companies on big placards, mostly in German and Scandinavian. In contrast, the buildings in St. Petersburg are languishing from the lack of foreign investment, their ornate plaster facades literally falling onto the cracked sidewalks below. Two weeks after I arrived in St. Petersburg I read that two girls had fallen to their death when the balcony of a fifth story apartment crumbled beneath their feet.

Once in Red Square, I was surprised by how many German, French, American, and British tourists were standing around in groups, snapping pictures and gaping at the impressive center of the capital. Enterprising Russians shouted through bull horns advertising tours of the city and Red Square next to beggars who sat against buildings, praying and crossing themselves, while roughly dressed Russian construction workers carried boards and buckets from one site to another—hardly the empty and regimented Red Square I remembered from five years before.

Alyosha wanted to go to GUM, the biggest department store in Russia. This enormous three-story building stands on the edge of Red Square and today is more spectacular inside than out—ornate shops with glass walls stand row upon row, enticing customers who can now leisurely stroll through the building and admire the new clothes or stop to get a bite to eat at one of the

many food vendors. In Soviet times, GUM was infrequently stocked with huge shipments of identical shoes, clothes, or house-wares which immediately disappeared, bought by the Russians who had stood in line for hours after getting word that new goods were available. Now GUM is a different world, filled with smartly dressed people, lights, restaurants, and boutiques stocked with furs, leather coats, fashionable suits, cosmetics, fabric, and foreign gourmet foods. In GUM the Russian nouveau riche can buy all they desire, but at inflated prices. A Nike store occupies one corner, guarded by muscular men with ear pieces, who stand at the entrance. Almost all the expensive stores have security guards who are always on the lookout for shoplifters and armed robbers. They let only a select group of people in at one time. Alyosha and I walked around GUM for about an hour, but soon felt overwhelmed and left.

When I returned to the hotel at five, Vova was waiting for me on the steps as we had arranged earlier. I was struck by how much he had aged in the three years since I had last seen him. However, his smile still made his eyes sparkle, and he was dressed as stylishly as ever in his black leather jacket, Harley-Davidson vest, jeans and Doc Martin boots. His apparel announced that he was a man who made his living buying and selling goods and making quick money. He introduced me to his friend, Vladik, who stood beside him.

Vladik towered over Vova, standing about 6'5", and intimidated me a little at first, but soon his gentle manner came through with his quiet laugh. The clothes he wore were more subdued than Vova's, but his Levi's jacket, jeans and leather boots showed that he too, had money. Taking advantage of his imposing stature, Vladik landed a job working three nights a week as security at Cherry's, a casino and bar on the new Arbat, a busy street in the night life district of Moscow. His job is to keep the clientele in line; he makes

sure the Mafia bosses and their entourage check their guns at the door. Many night clubs cater to the fast-cash Russians, and have armed security guards and metal detectors. Even so, just a few weeks earlier there had been a Mafia hit at the restaurant next door to Cherry's. Gang-land style murders have become disconcertingly commonplace in Russia as Mafia bosses show more and more boldness in their activities.

I asked Vova if Vladik was carrying a gun with him. Vova laughed and shook his head. "No, only at work." I didn't think my question was too off base, however, since the proliferation of fire arms in Russia has gotten out of control. In 1990 it was illegal for a Russian to own a gun other than a hunting rifle. But after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the frightening increase in both organized and street crime, the law preventing ownership was revoked and civilians are now allowed to own a registered gun for protection. Even my friend in St. Petersburg, Denis, owns a 9mm that he keeps tucked in the front of his pants at all times. His job of driving a "businessman" around is not the safest occupation. However, in Russia, as in the United States, registered guns are not the major problem. A huge and lucrative arms trading market emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union. Plagued by inefficient law enforcement, the government has been able to do little to stop the arms dealers from selling their goods both domestically and abroad. Many army officials supplement their income by turning a blind eye to (or sometimes actively participating in) the theft of military weapons. In the early 1990s guns were so prolific that mafia assassins used to leave the murder weapon (usually an AK-47 worth at the time about \$2,500) lying by the body. With each passing year the streets of Russia have become more dangerous for those with any connection to the omnipotent underworld.

As we walked to The Irish House, a popular Irish pub and restaurant next to Cherry's, Vova told me about his current life. He had lived in Moscow for three years, and just moved back to his hometown, where he owns a souvenir shop in a museum. His friend Slava had been killed a few months before, prompting Vova to move to the smaller, and relatively safer, Vladimir. I had met Slava on several occasions, and had grown to like him even more when both he and Vova visited friends in New Mexico. I stayed with them for a weekend, and remember how out of place Slava looked in the empty desert wearing a well cut maroon suit and shiny Italian shoes. But it was his humor and gentle manner with his friends' children that endeared him to me. I was saddened to hear he had become another Russian murder statistic. Vova didn't want to talk about Slava's death, saying only that Slava had lived a high-profile life with fast cars and too many beautiful women. No doubt, Slava's death and the lifestyle they were leading played a part in Vova looking much older than his twenty-eight years.

Once in the restaurant where we were better able to talk, Vladik and I discussed the prices of rent in Moscow, while Vova busied himself ordering vodka, beer, and food. Thinking I had made a mistake with my Russian, Vladik didn't believe me when I said that I could rent a house with a yard for six hundred dollars a month in Seattle. The dirtiest, smallest flat in a bad area of Moscow costs at least three hundred, which is high considering that some Russians make only two hundred dollars a month.

After a drawn out dinner of cocktail shrimp, good German beer, and Finnish vodka, Vova, Vladik, and I set out for a night on the town. Neither of them could figure out where to go, since some establishments have hundred dollar cover charges, too much even for these high rollers. Finally

Vladik decided he wanted to gamble, so we flagged a car and headed for the Golden Palace.

There are taxis in Russia, but the most common way for Russians without cars to get around in the city is to flag down private cars. Wealthy Russians are chauffeured around in BMW's and Mercedes, usually followed by their heavily armed guards who drive Jeep Cherokees with tinted windows and ignore the traffic lights, staying close to their boss's lead car. For other Russians who don't want to use the often crowded public transport, flagging a ride is the usual mode of travel. The price is established before you enter the car. If nothing can be agreed on the driver speeds off before you even have a chance to slam the door, and you're left waiting for the next car. Since the drivers are usually working Russians who have cars, the conversations on the way are often interesting. The man who took us to the Golden Palace got into a heated debate with Vladik over politics. He seemed to think it made no difference who the president of Russia was—he would be poor regardless and barely scrape by. Vladik got mad and asked if he'd really like to go back to how things were when people had little choice and when there was no room for social mobility not dictated by the state. They finally reconciled at the end, both agreeing that while the freedom had become greater, the daily demands of life and making a living had gotten more complicated. Leaving us at the door of the Golden Palace, the driver smiled and shook hands with Vladik before he pulled away.

Most night clubs have security, but I'd never seen anything like the guards at the Golden Palace. Two men in uniform stood in front of the entrance with fully automatic weapons slung over their shoulders. After we paid the cover charge, we were escorted to the internal security and checked

by two men in suits with hand-held metal detectors, who then waved us through.

The interior of the Golden Palace looked like a casino in Vegas, but less fancy and organized. I watched Vova and Vladik play cards, roulette, and a number of games I didn't recognize, while I observed the people around me--well-dressed men with thin, stylish women standing at their sides. Some were probably prostitutes. (In the past few years in Russia the prostitution rate has multiplied quickly.) When I first got to St. Petersburg I brought with me the media stereotypes, convinced that all the well dressed beautiful young women were hookers looking for a western client and hard currency. I soon discovered, however, that a fancy outfit in Russia is not an indication of wealth. Many Russians who make two hundred dollars a month will save up and then buy expensive products. Tanya thought nothing of spending eighty dollars from her two hundred dollar paycheck on designer perfume. Since young people usually live with their parents, they have no expenses other than clothes and entertainment.

Before Vladik, Vova, and I left the Golden Palace, we went to the coat check to reclaim our jackets. Each one of us had been given a tag with a number. I couldn't find mine and the old *babushka* (grandmother) who worked there would not let me take my coat without the number. At almost every movie house, restaurant, theater, and school in Russia there is a coat room, usually presided over by an elderly woman or man. Theft is very rare at these places, but as I learned, woe be to the poor soul who loses her ticket. Only after fifteen minutes of bargaining, and a five-dollar bribe, was I able to retrieve my coat. It's amusing yet ironic that the Golden Palace--a gaudy, western-style, manifestation of capitalism--still maintains hold-overs from the Soviet times like the power-wielding cloakroom clerk.

I spent the next day in Moscow with Vova and Vladik. We met around ten that morning at my hotel and spent the first two hours of our day trying to find a place for them to drink beer. While not every Russian drinks vodka and beer with the tenacity of these young men, for many Russians social life revolves around drinking. Many young people feel that they don't have a place in society, since work is hard to find and their futures are uncertain in the changing society of the new post-communist Russia. Alcohol is the one constant in their life. But most of my young Russian friends, while they do drink vodka and beer often, still have hopes and goals beyond the bottle. One of my student friends from St. Petersburg once related his father's advice: "You can drink a lot a little, or a little a lot. But don't drink a lot all the time or you'll ruin your life." Most young Russians are acutely aware of the problems of alcoholism in their country, but have a hard time seeing how their actions of today will have a direct bearing on their futures. Spare time is usually spent with friends drinking beer or vodka, but the spirits are more of a social enhancement than a crutch--a way to forget the hardships of *byt* (daily life) and concentrate on good friendships and conversation.

Both Vladik and Vova have a lot of free time and have control over their schedules. Neither of them has a stable income; they live with a feast or famine mentality. Many Russians who make large sums of money quickly feel as if they have no choice but to spend it, since there is, as yet, no structure for safe investment in Russia. People shy away from banks, and keep their cash in safes at home. When the banks of the fallen Soviet Union collapsed, the elderly were hardest hit. Counting on a comfortable retirement, they had managed to put their savings in a bank, only to watch the worth of their nest-egg reduced to a few dollars in a matter of weeks. Vladik and Vova prefer to spend the money they make on their friends, and in Vladik's case, also on his

family. This generosity, however, is not only because Russians have nowhere to invest. Even many Russians who move to America and have bank accounts spend exorbitant amounts of money on friends and entertainment. Two young Russians I know who now live in Brighton Beach—the “little Russia” of New York City—don’t think twice about spending their weekly earnings (acquired by waiting tables) on a huge feast at a restaurant with their buddies. Money should be spent on life’s enjoyments and shared with all.

Vova and Vladik finally found an Irish pub that was open before noon where they could drink Guinness and I could have a cappuccino. (I try to refrain from drinking alcohol in the morning hours.) Vladik started a conversation with Hillary, a British woman working at the bar. He wanted to know how much she made as a barmaid. Hillary replied that she made four hundred dollars a month, since she had a student visa and wasn’t working full time. Other foreigners who worked at the bar made eight hundred, while Russians made only two. This pay discrepancy between foreigners and Russians is not uncommon in Russia. Many businesses, especially foreign ones, take advantage of Russians’ dire situation. While employers know that two hundred dollars is not enough to attract foreigners, they also recognize that it is decent pay for a Russian who formerly made fifty.

Hillary told us how rude New Russians were. The term *noviye ruskiye* (New Russians) refers to those who have made a great deal of money very quickly and live to show their wealth. Known to be rude and demanding, they think laws cannot touch them. Along with their ostentatious apartments and cars, these people show their wealth by sending their children to private schools, and their wives and girl friends to Europe for shopping trips. Though the degree of wealth enjoyed by *noviye ruskiye* varies widely, they are the new class that has arisen from the fallen Soviet

Union. Many of the *nouveau riche* were former *aparatchiki*--members of the *nomenklatura* (the privileged group of party bosses who ran the Soviet Union). When the country they were in charge of disappeared, they quickly converted their power into wealth and privatized the factories and businesses they ran, pocketing the profits. Other New Russians were Soviet citizens with no party status who often dabbled in the "gray" market in the late 1980's. These men were known as *fartsovshchiki*. They sold currency and souvenirs outside the official economy to tourists. Vladik and Vova are part of this lower echelon--their money flow is unpredictable and small compared to the *ex-aparatchiki*. Vladik laughed sympathetically with Hillary as he rose from the barstool, agreeing that most *noviye russkiye* were indeed rude. After he fished money out of his pocket for a tip, we headed to a seafood store.

In the new supermarkets and twenty-four hour stores that have popped up around the cities in Russia, the process of shopping is as it is in Portland or Chicago. A customer only has to stand in line once, at the check out stand. However, shopping for food in old Soviet-style stores can be daunting even for Russians. First Vladik found the seafood he wanted to buy--fake crab and cocktail shrimp. He thought the crab was real. Like many food products sold in Russia, the crab came from abroad. Ingredients and directions are often written in French, Spanish, Italian, English, Finnish, Danish, Arabic, or Hebrew. Very few labels are written in Russian, making it difficult for people to know how long to prepare food and what the package exactly contains. Once Vladik selected the fish, he had to remember the exact price and stand in line to pay at the cashier's. He then received a receipt and returned to where the food was kept, standing in line again until the woman working in the shrimp section could help him. He had to repeat this process for the fake crab. By the time we left, both Vladik and Vova were frustrated

and glad to leave. They still had time, though, to stop in front of an old woman who was outside the store begging. Vladik said, "Here, Grandmother," and gave her some money he had in his pocket.

Vladik lives in one of the thousands of identical Krushchev and Brezhnev apartment buildings that cover the outskirts of Russian cities, where the buildings are the same in St. Petersburg, Moscow, or Tula. There's a well known joke in Russia about two business men, one from Moscow, one from St. Petersburg, who meet in an airport. They decide to drink vodka and toast their new friendship. Both get drunk, and somewhere along the way they end up accidentally switching plane tickets. The man from Moscow ends up in St. Petersburg, and visa versa. They both take a taxi to their homes on Veterans' Prospect, and take the lift in the identical buildings to the seventh floor. Even their keys fit in the door. Both wives hear their drunk husbands come in, and decide to greet them in the morning--only then is the mistake discovered.

Vladik's wife was home when we arrived. Still in her nightgown, she retreated to the bathroom, scolding Vladik for not warning her she had guests. After she dressed and brushed her hair, she joined us in the kitchen where Vova was defrosting the shrimp. Vladik is trying to save enough money to buy a nice apartment for his thirteen year old son and wife, who worries about her husband's safety at his risky job as a bouncer. Flashiness is not his style--he wants his family to live well and to be proud. Already they have many modern conveniences--a VCR, coffee maker, and nice furnishings--but he hates the suburban location of their apartment.

Later that evening we went to one of the western style restaurants that has sprouted up over the past few years. Not only are there an abundance of chic cafes in Moscow and St. Petersburg, now diners can enjoy meals served

by well dressed waiters who are, in contrast to their Soviet precursors, courteous and accommodating. The restaurant Vova chose was owned by a German who runs many dining establishments in Moscow. Vova, feeling nostalgic for the deserts of New Mexico, chose the restaurant Santa Fe, where they serve southwestern style cuisine and the walls are decorated with murals of cacti and wild horses. Prices are high, and listed in dollars, since the clients are mainly new Russians and foreign businessmen who relax in the plush chairs and calm atmosphere. Vova was quiet, but the vocal Vladik asked me questions about my country. One of the biggest misconceptions Russians have about life in America pertains to the multiculturalism. Virtually the only view of African-Americans that Russians receive is through movies and the media. I tried to explain the problems we face in America, but usually I felt I was fighting a losing battle. Russians need to deal with their own xenophobia before they can understand the way America should be. Even today in Russia, residents of the country are not all "Russians." Only ethnic Russians can lay claim to their Russianess, which is denoted on their passports. Other people, though they are citizens of Russia, have the nationality "Jewish," or "Ukrainian" marked on their documents for all to see. The instruments of repression are still in place—many fear they will be used again. Vladik asked about the status of people who live in the cities, wanting to compare his life with theirs. One of his dreams is to go to New York City, which in his mind is the heart of America.

The restaurant became crowded, so after we finished eating, we relocated our *troika* to the bar upstairs (an all too familiar pattern for me with my Russian friends). Once we sat down, Vladik started talking with the *barman* (bar tender). We introduced ourselves, and for the next two hours we talked to *barman* Vitalic, who told us that he worked only part-time and

attended classes during the day to learn computers. He and Vladik sympathized with one another as they talked about how crazy their lives had become. Even though Vladik makes as much in a night as Vitalic does in a month, he still saw him as a brother having a hard time adjusting to the changes in the new Russia. Every few minutes their conversation was interrupted when a waiter or cocktail waitress banged on the sliding door behind the wood-paneled bar. They carried appetizers on trays, making it impossible for them to open the cumbersome door that had fallen off its sliding tracks. Every time Vitalic opened the door, I caught a glimpse of the steamy kitchen. Tiles had fallen off the walls, dirty water lay in puddles on the floor, and surly cooks yelled from behind enormous caldrons. Just three yards from the fancy mahogany bar with brass fittings where we sat talking with Vitalic who carefully emptied the ashtrays every five minutes, was a chaotic, messy kitchen, not unlike a kitchen in a dumpy, old Soviet-style restaurant.

When we said good-bye to Vitalic, I had no idea that in a couple of months I would see the same young man on the silver screen. The movie was a fast paced, slick *boevik* (action film) about a mafia gang war in Moscow. Vitalic played himself, as he served a strong cocktail to the distraught hero. In a country with no legal contracts for much of its film business, I am sure that Vitalic was as surprised as I was about his fifteen seconds of fame.

After Vova, Vladik, and I left the restaurant and passed the valets who were parking foreign luxury cars for the customers in fur coats, we headed down the street about two hundred yards. Vladik explained that we could bargain for a cheaper price if we weren't standing directly outside one of the poshest restaurants in Moscow. The driver we did finally hail was a wizened man in an old Soviet Lada, a car designed by Italian engineers copying the

Fiat. Vladik and the driver almost immediately started talking, and about ten minutes into the ride, Vladik turned around and asked me if I had read Bulgakov's Master and Margarita. I said I had. He smiled and told me we were on the street where Bulgakov had lived for many years. Animated and pleased to have a foreigner who knew something about Russian writers, the driver took a detour to show us the street where much of the novel took place. It's a crazy world when the driver of a Fiat wannabe on its last legs is an expert on national literature and the *barman* who's barely scraping by ends up in a movie that glamorizes the very greed and violence that makes living in the new Russia both exhilarating and discouraging for the average man trying to survive the advantages and unfamiliarity of the new capitalism.

Chapter Four

An Old Friend

Nina has lived in Moscow all her life—a true Muscovite. She went to an English specialty school for the children of the communist party elite. Most parents there had cars, access to travel abroad, and high connections in the communist government, all exceptions to the rule in Soviet life. This was not the case with Nina's family, however. Nina's father is an engineer. Her mother was also, but hasn't worked for the past eight years since their second daughter was born. They live in one of Moscow's several huge Stalinist empire-style skyscraper apartment buildings, two blocks from Moscow School # 20—the elite, English specialty school where Nina studied. Their apartment, like those of most Russians, is small but manageable, with two bedrooms (one doubling as a living room), a kitchen and a bathroom. When I stayed with Nina in 1991, I was grilled several times by the Russian teachers at the school whether everything was all right with my living arrangements. It wasn't until later that I realized they were concerned that an American would be exposed to the normal living situations of ordinary Russians, instead of the privileged housing of the communist elite.

Nina's life, when I first met her, was far from dull, since she was always the center of attention for a great many young men. This was no surprise. Nina has a beautiful perfectly oval-shaped face, with high cheek bones, almond shaped green eyes, and smooth, clear skin. At that time her

hair was waist length, thick, straight, and light brown. But it was her personality that always led to her friendships. Nina is always easy to laugh, and her smile shows in every part of her face. She and her friends loved to gather at each others' houses and socialize. Her group of friends seemed to be the trouble makers for the teachers, but each was smart in his or her own way.

The two of us didn't spend all of our time at school when I stayed with her my senior year of high school. It was from drinking tea that Nina and I became good friends. Nina drinks her tea by pouring the tea into the saucer and slurping it loudly. If her then three year old sister, Nastya, was with us she would do the same, imitating her big sister. Nina's mother smiled and admonished her for teaching Nastya bad habits. Not unlike the British, the Russians' answer to everything is tea: on a cold day (and there are many), after a long night before the sun rises (I always thought it strange to see woozy, young Russian men sipping their tea from dainty cups), or just as an excuse to talk and spend time sitting together. The ritual of boiling the water and waiting for the tea to steep in the *chainik* (teapot) is the same in every Russian household, and creates order and calm in the otherwise hectic world. During our long tea drinking sessions in her family's small kitchen, Nina and I would often sit in silence and enjoy the low, soft light from the sunbeams that snuck through the streaked, double-paned windows, creating warmth and casting shadows on the flowered tablecloth. Often we would just look at each other, shake our heads, smile and whisper, "Oy!" Good for all occasions, this Russian expression is one of my favorites, expressing all emotions from humor to defeat—usually accompanied by a mirthful smile.

Unfortunately I soon had to leave my cozy existence with Nina, but I knew I'd be back, though probably not for several years. We were sad to part,

but happy we had become close. Five years later we met again, but this time Nina had a husband, a new apartment and a job.

Over the years we had written to each other, and I knew Nina had married Kirill, whom she met taking the lift up to her eighth floor apartment. Kirill lived in her apartment building, on the seventh floor, and had also gone to Moscow School #20, but had graduated four years before Nina. The only picture I had seen of him was their wedding picture, where a very scared and smiling Nina stood beside a then thin and happy Kirill.

When I came to Moscow in October of 1995, I called Nina and we decided to meet at Red Square, in front of Lenin's tomb. It felt strange to see her after five years, a married, working woman. She looked the same, though her brown hair now had a henna tint. We embraced and headed to her apartment on the last *metro* stop to the northeast of the city. Nina told me she rarely came to the center and left her region only to go to work.

Nina and Kirill were lucky as far as young couples go, for they didn't have to live at home with their parents. At first they lived together in an apartment about forty minutes from Moscow, in one of the many small suburbs, but then, when Kirill's aunt died, they moved to her apartment on the outskirts of the city. Kirill worked for IBM, and made about four hundred dollars a month, which used to be a small fortune. (Recently it has become barely enough to live on.) Nina still works for Awai, a Singapore firm involved with oil and gas extraction in Russia. She had gone to a communications institute for two years but didn't finish school. Nina speaks English well, and would like to go back to get her degree in ecology.

When we got to her apartment, Kirill was there with two of his friends, Igor and Misha, also graduates of School #20. It was noon and they were still recovering from the previous night. Both Misha and Igor had spent the night,

and empty vodka and gin bottles were strewn around the kitchen floor. After introductions were made, Kirill and his friends went out to get more drink and food, and Nina and I were left alone again. She showed me her apartment--nice and comfortable, with one bedroom, a living room, a good sized kitchen, a bathroom, and water closet. They had beautiful, dark wood wardrobes that had come with the apartment, and fine dishes that had been given as wedding presents. Nina said that she and Kirill's mom got along very well: she knit Nina sweaters and made her clothes. But Nina's parents did not like Kirill or his parents, because they felt she had married too young and had sold herself short.

Soon Kirill, Igor, and Misha came back with beer, tequila, and several bottles of vodka. All of us prepared the food, typical fare for an evening of drinking in Russia. Kirill cut the sausage into small pieces; Nina arranged cheese on a plate. I cut up the big, salty, juicy pickles, which had become my favorite food in Russia. (Most people pickle their own cucumbers, but I could usually find a *babushka* selling her homemade ones when I needed a pickle fix.) Igor cut up raw strips of bacon that Russians love to eat. Instead of frying the bacon, They eat it straight from the package. Of course the meat isn't raw, but cured. Still, I'd rather eat the fat in the form of hot grease. It's less obvious. There also was *salo* (smoked lard), served on bread. I declined the cheese-like *salo*--I just couldn't bring myself to ingest it. Kirill had splurged and bought caviar, red roe, which Russians eat on soft white bread with butter.

Once the food was carried out into the living room, we were seated around the table for an evening of toasts and drinking. Several vodka shots later, Kirill leaned towards me, glass in hand, and said, "Amanda, Amanda, I am glad we've met after all these years. Your letters were always so kind to me, though you did not know me. But as the Russian phrase goes, 'A friend

of a friend is a friend of mine.' Your house is my house, if you ever want to stay here with your friends, Nina and I can stay at our parents and you can stay here." Though I was touched by his enthusiasm, I also realized that the toasting we had been doing could have led him to make such a generous offer. Nina's smile, and gentle touch on my hand, however, assured me that regardless of whether or not her husband would remember his invitation in the morning, *she* wanted me to come again.

Nina grew visibly tired of all the drinking--her smile was tense and she looked bored. After excusing herself, she went to take a bath. I thought it a little strange, but later I realized that, as odd as it may sound, the bathroom is one of the only places to have total privacy in Russia, and Nina needed to get away from Kirill and his drinking friends. Though Nina said nothing to me at the time, she had grown sick of Kirill and his drinking. Before her eyes he had grown old and lost his motivation. Unfortunately, the story of the beautiful young girl, charmed by an older, fun-loving man--a charmer who turns out to be a drunk--is all too common in Russia. Some women feel trapped in a life they don't want by the time they are twenty-one. Luckily for Nina they had no children to complicate the matter. Many marriages in Russian end in divorce, and often an unwed mother chooses not to marry the father, deciding that it is hard enough to raise one child, let alone care for the immature father as well.

A few weeks after my first visit with Nina and Kirill, they invited me to come to their *dacha* (country home). Kirill and Misha met me at the train station in Moscow at eight in the morning, and we took Misha's car to Kirill's parents' place to get bedding that was needed for the *dacha*. For most Russians the *dacha* is a place to go in the summer when the kids are out of school, or on

the weekends to get away from the busy city. Most Russians have at least one within their extended family. During times of food shortages and high prices, the *dachas* are a means to produce food. People carefully nurtured their potato patches and vegetable gardens, not knowing if they would be able to get any food in the cities. Even now, when food shortages are a rarity in the cities, Russians often stockpile potatoes at their *dachas*. Kirill's parents' country home is about a three hour drive away from Moscow.

Moscow has one of the most confusing road systems in Russia. If you miss the direct highway, you have to spend half an hour spiraling out from the center. After about forty-five minutes, we finally made it to the road that would take us out of the city. We had been driving about two hours when Kirill informed me that Misha had just gotten his license six months before. That explained a lot. We were the slowest car on the highway; every so often a truck zoomed by and Misha would get flustered. I was relieved when we stopped at a roadside food kiosk selling *sosiski* (hot-dogs) and *shashlik* (shish kabobs). Kirill refused to buy the *shashlik*. Any stray dog that is hanging around one day may inadvertently find himself as shish kabob the next. Hot-dogs, though, are a favorite food for Russians. They don't eat them in buns like Americans do, but with white bread and ketchup - a bite of *sosiski* and a bite of bread.

Not too long after our food break, we had to make a pit stop. The trip was beginning to look as though it had no end. Since there are no rest areas on most highways, Russians just pull over at the most convenient place and run into the woods. Along the way I saw many families standing on the side of the road, the men with their backs turned and the women tromping off into the forest. Once everyone had taken care of business, we were back on our way.

We drove through a small industrial town, and then on a dirt road past barns where chickens hopped along the road. Nina and Kirill's small green *dacha* had white wooden trim, with the typically intricate Russian carvings. Until the stove, a clay wall that heats the entire home, heated up, we kept our jackets on and tried not to think about the cold. A few hours later we were in our T-shirts, comfortably sitting around the table eating marinated mushrooms and drinking wine. One of my favorite features of the *dacha* is the toilet seat. They keep the toilet seat inside, on the clay stove. When one of us needed to use the outhouse, we took the seat and sat in warm comfort. Russians are good at coming up with simple solutions to small but important problems.

When I awoke from my post-journey nap, Kirill and Misha were cooking *shashlik* outside on a grill and Nina was washing dishes. Since there is no running water, we poured the water we got from the well in the front yard into a bucket above the sink that releases water like a soap dispenser. In typical Russian fashion we ate a drawn out meal until we could eat no more.

The next morning Nina's foot was hurting her (probably a bone spur irritated by her new shoes), so our mission of the day was to find a doctor. Since health care is free, Russians will go to doctors for minor problems, often receiving treatments which we would consider odd and ineffective. We all hopped in the car and, with the rookie driver Misha at the wheel, left in search of a health clinic. Kirill was skeptical that we would find such a place in this "village," as he called it.

After driving around the town for twenty minutes, we found the hospital—a drab, five-story building. The cement facing had long since disintegrated. The main building turned out to be only for residents of the town, so we had to drive around to the other side to a smaller clinic. About

the size of a double-wide trailer, this clinic was putrid green. The paint was peeling, and the big white doors were about to fall off their hinges. We walked in noisily, and only after Kirill shouted to see if anyone was there, did we receive a response. A middle-aged woman wearing a stained white smock came out of one of the rooms with a cross look on her face. "*Chto?*" ("What?") she croaked. Kirill explained that Nina's foot was hurting her and they were here for the long weekend from Moscow. The woman, who was not a doctor but more qualified than a nurse, motioned for Nina to follow her into one of the rooms. The heavy door closed behind them and we waited for several minutes until the woman poked her head out and motioned Kirill inside. Moments later Kirill came out of the room, went to the car, and returned with a bottle of vodka. After handing it to the woman, he came back to sit with Misha and me.

Kirill had brought the vodka as a form of payment for the doctor, knowing that very little in his country is actually free. This I expected, but I didn't think the woman would ask so bluntly for the payment. I asked Kirill if it was normal for people to be so forward in asking for "gifts." He laughed and told me the vodka wasn't being used as a payment this time, but as antiseptic. Ah, vodka! What a versatile item.

We soon left the clinic. Nina had her foot wrapped and was limping, but in less pain than before. (Personally I don't think the woman did anything to Nina's foot except wrap it in a bandage, but if that made Nina feel better, it made no difference to me.) She wanted to sleep, so Kirill drove her back to the *dacha*, before he, Misha, and I went to wash the muddy car in the not-so-clean river. After crossing several rickety bridges which I refused to go over in a car and walked across, we ended up close to the river. The packed (and mostly dry) mud on the roads made driving challenging for the new man

behind the wheel. Only about fifty yards from the river did the roads turn to sand. I wasn't sure what Misha and Kirill had planned, but apparently they had decided to go down to the river. I told them that there was no way in hell that the car would make it. Kirill assured me that Misha's excellent driving skills would prevail. I personally didn't care how good a driver he claimed to be (though I've seen driver's education students with more aptitude), I was worried about his car. Of course I knew that two Russian men were not going to pay attention to the advice of a woman. Never mind that I happen to know just a little about the art of off-road driving. Five years in the Forest Service driving trucks and fire engines through the woods helped to expand my experience, but I also own a four wheel drive truck that's the same age as I am and has, as a mechanic once put it, "Been rode hard and put away wet many a time." Romping in the woods with my four-by-four is a favorite pastime of mine, so I was very sure the car would never reach the river. Needless to say, as soon as we hit the sand with all four wheels, we were axle deep. The four tires spun helplessly. "*Vsyo.*" ("That's it.") sighed Misha. Figuring we'd be there for a while, Kirill took three cups and a bottle of champagne out of the trunk. I didn't see much cause for celebrating. But I figured, "When in Rome..."

We walked back to the nearest house. Outside was an UAS (a Russian-made jeep—by far the best Russian vehicle, in my opinion), an army truck up on blocks, a motorcycle, and a dilapidated Lada. On the ground in front of the rickety, leaning fence sat a mother with a grubby child in her arms. Next to her, climbing on the army truck, were two dirty-faced kids. An old woman was working in the garden, while a teenage boy had his head under the hood of the Lada. All of them stopped work and quietly watched our approach. Kirill asked if there was anyone who could pull us out of the sand. The

younger woman spoke, saying her husband and brother would be back soon and could help us. We thanked her and returned to the car. I could tell that while Misha and Kirill looked at those people as backwards country-bumpkins, they were nonetheless nervous and felt a little out of place, like New Yorkers in the Appalachians.

We didn't have to wait long before a red Niva (a small, powerful, Russian-made four-by-four) came roaring over the hill, spewing sand and swerving on and off the road. The driver pulled to an abrupt stop in front of us, and he and another rough looking man stepped out, followed by a mongrel dog. Without so much as a reply to Kirill's "hello," these men started hooking up our car to the Niva with a chain. In four swift movements, they had us out of the sand, and facing the right direction. I was thoroughly impressed with their prowess. The bigger of the two men, who was wearing a wool jacket and felt boots, came over to Kirill, accepted his offer of cigarettes, and returned to his Niva. The mutt and the other man jumped into the car and they sped off, disappearing over the hill from whence they came. I have a great affinity towards people who own four-by-fours, no matter what back-water part of the world they call home.

As we humbly made our way back to the *dacha*, we came across a policeman in his jeep. He asked us if we'd seen two young men in a red Niva. We looked at each other and laughed. Misha pointed across the bridge, and the policeman ran back to his truck and hit the gas. I speculated that they had made a heist of some kind, but Kirill and Misha laughed even louder and said that the men were probably his vodka drinking buddies.

By the end of the weekend, I still hadn't had much of a chance to talk to Nina, since she spent a lot of the time sleeping. Obviously discontent with her relationship, she escaped the unpleasanties and avoided possible

arguments by keeping her eyes and mouth closed. With Kirill and Misha always around, we couldn't discuss the private aspects of our lives.

The next time I saw Nina was in January, but only for one day as I was passing through Moscow on my way to Irkutsk, in Siberia. Once again we didn't see much of each other. Kirill had a couple of friends over, and they had again been drinking all day. We sat in the kitchen, ate *pilmeni* (dumplings), drank beer and talked. When Kirill and his friends left to go for more food and beverages, Nina and I were left alone. She told me she was hoping she could go back to school and get a degree, perhaps in business. She liked how she was living, but felt a little stifled. There was tension between her parents and Kirill. Kirill's mother kept asking when there would be children. Even though they'd been married four years, neither Nina nor Kirill wanted children yet. Nina seemed more tired and smiled even less easily than before. We promised we'd see each other soon, perhaps in St. Petersburg.

It was a different Nina who came to St. Petersburg in April. She came with a friend, Dima, whom she had met at work. In March Nina and Kirill had separated, albeit on friendly terms. Their relationship wasn't working out, and realizing it, they both decided to live apart. Now Kirill and his parents live where Nina and Kirill had lived, renting out their apartment in the center, the one below Nina's parents. Those apartments, because of their good size and central location, are worth about \$300,000, though the market is beginning to level off. This number may sound suspiciously high, but if compared with a 5th Avenue apartment in New York, the price is actually reasonable. Nina said that Kirill's mother calls her often and wonders how Nina could have tolerated her son's drinking. His mother hadn't realized before she had lived with her son how most of his money went to entertain

his friends and drinking. Nina felt badly, but was glad her mother-in-law understood. They still haven't gotten a divorce, since they need an official stamp on their passports from the *militsia*. Kirill is afraid to go to the police station and do the paper work because they want to draft him into the army. Even though he served the three months required for students, the laws have since changed. Now all men from the age of twenty-five to twenty-eight are eligible for the draft unless they fulfilled their entire duty earlier. Nothing like grandfather laws exist for Russians. Already police had come to Kirill's apartment with their *avtomati* (machine guns) to take him away, but luckily Kirill had gone to the store and only his mother was home. Understandably, Kirill was reticent about going anywhere near the police no matter what the reason.

Nina's new man, Dima, had been to St. Petersburg before, but Nina had never taken the trip. My friend Alyosha chortled when I told him that, saying it was typical of Muscovites to never venture out of their city, let alone out of the region they live in. Nina, for one, knew very little about Moscow itself, knowing only how to get to work, her parents' apartment, and her place. Peterburgers seem to know a great deal more about their city, probably since the city has been preserved more than Moscow. Nina and Dima only stayed two nights, but we had a nice time together, doing the tourist attractions in St. Petersburg, and watching the May Day celebration parade where diehard Stalin supporters marched behind the Young Pioneers and in front of the fascists. Nina watched the celebration sitting on Dima's shoulders, and had a good view of the red flags that waved wildly in the cool spring breeze. Both she and Dima laughed when an old man in Soviet army garb broke from his formation in the parade, brashly brandishing a drawing of Yeltsin under

which the words, "He's the true fascist!" were hastily scrawled. The crowded whistled and booed until he retreated back to the ranks with his old cronies.

Nina seemed much happier than she had earlier. Dima is a nice man who had also been married before. He only drinks vodka on special occasions, and as Nina said, takes good care of her. Nina's smile had returned, and she is more like the vivacious girl I had known five years before. Like many young women in Russia she had gotten married before she herself knew what she wanted from life. Luckily Nina possesses the inner fortitude and love of life necessary to take her own destiny in hand.

Chapter Five

Politics Russian Style

When I first saw the poster for the political campaign of Yevgeny Gaidar, I thought I was looking at a condom advertisement. The slick black and white poster showed the naked torsos of a man and woman lying in opposite directions with their heads side by side. Both have their eyes closed and are apparently sleeping. The caption reads "Fall asleep in a good mood," in big letters. I felt sure the words below would say, "Make the right choice. Use Trojans." Instead, at the very bottom of the paper, in small print, was written "Make the right choice. Vote for Gaidar." Imagine an American politician launching a similar campaign. He would be crucified by his opponent, the press, and the religious right. But in Russia, a country where newly found democratic freedoms are blossoming, such strange political tactics are commonplace. For an American who is used to pat sound bites, these renegade campaigns often are as absurd as they are amusing. And it is not only the politicians that arouse our curiosity, but also the reactions of the average person. In the fall of 1995, when I was in St. Petersburg, the race for the State Duma was on. Several main players demanded the most attention.

Yevgeny Gaidar is one of the new "young" politicians who was not part of the entrenched communist bureaucracy. Trained as an economist, Gaidar was Prime Minister of Russia until 1992, and had helped Russia make the move into a market economy. Unfortunately for Gaidar, he was unable to

make the reforms he wanted, and he became the fall guy, receiving the brunt of the blame when prices shot up and staples became scarce. Gaidar lacked the political savvy and cunning to stay in office. He was replaced by Victor Chernomyrdin, who was still Prime Minister in the beginning of 1997. Gaidar remained a political player when he founded his own party, Democratic Choice. Another politician who has emerged on the Russian political scene in the past few years is Yavlinsky, who also served in the government during the reforms and, like Gaidar, was ousted by Yeltsin. He is considered an upstart, even though he was leader of the party YABLOKO (APPLE) during the Duma elections—an acronym using the first two letters of his name and those of his running mates. However, the two running mates dropped out because of a disagreement over policy with Yavlinsky and he then became the sole leader of that party.

In Soviet politics in the 1980s there were two camps—the “young” and the “old.” And the old were *old*. Gorbachev was the first leader of the Soviet Union who was not alive during the Russian Revolution. All the leaders before him were old enough to both remember and take part in the Bolshevik overthrow of the tsarist regime, which explains why the USSR went through three leaders in less than three years in the early 1980s—they were dropping like flies from a malady called “old age.” The “young” generation (of which Gorbachev and Yeltsin are a part) was born in the thirties and came of age in the fifties and early sixties during the “Thaw” under Krushchev. In the new Russia, however, these once “young” politicians have been knocked off their progressive pedestal by an even younger group of upstarts. These youngsters are in their forties and they came of age when it had already become overwhelmingly clear that the great socialist experiment had failed. The seventies were a time of underground rumblings of dissatisfaction. People

knew about the dissidents Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, and understood that they were not alone in their disillusionment. While only a few brave souls were publicly vocal, the average citizen felt safe speaking with his family and close friends about the ills of society without fear of persecution. In earlier times such grumbling could be grounds for packing off a person to the cold, Siberian labor camps, for even family members sometimes turned each other in to the authorities for "subversive" activities.

In 1995, Gaidar and his party launched a campaign in the State Duma, running against many other parties, only about five of which were serious contenders. (The Beer Drinker's Party and the Party of Women could be summarily dismissed from consideration.) In order for a party to send representatives to the Duma, they need to secure no less than five percent of the voters' support. With sixty different parties splitting the vote, five percent was not easy to reach. Gaidar's party was the most liberal, and his supporters were the intellectuals in the big westernized cities, namely St. Petersburg and Moscow. Yavlinsky's YABLOKO's support, like that of Gaidar's was in the cities. However, due to his propensity to whine and claim that nothing was his fault, the older voters disliked him. His followers tended to be young urbanites, but not necessarily students or intellectuals. The middle-of-the-road party, that of the status quo, was *Nash Dom Rossiya* (Our House Russia), headed by Victor Chernomyrdin, a politician of Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's generation who was Prime Minister during my stay. I grew tired of seeing his face on literally every lamp post in St. Petersburg. Someone with a big pocket book must have wanted his party in the Duma. (Or perhaps, and more likely, he was dipping into the state coffers to fund his campaign.) Two other contenders were also to be watched—the communist Zyuganov, and the ultra-nationalist sensation Zhirinovsky.

Zyuganov represented, in the minds of many people, staid communism--stability and predictability with no reactionary tendencies. He conjured up the memories of a time when life was easier, when jobs were secure, and when food prices were lower. A typically human trait is to wax nostalgic and pretend that all was beautiful and good in the times past. Zyuganov's rhetoric played on the distorted memories of the people, but his real policy ideals were closer to the status quo ideas of Chernomyrdin than anything radical. Zyuganov called himself a communist, but if elected, I doubt he would have been for radical change. Most likely the bureaucracy would have been enlarged, the economy stagnated, and the country would have become even more bankrupt. Zyuganov was not a very colorful politician compared with the final major contender, Zhirinovsky.

Zhirinovsky was leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, a deceitful name for such a reactionary. Zhirinovsky represented all that is fantastical, ludicrous, cruel, and absurd in Russian culture. There was no logic to his campaign ideas, but he had charisma and panache, something which has been missing from Russian politics since the time of Stalin. (I don't want to give the impression that Stalin was necessarily good for the Russians, but a cult of personality surrounded him, creating a myth that had little to do with the actual person.) Zhirinovsky had a symbiotic relationship with the press: newspapers sell and TV is watched when the strange and unexpected happens. When I was in Russia, Zhirinovsky knocked a woman in Parliament off her feet with one punch. They must have shown the clip of him rushing at her at least as much as we were shown the OJ Simpson freeway chase. Although he is sometimes seen as a threat to progress in Russia, he is really more of an annoyance and embarrassment. As might be

expected, Zhironovsky's bellicose tirades about reclaiming Alaska were not taken too seriously.

Most of Zhironovsky's support came from the Russian villages and the uneducated Russian workers who could care less if Russia became more closely integrated with Europe as long as vodka was cheap and they could toast the strength and greatness of their mother country. A lot of Zhironovsky's campaign strategies included trips to Siberian villages where he handed out free vodka to those who came to listen to him, and promised wealth, power, prosperity, and most importantly, endless liquor supplies to all. Of course he was a much bigger hit in the villages than Gaidar, who when asked, "We're living badly--will it get better?" launched into a detailed analysis of the economic reasons for the state of life now, and preached the need for patience, concluding that eventually, if the market system can be securely instated, yes, slowly, life will get better. Zhironovsky simply roared, "As soon as I'm president and my party runs the Duma, then all will be better!! Let's toast to our success!!" Zhironovsky was comparable to Ross Perot--grudgingly tolerated by other politicians who didn't really want to validate his positions by replying to his rhetoric. He was tolerated, but only so as not to isolate his supporters and give him grounds to create real trouble.

When I saw Gaidar speak in St. Petersburg, only a week remained before the Duma elections in the end of December, 1995. Alyosha had asked me if I wanted to go to the political rally. I agreed, envisioning Gaidar speaking to an excited crowd of thousands. The speech was at a theater, and I pictured one of the huge, arena-like domes of the Soviet era. Only when we began to near the theater where he was to speak did I begin to suspect that perhaps the fanfare would be more subdued. Off of the Fontanka canal no large buildings loomed on the horizon. Only the five-story stucco yellow

pastels and pinks of the old city reflected on the frozen water. We ducked through a gate and wound our way along a path. We had arrived at the theater.

There were no crowds, only a few dozen people standing around the entrance. The peeling facade of the theater was indication that not too much money had been spent on Gaidar's appearance. The crowd grew to about two hundred once we were inside. Most of the people were young--mainly students. There were a few older people there, probably from an intellectual crowd, judging by their natty hats and coats. Before we went into the auditorium, I collected several pieces of Gaidar paraphernalia. Gaidar's image stood in stark contrast to the sleek and racy posters of the "condom" ad vintage. He became known as "Iron Winnie-the-Pooh" because of his round, pudgy, Pooh-like appearance and his tendency to be philosophical and ponderous. It's hard to think of a worse political image.

Never before had I wanted to go into advertising or propaganda, but after seeing the publicity campaign of Gaidar, I wanted to help. A glossy pamphlet containing a thumbnail sketch of Gaidar's policies was handed to each person. On the cover was a cartoon of Gaidar as Winnie-the-Pooh. Inside was a comic strip with Pooh and Piglet discussing the economic future of Russia. I am almost certain no permission was asked of the estate of A. A. Milne, but since copyright laws are not adhered to in Russia, no one thought twice about it. Baseball caps with the same caricature were given away, along with little round fuzzy critters with peel-and-stick feet bearing a flag advertising the Iron Pooh. How Gaidar expected to be taken seriously and win the election with that nonsense was a mystery. I think he would have done better forgetting about the Poohs and the Piglets and sticking to the risqué, sexy format like, "Fall asleep in a good mood." He obviously had two

different groups of people working on his publicity. Luckily the Pooh camp didn't have a costume for him, or access to a TV show, because Sesame Street would have come to Russia.

Though Gaidar's political image may have been ridiculous, his integrity and understanding of Russia was serious and worthy of attention. Although the crowd gathered in the bleachers surrounding Gaidar's table was small, thoughtful discourse set the tone for the event. After a wordy introduction of Gaidar by St. Petersburg's progressive and well-liked mayor at that time, Anatolii Sobchak, Gaidar began to speak about his policies and political beliefs. He spoke clearly and with enthusiasm, explaining that this was a critical time for Russia and that patience and understanding were needed by all in order for things to settle down in the right way. Unlike the typical Soviet-era politicians who droned on in a dull monotone, Gaidar spoke with animation, his big blue eyes glittering with intelligence. This was obviously a learned man. And unlike Yeltsin or Gorbachev before him, Gaidar stayed away from bureaucratic rhetoric, and used simple economic terms and accessible examples.

Next to us on the bleachers sat a group of punks with black skeleton bandannas, Levi's jackets, big boots, and red Soviet flags. They were the Young Communists who looked more like heavy metal fans than conservatives. The great irony of today is that the youth who feel they must rebel are rebelling against the status quo, against the Democrats in power. The easiest way for them to show their scorn for authority is to support the ousted communists, and to shout about the days when Russia threw its weight around the world and was afraid of nothing. Less than ten years ago, however, similarly clad rebellious youth in Russia denounced the

communist government, heralding the greatness of either anarchy or democracy.

As soon as Gaidar mentioned the military, the group of communists next to us booed and whistled. (Unlike in the US, in Europe whistling is done in condemnation, not cheer—an important fact to remember when attending a soccer game with 10,000 fanatics.) One of them yelled that it was a sin for the Russian military to be weak. They thought it needed to be the strongest part of the nation so that Japan wouldn't even think of reclaiming the Kuril Islands. Gaidar calmly explained that Russia spent more of its GNP on defense than any other modern nation, and that if it were to cut spending to three percent of the GNP, it would be more in the lines of the US and other nations. The army needed to be streamlined and efficient, not big, nearly immobile, and ineffective. This statement caused a great deal of commotion with our neighbors, who stood up, roared some words that can't be repeated, shook their fists at Gaidar and tromped noisily out of the room, brandishing their red hammer and sickle flags—a good idea, since a few young people on the other side of the room had angrily screamed at them to shut up and were already moving in their direction. The younger portion of the crowd cheered when the communists left, while the rest just shook their heads in silence.

For about half an hour after Gaidar finished speaking, people were allowed to approach two microphones and ask questions. This type of question and answer forum was common in Soviet times, but the questions were usually as dry and predictable as the answers, and nothing interesting was ever revealed. Now, however, new life had been brought into the discussion between speaker and listener. Most of the people who went up to ask questions were students—some from the economics school, others from technical institutes or foreign language faculties. The questions they asked

were well prepared and evoked careful and thoughtful answers from Gaidar. Some addressed education, others employment. What impressed me about Gaidar was his candidness. He wasn't trying to sell himself, just trying to give serious consideration to the problems facing Russia and to offer thoughtful solutions. Certainly Gaidar realized he had very little chance to win the presidency in June, but nonetheless, he would most likely continue in politics as a voice of reason and to stay in the public eye. His concerns during the elections in the next week were to get the needed five percent to become a legitimate party in the Duma.

After the question and answer period, people were allowed to get his signature or take their picture with him. I now have a signed pamphlet and baseball cap. Unfortunately I didn't get a chance to tell him I'd volunteer to run his publicity campaign. I'll have to wait until the next presidential elections.

On the day of the State Duma elections a week later, in December, 1991, we sat around the radio in class anxiously awaiting the results of the election. Because of the eight time zones in Russia, the election results were in from the east coast of Russia long before the west. Early in the day Zyuganov was ahead, and Gaidar had far from the needed five percentage for the Duma. The teachers at the gymnasia where I studied were at their wits' end. Their only hope was that the voters in Moscow and St. Petersburg would give Gaidar and Yavlinsky a boost. It wasn't until later that evening that the final results were announced. Chernomyrdin and Zyuganov had the majority of the votes, but YABLOKO and the Iron Winnie-the-Pooh had squeaked in with five and seven percent. There was still hope for the country.

Later I asked my friends who they had voted for. Almost all of the teachers had voted for Gaidar, and most of my friends at the university had

too. Tanya voted for Gaidar, but Denis and Sviatoslav didn't vote. "What for?" they asked, "Nothing will change." Already the novelty of actually having a choice that made a tangible difference had begun to wear off. As far as most people were concerned, the real elections were in June when the country would chose a new president.

I had already returned home to the United States when the elections for president took place, but before I left in May, the race was between the communist Zyuganov and Yeltsin. Some people thought Zhirinovsky, who was making a big fuss and brash statements, had a good chance, but anyone who was realistic knew his rhetoric could take him just so far. Gaidar and Yavlinsky were running against Yeltsin, but they pulled out at the last minute to give him their grudging support. If the votes of the liberals had been split, Zyuganov would have had a good chance. While no one was ecstatic about the way things were going with Yeltsin's government, the fear of the unknown and the lack of a viable choice worked in the president's favor. It also didn't hurt him that he was running from an already established power base. He had all the funding he needed, along with the enthusiastic support of the US.

I only heard about Yeltsin's victory three days after the elections when I got my hands on an old newspaper in a base camp in Utah where I was working on a fire suppression crew with the US Forest Service. Even though I was sure he would win, I still breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't until January of 1997, when I returned to St. Petersburg for a month, that I was able to talk to my Petersburg friends about Russian politics.

In January, Yeltsin was still recovering from bypass surgery and was in the hospital with double pneumonia. Chernomyrdin, the Prime Minister,

was in Odessa for rest and relaxation, so no one was sure who was running the country. What amazed me was the humor with which the Russians looked at their state. In the US, if Clinton were in the hospital and if Gore were in the Virgin Islands vacationing, there would be hell to pay. But Russians are used to the great apparatus of the government running itself. From the end of the Brezhnev era in 1982 until Gorbachev took over the reins, there was not a leader under eighty who was operating at full mental capacity. In his final years, Brezhnev could barely read his speeches, which were written in such big print that he had to carry out stacks of papers to the podium. Andropov was never without his dialysis machine, and died after less than two years at the helm. With this in mind, it is not too surprising that Russians can be nonchalant about absent leaders.

A feeling of hopelessness and stagnation replaced the slowly ebbing euphoria in the new Russia. Alyosha's dad just found out that his small computer firm has to pay ten thousand dollars in taxes or the government will confiscate his hardware. The police informed him of this, making an unspoken threat that damage would be done if the taxes weren't paid. Most business men who wanted to run a legal business are facing the same problem. Since revenue is low, the government has raised taxes on businesses to an outrageous ninety percent. No one can obey the laws and still make a profit. It's no wonder that many people turn to organized crime for protection. At least they can make the payments and still eat; the choice is between the lesser of two evils.

When I spoke with Tanya and Sviatoslav recently, the picture was just as grim. Bars and places to go for Russians who are not making a western wage or extorting money have dwindled. And while there has been a new boom in places of entertainment, the prices are far beyond most people's

reach. Sviatoslav said that the choice was small for those who had incentive and still wanted to be honest. He pointed to Tanya and said, "She could marry a bandit, live well for a few years. But then what? Her husband will either be killed or put in jail, so there's no point." He was working 24 hours every third day as security at a sewing shop that repaired fur coats, but this only brought in \$200 a month. In his opinion it's not even worth working. When I asked him who he voted for in the presidential elections, he answered, "Zhirinovsky. At least with him life would be interesting."

Chapter Six

The Journey East

The word "Siberia" conjures up images of a vast, frozen, uninhabited land; Americans generally believe that Siberia is devoid of cities, culture and life. We think of prisons and the exiled peoples who were banished from the Russian heartland. Like my Russian friends from Petersburg and Moscow, I thought of Siberia as wild, somewhat uncivilized, and rather backwards, but I decided to double check my stereotypes, see for myself, and take the long journey in the middle of January to the other side of the Urals. I chose to travel by train, an adventure in itself in Russia, since that was the historical mode of transportation for the millions of Russians who had either been shipped or were fleeing to the Asian half of their vast land. Realizing that it is generally unwise to travel alone--sadly to say, especially for women--I asked my friend and student assistant, Alyosha, to come with me. He jumped at the chance, saying it had always been his dream to travel to Siberia and see the wild part of his country.

We spent several days figuring out the cheapest way to travel. First (and most importantly) I had to obtain the requisite funds from Sergei Vladimirovich, the director of the school where I was studying, who controlled the moneys allotted for travel. When I asked him for the money for the trip, his face grew serious and he shook his head gravely, asking why I would want to go to such a dangerous place in the middle of January. Acting on the

misguided assumption that Americans who study in Russia grow homesick for western amenities, he suggested I use the money to go to Paris or Switzerland for a week instead. I just smiled and insisted he give me the money for Russian travel since I was, after all, there to study the culture and see the country. Against his will he consented, reconciled only in the fact that I would not be traveling alone.

As a foreigner, I had to ride on the more expensive *lux* (luxury) trains. This rule is a hold-over from the Soviet times, when the government tried to show only the best side of Russia to its foreign tourists. Under communism, foreigners were only allowed to stay in special Intourist hotels, to ride on tourist buses, and to travel in train cars reserved for them. The government did not want the outsiders seeing the way Russians lived, or fraternizing with the people and spreading discontent. While this seclusion is no longer government policy, the need for state revenue leads to inflated prices for services and travel for foreigners. A small slip of paper stating that I was studying at the St. Petersburg Classical Gymnasium and stamped with the official stamp Russians love so much, saved me from paying the highest foreigner prices; I was able to purchase tickets at Russian prices, but still I had to ride on the nicest trains available for that route. Unfortunately my money could take me only as far as Ulan-Ude, on the east side of Lake Baikal, and not all the way to the Pacific Ocean. I supposed that crossing five time zones would be enough. I knew that the five days and nights on the train going east would be an experience one would never forget.

Alyosha and I chose to take separate trains to Moscow, where I would stay a night with friends and he would meet me the following day. Since I didn't want to spend much time alone in the carnival-like train station in Moscow, and the overnight trains arrive in the wee hours of the morning, I

took the day train. The car was practically deserted, except for a family from the south of Russia transporting boxes of wares. They were Dagestantsi (people who live in the mountainous region in the Caucasus next to Chechnya) and trade small goods and products--electronics, VCR's, fruits, and vegetables. They usually travel within the protection of their large extended families that live between the Russian cities and their homelands, trying to buy low and sell high. While the people of the Caucasus and the southern regions of Russia almost always deal in domestic trade, there are a number of ethnic Russian called *chilnoki* (shuttlers) who travel internationally on whirlwind shopping sprees, buying western goods and selling them for profit back in Russia. Popular destinations for *chilnoki* include Turkey, Greece, Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, and Italy. I sat in the back of the train to Moscow, watching the Dagestan family find comfortable sleeping places amidst their stacks of boxes and piles of bags.

Instead of meeting in Moscow at the train station, where finding one person in the crowd is nearly impossible, Alyosha and I arranged to meet the next morning at the McDonald's next to Red Square. As funny as it may seem, the McDonald's in Moscow make good landmarks - everyone knows where they are. In the year since I left Russia, there are already two new McDonald's in St. Petersburg, a city that swore it would eschew the fast food chain at all costs. It often seems that the multinational capitalism of McDonald's stands a better chance at democratizing the world than any of the aid packages the US can dole out.

There are about eight train stations in Moscow. The St. Petersburg station in Moscow is a mirror image of the Moscow station in St. Petersburg. Both stations were built in the 1850's by the architect Tohn, and later renovated in the 1960s. Stalin had grandiose plans for the two cities to build

towards each other until the six hundred miles separating them became one huge communist city. Our train didn't leave until ten that evening and we didn't want to carry our backpacks around all day, so we checked our bags for a small fee. I was always leery of baggage checks in Russia, but after looking at rows upon the rows of enormous bags, I realized my little backpack would be the last to be stolen.

By the time we had finished buying provisions for our trip at a fancy grocery store on the New Arbat, it was time to head back to the train station. We showed our tickets and our passports to the two robust ladies in uniform checking identification. When we found our compartment, we were surprised to see that it was already full. Three old men sat on one of the bottom bunks drinking cognac and eating sweets. The man in the middle, with a mouth full of pastry, laughed and told us to come in. We took off our coats and hung them on the hooks by the sliding door. Once we were seated on the other side of the table, one of the men offered us a drink. He told us he had been in the Caucasus at a sanitarium for three months. Russians often spend their vacation time at "sanitariums," or *doma otdikha* (rest houses). Most places where people worked in the Soviet times had access to one of the two, though usually the family could not travel together since it was next to impossible to coordinate vacation time. Now sanitariums are for those lucky enough to have leisure time.

I gathered the men had been in the car for awhile, since there was an empty can of *sproti* (fish) in tomato sauce, a favorite food of Russians when drinking, a half-eaten loaf of white bread, orange peels, and an almost empty bottle of cognac. Russians consider any liquor that is amber in color to be cognac. The three of them had just finished a toast as we walked in, so after perfunctorily shaking out the glasses, they poured us a cup to drink with our

new cabin-mate for the next five nights. Since it is impolite in Russia not to drink when offered, we toasted them, drank our drinks, and followed the sweet burning shot with a wedge of orange. Cognac seemed to be the drink of choice for special occasions. I, however, could never understand this, since the Russians drink cognac like they drink vodka--big shot after big shot. Not only does it burn going down, it has a pungent after taste, and worst of all, the fermented sugars of poorly distilled brandy make for an unbearable morning after. I prefer to stick to the simple, clean vodka.

The two men who were drinking with our traveling companion left when the stewards of the train yelled out the last chance to board. In Russia it is common courtesy, when seeing a friend off, to wait until a train or bus departs before taking leave. In America we are sometimes lucky if the person walks us to the terminal, let alone parks the car. In Russia it would be considered rude and disrespectful to not get out at least help the person to the waiting area with their baggage.

Our companion's friends had just stepped off the train when we started to move. The journey had begun. Only about a meter separated the two bunk beds in the small compartment. Alyosha and I decided to take a top and bottom bunk, so one of us could sleep on top of the bags we placed in the container under the bottom bed. Our companion had also chosen a lower bunk. For several hours we traveled through the dark, looking out the windows at the lights of small villages. Soon a pretty dark haired young woman came and asked us to pay for bedding. She brought us each a hand towel, wash rag, straight sheets, and the envelop-like sheet that Russians use to place over blankets. This ingenious little contraption has a hole in the middle, like a Kleenex box, through which you push the blanket. With some maneuvering, the blanket is straightened out and you have a comforter with

none of the problems of the blanket slipping out one end. Once we all got situated, we again sat down to look out the window at the darkness.

As our companion had explained to us earlier, he had been in the Caucasus resting, and was now returning home to Irkutsk. Apparently he originally came from the mountainous regions but, as he was quick to stress, the Russian part. He has been retired for several years, and introduced himself as Anatoli Andreevich. In answer to Alyosha's question about what it was he did, he said he had been the head of the GAI (the highway patrol) for the Irkutsk Oblast (Region). When he stepped out to use the facilities, Alyosha shook his head and exhaled. "*Glavnyi nachal'nik, nichevo sebye.*" ("Important official, wow.") The word "*nachal'nik*" is one that all foreigners learn after living in Russia a while. After I learned the word, I wasn't sure how I could have understood Russian life and business without it. The translation is "official," but *nachalnik* carries more weight in Russian than in English. In Russian the word conjures up images of a corrupt and important semi-feudal lord who wields power and decides people's fate. The word comes from the verb *nachat'* (to start). For Anatoli Andreevich, his position as head of the highway patrol was akin to that of a grand prince. The police are known to be the most corrupt body of officials in Russia. Everything has its price. And he, having the most power in the GAI, could demand the highest. His position ranked him high in the former pecking order of the entire Irkutsk region. Above him stood only the First Secretary of the Party, Regional Head of the KGB, and Head of Interior Business. Even though Anatoli Andreevich was retired, he still had the connections important to make life pleasant in Russia. Even our car attendant understood his important position and paid him proper homage.

We heard a knock on the door, and before we could answer, it was yanked open by the attendant. She brought tea and, after setting the glasses on the table, began to fix Anatoli Andreevich's bedding. Meanwhile he patted her behind and told her what a lovely, beautiful young *dyevushka* (maiden) she was. Once she left, he started rummaging through one of the bags he kept under his bed. "Chort" ("damn"), he muttered, "Forgot my *tapochki*." For the next ten minutes he proceeded to lament the slippers forgotten at his friend's house. For Americans this would be a minor inconvenience, but for a Russian about to embark on a five day train trip, such an event borders on the tragic. Poor Anatoli Andreevich forgot his *tapochki*. For the next five days we were reminded of his memory lapse every time he had to step into his squashed down shoes to leave the compartment. Half the time he just borrowed ours, stuffing his small, swollen feet into the slippers, and shuffling out the door before we noticed he had absconded with our *tapochki*.

From my perch in the bunk bed I watched the people passing below on the platform where we had punctually ceased motion for a brief stop, each taken by their own business. An old woman, large through the chest, wearing a long wool coat, tall felt boots, and a thick red, flowered scarf over her head, held steaming *piroshki* in her hands. I could only imagine her voice bellowing in the cold air--the white puffs of ice crystals were streaming out of her mouth as she plied her wares to the people boarding the train. After the bustle of the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, where people think life originates and ends, I was seeing the land of Russia--not her cities, but her stretches of unpopulated territory--wild, cold, different. I thought of all the Russians who had traveled to the eastern lands of Russia, some fleeing oppression, some seeking a better life, some forced to live in the hinterlands and die there from hard labor. These men and women had traveled on the

train, perhaps for the first time feeling and understanding like I was the vastness and infiniteness of their own country.

Not long after Anatoli Andreevich returned from the toilet, his sparse hair carefully combed over his bald spot and his shirt tucked over his big belly and into his rumpled pants, he brought out a thick black, nylon zipper bag from under his bed. Laboriously, he laid out old newspapers on the folding table between the two bottom bunks. Several minutes later a huge feast was spread before us. Hard-boiled eggs, *sukhari* (dried bread, like big croutons), pickles, cheese, apples and oranges. Alyosha and I contributed our canned fish and Styrofoam packaged instant soup from Korea and Japan. We prepared the soups with the hot water that was dispensed down the hall. Anatoli Andreevich had never tried this new fangled western-style soup. After opening the package before the contents had a chance to cook, and subsequently burning his tongue, despite our protests, he decided to cool off the soup by pressing it against the window at a precarious tilt. As soon as the train jostled left, the soup spilt and poured all over me. I forgave him, though, since I saw he was already feeling the effects of the brandy he had been drinking since awakening.

At the next stop Alyosha repossessed his *tapochki* and ran onto the icy platform in search of vodka with money our *sputnik* (companion) had given him. The train had already started to pick up speed by the time Alyosha ran into our compartment, breathing heavily, his ears and nose red from the cold. Thus began what was to become the tiresomely repetitive routine for the next three days—drinking, toasting, eating and talking. I knew the train ride would be memorable, but I had hoped I could minimize damage to my potentially abused liver.

Anatoli Andreevich had already decided that we would travel on to Irkutsk with him, without disembarking in Novosibirsk as planned. He wasn't bothered by the fact that our tickets didn't go to Irkutsk--he'd take care of everything. Around four, after our naps, Alyosha went to find the *nachalnik* of the train and begin negotiations on the extended tickets. His timing could not have been worse.

After Alyosha returned, he told us of his unfortunate encounter with the uniformed woman who dealt with ticketing on the train. When he had located her "office" and had pounded on the door until she yelled "*Zahoditye!*" ("Come in!"), he found her with rolled up sleeves and meat cleaver in hand, the jacket of her navy-blue uniform thrown across the table in the freezer compartment. A frozen pig carcass hung from meat hooks, swaying back and forth as she swung at it with her cleaver. Apparently the meat freezer was several cars from the restaurant, and she spent her spare time helping slice the meat. Alyosha described her as a "*Homo Sovieticus*." He explained how she refused to consider his request to pay the difference in the tickets and allow us to stay on until Irkutsk. I could picture Alyosha in his Red Socks baseball cap, standing erectly with over confidence--a twenty year old Russian boy, trying to haggle with this woman who assuredly thinks he is being disrespectful. She is living proof that when people have power (especially a small amount) they are apt to use it if not stroked the right way. I imagine Alyosha didn't have the finesse needed to butter her up. He came back to the car embarrassed that he had failed.

As soon as Anatoli Andreevich heard of Alyosha's misadventure he shuffled off to the restaurant car muttering, "I'll do it all!" Several minutes later Alyosha followed him with the bottle of vodka to soften the heart of the *Homo Sovieticus*. When Anatoli Andreevich and Alyosha returned, our

cabin-mate grumbled unintelligibly, grabbed the soap and razor out of his plastic bags, and stormed out the door. Alyosha burst into laughter, telling me the conductor (the meat lady) had said she would speak to neither of them until they had shaved.

Freshly shaven, Alyosha and Anatoli Andreevich set out yet again for the restaurant in hopes of being granted an audience. I suppressed my urge to sneak down the hall to watch. I consoled myself with the knowledge that these vodka dealings were, as unfortunate as I may view the inequality, men's affairs in Russia. Often I ignore such social guidelines when dealing with my cohorts, but since an older generation was involved, I decided to stay put. (Besides, I could use a break from the torturous vodka rituals.)

Russia is a country of much suffering, and has been since the existence of Kievan Rus'. The Russian Orthodox religion preaches suffering and humility as worthy qualities. This doctrine of suffering has become a source of national pride. Though I realize I am making grandiose statements by comparing the Orthodox faith with the culture of vodka drinking, there is a great deal of suffering that goes with the way Russians drink vodka. Russians always laugh when their American friends take dainty sips of vodka and say, "Mmm... It's good." For Russians the good part comes only after drinking. Every time I watch a Russian take a shot of vodka, I can feel the pain reflected on their face. Most Russian men grimace and breath out loudly before they take their shot. After the quick and surgical execution of their shot, they take a bite of bread (or just smell it), a pickle, or a big gulp of orange juice, tomato juice, or whatever the chaser may be. Only after this ritual sacrifice does the face relax and the merriness begin.

Americans, on the other hand, do not like to suffer. We are a society of pleasure and happiness. When we drink alcohol we want no pain or

discomfort involved. We make big fruity, sweet drinks, and mix our hard alcohol with juice, or drink beer. The act of drinking for us must be pleasurable, and the pleasure for us does not come directly from the bottle, but from the social aspect of drinking. We love to sit in restaurants, bars, lounges, slowly drinking, talking and relaxing. Russians have not always been afforded this luxury.

Not until recently have bars or restaurants been a commonplace for the normal Russians to gather. There were always a few, but they were expensive and too exposed to the big ears of the government. Now restaurants abound, serving all types. In the past Russians needed a place to gather, a home or *dacha*. Since most Russians don't have cars, the alcohol must be easily transported. A case of beer is hardly convenient to carry on the *metro*, so it must be vodka, vodka, vodka. A simple bottle (or several) will do the trick for a small gathering. Social comfort is the desire for both Russians and Americans—how we go about achieving it varies.

I was interrupted in my ponderings when the door slid open. Alyosha sneaked in with a sheepish grin, telling me he was in the process of negotiations for us to stay on the train until Irkutsk. He was drinking to the health of many now, since Albert, the restaurant manager who was also a professional masseuse, was also in on the decision. I wished him luck and told him not to hurt himself.

Their negotiations had been successful. After we paid a nominal fee to the train *nachalnik*, we were allowed to stay on the train until Irkutsk. For two more days we ate, drank, and talked with the conductor (who had loosened up considerably since her vodka inspired deal-making with Alyosha and Anatoli Andreevich), and Albert. We even met an American who was traveling to Siberia to work with farmers on agricultural techniques. He knew

Alyosha's best friend in America, and he and I had several mutual friends. (The world of young Russian-speaking Americans is a small one.) He soon, however, fell out of favor with Alyosha and our friends after an evening of toasting in the restaurant car. He kept surreptitiously pouring his vodka either under the table, into Anatoli Andreevich's glass, or substituting it with water. Alyosha warned him later that, while that may be tolerated by friends and those who don't care too much, fake drinking is not a good idea in the frozen abyss of Siberia with hardened farmers. "Either drink or don't drink," Alyosha cautioned. "But for God's sake don't pretend to drink." Snow slowly fell from the gray sky when our train reached the frozen station in Irkutsk. Five hours separated us from Moscow time and we had come to a land over half a huge continent away. Time seemed suspended and irrelevant. Anatoli Andreevich still insisted that we stay with him, but I thought it would be a better idea for him to discuss our visit with his wife whom he hadn't seen for three months. Leaving him standing at the traincar's entrance, slightly inebriated and confused while his daughter and grand-daughter gave him hugs and kisses, we promised to call later in the day. Bundled in my coat, scarf, and hat, I paused at the doorway of the car, looking at the ice covered platform below. Siberia. I breathed deeply, letting the cold air open my lungs and awaken my body. The air smelled different here--fresh. With eyes shining from the cold and excitement, I stepped off the train onto the platform, beginning a new adventure.

Chapter Seven

On the Banks of the Angara

Our warm existence on the train ended when we stepped out of the car in Irkutsk in the early afternoon. We bought a map of the city at one of the kiosks. It didn't take us long to orient ourselves, since from where we stood we could see the slow moving Angara river that runs from Lake Baikal. Even though the thermometer read minus 20 Celsius, the wild river remained unfrozen.

The first order of business was to find a hotel. This proved to be a much more difficult task than we expected. Looking at the map, we could tell where the Intourist hotel was located; when we looked up, we could see it across the river. Intourist hotels were built in the Soviet era to house foreigners. Soviets had to stay in decrepit hotels that had neither phones nor towels, and rarely hot water. Regular citizens were not even allowed to set foot in the Intourist hotels. (The word "hotel" may be too extravagant, since the Intourist accommodations are more comparable to seedy American roadside motels.) Most of the hotel staff during Soviet times were reputed to work for the KGB in order to keep close tabs on all visitors. These days, there are no more KGB officers working at the front desk, although the people there still tenaciously adhere to strict rules, much to the chagrin of many foreigners. Prices in hotels run on "a sliding scale"—from the Russian price to the foreigner price—and usually vary depending on circumstances and the

mood of the person behind the desk. As I was soon to find out, this mood is not often friendly.

Alyosha and I trudged on the squeaky snow across the bridge over the Angara and down a steep slope to the road on the bank of the river. As we made our way to the Intourist hotel, we looked around us, realizing we had most definitely landed in a Russia different than St. Petersburg or Moscow. Irkutsk is a city of 600,000—about one-tenth the size of St. Petersburg. In the center stand large, wooden homes, built in a Russian peasant style—ornate wooden trim around the windows, dark wood, and usually green window sills. The only structures I had seen similar to these homes were in the villages outside Moscow where people escape to their country homes. The houses in Irkutsk are old—dating back far before the revolution. Of course we had thus far only seen the homes along the bank of the river, but the center of the city is small, as we could tell by the map, and the main street, Lenin Prospect, is only about eight blocks from the river.

When we got to the hotel our noses and hands were frozen. In the small parking lot was an assortment of fancy cars—BMW's, Mercedes, and two Jeep Cherokees. Judging by the numbers on the license plates, a couple of the cars were from St. Petersburg and Moscow. Maybe the Mafia of the cities were visiting their satellite operations in Siberia.

The decor of the lobby of the Intourist was typically Soviet. High ceilings and dark lighting, along with a sixties-style tile floor, fit incongruously with the modern shops in the hallway leading to the bar. The casino-style lights that advertised drinks and games blinked on and off, disrupting the somber mood of the sitting room in the lobby, in mourning, as it were, for the hoards of captive foreign tourists who used to occupy it on their tours to see Baikal.

Behind the front desk sat two older women, who ignored Alyosha for about three minutes when he asked about the price of rooms. I sat down in one of the over-sized vinyl chairs, keeping a close eye on our backpacks. In the chair across from me lounged a grotesque caricature of a Mafia boss. His black silk shirt strained to fit around his ample midriff, as did his tailored slacks. Even his shiny black (probably Italian) leather boots looked too petite for this corpulent man. Only the thick gold chains he wore around his neck were proportionate. His hair was slicked back and he wore dark sunglasses. I felt like laughing, but since he was probably "packing heat" under his knee length leather jacket, I looked at the floor, bit my cheek, and kept quiet.

Alyosha came back with the rates. The good news was that it cost only twenty dollars a night for a Russian to stay there. The bad news was that it cost ninety dollars for a foreigner. Considering that the only Russians I could see in the lobby besides Alyosha probably had wads of one hundred dollar bills in their pockets, I didn't feel that these prices were exactly equitable. There was no way I could have passed for a Russian, since all guests need to show their passports. Prior to that moment, I had never been upset that I had an American passport.

Alyosha and I decided to try our luck elsewhere. We checked our bags at the Intourist hotel and asked the woman behind the front desk what other options we had. She was actually sympathetic after I explained that I was a student and couldn't afford to spend ninety dollars a night. She let us use the phone to call the other hotels that were listed on the map. One had been turned into a hospital; another was only for members of a certain Russian workers union. We were left with two options—the Hotel Rossiya and the smaller Angara hotel. We thanked the woman, and set out to find cheaper accommodations.

The first hotel we tried was the Angara, about ten blocks from the Intourist. Outside the air was clear and frigid; there were high clouds and we could look straight at the sun, a perfectly round orb which glowed in the light pink Siberian sky. Long shadows cast their cold shrouds over the streets--only the parks glistened in the feeble sun rays. I would have liked to spend more time leisurely strolling around the city, but the bitter cold necessitated a speedy pace. We passed several two and three-story apartment buildings with stucco facades painted in pastels, and more Hansel and Gretel houses with their delicate wooden carvings. In several windows the residents were growing tomatoes and herbs. We realized the inhabitants were not as timeless and quaint as their homes when we walked by a dark, rustic, wooden two-story home where a shiny new BMW was parked in the driveway. Obviously the long arm of capitalism had touched this Siberian city as well.

Staying with Anatoli Andreevich became a more viable option after we spoke with the insolent young lady behind the desk of the Angara. At first we thought we'd found the deal of the city when she told us a room cost thirty-five dollars per night. Then she quickly added that a room with a shower, bath, or telephone would cost more. We asked for two single beds, a shower and a phone, which turned out to cost more than at the Intourist. Discouraged, we left for the next hotel, bracing ourselves for the blast of breath-stopping air that hit us as we stepped onto the street.

Needless to say, the Rossiya was half again as expensive as the Intourist. Depressed and defeated, we acquiesced and called our friend. Unfortunately, his wife told us, he was visiting his son in the country and would be gone until the next day. We had no choice but to stay at the Intourist. On the way back we stopped at a cafe on Lenin Prospect to warm up and eat. We were both surprised that the main street of Irkutsk was still

named after Lenin. After the Bolshevik Revolution, most of the street names were changed from their pre-Revolutionary titles in order to honor Soviet heroes and patriots. After the USSR disintegrated, most of the streets were changed back to their original names. In 1992 the name of the city Leningrad was changed back to St. Petersburg. I had assumed these changes were undertaken on a national level, however, the names of the streets of Siberian cities had been slow to change. The communists still find a majority of their support in the eastern vastness, away from the big westernized cities.

Inside the cafe several men sat around drinking vodka and slurping *shchi* (cabbage soup) from bowls, wiping their mouths on their jacket sleeves. Even though the cafe was warm, all the men still wore thick coats and fur hats. I was not surprised, however, since this seems to be the norm in Russia. I first noticed that Russians rarely take their coats off to eat when I was in a fancy, modern bar on the banks of the Neva river in St. Petersburg. There were only a few people in the restaurant--a good looking "New Russian" couple and their driver. The woman was extremely stylish; her husband talked on their cell-phone. They drank wine and ate expensive dishes, but neither of them took off their leather coats. And their manners! I am not one to adhere strictly to table etiquette, but there are a few rules that could be followed. However, all bets are off in a Russian restaurant--even a nice establishment. The woman bowed her head over her plate and noisily slurped her soup, just like these men in the Irkutsk diner, while her husband shouted over the phone. They obviously had money, but money can't buy you class.

Back at the Intourist, I tried one last time to bargain with the lady at the front desk, which proved to be somewhat successful. I reasoned that since I was a poor student (I possessed the all important stamped piece of paper

which proved it) and did not have the thousands of dollars that the Russian Mafia guests had, I should not have to pay almost four times as much as they did. The woman laughed in agreement, and showed sympathy, but held to the rules of the hotel. I asked to talk to the manager, and much to my surprise, he came out of his back room. I haggled with him for a while, and it was agreed that since I was with a Russian and was a student, I would pay only fifty-five dollars a night, and Alyosha would pay twenty.

The room we did finally get had two tiny double beds, a phone, shower and a beautiful view of the Angara. All I wanted was a shower. (It had been five days.) I turned on the water. Nothing came out except a choking sound followed by a loud screech. I quickly turned the faucet off and told Alyosha. He picked up the phone to call the front desk, but the phone was dead. (We later found out that guests pay extra to connect the phone.) Alyosha went to the front desk, and half an hour later two plumbers came and started banging on the pipes. Soon hot water arrived. After five days confined to a hot train car and a day walking around frozen Irkutsk, not only was I dirty, but my muscles were in knots. I let the hot water flow over my back and head, not caring if the water was a little on the brown side. I never allowed my hopes soar too high for these "luxuries" in Russia, since about a quarter of the time I'd been in the country the water pipes in my apartment were either under repair, broken, or mysteriously not working. So when the steaming water did finally pour out of the faucets of the Intourist it was a godsend.

The next day we spent wandering around looking at the sights of Irkutsk. Both of us felt we stood out as the only tourists; we didn't see a single person who wasn't a local until that afternoon. We had just eaten a big, hot lunch at the restaurant in the Angara hotel which was as cheap as the hotel was expensive, when we spotted a person on the street corner who could be

nothing but American. He was wearing a red and black Northface parka, a wool hat with earflaps, and Sorrels. I didn't even bother to ask him if he spoke English, but just yelled out, "Hello!!"

It turned out that he was working for Sprint, setting up phone systems in Irkutsk. He had been there about a month and was staying for several more. His company had set him up at the Intourist Hotel for the duration of his stay. Most American corporations don't bat an eye at the hotel fees, since they feel they're getting the bargain of the century. He introduced his friend whom both Alyosha and I had taken for Russian based on the fur hat, wool coat, Russian boots, and craggy smile—but who turned out to be English. Both of us were taken aback when we heard his biting British accent. In the sort of exchange of precious information common among travelers from Bangkok to Paris, they tipped us off on the museum they had just seen. It was possible to sneak to the top of the bell tower, since the woman guard was not at her post. We thanked them and rushed to the museum. In the Soviet Union, many of the churches had been turned into museums—a blessing, since they otherwise would have been destroyed.

I felt the satisfaction of justice served when Alyosha purchased both our entrance tickets at Russian student prices. We ran up the stairs to the entrance of the bell tower. The first, second, and third floors of the museum had exhibitions, but we wanted to make it to the top before the guard's return. We ducked through the small door in the corner of the last public room and ran as quietly as we could up the narrow, dark staircase. The door creaked open as I pushed on it, revealing a barren, dusty room with unmatching pieces of wooden furniture. We pushed on the door to the tower, but it wouldn't budge. Luckily we noticed the old-fashioned key in the lock and

turned it. The heavy door swung open to the final staircase, and soon we were on top of the world.

Not only was the cold air a shock to our warm faces, but the view hit us like a gust of frigid wind. We stood on the walk of the circular bell tower overlooking the city. The panoramic view revealed all of Irkutsk--from the slow moving Angara to the billowing chimneys of a factory a mile away. Across the street, the spires of a Catholic Church of Gothic architecture stretched to the sky. In Irkutsk there used to be many Catholics who worshipped at the old church, but in Soviet times the building became the city's Organ Hall. Forty-five degrees to the left was a Russian Orthodox church; its onion-shaped domes glowed in the low, soft sunlight.

From our vantage point we could see that Irkutsk was not just the quaint wooden city visible from the center's streets. Around the factory where the chimneys spewed smoke, the monolithic Krushchev/Brezhnev apartment buildings were on display. Across the river, on the side of the train station, stood more of these buildings and factories. Leading away from the church museum was a park, white and covered with snow-sculptures and ice slides. Small children accompanied by their *babushki* (grandmothers) ran along the beaten paths and climbed the mounds of snow, screaming as they slid down.

Afraid that we would either be discovered or be inadvertently locked out, we grudgingly returned to the legitimate part of the museum. There we looked at exhibits showing how the peasants lived in Siberia. On the walls hung traditional peasant holiday costumes--bright red and white embroidered dresses for the women with matching head-wear that stood erect off the head like a tiara crown, sloping down in the back. These head pieces reminded me of the hats most of the Russian women wear in Irkutsk--tall fur hats that

stand up off the forehead. Beneath the garments lay wooden spoons and bowls, both for festive and everyday use. Russia is a country of wood, and has been for hundreds of years. Because of fires and natural decomposition, many of the structures from ancient times are now gone. But wood did have its advantages. As peasants and other Russians fled the encroaching power and taxation of the tsar and the state, they were able to rebuild their homes relatively quickly. The *taiga* (vast forest region) has always been a natural, although often inhospitable, sanctuary for those fleeing oppression.

We left the museum and returned to our motel to prepare for the next leg of our trip. Alyosha and I had decided to go further east into Siberia to Ulan-Ude. Since it was cheaper for us to buy the twenty dollar overnight train ticket than to spend thirty-five each at the hotel, we left for Ulan-Ude at eight that evening. As on the train from Moscow, we had two of the four bunks. Sharing our compartment were two young men who, though they did not know each other, both came from small towns on Lake Baikal. One of them was traveling with a fender of a car, which made our close quarters even tighter. As soon as the train started moving, the woman in charge of the car brought us tea. The men introduced themselves--Nikolai and Andrei. They didn't seem too shocked that I was from America, only surprised that I had chosen the coldest part of the year to travel in Siberia. They enthusiastically told us about Lake Baikal and its beauty, but they were sad that so many of their friends had left the fishing villages to find work and life elsewhere.

Flight from the village is a problem that has faced rural Russia for many years. Life in the villages is difficult; the work begins at sunrise and lasts until sundown. There is little opportunity for women to get a job outside of the dairy; they are rarely allowed to operate heavy farming equipment, since they would be taking a job away from a young man. Many rural women

encourage their daughters to seek a better life in the cities, where they will not have to toil all day and, on top of that, still raise a family. City life, however, is often no easier. The recent arrivals often miss the countryside. Rural Russia is in no way like rural America. In Russia the technology of the farms is decades behind the rest of the country, a fact that can be attributed to Soviet "progress." In the late twenties peasants were forced onto state-run collective farms, and like in the factories, efficiency didn't matter. Peasants who tried to profit were scorned and if they refused to give up their land and join the collective, they paid with their lives. In Russia the cities are isolated from the towns by more than just hundreds of miles, but by what seems sometimes like centuries. In the States we have television, movies, media, stores, and restaurants which, for better or for worse, are common throughout the country. But in Russia there is no such binding force. As technology spreads, media does too, but the pace is not rapid. Even the dialects between the different villages are varied so much that city dwellers have a hard time understanding the lingo.

Our cabin-mates climbed into their bunks early and read. I looked out the window at the snowy ground that glowed from the full moon light. As our train passed the southern tip of Lake Baikal, our friends looked up from their books and began to talk about the lake. To many Russians who live in this region, the lake is like a friend, for it is a source of life. Although it was dark, the milky ice on the lake reflected light from the moon. Suddenly we were plunged into darkness as we entered a tunnel which burrowed beneath one of the shallow mountains. When we emerged we could no longer see the lake, and the moon's light was muted by thick clouds.

We awoke the next morning at twenty to six when the train pulled into Ulan-Ude. Both our companions had left quietly during the night at one

of the village stops along the way. The cold hit us so hard when we stepped onto the platform that neither one of us could breath. The thermometer read -38 Celsius. We found ourselves in the middle of Asia—only thirty miles from Mongolia—as our journey into the wilds of Russia continued.

Chapter Eight

In a Strange Land

We arrived in Ulan-Ude in the Buryati region of Russia on a frigid morning. The Buryats are a native people in Siberia who are predominantly Buddhist; their region is home to the only Buddhist monastery that was allowed to operate in the Soviet Union. We still needed to buy return tickets to Irkutsk, which ordinarily would be a major task, since an American passport required a trip to the special foreigner sales booth. Luckily, the entire train station had only five booths, four of which were closed that early in the morning. We bought tickets for the 10pm train and reserved the whole day to visit the Ivolginskii Datsan (the Buddhist monastery about sixty kilometers from the city), but had no idea how to get there.

No one seemed to know where we needed to go, but it was clear that first we had to get to the central bus station. Fortunately for us, a woman overheard our questions and told us to come with her. In return for her directions, Alyosha would help her load her bulging burlap sack on the bus. (It must have weighted about eighty pounds.) She said that the next bus wouldn't come to the train station for twenty minutes, so we waited inside the train station. Several groups of people were milling around, most with large satchels of goods. Some were Caucasians, but most were Buryats. Though the woman we were with was not Buryati, she told us that she lived in a village near the monastery.

I waited with great anticipation for our bus as I stood outside feeling ice crystals form on my nose. Until that time I had thought I had braved some of the coldest weather possible with my childhood in Alaska and my college years in Maine (to say nothing of the countless hours I spent at the start of downhill courses on the tops of the highest American mountains wearing nothing but a skin tight Spandex body suit and a helmet). But this was something new. And to make matters worse, everyone else, with the exception of Alyosha, stood around quietly smoking cigarettes, apparently oblivious to the cold. The unmoving cigarette smoke reminded me of the ice-fog in Fairbanks on a forty below morning.

Thankfully, our bus soon arrived and I thought I would have time to thaw before we got to the central station where there would assuredly be a relatively warm place to sit inside. I must have been delirious, having forgotten that this was, in fact, the middle of Siberia and I would be lucky if the buses ran, let alone were heated. As soon as the bus rolled up, all the people who had so calmly been smoking cigarettes bolted for the opening doors. The woman we were with, though, had the situation under control and had told Alyosha several minutes before to move the bag up to the curb and stand in a certain spot. Sure enough, the bus pulled up just so, and the middle doors opened in front of Alyosha. By the time I fought my way in, he and our new acquaintance were already seated, saving me a place between them. Public transportation is always an adventure in Russia, and I should have realized that things would be no different in Siberia.

In the big cities, there are several modes of public transportation: bus, streetcar, *metro* (subway), or *electricchka* (the electric train that runs to the suburbs and villages surrounding the cities). Sometimes transport runs frequently, but more often than not you are forced to join the ranks of the

frustrated Russians who have been standing at the bus stop for half an hour in the unforgiving weather. The situation only worsens when equipment fails or resources are strapped. Sometimes, however, it is not the equipment's fault, but the operators'. On one bus route in St. Petersburg, passengers were befuddled by the fact that three buses ran one right after the other, about two minutes apart, after which an hour wait ensued. One curious citizen decided to take matters into his own hands and figure out the reason for the strange schedule. He followed the last of the three buses to the drivers' break station and went inside to speak with them. He quickly understood the origins of the problem when he saw all three bus drivers engrossed in a game of cards.

Under normal circumstances, riding the *metro* can be an adventure in itself. I lived on the last stop on the southwestern line in St. Petersburg, and in the mornings it was a struggle to get a seat, especially a place next to the exit. At each station the cars filled, and it seemed impossible for more people to get on. But they still came, pushing and shoving in and out. Most of the time people deal humorously with the crunch, but there are some who play dirty. And every time I felt a jab in the back or a mean push, I looked around to see who the culprit was and usually found, standing behind me with a satisfied look, not a young punk, but some short, buxom, wrinkled old woman.

Back on the Siberian bus the only heat came from the bodies that were packed together, which wasn't much since most of the windows in the bus were cracked and a few were missing. As we rattled along, one of the doors hung precariously from its hinges. Thankfully, we reached our destination before the door fell completely off. We appeared to be in the middle of a residential area. The woman trudged off through the few inches of snow that must have fallen the night before; Alyosha was a few steps behind her. I felt

like screaming through the dark silence after them, "Where's the warm bus station!?" But I maintained control and followed the footsteps they left in the crunchy snow, hoping that all would be clear in time. And soon it was.

After walking for fifteen minutes, I had no feeling in my feet or hands. We rounded a corner and found ourselves standing in front of a large parking lot with three semi-covered benches lining one side. This was the central bus station? The place was deserted, but soon we were joined by a young couple wearing fur hats and coats. They asked us where we were from, and after hearing, they laughed in surprise and wondered what possessed us to come to the middle of Siberia in the dead of winter. Upon learning that it was our school break, they took an instant liking to us.

It turned out that the young man was a monk at the monastery. He was studying with a priest and lived in the village next to the Datsan. Many of the monks live on the grounds of the monastery, but since he is from the village he is allowed to live at home. Apparently we were lucky to arrive at the Datsan so early, since he said we could attend a *hooral* (service) at nine. Normally I dislike attending religious ceremonies as an outsider, since I feel worship should be private, but given such a warm invitation, my reluctance evaporated.

By the time our bus arrived, I had given up all hope of ever using my extremities again. I recalled a Jack London story in which a man, delirious from the cold, actually feels warm and goes into a peaceful sleep—the peaceful sleep of death. I had not yet reached that stage, but when I saw the bus, I sorely wished I had—I'd take the illusion of numb warmth over the painful cold. Our bus, of course, turned out to be in about the same shape as the one we had taken to this miserable spot. There was no resemblance to the empty, plush, luxury buses with tinted windows and undoubtedly warm interiors

that had teasingly driven in circles around the parking lot only to cruelly drive off.

The ride to the Datsan was slow, but this gave me ample time to observe the scenery and the throbbing in my frozen toes. The sun had begun to rise and glowed pink over the frozen ground. There were a few rolling hills; on the top of one was a huge satellite and tower—a military outpost. Nothing else could be seen on the vast horizon, with the exception of the sporadic village. Occasionally the bus stopped at crossroads, miles from these villages, to let a passenger off or on. Thanking us for the help, the woman got off at the last bus stop before the monastery. When we arrived at the Datsan there were only six of us, including the young couple we had met, who smiled their leave taking and said we'd see each other throughout the day.

The sun rose low above the hilltops. To avoid freezing, Alyosha and I headed to the *stolovaya* (cafe) across from the gates of the Datsan. Several rangy dogs blocked the entrance, but we waded through them and pushed open the thick, wooden door. It wasn't much warmer inside than it was out, but at least there was no wind. One of the dogs we had inadvertently let in ran to the base of the stove and curled up. Smart dog.

We could see into the kitchen through the serving counter which was just a small hole in the wall. Nothing was prepared yet, except tea, and the woman behind the counter seemed surprised to see visitors at such an early hour. She poured a creamy liquid into tall glasses, and we sat down to drink the warm fluid. Alyosha, as a traditional Russian tea drinker (black tea, no milk—only sugar), grimaced and almost spat out his drink. It was green tea—unsweetened and with milk. As I was finishing his glass, a group of monks dressed in faded orange frocks walked in to the *stolovaya*, wiped their feet and reverently nodded a greeting to the woman at the counter.

On the other side of a fabric partition stood a heavy wooden table set with cups, bread, and a large, steaming bowl of tea. The monks gathered around, poured each other tea, and waited quietly while the young woman brought out bowls of *kasha* (porridge). They were still eating when Alyosha and I had warmed up enough to venture out again.

No one was at the gate when we walked through. During the summer months, the Ivolginskii Datsan is a major tourist attraction for foreigners and Russians alike. These days there are no regulations about religious gathering and establishments in Russia, and people are free to worship where and as they please. There is even a small group of Hari Krishnas that operates a cafe in St. Petersburg—probably the only vegetarian restaurant in meat-loving Russia.

Once we slipped through the beautifully carved wooden gates, we looked around. To the left there were rows of small huts—the homes of the monks. Running from the back of each hut is a fenced-in yard with an outhouse and enough wood to heat the hut through the long winter. In front of us stood large rounded-diamond shaped structures—three in a row—inside of which the Buddhists keep their sacred scrolls.

Three temples stood to our right with roofs that curved up at the bottom. Before we left for Siberia, Alyosha's mother told us the roofs are shaped that way so that the evil spirits that come down from the sky are flipped back to the clouds instead of landing on earth. The largest temple had a gold roof that glittered and glowed in the low sunlight. Fierce green and white dragon-like creatures stood guard at the entrance of the main temple. At the eastern edge of the monastery, where the sun rises, was another immense, ornate gate. Shaggy cows wandered on the other side of the gate, vapor rising from their nostrils as they foraged through the snow for grass.

Soon worshippers started to appear. Some had come on the bus that had just arrived, and others still emerged from the huts in the monastery and the houses of the village. First these people entered the smaller temple which is closed to non-Buddhists. Several minutes later they emerged and in no particular order filed into the largest temple. With the exception of one woman, all the people were Buryats--young couples, families with children, and old women and men. We entered the main temple with them.

There are two sets of doors to the temple on opposite ends of the side of the building. People enter on the left, walk in a big clockwise loop around the temple and exit through the doors on the right. Near the entrance on a table stands a large glass case into which people put coins or tightly folded rubles. At all times the people faced the life-size, wooden Buddha figure sitting serenely at the far wall on the other side of a small partition. Along with the contemplative Buddha figure are other gods and goddesses--some with eight arms or three heads. Around the figures burn candles and incense. Several of the visitors brought bits of bread, apples, bowls of porridge, flowers, and even bottles of vodka, placing the offering at the foot of the Buddha.

In the middle of the temple, surrounded by candles and incense a large group of monks sat in a circle on small, straight back chairs. They all wore colored frocks, though the hues of orange varied. Three elder monks led the chants. Throughout the ceremony different men performed different duties. Several of the men lowered a large board suspended on ropes, and lit the candles that covered the surface of the wooden platform. Hot tea was served ceremoniously to the monks throughout their chanting.

Next to the exit were several tables where visitors lit small oil candles and lanterns, bowing down as they lit the wick. Behind a small counter a young woman sold candles, along with incense, scrolls for good luck, and

small charms. The service was over in about an hour, but people came and went as they pleased.

There was more activity in the monastery by the time we left the temple. People were slowly strolling around--some were spinning the wishing drums. On each side of the monastery, next to the fences, were large drums on an axle under a peaked open roof. Several drums of different sizes stood in a row. Your wishes were supposed to come true as you spun each of the huge wooden drums. Just the act of pushing the round objects and watching them slowly turn was soothing to me.

We returned to the *stolovaya* to warm ourselves again, and shared a table with an elderly couple who were eating *poza* (the juicy, Buryati-style dumplings). By the time the sun had reached its highest point in the Siberian sky (about a third of the way to the zenith) and the air had warmed to the grand temperature of twenty-five degrees below, we again ventured out to walk around inside the monastery again. As we entered the gates we ran into the young couple we had met at the bus station. The young man asked us if we had enjoyed the *hooral*, and told us that the Lama, Sili Loda Rimboche, was granting interviews to visitors in a healing session. He showed us the small hut where the Lama would be in half an hour.

Alyosha had already planned to visit the Lama. His mother had told him about the time she and her mother had been at the Datsan and had sat before him to ask for a cure for her sister's problem. Dasha still wet her bed at the age of ten, and the Lama told her mother to give her powdered lizard tail. The cure worked. (But not for long.) Alyosha wanted to ask Sili Loda Rimboche how he could cure his stammer. His stammer was minor, but when he got nervous or excited it became more evident and embarrassed him. Since he intended to teach, he figured it would be helpful if he could

overcome it. Quite frankly, I had my doubts about the Lama's ability to cure a stammer, but decided not to voice such an opinion. It was not the first time I had thought the Russian approach to medicine a bit far-fetched.

Before coming to the country, I had been told disturbing stories about Russian medicine and hospitals, and believed that going to a Russian clinic would result in nothing short of death (or at least a serious illness). Once in Russia I avoided clinics at all costs, opting instead for the western-style American Medical Center, but I heard my fair share of stories about medical practices from Russian friends. Dentist stories always proved to be the most horrifying. A dentist's office was located on the ground floor of my St. Petersburg school, available for the students and teachers. Alyosha was allowed to use the school dentist for free. Dentistry in Russia is much simpler than what we are used to in the United States. If the tooth's bad, pull it out; if not, leave it in; if the tooth is somewhat rotten, rinse with vodka and hope for the best. Of course I'm exaggerating a tad—they do take x-rays and perform other procedures, but still, several of my young Russian friends were already missing a quarter of their teeth by the time they reached their mid-twenties.

Truthfully, it was not so much these stories that astonished me, but the tenacity with which even my young friends believed in what we in America might call old wives' tales or folk medicine. Once I was talking with two very hip, young Russian women who worked at the St. Petersburg Rap Music Center. Both had been abroad. With looks of extreme horror, they explained to me how they had seen, in their words, several "intelligent, beautiful young girls," sitting on cold cement steps or sidewalks. As sure as they knew the heart is on the left side of the chest, they knew that sitting on a cold surface like that would make a woman barren—common knowledge, as far as they

were concerned. I didn't dare disagree, but meekly surmised that every culture has its own strange ideas.

When I came down with the flu in Russia, I was told to dissolve salt in a shot of hot vodka. For a sore throat, the prescription is hot vodka with honey. Often I saw Russians either in school or at home with scarves tightly wrapped around their necks to cure sore throats. The cure for a fever—which any Russian knows—is to bury the person in blankets and sweat out the fever. Drinking liquids with ice cubes is a sure way to get sick. Many Russians who come to America think their host family is trying to kill them when they serve ice water. Such ideas are abundant in Russia, passed down from one generation to the next.

The entrance way to the Lama's hut was already crowded with people. Alyosha and I stood in the corner and waited. Slowly we moved closer to the Lama's room. We could see him behind the curtain. All of the other people who were waiting spoke to each other in Buryati. When it was Alyosha's turn to see Sili Loda Rimboche, I went in with him. We sat down on a bench and waited for the Lama to appear. A tall, well-built man with callused hands sat in the chair in front of us, a translator for the Lama who either didn't know Russian or refused to speak it. Soon an old man with a wispy white beard and a bald head wearing a long, faded orange robe, slowly entered the room from a door in the back. He walked towards us with difficulty, as we both rose to greet him. He beckoned us to sit down and then asked the translator to listen to Alyosha and to explain why we were there in the Buryati tongue. Alyosha told of his stammering. For a long time the old man did not move or speak. Then slowly he answered. He told Alyosha that he is young and has a lot of air in his ribcage which still needs to come out. The stammering will go away with time, but for now Alyosha need not worry and should try to relax and

not get upset. When the translator finished speaking, Sili Loda Rimboche turned to Alyosha, closed his eyes and nodded. We stood up, and thanked him as we left. Honestly I was a little disappointed, having hoped to see a more fantastical cure enacted. But upon further reflection, I think there was a great deal of truth in what the old man said.

We left the grounds of the monastery and waited for the next bus to leave. While we waited we looked at what was being sold outside the gates. A woman had set up her goods under a tarp. Heaps of pine nuts, which are native to Siberia, lay in boxes. We tried a few, shelling the small brown nuts in our mouths and spitting out the hulls, which is in itself a national pastime. We bought a small bag just as the bus arrived.

Once we got back to Ulan-Ude, the sun had already started to set and the temperature was dropping rapidly. It was Sunday, and none of the cafes and restaurants was open. We still had six more hours to wait for our train back to Irkutsk. We took a bus to the center of the city to see the largest bronze head of Lenin in Russia, in fact the world. His cranium stood about forty feet high. Statues and busts of Lenin occupied the entrances of every official building in the former Soviet Union. However, once it became clear that his communist experiment had failed, these effigies began to disappear from revered locations. "Graveyards" where old bronzes of Soviet figures languish untended have sprung up in most western cities in Russia, but often the metal is melted down to serve more practical uses. (But apparently not in the hinterlands.)

Alyosha and I stared up at the cold eyes of Lenin, the size of dinner plates. He looked straight ahead, out over one of the few cities that still allows him to stand in his full glory. His gaze couldn't keep us captivated for long, however, since the sun had set and with its exit the cold had returned with a

vengeance. The restaurants were closed, so we searched for a warm hotel. As luck would have it, we found a place on the first try. Neither of us had much hope that we could afford a room at this hotel, sporting a parked BMW outside. But we were fortunate that a friendly Buryati woman was working at the front desk. She knew we were travelers from some far off place, and when Alyosha told her we were just looking for a place to warm up and take a nap and a shower, she peered over her glasses at me. Then she whispered that she knew I wasn't Russian. She gave us the room for two-thirds of the Russian price anyway.

I hadn't been warm since we got off the train at five that morning, and had begun to believe that my frozen toes and fingers had become victims of the unrelenting Siberian cold. Only after a long (and blessedly hot) shower, could I wiggle my digits. Even Alyosha, who prides himself in his uniquely Russian ability to ignore the discomforts of the cold, looked miserable before he had his turn in the steamy shower. We were both luxuriously lounging in our room, watching national Russian news, when the woman at the front desk called and apologized profusely for her mistake. She had charged us twice as much as she meant to, since she forgot we were not spending the night. We could pick up the other half of our money at the desk. Most clerks would have pocketed the extra cash and no one would have been the wiser. In Russia, such actions are not even considered dishonest, like the policeman or coatroom attendant who accept bribes, these people are just trying to get something back from a system that makes living normally nearly impossible. Apparently, however, this woman felt she should help two visitors before helping herself.

Her kindness was an exclamation point to all we had experienced on our short visit to a strange winter locked land. The people in this often

forgotten region could just as easily have ignored us, or laughed at us, but instead they chose to help us, give us advise, and show us where to go. Even the frigid air didn't seem as harsh as it did when we arrived.



Chapter Nine

Lake Baikal

When I was six my parents gave me a globe for Christmas. I used to amuse myself for hours by spinning the world as fast as I could, closing my eyes, and putting my hand down on the moving surface. When the earth stopped I would look at the new destination chosen by my finger. Once, "x" marked the spot in the middle of a big green country called the Soviet Union. At the tip of my nail, in contrast with the monotonous green of the surrounding land, lay the long blue Lake Baikal. Ten years later, on my second trip to the Soviet Union, I bought a book filled with pictures of the beautiful, serene lake. The words were in a language I couldn't yet read. I knew that some day I must see the lake with my own eyes.

My chance to visit Lake Baikal came fifteen years after my finger pointed out my "destiny." When Alyosha and I returned to Irkutsk from Ulan-Ude, we planned to take the bus to the shores of the magnificent lake that holds one-sixth of the world's fresh water.

I looked around at the mayhem in the train station: gypsy families with five or six children sat on the floors along the walls with their huge bags and boxes. It looked as if they had set up camp for the long haul. I didn't think I wanted to join them. Unfortunately, our train back to St. Petersburg didn't leave until the next morning, so we needed to find a place to stay. Alyosha phoned Anatoli Andreevich, our train companion who had promised us a

bed in his home. There was no answer, so we left for the bus station, hoping he would be home when we returned from Lake Baikal.

The schedule told us that the bus didn't leave until one-thirty. We had two hours to buy food for our train trip, so we headed to the *rynok* (market) in the center of town. Unlike kiosks, *rynki* are true markets. Some are inside, some outside, but a *rynok* has all the trappings of an Eastern bazaar—piles of colorful fruits and vegetables, exotic smells, and the lively sound of voices bickering. I immediately fell in love with the *rynok*, since every price is negotiable and I derive great pleasure from bargaining.

After watching Alyosha make our first purchase (bananas), I made him stand quietly next to me so I could try my hand at making a deal. I was in my element. The key is to have lots of small change and to make rude comments about the quality of the products, especially fruit. I picked up a green apple and scornfully told the man behind the table that it was rotten. "How much?" I asked. "For this? You've got to be kidding!" I grabbed three apples and offered him an offensively low amount. He made a face of mock anger (his eyes were smiling) and said he, too, had to eat. He finally sold me the apples after I offered him a little more money, though he told me with a wink not to tell anyone else how much I paid.

Our hands were already full and we realized we'd have to buy a *pakyet* (plastic bag). Like Americans who live in big cities and don't have cars, Russians carry all their purchases around in plastic bags. Inadvertently, Russians have become much more environmentally kind consumers in regard to the disposable plastic bag. We throw our bags away, the Russians covet them. *Pakyeti* are not always available when you find a purchase you can't pass up, so Russians keep old bags stuffed in their purses and pockets. In the times before the plastic bags, Russians often carried a small net bag called

an *avoska* (from the word "Aha!") that could be used to hold a prized find like oranges or good tomatoes.

Pakyeti are at best gaudy, at worst obscene. I blushed the first time I saw a smartly dressed young woman sporting a plastic sack emblazoned with a picture of a blond, buxom naked woman. Later, though, I hardly ever noticed. I realized I had been in Russia a long time, when I commented to Alyosha as we walked by a row of *babushki* selling plastic bags, "Oh, what a beautiful *pakyet!*" I looked at Alyosha in horror—he responded laughingly, "You're a Russian now, Amandochka."

It was clear that we were in the middle of Asia when we bought instant noodles from Japan and Korea, along with small bags of grated spicy carrot salad made Korean style. Alyosha wanted to buy syrup made with certain berries that grow only in Siberia. His mother had beseeched him to locate a bottle for his sister. She often has a runny nose and fever, and his mother was convinced that the syrup could help. Our search ended at the edge of the market, where an old man stood in a worn fur hat and thick felt boots selling all sorts of potions and home remedies.

Upon hearing Alyosha's request, the man cackled and said, "Ech, it is good for a young man's potency and his wife will like it, too." He was looking at me. What wife? This was not the first time that Alyosha and I had been taken for a young married couple. Anatoli Andreevich, our chance traveling companion, had wanted to be our first child's godfather. It was too much trouble to try to explain our friendship to strangers, so we let them imagine what they wished. Sometimes it worked to our advantage. Feeling fatherly and sympathetic, the potion salesman told us that he too, remembered how it was when he was young and first married to his "very beautiful wife," so he sold us the berry syrup for half the asking price, then wished us good luck.

On the way back to the bus station, the handles of the *pakyeti* ripped out and the bottoms started to give. Much to my distress, we were forced to buy two more at a kiosk—one displayed a scantily clad woman and the other a racing car. I made Alyosha carry the one with the woman. At the bus station we figured we could check our bags, but once again our plans were foiled by the omnipotent *babushka*. The purple-haired elderly woman at the baggage check firmly told us that she left at five and locked everything. Our bus was scheduled to return at five-thirty, so we tried persuasion. Could she leave our bags outside when she left? No. Perhaps we could put them behind the counter? No. There was no reasoning with her. I was about to leave in frustration, when she asked where I was from. After I told her she warmed up immediately and we had a long talk about Irkutsk, the beauty of the place and St. Petersburg. She instantly became concerned about my inadequate boots—inadequate because they were not fur-lined. And she thought me crazy for not having a full-length fur coat. Although my coat was Russian-made, she thought it inappropriate for the middle of the Siberian winter.

It is not unusual for the elders of Russian society to take upon themselves correction of public behavior—of young Russians and foreigners alike. Before I went to Russia the first time, at the age of twelve, we were warned to dress warmly and to always wear a hat, lest we attract the unwarranted attention of a flock of *babushki*. Several in my group didn't take these words of caution to heart, and were angrily told in a Russian they didn't understand that they had better go back inside and get a hat and scarf or they were sure to get sick. "Advice-from-a-babushka" stories run rampant among American students. Matt, who'd spent the year studying chemistry in Irkutsk in 1994, lived in an apartment by himself. All his neighbors were old women. Emerging from the bathroom clad only in a towel he found four or five

babushki rushing through his apartment to his smoking oven with buckets of water in hand. He was scolded severely and ever after his neighbors took it upon themselves to give him cooking advice whenever they saw him--the first of much unsolicited advice Matt received.

For Matt living in the middle of Siberia, the coup in Moscow in October of 1993 was big news. The Parliament (mainly run by communists and conservatives) declared that Yeltsin's presidency was illegitimate. Yeltsin responded by disbanding Parliament. In response, the members holed themselves up inside of their building (the Russian White House) for several days. On the news they dramatically showed the final face off, which resulted in a fire that destroyed much of the White House. Matt, however, was soon to discover how distant Moscow actually is in the minds of those in Irkutsk. At first unsure whether or not he should leave his apartment until he heard more about the situation in Moscow, Matt finally decided to go out. He was on his way to the university, when one of his neighbors began yelling at him and shaking her finger violently. He was sure he was being reproached about the role of the damn American government (which unequivocally supported the liberal Yeltsin) in the Moscow coup. But when he got closer he heard: "Put your earflaps down! Are you crazy?! You'll catch your death!!" She went up to him and adjusted his hat herself; obviously upset by the stupidity of youth, she continued, "You don't dress right and I have to be your mother." She sighed and continued on about her hardships, "And bread prices have gone up another hundred rubles." She threw up her hands and marched away. Matt heard her mutter, "And there was a coup in Moscow." For these frontier peoples the far off dealings of the leaders of their country were the least of their immediate worries.

Like the *babushki* in Matt's life, the woman at the baggage check had our best interest in mind. Nonetheless, she had to leave at five, so we were forced to take our bags with us, which was no great tragedy, just a little inconvenient. The bus ride to the town we were going to took only about an hour. Listvennitsa is a fishing village on the southwestern shore of the lake, but we assumed it would not exactly be crowded in the end of January. We were right.

Exhausted by our escapades at the *rynok*, I slept the whole way, though I didn't miss much scenery since, with the exception of a small patch of window big enough for the driver to see out, the windows were perpetually frosted. I awoke as we were pulling into the parking lot of what looked like a marina, though there were only a few large fishing boats frozen into the ice of the lake. About five other people were still on the bus when we got off. We asked the driver when he would be back, and he instructed us to buy our return tickets at the little hut at the edge of the parking lot. The bus drove off and we were left in the middle of the parking lot, snow falling around us onto the frozen, icy ground.

Since we were both holding the oozing bags of groceries which greatly hindered our movement (the handles had ripped again), we looked around for a place to store them for the two hours we had in Listvennitsa. About two hundred feet away was a store, so we thought we'd try our luck there. Three women were working in the almost empty place, all of them wearing tall, thin, white cotton hats and long white frocks. We had stepped into a time warp. The large, high-ceiling room, was filled with shelves that were practically barren. Two of the women were baking and another was helping a young woman with her two children at the counter. The sparse offerings included cans of fish from Lake Baikal, bags of flour and sugar, noodles, some

cans of meat, and a large assortment of liquor and chocolate. (The only western food product were packages of Knorr soup.) Of course there was a freezer filled with the ubiquitous Russian ice-cream—a product with its own distinct taste.

The women in the store were extremely friendly to, and solicitous of, the two strangers who had walked through their doors. The youngest woman, whose red hair was drawn up under her white cap, and whose generous eye make-up made her look much older than she really was, kindly allowed us to store our bags of food behind the counter while we walked on the frozen lake. Her friendliness was a far cry from what I'd seen in the big cities.

Located on the shores of the enormous Baikal, the health and economy of this small village are dependent on the lake. Fishing and tourism are the only revenue sources, and neither is active in the long winter months, when the population of the town dwindles to its year-round inhabitants. Only three structures hinted that this town has seen the twentieth century: the school, a small Soviet-style apartment building, and a red brick factory that slowly spewed smoke into the gray sky. All other structures are wooden, not unlike the houses in Irkutsk, but on a smaller scale. Besides the women in the store, the only people we saw were three boys playing hockey on the frozen lake, a man cross-country skiing close to shore on the smooth ice, and an old, craggy man riding his ancient bicycle down the road carrying a big satchel and smoking a cigarette.

Alyosha and I slid along the slippery shore and began to climb over the large triangular broken chunks of ice that littered the lake's edge. We wanted to walk out on the smooth ice and see if it really was true that the lake was so clear that you could see fish swimming beneath the ice. Although we didn't

see any fish, the ice was indeed clear; we could see the many layers of white cracks that went down at least eight feet to the water below.

Lake Baikal is considered to be one of the gems of the Russian land. It supports a major fishing industry and is the backbone of the region's economy. Local Russians believe the lake has healing powers and that the surrounding areas are special, almost sacred. For many, Baikal has been the sustenance of life for several generations. However, the pristine lake is subject to the same environmental horrors as the rest of Russia.

Because Lake Baikal is surrounded by the *taiga* (the immense forested land of Russia), logging is a major industry in the region. Unfortunately, due to either the lack of regulations or the impossibility of effectively enforcing them, the many mills that line the shores of Baikal pump pollution-causing chemicals into the lake. Fish are dying and the general health of the lake has decreased over that past several decades. Locals are devastated, and their livelihood is threatened, but there is little they can do, since governmental funds are scarce, and the costs of environmental clean-up are too much to bear. For Russians pollution is not only ruining their surroundings, but it tears at their souls.

The relationship Russians have with nature is much different from that in the United States. We have many nature lovers in our midst, but often we must make a concerted effort to go out and be surrounded by nature. For Russians it is much different. Even city dwellers in Russian have a close relationship with nature. In St. Petersburg, I sometimes walked along the embankment of the Peter and Paul Fortress on the shores of the Neva, and looked across to the Winter Palace and the Admiralty. On stormy cold days, I usually saw at least one lone Russian plunging off the cobblestone shore of the fortress into the ice waters of the river. Even when the river freezes some

die hards cut holes in the ice in which to bath. Living in the middle of a city of five million does not seem to interfere with Russians' ability to take advantage of the surrounding nature. Russians who don't have time to go to the country and gather mushrooms often wander up and down the strips of grass between the city streets, their backs and heads bent in search of the little fungi. The land in the traditionally agricultural Russia has been literally the bread and butter of the country for all time. And the Russians themselves, if only subconsciously, understand this.

Once we retrieved our bags of food from the store, we returned to the hut at the edge of the parking lot. No one was there except a lone man who was peering in the windows. We assumed we could just buy a ticket from the bus driver who was due to come in fifteen minutes. For several minutes we stood in silence until a Lada pulled up. The driver asked if we wanted a ride to Irkutsk. When we told him we were waiting for the bus he laughed and said the bus usually only came to town once a day, and we had better come with him. Just after we had piled into back seat and given him money for the ride, a breathless young man, lugging an overstuffed sports bag, ran up to the car and banged on the window. He too needed to get to the city. The car was definitely at maximum capacity when we pulled away.

I kept expecting to see the bus coming in the other direction, but sure enough, there was no bus. I paled to think what we would have done, stuck in a deserted town all night with two tickets for a train that left Irkutsk in the morning. Moreover, I was relieved we weren't in the cumbersome bus, since it had started to snow heavily, and the roads were slick, icy, and full of potholes. The ride in the car was much more pleasant.

With the exception of the sporadic conversation between the driver and the man in the front seat, none of us talked; we just stared out the

window and listened to the music the driver played on his stereo. Vladimir Kuzmin was singing in his folksy pop style about love and women. "Hey, beauty. It's nice weather out. I don't need vodka, I need your love." Only when we reached the outskirts of Irkutsk did the scenery change from the empty fields and occasional village to the large block apartment buildings of an era now gone. We crossed the still unfrozen Angara and the driver pulled over to let both the other men out of the car, kindly letting us continue on to the bus station. There we could figure out where we would spend the night. No matter where we might end up, the day had been successful. After fifteen years of waiting I had finally set foot on the frozen surface of the beautiful Lake Baikal.

Chapter Ten

Hospitality

The distant Siberian sun had already almost completed its short descent in the sky when Alyosha and I called our friend, Anatoli Andreevich, to see if we could spend our last night in Irkutsk with him. He told us he had been arguing with his wife, and wasn't sure if we could come over yet—better call back in two hours. We had to laugh. The roaring, seemingly all-powerful Russian man was reduced to asking his wife's permission for his acquaintances to come over. The poor man's three months of freedom had come to an abrupt end.

I would have walked by the Georgian cafe where we went to wait, but Alyosha noticed that the broken sign above the door was written in both Russian and Georgian. In Russia I often walk right past stores or cafes, never even noticing that they exist. Unlike in the West (especially America), advertising in this new democracy is not the strong point for most small businesses, especially restaurants and grocery stores. Often, besides a small, unobtrusive sign which usually fails to describe what the place is, there is no indication that a store or cafe exists. Only by word of mouth are new patrons recruited. I usually only discovered such places with Russian friends whose keen eyes are trained to look for the tell-tale signs that indicate a nice, well-furnished, establishment hidden behind a dirty, unobtrusive door. Alone I would walk right by, unaware of what I was missing.

This Georgian restaurant in Irkutsk languished from its owners' neglect. As with many of the places where I had eaten in Russia, the smooth tile floor was dirtied with muddy footprints--not all of them human. A small, ratty-looking dog lay curled up in a corner, for the time being ignoring the crumbs of food that fell on the floor as a group of men ate and drank, but no doubt waiting for the cafe to empty before he retrieved the morsels. In addition to the Georgian men who were eating *lavash* (flat Georgian bread) and drinking cognac, the place was empty--truly empty: besides two other plastic chairs and an equally flimsy table, the room was devoid of furniture. Seating arrangements in Russian cafes are highly interesting. The chair situation in most Russian establishments recalls the predicament in my home in Seattle. Only once have we had matching chairs in our kitchen--two white plastic lawn chairs that stayed a pair for only a year before one of them came crashing to the floor, crushed beyond repair.

While restaurants are in no way a new concept to Russians, they have only recently become accessible to the average citizen. Both restaurants and bars were rare during Soviet times; most people didn't have the money or the inclination to go to the expensive, but (marginal) restaurants. I remember when I was in Russia in 1991, the best meals I had were at people's houses--the worst in restaurants. Russians went out only on rare and special social occasions--usually weddings and birthday parties. Now all has changed. Restaurants, cafes, and bars are literally on almost every corner, and often there are several to each block in the big cities. In St. Petersburg there are abundant places to eat. It took me several months to recognize the number of restaurants just in the neighborhood where I lived, let alone try a few. And like in the US, there are regulars at every bar and restaurant. By the time I left St. Petersburg I had my share of favorites, too.

One place I loved to frequent in St. Petersburg was the *Staryi Cafe* (Old Cafe). I stumbled upon this place with Alyosha, who had heard about it from a friend. Once we entered the cafe we felt as though we had stepped through a passage back one hundred years. Inside the stucco walls were stylishly cracking, and from the high ceiling hung brass cooking pots. The room was tiny--only about fifteen people could be seated at once. Against one wall in front of the bar stood a piano, played in the later part of the evening by a young man or a musically talented diner. One evening the small, gray house cat decided to jump up and make her own music by walking on the keys, much to the amusement of the patrons. Low hanging lights spread a yellow glow over each of the tables, while candles, their wax dripping down the ragged brick walls, lighted the corners. The atmosphere sets a uniquely archaic mood, but it is the Russian cuisine that makes the *Staryi Cafe* exceptional.

Most Americans think that Russian food is about as tasty as prison food, and as nutritious, too. I am always pleased to tell people that this is one stereotype they need to discard. To say that Russians eat only meat, cabbage, and potatoes is like saying that Americans eat only cheeseburgers. I usually dispel the horrible-Russian-food myth by making a dish or two for my friends. But at the *Staryi Cafe*, all the food served is beautifully prepared--down to the dates, olives, and Italian parsley that decorate the main courses. For appetizers there is a wide array of dishes, from thinly sliced, cold tongue, to the simple tomato and cucumber salad mixed with sour cream. Soup is a big part of Russian eating and there are two main types--*borsch* (beet) and *shchi* (cabbage). Many Russians who spend time in America bemoan the fact that we rarely include soup with our meals.

Typically in Russian cuisine the main courses are served with sautéed potatoes (like home fries for the Easterners in the US, but thinner) and marinated cabbage. While I understand that I am not writing a restaurant review, the food served at the *Starii Cafe* deserves detailed description. I never had room for dessert (they serve huge portions), but once I met Tanya at the cafe to have wine, and she ordered ice-cream. In my humble opinion, Russian ice-cream is the best in the world. Unfortunately, too much will lead to an early demise, since it is really ice-cream. On most street corners in the center of the city and at every *metro* stop there are always ice-cream vendors. The Russian flavors are unique—logan berry, currant, and caramel. Ironically, of late, foreign ice-cream has come to Russia. Frozen Snickers bars and even Baskin and Robbins are popular, though the ice-cream isn't nearly as creamy, and costs four times as much.

Usually several Georgian restaurants grace most Russian cities. Irkutsk was no exception. Spicier than most Russian food, Georgian cuisine's main ingredient is meat—an essential for the Russians' diet. As in my favorite Georgian restaurant in St. Petersburg, the Irkutsk establishment served a variety of seasoned meat dishes and soup, accompanied by the Georgian flat bread, *lavash*. Georgians drink cognac and wine, famous for fruity sweetness. We chose *lavash* and wine, once we had gotten the attention of the host, who himself had joined the group of men toasting each other with generous helpings of cognac and was ignoring us.

We made the bread and wine last as long as we could, but we soon had to leave the Georgian restaurant, since the host began to put the empty chairs on the tables and sweep the muddy floor. To keep ourselves entertained (and in a heated building) until we could call Anatoli Andreevich again, Alyosha and I went to the cinema—a favorite Russian pastime. Russians are huge

movie fans, and only in the past six years has the market opened up to feature any foreign film, as well as all Russian films. In the USSR, movies had to be approved before they were shown, so the repertoire was limited. Russian film makers often made brilliant films that were forced to *lezhat' na polke* (lie on the shelf) until the political mood of the country changed. Now one can see anything. With the increase in VCRs the pirate-video market has soared. Movies actually "come out on video" in Russia long before they do in the States! Some entrepreneur with a video camera films the movie as soon as it arrives in the theaters and another person does the dubbing (or paraphrasing would be more accurate). Unless the film is dubbed professionally, usually there is only a voice over by one man who explains what is going on in the film. Half the time when I watched dubbed American movies in Russia, I was in stitches. For example, one film star said to his sweetheart, "Your fine golden hair glows like rays of moonlight in the starry sky." The Russian "translation" was, "You look nice." Atrocious dubbing aside, the number of films available was unbelievable. Even though I'm well versed in American cinema, most of my Russian friends had seen movies I'd never even heard of. Not only that, but the Russians always put me to shame by talking in great detail about the directors and producers in America and Europe. Russians are always shocked to find out that Americans usually identify movies with the actor, not the director.

When the film ended, we went back into the cold night and called our friend. He told us to come over for "tea." (For Russians this can mean a small feast.) We smiled and hurried to his apartment. Arratoli Andreevich looked much smaller than I had remembered him when he met us outside and silently lead us up the four flights of stairs to his apartment. (In Soviet times, such silence protected the host from the prying neighbors, who might report

suspicious foreign voices.) His wife, Irina Vasilievna, waited for us to enter the foyer before she warmly greeted us and helped us with our coats and bags of food. Although she looked much younger than her husband, she was probably close to the same age. Heavy drinking and work age the men in Russia faster than the women. We knew we were with one of the most powerful men in the Irkutsk region, and their huge apartment did not disappoint our expectations. Irina Vasilievna gave us a fast tour, showing off the high ceilings and many well furnished rooms. A table already was spread with the various fine accouterments of tea in a well-to-do home. A samovar and fine bone china, bread, salad, eggs, juice, meat, fish, and caviar accompanied the tea. She made us sit down, and went into the kitchen to get the soup, never once breaking her constant chatter. Her suffering husband hadn't spoken much yet, a far cry from his boisterous self on the train.

When Irina Vasilievna produced a cognac bottle, her husband's eyes lit up. Pouring us half glasses, she turned to her husband said, "I think that Anatoli Andreevich will not drink tonight." His face crumpled and he slouched back into his chair. We had to drink for him. Alyosha and I figured we were in for a nice, relaxed evening of cognac sipping, but we were mistaken. Our large glasses were half full of the bronze liqueur, and when Irina Vasilievna toasted our meeting and tilted her head back, we assumed we would just be taking a sip. I watched in horror as she downed her glass, exhaled, and smiled. Apparently heavy drinking was not the domain of the men of Siberia. She didn't look like one to imbibe heavy spirits--a nice mother, maybe, but not a tipling domestic tyrant.

The evening crept on and the cognac bottle emptied. We had begun to think that we were out of the woods when our hostess produced a bottle of champagne. Both veterans of endurance drinking, Alyosha and I tried to

make sure our glasses were never completely emptied after the toasts. She, however, filled hers bottom to top. Unfortunately, she kept toasting important things like love and marriage and happiness, and if one does not *dopit* '(drink to the end) it is bad luck. Tradition dictated our consumption. I thanked God and my parents for my robust height and weight

Unlike our acquaintances west of the Urals who abhorred communism, Anatoli Andreevich and his wife had thrived under the Soviet regime: he had held a position of imminent corruptibility and power, and his former connections continued to help them live well. They obviously suffered little under the stifling conditions of the former government, since life for Soviet citizens with friends in high places could be quite pleasant in comparison to those who had to wait for hours in long lines to buy third rate goods. Communism had treated them well, so there was no need to change anything in their minds.

The bottle of champagne was almost gone, as were the wild strawberries that came from the forests around Irkutsk. Irina Vasilievna demanded that her husband buy another bottle. Much to our relief, Anatoli Andreevich returned to his vocal self and put his foot down, refusing to go out into the cold night for more alcohol that he wasn't allowed to drink. While it was clear that Anatoli Andreevich had the last say in most matters, his wife was definitely a strong, vocal force behind him. In most Russian households, the women are the foundation. The wealth of the family often depends on the man, but if he fails the foundation is always there and always strong. With no more to eat and no more to drink, Irina Vasilievna decided it was time for bed.

Later, before dropping off to sleep, warm and snuggled in the deep comforter of Irina Vasilievna's spare bed, listening to the Siberian wind howl

out of the vast *taiga*, I reflected on the extraordinary experience of meeting Anatoli Andreevich and his strong willed wife. I felt honored (as I'm sure Alyosha did) that we had been taken under the wing of this unusual couple who fed and housed two young strangers from the western edge of their country as though it was an everyday occurrence. When Americans ask me why I love Russia, I always reply, "The people." For it is men and women like Anatoli Andreevich and his wife who define Russian hospitality. Once they take you through their doorway and open their home, there is nothing they won't do for you.

Chapter Eleven

The Ski Trip

The Russians' love of winter sports can be traced back centuries. In the time of Pushkin, stylish men and women ice skated in the winter, exhibiting their grace and prowess. In Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Levin shows off his strength and agility to Kitty by performing an acrobatic feat on skates. For those who wanted to absorb winter's white beauty, horse drawn sleighs laden with bear skins to keep the passengers warm took couples to the wild lands on the outskirts of the city where they could romantically watch the sun set in brilliant purples and oranges over the Baltic Sea.

One hundred years later, during the Soviet times, winter sports remained popular--courtyards became hockey rinks, horse racing tracks were changed into cross-country ski paths, and churches were even turned into swimming pools! Those who had talent and excelled in one sport were often able to live a life inaccessible to most. *Sportsmeni* were given privileges even some of the elite communists went without; the athletes were pampered, allowed to travel abroad, given generous stipends, and often became the heroes of the state. From the moment they entered kindergarten, the talented were singled out and sent to special schools for skiers, boxers, hockey players and the like. Unfortunately burn out was common, since the psychological pressure was more than most athletes today could fathom--the entire burden to show the world the success of the communist experiment lay on the

athletes' shoulders. *Sportsmeni* aside, the government encouraged sport for all citizens, and physical education was an important part of school life. Almost every school had a gym, and some of the more elite schools had swimming pools for their pupils. To remind the youngsters that the idealized image of a Communist was a strapping young woman or man with great physical stature, representations of these almost myth-like creations were present all over Russian cities. Great bronze statues of brawny men and women, of the worker and the peasant, stand on street corners and in parks near factories and sport centers for all to see.

It is understandable that Russians are such fanatics about their sports. In the country where, for seventy years, soccer was one of the few allowed subject of debate, the fans discussed their teams and players with the type of fervor we reserve for politics. I am sure that family feuds have begun because some one once rooted for the wrong team. This fanatical idealization of the sportsman is much deeper than our media influenced, highly commercialized infatuation with sports.

Russians relate to nature, the same way they relate to everyday sporting activities. Unlike many Americans who must spend hundreds of dollars on equipment in order to enjoy "the great outdoors," Russians are content to spend a day gathering mushrooms in grubby old clothes they keep stored away for such an occasion or, if it suits them, to simply wear their nice city clothes. And unlike Americans who cringe in horror at the thought of jogging in jeans, Russians think nothing of playing basketball in the clothes they happen to have on at the moment. A good deal of planning goes into most American encounters with the outdoors—time is often spent on selecting the appropriate water bottle or the right shoes. Even if Russians had

the options we do, many might just opt to use what's at hand, not wanting to be bothered with insignificant details.

An American mountaineering friend told me a story she heard about an expedition up a high peak in Russia. The ascent was a long and treacherous undertaking; climbers from both the US and Russia were participating. The Americans showed up in all of the latest clothes and toughest gear. The Russians sported hand-made backpacks that were unraveling and used ancient equipment. Climbers from both countries made it to the top. After they had descended to base camp, dehydrated from the altitude and exhausted from the climb, the Russians whipped bottles of vodka from their packs. The US-Soviet *détente* was achieved during the ensuing spree on that glacier field. Russians are always doing things that break with the conventions we hold dear and do so in a charming way, showing us that perhaps we have lost sight (in our scramble to own all of the latest, faddish equipment) of the real reason we spend time outdoors.

My adventure of skiing in Russia bears out the observation that Russians can use what they have for a good time. Tanya, Sviatoslav, Denis, and Masha often went skiing on the weekends. Usually I was too busy to join them, but in all honesty I was deeply hesitant about skiing in Russia, especially since within the last two years of ski racing in the States I had experienced three knee surgeries. I envisioned re-injuring my knee, ruining my chance to fight fire again during the summer, and—worst of all—finding myself at the mercy of Russian orthopedic surgeons. Finally I put my fears aside and on a moderately warm day joined my friends on a trek to the “mountain.”

Of course there are no mountains *per se* in the vicinity of St. Petersburg—the flatness of western Russia is famous. (How else could

Napoleon and Hitler have moved so quickly across the great expanses?) However, the rolling hills around the city have enough vertical rise for a few ropetows. Luckily, Denis was in possession of the black Jeep Cherokee he drives for work, so we rode out to the hills in style. Tanya gave me her father's old skis and her aunts boots—old 160cm skis with reverse camber, and a pair of fairly new rear-entry boots, both of which would make my first time skiing in a year an interesting one.

Sviatoslav, Denis, Masha and Tanya began by warming up their muscles with a few shots of vodka. In all my fifteen years of ski racing I'd never skied inebriated—I saw no reason to start. Instead I did mock ballet moves on my skis to get the feel of such short boards. A series of huts that offered *sosiski* (hot-dogs), bread, beer and vodka served as both the lodge and the ticket office. At the bottom of each the ropetow stood one such hut. One chooses a hill, pays the tow operator, and skis for the agreed amount of time. Payment is by the hour and, like most things in Russia, negotiable. The leather-faced old man at the bottom of our tow obviously remembered and liked Tanya, so he let her ski for free and gave me a discount.

Ropetows were never my forte. I harbor many agonizing memories of childhood and teenage trauma—I could never grip the rope for the entire ride. All I recall is the high speed whirl of my gloves melting as the rope ran through them at full speed. As grew older I could ride most ropetows with no problem. However, the Russian ropetows are much thinner and faster than the ones I'd used in America. All my bad experiences came flooding back—I again dreaded the ride to the top of the hill. I soon discovered, though, that there is a contraption that encircles the waist and hooks onto the ropetow using body weight to keep it secure. Tragically, for the life of me I couldn't figure out how to connect the hook onto the rope. So for fear of falling off and

sliding down the steep glazed track on my behind, I clung to the rope (wire cable), clenching my fingers until I couldn't feel them. My friends just thought I was strange—and American—unaware of my ropetow phobia.

Most of the skiers on the hill were dressed in jeans and warm coats, though there were some undoubtedly “New Russians” decked out in the newest equipment. They looked strangely out of place on this dumpy little hill. Much to my surprise there were a couple of snowboarders wearing the latest baggy pants and big jackets for which the jibbers are famous.

The old man at the bottom of the tow herded people into the right line so they wouldn't mill around like lost cattle. After every run Tanya jested with him, her bright eyes shining—a rapport he was clearly enjoying to the fullest. Masha had fallen, and Denis and Sviatoslav had stopped to help her put her skis back on. Tanya and I had a few minutes to talk with the man. He asked where I was from. I told him that I used to ski race, and it turned out he did, too. He had been to the Caucasuses and to Kazakstan—we talked about big mountains and the good life of skiing. Masha soon came down and said she wanted to use smaller skis, so I gave her mine and said I'd wait until she took a few runs, since we couldn't adjust the bindings on her skis to fit my boots. With more time to talk skiing with the old man, our conversation turned to equipment and the new skis of the day. We both laughed at the little skis I was using and my very non-racer boots. He yelled to a young man who was attending the ropetow, and told him to come over.

He introduced us. The young man, Sasha, was also a ski racer, and asked me if I would like to use a pair of better skis and run some gates with the local racers. Why not? I trudged after him to get the new equipment. Like ski racers everywhere, he and his friends had a little cabin where they stayed and kept all their equipment; a small dark hut with a good heater and a few

bunks. Almost every young ski team in America has such a hut, damp and smelly from drying boots and gloves, and littered with various ski racer paraphernalia: broken skis and poles, miscellaneous wax, screwdrivers, candy bar wrappers, and of course, the omnipotent roll of duct tape.

Sasha surveyed a pile of skis, chose a pair of old Elans and handed them to me. He then looked at my boots, laughed, and gave me an old pair of Nordicas. They fit well enough, but some how managed to hit all my bone spurs in the wrong place. We grabbed a bundle bamboo poles to set a slalom course and headed back to the ropetow. (Luckily, Sasha carried them up the hill.) The old man winked at me and said I better keep my eye on him since, "he'd just gotten out of jail." Looking at Sasha I wasn't too sure he was kidding. They bantered back and forth, joking and making fun of each other, as we headed up to the top.

I felt I had a lot riding on my ability to make at least somewhat of a good impression, since I had told them (truthfully) that I was in the Junior Olympics a few times and had spent a year traveling around the States racing. We were soon joined by another racer--skinny, stubble-chinned, young man who looked more like Shaggy on Scooby Doo than a mountain athlete. He sized me up and laughed. "You don't look like a racer." Ha! And neither do you, my friend, at least not one from this decade. Like Sasha, the guy who joined us to run the slalom course was in old seventies-style slalom pants, and boots that had seen their prime at least ten years ago. Their skis, and the skis I was loaned, were from the mid-eighties and had the mileage to match. (I had a pair of the same model when I was ten.) In competitive racing the latest equipment is essential. Even racers who are still on last year's model are at a disadvantage against their competitors--ski technology changes so fast. I

tried to explain that, excuse me, I hadn't skied at all this year, and of course I hadn't taken my equipment to Russia with me. He just smiled and shrugged.

Now I really had to put my money where my mouth was, although I wasn't sure I could live up to the talk; the course they set was a mutation of slalom and giant slalom set on a steep, icy, ungroomed part of the hill. (I doubt they even have grooming equipment.) The run I took while Sasha was setting up the course didn't improve my confidence much. The 190cm skis I was on felt like immobile boards compared to the 160cm. Usually 190 is the shortest I race on, for slalom, but I don't think these skis had seen a tuning board for many moons. The only thing allowing me to grip to the ice were large burrs that ran up and down the edges.

My fears of getting hurt in Russia came crashing in on me as I watched the first guy go sailing down the course, fly into the air off a frozen snowdrift, lose his ski, and go tumbling down to the end of the course. After a deep breath, I gave myself a halfhearted push and hoped that today would be my lucky day. I can't say that I skied like Phil Mahre (or the young Russian woman who raced World Cup downhill in the early 1990s), but at least I made the majority of the gates in a somewhat race-like manner. I wasn't wearing any of the usual body armor that's needed in slalom, so I didn't want to get too close to the poles and end up with painful welts.

Sasha watched from the bottom, nodded his approval and we headed up for another run. He had studied at some technical institute in the city and now gave skiing and racing lessons, and worked at the mountain. He also did odd jobs for money. I only made a few more runs on the course, since each run was progressively becoming more and more of a mad straight dash to bottom of the hill. As is usual when skiers see gates, they flock to the course to try their newly found expertise. The run was looking more like a battle

field than a course, as the gates got knocked out and slid down the hill. Even Sviatoslav took a turn at the course, but it didn't go very well for him since he turned the wrong way around the first gate and progressively became more confused with every turn. By the time there was only one gate standing, I decided I had had enough. I helped Sasha gather up the poles, and we lugged them back to the race hut.

Back at the bottom of the ropetow, Tanya was keeping the old man amused with her colorful language brought on by a painful fall she took at the end of the day. He chortled when he saw me and asked me if Sasha had behaved himself. I said he had. He laughed again and took a small flask out of his pocket and offered us some. I kindly refused, figuring it was *samogon* (home brewed vodka which is closer in strength to rubbing alcohol than liquor). We talked a little more, and soon were joined by Sviatoslav, Masha, and Denis. They're cheeks were wind burned, and their blue jeans were wet in the seat and knees from a few tumbles, but these extraneous details didn't dampen their spirits. Before we left, the vodka and *buterbrod* (sandwiches) were brought out and we toasted a good day of skiing. Denis loaded up the car, and in typical Russian fashion, used the frayed, old ropes to haphazardly tie the delaminating skis on the shiny, new Jeep Cherokee.

Chapter Twelve

The *Dacha*

The *dacha* (the Russian country house) is an indispensable part of Russian culture. For some Americans the word may conjure up vague images of a small, picturesque cottage, quaint and lovely, where Russians sip tea, drink vodka, and sing songs on the weekend. For Russians, a *dacha* can mean the difference between a sad existence or a full life. Russia is a country with a heavy cultural investment in its land, woods, and nature. Before the revolution, the vast bulk of the population lived in villages and worked the small piece of land they were assigned by their *mir*, or peasant commune. Their survival depended on the ability to eke food out of the overtaxed and often barren land. The Bolsheviks, during their idealistic stage, wanted to give the land back to the people. Their entire platform was based on the slogan, "Peace, Land, and Bread" Ironically, once the revolutionaries came to power, peasants were forced, often at gun point, to extract even more from the land to feed those who had fled to the city in hope of finding a better life in the industrial world.

Eighty years after the Revolution, Russians are still psychologically bound to the land—to Mother Russia. Most modern city dwellers are only one or two generations from the country. Either their grandparents or great grandparents were peasants who lived and died in their small villages. The

love of the land and of nature has been passed almost as a holy relic, often from a grandmother who cares for her grandchildren, spinning them stories about the Russian forests. The fearsome, yet goodhearted witch, Baba Yaga, emerged as a symbol of the Russian woods. She whirled through the dark forests of her domain, grinding a mortar and pestle, making flour from the bones of her adversaries. She often came to the begrudging rescue of the exploited Vasilisa the Fair, who sought advice and help from Grandmother Baba Yaga. Ivan the Simpleton is a well-known character in Russian lore. He is the kind souled, youngest brother who, without brains but with perseverance, always seemed to emerge victorious over his conniving older brothers. From an early age Russian children learn to see the woods and the country as a mysterious yet powerful place. At the same time that they are drawn towards the dark, they are repulsed and frightened by the consequences that await those who dare to cross the supernatural forces.

In the Soviet years, Russian urbanites had no place they could really call their own. Many lived in housing projects of the Krushchev and Brezhnev eras, as uniform and monotonous as prison uniforms. Almost every apartment resembled the next. Even the furniture and the TVs were identical, as were many of the dishes and flatware. The one place where Russians could exercise their creativity was at the *dacha*.

Not all Russians were fortunate to own their own *dacha*, but most had access to one. Even in the country where there was supposed to be no private property, some citizens actually owned their country homes. Ironically, those owners were the very people entrusted with protecting the citizens--the communist *aparatchiki* and *nomenklatura*. The most common way for the average worker to spend time in the country was through their place of work. In the beginning of the Soviet *dacha* system, worker unions had an allotted

piece of land broken up into different sections, where individuals were given a spot to build a *dacha*. However, as time went on and people either changed jobs or made connections, *dachi* were traded, bought and sold, and the original, larger pieces of land once exclusively inhabited by workers from one factory became integrated. Besides *dachi*, Pioneer Camps for children also offered access to the outdoors.

Young Pioneers resembled our Brownies or Girl Scouts, but instead of learning how to tie knots and make camp fires, they learned about the tenets of Marxism-Leninism and the greatness of their communist country and sang patriotic songs. Parents considered it crucial to their child's health to leave the hot, dirty cities for the summer months and to breathe fresh air in the country. From a young age, most Russians have very pleasant memories of times spent in the country.

The *dacha* became a private haven for Russians who somehow acquired one through their place of work or who were fortunate enough to have the money to purchase one. The *dacha* was something they could call their own, and basically do with it what they wanted. Of course the government regulated the use of the *dacha*. The most important of these laws required that families grow food on their land. However, this law was hardly ever broken and stated the obvious, since almost all Russians supplemented their diet with the fruits and vegetables they carefully nurtured on their small piece of land. Potatoes were the staple, but ingenious greenhouses made with scraps of wood and visqueen lengthened the growing season for green vegetables, tomatoes, and other fruits. Much to my surprise as I passed by a home in Irkutsk in the middle of January, I saw lemons growing off the stems of a tiny tree that was soaking in the low rays of sunlight through the window of a makeshift greenhouse.

During the times of food shortages, *dachi* have always been security against starvation. Even those Russians who didn't own a *dacha* tried to get a small plot of land in a communal growing area where they could plant food as a hedge against needy times.

Since all Soviet people were ostensibly supposed to live equally, the only real measures of status and importance were apartments (number of rooms), a *dacha*, and a car. If a family possessed all three of these, they were indeed rich. But in 1997, the meaning of the *dacha* changed. The new rich Russians no longer need to hide their wealth. One has only to look at the car driven, and the clothes worn to understand who is truly rich. And many New Russians would much rather go to Paris or Italy during their free time than to a small country home.

Alyosha's family bought their *dacha* in 1990 for 4,000 rubles, a significant amount of money at the time, considering that the average worker made about 200 rubles a month. Religiously every weekend, all weekend, throughout the entire summer, Alyosha, his parents, and his little sister journeyed to their *dacha*. For Russians who don't have a car, but have a *dacha*, the electric trains that go to the suburbs and villages around the big cities provide the transportation. For Alyosha's family the *dacha* proved its worth when the major food shortages hit in 1992 and 1993.

Once the Soviet Union disintegrated, prices of some items shot up and other items just disappeared. To make sure that staples were provided for most people, the government issued coupons for meat, milk, flour, sugar, butter, cigarettes, and other necessary items. Shortages were everywhere, and those who had access to products had leverage for bargaining with others. Alyosha remembers going to school with the coupons for cigarettes his non-smoking family didn't need. He traded these for coupons for toilet paper, or

sometimes he sold them for money. With such an extreme shortage of domestic products, the *dacha* became essential for survival. Every weekend the family would drive to the *dacha* to work in the garden and greenhouse.

Seven years later, the *dacha* is still an integral part of Russians' lives, but the sense of dire necessity has disappeared. Food packs the shelves of Russian stores, and all produce that is needed is accessible. Even kiwis and passion fruit are sold at corner store kiosks. But still the tradition of the *dacha* continues. The *dacha* provides a nice break from hectic city life any time of the year.

In the middle of the cold and snowy winter, Alyosha invited a few of his friends to his parents' *dacha*. We didn't take a car, since none of his friends could drive. Laden down with food, a tape player, and a couple of bottles of wine, we piled onto the electric commuter train and headed out to the country. Three hours later, after disembarking and trudging through empty fields, we finally arrived in the village of the *dacha*. It was dark and except for the dimly lit windows of one of his neighbors, there was little sign of life. The small *dachi* stood row upon row, each surrounded by their own plot of land. No two were alike; there were A-frames like Alyosha's, large lumbering structures that had been added to progressively, and even some small stone cottages. Smoke billowed from only three chimneys in the entire village.

To combat the cold we needed to start a fire in the *pechka*, the stucco chimney/fireplace that provides the heating. Alyosha went to get the wood, and came back with disturbing news. Besides a very small amount of wood, all the rest had been stolen. We would have enough for that night, but in the morning we would all have to go into the forest and find wood, which meant cutting down a few trees. It turned out to be a grand adventure.

At first light the next morning, we bundled up in the spare jackets that his family leaves at the *dacha*. Alyosha grabbed a small hand saw, and we headed for the woods. We only had to walk down the snowy road between the rows of *dachi* for ten minutes before we came to a wire fence, separating the village from the birch forest. Apparently we weren't the only ones who needed wood, but judging by the sled tracks, we were the only ones ill-prepared to carry our wood out. We followed the foot packed path a few hundred yards into the woods, and there decided to select our tree. The trees were drooping with heavy snow and ice, so it was hard to judge the lean and the rottenness of the tree, but since they were only about six inches in diameter, I decided to cut anyway. The felling process was a much longer one than I was used to. In the Forest Service we have chain saws that would have zipped through the small birch trees in a millisecond. But with the dull hand saw, nothing happened very fast. I hacked away for ten minutes, and finally the young tree fell with a satisfying thud. However, the main challenge still remained—carrying the trees out without a sled.

Alyosha cut the tree in half and Vova and Max each took one end of both sections and rested them on their shoulders. About twenty feet of log separated them, so they had to coordinate movements. We should have had a deer dangling upside down from the two poles to finish off the effect. At the *dacha* we took turns using the cross bow saw to cut the wood into choppable pieces. Alyosha told us his grandfather's wise thought about sawing. There is no better way to get to know another person—feeling the rhythm of the other person means the difference between jerky, useless motions or the soothing back-and-forth that makes you smile.

The rest of the weekend we spent taking walks, singing songs, and dancing inside the *dacha*. As small as it was, the old wooden walls were big

enough to hold our jolly group. The only other inconvenience we ran into was when the refrigerator (I was actually surprised there was one) froze all of our food. No serious damage was done; we just fried up the vegetables and no one could tell they had wilted beyond recognition.

I was impressed by how at home these young city dwellers felt in the country. They happily traipsed into the woods to saw down a tree, and they had fun washing the dishes in the snow. Even the outhouse didn't faze them. There was a nice little wooden room attached to the shed with a toilet seat under which stood a metal pail. Of course everything was frozen, but I felt that was a welcome change from the sweltering, fly-ridden port-a-potties (or blue rooms, as we called them) that were the only option during the summer in the fire base camps. Most Americans think that "roughing it" includes any excursion to a place devoid of indoor plumbing, but these young urban Russians don't even know that such a term exists. In Russia you "rough it" everyday.

The next time I went to Alyosha's *dacha* was under completely different circumstances. We went with his parents and we went to work. The long shadows of the low winter sun gave way to almost unending days. In the middle of April, the skies stayed light until nine o'clock, so we would have plenty of time once we got to the *dacha* to complete Alyosha's mother's agenda for our day trip. Both Alyosha and his father were dragging their feet. Neither wanted to waste their day digging in the dirt to plant tomatoes or flowers which could just as easily and more cheaply bought at kiosks. But the enthusiasm, or rather persistence of Yulia, Alyosha's mother, finally convinced them they had no other choice. Alyosha's father, Mikhail, told me

later in the day that marriage was about compromises, so he was doing what he had to.

Early that Saturday morning, driving out to the *dacha*, it was obvious we were not the only ones headed to the country. The first car we passed was a green Lada with an overflowing load. On the roof wooden crates were lashed down with fraying rope, oozing their contents. Judging by the little hands we saw clinging to smaller boxes inside the car, the entire family must have been on their way to the country. Only the driver could see out the windshield, and I wasn't convinced that he could see much through the jungle of plants his wife was holding on her lap. Many Russians, Alyosha's mom included, nurse seeds into small sprouts in southern exposed windows of their city apartments before planting them in the soil at their *dacha*. Spring, of course, is the big planting time, so the green Lada was not the first jungle car we passed. A genuine mass exodus from the city was taking place.

We were joined by an old friend of Yulia's, Tatianna Andreevich, who always came with them to the *dacha* to help garden and spend time with the family. Yulia was embarrassed to find that I was among the group that had been there in the winter, since she had had no time to clean up before we saw the place. I told her not to worry, and that I was quite used to chaos in living quarters, since I spent my childhood in a house that was never finished, and had exposed fiberglass and plasterboard for walls. Most Russians seem to think Americans all live in a great state of order. While this may be true for most families, it was certainly never true for mine. As the saying goes that the tailor's children have no clothes, the same can be said for the general contractor's family. Our houses have always been in a general state of disarray—boxes and building materials stacked in the corner, paint peeling from the kitchen walls, and seasonal floods in the basements. Perhaps

growing up with this domestic turmoil predisposed me to feeling quite at home in Russia.

As soon as we got to the *dacha* we were all assigned chores. This was the first visit of the year, so there was lots of work to do. The first order of business was to pull the weeds and rake the soil so we could plant the seedlings. Playing in the dirt is one of my specialties, since as a forest fire fighter our main job is to dig line. Of course the scale was a little smaller at the *dacha*, but the digging was the same, and it was pleasant to sweat a little and feel the sun on my back. I just couldn't believe how slowly Alyosha worked and how often he took breaks. After all his enthusiasm about the virtues of manual labor and how much he truly admired his *muzhik* (workman) grandfather who could build anything with his golden hands, I figured Alyosha would work without a whimper or break. Had I read Tolstoy's Anna Karenina earlier, I would have understood better the Russian intellectuals' scorn for manual labor. For Levin's brother, Koznishev, the country holds great mystique and power; he loves the simple and beautiful life of the peasant—but only from a distance. Koznishev laughs at Levin when he actually suggests that they go cut the hay with the peasants. Only Levin understands the true virtue of back-breaking manual labor. I don't in the least want to compare stirring a couple meters of dirt to mowing an entire field with a sickle, however, the principle is the same: move the dirt, mow the field, bring in the hay with the consciousness of a digger, a mower, a fieldhand. One must leave extemporization to philosophers. Tolstoy would understand, totally.

In theory, during Soviet times, all citizens were expected to take part in the tilling of the fields. University students were to spend three weeks in the fall on a farm working collectively to bring in the harvest. In reality, what was

accomplished was much socializing and very little actual work. Most of those pursuing academic tracks do not feel it is their place to work with their hands-the peasants (or village dwellers) could do that. However, philosophizing about the virtues of labor, like Tolstoy's Koznishev, seemed to be quite en vogue.

After we finished weeding and tilling, our next job was to help Mikhail with the greenhouse. The snow, wind, rain, and several animals had destroyed the visqueen that covered the arching frame of the greenhouse. Our task was to attach the new plastic we had brought with us. While not by any stretch a carpenter, I helped my father as a youngster, using tools under his guidance, and feel capable of wielding a hammer and figuring out basic structural problems. Alyosha, who has not a callous on his hands, decided he knew how to do everything. I think his father could tell there was trouble brewing, so he did the work of cutting the visqueen while we stood about arguing and mending some of the frame.

In Russia there are interesting dynamics between the genders in regard to manual labor. The Soviet Union stressed equality to a point in the work place, more in the name of practicality than from idealistic reasoning. With most of the men fighting wars or dead in the early years, it was essential that women could also operate the heavy machinery on the farms and in the factories. The end result was not as liberating as one might think. Most of the road builders, brick layers, and assembly line workers were women, while the men operated the factories and supervised, standing around watching the women work. Most women still receive lower pay, and they occupy the low pay end of the work scale. While American women were fighting for the right to work in the woods, operate bulldozers, and work as underwater welders, Russian women were (and are still) fighting for their right not to

work at such back breaking jobs, and to move into more domestic forms of work. So with this in mind, one can understand why Russians (especially men) always thought it strange that I fought forest fires. Why would an American woman choose to labor?

We had to move one of the heavy beams to the top of the greenhouse, and I said I was glad to be doing something physical, since I hadn't done anything all winter and I needed to be in shape for the fire season. I was complaining about my weak arms. Alyosha's father asked me "*Zachem?*" ("For what?") does a woman need strong arms. And this was coming from a man who met his wife mountain climbing and who obviously was much more progressive in his views towards women than most Russian men. I explained, and not for the first time, that I needed to be strong for my work in the summer. He just smiled slightly, shrugged his shoulders and wandered off, leaving me holding the hammer, and effectively ending our conversation.

The real problem came when we had to nail the visqueen to the rotting wood. Alyosha again decided that he knew best how to do it. After much figurative banging of heads, I had decided, right or wrong, I would let him do it while I went inside and helped his mother in the kitchen with the "women's work." I was fighting an uphill battle, and though it was probably already too late, I didn't want to seem overly head strong. After the potatoes were peeled and were boiling in the pot, I went back outside to help. Alyosha's dad was still working, but Alyosha was sitting on a folding chairs with his feet resting on a stump reading a newspaper. The greenhouse was nowhere near covered. He informed us that he was taking a rest. If this was what Russian women went through daily it was no wonder they wanted a

change. So much for aggrandizing the thought of manual labor. That's pretty much all it was for Alyosha--a thought.

Soon the long but interesting day came to an end. After a picnic of marinated mushrooms, salami, bread, hot potatoes and jam, we packed up all the uncooked potatoes we had salvaged from the underground storeroom, and headed back to the city. I could see why both Alyosha and his father didn't love going to the *dacha*, but as Mikhail told me on the drive back, the first couple of visits are always labor intensive. In the middle of summer the weekends are more relaxing when they could sit around a bonfire and sing songs as he played the guitar.

I slept well that night, and was already looking forward to the next time I could go out to their small A-frame house in the village and listen to Russian songs and look at the clear sky. Unfortunately that was never to be.

I found out in January of 1997 that they had sold their *dacha*--all that toil and sweat for nothing. With both of his parents working now, and money being more important than nice plants, the family decided to sell their *dacha* and do a little home improvement. The symbol of Russian attachment to the land was traded for a Panasonic TV and VCR, a new bed, and a trip to Prague for his parents. Now his family loves to watch the movie *Oscar* over and over again and improve their English. When I got the news from Alyosha on e-mail, I felt as though a little bit of the Russian soul had been sold to the western devil. Of course times change and the modern world takes priority, but maybe there's a way not to trade Baba Yaga for Sylvester Stallone.

EPILOGUE

Life is always in a perpetual state of flux. Needless to say, the situation in Russia has changed even in the short time since I took these snapshots of Russian life. Already the government is preparing to abolish mandatory military service for the country's young men. Now it is illegal to flag a private car for a ride in St. Petersburg. Kiosks are not allowed to sell vodka--only licensed stores can.

The people in these snapshots, however, continue to move along in life. Tanya has the opportunity to come to Detroit on a business trip. Nina is now studying nights to obtain a degree in ecology. She told me not long ago that Kirill has finally found a job. Alyosha decided to pursue a career in journalism and recently wrote an article for a women's journal about gynecological services in health care clinics. These young people have the bravery and the humor to meet everyday problems, cope with them, and continue ahead with their lives. Looking in at Russia from outside the threshold, life may seem hopeless--hard beyond our imagination--but Russians move forward wherever they can.

Sometimes my Russian friends despair about their future and that of their country, but they would never trade places with anyone else in the world. They are as tied to their land as were their serf grandparents, only now the tie is psychological. In order to understand Russia, we must understand the peoples' love for their motherland. Young people like Tanya, Nina, and Alyosha want out of life what most of my American friends want: a family, a home they can call their own, a job they enjoy, and the freedom to follow the path of life they choose for themselves. Today, like no other time in Russia's history, there is hope that all these goals can be achieved. Of course, the road will not be an easy one, but what is important is that there is progress. This progress will be slow--one cannot expect a country as vast as Russia to change from an inefficient command-based economy to an efficient supply/demand economy overnight. Even the Russians have grown tired of waiting for the situation to stabilize, but things are getting better in Russia, one small increment at a time.

During my first few weeks in Russia, I remember my host mother asking me if I could help our neighbor. He was a successful computer programmer, and his burgeoning company was sending him to meet with their American partners in Atlanta. They had opened a bank account for him in Georgia to receive his salary and help pay for the trip's expenses, and had sent him his checkbook and bank card. He had no idea what the small tablet of papers meant, and wanted me to explain the whole banking and checking process to him. I remember his disbelief when I told him he could actually purchase anything he wanted in America by writing a check. "But it's not money," he said incredulously. I assured him that in America that small piece of paper was, indeed, money, and that, in fact, we didn't even use checks very much any more, because it's such a hassle to show proper identification. He was even more flabbergasted when I told him that he could go to any ATM machine in the world, press a few buttons, and receive cash. By the time I left Russia, nine months later, there were several new ATM machines in St. Petersburg, and most of the new stores in the city accepted all types of credit cards.

Unlike the neighbor whom I had helped, my young friends are growing up in a Russia that is rapidly becoming integrated into the world economy—they understand the previously mysterious system of plastic money, even if they themselves do not have a bank account. While ATM machines are not necessarily indicators of a stable modern economy, they help to increase the communication and compatibility between the East and the West, not only in the structural sense, but also on a personal level. Through their dealings with foreigners and their jobs, young Russians have already become equipped to deal with new circumstances as their world merges with the outside one. And they are prepared to lead their country into the future.

For years, American scholars have argued about which path Russia will take. Some believe the country is on a disaster course that can lead only to the reinstatement of an authoritative regime, while others pinpoint specific positive developments that suggest Russia is slowly moving in the direction of a western democracy. We are bombarded by media images of a desperate Russia where not a soul can make ends meet, people are malnourished, and workers are walking out of the factories and taking to the streets demanding more pay. While these facts are realities in Russia, they

certainly are not representative of the situation as a whole. There are Russian who are doing quite well for themselves, on legal terms, and by western standards. My friends stand a much better chance of realizing their dreams than their parents did. All of them can hope for a family, home, career, and meaningful life in the future. This possibility of success, of succeeding and failing by one's own actions, is what makes the Russia of today so intensely exciting for young Russians.

I am not denying that there is hardship in Russia. Risks must be taken, and failure is a part of the move forward. At times Russia will take two or three steps backwards. In the dark days that are bound to come, and they come to all cultures, it is important to remember the peaks of brilliance and beauty that glitter and shout out the glory of Russian culture. These peaks are the individuals who find delight in quoting the literary geniuses of their past, who take pleasure in toasting the future with their friends, and who feel pain when they look at the sad lot that has befallen many of their compatriots. Like the sweet hot tea the Russians sip in their warm kitchens, or the bitter biting vodka they drink on the streets, happiness and sorrow are parts of life that will be with them forever. Russians understand the polarity of happiness and hardship. It is for this reason that I choose to write about Russians in these changing times. They are not afraid of the future; they have lived through great sorrows that have not broken their spirits. These people will always find humor and light in dark times.