

FINDING  
COMRADE  
RIGHT

YOU HAVE TO really want to go to Russia. The briefest of visits involves a lot of paperwork, and if you want to hang around for any length of time, they make you take a leprosy test.

Russians pride themselves on their legendary hospitality, but whenever I stagger off the ten-hour flight from New York, I never seem to see the smiling, flaxen-haired Slavic beauty in national dress offering me the traditional symbol of welcome: a round loaf of bread topped with a small container of salt. Instead, a thirteen-year-old passport-control guy with pitted acne and a dull green uniform scrutinizes me unsmilingly from behind a smeared bulletproof window just long enough to make me feel like I actually might *have* leprosy.

I pilot my rickety cart, stacked high with luggage, through a phalanx of the world's most aggressively unpleasant taxi drivers. Once outside the terminal there are the titanic statues of Russian military types who, "with conquering limbs astride," guard the gateway to every major Russian city. Some are dressed as medieval warriors, others in the high helmets of nineteenth-century hussars, but most, like the ones who guard the road to downtown Moscow, are clearly those who defended Russia from the Nazis. Huge and menacing, they loom up, their arms firmly extended, palms held out in warning. You do not need to speak a word of Russian to interpret their message: "Halt and go no further!" they say, and I never feel that this is madly welcoming.

If you ask me (and no one ever, ever does), the Russians should rethink the statuary. When you are all about turning Moscow into a global financial hub or transforming Sochi, a

sleepy, subtropical backwater, into the venue for the 2014 Winter Olympics, the menacing Red Army dudes on steroids just send the wrong message.

None of this mattered to me in the beginning, because I really wanted to go to Russia. I had wanted to go since I was thirteen and stood on tiptoes to slide *Nicholas and Alexandra*, by Robert Massie, down off the school library shelves. That thick black tome became, as the best books do, a portal to another world. I didn't read *Nicholas and Alexandra*—I inhaled it. I devoured it. In fact, I think I eventually stole it from the library. I couldn't help myself. I spent hours poring over the sepia photos of the last tsar and his attractive, tragically doomed family, and I became determined to go to Russia. Who wouldn't want to go to that vast, distant, secret, snowbound country of Firebirds and onion domes, where beautiful, sepia-skinned grand duchesses had names like Tatiana and Anastasia? At this point in stories like these, there is always a kindly librarian to point the way, so I'll include one here: she pointed me further down the rabbit hole, and I discovered lusty Catherine the Great and lunatic Peter the Great. I met Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, Anna Karenina and Vronsky, and Yuri Zhivago and his muse, Lara; and of course I wanted to go to Russia even more. I wanted to drink tea out of a glass from a hissing samovar, I wanted to stay up all night for the Easter vigil, I wanted to ride in a troika and take a brocade-upholstered train through a blizzard, the obligatory handsome army officer at my side. I wrapped my head in woolen scarves like Julie Christie and Diane Keaton and imagined myself triumphing over adversity in the midst of war and revolution, though to be honest, my interest in Russian history ran out of gas at the logical stopping point of 1917.

Though later the grittier, grimmer, gray Soviet stuff came to interest me in an academic way, it never drew me in on a visceral level the way imperial Russia did. *Nicholas and Alexandra* left me with the unshakable conviction that Lenin and his cronies were the villains of the piece, and long after I was old enough to know better I nurtured a naive but heartfelt vision that one day, the sepia-colored Russian people would rise up, throw off the Soviet yoke, outlaw Marxism-Leninism, and bring back the sepia-colored tsar. Russia would live happily ever after. By happy coincidence, in the autumn of 1985, when I walked into

my freshman-year Russian language class, the Russians seemed to be on the verge of doing just that.

Russians say of their native tongue that it is *bogatiy*, or “rich.” By this they mean that Russian words and phrases can have multiple meanings and convey such universal truth that translation is often impossible. In my college years I associated “rich” with the considerable financial aid available from the US government if you were willing to take a crack at learning Russian—another happy coincidence. I spent tortured hours with flash cards and learned to use a different part of my mouth, forcing my tongue and teeth to pair unlikely consonants that have no truck with one another in Romance languages. *Z* and *h* tell the names of heroes: Zhukov and Zhdanov. *K* and *v* together herald two incredibly important Russian words: *kvartira* (apartment) and *kvitansiya* (receipt), and the lack of either can lead to epic Russian stalemate. *T* and *s* form one letter, crucial if, like me, one was interested in the last tsar, or the “*Tsentralniy Komitet*,” of the Communist Party. See what I mean? I spent months figuring out the difference between two remarkably similar letters—*sch* and *sh*—through endless repetitions of a popular Russian tongue twister. Translated, it ominously warns that the Russian diet is relentlessly monotonous; it reads: “cabbage soup and porridge are our staple foods.”

I learned that this is no mere folklore when I took a ten-day student trip to Leningrad, Pskov, Tver, and Moscow, during which time we consumed a great deal of both cabbage soup and buckwheat porridge and not a lot else. The USSR in February 1987 was gritty, grim, and gray, but the good news was that it looked like Team Lenin was losing the struggle for global Communism. Within six minutes of checking in at the shabby Hotel October on the wrong end of Nevsky Prospekt, my fellow travelers and I were deluged with offers from the chambermaids to buy our blue jeans, cigarettes, sneakers, and, in one case, our actual suitcases. Could we blame them? There was nothing in the stores, and Gorbachev’s career-destroying “dry law” was in effect. Everyone looked positively miserable. This did nothing to dull my passion for Russia, however, as is evident in one particular photograph from that trip. We have just stepped off the tour bus in Palace Square in Leningrad. I am in the foreground, and the magnificent mint-green Winter Palace, which today houses

the Hermitage Museum, takes up all of the background. The photographer catches the moment when I turn around to my fellow travelers with a look of pure rapture and triumph.

Readers, do not confuse a passion for Russia with a passion for one single Russian. The former involves a lot of great literature, the growing understanding that you should never ask a question beginning with *why*, and a certain amount of time poring over *501 Russian Verbs*. The latter means regular leprosy tests. I knew from an early age that I really wanted to go to Russia, but I never planned to stay there. Certainly not for twenty years. I never planned to start buying toothpaste there (a certain sign that you've committed to living in a country). A Russian husband formed no part of my vague "when I grow up" plans, although I was given fair warning that one was in my future.

A Georgian sightseeing guide spotted him in my coffee grounds about a year and a half before he showed up. Her name was Dzidzia, and by the time I met her, in 1990, I was pretty good at moving my mouth around those unlikely consonant pairings. I knew that Russian swear words packed forty times the amount of lewdness as their English counterparts, and thanks to a language lab staffed with a legion of Jewish émigrés from the Soviet Union, I had an adroit little rasp to my *r*'s, which made everyone think I came from Odessa. I had graduated from Columbia the year before, and instead of sensibly parlaying my Russian Area Studies diploma into a grown-up job, I had gone into the tourism racket, guiding American tourists around what would soon be known as the former Soviet Union. I met Dzidzia in yet another unpronounceable city, Tbilisi, the capital of Soviet Georgia. We shared the sacrosanct guides' table one day at lunch, and she offered to tell my fortune, which she said would be clearly written in my coffee cup.

"Take the cup," she commanded, "and swirl it around the way a clock goes, then, how do you say in English, upend it—"

"Turn it upside down, you mean?" I asked.

"Exactly so!"

I gave the cup a clockwise swirl and in one firm gesture flipped it onto the saucer. "Now what?"

"Now we see," said Dzidzia, gingerly picking up the cup with her index finger and thumb. She peered inside, silently evaluated the contents for a few minutes, then set the cup down carefully

at the side of the now dirty saucer, brushed a few grains of coffee off of her hands, and smiled.

“Interesting,” she pronounced.

“Interesting good, or interesting bad?” I asked.

“Let me see . . . you wander,” she began, and then laughed. “Well, we don’t need the coffee to show us that, do we?”

“Not really,” I agreed.

“But soon, yes, quite soon, you will settle,” she continued, “and far from your own home, for a long time, with a . . . with a man who is coming—you do not know him yet, but you will soon. Do you see him right here?” She pointed to a V-shaped smear that didn’t look like much of anything, let alone a life partner.

“What kind of a man?” I asked.

“He’s a military man, that much is very clear from the V—those are the, how you say, the epaulettes. This man, you don’t know him yet . . . see how the V is on the other side of the cup? He’s a strong man. Yes, I see that you will work hard and have . . . I see houses, yes, and I see one child.” She flipped her hands up in a celebratory gesture. “Happy evermore!”

“Happily ever after, you mean,” I said, laughing. “Okay, so where do I find this Comrade Right?”

“I think he is not so far from here . . .,” said Dzidzia, turning the cup thoughtfully.

“How not so far?” I asked.

“Perhaps it is our country,” she said slowly, squinting back into the cup, then making a sound that was much more snort than laugh. “In which case, good luck with the happy ever after . . . you are going to need it. Our Soviet men are impossible.”

So I set out to discover just how impossible Soviet men were. I herded my group up to Kiev, where I met Pasha, who had chiseled cheekbones and an arrangement with the door attendant of the shabby Hotel Rus. He later married a French countess—of course he did. Then on to dazzling Leningrad, where the sun never sets in June, and there I ricocheted from dates with Yuri, a sophisticated maître d’hôtel, to riding out to watch Leningrad’s stately drawbridges go up at 2:00 a.m. with Stass, a black-market currency trader with Windex-colored eyes and a brand-new Lada. These encounters were mildly satisfying in the way a tepid Fanta can be at the lone café on the road from Samarkand to Bukhara, but like the Fanta they left an unpleasant aftertaste,

did not slake my thirst, and left me craving something more authentic, something simpler and more straightforward. Something served at the right temperature.

I still really wanted to be in Russia, and by 1991 it was exploding with opportunity. The tourists were flooding in, and I spent the entire boom summer of 1991 running back-to-back tours and hosting trade show delegations. In 1991, it seemed, everyone wanted to go to Russia. I met more *Nicholas and Alexandra* fans than I ever imagined existed. They trooped, footsore but obedient, through the Kremlin, Peterhof, and Tsarskoye Selo.

“Can we spend six days in the Hermitage?” they would plead on day one, to which I would smile enigmatically and say sure, then watch with private satisfaction as they limped out of the world’s largest museum, defeated after only three hours. I was still pining for my sepia-colored Russia, but I was distracted by the more garish celluloid-and-neon Russia that was steadily replacing the infinite shades of Soviet gray. The long-dormant Russian economy was sputtering and chugging slowly into first gear. There were the executives, who came to uncover a virgin market of 150 million people who had never known a reliable supply of toilet paper. Just opposite the seedy Hotel Cosmos, where we stayed with large groups, was VDNKh, the All-Russia Exhibition Center. This vast park opened in 1958 to glorify the triumph of the planned communist economy; in 1991 it played host to nonstop capitalist trade shows: furniture, mobile phones, agricultural machinery, office supplies, leisure and hospitality, oil and gas—you name it, it was at VDNKh.

That summer flew by, and my confidence soared. In my mind I had mastered all the complicated rules of perestroika Russia. There were two exchange rates: the official rate and the black-market rate, and I knew how to work them both. There were hard-currency stores and bars where you could purchase recognizable commodities such as Cadbury chocolate, Marlboro cigarettes, and Gordon’s gin. I doled these out to oil the wheels that needed to turn flawlessly. Everyone wanted something I had, so I was popular. I knew exactly how to snag the only air-conditioned bus in Bukhara and where to score last-minute orchestra seats to *Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi. I was the best in the business at organizing shiftless porters to move 150 suitcases out of the bowels of a bus, onto a railway station platform, and into

individual couchettes in under twenty minutes. At midnight. In the winter of 1990 I did it in a blizzard. Three times.

My packed schedule had one week free in July, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it: explore Leningrad on my own, unencumbered by a busload of weary American tourists. Friends eagerly offered sofas, and these off-piste arrangements, par for the course in New York and London, made me feel deliciously naughty. They further underscored, I felt, my total mastery of the establishment regulations. The only real problem was how to get from Moscow to Leningrad. My visa permitted me to stay in Moscow only. That in itself was no problem; I knew at least three train conductors on the midnight *Red Arrow* train between Moscow and Leningrad who, for a small fee or bottle of something from the hard-currency store, would forget to check my passport. The big question was how to buy a ticket. Soviet citizens had to show their internal passports to go to the bathroom, much less travel from one city to another, and I was clearly not a Soviet citizen, so I couldn't go to the train station and try to purchase a ticket. I could go to any state tourism committee office and purchase a "hard-currency" ticket, but they would definitely check my passport, see that I had no visa, and flatly refuse to sell me anything. No matter. I was, I fancied, really becoming quite Soviet in my thinking, and when presented with a regulatory roadblock, I immediately began to scheme a way around it. I deployed my *blat*.

*Blat* is one of those words you absolutely have to learn if you intend to hang around Russia long enough to need the leprosy test. Because Russian is such a rich language, it's hard to define *blat* in just one English word, but it means "connections," as in "I know someone who knows someone whose uncle has what you need." It connotes the valuable currency of influence in a country where the coin of the realm is about as useful as the stuff in the Monopoly box. Someone who is "*blatnoi*" or "*blatnaya*" (the feminine version) is blessed with these essential ties to decision makers who help them get through the day and inch up the greasy pole of Soviet life.

Outside the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall earlier that summer, waiting for clients to stream out of another folklore performance, I stood with my fellow guides at the feet of the monolithic statue of Vladimir Mayakovsky, tribune of the Russian Revolu-

tion, depicted striding purposefully toward a brighter future (which included suicide). If you had told me then that in fifteen years I'd live two blocks up the road and that the bard of the revolution would soon be striding purposefully toward Moscow's largest KFC, I'd have told you hell would freeze over first. I chatted with the other guides, making sure to pass around my Marlboro Lights. Someone went to the concert hall's buffet for a bottle of Armenian cognac, which we drank from the bottom halves of a wooden matryoshka doll. I made discreet inquiries and was surprised and pleased to discover I was only one degree of separation from what I needed. Congratulating myself that I was very *blatnaya* indeed, I went to wake up Volodia.

Volodia Stepanov was an Arabic-speaking guide with a lot of time on his hands. All of his clients were Syrians who purchased package tours from the state tourism committee for seven nights in Moscow with the full complement of meals and excursions. Instead of going to the Kremlin or the Pushkin Museum, however, they went shopping for refrigerators and other electrical appliances. I had a vague idea why there was such a dearth of electrical appliances in Syria, but why the USSR was considered a consumer goods mecca I never understood. Volodia had to be at the hotel to sign for their meals, but apart from doing that, he spent most days flat on his back on the couches of the state tourism committee's large office at the Hotel Cosmos, sleeping off long nights of hard drinking.

I treated Volodia to a strong cup of Italian coffee from the hard-currency bar, and we began the delicate pavane of a transaction executed *po blatu* (by means of connections). Volodia told me to leave the ticket issue and a twenty-dollar bill or a carton of American Marlboro cigarettes with him. Preferably, he said, the cigarettes. Yes, he knew someone. No, it was no trouble. In the essential step of underscoring to one another that our relationship was in no way limited to the mercantile, Volodia pressed upon me a warm invitation to his birthday party the following week, which I enthusiastically accepted. He gave me directions to his apartment and warned me it was a little bit out of the way but accessible by taxi.

"Just don't tell the taxi driver you are American," he warned, "or they will charge you a fortune."

"I know that!" I said defensively, priding myself on the finely

honed taxi-haggling skills my friends had taught me. We agreed to the handoff in three days' time, and I left for the airport to meet a busload of cellular telephone sales guys.

However, when the night of the birthday party rolled around, I almost didn't go. I had a bottle of gin in my room, and I was sorely tempted to slip Maxim the bartender a pack of Marlboro Reds in exchange for a bag of ice, buy three bottles of tonic, and call it a night. But my hotel room, which faced east and baked all day in the sun, was an oven, and the thought of letting Volodia down seemed churlish. Russians put great store in both *blat* and birthday parties. I had to go. So I took a hot shower, sprayed on some duty-free Chanel, and stashed the bottle of Scotch I'd purchased at the hard-currency store in my knapsack. I left the hotel and walked down the long driveway, specially designed to keep the hotel guests separate from the people in the street. I walked past the official taxi rank and took the underpass below Prospekt Mira to find a gypsy cab driver who would take me to the wrong end of the ominous-sounding Highway of the Enthusiasts for a price I could afford.

I pretended to be from Ljubljana, the most European part of crumbling Yugoslavia, a ruse I kept up for the entire fifty-minute journey as the driver of the beat-up Zhiguli sliced through the concentric circles of Moscow. We rattled past the monumental postwar Stalin buildings, which tapered off into the shabby five-story "Khrushchev slums" of the 1960s, then out to the grimy prefab high-rises of the 1970s, and finally to Collective Farm Workers' Street.

The party was in full swing when I arrived, everyone squeezed around a long table crowded with half-eaten mayonnaise-based salads and a jungle of sticky glasses. Volodia could barely stand but politely asked about my journey.

"I told the driver I was a Yugoslavian and only paid thirty rubles," I informed him proudly, as I struggled into a space between him and a girl called Lena.

"Our Yugoslavka," slurred Volodia, ". . . brilliant!" He made brief introductions of the other people around the table: his younger brother, Sasha; Sasha's girlfriend, who was confusingly also called Sasha; other colleagues; relatives; and then a guy sitting almost directly opposite me, who appeared to be one of the few people at the party still sober enough to carry

on a conversation.

And you know what, reader? It really is a truth universally acknowledged: the minute you stop looking for Mr. Right, just look up, and there he will be.

Smashing looking, I thought, as I realized he was regarding me with equal interest. He had a smile that started in his warm brown eyes and ended at my curled-up toes.

“And this is our comrade who organized your train ticket,” finished Volodia.

“Gosh,” I said, and instantly mentally kicked myself. Who the hell says “gosh” anymore? Certainly not savvy Yugoslavians from Ljubljana. I switched back to Russian. “Well, thanks so much. They are hard to get. . . . Do you work at the train station?”

“Something like that,” he said, adroitly avoiding answering.

There was a badly dubbed, grainy version of *Top Gun* on the TV—which back then they couldn’t get enough of. Eventually everyone else evaporated in different directions to either pass out or pair up, leaving just Comrade Smashing and me. He opened one of the remaining bottles of sweet Russian champagne and sat down next to me to watch the film.

“Those aren’t our pilots,” he said presently, as Tom Cruise was being aerodynamically haggled by MiGs, whose pilots’ faces were fully covered with sinister Darth Vader–type headgear.

“Aren’t they?” I asked, not caring one way or another, just hoping he’d stay right where he was.

“Those are our planes, certainly,” he explained. “Not our pilots.”

“Oh,” I said, thinking that, for someone who worked at a railway station, he seemed to know a lot about naval aviation. I said as much.

“I’m a military officer,” he said, looking at the bottle of champagne to see if I’d had too much.

“I see,” I said as we watched Tom take out another MiG.

“Our planes,” Smashing said again, “but not our pilots.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, wondering where military officers lived and worked.

“But you should know that,” he said, looking confused. “You’re from Yugoslavia.”

“No,” I said, “I’m American. I just said I was Yugoslavian to

keep the taxi fare down.”

“But Volodia called you ‘Evgenia Petrovna.’”

“Oh,” I explained, “that’s just his joke. That’s what the Russian guides call me. My name is Jennifer—they call me that because Zhenya, short for Evgenia, is the closest thing to it.”

“But Petrovna—you have a patronymic?” he asked, referring to the universal Russian middle name consisting of the father’s name and a gender-specific ending.

“No, but my father is called Peter.”

“Duh-geen-ee-feyer . . .” He struggled over the unfamiliar syllables of my name.

“Good,” I said, smiling.

“I’m going to call you Petrovna,” he declared. My stomach flip-flopped. This was seriously encouraging. Russians use the patronymic together with the full formal name to show respect, but the patronymic alone, as my Russian teachers had explained back in college, denotes warm intimacy.

Warm intimacy duly followed.

The next day I went to wake Volodia from an epic after-party slumber. He was a mess, sprawled on the state tourism committee couch, snoring audibly.

“Tell me more about your friend from last night,” I demanded, nudging him up and handing him a shot glass of brandy, then a double coffee.

Volodia sat up gingerly, holding his arm against his eyes to block the light streaming in the windows, and gratefully downed the brandy in one swallow.

“Come on, Volodia,” I pleaded, “tell me everything!”

“*Bozhe moi*, my god, I’ve never seen you like this. Hang on a moment, let me just breathe for a moment,” he moaned, massaging his temples. “Well, there isn’t much to tell, really. We grew up with him in East Berlin. His dad was in the army, and his mother was our history teacher at the diplomatic school. Is there maybe a younger sister? Or is it a brother? Well, that hardly matters. Anyway, he was more Sasha’s friend than mine—they called them the Berlin hooligans. They sold Western comic books and gum when they were fourteen and made a lot of money, I remember that. In fact, that’s probably how Sasha got his seed money.” Sasha Stepanov, Volodia’s brother, was making a tidy sum as a “shuttle trader” going to Turkey and the Far East to buy

everything from cheap leather jackets to refrigerators, which I suppose he sold to Syrian tourists. It was a funny time.

“And now he’s in the army,” I prompted.

“That’s right. He left Berlin around the time I did. Well, we were both doing the hostage thing.” I looked blank.

Maria Ivanovna, the state tourism committee’s officious hotel representative, click-clacked her way into the guides’ lounge on her metal-heeled stilettos.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” she informed me curtly.

“I know. . . . I’m just going,” I said, hastily scrambling to my feet.

“Please go now,” insisted Maria Ivanovna, sniffing to show the magnitude of my impropriety.

“Come on, Evgenia Petrovna,” said Volodia, hauling himself to his feet. “Let’s get another coffee, and you can buy me another brandy while you are at it, and I’ll explain it all to you. *Bozhe moi*, my god, I’m a physical wreck.” Volodia exhaled, and I reeled from morning-after fumes. I helped him shuffle to a table at the hard-currency bar. He slumped over in a chair and buried his head in his arms. I went up to the bar.

“Maxim, can we have one brandy, two coffees, and . . .” I fished around in my backpack and found no cigarettes. “Give me a pack of Marlboro Reds for the birthday boy.”

“Dunhill,” grunted Volodia.

“Picky, picky,” I said, carrying the brandy to the table.

“The hostage thing,” I prompted.

“The hostage thing,” said Volodia, gulping down the brandy and shuddering as it hit his system.

“When a family goes abroad to work, they can take any children with them who are under sixteen, but they have to have a parent or a sibling back in the Soviet Union. Once the oldest child is sixteen, he has to return to the Soviet Union as a sort of hostage. If that child wants to visit the family abroad, then the other child, or one of the parents, has to fly in to take their place.”

“God, that’s awful!” I blurted out. That kind of thing would never happen in my sepia-colored Russia, I thought.

“Not really,” said Volodia, sliding a Dunhill out of the pack Maxim had brought to the table. “I lived with my grandparents, and they let me do whatever I wanted. Sasha stayed with our

parents and finished school in Berlin. It's why younger children in families like ours are so goddamned spoiled. Probably it's why I drink so much," he added matter-of-factly.

"Why do they have a rule like that?" I asked.

Volodia looked surprised. "*Duritchka* . . . little fool," he said tenderly, "it's to keep the family from defecting to the West."

"Oh," I said. "Right. But they don't have that rule anymore, do they?"

"Who knows?" Volodia shrugged. "Everything is changing now. They say they are going to get rid of exit visas, but I'll believe that when I see it. As to your latest conquest: well, unlike me, who hung around Moscow State University doing not much of anything, he went to the military school in Leningrad, and he's an officer now, though for the life of me I don't know how he managed to get to Moscow. His family is from Ukraine, so how he didn't end up getting assigned to Dnepropetrovsk or some backwater like that is beyond me."

"Are the family still in Berlin?" I asked.

"No, I think they are in Lviv, in Ukraine."

"Ugh," I said, recalling the rubbery chicken and the watery borscht.

"But he's here. I'm guessing he got here because he plays volleyball really well—*really* well."

"How does that work?"

"Honestly," said Volodia, lighting another cigarette, "for someone so smart, you aren't very well informed. Some general or colonel or someone like that would have wanted him to play for the garrison team."

"Oh," I said. "And he's not married?"

"No," said Volodia, "not that I know of, anyway."

"Where does he live?"

"In a dormitory for single officers, which is not a place you can go, dear one, and he can hardly come here," said Volodia, waving his arm toward the entrance of the hotel, where guards were energetically checking visitors for hotel passes.

"No, I suppose not," I agreed glumly.

"Well, you can always meet at my apartment."

"I'm not sure we're at that stage after only four hours," I reflected, "but thank you, Volodia, that's very kind of you."

"He's a nice guy," Volodia said, pushing his coffee cup away

and signaling the end of the conversation.

“You like him?”

“I’ll tell you this,” mused Volodia. “I’ve known the guy for about twelve years, and in all that time I’ve never heard anyone say one bad thing about him.”

“Is that a good thing?” I pressed.

“Who knows?” Volodia moved his shoulders in an enigmatic Slavic shrug.

I decided the situation called for decisive action. I took a shower, dried myself as best I could with my damp towel, and sprayed on my Chanel. I went to the hotel’s hard-currency grocery store, where I bought a six-pack of chilled Heineken beer, wrapped it up in my windbreaker, and stuffed it inside my backpack. I coaxed sketchy instructions from Volodia, who begged me to leave him alone for four consecutive hours. I took an official cab from the rank to the railway station and found the building Volodia described without a hitch. After a few wrong turns, I made my way through a long corridor adorned with scary-looking hammers and sickles and gray photos of old-fashioned people with lots of medals, all of whom looked clinically depressed. I ignored the funny looks I got from passing uniformed *apparatchiki* until I found the door I was looking for. I took a deep breath and knocked. When I heard a grunt, I pushed the door open. Apparently I am the first and last person to ever knock on that door.

He was sitting at a desk in an olive green uniform, playing Pac-Man on a computer.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi, Petrovna,” he said, rearranging his features from surprise back into business as usual.

“I’ve brought you some beer,” I said.

“You don’t have to do that,” he assured me.

“I know,” I said, “but I wanted to.”

He smiled the smile that went all the way down to my toes.

And that was HRH. My Handsome Russian Husband, although there are days when I silently think of him as my Horrible Russian Husband.

No one seems to “date” anymore, but I suppose that’s what HRH and I did the summer of 1991. Exactly what we shouldn’t have been doing. Even in 1991 there were strict rules for both

of us about fraternizing with foreigners. But the old rules were fraying at the edges. If you pulled at a thread of a rule with enough resolve, you usually found it began to unravel.

“Do you see any scenario where we could possibly be together in a normal way?” I asked in late July.

“Of course,” said HRH, for whom the possibilities of the future always seem limitless. “Maybe not now, but definitely later—*potom*. You’ll see.”

Then came a weekend in August when a military junta seized power for a few days. Gorbachev and his family were placed under house arrest in Sochi, and the world held its breath to see if this meant a return to the repressive regime or a new era for Russia. I was on the last plane out of Russia before things went postal, which enraged me and set a pattern for the next twenty years. I always miss the dramatic stuff—those windows of opportunity to do my Julie Christie/Diane Keaton head scarf thing. It’s seriously annoying. I sat by the TV biting my nails, as much about HRH as about my livelihood, but I needn’t have worried. We were back to work in three weeks.

After August, with the Wall well and truly down, life in the Soviet Union started to change. For one thing, very soon after that we started to call it “Russia,” as the USSR broke up into independent nations. Traditionally safe careers like the army suddenly became professional dead ends. HRH weighed his options, then took a leap in the dark—he left the army with a few of his more adventurous classmates from military school and joined the ranks of fledgling entrepreneurs. At first they sold cigarettes and soft drinks out of a badly constructed kiosk, constantly at risk of attack from rival factions. Then they opened a small store, and then another one.

Contrary to my hopes (and those, no doubt, of Princess Michael of Kent), the hastily reorganized Russian government did not ask Prince Michael of Kent (who I felt had a lot going for him as a Romanov claimant) to come and be crowned Michael III, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias. More fool them. Instead we embarked upon the “roller-coaster years”: that messy, wildly optimistic, helter-skelter Yeltsin era in “the Wild East.” Anything and everything was for sale—these were the days when, down in the bowels of the Moscow Metro, you could buy shares of what would become major oil or metals

companies through the controversial “voucher” program, in which the state gave each citizen a portion of the state economy. A plate of Italian pasta cost sixty dollars, but vodka was still forty cents a liter.

As the Soviet system teetered on its fulcrum, the floodgates heaved open, and in rushed the latter-day carpetbaggers: oilmen, grain traders, European bankers, Dutch publishers, and a group of smarmy twentysomethings who thought they were invincible, brandishing newly minted INSEAD and Harvard MBAs, a smattering of Russian, and a very dubious understanding of the difference between right and wrong. They began to consult the Russian government on privatization auctions and the emerging business-savvy wheeler-dealers on how to turn the vouchers into major companies. Dazed-looking executives from places like Ohio stumbled off planes, under strict orders to supply the insatiable Russian demand for Tampax, Coke, diapers, face cream, and toilet paper; many fell prey to Russian girls with creamy skin and hard, calculating eyes looking for an expat husband and a one-way ticket out of Russia.

HRH moved his one suitcase from his military dormitory to a one-room apartment he received from the army in a sprawling urban jungle called Northern Butovo. Northern Butovo was—and occasional trips through it on my way to the airport suggest still is—a scale model of hell: an inelegant, sloppily thrown together cluster of prefab buildings painted in what must have seemed like optimistic shades of garish pastel blue, yellow, and green but which instantly faded into depressingly dingy versions of the original hues. No sepia tones in Butovo; more like pig-swill beige. Butovo and its ilk sprang up so quickly to meet the incessant demand of the post-perestroika housing boom that it took the public transportation system a decade to catch up. To reach Butovo in my day you took the distinctly proletarian orange line to its southernmost end and then waited way too long for bus number 835 (a number engraved on my heart). Then, hopefully, you crammed into it with three hundred other people and rattled and bounced until the end of its route, some thirty-five minutes later. Butovo made me understand that I had barely scratched the surface of what went on in Soviet life.

For HRH, this was a wild Soviet fantasy come true: an apart-

ment of his very own at age twenty-four, in Moscow no less! Okay, the very messy edge of Moscow, but Moscow nevertheless, and with it came the all-important, highly sought after Moscow certificate of residence, the *propiska*. None of it was lost on me, although I was more focused on the fact that his new apartment and new civilian status meant we could not only live together, which seemed incredible, but also that I could finally unpack my suitcase completely and experiment with house-keeping, about which I knew nothing. I got a job in executive recruitment, about which I also knew nothing, but in those days you didn't have to be an expert in anything.

The apartment consisted of one long, narrow room, into which HRH had crammed a *stenka*, the ubiquitous oversize, top-heavy wall unit without which no Russian home is complete. The *stenka* featured a narrow closet in which you hung clothes one in front of the other for maximum inconvenience. Some of the shelves were protected by sliding glass panels, making both easy access and thorough cleaning impossible. The top was decorated with touches of Baroque carving as interpreted by a Slovakian factory in the mid-1980s, but it was the *dernier cri* in home furnishings for the period, and HRH was so proud of it that I didn't have the heart to complain. We slept on a divan—a couch that folded out into a flat surface rather like a glasses case. Hard as a rock, upholstered in faux brocade in contrasting shades of pink and beige baby vomit, it was five feet wide and featured a deep gully in the middle where the hinges opened. I saw it recently out at a friend's dacha, and I wondered aloud how on earth we ever got any sleep.

In the area of the long, narrow room designated as the living room there were two giant, clunky Turkish chairs shaped like oversize mushroom caps in a depressing shade of beige, surprisingly comfortable for something so hideous. We pulled them up to the TV, which didn't get great reception since the signal wasn't strong enough to reach Northern Butovo, but on a good night we could tune in to the latest innovations on the new commercial channels. There were game shows like *The Field of Miracles* and two cheesy Mexican soap operas called *The Rich Also Cry* and *Simply Maria*, which held the nation—the female part of it anyway—enthralled. We even watched the news, which

in those days was enjoying a brief but exciting renaissance of hard-hitting journalistic grit. And commercials, which were a completely new thing.

“I form the impression,” HRH called to me as he watched TV and I prepared dinner in the winter of 1993, “that America consists entirely of toothpaste, cat food, and feminine hygiene products. Does it?”

“Certainly not! We also have dishwashing liquid, diapers, fast food, and soft drinks!” I called from the kitchen, where I was experimenting with a marinade for two “Bush legs.” This was the most popular type of meat available at the time: chicken legs and thighs named after President George H. W. Bush. Bush legs were sold as cheap surplus to the developing world by an America obsessed with boneless, skinless chicken breasts.

We got married in city hall, then got married again in a church, with a white dress and a big party, and then we even got married a third time on the beach in California to satisfy our need for all kinds of documentation. Neither of us can remember any of these dates, but I take comfort in the fact that getting divorced would be a bureaucratic impossibility. We changed jobs and moved apartments every three years or so, finally buying one when our daughter, Velvet, was born.

As the “wild nineties” gave way to the more “restrained oughts,” HRH and I kept pace, and our life focused more on the minutiae of living it rather than the tectonic socioeconomic shifts that were rearranging life in Russia. Velvet developed a passion for horses, and all attempts to steer her toward other interests fell flat. A group of diverse Russian and expatriate friends gelled into what I called “the urban family.” HRH continued up the ladder of corporate success as I cycled through jobs in tourism, hotel management, and airlines until finally stumbling into a wonderful job as the head of PR and marketing at a bank I called “The Firm.” *Nicholas and Alexandra* gathered dust on the upper shelves of the *stenka*. After three enjoyable and mildly lucrative years, something I thought of as “Multinational” bought out “The Firm.” I pondered my next move.

“Do you want to work for Multinational?” asked HRH.

“Not really,” I mused. “I’m a strategic advisor at The Firm, but at Multinational I get the sense that I’d be just a canapé counter.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I think I want to write,” I said, voicing aloud for the first time an idea that had been gently percolating for months.

“Write what?”

“A book about Russia? Maybe a funny book; there aren’t so many funny books about Russia out there,” I ventured.

“Sounds good,” said HRH, who has yet to experience the challenge of courting the capricious muse.

We moved again, to a new apartment located in one of Moscow’s eclectic neighborhoods—and I use eclectic in its most negative connotation. Our building marked the crossroads of two completely different communities. Due east was a modern high-rise office building made of glass and steel, home to multinational banks and law firms. To the southwest lay the typically shabby and dusty dwellings of the middle class and the disappointing retail outlets that serviced them. The one exception was a long, low four-story gray building exactly like the hundreds of other long, low four-story buildings in Moscow that house research institutes or minor municipal government offices. This one looked so neglected and dejected that at first I worried it would be razed to the ground to make way for another glass and metal high-rise office space, which would block our view of the Moscow skyline and much of the lovely light that streamed into our apartment. Fear was replaced with intense interest when HRH told me what actually went on there. Our neighbor was a research institute devoted to one single task: maintaining and preserving Vladimir Lenin’s embalmed corpse. Lenin, for all intents and purposes, lived next door.

I had visited Lenin many times in his mausoleum on Red Square: there was always one in my group I knew would find the stairs challenging, so I always went down with them and listened to the official spiel. So I knew very well that several times a year Lenin’s body was removed from the mausoleum and brought to a special institute to take a bath in embalming fluids, get a clean white shirt, and be changed into his other black suit. I assumed they touched up the body makeup and maybe pumped something into him to keep him going for another three months, and I reeled at the idea that this was all taking place across the courtyard. I yearned to take a casserole over and try to make friends, but of course that kind of thing is not en-

couraged in Russia. So I contented myself with spying on them, which is very much encouraged in Russia. My tiny home office looked out on our courtyard and across a high metal fence onto the roof of The Institute. During my frequent breaks I would lean over the balcony railing to see if I could detect any interesting activity across the way. I pretended to be taking pictures of the Moscow skyline with my long telephoto lens, but I was really trying to sneak a peek into the windows of The Institute.

“Put that camera away,” commanded HRH. “People are beginning to talk.”

“What do you think really goes on in there?” I asked, perching on the deep window ledge and reluctantly unscrewing the lens from the camera body.

HRH shrugged. He’s not into historical hypotheses or embalming, having real-world problems to solve. I put the camera away, but I kept up my surveillance of The Institute’s courtyard from my balcony.

What was I looking for? A turn-of-the-century claw-foot bathtub, I imagined, or mysterious trucks delivering economy-size bottles of embalming fluid. Maybe I would get to see a covert 2:00 a.m. arrival of the architect of the Russian Revolution himself (I assumed they did it in the middle of the night—Russians are very into doing things in the middle of the night). I wondered how many people worked there and what they did all day between Lenin’s baths. Alas, I never saw anyone or anything go in or out of what I came to think of as “Lenin’s Bathtub.” I knew that there was some life in there, since I could just make out, through the annoyingly tinted and smeared windows, the standard-issue dusty ficus plants that grace every mid-level Russian office building, but they seemed to be the only living organisms inside the building.

There were so many things about Russia in that post-perestroika era that made me think that Lenin would turn in his mausoleum. Living next door to Lenin provided me with a very tangible link to Russian history, and that somehow kept everything in perspective. It reminded me of the Soviet mantra “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live,” which sounds far more assertive in Russian. There was a reassuring permanence about The Institute: no one was going to raze Lenin’s Bathtub to the ground to make way for another Allied Municipal (“Ally-

Muni”) Bank branch, and I liked that. But I was truly thrilled the day I walked past Ally-Muni and saw a group of Tadjik migrant workers in orange and navy blue uniforms hefting a large sign into place on the ground floor. I stopped to watch them peel off the bubble wrap and canvas to reveal a familiar green and white logo with a smiling mermaid.

“I don’t believe it,” I breathed. A Starbucks . . . next door! “Take that, Sarah Palin!” I shouted, punching my fist in the air in triumph. “I can see Starbucks from my house!”

The Starbucks was—and still is—an absolute godsend. In fact, more than half of this book was written there. In the frigid winter months, HRH and I toss a coin; the loser has to escort Velvet to Starbucks for hot chocolate on the way to the school bus stop and bring a latte back for the winner. HRH almost always wins, which I found suspicious enough to insist we use an American quarter. He protested, and we compromised on a one-euro coin, but still he wins most of the time. One wet March morning, however, I won the toss, and I got to snuggle back under the covers while HRH took Velvet to the bus stop.

“Come on, Papa!” she enjoined him. “‘*Ziegel, Ziegel, ay-lyu-lyu!*’ We have to make time for Starbucks!”

HRH returned thirty minutes later. He placed a cardboard cup holder on the bedside table, shucked off his jeans and sweater, and climbed back in bed with me, invading my warm patch with his icy nose and hands.

“Hey, Petrovna,” he said, “look at this.” He pointed to a white paper cup on which Larissa the barista had written, in Russian, “Velvet’s Papa.”

“Oh, that is a keeper,” I said, smiling. “Very sweet.”

“It is,” HRH agreed, and handed me a cup. “Here’s yours.”

“Helpful Russian Husband,” I said appreciatively, “thank you!”

I stuffed some pillows behind my back, pried the lid off the cup, and stirred the contents to mix in the grains of chocolate sprinkled on top. I took a sip, automatically using my tongue muscles to filter the liquid from the foam. I stopped in mid-sip. I looked down into that coffee and then over to HRH, who was already burrowing his head into the pillow; his dark hair is now salt and pepper, but he still cuts it as short as a recruit’s. I’m not saying it was like Proust and his cookie thing, because how pretentious would that be? But seriously, in that instant

I remembered something half forgotten for sixteen years: the mountaintop restaurant, the warm sun, Dzidzia, and the man she'd seen in the coffee grounds, the man I'd flippantly referred to as "Comrade Right."

So yes, I had really wanted to go to Russia. And I did go. And no, I never meant to stay so long, but there you go, reader: that's what happens when you marry him.