

Moscow Journal, or The Bratislava Option

March 10, 1997

I am sharing a late dinner in the apartment of my new neighbor, an Uzbeki physicist, formerly of Moscow State University--where I shall soon be teaching--and now "in business"; his card indicates chemicals. University salaries are absurd in the new Russia and quite insufficient to support an instructor living alone, much less a family. A heavy man with diminishing sandy hair, he has obtained a degree in business at a school in Michigan, where classmates called him "Bob," a loose phonetic equivalent of his Uzbeki name, and we aren't alone. A lovely Russian woman, no more than twenty-five, is seated across the table directly in front of me, silent, her hands folded on the table--she has some English, but to speak in front of a native speaker embarrasses her. Bob's last name is easier to pronounce than his first name--it is the same as an American writer, a science fiction writer who became famous in the sixties, and the coincidence pleases Bob and gives Americans a useful handle for sounding his name. We had met in the elevator of our building that afternoon, and, discovering that I am fresh from the U.S. (Chicago), he invited me to his home. This instant hospitality is quite Russian.

"I think of my children all the time," he tells me, pointing to a photo of two with his wife perched on an etagere. He commutes to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, and tomorrow at noon he'll regretfully cancel an afternoon tour of the city we have planned. I return to my apartment, and this will be our first and last visit of my stay: I will call at

regular intervals for a month, but he won't be home. He has pulled some volumes from an armoire in the small room we are dining in--the book of Tao and Freud's *Introductory Lectures* (in English), tomes that would have been hard to acquire in the Soviet era (certainly the Freud) but attract my host because of what he has called his quest for self-understanding. A scientist, he begins (at my request) an explanation of relativity and regrets that his understanding of Shakespeare isn't more developed. Bob assures me that we enjoy a prestigious address. Deteriorating but relatively new, Olympic Village is home for much of the faculty at my elite new school and is minutes away (by bus) from Southwest, our Metro stop. There is a small, western-style grocery store nearby, along with a pharmacy; also a casino and a restaurant. Bob's companion is sitting across from me at the table, and throughout our conversation she is almost stock-still, a sort of cubist beauty, her lovely hands folded on the table, eyeing me steadily and silently with the ice-blue eyes of northern Europe. Just before midnight I leave.

I had arrived in Moscow about two weeks before, but this was not my first contact with Russia. I had spent ten days in Petersburg three years earlier, making a temporary home for myself in a facility that Americans would size up as public housing--my baptism in Russian poverty, which I would use to steel myself for almost everything I would see in Moscow during my four-month stay. In Moscow I was met at the airport and deposited on the seventh floor of this high-rise by a language teacher at the university, who informed me on the ride in from Sheremetovo, that during the sixties he operated an anti-aircraft battery for the North Vietnamese. He keeps a memory of Hanoi. Because he taught Russian in Bogota for two years, he accidentally slips into Spanish, which I once spoke passably well and now use to hold up my end of the conversation. After stopping

at a food shop (you wouldn't call it a grocery) for provisions, he takes us up a winding road to a long sequence of concrete high-rises, more than a score, and at the door to my new apartment, left me with the keys and his telephone number. The seventh floor of Building Sixteen in Olympic Village, built for the athletes almost twenty years ago for the 1980 Olympics (which the U.S. boycotted because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan); and now I'm here, and fearful. My Russian is primitive, and though I have a project--a teaching position--I hardly know a soul in Moscow. By American standards, I saw that, for a single man, my apartment was more than ample, but the building--indeed the neighborhood, and the whole city--is going to be hard. The buttons on the panel in the elevator are badly corroded, and number seven pops out with a sharp report when I reach my floor.

Bob, whom I met in the elevator my first full day in Moscow, gave me instructions on how to manage it: I am to delay pressing the button for the seventh floor if someone I'm sharing the car with exits on a floor below mine; the panel, he says, hasn't any "memory." Not until the other party in the car exits on a lower floor should I press the button for mine. The blue-painted walls in the entrance, stairwell, and corridors are extensively marked up with graffiti, some English, some Russian, most obscene. At the entrance to the building, a heavy rubber cable has been looped around the doorframe: the glass door lined up within it lacks a hydraulic control, and often slams into the frame violently; without the cable to absorb the shock of slamming door, the glass would probably shatter. The most curious thing is a huge mechanical part or piece of some kind (I don't know how else to describe it) that has been placed in the middle of the concrete path that crosses the entrance to Building Sixteen: According to my fantasy, an engine

fell from a jet passing overhead, and it landed right here, in front of my new home, and although the sight is aggressively offensive, for several weeks it identifies my building amidst this cluster of identical high-rises. I assume it was a car part, and eventually it was dragged or carted away.

But the apartment itself is fine. Undoubtedly two families shared it when the athletes moved on: I have an ample living room, a bedroom, and a big kitchen, though the oven has electric burners. (I prefer gas.) It takes me several minutes to realize that the cords dangling by the doors to the living and bedroom control the lights. The flooring consists of wooden slats fitted at right angles, though a worn, lint-ridden line of red carpet rests between the two smallish beds.

March 19

At a table in the corner of the small *stolovaya* (dining hall) at International College, where I am taking classes to extend my Russian, observing a young Korean student sitting directly across from me. I am wondering how to identify the quality of her skin. The whiteness is flavored with a certain darker tint. Skin extremely smooth. The downward line of her cheeks is gentle. Very fine, dark brown hair verging toward black. She is doing a language assignment, working with a Korean-Russian dictionary, and too absorbed in her work to notice my interest. Like many Asians, her age is hard to judge, but clearly she is quite young, perhaps only twenty. I am impressed by the way this young woman is working with three highly dissimilar languages, Korean characters, the Cyrillic alphabet and the Latin one, choosing the last to identify ownership of her

dictionary. "Shin," I see, is her name, marked in large pink letters with a felt-tipped pen across the top of her book--when the volume is closed and the leaves are pressed together, her name becomes legible. I obtain this information after checking the book when she leaves for the counter in this primitive student cafeteria. Later we are joined by others. The young girl to my right, another student, is almost certainly Jewish--very dark brown eyes; hawk-like nose, shoulder-length brown hair. Wearing a red sweater, she too seems about 20 and has a lovely scarf with a gold design draped across her shoulders and breasts. A plain Russian student, not beautiful, sits at my left. None of the students seems to be paying me the least attention--the indifference of the young to an older man. But then the Jewish-looking student unexpectedly addresses me:

"Do you speak English?"

"Perfectly."

"Can you explain the difference between a state school and a public school?"

I explain the misuse of the terms, which leads to a brief conversation; they had been more aware of me than I had thought. Sitting in the corner of this plain room, with my coffee, I had begun my diary, assuming I was inconspicuous. After a moment of hesitation, I go ahead:

"May I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes."

"Are you Jewish? You don't look Russian."

"Everybody says that. My mother was Russian; my father was Armenian and Greek."

This exchange draws the interest of the Korean girl who, having discovered that I am American, quizzes me on her prospects of teaching English at an American high school. Leafing through her bilingual dictionary, she had seemed coolly indifferent, looping her beautiful hair behind her ear, self-sufficient in her beauty, withholding her attention from others. But I have misjudged her, I see, and after some talk I suggest that she consult with the American Embassy.

A few minutes later, I am off to see L. and experience another delay, this one attributable to the inexplicable nomenclature and organization of the Russian university. I was to meet her in the dean's "office," or perhaps it was the "department"; I'm not sure. But I did go to the "office" where I had met the week before a large, queenly woman quite well-known in Moscow in her specialty, the dean. Waiting in this room leads to a pointless twenty-minute delay. A pleasant secretary with pretty good English volunteers to track down L., who it turns out has been waiting for me in the Dean's "department." I have made the appointment to obtain my Moscow State identity papers, and L. calls another woman elsewhere in the university whom she assumes is responsible for arranging my documents. But this is not the right person after all, and L. is referred to a middle-aged academic bureaucrat who handles foreign students and teachers and whom I have seen several times since arriving in Moscow the week before. He will be happy to supply me with an ID; I need only provide him with a passport photo. Fortunately, I have brought an extra one with me from the US. Otherwise, I would have had to look heaven knows where in downtown Moscow for a suitable place to have my picture taken--one of the hundred inconveniences that goes with being at this school, in this city, in this country. Any American university would have the equipment that produces cheap photos

quickly for identity cards. To reach this bureaucrat, L. has tried several times to dial out of her building's phone system, even though our contact is in the university's main building some blocks away. Patient and familiar with these defects, after a dozen times she succeeds.

L.: Dark hair, dark eyes, round-faced, fortyish, the fair skin of northern Russia. I have learned that people age quickly here, but for a middle-aged woman, she is still rather attractive. Her style is quick, energetic, and strong; many months later, after my return to Chicago, I have a distinct memory of her looking up into the face of a tall young man in her classroom, spitting out "*Nyet*" to one of his questions. Not rude, but quick and abrupt; her voice fairly rings. Like all faculty members--she's at International College--her English is excellent, British-accented. She inquires into my knowledge of languages; she assumes I know others, probably because one floor above I am trying to work up some proficiency in hers, trying to get past my wretchedly inadequate Russian. It is intolerable to be an illiterate in this city, asking people who look suitable--i.e., the younger and better dressed--whether they speak English, in a country where the educated live on talk, conversations lasting for hours.

I explain to L. that my Spanish was once passably good; I spent a year in Buenos Aires. I worked up some French when I was younger, though it's rusty now, and more recently I have given many hard hours to German. But in none of these languages can I claim an ability that is comparable to L.'s ease with English. I feel better when she dismisses this as unwarranted modestly, though she is clearly wrong. She describes, favorably, a semester at the university in Madison, Wisconsin. She spent a weekend near Christmas in Chicago and found Marshall Field's--it's unclear whether she means Water

Tower or the store in the Loop--vulgar in its promotional holiday layout. Her tone is decisive but also communicative and perhaps even friendly; she calls a colleague to learn where I might find the "wholesale market" in my neighborhood that may sell the little containers of soup that take boiled water, my dinner staple in Chicago. She mentions a second market near the university where I can buy a few potatoes; the grocery stores I have visited only sell heavy sacks of small potatoes with pale, brown skin, far more than I need. L. strongly discourages shopping at these places--Cyrillic letters are used to spell out "supermarket"--as their prices are high. Actually, the one in my neighborhood looks like a stripped-down version of an American grocery store. Others are slightly better stocked. The inventory is small, but one assumes the food isn't contaminated, as it might be in smaller, less formal establishments, like the stalls and trailers one sees outside the larger subway stations. (To balance this support of nascent Russian capitalism, I buy oranges from women peddling bread, produce, meat and cigarettes in my neighborhood streets.)

L. pours me tea, though I declined it when originally offered, and indicates also a plateful of fruit--we can't decide whether they're figs or dates. After inquiring from a secretary if the box of candy belongs to the department--her manners are punctilious--she presents me with chocolates as well. I decline everything except the tea.

Back on a trolley to First Humanities, the building holding one of the departments I am assigned to. There is a faculty meeting for the law department scheduled at four, to be followed by a reception or party of some kind. I pass a few moments in the hall on the ground floor chatting with a young lawyer from Belgium studying Russian law. "If you can survive Russia, you can survive anything," he tells me. Quite affable. Then up to the

department, now filling with my colleagues, where a table has been set in the simple Russian style, and by local standards the food looks pretty good. But instead of dining we are all summoned to a classroom. We depart for the other room, which is filled by a penetrating sunlight coming in through dusty windows running the length of the wall--there are no shades. I dislike this intense, hard light, especially late in the day, and my irritation is fed by my fatigue. The meeting, which will be followed by the meal, could last twenty minutes, forty minutes, or longer, and it will be unintelligible to me. I accept the risk of offending a colleague and edge myself from the back of this suddenly filled-up room to the door, feeling uncomfortably conspicuous. Outside, I sit briefly on a stool in the dilapidated hall, hunched over in my fatigue, and after a few minutes decide to leave. I have had three hours of Russian and even more of the discomforts here, and I take the subway back to my neighborhood on the southwest edge of the city. I need help from a passersby, but at my station I do find the market L. had described--a large warren of stalls selling produce, meats, cheese, bread, household goods. I find my cups of soup.

March 21

Had my first disappointing class--the law students for a Friday afternoon session. Felt flat and struggled to interest the students. A discussion of public and private universities in the US, but I have repeated myself for the umpteenth time and failed, as far as I can tell, to draw much interest from the class. And the students seemed, inexplicably, a bit peeved. M., a female colleague, tried to console me afterwards, noting the impact of a late March snowfall, a point made by other faculty members. But I still

felt quite low as I left the school in the late-afternoon cold, preparing myself for a vacant Friday night at home. Had had thoughts of the synagogue, but not tonight--too tired, and the ice-clotted, snow-filled streets are no incentive either. Also, I don't know if the synagogue has a Friday evening service, though it probably does. Shopping at the "wholesale market," however, I felt my spirits rising, began to feel organized, active and knowledgeable, more as if I were fitting in and doing the right thing. The Russian masses generate warmth, literally and figuratively; my glasses fogged up in the underground passageway amidst the crowd. I have noticed in the subway that I attract attention instantly: My decade-old winter ski coat, dark green, and black, fedora-like hat announce my nationality immediately; glances that would normally drift away after encountering mine linger for a moment, and I admit that my vanity is stoked by this anonymous, transitory celebrity. There are large numbers of expatriates in Moscow, hundreds of thousands I have been told, but they remain curious enough to the Russians, especially in a corner of the city where they are seldom seen. I draw suspicious reactions from women when I seek directions, but they always answer.

Felt keenly resentful of the university yesterday, especially after the academic bureaucrat hit me up for \$100 to register and extend my visa, which expires in May. (This demand later fell to \$20.) Also, the irritating security checks at the main administrative building, a repulsive Stalinist monument towering into the sky, which I'll describe more fully later.

S., a colleague of mine in sociology, my second department, draws me aside during an interval between classes: "The situation is bad. We have no cafeteria worthy of the name. I often have to bring my own chalk. The duster"--a gnarled mound of black

fabric that that's used to erase the board--"is poor. Yet we have to offer a decent education. I get \$150 a month, and the teaching load is sixteen hours a week--no, 18 hours a week this semester." He courteously goes to a bathroom to moisten the eraser for me. The heat in the class has been a bit erratic; it fell before the session ended, though the temperature is usually steadier in my apartment; I often close the door to the living room to keep the bedroom warmer. I am writing this sitting in bed. I wasn't supposed to attend that class, but, misjudging my schedule, I had come early and, impressively, S. instructs me to correct any of his mistakes with English. (He does misuse a past participle, his only error, but I say nothing.) His class deals with fairly subtle differences in usage and modals, and he discusses slight phonetic differences between English and American speech, nuances he describes as "beautifully complex." The students, using photocopies he has paid for himself, are coping deftly with a difficult lesson.

I have been assigned seven classes in two departments--law and sociology--meeting once a week each for seventy-five minutes. With about half of these classes, I have an English-language textbook, and in the other half I am to improvise, selecting topics to lecture on that will be interesting both to me and my students; but my subjects generally speaking are American culture, broadly defined, and history. A pair of classes in sociology are repeated on separate days. Many of the students are pursuing legal careers and make esoteric demands: Describe American courts. I know almost nothing about the subject. At times, a book deals with a topic of which I am ignorant but for which the students are avid for information--Hollywood or American music (understood as pop music). I have to beg off and switch to something familiar. The textbooks I am using, one English, the other Soviet, deal with the U.S. by region or cultural topic (e.g.,

literature, politics, advertising, etc.), and I have been asked to present the material with whatever elaboration I can bring to it as an educated American who has lived most of his life in the States. At times I convert the course into a language class, and at all times I am careful to explain vocabulary if I think it might be difficult; but I certainly wasn't hired to teach English. My colleagues can do that quite adequately without me. It goes without saying that I taught in my native language.

It is important not simply to teach well, but to present myself in a particular manner. The American representing The Triumphant Cold War Power is entirely out of the question: People here will have a cat-like sensitivity to the least suggestion of that. I am not only a teacher but an ambassador of good will, the first American many of these young people have seen, and I have decided to limit myself--with one exception, when at the request of some students I offer a view of the Cold War from the American side--to describing the U.S. My first public lecture, to students and faculty alike, I devoted to what I called "American problems," including the danger of social disaggregation and the historical emergence of impoverished minorities with little experience of our celebrated prosperity.

Deprived of adequate funds in the new era, Moscow State is undergoing severe decay, but given the historic poverty of Russia, imperial and Soviet alike, I am sure it has experienced privations of all kinds in its history. Most of the structures that survived the war and constitute the remains of nineteenth-century Moscow are downtown, near the Kremlin, but the school I am teaching at is on the southwest edge of Moscow, near the Metro stop *Universitet*. The grounds make a large rectangle, perhaps a quarter-mile long, and at the center is an immense and ugly monolith topped with a spire, the "wedding

cake," so named for the way the design narrows as it ascends, a dispiriting product of the Stalin era perched on one of the hills of Moscow and visible from a great distance. On a clear day it is easy to see from my neighborhood, two subway stops away, with its several hundred nearly identical windows and heavy, dark stone. The message of the design (and its duplicates elsewhere in the city) is immediately clear: the individual counts for nothing, the state-run institution (and therefore the state) for everything. I have been assigned classes in another building, but I often visit this one, either for meals or to attend to bureaucratic matters, and whenever I made my approach, I lowered my gaze to the paved ground to avoid the distressing impact of this Stalinist structure, probably built by German prisoners of war after 1945; many were still here years after the war ended. I never saw more than the basement level and first two floors of the place: offices and cafeterias, with ample marble. There is, however, no central rotunda on the ground floor, and for the first half of my ten-week stay I never failed to get lost in the labyrinth of halls, corridors and stairwells spidering out in different directions. Up till the end, even, finding the (note the article) bathroom or some other useful spot on the ground floor was a matter of educated guesswork. Until it became more familiar, I would spend twenty minutes or longer leaving one office, finding another, and making my way back to the first: I knew that once I left a particular point in the basement on the ground floor there was a very good chance that returning would be a lengthy, time-wasting ordeal, like finding the home of someone in a seldom-visited corner of town that one has never been to before. This was a novel experience. Visiting a building for the first time, one is not surprised at getting lost; but for this to become a predictable event, something one allots so many minutes to, as if it were part of the daily commuting distance to work, was

something else again. This design, I assume, was also purposeful. But this perplexing and towering monolith had the best dining hall on campus, and I went to it nearly every day: Finding the second-floor *stolovaya* at least was easy. And the building had a few accoutrements of modernity, including an automatic teller machine. Few students had cash accounts that they could gain access to with this instrument, as I did. By pressing buttons and allowing the machine to register codes, I could acquire from my account either dollars or rubles in about ninety seconds.

But this (again) is not where I taught. My sociology classes were in a much smaller building near the Metro, a dusty and dilapidated affair, undoubtedly much older, perhaps from the last century. The law department, like sociology, was in yet another building near the opposite end of the rectangle named First Humanities. I never paced out its length, but the halls might have been one hundred meters long, with no interruptions. An eleven-story disaster from the 1970s, part-concrete, part corrugated metal, it warehoused various departments, innumerable classrooms, a few computer labs, and a handful of small cafeterias; and those hundred-meter corridors extended the length of the building, more or less unsegmented. The numbering of the rooms, like many of the streets downtown, followed a Russian pattern: the numbers on opposite sides of the corridors were not always close to one another--even on one side, opposite on the other--but instead were sequential, that is, one to fifty on one side, fifty-one to one hundred on the other. Interpreting the pattern seldom helped anyway, because sighting the number of a room was often impossible in these dark, ruler-straight, linoleum-tiled halls that extended forever. Overhead fixtures were either busted or the fluorescent bulbs had long-since burned out. Often I would open the door to a room to let some sunlight into

the corridor to identify my location. With time, of course, I could reach my classrooms fairly easily, but not all the elevators worked, and those that did were quickly filled with students and teachers milling about on the ground floor, waiting for the car that had gone up to come back down. Often I just galloped up the stairwells.

Maintenance ranged from poor to nonexistent. Inside the classrooms, aluminum light fixtures sagged, and the walls, often spotted with graffiti, badly needed fresh paint; students' wooden desks were corroded and stained, probably by water and tea, and also by chalk-like markings that could not be effaced; chairs had their backs broken off, thereby becoming stools, and those with cushions had the ticking ripped out. The trays at the base of the chalkboards had a month or more of dust--when they had not been pried off altogether--and the tiny stubs of chalk remaining often simply glided over the board without leaving a trace. The windows were generally dirty; the few curtains one ever saw were threadbare. Clocks had stopped running years, maybe decades before. One Friday afternoon I noticed that a large window on the stairwell had shattered, perhaps by the impact of wind, improbable as that seems: The window was, I think, on the eighth floor, and I doubt that an object cast from the ground had done the damage. Hundreds of shards of glass lay undisturbed on the landing and stairs throughout the weekend. When I went to the school for a rare Sunday visit, the debris was still there. But by Monday it was gone.

The decay, disheartening for an American visitor, hardly troubled the students at all. Russians, and young, they were hardy, and entirely used to the poverty of their surroundings: Most had never been out of the country and took the wretchedness for granted. More than that, many of them were having the time of their lives at the most

celebrated school in the country, with exacting standards of admission, a showcase of education during the Soviet era that attracted the most gifted, not only from Russia but from the entire Eastern Bloc, and to a lesser degree from Asia as well, a kind of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton rolled into one, attendance at which indicated superior intellectual abilities and was a virtual guarantee of life-long success (as these young people understood it). I think that few students were aware that in the post-Soviet era the education the school was offering had declined, and that the censorship of the preceding decades, with its compulsory Marxist orientation, circumscribed the range of teaching materials, often sharply, in all fields outside the natural sciences. But for about ten weeks this was my professional home.

M., a colleague I'll describe more fully at the end of this narrative, indicates her demanding schedule. She is undergoing retraining to make herself proficient in Russian and American law in order to earn money as a kind of legal translator. She has lost enthusiasm for this but is determined to finish up with it. She rises at the crack of dawn, teaches during the day, and attends classes of her own until 10 p.m. Formerly married to a Bulgarian, she is now a single mother with a ten-year-old son. I was told by friends who know her in Chicago that M. has no contact with her former husband and is quite dependent on her earnings. She and I had talked over the phone, preparing for my trip when I was still in the States. She has a seductive voice and a nearly flawless English, but as with most contacts limited to the phone, this impression was misleading: M. is a huge woman, perhaps 300 pounds, but also quick, bright and energetic. N., another female colleague in her sixties, tells me the Russians have a lot of strength because of all they've experienced, not personally but as a nation.

I can't say as I enter these impressions in my blue spiral notebook, lying on my stomach in bed, that I greatly miss Chicago. The privations here can be intolerable, but I have no yen to leave. Thinking of the familiar places in Chicago--bookstores, coffee shops, libraries--I experience no great yearning. They'll keep.

March 24

Saturday. Stayed home all day, and that evening an appointment with Olga, Katya and Elena, to a place billed as the finest Mexican restaurant in Moscow: The Azteca. Olga I met in Chicago about two years before, when she visited the home of a student of mine, and we have agreed to meet, Moscow-style, on the platform of a subway station downtown. I assure her that in the tides of humanity traversing the platform I will be instantly recognizable as an American, because of my apparel and appearance, above all that black hat I have brought, quite different from the fur pieces Russians wear to survive their winters, and she spots me instantly standing next to a pillar. She was a bit heavy when I met her in Chicago, but I was impressed with her intellectual vitality; what strikes me with disappointment now is that she has added more weight in a manner I find quite disfiguring. She leads me to the Azteca to meet her friends; all three are analysts for an American consulting firm and cynical about their work. They are linguists, excellent products of Moscow State, and speak English comfortably. After our orders have been taken, they quickly light cigarettes and talk with animation. Katya indicates that they are each earning \$30,000, which I suggest for Moscow is a substantial sum. Olga dismisses that and informs me that she and her friends have western expectations of

credit cards, modern healthcare, and the rest. She reminds me that when we met two years ago, I had argued the danger of prosperity, but these young people--they are not quite thirty--are just getting a taste of it and are skeptical. Katya understands the danger of technology and acceleration, making an excellent point on the loss of "harmony"; they are bright women and catch on quickly but they are not persuaded. I mention an Orwell essay from 1946 on "pleasure spots," where he pleads for a world where people ask, "Does this make me more human or less human?" These young woman, smoking cigarettes, level-headed, quick-witted, rise to the issue quickly, with that characteristic Russian mental vivacity. Olga says she would like to study Sanskrit but can't give it the time; I know that in addition to English she has studied Czech and Serbian. "David," one of them says, "our prime minister has said that Coca Cola is the `epitome of vulgarity.' Can you explain what he meant?" I have trouble answering this unexpected query after the alcohol we've shared. I leave almost drunk and make the pleasant discovery that I can still make my way home on the subway. On the ride south, a young Russian man sitting across from me in the car convivially offers me vodka--Russians will do this--and, declining, I slide down the cushion, into some vomit.

March 25

Masha P. has invited me to hear some piano at Rachmaninov Hall, a small recital annex of the Moscow Conservatory. Students are performing Lizst, Chopin, Scriabin, Rachmaninov. The best was the last--a student does the Rach Paganini Theme, with her teacher, at a second piano, taking the role of the orchestra. An odd effect but successful.

The hall is papered (or painted) light blue and white, with triple-bulbed wall sconces. All the students are presented with flowers, Russian style, at the end of their performance. I am exhausted by the end of the program; it's 4:30, my late-afternoon low point, but the group I'm with heads out into the cold, snow-filled streets to look for a restaurant. These attractions are not nearly as abundant here as in western cities, and the first one Masha tries seems to have closed, so we settle on a Chinese restaurant, or a place trying to be one, with a pool table near the entrance. Food okay. Spoke at length with Olga K., who is about thirty, short, slightly heavy, with a Ph.D. in linguistics. She is speaking English very easily. Did consulting and translating work for the same firm as my trio from the night before but found the work distasteful--business life is impersonal, at times pushy, and the pace too quick. Ukrainian-Jewish; spent six months in London teaching business Russian, work she found neither creative nor congenial. Now a self-employed tutor but doesn't seek out students, preferring instead referrals so she "can be in charge of the relationship professionally." Really quite nice and supports her parents, who live in the Ukraine.

Conversation, on my other side, with Vika, slightly older, an endocrinologist. She wanted to paint but her mother insisted on medicine. Her husband died a few years ago, leaving her to raise two sons. The younger, five or six, extremely good-natured, circulates a notebook at the table, seeking autographs. I struggle to produce a Cyrillic version of my name. But I find the entire affair disquieting--I had expected something briefer that would last no more than an hour, but Russian meals, and social occasions generally, are always drawn-out, and this one extends well into the evening, with fifteen of us, and there are long silences when people apparently feel they have nothing to say to

one another. Masha's husband drops me off near the Pushkin Metro and I feel rather low, trudging across a Moscow street banked with snow on a Sunday night. But inside the station, I discover a hub of some kind with small retail shops, crowded and festive, a Russian hive of color and warmth that instantly lifts my spirits. Felt better at home.

March 26

At the university. I fall into a conversation with Y., an older man nearing retirement who spent the war years in Moscow. I would like to hear his memories of this, but for now he asks me how I would define "bilk"--is it to pay a part of a bill, or none at all? I can't answer this. More conversation, and I say "I would like to ask you a second question." Y: "David, you don't have to number your questions." Discovering that I plan to visit the library of the American Embassy (I later learn they are separate facilities), he asks me to obtain addresses of Faye Dunaway and J.D. Salinger, and also the zip code of the math department of the University of Chicago. Seems he was a translator for Dunaway when she came to Moscow decades ago.

My 9 a.m. class this week was on presidential elections, and moderately successful at best. But the 10:30 group is much better, as I describe the problems America students confront upon graduation--keenly competitive work conditions and the intensifying isolation of American life. The class is wedged into a small rectangle of a room, formerly a language lab, primitive by American standards and, like much at the University, broken down. Nevertheless, every Monday morning I have to fetch a key from another room at the end of the hall, over a hundred feet away, as though there were

anything to steal. Inside the "key room," as I call it, hangs, improbably, a framed pencil sketch of Bernard Malamud and a photograph of the bell tower at the Riverside campus of the University of California. Surprised, I once pointed to the sketch and asked a tall, lovely student managing the room, "Do you know who that is?" "Yes," she replies, a bit sullen, adding nothing more. I feel twinges of erotic deprivation here, surrounded by so many tall, good-looking young women, with characteristic touches of Russian beauty--the eyes many shades of grey and blue, exotic in that hard-to-read look they often project, the clear, fair skin. In the cold spring weather one observes a taste for short skirts. In the classroom I remind myself not to let my glance linger on anyone longer than it should.

That afternoon I tracked down the Choral Synagogue. Got lost exiting the Chinatown Metro; the street on my map is misspelled, but an English-speaking Russian guides me the right way. Inside the synagogue, a thirtyish man with passable English describes the Choral as an Orthodox shul going back about a century. Indicates a schedule for Friday evening services. Says there are about one hundred thousand Jews in Moscow, but because of the scale of assimilation, that's only a guess. Our exchange is pleasant but I won't return--I have no interest in the Orthodox or their services and have come chiefly to gauge the contacts I might make.

My first week in Moscow had been a gift of good weather, like Chicago in April, a sunlit 50 degrees; but after that, snow and cold, which lingers through March and will last till early May. An odd sight in my neighborhood: a truck with a funnel-like device trailing behind it is sucking up the snow.

March 27

I have spent an afternoon and evening with my colleague S., a heavy-set man in his early forties who explained over lunch that almost everyone at Moscow State is moonlighting, that indeed most only stay at the school because of its prestige from the Soviet era, when it was the showcase institution of Russia. Now it is chiefly a springboard for profitable work outside. He translates freelance and adds that if I didn't ask for at least \$40 for a ninety-minute tutoring session I'd be considered "stupid." S. concedes that for Moscow the fees are high, but argues that Muscovites paying out this sort of money--for themselves or their children--have profited from the transformation of Russia: "They rip me off, and I rip them off." Adds that to do a good job—tutoring--one needs to know what is in the qualifying proficiency exam for the University. Although Moscow State is tuition-free, students have to hire tutors to score high enough in the competitive exams that determine admission. Says the Ph.D. students in his department seek the degree mostly for prestige, because no one can get an adequate paying teaching job anywhere in the country. As best I can tell, unlike an American school, which would have a French Department or a German Department, the various departments at Moscow State have separate English training programs. Also unlike an American university, instructors are expected to teach more than to conduct research, which explains their heavy course schedule.

After lunch in one of the better *stolovayas* at the school, I go with a student to Leninsky Prospekt to look for a short-wave radio; the one I brought broke down my second week in the country, and I need one to receive the BBC. We check a store near the university which offers nothing suitable, and other shops a bit farther away that were

selling consumer electronics just a few weeks back are now retailing different product lines. S. finds this off-putting and another example of the unpredictability of contemporary Moscow. He inquires into my religion. My family is Jewish, but I am not observant. I remark, "For me, a spiritual life is individual rather than collective." S: "I couldn't agree more." He practices no religion. Asking whether I object to our lengthy walk (which I don't), he comments, "I understand that some Americans take a car to go to the bathroom."

We give up our search for the radio and enter a small one-room apartment he shares with his second wife; he has decided to lend me a radio till I can find one. He has mats and sheets on the floor, the sleeping area and work combined in one room along with a kitchen; cozy for one, but most Americans would find it a bit cramped for two. A TV with cable connection; he monitors CNN, which he considers essential for keeping his English current, and has bought a computer for e-mail (but which lacks web access). An ample personal library consisting of lexicons and language-related texts. Like other personnel at the University, his English is excellent. Serving me the best coffee I have had in Moscow along with a "sugar-free biscotti," S. tells me that *1984* is pale compared to what he and his colleagues experienced: "You talked about totalitarianism; we lived it." This perhaps is said for effect. Describes the long wait required to use a photocopier during the Soviet era--two weeks just to get permission. Bringing foreign visitors home was nearly impossible, and if repeated could lead to the loss of one's position and therefore permanent unemployment.

Now S. helps families, for a fee, get their children--especially the male ones--into schools in the U.K. Partly for education, but mostly to keep them out of the army.

Russia has been fighting two nasty wars, the one that has recently ended in Chechnya, and a border affair in independent Tajikistan against Muslim soldiers in Afghanistan. S. describes the Tajiks as “hopeless, benighted drug addicts smoking opium and grass, and unable to defend their country.” Taliban and other Muslims would like to occupy Dushanbe, the Tajik capital. Also, the Russian army is considered a horror--severe hazing, beatings, rapes, suicides, even starvation. I have read that support groups meet in Moscow sharing strategies on how to keep children out of the service; Yeltsin has promised the country a volunteer army, but for now mandatory conscription begins at age 18. S. places the children of wealthy parents in English schools, gaining a deferment similar to the one American students obtained during the Viet Nam war. A year at a prep school in the U.K. preceding a university can cost \$25,000. The subject shifts to Max Hayward's translation of Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs and other Russian-language texts, and the tone of our exchange shifts as well; S. seems uncomfortable, which makes me uncomfortable. Perhaps he thought I was testing his knowledge or he feels self-conscious with an American, insufficiently "advanced" or "western"--a very common Russian reaction dating back a few centuries. Sinyavsky and *Soviet Civilization*. I let him draw the conversation back to mundane matters--the hazards of the drinking water, the need for personal security in Moscow. Don't open doors to strangers, etc. Millions in the city are living under the poverty line. Lots of begging and hawking in the subway stations. My first week here saw a thirtyish man scratching away at a fiddle in the Metro, rather badly. When I stopped to offer him a few rubles, an exhausted girl at his feet I hadn't even seen raises a hand to take the sum, over the body of a second exhausted,

immobile girl, presumably a sister. I had been warned that the city can be raw, and at times it certainly is.

After coffee S. escorts me over the snow to a trolley that stops at *Universitet*, the Metro stop for the University, where I will get a train that takes me home. As we part, I fish through my briefcase and the numerous pockets of my overcoat and discover that I cannot find my transit pass, and S. courteously tears off a ticket from his packet that I can use. It is a real Moscow night--grey, woolen skies, frozen snow, gritty underfoot, and the steady cold; but my spirits are fine. In the trolley I am grateful for his ticket: an inspector presents me with his ID and checks to see if I have one.

March 28

Real discomfort in my Russian class. Botched the dative with no preparation for the lesson. The instructor--a big Russian guy, almost fifty, bearded, wearing glasses, lively--rags us all; soon I'll drop out. Waiting for my department head in First Humanities, I encounter M., who repeats S.'s warnings on security. Going through a table of give-away books in English, mostly propaganda rubbish from the Soviet years, I meet Ira, a nice-looking tall girl, bad teeth and slightly flat-chested, but attractive. I ask her for her phone number, which she offers, and this seems to draw the attention of the big departmental secretary sitting heavily nearby: A few minutes later I catch her murmuring something to a colleague.

Back home I suffer a brief panic over the breakdown of the telephone--I can hear but cannot transmit sound. A stroke of luck, though, when the building manager, a

middle-aged woman, turns out to be remodeling the apartment next door, and, with only the slightest prodding, agrees to replace the phone then and there. Bless her. An unexpected godsend--the old one had persistent static that obstructed conversation. The new instrument is perfectly clear, and when A. calls that night from Chicago, we have a long conversation and rejoice over the quality of the contact: I could as well be receiving a call from St. Louis. We also discover that she is better informed on local events than I am: A. has discovered a website on the Internet that is devoted to Russian affairs, which she is now routinely checking for area news. I, of course, cannot read Moscow's Russian-language press, and only occasionally find the two or three papers published locally in English. So I am getting information on my new home from a source several thousand miles away. The Russian president's health, divorce statistics and the impact of spreading alcoholism; A. is reading it all and transmitting it back to me by our transpolar connection. Needless to say, this is costly. She has begun to fret about her telephone bill, which she hasn't received yet, and we begin a debate over my helping her with this expense that will accumulate until my return to Chicago at the end of May.

March 29

"My name is D.C., and I am an American living in Moscow...." An unsuccessful afternoon with Ira. Phoning her the night before, we had arranged an appointment for this afternoon, the last Saturday of the month. Learned that she is an English teacher at the older downtown branch of the campus. Her English is slightly halting but quite reliable, and I had hesitated before asking for her telephone number; but she gave it to me.

We have agreed to meet on my subway line at the *Okhonty Yd* station. I arrive a few minutes early and she comes up to me on the platform, taking off her fur cap, revealing her fine short brown hair, slightly matted.

"Where shall we go?" she asks.

"I don't know; this is your town. Some place for coffee and a sandwich."

Up the steep escalators and out of the station, past the Metropole Hotel, which I have gotten into the habit of visiting each Friday for postcards and newspapers. We pass a place that looks expensive with piped music coming from what I take to be the entrance; and then more walking, to a bus that will take us to a restaurant. I inquire about the various passes for the Moscow transport system and she produces a *Yediny*, a sort of all-purpose card that allows her to use busses, trollies, trams, and the subway. It is a monthly pass that goes for 180,000 rubles, or \$30. She bought a student version from a young man who sold it to her for seventy thousand rubles. Toward the end of every month, one can see students hawking the passes at the Metro. Ira leads me to a small side street that looks like an unlikely place for a bus; she explains that the usual traffic has been diverted by reconstruction of the city.

I ask her about her students, whom she says are rather young, just about 17 or 18. I respond that mine are in their early twenties, come to think of it, just a few years younger than she. I had taken her to be about twenty-five, but she makes a face, indicating she is older. "I am twenty-eight." I am aware that in Slavic Europe women have a quite different notion of age than we do in the West, and I assure her that by American standards she is a young woman.

"How old are you?" she asks.

I hesitate a moment, but dishonesty is repugnant to me; I hadn't expected the question.

"I'm forty-three."

"I thought you were younger."

On the bus we sit in silence for a few moments. The snow is falling steadily, very dismaying for the end of March, and on the escalator up from the train I had complained of this. "Do you prefer the summer?" "I like the fall. Autumn in Chicago is beautiful." We get out after a few stops and end up in a small, western-style place--neon lights, rock music on the sound system, a row of cafeteria-style food bins. She orders a plastic dish of ice cream and a milkshake; I have a chicken sandwich and a cup of coffee. The coffee is excellent, and I say so.

"Do the prices seem high to you?"

I consider the question. The sandwich is about four-fifty and the coffee a buck, which is in line with what I'd expect to pay in Chicago.

"These prices are high for Russians."

The conversation takes an unexpected turn. She asks me what I think of minimalism.

I give a thought to the volumes of Harold Rosenberg I have on my shelves in Chicago, but come up with no answer. But I think I can improvise one. "I can give you some explanations, but I don't know if they'll make any sense to you. I speak from my experience as an American."

"Modern art is international."

"Well, that's true," I answer, remembering Rosenberg's insistence on this. "I think of minimalism in two ways. The first is emptiness, personal emptiness, and the second might be the impoverishment of the external world." I try to adumbrate these points as best I can. Because of the end of religion and the rise of technology, modern people suffer from an inner poverty. We live in an object-filled world bereft of suggestiveness, and I indicate the establishment we're in--neon lights, Formica tables, prepared foods, and so on. I give a side thought to Henry James and *The American Scene*, and the absence of "the constituted." Later on, I mention the contactlessness of American life, of life in the West generally. Our exchange turns to what might generate value; but science has replaced religion, the one point or experience all can agree on. H.G. Wells said that science is the mind of the race, but whether this produces community is another matter.

She counters: "I have a friend who went to New York last year because she had leukemia. She was cured there."

"Do you know how far it is to the moon?"

"No."

"It's about 250,000 miles. Now: Do you care?"

She makes a defense of scientific research, and I offer a few concessions. I wear glasses, and without them I might not recognize her sitting a foot away. If I hadn't had knee surgery a few years back, I would hardly be able to walk. But all of this has to be understood against a background of dehumanization and a mentality that assumes science will solve intractable problems and clear away the troubles. I add the word

disenchantment to our discussion, a reference to Max Weber. On the other hand, perhaps I might reconsider these matters from a Moscow perspective.

Ira picks up a copy of *The Moscow Times*, a fine English-language paper. I thought this indicated she'd lost interest in our topic, but instead she leafs through the number for an article on a new movie house offering minimalist films. She says she has heard of other explanations of minimalist art that aren't so "apocalyptic."

"How would you describe it?"

"It's a description of the world using materials other than those which painters have used in the past."

"Yes," I agree, "but what is the nature of the description?"

She looks across the room where people are dining before answering. "That's a good question."

I enjoy looking at this young woman. I usually like a fuller head of hair on women, longer, but her light-brown hair is attractive to me. So are her light-brown eyes. One of her cheeks is slightly blemished, but her fair skin is agreeably youthful. She is tall, slender, young and her hands are fine. Her smile isn't beautiful, but this is Russia. Ira is sitting quite close to me, in the Russian style, her face a matter of inches from mine, which is also pleasant. She asks me about American painting, in her slow, careful manner, searching for the right words and the correct syntax.

I write out the name Mark Rothko on a small notebook I have brought, and I try to explain the large, dark, brooding canvasses I have seen in Chicago and London. I describe what I recall of his suicide and the posthumous scandal of his estate. I add the names of de Kooning, dead just a week before; Pollock's drip technique and his ghastly

car accident; Franz Kline's violent gashes of black against a white canvas. But I soon feel uncomfortable with this discussion--I have to be in the right mood to enjoy these paintings, and of course I cannot really give an adequate account of American art since 1945. Instead I pass on the names of great critics and scholars whose books might be available in local libraries--Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, Meyer Schapiro.

She asks me what I think of Russian painting, but not much comes to mind. I strain to think of Malevitch and the constructivists of the 1920s, Kandinsky, living in exile, perhaps Chagall, but no other names come to mind. The early Soviet years produced a galaxy of major artists, but I don't want to offend her, and I add that Russia's contribution to art is in the literature of the nineteenth century and the music of the twentieth. I ask her which Russian writers she admires, and she mentions a few names of the twentieth century.

"What about Tolstoy?" I ask. A Saturday ago, a young woman, destitute, stood at the entrance to the corridor next to a bank of elevators in my building, her daughter by her side. She began her appeal in Russian, and I answered that I didn't understand the language. "*Pomosh*," she replied simply. "Help." I gave her a small sum, but later in the evening, on a subway ride back to my neighborhood, I thought of Tolstoy's novella *Master and Man*, a masterpiece that has entranced me since I read it a decade ago. I asked Ira whether she knew the composition, but she didn't. I am always surprised when educated Russians tell me they are unfamiliar with this remarkable story. Ira says she has lost interest in Tolstoy, and I understand why—it is a name that has been dinned into her since she could read.

Conversation proceeds in a random manner. She laments the failure of a talented Russian painter in New York, and I explain how the art world is dominated by money, fashion, and the verdict of a few critics. Surprisingly, she says that architecture is the art she values most, adding that she hopes to visit Scandinavia to examine its traditional styles. She also plans to visit Magadan, Kolyma and Solovetsky Islands--some of the worst labor camps during the Stalin years--to inspect the surviving monasteries. She describes her education at Moscow State. She is a product of the History Department, of *fakultet*, as it's called, and, somewhat improbably, wrote a thesis on the political philosophy of Jefferson Davis. The culture of the Antebellum South appealed to her. Ira is an only child, not unusual in a country of small families (at least among the ethnic Russians), and says she wanted a brother. Her mother told her, "You were enough." She lives with her family, which is also very common. She describes a Russian journalist who has lived for years in Dusseldorf and is disillusioned with Germany. He says the West is dying....She wants me to describe my reaction to living in Moscow.

"I feel as if I'm seeing the city through gauze. I enjoy the university and most of my students. The Metro is easy to figure out. But it is also uncomfortable here. I don't know why I came or what I'm doing here or how long I should stay. I sometimes wonder whether my brain is still working."

"I think it is," she laughs.

Our talk goes on. It is mostly intelligent, and she is attentive to me, but after two or three hours, I decide to leave. The background music, dismaying at best, has become intolerably vulgar, and it displeases both of us. We put on our coats and return to the street, where conditions are even fouler than when we entered the cafe. Instead of the

snow there is rain and sleet, the streets are dense with slush, and the sky heavy and dark. After a block or two I ask Ira if I can hold her hand.

"For what purpose?"

For what purpose? To bring some warmth into a dark day, or combat the emptiness of things, or produce a sense of contact. But these are the answers that occur to me several minutes later, and for now the disappointment of her reply has bitten into me rather hard. I keep my hand and my reaction to myself, and we cover the traffic-ridden streets in silence. She is leading me to the Moscow Conservatory to check the posters listing current concerts, but in this pelting rain, what I chiefly want is the Metro and my apartment. I volunteer to cover us both with my umbrella, and she accepts the offer, for a moment taking my arm; but she has second thoughts and checks her reaction, returning her hand to her coat pocket. She is a tall woman striding briskly down the street, over the curb, past other pedestrians, not hindered by the snow or the slush. Matching her pace while keeping the umbrella aloft is fatiguing. Finally we reach the conservatory and check the posters. A concert scheduled for a week hence has Beethoven, Wagner and Strauss, but I have trouble interpreting the program. Wagner is clear enough--passages from *Tristan*--but I can't make heads or tails of the Beethoven. Ira seems to say that the violin concerto has been transcribed for piano, an idea that strikes me as peculiar and uninteresting. I have little taste for Strauss, and I positively dislike the teasing rhythms of *Till Eulenspiegel*. We study a few more posters, but this is absurd--the rain if anything is a bit heavier, and water is seeping into my boots.

We return to the street, and I struggle with that quick Muscovite stride, block after block after block. Finally we reach the Metro, and as we go down the steps I close the

umbrella, remove my scarf and step onto the platform. Drops of water on my glasses make me feel foolish, and I dry them as we stand there in silence.

"Your train is on that side," she says, gesturing.

"I'll wait for yours."

"Thanks."

She smiles and looks into my face, a glance we hold for a moment, one pair of brown eyes regarding another, and it seems as though we might renew contact. But our trains arrive at the same time and we part.

The ride back to my station is long and empty. Was I too critical of things? Was I unattractive to her, or too old? Was the attempt at physical contact too abrupt? These questions are as futile as they are inevitable, but I consider them anyway, as the train makes one stop after another, interminably. And then I remember: "My name is D.C., and I am an American living in Moscow...." This was in response to a listing in a local paper. A young woman sought to exchange lessons--Russian for English--and before meeting Ira I posted a letter accepting her offer. This is something I never do in Chicago, and I am attacked once more by the doubts I overcame before answering. I never strike up conversations with women I don't know, or invite them out, or later suggest holding hands.

Finally, Southwest, my stop, the last on the line. I exit from the wrong side of the station, retrace my steps in the passage under the street, and miss the bus that would have gotten me out of this weather and returned me to my neighborhood. Once there, I decide to visit a small food shop. The young woman at the counter--after three weeks in the city we are familiar to each other--has large green eyes, a mass of fine black hair and a shop

girl prettiness I admire. I buy a few bottles of Baltika, an excellent beer from Petersburg, and also some buns, but instead of the sweetness I am expecting from her her manner seems to me brusque. I ask for a *paket*, or bag, to take this home in, but instead of the simple white plastic sack I usually get she offers a more elaborate product with handles that costs. I decline this and she shrugs: "*Ladno*." Curious about this particle of speech, I check my pocket dictionary: "Alright."

In my apartment I open the beer and, though I am not hungry, I have one bun, and then a second. I lie in bed, the radio tuned to the lulling banality of a late-afternoon BBC sports program (a cricket match somewhere), the snow coming down a dark-blue sky, visible in the window. I doze, and wake myself, and put the kettle on for tea; and later that night I prepare this account.

March 30

Last night, two nightmares. In the first, a woman I am trying to subdue is slashing me with a scissors. In the second, I am trying desperately to make contact with my father. He is in the house, maybe on the ground floor, but I can't reach him.

March 31

A long subway ride to the northern edge of the city, followed by a bus ride to an odd language school. The standard Moscow style of clustered, identical high-rise building with indeterminate addresses, which invariably means getting lost and harassing

people--often many--for directions. Muscovites have put laundry to dry on cords over their balconies ten, fifteen, and twenty stories up, though what they expect to dry in this cold, damp wind is a mystery. It feels like late-October in Chicago, and the bare, grey towers rise into the overcast sky. The language school has advertised in a local paper but, as usual, I can't find it, even though I'd thought I'd got the hang of interpreting addresses. I enter the wrong building, where a pleasant secretary with no English imagines I am seeking what turns out to be a neighborhood children's school of some kind, from which I am curtly asked to leave by a woman at the door. A middle-aged woman inside a cement cafe fairly shouts at me when I ask for a telephone. I step outside and a third woman, this one young, directs me to the school--about twenty feet from where I am standing.

Inside I'm introduced to the director, a woman in her forties, English halting, German excellent, Italian apparently good. She studied in Heidelberg. Oddly, the school has lectures for students and staff on Indian spiritual ways (*geisteswissenschaft*, the director calls it), which are in English. Shortly an aide comes in, a young woman, squarish face, glasses, large and beautiful brown eyes, who quizzes me in very good English on my teaching experience. Eve. I protest the low wages--\$15 for a 90-minute class. She seems a bit critical of my responses to her interview questions. After this exchange I am offered tea and some sort of rice cake, and another woman on their staff goes through some spiritual spiel--the food was made with love and we're all children of God, who is pure light. Despite these oddities I find the place attractive, but still too far away, the opposite end of Moscow, and a solid hour on the subway.

That night, at about 11:30 or so, the phone rings: Eve. Because of persistent bad sleep I have begun to put myself to bed early, and my head has been on the pillow for at least an hour.

"Isn't this a bit late for a call?"

"Not if it's not business."

This is oddly true, by Russian standards; they are generally night people and can be up and about past midnight. We speak for fifteen to twenty minutes. She advises me to avoid the school, says it is small and dominated by a religious cult. Also on the verge of bankruptcy. Adds that she has been there for two weeks and plans to quit tomorrow. Her father is Armenian and lives in Yerevan; the mother is an English Jew living in England. (They're not divorced). A sister in Israel. Sometime after this conversation ends the phone rings a second time, but I don't answer it.

April 1

My first visit to the computer lab on the eighth floor of First Humanities, a small room where I will spend a considerable part of my ten-week stay in Russia. It was late afternoon, and I spent nearly ninety minutes trying to get access to my e-mail account at a university in Chicago where I formerly taught. It is a great shock to see here in Moscow the university website, which draws me back to the years I spent there and which in my present circumstances has the remoteness of Saturn. Two young students and finally the director come to my aid; we get nowhere. Ditto when I call A. from the cheap rotary phone in the lab. "Well, we did our best...or worst," I say, trying to get over my keen

disappointment, and Masha, a very agreeable young student peering in silence at the screen next to mine, nods ruefully at this joke, not taking her eyes off her terminal. (I'll describe the lab more fully later.) I end up with an account in the Moscow State system, which is a party line (the pun is unavoidable) used by a number of students and faculty. Email and the Internet have reached this province, but in some ways, it's a collectivity still.

April 2

I find myself on the subway seated next to a young woman who is reading, in English, Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*. I am tempted to ask if she can follow the text, but suppress the urge. An inveterate carrier of books--I dislike those idle minutes on busses and subways without one--I return to my own. I have brought several with me from Chicago, along with photocopied essays and notes from a seminar on Proust that I took with a famous scholar some years before. My closest friend in Chicago, taking me to the airport, had scoffed when he saw me with all this: I should, he said, pack one suitcase, not two, and give all my attention to the Bible and an esoteric volume by the mystic Rudolf Steiner. That was all I needed. But I regarded the books I had brought as protection in a land hostile and unknown. They included Ernst Pawel's biography of Theodore Herzl (a present from A.); an essay by Bergson; some Robert Frost, Suzanne Langer; Freud and the psychologist Kohut; as well as *A Room on the Route*, a long-forgotten novel by the English journalist Godfrey Blunden who spent the war years in Moscow and also produced the far superior *The Time of the Assassins*. I had

thought a great deal about the titles I wished to bring, much the way a physician treating a patient might consider the best combination of medicines, reshuffling the list continually, depending on my interests at the moment; and in Moscow I ended up reading very little of what I had brought. I often felt too scattered to read anything so demanding as philosophy or technical psychology. No matter. Books have been a constant companion since my earliest years; I knew the frustration of looking at them before learning to read. Their greatest value has been protection from isolation, a guarantee of stability, the promise of a wider existence. Having books, those stitched and glued physical objects brimming with sentences, was more essential than reading them. In Moscow I completed no more than half of the Pawel and hardly touched the rest. Because of my trouble with sleep, I began going to bed early, between 9:30 p.m. and 10 p.m., and there wasn't much time for Freud, Langer & Co. after diary jottings and preparation for classes. A few of the texts, secreted away in zippered sheaths of my luggage, remained hidden away until my return to Chicago; I rediscovered them unpacking.

April 3

Up to the electronics shops at *Ostankino*, a plaza in northern Moscow, continuously wind-swept, I am told, where speakers mounted on streetlamps are projecting pop music. I am accompanied by Olga K. She is looking for a cassette player, I for a coffeemaker and a shortwave radio. She hesitates between different vendors and chooses the first--the second was a questionable-looking man selling from a stall, and if she wants to return the merchandise later, he may no longer be there. Handling the

product on the subway ride home, she notes, gesturing playfully with her hands, "It's like me, short and round." She describes practicing her intonation during her first English classes, working, of all things, with a metronome: "The rain/In England/can change/very quickly." In the apartment, I find that I cannot tune in the BBC, which is a sharp disappointment.

April 4

A fairly bad day, after another night of unrest. I am awakened three times by my telephone, which I can neither switch off nor disconnect. I drag myself through my Russian class. Sometimes I feel tortured, simply tortured, by words and grammar and the needling tone of the instructor, who succeeds in making me feel quite incompetent. When I'm asked a question, my mind goes irrecoverably vacant. We are asked to identify our favorite actors, and the only name I can think of is Jimmy Stewart. A student teacher with an interest in music quizzes me on opera, and the only ones I can recall are *Idomeneo* and *The Magic Flute*, though I've seen quite a few. I share this matchbox room with a Brit and a small group of Swedish students; our common language is of course English. Katya, the homely, young Swedish girl I sit next to, is doing evangelical work for the Lutheran Church. The text is an extremely dreary product from the Soviet era, and I wish I'd brought my older ones from Chicago that go back to my first contact with the language nearly 20 years before.

I have a one-stop trolley ride afterwards to the Professor's Dining Hall in the main university building, which is the best *stolovaya* on campus. Standing in line for the

cafeteria food, I am befriended by Sergei, a specialist in environmental sciences who speaks pretty good English and, in fact, tutors it on the side. Like many here, he relishes the chance to work on his English with me. Later that day, I have a dispiriting interview at another ESL school, this one downtown. Eve had given me the name of the place and I phoned for an interview, which ends inconclusively. How I have come to hate the ESL scene, with its low wages and low status. That evening I have a 30-minute conversation with A., which deals with the physical inconveniences of being here, and later, near eleven, Eve calls again. She tells me she is pregnant by an Englishman who formerly taught in Moscow but has since moved to a small town not too far away and now refuses to talk to her. The first time we spoke she put her age at twenty-five, and now says she's twenty-three. The father is nearly fifty, and she can't understand why he refuses to marry her.

"Older men are often afraid," I suggest. "They fear they'll lose a young wife to a younger man later on."

"What can I do?"

I suggest writing a long letter indicating her feelings. The discussion shifts to my interview at the school and my reaction to the director.

"Did you find her an old prude?"

"No."

"She's an old woman."

"No, she's not. She can't be past her forties."

"She's older than I am. How old do you think I am?"

"You said you're 25."

"No, I didn't. I'm 23."

She had said she has two children--one twenty-five years younger, her unborn child, and one twenty-three years older, the father. The conversation shifts to my proficiency in languages, and I tell her my French and German are passable. She says she is famous for knowing nine languages from the Near East and East Asia, but considers English her native language.

"What's your specialty?" she asks.

"I don't have one. I'm a reporter with a taste for higher things."

"Can I say I'm a specialist in Asian languages?"

"You can say you're a specialist in anything. It's a general word."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"In Chicago or Moscow?"

"Chicago."

"I suppose there's a woman waiting for me there."

"Do you love her?"

"No."

"What are your intellectual interests?"

"Literature and philosophy."

"Whom have you read in philosophy?"

"Plato, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger."

"I've never heard of Bergson. Do you know any Hebrew?"

"No."

"What sort of Jewish man doesn't know Hebrew?"

"Plenty. I don't go to services either. Did you say you have a sister in Israel?"

"Yes," she says, her voice rising suspiciously.

"And she studies Hebrew?"

"Yes," she says, still more suspiciously.

I complain about a Hebrew teacher I had some years before, who taught the cursive and printed forms of the language at the same time, greatly complicating matters for the class. Eve cuts me off and interjects: "Men are weak."

"Why?"

"Because they won't commit themselves to a woman."

"That's a common problem. Read *Anna Karenina*. A woman I know in Chicago says men wander, women attach themselves."

"How old are you?"

"I'm 43."

"Pretty soon you'll be too old for marriage."

"I'm sure you're right."

She offers more tips on finding work teaching English, a subject she knows plenty about after four years in Moscow. But I soon bring the conversation to an end. She's an odd woman, and it's late.

"You look Jewish," she says.

"So do you."

"Why?"

"The usual dark looks."

April 5

Combating intense irritation all day, and into the evening as well. The BBC shifts to Russian just when I want some news—I'm using a borrowed radio--the toilet doesn't flush properly, creating that unpleasantly resonant sound of water rushing through pipes, and dogs are baying interminably outside. The accretion of dust on the cheap furnishings of this apartment offends me. A continual assault on my senses. Even the badness of my penmanship as I write is an irritation; and the accumulated hurts of one's personal history.

A Saturday evening at the Bolshoi Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. The Chopin is getting a bit familiar, but at least the young pianists are performing at a high level. N., an elderly woman, a colleague at the University, has invited me out, and she has come with another older woman, also apparently an English teacher. N. has told me that she leaves in the middle of concerts nowadays, because she fears returning home alone at a late hour. In Chicago, I had been keenly anxious about the reports of danger in the city, but I now think that they are absurd: Moscow is unquestionably safer than Chicago, and for that matter any large American city. At the Metro stop for the university, *Universitet*, I noticed during my first several weeks young people, standing on the curb, extending their arms to get the attention of a driver, and then getting into cars that pulled over. How nice, I thought: Their friends have agreed to pick them up and spare them the wait for a bus. Nearly a month passed before it occurred to me that people were simply hailing cars, negotiating fares, and paying for rides in the same way that we in the West solicit taxis. Indeed, young women, alone, often late at night, get into cars driven by complete strangers. I have done this a few times myself, though my primitive Russian makes me reluctant; I hadn't realized that others were doing it too. On the other

hand, one shouldn't take too much for granted. A group of Chasidic Jews visiting from Canada was greeted pleasantly on Red Square but was later set upon by a group of thugs at a remote subway stop. I have been specially warned about roving "gypsies," those mysterious bands that are a particular danger in the open-air markets. They are said to be very aggressive, and eventually I did find myself accosted by these brigands, whatever nationality they may be. I fell into the habit of going to the Metropole Hotel downtown every Friday before my 10:30 a.m. class to buy the *International Herald-Tribune*, a treat I allowed myself once a week, and to pick up the local English-language papers. As I left the *Okhonty Yd* Metro stop, my last time there, a horde of these people, perhaps as many as ten, a few of them just children, crossed the street to intercept me and beg for money as I made my way to the hotel. Their technique is to descend on a potential victim unexpectedly and to disarm him with their numbers, their motley-colored garb, their odd cries and pleas--in short, instilling fear. A diminutive woman leading the charge went so far as to put her hand on my arm. Struggling with fatigue-induced irritation after a night of broken sleep, I shouted *nyet*, and the sharpness of my reaction causes the group to back off while a few Russians nearby freeze, riveted by the encounter. But this was my only threatening experience in the city.

Before meeting N. at the Conservatory, I had made an afternoon excursion with students to *Ostankino* to return the short-wave and find a barbershop. With little Russian, that's a trial: At the electronics shop, I am told that even with a receipt returns aren't accepted if the owner is absent, probably because he doesn't trust his staff. At a barbershop, a punctilious young woman asks continual questions about styling even though all I've asked for is a trim. Fortunately, a student stayed with me to translate.

And the woman does do an excellent job. Still, I feel rushed, returning home for a hurried meal and dashing back to downtown Moscow to look for the Conservatory: Muscovites who imagine they know its location are sending me in different directions in the raw spring weather.

After the concert I leave N. and her elderly friend at their Metro stop and wander in the underground corridors of the system, trying to arrange some entertainment; it's still early. A pick-up string orchestra has attracted a decent-size crowd with *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. A violinist, a young woman, plays in another stretch of the system; as I drop a few rubles into a hat our eyes meet, briefly. Out of the system and up to Red Square. St. Basil's at the south end of the plaza is extraordinary, as flood lights capture its weird beauty, the multiple spirals rising in a black sky. In the darkness, a woman amidst a small group of young people identifies me as an American and greets me playfully: "Hello." Her friends titter. This is more like it; this is wonderful. It's why I've come to Moscow. I wander toward the other end of the Square, develop a fantasy of speaking flawless German, and head for the Metro for a return home.

At the end of the line, Southwest, I wait for a bus to Olympic Village, and after a half-hour it occurs to me that service there has stopped for the night, though it's only eleven. Later on I will learn how to reach Building Sixteen on foot, but for now, in the darkness, I fear getting lost. Fighting rising anxiety--the reports of local danger are exaggerated, as I've said, but I won't discover that for a while--I track down a taxi, remembering the stories. When I try to establish the fare, the driver indicates his meter, but I don't want to be cheated, and try to get an estimate. We settle on 30,000 rubles, or \$5.25, which seems a bit high for a five-minute ride, but it's late and I'm tired. With

difficulty, we make the necessary turns in the dark and find my building, but now the driver can't break a 50,000-ruble note. I have dollar bills in the apartment, and with considerable reluctance he agrees that I should fetch them, brightening when I return with singles. He has insisted on six.

"Where are you from," he asks, running off the names of some countries, only one of which, Argentina, I can identify.

"I'm an American."

"From where."

"Chicago."

"Chicago," he says tentatively, testing the sound. "Chicago bluss..."

"Bulls," I correct.

"Chicago mafia."

"Not now. Formerly."

We shake hands. Three minutes in my apartment, and the phone rings. It is A., and for a half-hour I describe the day with great animation. Trouble sleeping.

April 7

Afternoon at the Pushkin Museum with T., another colleague. Picking me up at a Metro stop, she drives past the disastrous Tseretelli monument to Peter the Great, a dark, massive and ugly vertical structure planted in the Moscow River--there is a public campaign to demolish it--and a high-rise where, she says, Yezhov's grandchildren live. Fabulous museum. Observing a still life by an unidentified Dutch painter from the 17th

century, above all the somber drinking glass half-way filled with wine, I understand that art invests the particulars of life with resonant human meanings. I have read that, and now I see that it's true. Second-rate commissions and Impressionist art near the beginning disappoint, given the Pushkin's reputation, but I found myself coming alive in a room filled with superb canvasses by Cezanne and Van Gogh. The accumulated massing of white of the clown's outfit in Cezanne's *Pierrot and the Harlequin* is one of the most extraordinary things I've seen in a museum; it is dazzling. M., who has come with me, is greatly entertained by the Harlequin's absurdly superior smile and gives strong and lively reactions to the collection of art; an excellent host.

Called Ira later that evening. Conversation brief, strained and inert; I do not ask her out.

April 8

An unusual day, and generally unattractive. Another bad session with the Monday morning law students--tried to get a discussion going of the Simpson murder trial, but it was slow going. Students talked among themselves--characteristic of Russian classes generally--and seemed bored and indifferent, with occasional smirking and scoffing. Offended, I told the two instructors responsible for the class afterwards that I wouldn't teach it anymore. Really, the University can sometimes seem like a dismal place run by improvisation, with classes found, dropped, and reshuffled, not to mention the severe decay of the facilities generally. One instructor simply abandoned her classes for a ten-day trip to the Mediterranean (a vacation). During the early-May celebrations

two other instructors will combine various classes (that I'll teach) to allow trips to Western Europe. Of course, one has to remember that salaries here are less than pitiable. Students don't get individual course grades at the end of the semester, but instead take subject-area exams at the end of the school year and drop in and out of classes as they like. A strange student with an odd, intense manner in a cheap suit in my Monday morning class wears a tie clasp, an accessory I haven't seen for at least twenty years, that never seems attached to his shirt. Tall, thin, with flaxen hair. After I describe how security personnel in the streets and subway stations check dark-skinned types from the Caucasus for identity papers, he assures me that he feels mistreated as a Russian in Moscow. A strange, unpalatable collection of students, but I won't be seeing them anymore.

Later, off to Moscow State Linguistics University for another job interview, and a disagreeable encounter with K., an American man from Chicago whose age is close to mine; oddly enough, I had a vague memory of him from a decade before; we had friends in common. Chance encounters with people from my past are always unsettling, and this was more troubling than most. K. is a seedy man with a sallow face and bad teeth and is injuring his health with cigarettes. Russians often do little to protect their health the way middle-class Americans do. Even Sergei, the biologist specializing in environmental stresses, drinks the tap water, though he knows it's poisonous. This stems either from profound indifference or a sense from decades of Soviet tedium that as this life goes one had better take whatever pleasures might be available. This can affect expatriates. I didn't recognize K. at all, but he seemed to remember me, and by questioning me he narrows down the couple we knew in Chicago and the grounds of our acquaintance. I do

remember the occasion where we saw a minimalist version of *The Cherry Orchard*. An offensive, needling style. Offers me cigarettes in an affected manner though he knows I don't smoke. Divorced from a Russian woman. Doing administrative work for the school, deeply bored, at work evidently on a manuscript of some kind. When his secretary leaves, he makes a remark about his sex life in Moscow, then describes two and a half years of abstinence, and goes off on a barely intelligible description of his study of Sufism and a quest for spiritual growth. The demands became a "spiritual prison," he decided, further concluding that one's conduct is irrelevant anyway because (as best I could follow his argument) life is karmically determined. I don't think he's a fool, but he can sound like one, and because my interview with the director had been delayed, our exchange (or his monologue) gets extended intolerably. The school is an attractive place near *Park Kultury*, smaller than Moscow State, more intimate, no more dilapidated, in a good neighborhood and closer to downtown. In my interview with the director, I am offered as part of my wages a private room in a nearby dorm set aside for instructors. The school in the Soviet years had an excellent reputation, but I'll probably reject the offer, if for no other reason than to avoid K. The dorm is probably border-line adequate.

Back to the University and up to the computer lab and a wait for the sole machine with email access. Ten or twelve letters from A., some sexually suggestive. Andrei and Mikhail, two students, draw me into conversation to improve their English:

Andrei: What do you think of Russia?

Me: That's a hard question.

Andrei: In a single sentence.

Me: Life is hard here.

Andrei defends his country with a claim that is dinned into the ear of every visiting Westerner: that instead of our materialism the Russians have an inner life, or soul. I suppose I'm prepared to believe this, but I'm not sure it's adequate compensation for the privations of living here. The three of us return to the Metro, *Universitet*, and I give them my phone number and offer to help with their English in return for the help they've given me in the lab. Tried to answer A.'s messages, but at one point six students were peering over my shoulder, curious or simply waiting to use the computer. Seeking consolation for the day's troubles, I phone her that evening. In a month in Moscow I have dropped over \$500 in telephone calls, but the connection has become important in many obvious ways.

April 9

I am back at *Ostankino* for my third visit, now to return the radio. Quite put out, I am prepared for a confrontation, determined to have the product accepted and my money returned; but it becomes clear there is no need for belligerence. The same salesman from Saturday, wearing glasses, quite overweight, apparently Jewish, takes my receipt as well as the radio, has me follow him down a corridor as he consults with a superior, and seats me at a desk while he completes various forms. And then the lights go out, leaving me, him and various secretaries sitting in near-darkness. We do nothing for several minutes, until the salesman produces a flashlight, which I hold for him as he completes the paperwork. I consider his life, which I know almost nothing about, and compare it with mine. He seems to me an obscure clerk learning his trade in a freshly created retail

establishment, while I am an obscure writer with access to a modest bank account and the rest of the world. I was raised in a democracy with ample means available for my self-development, while his life (until now) has been circumscribed by the dictatorship. But what is the difference in our spiritual constitution, in our inner lives? Prosperity can be damaging; his scantier means, less diffuse but more concentrated in their application, might perhaps be used to a more telling effect. Michael Iossel, the Russian-Jewish expatriate, describes in *Every Hunter Wants to Know* his encounter with an American student in Leningrad in the 1970s, whom he resembles, and who, (like Iossel), is Jewish. His family (like Iossel's) originated in the Pale, migrating to America early in the century. Iossel considers the experience of those who stayed and those who left, and the consequences for the following generations. My forebears are from Poland rather than Russia, but I find myself considering the same questions as the young salesman fills in lines and boxes. This is not the first time I have found myself in proximity to a stranger whose appearance identifies him as a Jew. His ancestors rather than mine could have attempted the migration, reversing our situations. He finishes his work, and after I thank him we shake hands, he to resume his destiny, and I mine. However, this excursion and its by-meditations has come with a price: Two full hours have passed by the time I return to the University.

April 10

The experience here can be wretchedly hard. Went to the Russian class at International College at 10 a.m., thinking I'd be an hour late, and discovered that it had

been moved to noon. That night P., the instructor, calls and reports that he had a faculty meeting and that a student teacher had assumed the class, though I saw no one in the room this morning. But even this much isn't clear--P. hates to speak English, though his proficiency is passable; and at the end of an exhausting day, I am compelled over the phone to interpret his Russian. So instead of class, I went to the computer lab for several hours. A lovely student came in, unlike most, beautifully dressed, agitating me sexually. Had great trouble getting access to the financial data I wanted, and when I had to enter ticker symbols, the keyboard produced Cyrillic characters. Converting them to roman took time. Then I read A.'s messages, which were flattering but also rambling, her email style, and on this party line, I haven't learned how to delete them.

A fine meal at the Professor's Dining Hall. And then into the wind-driven streets. It's the middle of April, but it might be early March in Chicago--bright and cold, not even 40 degrees, with a sharp wind casting all the debris of this dirty, dusty city into the faces of pedestrians. Large stretches of ground, gullied and trenched, have no grass whatever, and the main streets are quite dirty. Underestimating the sharpness of the cold, I left my scarf at home. A long subway ride to the American Embassy, only to be told by a clerk at the entrance--with a Marine guard eyeing me--that the library is in another part of the city entirely. That will have to wait. Back to the subway, the stop at Lenin Library, a long walk at a raw time that recalls a line of Eliot's--"Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind"--and over to the Conservatory for a ticket for Mahler's Ninth. With every step, I wonder if I shouldn't simply return to Olympic Village and bring the day's unhappy peregrinations to an end.

It's hard, but in my apartment that night I force myself to study the dull, Soviet-era Russian text. Then a thirty-minute conversation with A. An exhausting, punishing day, including irritation over my slacks, which are baggier than I want. Wasted time, cold weather, trekking across the city, put out with my own clothing. A long, warm shower helps a lot. I am wondering what the Mahler will sound like Thursday--I have heard it twice in two years, with excellent orchestras, and it seems inconceivable that an ensemble in Moscow that has been depleted of its best talent will offer anything comparable.

April 11

The Mahler. I am seated next to what I take to be a Jewish couple, perhaps in their late thirties. A large group, perhaps six or seven people, sidle into our row, forcing everyone to stand, and then retreat, comically, after discovering that its seats are elsewhere, their faces to us, not their backs, which is how Americans make their exit. "*Kakoy kauchmar*," a middle-aged man mutters to himself. ("What a nightmare.") The Jewish wife and I exchange a glance and smile. The orchestra is ragged at the beginning, so ragged that I wonder whether I should have come. But the group improves with each movement, and the final one is done wonderfully well. Not for the last time, an orchestra here plays with real feeling, compensating for its defects. I congratulate the conductor afterwards, who hardly understands a word of my German but dumbly takes my hand. On the way home *aux anges*, as the French say--walking on air. An elderly woman in the subway asks me to take her things, strapped to an airport luggage device, down a small

flight of stairs. Exuberant, I bound down the flight so quickly that she follows me with a start, fearful that I might run off with her possessions.

April 12

An evening with Oleg and his family, who live in a high-rise on the northern edge of the city. I meet him at my Metro stop, Southwest, feeling somewhat chastened, getting there fifteen or twenty minutes late. I lingered at the computer lab longer than I should have, checking different websites and transmitting a message to A. Much help from Masha, a very young student in the law department who has been quite friendly to me--a slight woman, fair-skinned, intent light-blue eyes, light-brown hair with an open Russian face. She steals glances at me from a terminal a few feet from mine, and when I am rushing to finish up and meet with Oleg, tells me simply: "Let'em wait." I have gotten into the habit of labeling my messages to the States, "Cohen in Moscow," which she finds amusing. I shall ask her later for a phone number, but for the moment I have to say the right thing to A.: We quarreled last night over my description of a charming French girl in my Russian class. A. considered this a deliberate provocation, and the call ended badly.

Later, at Oleg's house, after a long subway ride. I was given his name by a medical student I tutored in Chicago who trained in Moscow. Oleg is an endocrinologist, his wife a cardiologist, and his parents are also physicians. Everyone looks Jewish, but I see a crucifix on the wall. All four live in the same house which, given the housing squeeze in Moscow and the tendency of the generations to live together, is not unusual. I

had called Oleg that week, and in typical Russian style he invited me at once to dinner. They are cautiously appraising me, Oleg and his father, and trade glances to check each other's reaction. They have clever Jewish faces. I am low on energy, after three hours of sleep, and Friday is my heaviest teaching day, with three 90-minute classes. On the subway ride north Oleg describes to me how isolated Russian medicine was during the Soviet era. They have different troubles now, with scarce funds restricting research and subscriptions to western medical journals; but at least researchers have access to the Internet. He produces from his pocket a small hand-held object that is supposed to allow patients to take their own EKG readings when remote from a medical facility and transmit the data where it can be properly interpreted--evidence, he says, that Russians can produce distinctive products.

Table talk at his place shifts to politics. Like all educated and successful Russians, they favor the country's transformation. Someone produces a newspaper photo of a street scene during the aborted Communist takeover in August 1991--Oleg, his father, and other supporters of Gorbachev are keeping a tank at bay. Two pictures of kids in their twenties who did not survive that week. But this exuberance was six years ago, and the mood has changed. The father explains that people want to live like Americans and work like Soviets, i.e., hardly at all. I am quizzed on what a middleclass income would be in the states, and I explain the dilemmas that come with prosperity--little stability, while the usual domestic and social comforts get kicked away.

The conversation shifts to environmental issues, which are especially interesting to the mother, who has some connection with the Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. She notes that wind carried radioactive materials from Chernobyl north to

Belarus, where higher disease rates reflect the damage. They explain that tap water contains heavy metals in addition to bacteria, and that boiling only removes the latter--many Russians drink only bottled water. I must have said the right things, because by the end of the evening the father asks if I would be willing to work on his English.

Afterward Oleg and I spend a little time at his computer, and I send another message to A.

April 13

The phone rings in the middle of a Saturday afternoon, and it's Eve inviting me to dine with her downtown. We meet at Park Kultury, her Metro stop, and shove off to an attempted Western-style, overpriced place frequented by wealthier Russians. Eve seems to like neither Russia nor the U.K., and, quite lonely, hates to return to her room on the weekends. She lives, it turns out, at the facility maintained by Moscow State Linguistics, though she teaches elsewhere. "I don't like Russians," she tells me. "They're hard to avoid in Moscow," I suggest. She said the child she is carrying reminds her of the father she had the affair with, and though she doesn't have any money, she won't insist on child support if the father doesn't volunteer any. In a conversation once he questioned whether he was the father, and Eve, enraged, insulted him over his age.

April 14

Sunday morning, and a long conversation with A., which depresses me. She's unhappy about my trip to Moscow--she's lonely in Chicago, and quarrels with her

roommate--and refuses to look for an alternative to the wretched assignments she finds as an adjunct instructor. Under serious financial pressure, with unpaid graduate school loans, she has rejected a career outside of academic life. She is adamant and won't debate the issue. Students at the college where she teaches are indifferent and write so badly most ought to be flunked. This is a familiar dilemma for the instructors who come and go in English departments--in the face of such incompetence one isn't sure what standards to apply, and the adjuncts are such transients that they don't know whom to talk to. I nap later in the afternoon, trying to recover from another night of poor sleep.

But in the evening, an excellent concert with P. at the Conservatory. She is a student at Moscow State, and a colleague has her asked to spend time with me in the city. We have fallen into the habit of going out, and tonight we're going to a chamber concert. I have decided for now to forgo a romance, which makes me feel freer and more comfortable. She is a fifth-year student working on her "*diplome*," a lengthy essay graduating students have to produce, and like most students she is delaying and asks me not to discuss the matter. She quizzes me instead on my intellectual interests and personal history. She lost her father at an early age and lives with her mother, a computer science teacher who doesn't greatly enjoy teaching. P. considers herself remote and not not very approachable, but in fact she has always been friendly.

In the *Maly Zal*, set aside for chamber concerts, the Moscow Trio performs Beethoven, wonderfully. L. has had little contact with serious music but seems to enjoy herself. The curious style of Russian musical performance. A middle-aged woman comes on stage to announce the music and musicians, for symphonies as well as for chamber groups. When she is finished, applause, and the musicians enter, and more

applause. Entire orchestras file onto the stage at once, just minutes before a performance--no on-stage rehearsing of difficult passages. Programs cost about 50 cents, and since not everyone buys one, you can see people looking around to find someone willing to share.

The Bolshoi Zal of the Conservatory where orchestras play is a plain, agreeable old-fashioned place going back to the middle of the last century, with a main floor and a balcony that curves around in front. On the walls are large, somewhat romanticized paintings of composers. Most of the seats in the balcony are bench-like, undivided cushioned rows. Not uncomfortable, and no more cramped than similar seats in Chicago. Chamber concerts in the Maly Zal are generally better than orchestral ones; fewer of the top musicians have been lost to the west. The scheduling is conventional--Beethoven, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Chopin; the Mahler 9 was I imagine on the farther end of the public's taste. I have read that Russian musicians, paid the same miserable wages, run from concert to concert, rendering the various ensembles interchangeable. But the chamber groups have been together for decades and probably have fewer options abroad. I learn of their performances by checking the large white posters pasted to the walls of the Conservatory that identify the concerts for a week or two hence; no glowing endorsements by critics. There are listings in the English-language papers, but these are incomplete, and I often find myself making a detour in my trips downtown just to check the schedule. The route by now is very easy for me--the Metro stop near the Kremlin at Lenin Library, a brief and brisk stride down V. Street to avoid the heavier traffic on Tverskaya, down Romanov St., past the beautiful courtyard apartment buildings from the nineteenth century, three stories high, rose or pink, depending on the sunlight, where bronze markers identify in bas relief the famous Soviet generals who lived there,

including Voroshilov. This is one of the most expensive addresses in Moscow. A few blocks on Nikitskaya to the Conservatory. I have been attending concerts twice a week, and certain faces in the two halls are becoming familiar--expatriates with a taste for serious music acquire tickets for two or three bucks. There are three box offices, and I shuttle among them, studying seating charts and specifying a location as best I can.

April 15

This morning a call from A., who offers advice on arranging long-distance telephone service. We lament that in the apartment I have a rotary phone, which precludes using a service charging low rates. After a lengthy wait for the only machine in the lab with email access, I transmit a message to her. A. is a stabilizing element of my life here. She offers the continuous support of feminine interest and contact with someone in Chicago. Not a beautiful woman, and a few years older than I, but she is attractive. What I find so unusual about this rapport is the way it has developed. We met last semester at a university where we shared an office. Outspoken, A. surprised me by openly criticizing a high-placed woman in the department who controlled her future at the university. But the outburst only reflects A's commitment to education--she detests people who further their careers at the expense of teaching students. Interested more in reading than producing scholarship, her main passion is teaching.

Slightly bohemian but also fastidious, A. has been attending and teaching at schools across the country for twenty years. Now ABD. Her chief interests are literature and philosophy, and she has a half-finished dissertation on Elizabethan England.

Definitely feminist. I have had no success persuading her to leave academic life, a graveyard for the part-time teachers, but the only career she knows. A vast contempt for the business world. Our attachment developed at the end of the semester, when we began lunching at an excellent cafeteria downtown, and then began visiting a university computer lab off Michigan Avenue. I felt uneasy with her at first--an odd woman teaching an impossibly heavy load that semester, four classes and 84 students. On a cold day in late December, my spirits rose after our first lunch when I left her for the public library. After a month in Russia we began talking twice a day, disregarding the expense.

April 16

One of my hardest days in weeks. Awakened three times last night by the telephone, and in the morning I force myself to rise from bed. From now on, I will swaddle the phone each night in bedding and coats to muffle the ring. In my Russian class I am exhausted, and the instructor has us execute the passive and active voice while maintaining the proper declension--impossible. As usual, the teacher forces me to participate, dutifully correcting my every mistake; he seems to relish pointing out my errors. After that, back to the apartment for the address of a pharmacy that stocks a drug I need for my bronchitis. That had abated before I left Chicago, but the pollution in Moscow has brought it back.

From the Metro stop downtown, a very long trek down the Arbat, a most unattractive retail strip extending west with a heavy burden of traffic and concrete buildings. Underestimated the distance to the pharmacy, which lacks the version of the

drug I'm looking for, though a female druggist dials a dozen times three numbers for the local office of a western drug company. She has tried repeatedly to get through, but the lines are either busy or no one answers. After some research she decides there's no alternative to the drug I had come to buy and I leave empty-handed.

April 17

A. calls this morning at 8:30, as we have begun our routine of talking twice a day, in the morning and evening; she usually places the call because rates from her end are lower. Then off to the pc lab to check the mail and the news. I should be down the street at my Russian class, but the lab is certainly preferable to an hour of the the pushy, ironic style of my instructor. I shall worry no more about declensions and the sequence of errors I make in the simplest Russian sentences, the various cases, dative, accusative, and prepositional, or the instructor's taste for needling us. Regrettable to take such an interest in this country's culture and history and find the language so unpalatable. I first studied it twenty years ago, doing workbook exercises as an undergraduate while listening to a classical station that carried, of all things, concerts from the Moscow Conservatory. So there was an earlier time in my life when these activities also went hand in hand.

The computer lab has the mid-morning emptiness characteristic of universities everywhere, and I have full run of the equipment. In the email bank I discover a lengthy message from A., who argues that I should weigh the meaning of the trip in terms of what I think is best for myself. She is reasoning by way of analogy to the reactions of J., her Chinese roommate. She is an immigrant in her mid-thirties with a brief marriage to an

American behind her; A. has roomed with the woman for six months. Acquisitive and unhappy, S. is a programmer who has just paid an introductions service \$1,500 (she negotiated the fee down five hundred bucks) to help her find her an appropriate man. Her chief demand is a six-figure salary. She has said that returning to China would be a public confession of failure, evidence that she couldn't succeed in the North American mecca. A., an independent woman, is provoked by her roommate's tendency to measure her experience of life by the expectations of others, and she warns me against a similar mistake. The message goes on: She laughs at my spending three or four hours at the lab daily, but when I close its padded steel door I feel that I'm locking myself away in the closest thing I have to an oasis of comfortable modernity in this capital. After I leave I may never see Moscow again, but for now the lab is my contact with the West, to everything that is familiar and comfortable, which I have no access to on the streets or in my home.

So I stay in the lab until 2 p.m., visit the fine cafeteria in the main building up the campus, and have my best lunch since I've arrived; and after that--a day off, why not?--to downtown Moscow, Alexander Gardens, and Red Square. A shock to see St. Basil's at the southern end, always beautiful, especially on one of the first real days of spring since I've come here. Those spires and domes rise into the cloud-interrupted blue. This really is Moscow, I think. How many thousands or millions have had this experience, coming to Red Square and finding this four-century-old church up against the sky on this cobbled rectangle, the Kremlin rising in a wall of bricks a hundred feet on the western side of the plaza? Down the Square and over to GUM, the long, restored, white structure that has become a retail palace, with the inevitable fountain in the middle. Into the streets, I want

to check the Conservatory, but I'm quickly losing stamina. In the underground passages linking the avenues, dozens of identical elderly women stand shoulder to shoulder peddling cheap apparel they hold up in both hands, a depressing sight. Back to the subway, then the bus, a few minutes in a local food shop, and then down the central axis of the complex to my building, Number 16. When the elevator rises in the shaft the button for the seventh floor snaps out with that loud report that always jars me, and in the apartment, fifteen minutes of intelligible news before the broadcast shifts to Russian at 6 p.m.

April 21

Just two students for my mid-morning Monday class, Maggie and another girl, after having fifteen the week before. Maggie is a charming and diminutive student, very young-looking, twenty-one passing for sixteen. Dark eyes, short, dark brown hair and fair skin: not at all Russian looking, and her English is nearly perfect. She notes that students will stop attending classes if they find the instructor a bore. That's encouraging. With just three of us, the talk gets personal, and Maggie tells me that she lives in downtown Moscow with her mother and her boyfriend. (Her father is dead.) A former exchange student, she spent a year in Kalamazoo and had a bad experience in the States. Her first "host mother" accused her of sleeping with the husband, whom Maggie describes as a 60-year-old man. Transferred to a second family, she discovered after some weeks of confusion that the mother was alcoholic. She experimented with cigarettes, grass and cocaine to (as she put it) drive out her unhappiness. After the

confession of cocaine she screws up her face protectively, a pleading look that is intended to deflect criticism: "I was unhappy." Enormously charming.

April 22

I am disciplining myself to spend no more than ninety minutes today. A lengthy message from A., who defends herself for having called me three times the night before. Probably because of persistent poor sleep, I have developed a headcold.

April 23

Another bad night, waking in a bit of panic past midnight--I can barely swallow. I call a physician in Chicago, leaving a message on a tape recorder, and I get a return call just before 3 am. As I guessed, the head cold has aggravated the bronchitis. Nothing serious. But for about a half-hour I struggled with panic--living abroad intensifies your reactions to illness--fearing that I'd need immediate treatment with nowhere to get it. Subways here shut down at 1 a.m., and Russian emergency medical service is not to be trusted. For that matter, Russian medical service of any kind is not to be trusted; the stories of incompetence and neglect are legion. I am told there are some fine physicians here, and I'm sure that's true, but a serious illness in this country is every expatriate's nightmare. After my physician reassures me over the phone that an over-the-counter drug, readily available here, should clear up the problem, I spend another peaceful hour reading and gazing from the window. Across the small grassy square outside is another

building identical to mine, and though all the windows are dark, I can see strips of light from a stairwell at vertical intervals. It is a clear, beautiful night, and the moon is declining in a cold, crystal sky. But at 4 a.m. an ululating car alarm sounds, and I imagine that hundreds of people, perhaps a thousand or more, are jerked from sleep. I return to bed.

In the afternoon, an appointment with the Dean, the large, queenly woman in charge of my program. A large, queenly woman, about sixty, she assures me that I have been a success with my students and colleagues, and asks me to return in the fall. Then back to the drugstore on the Arbat to pick up the drug, only this time I take the trolley to avoid the walk. Afterwards, setting a return date at the airlines office downtown, a good-looking female clerk gets impatient over my questions: Her office needs to check with Chicago over the terms of my ticket. So much here is intensely bureaucratic, and little happens quickly or easily.

April 27

A long day of walking Moscow. A colleague has pointed out an excellent store stocked with Western groceries, and I have taken the subway to *Universitet* and *Leninsky Prospect*, for a trolley going south. Strange and extraordinarily exotic to be on a trolley traversing the great boulevard, going past the retail establishments--furniture, electronics, groceries--and plain shingled apartment houses with Russians passing on the pavement. Their lives and mine have briefly intersected. The directions I was given prove accurate, and after inspecting the place and buying a few things, I return to *Universitet* and then up

north to the Conservatory box office, where an elderly woman slows down her Russian and explains with great charm where my seat in the Maly Zal is. Two tickets, one for chamber music and a second for Beethoven's Ninth.

April 30

A job interview today at a local house that publishes an English-language paper. A copyediting test, and later an interview with S., the managing editor, who explains how he has brought over from his previous company an accountant he describes as "moderately honest"--and the best he could do.

May 2

The early-May holidays have descended, and with them the holiday loneliness familiar to people who are living alone. For the Russians, the first ten days of May are the equivalent of what we in the West experience in late December. Yesterday was May Day, and a week from now they'll celebrate the victory over Germany. Some of my colleagues are traveling in Western Europe, folding their classes together and adding them to mine. Today was only the second time I have spent an entire day in the apartment alone; the first was my first one here, when I was afraid to set foot outside my door. I am feeling a bit weak and I might be slightly ill, so I spend time in bed catching up on lost sleep.

Perhaps it is time for me to describe the computer lab I use at the university, which is reserved for the law department students. I am a newcomer to email and the internet, but I am learning quickly, though Moscow might be a poor introduction to this computerized expansion of my life--the equipment is defective, and frequently hard to operate. If I transmit two or three messages to A. over a day or so, she will receive them in any order, not in the one in which they were sent, or not receive them at all I seem to miss some of the ones she is sending me, and I suspect the same is true for message I have to others in the States with whom I have tried to maintain contact. I learned at the end of my stay that innumerable students have illicitly tapped into the university's server to avoid paying for service themselves, overloading the system and impairing the flow of communications.

There are nine PCs in this lab, but one of them doesn't work, and of the remaining eight, only half are connected to the Web, and among that four only one allows access to the University email account. This instrument is highly coveted and the first to be taken. The room is supposed to be open at 10:30 a.m., but it may stay locked until eleven; or perhaps be opened a bit early. Closing time, nominally 5:30 p.m., is hard to predict. One Friday evening Max, a Russian student in charge, told the few of us lingering at quarter after that we should finish our work. He was replaced by Olga, another student, who kept the place open until 7 p.m. That was either Russian inefficiency or simple kindness. That night I stayed until the end, reluctant to return to my empty apartment, though cigarette fumes had penetrated the room and left me with a sore throat for the rest of the weekend.

This shabby little room on the eighth floor of First Humanities, with its threadbare curtains and assortment of cheap wooden props and overflowing trashcan, has become, along with the twice-daily telephone calls to A., my lifeline to the known, the familiar, and the comfortable. Because of the equipment, the door, as I have said, is padded steel, unlike the corroded wooden ones elsewhere in the building, and when I close it behind me, I feel that I'm shutting out all the discomforts of Moscow. When someone leaves the door ajar, I feel as though my sanctuary were threatened, and I immediately rise to close it. Making connections to the various links and websites can be terribly slow, perhaps, as a student suggested, because the software was improperly installed. Since I stopped attending my Russian classes on Wednesday and Thursday, I usually reach the lab early, when it is least crowded. Almost everyone there has some proficiency in English, and the email bank, as I have said, is a party-line. The languages used for transmissions are English, German, Dutch, Spanish, and Russian transliterated into the Latin alphabet, which must make odd reading for a native speaker. The foreign students I usually see here are an Australian and a trio of Belgian students from Flanders writing in Dutch. It took me some time to learn how to delete messages, and the ones that come to me from A. have begun to fill up the bank, at times accounting for half the ones there, and although this has brought me a certain celebrity, it is also slightly embarrassing; there is nothing private about this. Three in a row from A., four in a row, a few for Zachary, Bert or Lisbet, the foreign students, and then another two or three from A. I have wondered whether the accumulation from a party with a female name hasn't tempted others to read in my account. Probably not, though the notes, with their private declarations and erotic suggestion, would make entertaining reading.

Lab routines are usually courteous. If someone is using Number 2 and a second person wants to check his mail, the first often shuts things down to let the waiting student in. Those using Number 2 just for Net access will usually shift to another machine--if one is available--to let the other party receive or transmit messages. As I have said, my first occasion at the lab produced a shock, when I found my university's website in Chicago, and two students, Mikhael and Masha, labored to help me reach my account there. That was when I began using the account at Moscow State, and after a few weeks I felt perfectly competent, though having to interpret Russian-language icons and switch the keyboard from Cyrillic to Latin slowed my progress.

I had made two lists of the addresses--email and street--and phone numbers of friends in Chicago, and one copy I keep in my apartment and the second in my briefcase, so often do I use it. I can sit in the lab for hours, checking mail, stock quotations, American newspapers, and the listings of women, all over the world, who are available for marriage. (I communicated with one in Israel, a pianist, describing the local music scene.) I feel connected with the world that I know, and up-to-date in my methods, which is odd, because I seldom feel modern about anything.

I admit that time in the lab can be tedious. As I have said, making connections can be slow, and some websites that I frequently use, such as the Washington Post, have an irritating tendency to freeze up, forcing me to strike the reset button and start the procedure all over again. Until I got used to them, the advertising and graphics could irritate. But I have no morning paper at my door, and the BBC service I hear when I breakfast and shave is hardly more than a headline service. I can avoid the expensive

private computer facilities downtown, and obtain an indirect form of compensation from a University that's paying me a token sum.

I have said that lab protocol is courteous, but there are deviations. A woman who has taken to using the facility in recent weeks kept a cheap transistor tuned to a rock station, which I detest. I had thought the radio was hers, but it seems to have been shared out among other students who are using it, and the routine of asking them to keep the volume down has become tiresome. I haven't seen it for a week or so. Some students munch food at the terminals, a habit I deplored until I myself began to gnaw on a small loaf of heavy black bread as I swigged mineral water, often my lunch (or pre-lunch), because I feared abandoning my instrument for the *stolovaya* in the main building. When I return the room will likely be filled. Some students leave the terminals for a half-hour or longer with their notebooks open and their homework glowing on the screen, indifferent to the need to share a limited number of computers. Little of this would happen at a university lab in the States, but comparisons are pointless.

Perhaps I should fill out the description of Masha that I gave in an earlier entry. We are now on friendly terms. Sometimes I let her take the instrument I am using while I step out for lunch. Masha, so to speak, reserves the terminal for me, and I reclaim it on my return. I had thought she was being studious and modern in her school work, but I have learned that she is avidly checking into a figure skating chatroom to debate the subject with participants in the West. "David," she once asked me, "do Americans always think they're right?" These exchanges can turn aggressive, and someone in another part of the world called her a halfwit. She didn't understand the insult, and I got indignant on her behalf while explaining it. I gave her a sample of English invective that

she could lob back over the ocean, but after weighing matters Masha chose not to respond. A week later she simply said, "Everybody got angry," quite as though an exchange at the seminar table took an unpleasant turn. She is invariably mild and friendly, always greeting me in the lab or in the building, and her unwillingness to participate in the unpleasantness not a surprise. I asked her for her phone number once, and she wrote down instead the name of the dorm where she lives, though there must be a pay phone there. I am not drawn to her erotically, but she is very companionable, and our contact is always agreeable. She commented in late April that she'd recently had a birthday. It turned out to be her eighteenth, which seemed to her troubling and significant. Remember that women in Slavic Europe consider themselves old by the time they're 25, a conclusion most of us in the States consider laughable. I have not yet asked her out, but I am hoping for some kind of formal leave-taking before I depart.

May 3

It is a Saturday evening, and though I had intended to visit another club, I think I'll stay home and add to my journals. I am quite tired and don't care to make the journey to downtown Moscow. This will require dressing, setting off for the stop some minutes away, waiting for a bus that leads to the Metro, and taking the subway north. This is not quite as onerous as I am making it seem. If I left this minute, I could probably reach my destination within another forty, but I am quite tired, and outside it's springtime Moscow-cold, damp and windy. And these clubs can be paltry affairs. The week before, after an evening at the Conservatory, I visited The Hungry Duck, recommended by a student, who

described it as a place where confident Russian woman sought out the companionship of men. The Conservatory concert was over at 9 p.m., and it seemed a bit early to be heading home. So after fending off a pair of drunks accosted me in the subway, I went off to check this place. Guards, a metal detector at the entrance, along with the standard *garderobe*, or cloakroom, one sees in all Russian establishments. But it was only a loud bar crowded with young people half my age. It was dark and hot, and kids in their twenties were improvising dance steps on the bar counter. One very good-looking woman, minimally dressed on a cold spring night, fell off the counter in front of me, a spill that could have broken bones or teeth; a few men helped her into a booth behind me. An awkward thirty minutes or so. I had given my Friday morning class a lengthy criticism of rock music, and a day later I find myself in a joint where it's blaring, and where any of my students might be visiting; there aren't many such places in the city. So I edged into a nook of the room where I could keep an eye on things and lessen my exposure to the noise and any students who might wander in. But I was finally driven from The Hungry Duck when I spotted a pair of elderly men by the bar who were almost certainly American. This was intolerable, to be in the company of 50-year-olds looking for the same thing I was, and I left.

Tonight is different. I will stay home, try to read and write, phone an editor to discuss a job offer, and wait for A. to ring.

May 9

VE Day for the Russians, and an odd one for me. Went for English-language newspapers to the Metropole Hotel and had to pass three security checks, feeling conspicuous and uncomfortable. The boulevards and side streets were blocked off, perhaps for a parade. Went to the Lenin Library for a visit to Red Square, but security personnel have blocked access to Alexander Gardens; off instead to the Conservatory to check the schedule, some food at the upscale market nearby, lunching on nuts and mineral water in fine weather before the Tchaikovsky monument; and then a bus to the pedestrian walkway the Arbat that slants diagonally southwest. The architecture from the last century is agreeable, but Russians are hawking cheap tourist things, and "artists" are producing schlock portraits in black and white. Tawdry stuff. Balloons, chess sets, T-shirts with images of Lenin selling hamburgers; the usual touts, though nobody's pushy--the Russian vendors are new to this and the hardsell isn't their style. Many of the street-side cafes seem attractive, but the retail scene is disagreeable. A bus back to the Arbat Metro, over to Alexander Gardens--now open--and the Tomb of the Unknown, with thousands of others, wreaths and flowers, classical music from a sound system, a pair of guards, ceremonially dressed, white gloves, rifles at parade rest. From there to Red Square with a file of Russians past the graves at the Kremlin wall, more than I had thought, forgotten old Bolsheviks from 1920. Busts and marble monuments, plaques; a few roses for Andropov, for Stalin a wreath and flowers. Guards at the wall prohibit picture taking. On Red Square, a military band performs classical music. A walk over to the Rossiya Hotel and later off to the Chinatown Metro. At home now and feeling low.

An important week, however. On Tuesday evening S., the editor, invites me to a literary reception inaugurating the first issue of *Yasnaya Polyana*. (This is the name of Tolstoy's estate south of Moscow.) I had taken him to be another routine newspaperman, but I am learning that he is far more accomplished than that. Born in 1936 and spent years of his life as a youth in Belgium and Germany and has considerable proficiency in French and German, in addition to her perfect English. In his early years he was a mountain climber, but at 28 in Pyatagorsk, he fell 30 meters into a ravine, shattering his left shoulder and damaging his left ear, leaving him virtually deaf on that side. After the literary awards, a big spread with wines and vodka. S. refers to a "family rupture" in 1990, and is apparently estranged from his wife, who is attending the ceremony and with whom he doesn't speak. We meet briefly near a table, a short, fat woman whom R. says can't write a sentence: her interests are translating foreign literature into Russian, editing and publishing new Russian fiction. More talk with R.: He translates back and forth between Russian and English and has manuscripts of his own, incomplete and in both languages. In his earlier years when he was alone would roll on the ground when he was alone in wooded areas yelling "freedom, freedom." He introduces me to various literary people, including a middle-aged woman who edits a journal. Me: "Poetry can't be translated." S.: "Do you know you are speaking to this country's foremost translator of poetry?" Recently back from a conference in Israel, she tells me she is translating and publishing Amos Oz and Yehudi Amichai. R. comments that he has translated Akhmatova into English and complains that the translations he has checked are totally inadequate, preserving neither her metre nor rhyme. Offers me a definition of Acmeism--the acme of the classical style--that finally sticks. I meet a specialist in Eastern religions

and his wife who taught at Cornell in the seventies. Our discussion makes the predictable reference to Nabokov, but I add the poet Snodgrass, whom they remember. The husband teaches the Vedanta at Moscow State. S., who formerly wrote on music for a Moscow publication, tells me he regrets he isn't younger and can't participate in the transformation of his country as a young man. I observe some very good-looking women, and I ask S. if he knows one: "No. They're what I call para-literary women." Women on the fringe of the lit world. I can see people putting on the make. A lovely woman, late twenties, is standing in front of us, and as we talk, an older man comes over to make contact. They seem to know each other, but she is determined to rebuff him. She hooks up with a younger man shortly. S. tells me the reception is filled with failed and would-be writers. I seek out the specialist in Eastern religions to seek if he's interested in Rudolf Steiner, whose volumes I have read in Chicago. No, he tells me. Andrei Biely and Scriabin carried anthroposophy into cultivated Russia before the Revolution; adds that there was a following in the Caucasus. During the awards S. was invited to make some impromptu remarks; later complains that he wasn't forewarned and couldn't concentrate: evidently unhappy with his performance in front of cameras and literary Moscow. I ask him to describe the politics of the gathering, and he says leftwing and bohemian. I had been told that his publication was a committed proponent in the struggle for reform, and clearly he wouldn't be in this group if it weren't. I asked him how writers were supporting themselves now that state-sponsored publishing has ended, and he says that some write advertising copy, others "produce filth," and some rent out their apartments to those with money and live on dachas in the country. S. is partly a scholar but it also a literary journalist. He is also an accomplished translator. He has been around for decades, has

contacts in most of the arts, and knows almost everyone. Also an oenophile: identifies the table wine with enthusiasm. I ask him a number of times whether the work people are producing today will be read in 50 or 100 years, which strikes me later as a silly question. S. demurs repeatedly. The technological and other changes are too vast to make a prediction. He does allow that in the Soviet years the so-called "fat books," or literary journals, that cleared censorship and were published, were read intently by people avid for literature, eager for any sign of independence or talent. "It was a game," he says, to see what might be slipped past the censors. Now their lives are chaotic, and there are distinct cliques and adversaries, but people still read the works of others because they're intensely curious over what friends and enemies are publishing. We leave the reception and walk together to the Arbat Metro; he seems disappointed over our parting, but the evening was rich with events and incident, and just now I prefer to be by myself.

May 10

I am feeling slightly queasy as I write this. I drank some beer, napped, made coffee, and now in addition to feeling unwell and bloated I have a mild case of the runs. Elected not to go to a movie tonight; I have seen none since I arrived two months ago, but of course the English-language selection is small, and I am feeling unreal, in a strange psychological state, unable to reach the center of myself. I might go to a bar tonight, nominally homosexual, but perhaps it is best to stay in. Called a married couple in Chicago, but after the phone rang four or five times, I hung up--if I couldn't speak with them I didn't want their tape recorder. I am puzzled why they haven't answered my e-

mail, though it is possible they haven't received any. I decide to check my finances and see that I'm doing all right. I'm spending only \$800 a month, excluding my international phone charges. Then I called my carrier and learned that from the inception of the trip to late April my bill was almost \$1,100, which was a surprise: I knew that I'd used the phone often during my first month, but I thought I'd got things under control since then. Obviously not.

This morning I took my first trip to *Virtualny Mir* (Virtual World), and it strikes me as odd that I should neglect some of the sites I have been intending to see in favor of an Internet Cafe. I had read of the place in an English-language paper the night before and promptly phoned for an address. Why not? It's Saturday, the university lab is closed, and I resent the fee set by the Tretyakov Museum for foreigners--it's triple the rate for Russians, and I'm not getting rich here explaining checks and balances. Over to Southwest, up to the Circle Line, a ride a few stops east, and then back south. *Virtualny Mir* isn't hard to find, and to reach it I pass a small park, not quite green because of the cold, traversed by trolleybus rails: It has the feel of 1940, which is appealing, a world unchanged and unchanging.

Virtualny Mir turns out to be in the back of an electronics shop. There is a cafe on the side and about a dozen computers, more modern than those at the university, each with email and web access. Very modern: circular, glass-topped tables, each with four computers, with chairs that have casters, the first I've seen in Moscow. Websites pop up quickly. The monitors have anti-glare guards, which are certainly needed. The roof is glass, letting in not only the heat of the sun but also its light, rendering the screens nearly invisible. The man running the place takes in my Russian, switches to English, and

promptly sets me up at an instrument, indicating a sixty-minute time limit. Schlock art on the rear wall: a huge blue canvas with a pair of clasped hands. The bathroom is modern and spotless, which is a world away from the facilities at Moscow State.

I check the usual websites. There were a pair of murders in my neighborhood in Chicago, and there is a long narrative by Saul Bellow of his experience in intensive care; and after an hour the fellow in charge helps me get off a message to A.

May 12

A disappointing Sunday afternoon with Y., my older colleague from the university. I had hoped for a reminiscence of Moscow during the war. Instead he complains about his work as a teacher, which takes him away from research in philology. After maneuvering us at great length, and slowly, along many streets, some fouled by traffic, he brings me to Christ the Savior Church, recently rebuilt: It was destroyed by the Bolsheviks.

Me: "Was it dynamited?"

Y., slightly sour: "Well, I don't think they bombed it."

That stings a bit. Y. surveys the job and roundly declares it a failure: those golden onion domes go back to medieval Russia, a style that no longer fits. But the small alleys around the church are quite attractive, and it gives me the impulse to wander in parts of the city I haven't seen (which includes most of Moscow). Y. and I part, and I take the subway north to Lubyanka, once home to state security and a terrifying prison. It is a perfect spring afternoon, and in ten days I'll be back in Chicago. At a fine

rectangular park in *Chisty Prudy*, a tart with bad English hits me up for cash, and when I refuse she lowers her face and mutters an obscenity. Because of the extended cold, this park isn't very green yet, but I am assailed once more by that impression of something terrifically exotic, agreeably seasoned now by the thought that when I return home I will be back on streets that are intimately familiar. This part of Moscow is steeply hilly, and I am maneuvering my way amidst these low buildings to capture a view of the sunlight, which seems to me the clearest and most luminous that I have seen since I arrived. I have a private theory of aesthetics, that pausing to take in these occasions is protection against mortality. I have not so much reasoned as felt this, perhaps because I know that in succeeding years or decades others will duplicate this act, detaching themselves from other matters, which means that I am part of a continuing aesthetic activity. The experience--quintessential moments, I call them--seems to have the characteristic of eternity. But as the hours pass and the light diminishes, I head for the Metro, my mood faltering.

At the end of the day, I am feeling low over impaired relations with A. We have gotten into an argument, and I am finding her provocative. We discussed J., her roommate, a Chinese immigrant A. describes as tall and queenly, a woman with real presence. Unhappy as a single woman, S. is dissatisfied with the video tapes of suitors the introduction service is sending her. The screening seems nonexistent, the men wildly inappropriate: A. gives witty descriptions of their awkward gestures and effects. When I asked A. if she'd consider something similar she is shocked. She would never even think of it; how could I ask? Obviously, really obviously, I don't understand her; I don't understand her at all. Women can live independently, I say, but most women, and

perhaps most men too, want someone in their life. A. describes a woman who gave up her career to make a home for her husband and children. If that is what the woman wanted, I answer, there's nothing wrong with it. But A. says her husband would never have agreed to do something similar. We agree to disagree, but I wake up on Monday angry; I am tired of women heaving their grievances at me like bricks. I will not answer the morning call. But when the phone rings a second time I decide to take the receiver.

"Good morning Sleeping Beauty."

"I've been up for forty-five minutes."

"So you didn't answer the phone the first time deliberately, because you're mad at me."

"That's exactly why I didn't answer the phone."

"Why are you angry?"

"I found our conversation last night provocative, angry, and neurotic."

"Why don't you be more specific. You mean, you found me that way."

"Yes."

"Well, there's a remedy for that!"

And several thousand miles away, she bangs down the receiver.

May 21

I am spending my last afternoon at the computer lab on the eighth floor of First Humanities, transmitting a final collection of messages to friends in Chicago and, for the last time, reading the signs on the terminal encrypted in Cyrillic and guessing which one

will produce the results I'm seeking. Earlier in the day my elderly colleague N., a slight, elderly woman, describes her VE holiday excursion to Spain, her first experience of that country. Her handbag, which she carelessly left on a train seat, was stolen. Later on the trip, she was accosted on the street by a Spaniard who brazenly stripped her purse from her hands.

N: "We saw a lot of poverty in Spain. Perhaps they needed the money more than I did."

When I decide to leave the lab it occurs to me to check with Georgi, the language instructor teaching three floors below me, the man who picked me up at the airport ten weeks before and is charged (I thought) with returning me there tomorrow. I confirmed our schedule three times in the last ten days--the day and time of the pickup--but I decide to check one last time, to forestall any confusion. And when I do find him I receive the penultimate lesson in Russian incompetence in practical matters: Anxiously checking his his schedule for Tuesday--identical to the Tuesday schedule he has had since the term began three months ago--he discovers classes he is obligated to teach. This discussion is taking place about eighteen hours before he is supposed to pick me up. I wonder if he even intended to call. I argue briefly with this fool and return home, phoning another friend, a woman who has just learned to drive and is willing but also reluctant: She has never driven to the airport, which, like most, is a good distance from the city.

In a mild panic, I visit S., the colleague with whom I've spent so much time, and with whom I am leaving a small appliance until a possible return. He recommends a reliable taxi service that for \$38 will pick me up, an unforeseen expense that compels me to return to the electronic teller at the university and load my billfold with additional

rubles. That night I pack and prepare for my departure, having gotten help from a neighbor in arranging the ride. Things pass smoothly the next day, but at the airport there is a final unwanted surprise: The airline staff downtown, whom I visited earlier to reschedule my departure--the return flight had been dated for later in the year--has failed to paste into my ticket the adjustment, and clerks at the airport now insist that I can't take this flight. A phone call to their colleagues downtown clears the matter up, but not before I have spoken harshly to these young women. What if this had been a weekend, or evening, and the other office empty, the colleagues departed? And the two young women are now having little to do with my attempt to make amends for my angry reaction. But things are in place, and the plane at least is punctual in its departure.

But before I conclude, I want to restore the reader to my final occasion with M., the instructor with whom I communicated from Chicago when I was arranging this visit. We spent an evening together my last Saturday in Russia. She played such a large role in laying the groundwork for my stay at the University but I have spent so little time with her since I arrived here. On that evening, I took a long subway ride to her large apartment on the northwest edge of Moscow, which the Russians consider the most "ecologically" desirable part of the city: Frequent winds from the north come down and are said to clear the air. M. is way up in a high-rise, and points out below the private home of Yeltsin, who however now lives in quarters set aside for his office. A large wooded area nearby cheers my spirits immensely: I have the sense of escaping the brown dinginess of the city and returning for a moment to natural beauty. I greatly enjoy this place, but M., wondering if I'm sincere and eager for approval, presses me for my reaction. But I really do like the place, greatly.

I am introduced to her young son, a very handsome boy about ten years old. There is an old upright piano in the corner, and when I ask "Who plays the piano," the boy answers "I did, when I was younger." "Oh," I counter, entertained by this worldly reply, "but you gave it up for more mature interests when you grew up?" M. laughs. She is a huge woman, as I have said, perhaps 300 pounds, but is a highly gifted linguist. Her English is very nearly perfect and she seems to be at home with French and Italian. The light from a clear sunset is coming in at an angle, adding to the beauty of the moment, splendidly illuminating the forest of green beneath her window. Moscow is so grey. M. then begins pressing me for help with an American tax return. She spent a recent school year teaching in Chicago, and though she paid her taxes, the IRS is harassing her with more documents. She has sought my help with the forms, which I am unable to offer: I pay an accountant to handle these matters. M. spends perhaps an hour or more fooling around with the documents, leaving me to her son, who enlists me as an observer to the magic tricks he has learned. She has said little on the subject, but I know that she has been sharply disappointed by the Slavic department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. There had been the prospect of a longer appointment, perhaps even a permanent position, but after a semester or two she was forced to return to Moscow: The department head pleaded lack of funds.

This I had learned from the wife of a colleague, a man who had set my Russian experience in motion by giving me M.'s telephone number the preceding September: If I wanted to teach at Moscow State here was a contact. After our initial conversation, I sent the university a resume. M.'s response, some weeks later, was positive; the school might be interested. By the middle of October I was offered a job and elated. But then began

the series of errors the cost me heavily, in every sense of the word: Nervous by the middle of November, I called M., telling her I needed a visa shortly, that I could not leave Chicago on a moment's notice, that the project required planning. Christmas came, then New Years, and no visa. M. assured me she had done all she could. More phone calls in January, this time to other academic contacts in Moscow, and those international charges began adding up, to several hundred dollars.

By the end of January I assumed the project was dead. The winter semester at Moscow State begins in early February, and when that date approached, arrived and passed, I assumed that my chance to work in Moscow had done the same. But I had misunderstood the looser approach Russians take to these matters: A formal invitation from the University, essential for obtaining a visa from the Russian Embassy in the U.S., was faxed to me in the middle of February; and when I learned of this, from a secretary at a school where I formerly taught, I was astounded.

I had by then prepared a backup option. I was still planning on Eastern Europe, probably Budapest, when a chance encounter at a bookstore presented me with a different option. A. and I were visiting the travel section of the shop, a very amply supplied corner of the store, and hit upon some books on the Czech Republic. Prague was out--it was inundated with Americans--but there was this remote spot cakked Bratislava, a provincial capital. This possibility was furthered when we checked the foreign papers the store carried, and met a young man reading a Czech daily, with whom I fell into conversation and who began to tout. . . Bratislava. My guide described it as small but cosmopolitan, a meeting ground historically for many nationalities. There was even a small American community in place, which published its own newspaper. But after a day or so, this

option was swept aside by that fax from Russia: my invitation and other material went to Washington; and two weeks later I to Moscow.

Silly, I know, but M's request for consumer goods is suggestive that the old USSR 'rationing' mentality hasn't changed (sounds like what S. tells me of China); Tylenol, pumpkin seeds, and 'panoramic picture frames' are still either in short supply, available in limited varieties, too expensive, or just not easy to get.

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