

No Sleeping!

Uncle Valeriy glanced at his Rolex, then at Jeff's messy plate, then at my clean plate, and told us, or me, rather—Jeff didn't speak Russian—that he'd be expecting us back here tomorrow, at one. "You'll be hung over," he said. "I guarantee it. Why not drop by the office for lunch?"

I nodded politely and said: "Of course, Uncle Valeriy. Tomorrow at one." Jeff finished his glass of wine and nodded, too. "You're welcome, sweetheart," said Uncle Valeriy and gently poured Jeff another.

Uncle Valeriy evidently had a guy outside of Moscow who made wine out of berries. Farmed them, stomped on them like some Sicilian village girl, distilled them with "snow or some shit"—the whole thing. Uncle Valeriy had asked the guy to make him a little bit, for the family—and the guy made two tons. "I've been calling people for two weeks," complained Uncle Valeriy. "Nobody wants two tons of boysenberry wine."

We staggered out of Uncle Valeriy's office into the daytime snowy Moscow carrying five gallons of boysenberry wine, in four milk cartons and a whiskey bottle, crossed the road to the oval-shaped Chistye Prudy (named the Clean Ponds after Peter the Great had scrubbed them clean—of pig entrails, manure, and dead peasants), took massive swigs from the whiskey bottle, and slid over to the *metro*. I informed Jeff that the Ponds had been famous for its white swan until a bum ate him a year ago.

Inside the station, I announced to the ticket booth lady that my friend and I were in dire need of tokens—and as I slowly breathed out each cold, accent-less, fuck-off sound of Russian, I was happy. With unfeeling fingers I counted off six rubles (Jeff called them *publes*) and we embarked on the windy descent into the Moscow Underground, my first in twelve years.

We got out to stroll through my old neighborhood of Taganka, barely recognizable, yellow and touched-up having replaced colorless and decrepit. We finished off the wine in front of my old house, now an office building. We smoked a joint in the yard of my old school, still a school. On the way back to the *metro*, I got lost. "There," pointed an incredulous passerby. "With a gigantic M on top."

At the hotel, Jeff napped while I smoked out of our eleventh floor window onto the Kremlin, which looked small, decorative. I flicked the cigarette and stuck my head outside to watch it tangle with giant snowflakes. I then slowly transported myself up one floor to a small cafeteria, sat by a window with a view of darkening downtown Moscow, ordered an omelet, a shot of Honey Pepper, coffee, downed the shot, chased it with coffee, and dialed the apartment of my high school girlfriend, Alisa.

"She doesn't live here."

"Where *does* she live?"

"Not here."

"Well, is she married?! If you were so kind as to..."

That hellhound of a grandmother hung up on me again. This had been the leitmotif of our relationship from the day I got Alisa's phone number from my friend Pasha in seventh grade.

The glowing Kremlin Clock solemnly rang five. I went back to our room, woke Jeff, handed him a milk carton, and told him that it was five and that we needed to get going. "Are we finally going to meet some Russian sluts?" Jeff's voice rang in the dark heated room.

The week before we flew to Russia, I emailed Jeff to ask if he was ready, if he had all his *babushkas* in a row so to speak. "I've got babushkas coming out my ass!" wrote Jeff. "I need to get in touch with that Russian travel agent to see where my visa and passport are. One week from *mañana*, dude. My balls are tingling." I responded with an anticipatory haiku: "One week from Friday / Hand over my passport bitch / My balls are tingling" and dedicated it to Jeff, and the next day Jeff came back in blank verse with "passport is ready bitch didn't bother calling what a russian slut."

First, I took us to Britannia, an over-the-top English pub with a view of the Kremlin wall, an extremely unlikely place to meet any actual sluts. The burly bouncer at the door was reading the Russian *Financial Times*.

"No entrance," he said without looking up. "Tonight is club night."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He raised his calm blue eyes at me: "No entrance. Club night."

"Right. We're here for the club night. Valeriy sent us."

The bouncer considered it for a few seconds, then shrugged and stepped aside. Jeff attempted to give him a high-five.

The bar was empty. We sat at a corner table, facing the back of Lenin's tomb. When an unsmiling waitress came with our Guinness, Jeff asked her what time she got off work. "My friend is very happy to be here in Moscow, the cultural capital," I translated. "He's looking forward to exploring its culture fully." The waitress disappeared. A different one materialized with a copy of *Ne Spat'!*—No Sleeping!—an extensive guide to night-time entertainment. "What time do you get off work?" I asked. She silently turned around, grabbed a remote from the counter, and turned on the cricket. We drank to Lenin. I showed Jeff how to do the *pioner's* salute.

Five pints later found us asking a tattooed ex-something guy formidably manning the coat check in Elmo's, a nearby piano bar, if we absolutely had to check our coats, as had been the rule in every other establishment regardless of business purpose or repute. As in every other establishment, the answer was a frosty stare. There was a problem with Jeff's coat. When he had asked what kind of "warm shit" he needed in Russia, I said whatever you wear in Iowa when you go for Christmas, so from first day on he'd wear his yellow Iowa Hawkeyes fleece, making both of us so outrageously something—perhaps *gay!*—in the eyes of leather-clad Muscovites, our only saving grace was to speak to each loudly and laugh whenever possible. "*Amerikantsy*," would nod the Muscovites and continue on their way.

A phone on the coat check counter sang the *Dance of the Little Swans*. "I'm busy!" the attendant barked into it, but we were now halfway down the archway into the dining room where one hoped he had no jurisdiction.

"Look, look, *pindosy*," I heard from a crowded corner table as we sat down. "What's your name, America?"

Jeff waved at the table. "Scooby."

I saluted the table. "Rocky."

"Yankee! You funny!"

"Yankee!" a voice from another table called out. "Go home!" The two tables erupted in rasping laughter.

"Tomorrow is Thanksgiving," said Jeff as we were finishing our steaks.

"Good luck with that turkey dinner," I told him. "Uncle Valeriy's office cook is making you stuffed sturgeon over beets."

"What should we do for Thanksgiving?" Jeff asked our smoking hot waitress when she brought the tea.

"What?" said the waitress.

"Thanksgiving," said Jeff. "American holiday."

The waitress, who we politely had not harassed throughout the meal, nodded and came back two minutes later. American restaurant: Simple Pleasures, Sretenka 15.

"You're welcome," she said.

"You've very kind," I said to her in English.

"Me? Kind?" smiled the waitress. "You American boys think everybody kind." She's right, I told Jeff. We assume the best in people.

As we were walking out of Elmo's, my school friend Pasha called and said he'd meet us anywhere in the city within the next half hour. We picked The Smoked Hare, where the night guide promised a special Tarzan theme.

In the cab on the way there, the driver wanted to know if we were English.

"Where are *you* from?" I asked him in Russian.

"Moldova."

"New York," I said.

"Hey," he looked me over in the rearview mirror. "Look at that. And is it hard to get to New York these days?"

"Not easy. Unless you know somebody."

"I don't know anybody."

"Well," I said.

After a minute he turned around with a smile on his narrow scruffy face. "Maybe you can help me with a visa or something?"

"Yeah," I smiled back. "I'll see what I can do."

"Do they pay a lot in New York?" he asked after a while.

"They do," I said cautiously. "What do you want to do there?"

"Construction," he said firmly. "Skyscrapers and such. Listen: one day I'll get there and look you up."

I told him I believed him, and gave him a fifty ruble tip when he finally stopped the car. "Good luck to you," he said without looking at the money. "And tell him too," he pointed at Jeff, "good luck to him too."

Pasha appeared like a fifties Vegas lounge singer, skinny, taut, with gelled blond hair combed over to one side, dressed completely in black with a slim cigarette in his mouth, against a backdrop of naked women climbing vines inside a cage. We hugged and got into a booth, away from the cage. Jeff stayed behind—he said he'd try to get in on the vine-climbing before he had anything more to drink.

"You look totally different," I told Pasha. "You used to be tall and beefy."

"Well, you know," he said. "Very stressful here in the old country."

I asked about our class—who slept with who, who married who, who's doing what.

"Everybody pretty much fucked everybody else," said Pasha. "I married Karlova, remember, went to Canada in sixth grade? Came back, broke me up with Alisa—you know about me and Alisa?—so then I had to marry her. Alisa married some old dude. Big scandal."

"Interesting," I said.

"Let's see. Korzhik and Denis were in the slammer for two years for possession, they've been out for a while, I think they paint now—walls I mean; Zhenyok was a cop, then an armored car driver until he got fired because he'd, like, leave the cash vault twenty minutes at a time to go buy sausage; Novikova married Pinkus, then left him when he broke his leg in a car crash... Who else?"

"What about you?"

"I'm a lawyer. What's New York like?"

A waitress brought us steamed shrimp and beer. Jeff sat down. We drank to our health.

"I don't have her number," said Pasha. "But we can call Oleg Olegovich, the history teacher. I think they kept in touch. He's not a history teacher anymore—get this—he's a Narc now. Tried to mine me for connections to the criminal underworld. Oh, and her little brother, remember that asshole? Used to throw bricks at you after school? Doing three years at Butyrka. Some really stupid shit, too, like breaking into a zoo or something."

"I can believe that," I said.

"What do you want, man. Honest blue collar Russians. Not like you Jews and your Americas. We've got no place to go but jail."

"Right."

"You do that thing before you speak, you fucking Yankee," said Pasha. "That 'uh'—that's so Yankee, but other than that your Russian, it's spotless. Hell, Karlova only knew how to say 'hello' and 'cock' when she came back from Canada."

I told him about New York as we worked on a mountain of shrimp. I told him how I ran east on Maiden Lane on September 11th.

"What do you think of Moscow?"

Feeling a surge of alcohol cloud my brain, I told him how I'd missed it so much, how I'd had dreams about the winter air, the night glow of high-rises as the snow's coming down, the warm smoky kitchens, the boulevards, the pick-up hockey games in frozen courtyards. About people queuing up for ice cream, about how everything smelled like a holiday.

"May I interest you gentlemen in a special jungle adventure?" a naked dancer asked without any enthusiasm.

"Doesn't smell like a holiday anymore," said Pasha. "Hey!" he laughed and grabbed Jeff's arm. "*Ne spat!*"

"No sleeping," I translated for Jeff, who'd been slowly passing out from lack of conversation. "He wants a special jungle adventure," Pasha told the girl and gave her Jeff's hand. "Special special."

"It's too bad you left so early," said Pasha as Jeff was led away. "We had some good times here after you left."

Pasha was in the middle of a joke about a Russian businessman returning balloons to a store, when Jeff came back with the dancer and a man in a pinstripe suit and said that he apparently owed three hundred bucks for a couple of sorry lap dances, that there was no way he was paying that, that this was absolute horseshit and can we please get out of there and go somewhere not lame.

"What's the problem?" asked Pasha.

"Tell your friend he owes me three hundred," the dancer was now an Amazon, with one breast exposed. "That's five exotic dances and heavy monkey petting."

The man in the pinstripe suit yawned and turned to the stage. Guys like him were everywhere in Moscow: empty-eyed, thick-necked men in cheap suits.

"And then," added the dancer, "he fell asleep on my lap and drooled all over it. Is he a *gay* or something?"

"No mademoiselle," I smiled. "You are probably just not his type." Pasha laughed.

But the moment was ruined. I stood up. "What, we don't look important enough? Did you try to take him downstairs to King Kong's lair or wherever, and he said no? Did he make a monkey face? Are you scandalized by his yellow coat? Well, we are scandalized by your attempt at extortion."

The dancer looked aghast. "Dima, what the fuck?!" she tugged the security guy's sleeve forcing him to turn around and look at me.

I winked at Jeff and switched to English. "I guess what I'm saying," I slowly mouthed in Rocky Balboa's busted-mouth baritone, "is if I can change. And he can change," I pointed at Pasha, "then everybody can change. Fuck you, we're not paying. Right Pasha?" Pasha, still laughing, shrugged his shoulders.

Two white shirts silently pulled me from the booth by the armpits. Two more white shirts twisted Jeff's hands behind his back. Pasha screamed: "Are you insane? They're from the American Embassy!" which impressed no one and wasn't even true. Then I couldn't move my hands and somebody hit me on the temple. Then it was dark with dancing lights. Then I looked up and saw Pasha and Jeff outside with me in the snow, Jeff on all fours, Pasha wrestling a white shirt, a white shirt in front of me setting up for a punch, another white shirt about to kick Jeff in the ribs. I screamed and blacked out.

When I came to, Pasha and I were on top of one of the white shirts, pinning him down. The others had disappeared. "I can't be doing this, you ingrates," Pasha was breathing heavily. "I have a daughter, what the fuck are you doing?" After a while, the white shirt said, "Enough boys, O.K.," and we let go and sprawled out on the ground on either side of

him. I lifted my head and called out to Jeff, who was lying face down several feet away.

First there was nothing but then a faint: "*Oshkodoshkoshk?*"

"That's his Russian imitation," I told Pasha.

"Fucking hell people," said Pasha. "I haven't been in a fight since psycho ward rotation."

"I thought you were a lawyer?"

"I am now."

As we were propping Jeff back up on his feet, the conquered white shirt came over with Jeff's wallet. "Everything should be there, plus or minus," he said and offered us cigarettes. "I don't know what you guys do for a living," he added, "but I've had it up to here with this fucking job."

"Next stop?" asked Pasha from behind the wheel of his Audi.

The three of us sat at the window table in the twelfth floor cafeteria. My left ear was protruding at an unnatural angle. Jeff had a rapidly swelling eye and a fully swollen lower lip. The hood of the Iowa shirt had been nearly torn off—the Hawkeye on the front of it looked pissed. Pasha was fine except for a footprint around the breast pocket and a bit of tousled hair. He looked ecstatic. We ordered shots of Honey Pepper and kvass.

"To new beginnings," said Pasha.

My phone rang.

"Hey. It's Alisa," said a girl's hoarse voice. "Alisa."

"Alisa," I said. "You're an asshole."

Pasha gave out a short train-like whistle and raised an eyebrow. "Look at that! The history teacher! Go get her, Stallone."

Thirty minutes later Alisa and I were doing tequila shots in Britannia. She was showing me her wedding photos.

"I thought he was sixty or something."

"He's thirty-six."

I took out a wallet picture of Pasha's three-year-old. "My Anechka."

"Wow," said Alisa.

I showed her my driver's license.

"New York, New York," she smiled. "East 87th street."

I shook her hand, excused myself, went outside, lit a cigarette, and made a beeline for the farthest corner of Aleksandrovskiy Sad, away from the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier, where I peed on fresh snow and stared at the moon. A cop came over from the side, waited until I finished, slowly saluted and asked to see my documents. I gave him my American passport.

"Place of temporary residence?" asked the cop.

"Hotel Rossiya."

"Purpose of visit?"

"Tourism."

"Been drinking?"

"No," I said and gave him a hundred rubles.

"As you were," said the cop and turned away.