

## Russian Tales

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### Father and Daughter

I'm in Moscow for some reason or the other, and one day my Russian girlfriend calls in tears saying that her father abused her.

"Call the police," I say.

"No, the police are useless, I want you to come over here now and beat him up."

"Me?"

"Yes, if you love me you will protect me."

"Okay," I reluctantly say, and take the metro to the station near her house.

There I am a boy from New Jersey walking down Tverskaya Street, a couple blocks from the Kremlin, the heart of the evil empire, on my way to beat up my girlfriend's father who is not only younger than I but bigger. How did I get into this?

Her father, Vladimir, is in the living room lying on the sofa with a rag over his face and his wife and daughter, my girlfriend, are scolding him in Russian.

My girlfriend says, "Go ahead, beat him up, or I'll know you don't love me."

"Okay," I say, "come on Vladimir, put 'em up." His daughter translates while I'm hoping my offer is declined.

Vladimir says something in Russian, and his daughter says with a smirk, "Father doesn't want to fight."

Whew, I lucked out, I'm thinking.

Vladimir, then props himself up to look at me and the rag falls off his face showing a black and blue eye.

"How'd he get that?" I asked my girlfriend.

She says, "He came home and wanted me to make him some soup, but I didn't want to, so I bounced the can of Campbell's off his head."

Then Vladimir's wife rushes over to the sofa and wham, slaps him right across that eye.

I saying to myself, I'm getting on the next plane out of this nut cake country and I did.

## Volunteer Cops

The son of the family where I rented a room when in Moscow was a volunteer policeman.

Late one night I went out on assignment with him.

His group of volunteer cops were helping the regular police run a check point for drunken drivers on the outer ring road that circled Moscow. Cars would stop and they'd check ids and whether the drivers were drunk.

It was boring when suddenly a black Mercedes Benz zooms through the check point.

The volunteers and I pile into what reminded me of a Tinker Toy car with the regular cops jumping into a Match Box Toy car.

Off we go in pursuit with me wondering how these cars powered with lawnmower engines are going to catch a Benz.

Want to know how? By seriously reckless driving. Our driver turns off his headlights, leaving starlight—no moon, and an occasional working street lamp to navigate by in his effort to sneak up on the Benz.

Through sheer lunatic driving, a dirt road short-cut and luck, we end up right behind the Benz with the regular cops directly in back of us.

Our driver turns on his headlights and the Benz, trying to lose us, makes a sharp turn off the ring road zooming down a half paved road with no street lights.

Then I hear gun shots. Damn, the goons in the black Benz are shooting at us? I'm glad I'm in the back seat. But there were no gun flashes coming from the Benz, so I looked behind us at the regular police. They're the ones shooting at the Benz with us in the middle and me still in the back seat. I'm trying to figure out if I still like the people mentioned in my will.

The Benz finally stops—it's a dead end. The volunteers rush out toward the Benz without a second thought as to whether the occupants of this favorite car of the Russian criminal class are armed.

The regular cops are keeping their distance, standing behind the open doors of their car with their guns ready.

The volunteers yank open the driver's door of the Benz and pull the unarmed driver out. The regular cops see this and that the other passengers are two girls. The regular cops leave the protection of their car, grab the driver and beat the tar out of him. We all go to the stationhouse, where the regular cops beat the driver some more—swift and effective justice.

## Disco Duck

I'm enjoying a Moscow nightclub and decide to go out and catch some air. Smoking was legal everywhere in Russia, but the cancer rate wasn't too bad because they still used the old Commie health statistics.

While outside and standing off to the side of the entrance, up rolls a bus that looks like it escaped from a Donald Duck cartoon—wide and foreshortened and gray. The bus turns and backs up to the club's entrance. It has this oversized door in the back of it. The door flies open and out piles, not cartoon characters, but the military with AK-47s. They rush by me into the nightclub slamming to the side anyone in their way. I follow to check it out. They find the guy they're looking for—maybe an enemy of the state or someone who didn't pay enough in bribes—beat the tar out of him and drag him back to the Donald Duck bus.

Off it chugs down the road to Lubyanka.

## McDonalds

In the early 1990s, McDonalds opened its first restaurant in Moscow. It immediately became the place to go with Russians dressing up the way Americans used to when dining out at a fancy place.

For me, it was one of the few places that served edible food.

The first time I went, the line stretched around the block. The police had set out these metal barricades, like the cops in New York City use for crowd control, to channel the line into the restaurant.

The barricades allowed for three people to stand abreast, but up and down the line only two people were standing abreast, leaving a kind of passing lane on their left. Strange I thought until a couple of Russian hoods, you can tell them by their size and all black clothing, used the passing lane to cut in front of the line.

Screw this, and I stepped into the passing lane, but not to cut in front, rather to block anymore hoods from doing so. Along came another couple of hoods, they clearly recognized me as an American from my suit, and proceeded to push the Russians standing next to me out of the way, so as to cut around me and resume their travels in the passing lane. They didn't touch me—guess my Brooks Brothers' suit intimidated the hoods.

## West Moscow Party

The New Russians—government officials in positions to privatize state assets by pocketing them—build their mansion dachas west of Moscow. Perhaps they are trying to get nearer America's conspicuous consumption culture.

The members of a band with whom I was friendly and often went to watch play were hired for a New Russian event west of Moscow. They invited me and I went.

There was plenty of booze, hot young amateur prostitutes making their way through college and older, rich, corrupt mini-oligarchs. While returning from a trip to the men's room, some mini-oligarch ran into me and started cursing me in Russian for daring to make contact with his augustness. Not about to be intimidated by a commie crook, I responded, "Okay Bolshaya Shyshka (big boss), let's take this outside." The mini-oligarch quickly said, "Oh, I didn't know you were American. My apologies." Which I as quickly accepted.

Good thing I wasn't Russian. I might not have made it home. The New Russians see themselves as the new aristocracy that can get away with anything as long as only Russians are involved. But when it comes to Americans, they fear us more than the Nazis. After all, we won the cold-war.

### Hunger

In 1992, my girlfriend and I brought some food to a Russian family with whom she was a friend. The husband and wife were in their 30s, both had PhDs, and they had a young child.

We sat down at a table, and when I looked up, one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse was staring into my eyes—starvation. These two highly educated parents were starving in order to provide their child with enough food. This was happening in the capital of Russia—Moscow, in the 20<sup>th</sup> not the 13<sup>th</sup> century.