

Friends Of Fred

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Michael Priv

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Dedicated to Old Fred, my teacher.

* * *

1986, San Francisco. An exuberant crowd of nearly two thousand soon-to-be US Citizens from eighty countries of the world packs San Francisco Moscone Center this pivotal summer morning—just a typical day for most San Franciscans but an event of infinitely more significance for the bright-eyed crowd at Moscone Center. There is nothing mundane in being sworn in as Citizens of the United States of America.

“Soviet Union!” I hear the MC’s call. About twenty of us get up throughout the great hall, soaking in the cheers. I stand there with the other Soviets waiting out the applause and gazing at the stage draped in a huge American flag. There it is staring back at me proudly. Beautiful flag and a powerful symbol of freedom. Freedom to create my own future the best I can and as I see fit. Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead!

Half-listening to the speaker, I see a different flag, different place and time, a huge red flag in the central square of a Ukrainian village *Krasniy Oktiabr* what seems like a life-time ago.

* * *

PART ONE

A COUNTRY OF FOOLS

Chapter One

CHILDHOOD

AMERICA IS NOT a country of immigrants. America is a country of Americans. But there are immigrants—legal and not—sewn in swatches or sprinkled randomly all across the colorful quilt of American demographics. Loved or hated, respected or despised, immigrants will keep on rolling in like waves lapping US borders. The waves retreat, leaving as sediments the overwhelmed and largely penniless humanity, the immigrants. These people are unkillable because the crises they went through elsewhere cannot usually be rivaled by anything this great nation of ours could throw their way. They are here to stay.

I am an immigrant.

My name is Misha. I am 5'7", 170 pounds, blue eyes, kind of stocky, very strong. Occasionally, under certain circumstances I have been called smart and handsome. Most often, however, I have merited a multitude of less flattering epithets.

The name "Misha" is an equivalent to Michael in English. Although "Michael" does not have any special meaning in English, "Misha" is the name for a "bear" in Russian. So I am a bear. I was born in Kiev, Ukraine, USSR, in August of 1960. That makes me a Leo and a Rat, according to Western and Chinese zodiacs, in addition to being a bear by name. A lion-bear-rat. Can you imagine the strange-looking animal I would make? Or the psychological personality problems such a makeover would entail? Fortunately, I do not believe in the Zodiac, brimstone, destiny or

man-the-animal theory. I do believe in myself. I believe in people. I believe that natively we are all immortal and powerful spiritual beings. I believe that people are good and given a chance will do the right thing and that all of us could always improve and become even better.

By birth I am a Jew, although that never made any sense to me. I did not want to be a Jew but there was no way out of it. In the Soviet Union Judaism was considered a nationality, not a religion. You inherit nationality from your father, while Judaism as a religion is supposed to propagate through the maternal line. I remember the first time I started objecting to such an unorthodox interpretation of Torah at the tender age of three once, at a children's playground, in a sand box where mothers removed their progeny from my presence when I was brought in to play.

We resided in an apartment in a five-story dilapidated building with unavoidable laundry drying on the balconies here and there like a tattered sail of the sinking ship of my past. Nobody owned—or ever heard of—clothes dryers. Our Building Number Three was flanked on both sides by similarly unattractive five-story tenements in a letter "U" formation. The open end of the "U" butted up against a hill. The area inside the "U" among other things contained a large playground for kids, rather pleasant. We had a couple of verandas there, sand boxes, slides, a climbing gym of sorts, a bit of grass and some trees—all dusty and unkempt but pleasant nonetheless. Three huge old poplars, five to six feet in diameter, stretched their enormous gnarly arms toward the sky, much higher than our five-story buildings. They were my favorite trees—my friends, my magic forest.

That day my mother brought me to the sandbox to play with my little shovel and those colorful kiddy plastic buckets of various sizes with their bottoms formed in 3D patterns. What wonderful sand pie creations could you make with these buckets to then be proudly presented to your friends. Except all the kids were yanked out of the sand box as soon as we showed up.

"Mama, why is everybody leaving?" I asked my mother.

"They all had to go, honey, they just have to eat now." Mom explained gently, "Let's play together." She stepped into the sandbox, lowered to her knees and played with me, just the two of us. My mother, as every mom, was the best and most beautiful mother in the world.

The sudden departure of my never-to-be playmates resulted in me having the entire sand box to myself. That was my first glimpse at the concept of using any opposing force to my advantage—an important principle of combat as well as a definition of making things go right. When adversity hits the fan, people sometimes say "Make it go right!" Just think, what do they mean by "make it go right?" To me it means to try and use the abundant opposing force you get hit with to your advantage.

I remember occasional beatings at the school yard, ripped cloths, bloody noses and shiners through the years—all on account of me being a Jew. Afro-Americans in the US are recognized and judged by their skin color. I venture a supposition that at least some of them hold skin whiteness as a panacea to all life's problems. However, you do not actually have to have dark skin or any other distinguishing marks other than one word in your passport to be discriminated against, sometimes violently. The fact that nobody you normally meet had ever seen your passport would not save you. It was enough for people to know or simply suspect that your passport specified you as "Jew" as the dreaded "Item No. 5 Nationality" to start hating you. I did not want to be a Jew.

"Wait a minute," I wanted to scream on numerous occasions, "I do not want to be a Jew! I want to be a Ukrainian, like everybody else!" Nope. Being like everybody else was not in the cards for me. By the ambivalent powers of the accident of birth I was forced to make my choice between being a cowed second class citizen and doing my damndest to outperform the mob and soar high and free.

As an unexpected bonus, getting insulted and occasionally beaten up for no reason gave me a perfect excuse to occasionally insult and beat up other kids for no reason too! Sometimes that was fun. Ah, the happy childhood . . . I had very few friends.

Among coherent memories from my early childhood, in addition to the sandbox episode, two more events stand out: the lobster incident and my earliest criminal experience. They have no connection whatsoever to the plot-line of this novel but they do offer a glimpse of our lifestyle at the time.

When I was about three or four my father gave me a boiled fresh water lobster to play with. "What kind of a toy is a cooked lobster?" you ask. An awesome toy! That crustacean is the most fantastic looking creature a small child could ever hope to encounter—the color, the various strange mouth appendages, the armor scales, the incredible claws, legs, the very shape of the body, eyes—everything about it would spur my imagination. Exhilarated, I dragged the red lobster around the carpeted floor, lost in the magic world of my own.

In the evening my father came home from work and immediately stepped on the lobster. "An accident," he said. "Sorry!" he said. With a crunch my beautiful monster, my most prized and rare possession, was reduced to a tangle of white meat, legs and broken scales. Sorry? A woman scorned is sweet-tempered by comparison to a small Ukrainian boy whose boiled lobster is trampled upon by a size sixteen work boot, I assure you.

Mother took my side. "Murderer!" she yelled at the perpetrator, jabbing him with an accusing finger, dark passionate eyes ablaze.

"I swear, I didn't see it! Besides, it was dead already!" My father's feeble rejoinders fell on a deaf matrimonial ear. It was touch and go for the entire evening but fortunately the marriage survived.

Playing on the floor at home once, around that same time period, I found a five-ruble banknote. I have no idea how I knew what that colorful piece of paper was, but I did. The only thing I did not know was how much that money was worth. I wanted my mom to buy me a toy horse that we saw at a store earlier that day but mother said that we had no money for toys. I wanted that horse. I folded the money at least sixteen times and hid it in a matchbox with a bit of dry grass in it, normally reserved for my pet bugs. My mom was scared to death to come anywhere near it.

My parents were looking for that five-ruble bill for a couple of hours. "Just think, where did you see it last?" my mom would question in an accusative manner, putting my dad on a defensive. "I don't know. I don't even remember seeing it at all. You are the family treasurer, you remember! What did you spend it on? Mascara?" "How dare you! When was the last time I bought mascara?! Other women buy mascara!" And so it went.

We were very poor in those days. Five rubles was more than a day's wages for my mom. At that time she was making only ninety-two rubles a month. My parents ended up taking everything out of the china cabinet, the wardrobe and all the other furniture we had in our two rooms and sifting through everything.

Not being able to stomach it any longer, I took the money out of my matchbox and exclaimed in my best good boy voice, "Look how nice! What is this, Mommy?"

"O-o-o!" My parents cooed, much relieved, "You thought it was a candy wrapper! How cute!"

They used to tell this story for years to come to our guests at family gatherings and events. "O-o-o! How cute!" melted the guests. "No, you fools! I knew exactly what it was! I stole that money to buy a toy horse!" I wanted to scream but never did.

Poverty, and lack of toys as its logical consequence, was just one of the important problems of my childhood. There were also other problems, the biggest of which was nuclear war. I was terrified of war, especially the nuclear variety.

Starting from day-care center and all through school we were taught in various ways that a war with America was imminent. America was our number one enemy and it was to be hated and feared. That propaganda took the form of innocent little fairy tales with nasty Uncle Sam and a special character "Mister Twister, Important Minister," a fat and stupid little man—his viciousness rivaled only by his greed.

I remember being terrified of America to the point of nightmares after our Civil Defense classes at school. I was frightened stiff of all the dispassionate pseudo-scientific babble of the terror-mongers, all the talk about thermal injury, lethal radiation range, complications and blood disorders, birth defects, cancer, cataracts. I could not see any purpose in doing various things that I was supposed to do in life if my only certainty for the future was early, yet terrible demise.

Life had not always been grim. Poor as we were in the 60's, my parents used to entertain quite a bit. I did not particularly enjoy large gatherings but I loved having Uncle Eugene over. He was not my actual uncle, he was just a school friend of my father's. One distinguishing characteristic of Uncle Eugene that I remember was that he was always dressed in black sweaters, black pants and black shoes. Longish, tousled red hair over pale, freckled face and black clothing—Uncle Eugene has his place in my heart.

Uncle Eugene was a radical. He called himself "a freethinker" and that he was. My parents would sometimes discuss in his absence that Eugene was not long for this world because he talked too much for his own good. Sitting under the table or hiding under the couch, I would eagerly absorb Eugene's passionate tirades. My parents usually played devil's advocate. On the one hand, I suppose, such an approach would spur Eugene's fascinating rants and, on the other hand, it could help deniability if need be.

"How can you say these things?" my mom would ask. "This is our Motherland. This is the country our fathers died for. This country is an all-powerful giant!"

"Your beloved Motherland," Uncle Eugene would retort, "is a giant, yes. It is like a mythical Goliath, the largest country on Earth. But Goliath's gargantuan legs are made of clay, barely able to hold his weight. Of those clay legs, the right one is called 'Socialism' and the left leg is 'Corruption'. And the words 'Communist Party' are axed all across his forehead right next to the hammer and the sickle!"

"What about all our scientific achievements?" my mom would interject.

"Just PR. What achievement?! Open your eyes! It is all lies! The press is making up all these incredible industrial and scientific achievements but there are shortages of everything all the time! The agriculture is in a deep hole, too. That is why the grocery stores are empty. Where are these achievements? There aren't any! But the "Closed Stores" that are only for the government are bursting with good stuff! They show only those stores to foreign tourists. It is just all PR, I tell you! These bastards have two faces for everything. This country is one god-awful contradiction—always was and still is!"

I remember a lecture from Eugene specifically about war. "They need an enemy to distract us from their own rampant criminality and abuses!"

Eugene would explain, usually with his mouth full and eyes watering after a good swig of vodka. "If there is no enemy, they'll invent one! Look, everybody except the government is dirt poor but nobody is protesting! Why? Because we were fooled into believing that we were under attack and so we had bigger problems to worry about. This is all nonsense! You really believe that we would ever get wiped out by the American hordes? Why?! What would Americans want with us? Come on! They are rich and we are poor. And then Americans would have to endure all our drunkenness and incessant whining. Who would want to fight for that much crap?"

Eugene's crazy ranting would calm me down. One thing that I firmly grasped in those years was the notion that we'd stay alive as a country for as long as we didn't amount to much because nobody would want to attack us. True or false, it made me feel better. In those days, I would grab for any reassurance of the possibility of any future at all.

The happiness of childhood is vastly overrated, if you ask me. And as I wanted to live in an inept and uncivilized country that nobody wanted, I was fortunate to get plenty of that.

For me, as a kid, the epiphany of my forever drunk and hapless Motherland was the construction of a nine-story office building right across the street from the dilapidated five-story bee-hive that I called home. Having been started around the time I was born, and completed very near the time I left the country some nineteen years later, that office building construction became the backdrop to my entire existence.

That construction project was bigger than life, an eternal natural phenomenon akin to wind, water, fire, moon and chestnut blossoms. My first step coincided with the foundation being almost dug out. My first day in school—the basement floor almost completed. First kiss—the future office building shell loomed over us, almost all there, black window openings agape. My first day at work—the almost completed landscaping was bringing joy to my heart, with the fountain, its centerpiece, almost operational and already full of stale water. We used to catch tadpoles there. I kept a few in a large jar at home. Tadpoles—the almost frogs . . . Of course, there were also lotus flowers in the unfinished fountain and brave blades of grass streaming through brand new but already cracked concrete, too.

Many an hour I spent watching the construction through our kitchen window. A few drunk and lethargic brick layers stumbling around, carpenters carrying a board, occasional welding sparks, dust, pounding . . .

The "almost" childhood in that "almost" country. I was usually home alone after school. Both of my parents worked; my grandparents were dead. Both of my grandfathers were killed in WWII fighting the Germans.

I was named after my mother's father who was a colonel and a war hero. He had a regiment under his command. My grandfathers died honorably in battle, defending the world against Nazis. My grandmothers died early as well, one shortly before I was born and the other one soon after.

I used to wear our house key to school on a string around my neck like a necklace—or a yoke. Mom used to leave one of the gas stove burners on just a tiny little bit and my soup in a small pot in the fridge, ready to be placed on the stove when I needed it. I would turn the stove knob clockwise slowly, just as my mother taught me, watching the tiny blue ring of the gas flame grow larger. Then I would place the pot on the burner for three minutes. I was about the same height as the stove at first so I could not really see what I was doing but I had a special box on which to stand.

Chapter Two

APARTMENT No.38

WE SHARED OUR three-room apartment with a Ukrainian family. Perhaps I should write a whole other novel some day about life in our apartment number 38. We had two rooms, they had one and we shared the hallway, bathroom and kitchen. The roommates had a daughter Ludmila, one year my senior. Some days Ludmila and I would come home at the same time, warm our food, eat and play together.

The husband in that other family was twenty-four years his wife's senior but he liked to bang anything that moved any chance he had. From his explanations we gathered that apparently that innocent proclivity was just a quirk of his artistic nature. For that reprehensible quirk, his hefty and young but not as artistically inclined wife used to whoop his artistic ass mercilessly—and very noisily—on a regular basis. Infidelity was not the only reason for his beatings. He used to piss her off in numerous other ways, too.

One time he stopped at the daycare center on his way from work to pick up their daughter, Ludmila, but accidently brought home a different little girl! When interrogated on that fact by his appropriately irate young wife, his defense strategy went along the line of "What's the difference? We have to take her back to the daycare tomorrow morning anyway and somebody will just bring back ours, so what's the problem?" In retrospect, I am sure he'd agree that as a defense strategy it fell short of his expectations.

Ludmila and I used to play together. She was bigger, quicker and smarter. I accepted that she could run faster, hit harder and think sharper.

And she was an excellent swimmer, too. I was the small and dumb one so I looked up to her. Sometimes she would stand up for me against older boys who were picking on me.

I remember one time in particular when she stood up for me against a local bully, Stepan, who was not, in all honesty, an anti-Semite. Stepan was just a person whole-heartedly dedicated to intimidation and extortion. His sidekick was a smaller caliber hoodlum but very annoying. They, accompanied by a couple of wannabes, stopped me on the way from school once and roughed me up. I did what I could but had to give up the little pocket change I had and also an old broken watch, my father's present. I mean, it was working when my father gave it to me originally and all the way to the point when I took it apart to see what was inside.

Ludmila suddenly appeared and jumped on them, all fists and elbows, yelling and carrying on like a banshee from Hell. I will never forget the sudden expression of utter astonishment on Stepan's face. With her mother as the mentor, Ludmila knew how to smack a good one. The wannabes disappeared and the hoodlums bid a hasty retreat but not before Ludmila frisked a couple of the bunch. When the dust settled, Ludmila gave me a handful of confiscated change and a watch which wasn't mine but had an indisputable advantage of working just fine. I refrained from taking that one apart.

Then, totally unexpectedly, Ludmila developed boobs—the cutest things. That was a big deal. I liked to touch them but she'd get all weirded out. Ludmila . . . Imagine my surprise being woken up in the middle of the night once—I guess I was twelve or thirteen then—by Ludmila's enthusiastic gyrations under my blanket. That night she demonstrated a few things about the birds and the bees to me in no uncertain terms . . . But that was later, just around the time they almost completed all of the building exterior walls. Yes, it definitely could be a subject for a whole different story.

My parents were usually home about six or seven or later, after a day of work followed by the daily raids on various food lines. They would usually bring home the bounty, although sometimes they would retreat empty handed—tired and frustrated, not always as patient and kind to me as they wished they were, I am sure. Then my mom would cook us a dinner and we would all set the table in the kitchen and eat together, coordinating on the schedule with the housemates—they had to eat dinner too—either taking the first or the second sitting at the kitchen table.

The dinners were a rich and meaningful ritual, my favorite part of the day. While mother was preparing the food, my dad and I would go

over my homework. Then my mother's shrill cry "Eat!" would send us dashing down the hallway to the bathroom to wash hands and then to the kitchen. We would take our assigned places at the table with my father taking his seat first, then me, then my mother served the food—first to my father, then to me. We would then share the food and brief each other on the day at work and at school, all taking part in the life of the family. All too often the news was not good, the injustices and frustrations of life spilling onto our dinner table, unwelcome and trite but really just the foundation to build our agreement within the family upon, just something to shatter to smithereens by the power of the Family. The dinner would end with dad's and my "thank you" to my mother for the meal but the ritual would continue with busing the dishes and cleaning up.

My assigned duty from about the age of six was washing dishes. My father made a wooden box to stand on because I was too short to reach the sink. I would solemnly drag my box from the closet and get on it in front of the sink and wash the dishes. Sink, warm soapy water, my brush, dishes—it was my kingdom. I was the King! My parents were bringing the dishes to ME to be washed and I washed them. I wasn't just an equal then, I was the boss! A philosopher once said that to command was to serve and a person was only as valuable as he could serve others. That is an insufficiently understood, in my estimation, crucial piece of wisdom in life—a priceless gem of understanding that I successfully internalized in those years. I loved contributing to the family by washing dishes and I hardly ever broke anything—mother being tolerant even if I had.

Life was pleasant at times but usually it was akin to a ride in an overcrowded Kiev city bus during rush hour in the worst of the summer heat—uncomfortable, nauseating, tiresome and so crowded that you couldn't get off when you wanted. We were poor, about as poor as most other people. My mother, an electrical engineer, and my father, a house painter, were making enough money together to eat, live in our two rooms, buy some basic clothing and put away a tiny little bit for entertainment, such as occasional concerts and even vacations, albeit infrequent. The frustration, the constant struggle to stay afloat financially, food hunts and long lines, aggravated by domestic frictions with the housemates, caused by too much humanity stuffed into too small a space took their toll on my parents' health. And if you compound that with the fear of authorities, fear of violence and injustice against Jews, occasional actual instances of violence and injustice, fear of the future, frustration with simple things made difficult by that dysfunctional and cruel bureaucratic system . . . Yes, my birthplace, Ukraine, truly was a dump.

I didn't really mind it at first. I didn't know any better. It was just the way it was. I guess I was kind of like a small bird who finds a fresh pile of steaming cow manure in a cold winter and burrows into it, feeling warm and snug for a while. Then eventually it looks around and realizes that it is just a pile of dung, even if it is warm.

I became conscious of my disenchantment with the whole smelly aspect of USSR for the first time on a collective farm in the summer of 1977.

Chapter Three

THE FARM

ONCE A YEAR every able-bodied citizen of Ukraine had to work for some days or weeks on a collective farm to help provide food for the city. That was called a “farm duty.” These farms were huge and belonged to communes of people who worked them or, to be more specific, they belonged to nobody at all. As with any possessions that have no owner, these farms were run into the ground to such a degree that they were no longer capable of supporting the nearby cities or even their own workers, who were responsible for their destruction. Unable to survive by working the land, these hapless peasants flooded the nearby cities and became police officers and high-ranking government officials. As a result, there were these giant farms all around us but the population was starving. You can probably perceive a subtle contradiction there.

In 1977 all the students of my Culinary Tech School were sent for our annual farm duty to a farm called *Krasniy Octiabr*, the “Red October,” some seventy miles from Kiev. They had dorms set up for the city work force: two sad looking red-brick houses with dirty windows, dirty wooden floors and dirty wooden bunk beds. There was also a large kitchen and a dining area but we ate outside at haphazardly slapped together picnic tables.

Toughened up by my living arrangements at home, I did not particularly mind the Spartan conditions at the farm. In fact, I always enjoyed the annual farm duty detail. Just imagine, you were all together with other

guys and girls, good healthy work, fun production competitions, great food, bonfires at night, guitars playing, dancing . . . Our Tech School girls were among the most beautiful females within at least a seventy-mile radius. As future cooks, they were service oriented, happy and healthy girls. Needless to say, a considerable amount smooching did indeed take place around those bonfires.

The work itself was enjoyable. It was organized as a competition. We were separated in teams competing against other teams while the individuals within teams were competing against each other. Jousting tournaments were probably fun too in their own time and place. At *Krasniy Oktiabr* our equivalent of jousting was harvesting vegetables. The one with the greatest number of filled crates wins. Stakes were high and we were playing for keeps. The winners were bathed in admiration, which manifested itself mainly in a lot of back slapping by your friends and kisses from pretty girls. I cannot even begin to describe the profound sense of triumph and how great it really felt to win.

On that fateful mission we were assigned to harvest cucumbers. That was a record year for cucumbers, kind of like a perfect hundred-year cucumber storm. Cucumbers were collected into large wooden crates that could hold about fifty kilograms of vegetables, which is about a hundred pounds.

I was working my two rows, filling up wooden crates that were set up along the aisle for me. Absorbed in my work I did not even notice that I was ahead of everybody else! A local supervisor, a slovenly fellow of about thirty-five, rode up to me on a bicycle and asked, "How many crates have you done so far?"

I counted them and told him that I had six full ones so far. His face brightened with appreciation as he wrote down "8" on his clipboard right in front of me, that jerk!

"Hey, imbecile, are you deaf?" I inquired politely, "Do you still remember numbers from your school days? I just said six. Why are you writing eight?"

"Knock off this tone of voice, kid! What am I supposed to do, follow you around every minute? You will have eight by the time I get over there and back, maybe even more. You want me to ask you every five minutes? Get back to work!"

I was ahead of everybody, I was winning. He could go to Hell with his falsification, that criminal! I was just about to start a screaming match with the bastard when his boss, a fat lady, pulled up on a small tractor and jumped off toward us, yelling to him in Ukrainian over the huffing of the motor, "*Skiki tsey zrobiv?*" "How many did this one do?"

"Eight!" he shouted back.

"Great!" she nodded approvingly and I saw her writing "10" in her notebook.

I could not believe it! My production stats have just been falsified by 40 percent in under a minute! I never thought much about such matters before, but they sure got my attention now. Uncle Eugene was right: the country was nothing but lies! The data from this field would go to the regional statistical bureau, then to the Ukrainian State Bureau, then to Moscow. Five-year plans for the entire country would include this number.

I couldn't sleep that night, pondering on what I'd witnessed. Our planned economy was based solely on stats. If this wasn't just an isolated criminal act, the whole system was seriously flawed. I had a notion that the events unfolding in front of me were not isolated. You'd think that too, if you ever tried to find fresh cucumbers in Kiev. Yes, most likely stats were falsified as a routine. However, the stats, being crucial for the Socialist planned economy, did not seem to make much difference in the short run right here and now. The purpose of the whole activity, right that very minute, was simply to supply cucumbers to Kiev so mothers could feed their families. As I just mentioned, we had not seen a lot of food in the stores where I grew up and fresh vegetables were no exception. Pretty much any and all food was in short supply, even bread at times.

Now looking at this profusion of cucumbers on the fields, so huge that you couldn't see the end, I could not help wondering where they all went. Regardless of the false stats, there were actually a whole lot of cucumbers here. Not on paper but in this actual enormous field. We ended up collecting probably ten thousand crates. We stacked them some six high in the area of a large city block. Our brave cosmonauts could probably see our cucumbers from space! Where did they go, if not to the city, as they were supposed to? Was somebody stealing them? If so, where did the stolen cucumbers go? They would have to surface somewhere because nobody could just deposit them into a Swiss bank account! Into what black hole were the cucumbers mysteriously disappearing?

Things became considerably clearer when it turned out that there were no trucks to take them to the city. That summer was sweltering. Cucumbers started rotting and oozing in a few days.

I went to see the supervisor.

"Where are the trucks, boss? The cucumbers are rotting. We need to get them to the city fast!"

The supervisor averted his beady little eyes, "We'll take care of it, don't worry. We have seven trucks here. And Kiev promised to send us more trucks in a week or two. So just keep picking. Don't worry!"

A week or two? I worried. And the seven trucks that the farm owned turned out to be 1.5-ton trucks—too small for the task—and they were all

broken. And why 1.5-ton trucks and not the semis? Each of these small trucks could take thirty crates max, a drop in a bucket. We were trying to feed the two million people city of Kiev here!

An old man, some local retiree, who watched me running around worried from the corner of his squinting eyes, motioned for me to come over with his *papirosa*. A *papirosa* is like a cigarette's retarded older brother. It is a thin hollow cardboard tube about three inches long with about an inch-long of the lowest possible quality filterless cigarette attached to the end of it—rather stinky. I came over, holding my breath.

"Did you call me?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Listen, kid, you got to understand something."

I waited patiently while he just silently puffed on his *papirosa*, holding it with yellow nicotine-soaked fingers.

"Yes?" I finally ventured.

"Do you see any 18-wheelers around here?"

"Can't say that I do. Why?"

"That's the point." He fell silent again for a long while and then continued, "There are no roads around here for some miles that a loaded eighteen-wheeler could go through."

"So?"

"So here we use *polutortki*, the one-and-a-half ton trucks."

"Okay, where are they?"

The old man just smirked, shook his head and fell silent again, staring just a tad above the horizon line, I'd say, probably contemplating an off-chance and miraculous appearance of an alien spaceship which would snatch him from this hellhole. I eventually simply walked away quietly. He didn't seem to notice.

Okay, got it. No big trucks. Therefore, they must have had a mechanic around here who could repair the 1.5-ton trucks that I heard about or make at least one operational truck out of seven or something. Yes, fortunately, it turned out there was one! But, unfortunately, he was very sick at the moment. I decided to go have a bedside chat with the sick mechanic, hold his hand and hopefully make him feel a little better. It was pointless to continue harvesting tons of cucumbers when they were all rotting there in the crates anyway.

Nobody was interested in coming with me except my buddy Tolik, a bespectacled, tall and bony Ukrainian guy with a dignified nickname "Professor," which he personally awarded himself because he liked it, and my sweetheart, Nadia, with her very nice breasts and a personality to match. So Tolik, Nadia and I took a walk to the Motor Pool. It was a large barn about a mile down the dirt road. Inside the barn we found seven totally stripped trucks and a hopelessly drunk mechanic sleeping it off on

the floor in the midst of a picturesque disarray that must have resulted from many years of diligent avoidance of any kind of cleaning.

Just to start my bedside visit on an appropriately sympathetic note, I woke him up by dumping a bucket of rain water on his head. I asked the gurgling mechanic politely if he was selling truck parts to buy vodka. He nodded. I punched him in the face, he yelped, blood splattering from his nose. Nadya jumped on me for that, blue eyes glaring, so I backed off.

Nadia was an angel. I knew we were not meant to be together for very long but that did not make her any less of an angel. I don't mean her blond hair, blue eyes and heavenly body, I mean she was as kind and giving as I'd expect an angel to be if there were angels. Tolik knew that regardless of my lack of commitment, I would never go against Nadya as I was too fond of her.

Tolik picked up the drunk and punched him hard in the stomach. The mechanic doubled up and puked. Nadia jumped between Tolik and the mechanic's limp body yelling and glaring at both of us now. Tolik and I both backed off. My sweetheart was too sweet a person to get her all rattled for this scumbag. There was nothing else to do here. Tolik and I wisely used our last chance to kick the drunk on the way out. We still had no trucks. Our cucumbers were doomed!

Working in the fields was pointless. The three of us, demoralized and irritated, hung around all day. I was doing some serious thinking. I remembered my past observations, Eugene's bitter take on things, the construction, open lies in the newspapers and rumors about people disappearing into the mental institutions for raising their voice against the government. And I remembered shortages or absence of pretty damn near EVERYTHING I ever wanted. The socialist natural law of existence states "If you want to have it, you can't but if you don't want to have it, you will." (There is a corollary to that law of socialism, by the way, for you aspiring socialists out there: "Steal, cheat and bribe and so ye shall subsist!") I remembered long food lines and haggard women, old before their time, always carrying bags of food for their families, bread and butter or possibly even fish or meat, the rare booty they scored after hours of waiting in lines.

I remembered many things now, looking at them through the prism of my suddenly acquired new experience. An entirely new concept germinated in my mind, the concept of social justice and the basic human entitlement to dignity. This line of thinking eventually took me on the great journey, not just the geographic journey within the confines of geopolitical division of the planet between different countries, but a deeper journey to understanding the human condition. There at the farm, among the stacks of rotten cucumbers, was the inception point of that journey.

Next morning the manager—a burly middle age man with a full head of unkempt hair, always dressed in baggy old pants, checkered shirt of undeterminable color and heavy army boots caked with mud—ordered us to go through the crates and separate out all the rotten cucumbers, load them up on a flatbed trailer and take them to the cows. Our cucumbers could be used to feed the cows! Good cucumbers were to be packed in crates again and stacked up neatly.

Our noisy mob devoured the new task and we ended up with a huge oozing pile of rotten cucumbers and a smaller stack of good ones in crates. An old rusty tractor arrived, pulling a flat trailer which must have been at least thirty feet long. We quickly shoveled up the rot. Then five of us hopped onto a trailer loaded with rotten cucumbers for our first run to the Animal Farm. What I saw there was shocking.

Can you imagine a Nazi death camp for cows? Try. The cows were dirty and wasted, you could count their ribs. They were starving. In fact, as soon as we showed up and it dawned on them that we had food, they stampeded the tractor. A tidal wave of mad cows came straight at us. You could see their eyes rolling in the sockets and Pavlovian saliva foaming from their mouths. Things looked bad for us, real bad there for a couple of excruciating minutes as a thousand cows pressed on the trailer from all sides trying to get to the cucumbers. I thought my end had come, mangled below tons of rotting cucumbers and ravaging cows—the terror and confusion of the moment amplified by deafening mo-o-o-ing noise and intolerable stench. We had to shovel the cucumbers as fast as we could, throwing them away from the trailer to diffuse the onslaught of the cows. The rotten cucumbers and all the slime were landing on cows' backs and heads. Other cows were eating that slime off of each other. The push subsided. Trembling, we finished unloading the trailer and the tractor driver slowly took us out of the yard.

We made several feeding runs to the Animal Farm that day. Cows satiated their hunger after the third run and then were not all that interested in us. I felt great that we helped the cows and Nadia was happy, but this food would be gone in a day. Then what? What did they do with the cows that died of starvation or disease? Sell the meat to us in the stores? Knowing how unimportant and irrelevant the general population was viewed by the government, I'd say, most likely.

Next morning at dawn, around 5AM, we woke up to the powerful rumble of an idling eighteen-wheeler. The picture is etched into my mind: a powerful tractor-trailer shrouded in the wisps of morning fog, rumbling mightily right under to a large red flag embroidered with a gold hammer and a sickle design. Who drove the truck here and how did he manage to do that? As it turned out the farm manager diverted this guy from his

route—illegally, naturally. The driver unloaded his freight some other place and drove all night to our farm on his way back to Kiev to make a couple of bucks and score some fresh veggies for his family. He claimed that nothing at all could stop him, he was a professional and he could make it through to the city with our cucumbers no matter what!

We happily loaded him up with some 60,000 pounds of good cucumbers. He asked for eight strong guys to go with him as volunteers. Everybody volunteered so he picked the guys himself. I was one of the chosen ones. We were to help him get to Kiev and then our farm duty for the year was over! We left an empty area in the back of the trailer for six guys (the other two were in the cab with the driver), loaded shovels and picks with us, red roadwork jackets and two MEN WORKING signs. The driver warned us that driving to Kiev was not going to be easy, it would take some hours. On that news the girls got us some meat, bread, a bucket of clean water and a tin mug for the road. We took off with the crowd cheering and Nadia blowing kisses at me.

When people said that a loaded eighteen-wheeler could not make it through, they were right! It couldn't! We had to zigzag in search of better roads, we doubled back and drove straight through fields in some places, we had to do some road work along the way here and there just to get through. We were dirty, tired and unhappy as our ordeal dragged on.

At one point we had to patch up the road to get through. As we were working under the sizzling sun the driver suddenly had a nervous breakdown or, as Russians say "the roof has slid off his house." He started laughing hysterically repeating the same words "*strana durakov*," "a country of fools," over and over again. Tears were streaming down his scrawny, unshaven and very dirty face. The vivid image of that crying, very tired grown up man haunted me for many years to come.

We finally made it to one of the Kiev distributor warehouses at around 6PM. We were filthy and exhausted. But at last we were on the finishing stretch! We were practically on the verge of going home, taking a hot shower, eating dinner and kicking back in front of either of the only two TV channels! Right? Wrong! The warehouse manager did not want us or our cucumbers! He told us to come back tomorrow because they were closing at six o'clock and it was almost six already so . . . The driver's legs gave out and he slumped down by the front wheel silently. He had been up for over forty-eight hours by then. He had to return the truck that day—all empty and cleaned—and he was already overdue.

"Sir," I tried explaining fervently, "We brought thirty tons of fresh vegetable here to feed our citizens. You are a vegetable warehouse, the distributorship. No?"

"So?"

"Take the damn cukes, I tell you! You know what it took to collect them? We had no truck 'cause the drunk mechanic trashed them so we had to find this one, then we had to drive through god-knows what. And we made it! We are here! Our people can just eat the cucumbers now and be healthy and happy!

He glanced at me blankly and told me to fuck off.

Finally the driver bribed the manager into leaving us the keys and we would unload, store everything properly, lock the place up and then hide the key under a pile of crates by the entrance on our way home.

We spent the next six hours shoveling slime and rat poop from the warehouse corner and putting up boards and cardboard to prepare a clean space for our precious cucumbers, then unloading the truck and cleaning it up. I have never imagined a place so dirty or rats so big and fat as I met in that warehouse that night. As big as cats, I swear. When you are confronted with one of those rats in a tight, barely lit aisle, you just want to step aside politely, take off your hat and call it "Sir." Only after you are out of the monster's field of vision you start retching and convulsing, while incessantly asking yourself "Why me?"

I was unable to think about anything at all by the time I got home. But I sure did a whole lot of thinking and looking in the weeks and months that followed. I remembered Uncle Eugene's rants. I heard things, I read things and I suddenly saw things. They were always there but I never noticed, because I never honestly looked before. The idea that I did not want to contribute in any way at all to that pitiful nonsense called USSR was slowly crystallizing in my mind. I wanted out. And if I wanted out, I'd get out! I pushed Tolik and Nadia away with no remorse. I was too young and foolish for remorse. I did not want them with me—not so much where I was going but more where I could possibly end up.

Chapter Four

THE KGB LIEUTENANT

I LOOKED INTO THE bloodshot eyes of the gray haired, heavysset KGB lieutenant and wondered briefly who in their right mind would voluntarily come to a KGB officer inquiring about immigrating from the Soviet Union to the Free World. I was not in my right mind, I suppose. It was 1978, I was eighteen years old. I despised communists in general and this old toad in particular. I knew that I had no future here anyway. Do you know another name for a condition of no future? Death.

"Stop horsing around," the lieutenant hissed menacingly. "What are you kids playing, chicken or something? Or drinking? Go home, sleep it off. And don't drink on an empty stomach any more, boy."

He grimaced. Must either be a toothache or his best smile imitation. Oh, the life of an old, washed-out KGB lieutenant! Everybody hates and fears you, you have no friends, can't trust anybody, including your superiors or comrades at arms, because you know too much and you know deep inside that you are really a worthless, disposable piece of trash.

"What do you mean "Go home? With all due respect, Sir, it is written right here "To the Service of the People." I am the people around here, I need service. I have a simple question, Comrade Lieutenant, how do I get out of here legally? I don't like it here in the Soviet Union anymore, I want out. Do you want me to go ask somebody higher up?"

The annoyed lieutenant made me walk a straight line back and forth, then I had to touch my nose with my index finger, then I had to do it while

standing on one foot with my eyes closed. Then I had to hop around on one foot with one hand behind my neck and elbow out while touching my nose with the index finger of the other hand. Then I did it all over again. Finally he checked my arms for needle marks.

He was sweating and panting in frustration by then. Not once during that entire procedure did it occur to the old fool that I may have been actually trying to get an answer to my question! He just kept trying to figure out why, really, I was standing there in front of him. What did I REALLY want? He finally slumped down behind his dilapidated desk dejectedly and fell silent.

The lieutenant's ruddy complexion suddenly turned even redder. He whacked his fat fist on the desk and jumped to his feet.

"How dare you?" he yelled, his eyes bulging. "Do you know that when you were tall enough to walk under this chair here I was already an Internal Security Troops sergeant decorated with a medal? I fought bandits near Kiev under the legendary Comrade Colonel Ilin himself! Who do you think you are to come here with your stupid tricks? Who sent you here? They think I am too old, don't they? Speak up right now!"

At first I was taken aback by this display but then I slowly traced his twisted thinking. He thought his superiors sent me to test him. They are all morons.

I cleared my throat, "Kh-khm . . . Listen, Vasiliy . . . You don't mind me calling you Vasiliy, do you? Okay, thanks. Let's be sensible here, Vasiliy. I am not saying anybody sent me here and I am not saying anybody didn't send me here. I just have a simple question on immigration laws, for which I have been trying to get an answer from you for the last forty minutes. You just keep stalling. Should I just go ask somebody else?"

"No, no, Misha, it's okay. Come here, sit down, let's talk."

He ushered me pompously to the scruffy visitors chair with his arm around my back like a real friend that he was to me, I am sure. I sat down.

"As you know, my boy, we are the most humane country in the world."

"Yes, Sir, I know."

"As you must also know, being the most humane country in the world, we signed the Helsinki Convention for Human Rights on allowing families to unite. Anybody who wants to unite with their family abroad, can just go ahead and do so—provided, of course, that they in fact have relatives abroad, who are inviting them, and they can prove that particular point beyond a shadow of the doubt."

"Well, that shouldn't be too difficult then!" I brightened up. "How difficult could it be to prove that you have a relative? Of course, if you really had one. There must be records, archives or something."

"Oh, yes. Definitely! In these lands, however, that were under the German occupation during the War, it is not all that simple. Some archives were burned by our heroic retreating Soviet troops so they wouldn't fall into the Germans' hands. The rest were burned by the advancing Nazi barbarians for no reason at all. So, archives around here do not go that far back. And obviously very few people left the country since 1945 because they love their Motherland so much so as you can see . . ."

"I see. So what would a proof beyond a shadow of the doubt look like then—without archives to prove anything? Have you ever seen such a proof, Vasily?"

"No, can't say I ever have."

"Perhaps some letters from relatives abroad would do?"

"Are you kidding me?" Vasily smirked sagely, "No way! Everybody would just fabricate such letters to get out!" Vasily lowered his voice, "You realize, Misha, there are still some morally flawed people in our beloved Motherland?"

"Yes, yes, I know, our beloved Motherland, naturally. What about family photographs or something?"

"No good. Could all be fabricated. Photomontage, you know. Those capitalists and their minions, they are e-e-evil bastards. They falsify things all the time!"

"I know, Comrade, definitely these capitalist pigs and their millions. So I guess nobody can really leave the Soviet Union then?"

"You are not listening to me, Misha! You need to start paying attention! I told you that we are the most humane country in the world. Didn't I tell you that? I told you that! Anybody who wants to leave, can just get up and go! This is not a jail, you know! They just need to prove they have re-la-tives a-bro-a-d who want to reunite with them. Clear now? That's all!"

"I got it now, Vasily. Thank you very much for your help! I will recommend you to all my friends," I raised my eyebrows a bit at this point to his obvious delight. "You are a true hero and a patriot of the Motherland. Even Comrade Colonel Ilin himself would be proud of you, Sir!"

I shook his hand. Vasily had an ear-to-ear grin on his fat face as he escorted me to the door with his arm around my shoulders. Bringing happiness to another human being usually makes me feel warm all over. This time was an exception. We shook hands for the last time and I went home—in one piece. I failed to find the way out of this dump but I did in fact glean some valuable information.

Chapter Five

THE BLACK MARKET

I WENT TO MY parents to find out about all our relatives abroad. It turned out we didn't have any. You have a mother, you have a father, you kind of expect certain things from life, like relatives, maybe, but no! Not a single goddamn relative abroad!

Well fine, if there were no way to leave legally, I would join the dissidents and use their help to leave illegally! It was common knowledge that dissidents helped get people across the southern borders to Afghanistan and Turkey, or up north to Finland, or west across the Baltic Sea to Germany. Statistically speaking, the escapees had a 50-50 chance of survival. About half of the escape attempts were unsuccessful, the fugitives died en route, were killed by the Border Troops or captured. These were either jailed for eight years hard labor in very cold places, where some of them died, or thrown into psychiatrists' dens to be turned into vegetables by psych drugs and shocks. The other half made it to the Free World. Rather decent odds in any game, 50-50. The only trick was pulling up to the finish line in the right 50.

How do you find dissidents and get them to trust you enough to help you? Was there anything I could actually do about this? Logistically speaking, the one thing I needed that I could actually get right then was money. First of all I would make some money to finance my escape.

The easiest place in the world to make good money fast was our beloved Motherland. The place was so backward and poor that EVERYTHING

good was in short supply. In general, "good" implied "foreign." If you had anything foreign to sell, you could get rich fast. The stuff didn't even have to be new, could just as well be old and used. All the foreigners who came to the Soviet Union for any reason were expected to have the almighty STUFF. If you had mascara or T-shirts or LPs or condoms or jeans or umbrellas or shoes or cigarettes or chewing gum or candy or even just goddamn plastic bags—just anything foreign—you could become an overnight millionaire. You could also get seriously hurt by the competition or, more likely, incarcerated for three years. You do not watch TV and play basketball in Russian jails, you just suffer all the time. The criminal charge was "speculation," i.e., buying at a lower price and selling at a profit, the free enterprise.

The first hurdle to overcome was finding and contacting any foreigners to buy from. There were other hurdles too, such as having capital to buy with and having customers to sell to, but first I needed to contact some foreigners.

There were two breeds of foreigners in Kiev: foreign students and tourists. Foreign students were mainly skinny, slightly deformed and malnourished Algerians, Tunisians and other such hillbillies from Africa. The foreign students were not much better off than us. Whatever treasures they may have once possessed, such as a used pair of jeans, they already exchanged for food or sex. They were too accessible. There was no point chasing after them.

Then, of course, there were tourists, a very different breed. They were rich, oh yes! But they were confined to their special "closed" hotels where every single hotel employee was a KGB informant! It was just a part of every job description in those hotels. And there were only a dozen closed hotels in Kiev. Soviet citizens were banned from those hotels. Any local caught there would get in trouble, even if they weren't doing anything at all.

How did one meet foreigners in the Soviet Union? Simple. Just be one! It is just a role to play. Just be a foreigner! Just walk into a hotel looking and behaving like a foreigner, go up to any floor, knock on any door and push your way in as soon as it opens—or just leave the hotel immediately if nobody's home—all in plain sight of a floor attendant-informant. Yes, there were floor attendant stations on every floor overlooking all of the doors on that floor.

How do you look like a foreigner? Just BE one. Clothes would not make you a foreigner, although a pair of Levi jeans went a long way. You just have to feel more careless, be more energetic, smile more, swing your arms more, add some spring to your step, wave to somebody, say "Hi!" in full voice, look people in the eye and smile wider, say "How are you?" and

smile even wider still and that's it! Nobody would doubt for an instant that you were a foreigner! And why wouldn't anybody double check and ask you what you were doing there, just to make sure? Obvious! Totally Russian logic: because if you were a foreigner, you might get upset about somebody stopping you and asking questions and get that person in trouble. Who wanted to create bad PR for the Motherland and get in trouble? Nobody. Who would try to stop me and ask any questions? Nobody. How could they prevent me from contacting foreigners? They couldn't! Just a minute ago it seemed impossible to succeed, didn't it? Now it seems impossible to fail, doesn't it? A land of paradoxes.

I bought my first pair of jeans from some Yugoslavs. It was a relatively easy gig and somewhat of an accident and I almost soiled my pants in the process, but it worked out fine in the end. I paid a hundred rubles for that pair, size 32x32. Over half of the money was borrowed. I sold that pair of Levi's for two hundred rubles to some friend of Ludmila's the same day. I made a hundred rubles. For comparison, at that time my mother, an electrical engineer, was making 140 rubles . . . a MONTH. I turned around and bought two pairs of Wranglers in a different hotel.

Within four days I had over 700 rubles capital which was enough for seven pair of jeans. I could sell them for 1400 rubles or as much as my mother was making in ten months. I could make that much in under a week with a starting capital of forty rubles. There is something obscene and even insane about that, if you stop and think. An eighteen-fold return on your investment in a week? On blue jeans? Insane.

By that time, the goons of the local Jean Lord, Gena Drozdov, were already looking for me. The word was out that he was going to break my legs for cutting in on his territory. I knew I was in trouble, although I most seriously doubted that he would actually inflict such damage to my extremities just for a few pairs of jeans, especially since I knew Gena personally. Gena and I used to hang around together because we went to the same school for a few years when we were kids. He did not know where I lived but if he really wanted to find me he would be standing at my doorstep the same day. I did not want that. I had to do my last gig, make the 1400 rubles, or whatever I could, and drop down low for a spell. I had no idea if 1400 was enough to escape from Russia, but it would have to do.

I chose Hotel *Bereza*—"The Birch Tree," Russians love birch trees—a large, beautifully kept-up high-rise hotel for foreigners. It was located within spitting distance from Gena's house, so I could use that good old element of surprise that I liked so much. His people would never expect me in their backyard, especially after they went through the trouble of making it known that he was looking for me.

I did not own a pair of jeans to look like a foreigner. I did not consider it sane to spend so much money on a pair of pants. But I had a successful "foreigner" getup nonetheless. It consisted of a pair of old sneakers, old crumpled khaki pants, a slightly torn Led Zeppelin T-shirt and an old leather jacket. It worked fine. I got in okay, waved to nobody in particular, yelled "How are you?" in the general direction of the Gift Shop and marched to the elevator swinging my arms and smiling. Nobody stopped me. In the elevator I smiled wider, slapped a dejected looking elevator attendant on the back and said, "Four." I liked the sound of FOUR-R-R. I kind of rolled it in the end sounding very American. I liked that. I liked America a whole lot, the Land of the Free. Or at least the land where you could buy all the jeans and cucumbers you wanted without risking your silly ass!

I disembarked at the fourth floor, walked past the floor attendant with the words "Ma' man" and a wide grin and knocked on the third door down the hallway, purely at random. While I was sweating out the wait by the door, I looked at the attendant, smiled and waved. He smiled back politely while speaking on his phone. Who was the bum talking to? I sweated some more.

The moments dragged on, almost tangible as they went by in their morose succession. Finally the door opened. Stepping in fast and pulling it shut behind me, I found myself staring at six unshaven Arabs. They were a bit taken aback by my abrupt entrance but quickly understood the few English words I knew, "Jeans? Money-money!"

They were instantly all smiles. Yes indeed, they had jeans and they wanted money! One of them brought a notebook and wrote number "12" and another number "1600" next to it. They had twelve pairs and wanted 1600 rubles. I remembered what I read about the Arab culture. They spent some time fooling around with mathematics and medicine, I'll give them that, but mostly they have just been selling used camels to each other for thousands of years. Okay, let's haggle! I took the note book, crossed out "1600" and wrote "400." Ha! There! Show me the camels!

In a few minutes of constant chattering, smiles and a lot of unfamiliar hand gestures, scratching hairy throats, rolling their eyes and crossing out numbers the Arabs agreed on seven pairs for 700 rubles. Then I drew a little map of our future meeting place in the park a few blocks from the hotel, wrote the time "1700" hours and marked the exact location. I knew the place, it was somewhat secluded. I tore up the paper and flushed it down their toilet after I was fairly sure they understood the basic concept of bringing the seven pairs of jeans to the park at 5PM today and I would pay them 700 rubles there.

I walked out as empty-handed as I walked in. That was the only safe way of doing it.

At five o'clock I was at the park to meet the Arabs at the designated place. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon, blue sky, warm breeze, birds chirping and children shrieking hysterically at a playground nearby. Hiking to our rendezvous place I noticed that there were very few people around. The park was pretty much deserted. I felt a ping of apprehension, scanning the lush vegetation on either side of the path, searching for any indication of an ambush. Would the Arabs dare to attack me? There was nothing out of place that I could see but I felt alarmed, the ambience felt wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it but something felt wrong.

Wait a minute . . . there *was* something wrong! I could not hear or see any birds anywhere near the meeting place. Was that normal? Probably not. I turned around and scrambled back toward the park entrance when one of the Arabs suddenly bolted from the thicket straight at me. We both fell, fighting, when the rest of my former business associates fell upon me like a pack of wolves, kicking and punching. Being a Jew I was always outnumbered, so I was somewhat experienced in fighting losing battles. The secret of winning while losing is in picking a target small enough for you to chew up and then defeating just that small target while ignoring the rest.

Disregarding the blows, I managed to get on top of my assailant. Nothing existed in the world except me and my enemy. I got a good hold of his lower lip with my right hand and yanked it down, flesh tearing, while clawing at his face with my left and butting him anywhere I could reach with my forehead and knees. He bellowed and heaved, shrieking in terror now, gagging on his own blood and sputtering. The kicks were hailing on my body and head from all directions. I could not take it for much longer. Things were getting dim. Then somebody turned off the lights.

I focused slowly. Silence. Having wiped the blood off my eyes the best I could, I looked at my watch. 5:04. I was out for only a few minutes. Good news. My condition could not have been that bad if I was unconscious for just a couple of minutes. My head ached, as well as pretty much all the other parts of my body, and my stomach was churning. I crawled into the bushes on all four and vomited. A little better. My assailants were gone. There was a stain of blood on the dirt path where I took my Arab apart. Well, dick, you will be eating with a straw and breathing through your mouth for a long time, I promise. I checked my pockets—yeah, the money was gone. So they attacked me, roughed me up, robbed me and left me in the bushes nursing my bruises. On my turf!

Boy, was I pissed! Who let the stinky foreigners run amok attacking people? Who was in charge here? Gena Drozdov, that's who! It was his territory! And he was chasing after ME? He should be chasing after the Arabs! Some of my teeth felt tender, my lip was cut, some of my ribs and

a knee hurt like hell. The rest of my body was bruised up and achy but basically intact.

I washed up the best I could in the overgrown irrigation pond nearby and went straight to Gena's house.

He lived the same as anybody else, five-story dilapidated apartment building where somebody urinated in the lobby. He had a three-room very messy apartment full of expensive furniture, located in a neighborhood that looked like any other—shoddy, crumbling streets lined with five or nine-story dingy apartment buildings that all looked the same and even smelled the same inside.

Was it stupid of me to come here? Not really. I rang the doorbell. One of his goons opened the door and froze, looking at me incredulously. Then he stepped aside letting me in and pushed me through one of the rooms into the kitchen.

Gena was having dinner. He was not a little kid anymore, he was heavier, sweaty, unshaven and wearing a dingy PUMA tank top. When he saw me, Gena yelled with his mouth full, waving his fork and spitting food all around the kitchen.

"You?! Here? I'll kill you!"

He has always been a bit theatrical. I could be too.

"Shut the fuck up, Gena! You good for nothing bum! You and your pissy little girlfriends here! Shut up!" I was stamping my feet in rage, "You know what just happened? A bunch of stinky Arabs from the 4th floor Bereza Hotel beat me up and took my money! 700 rubles! And kept the jeans! See my face? On YOUR territory, Gena!" I pushed away one of his cronies who happened to step into range. He fell, bringing down a small wine rack or maybe a side table—probably pushed him a bit too hard. "On YOUR territory, Gena!" I continued even louder. "What kind of Mickey Mouse operation are you running here?! You have Arabs running around attacking people! You are all lazy cowards!"

"Serves you right, you bastard! Stay out of MY territory!" Gena yelled back trying to look ferocious but I could tell that his heart was no longer in it.

"Don't change the subject, Gena! Who's in charge here? Stinking Arabs? I'll tell you who! Nobody is in charge here! It's just a goddamn anarchy!"

"I am in charge!" Gena puffed his sizeable chest out defiantly.

"Nobody is in charge! If somebody was in charge, there'd be some order around here!"

I turned around and stormed out the door.

"Where do you live, you crazy bum?" I heard Gena yelling.

"Kiss my ass!" I yelled back slamming the door behind me. Nobody tried to stop me.

Next evening Gena was standing at my doorstep—alone.

“Here,” he handed me a zipped leather shoulder bag. Very nice bag. Probably till very recently it belonged to the Arabs. I opened it. It contained seven pairs of jeans and my seven hundred rubles in an envelope neatly tucked inside.

“Thank you, Gena.”

“You sure did a number on one of those guys. You are even crazier than me!”

“Thank you! I take it as a compliment! You don’t know how much it’s worth to me. And my thanks to the Arabs for the jeans and the money. Very thoughtful. Much appreciated.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told them too. I said thank you. They said they were sorry. I forgive them. What about you?”

“I forgive them too, Gena. Perhaps they were merely channeling their psycho-bullshit tendencies into criminal acts of despicable violence, that’s all.”

“Ha! I’d say! They can go channel their bullshit somewhere else, like Sahara desert!”

“Exactly! Nice bag too, thanks. Sit down, Gena.”

“Thanks, buddy, got to go. I just wanted to know something. Do you want to work with me? I kind of enjoyed your crazy style.”

“Work with you or for you? No, I don’t want to. But I can promise you not to work at all for a few months. Will that do it for you as a token of my deepest gratitude?”

“You want to know the truth, Misha? I don’t give a flying hoot. What are we talking here? A 1000 or 2000 rubles in business? Ha! I spend more on Zinka’s tampons! But you running around on your own just makes me look bad. Sets a bad example.”

“What if we were just old school friends?”

“Friends? I have not seen you for two years! How about when you are ready to get back to work in a few months, like you said, you just tell me first and I organize some deals for you. Of course, I would want a cut. But you would use my contacts and purchasing power. You will make per unit almost as much as you do now. And it would look good to others, set a good example.”

“I won’t work for anybody, Gena, nothing personal. But we could hang around together sometimes, get seen together, stuff like that. If you want.”

“Well, okay, I suppose I could take you to the Chicken Coop Bar with me tonight. Show you to some people. You wanna go?”

A bar? I have never seen one in my life, except in a few American movies I saw. Of course I wanted to go!

Gena had a car, a tiny Russian *Zhiguli*, an astronomically expensive Russian coffin on wheels, a very bad replica of the Italian *Fiat*. We drove to the industrial part of town and parked next to some long, ugly and dark warehouse.

“What is this?” I expected something totally different.

“This is a textile factory or a warehouse or some shit like that, you’ll see. All kinds of huge spools and stuff inside.”

Spools? What about the bar? The bartender wiping glasses, the din, the TV, music, long-legged lonely women—all the good stuff from American movies? Incredulous, I followed Gena inside the warehouse. We walked to the very end of the barely lit, dusty warehouse. It was full of some shelving and huge rolls of some textile or something. We stopped by a door at the end wall. Gena knocked. The door opened to a dark space. I could suddenly hear some muffled music from somewhere. Some big guy, dressed in all black, stepped out from the darkness and shined a flash light in Gena’s face. The guard recognized Gena and waved us in.

We stepped into the darkness. Gena opened another door. The place was dimly lit. It was a narrow long space filled with a bar counter and stools next to it. There was a large TV set mounted overhead, some speakers, nice quiet music, smell of good cognac. There must have been at least thirty people there, guys, girls—mainly guys. They were drinking and talking. The bar was set up behind a false warehouse wall. The walls and door of the bar were completely covered with exercise mats as sound insulation. Police absolutely had to be in on it, getting a cut of the action.

We went to the bartender and ordered two cocktails *Beriozka* (“Little Birch Tree,” wouldn’t you know?), half champagne, half French cognac, no ice. Russian style.

From that evening on, I often visited that bar, with or without Gena. There, at the Chicken Coop, I met black market dealers connected to dissidents. There was a lot of money to be made on equipping and channeling people, the dissidents, across the borders, those people who would take their 50-50 chance but pay in full upfront. I wanted to be one of those dissidents and I found a path that led me to them.

Chapter Six

DISSIDENTS

SOME DENIM-CLAD WHEELER-DEALER at the bar arranged a meeting for me with Isaak, our local self-appointed dissident leader, a wiry and nervous middle-aged Jew. We sat at the bar, drinking my beer and talking.

"Isaak, I want out," I said.

"You'll probably get yourself killed," was his answer.

"Yeah, but can you help?"

"I possibly could, but why? And you'll be the first one to sell me out at a drop of a hat. People are garbage, no good deed remains unpunished, you know. So why bother?"

Why was I wasting my time with this loser? Isaak was a very bitter, sarcastic and cynical fellow like most of the other dissidents I met. Everything around was bad and impossible to improve and all people were bad and everything was hopeless. For the most part the dissidents were kind of crazy. Either life made them that way or, most likely, they were that way to begin with. Of course, not all dissidents were crazy.

I heard wild incredible stories about people making it across. There was a guy, Misha, like me, who was hidden in a train parked in Kiev, which was supposed to go to Vienna. He was secured to some pipe above the drop ceiling in the bathroom. Misha spent some hours hanging from that pipe between ceilings before the train left Kiev bound for Vienna and then some more hours while it was in motion. Then the hand ties broke and he

was actually hanging there bound by his feet and holding on to the pipe. Finally his arms gave out and his head and shoulders crashed through the drop ceiling, while his legs were still bound to the pipe. Some passenger, who walked in to use the john, found Misha hanging that way and raised hell. The unconscious escapee had missed the happy moment of police unloading him off the train. Austrian police! He made it to the free world. A little banged up but he made it! Statistically, for every one who made it, there was one who didn't.

At the Chicken Coop I also met a great guy, Yura, who used to be a merchant marine assigned to a freighter that was transporting goods in the Baltic Sea. Yura told me that a few years back he was totally prepared for his escape from the ship. He was supplied with a wet suit, a compass and a pair of flippers. He was given the exact compass bearing and the exact time at night to jump off the ship. Yura jumped overboard at night at the exact right time and started swimming toward Germany per the compass instructions he bought from the black market dealer. That course immediately brought him in the darkness to a Russian gunboat that was waiting for him. The black market dealer sold him to the KGB. He probably had to do such things sometimes to be able to get anybody across at all.

They fished Yura out, gave him his brisk but fair trial, most humane in the world, and in short order sent him on his way to destinations far north. He received the usual eight-year sentence, but, having repented publically, was let out after four years for good behavior. Yura denounced his actions, pounding his fist on his chest and explaining how Voice of America radio station led him astray and how all that insidious capitalist propaganda clouded his judgment. They let him go and he returned to Kiev to stay with his mother. That is when our paths crossed.

I asked Yura what he was going to do now. He told me with a straight face that he applied to get back his old Baltic Sea merchant marine job. I stared at him. He just smiled his toothless smile. He lost three front teeth in the labor camp and had not had a chance to fix them yet. That is how I remember Yura. As I later found out, his dead body had washed up on the German shore with his skull crushed in. The official story was that he accidentally fell overboard on choppy seas at night, drowned, and the body got bashed against the rocks by the waves. There were no rocks. Nobody knows what really happened to Yura that night except he never made it to the Free World alive. Yura was a strong spirit, unstoppable—except by death.

"Any special skills that you can use to escape?" Isaak eyed me distastefully and went back to staring at the chess board. That was during our second meeting. We were playing chess on a wet park bench, just the two of us, not a soul around. It was a grey, miserable day, light drizzle

misting Isaak's glasses, exaggerating the feverish sheen of his gaunt face. Just a couple of friends—or perhaps a father and son—playing chess under rain. I bet nobody would ever find it suspicious. Was it just me or was this guy totally nuts, in addition to stinking of BO? He took my Knight.

"If you are as bad at everything else as you are at chess, you are doomed." Abrasive old man. Being a decedent meant that he was not allowed to leave the country. Beats me why the authorities wouldn't just let him go. Why would anybody want to keep this guy around? He pissed me off pretty much every time he opened his mouth.

"I am a good swimmer, old man, and I am also pretty good at shaving and washing every once in a while, unlike you." I snapped back.

"You are a fool," Isaak retorted with a scowl, "You searched me out, not the other way around, remember?"

He was right, of course, "Sorry, Isaak. What do you have in mind?"

"If you are a good swimmer, you could swim across the Black Sea to Turkey. I could get you to a good place, the shortcut, you'd have to swim maybe, oh, thirty kilometers. Can you make it? Are you really that good?"

"Don't know, never tried. How is the sharks situation?"

Isaak shrugged, "You are so bitter, sharks would stay away in droves. But in any case, Black Sea sharks, called *catruns*, only grow to about a meter long. They are totally harmless. The sea is warm, no large storms. The only thing to worry about is border subs and gun boats. The place is inundated with hardware."

Well, the chance for a gunboat to find a swimmer in the open seas seemed pretty slim. I started intense training at my favorite public 50-meter Olympic pool.

But to be honest, I had my doubts about letting dissidents run my life and organize my escape. Isaak was crazy. Most of them were crazy. So why would I want to trust psychotics with my life? There did not seem to be any other way to get out, that's why. But as usual, an opportunity presented itself.

Chapter Seven

THE INVITATION LETTER

ONE DAY, IN the spring of 1979, I accidentally ran into an old friend of mine, Vitia, an electrician. He worked at the Exhibition of Soviet Technical Achievements. The Exhibition was a huge park with many exhibition buildings, where foreign tourists and the school kids were blessed with an opportunity to see all kinds of USSR technical achievements, such as nuclear ballistic missiles, milk bottling machines, color TVs, proximity bombs and many other interesting and useful things, all invented, of course, by Soviet scientists. I used to go to that park every year in February when they had *Maslenitsa* celebration there. *Maslenitsa* is a pre-Lent festivity—before Ash Wednesday—similar to European carnivals. It is known for its food, especially pancakes. There was also horse sled riding around the park. I used to love *Maslenitsa*.

Vitia told me that next morning he was leaving for Vienna as a part of the setup crew of the Soviet Achievements pavilion at some international fair there. He was going to the Free World! Vitia literally danced with excitement, a wide smile on his plump face. Nobody I ever talked to went out of our dump and wanted to come back!

I invited Vitia to our apartment, took out a bottle of vodka, some boiled potatoes and pickled herring that I found in the fridge and we had ourselves a farewell party for Vitia. We drank to the success of his trip, then to his health, then to my health, then to all the scientific achievements of our glorious Soviet scientists and finally to the health of Yuri Gagarin, posthumously. The

first man in space happened to be dead for about ten years by then but we were not about to let little things sidetrack us. Vodka was almost gone. I thought the time had come to plunge in with my burning question.

"Vitia, see if you can find my relatives in Vienna, will you?"

"No kidding? I didn't know you had relatives in Vienna! Let's drink to your relatives in Vienna! May they always have a good erection when they need it!" Vitia filled the glasses with the last of the vodka, unsteadily.

"I don't have relatives in Vienna—far as I know—but I'll drink to that!" We drank. "Ah-h-h-h!"

Vitia stared at me with a potato sticking out of his mouth. He looked a bit like a snake who wasn't quite done swallowing a mouse. Disturbing. Vitia mumbled through his potato, "How can I find your relatives, may they be healthy and well, if you don't have any? Did you think of that, hah?"

I got offended. "Have you ever been to the Free World?"

"No, never."

"See? How do you know who you can find there? Who knows who was screwing who during the war in a heat of the battle? Are you sure you don't have relatives in Vienna, hmm?"

Vitia brightened up and yelled, "Yes! To my relatives in Vienna! May their children never be afraid of diesel locomotives!" He grabbed the empty bottle in an enthusiastic attempt to squeeze a few more drops of vodka out of it—with quite disappointing results. I knew the feeling. A glass could be seen as half-full or half-empty but when all vodka was gone, the glass was just empty.

I continued, "So how do I know what relatives I have where? How can you be sure that you won't find my relatives?"

Vitia scratched his neck, a bit confused.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Oh, not much, really. Just take my personal data with you. Mine and my parents. You know, passport numbers, names, address, dates of birth, mother's maiden name—things like that. See what happens."

"But I think they search everybody at the border. That's what I heard." He stood up, swaying unsteadily, "I don't want them to crawl up my ass and find something there!"

"I hear you." Naturally, I had a bright idea; I would not be stopped. "Then we can write my data on the elastic of your underpants. Nobody will find it even if they strip search you. Just don't change the underwear!"

"You are crazy! What if I get caught?"

"Relax, Vita, take a deep breath. Why would anybody look for anything interesting in your underwear?"

"You talked to Galina, you bastard!" Vitia pointed his accusing finger at me, doubling up in laughter and slapping me on the back. I guess Galina

was the name of his girlfriend. We both hooted at the joke. "Nothing interesting in my underwear. Right!"

We cut the elastic in his underpants and pulled it out, wrote all the data, pulled it back in and tied the cut ends into a knot. Vitia left.

He returned two weeks later in shambles, "I knew I shouldn't have listened to you! You are crazy! We are both dead now! What have you done?" I pried out of him what actually happened there that got him so terrified.

It turned out that as soon as he arrived to Vienna, a very tall stranger approached him at the train station and asked in broken Russian with some unrecognizable accent if he knew any people who wanted to leave Soviet Union. Vitia, startled, told him all about his underwear.

The tall man escorted Vitia to the nearest public bathroom where they cut the elastic, pulled it out, the tall guy thanked him politely and left with the elastic.

The question that was driving Vitia crazy was "*Who was that tall guy?*"

There seemed to be only one answer—KGB. Who else could it be?

I had to agree. I just couldn't think of anybody else who'd be interested. Nervous, Vitia ran off somewhere never to be seen or heard from again.

The next three weeks were hell, always expecting a knock on the door, expecting our life to be ruined forever, not just my life but also my parents' life. And they did not even have a clue all this was happening! I was trying to be especially nice and attentive to my mother. She thought I needed money, of course. Typical.

In about three weeks a large envelope addressed to my father came by mail. It was from Israel. I was home and I was expecting trouble so I decided to examine it before my parents got home.

The letter turned out to be an invitation letter from the Israeli government. It was signed by four government officials using ball point pens that were skipping and smearing a bit in some places, as such pens did. Boy, did this look authentic to me!

The letter had the same text in three languages—Hebrew, English and Russian. It read approximately this:

Congratulations Mr. Priv!

Your cousin, Vlad Hertzl, has found you after 20 years of searching with the help from several international non-profit agencies that are listed below. Your cousin, Mr. Hertzl, is a citizen of Israel and has been since 1948.

As you may remember, in August of 1941 you and your family were being evacuated by train from the advancing German troops. There was a lot of confusion caused by

enemy air raids and artillery fire. As you may remember, near Korosten station the train was bombed and your three-year old cousin Vladimir was separated from the family and left behind in the mass confusion.

You may have considered him dead but he survived. He was adopted by another Jewish family, the Hertzels, who made their way to Palestine during the Great War. That explains Vladimir's new name. He has been looking for you and finally he has found you. He is hereby officially inviting you to live with him and his family in Haifa, Israel.

Upon presentation of this letter, you become eligible for Israeli citizenship, the right and duty to bear arms in defense of Israel and for low interest government loans.

Welcome!

Holly Moshe Dayan! I realized that I was looking at the proof beyond a shadow of the doubt! Behold my ticket out!

First of all, I went to see my father.

"Congratulations, dad! Your cousin has finally found you!"

"What cousin?"

I showed him the letter. He was a little incredulous at first, mainly because his family never evacuated from Kiev but stayed under the German occupation. Then, of course, it turned out he never had a cousin by the name Vladimir, either. Who sent the letter and why? It was a mystery but I didn't dwell on it.

"Shame on you, dad! You don't even remember your little cousin Vladimir! How could you forget little Vlad? The poor guy has been looking for you for twenty years and you don't even remember him!"

Chapter Eight

UP AND AWAY!

TO MAKE A long story short, my parents decided to take this chance and get the hell out of the Soviet Union. It was not by any means an easy decision for them. When you apply for the exit visa, just by the act of applying, you FOREVER forfeit your life, career, even your apartment. If you were denied the exit permission, you would have permanently and completely ruined your life and been forced into the ranks of dissidents. If my parents were allowed to leave and left the country, they would forever lose their friends and relatives, even the right to visit their parents' graves. The real reason they made their decision to leave was my compulsory military service that was coming up that fall, right after my graduation from the Technical School. I did not consider that reason truly important at the time. My attitude changed drastically a year later when the Afghanistan blood bath started. Looking back now, who knows, who knows . . .

Meanwhile, the next step was a visit to old Lieutenant Vasiliy. I showed him the letter. He read it, then looked at the signatures through a magnifying glass and finally declared the letter to be authentic.

"Of course, Misha, you understand that we would have to actually find this guy Hertzl and double check his story, but otherwise looks good from here."

"Great. So what do I do now?"

"You need to fill out and submit an application. Oh, it is easy. Just a few simple things to get the application ready."

The list of simple things included collecting attestations from all the libraries in Kiev that we did not owe them any books. Then, getting similar attestations from every rental place. There were several other simple steps as well, all totally idiotic.

Collecting the library attestations was a nerve-wracking experience at times. You come to a library, located usually in a basement of some apartment building, and ask for an attestation that you don't owe them any books. You know how in America librarians are considered to be among the most helpful people in the world? Well, in Russia they aren't. They are usually cranky old ladies. So you ask for an attestation and you hear back that you should just bring back the books and stop fooling around.

"But I can't bring back the books because I did not check out any books from your library. So how could I bring them back?"

"How should I know? Am I supposed to believe everything anybody tells me?" ironic smile, "You think I am stupid? Return all the books immediately!"

"I don't have any books! Can't you check your records? You must have a card file around here or something."

"Don't you tell me what I must have, you criminal! Bring back the books immediately or I am calling police!"

After a few false starts and some careful consideration I worked out two strategic approaches to handling this problem—a box of chocolates as a working strategy or impersonating an authority figure as the emergency Plan B. The chocolates approach was an obvious one. Women like presents and love sweets. That includes any and all women.

I reserved the second approach only for those rare librarians who seemed especially forbidding. Soviets were hysterically afraid of authorities. Possibly it had something to do with many millions of people taken away in the middle of the night in the old days never to be heard from again. When the body count gets into millions, people start noticing in a big way. They get terrified. Good ol' Uncle Joe Stalin. *Stalin* means "made of steel." Made of steel? Homicidal imbecile.

I would show up wearing a suit and a tie, with my clipboard in hand, the attestation already typed up and just waiting to be signed. I'd walk around silently, look the librarian straight in the eye, take out a pen, ask her name weightily, ask if she was in charge here and since when, inquire with gravity how many books get checked out daily and by whom, write it all down with a solemn frown, silently look through her records making notes, then take out the attestation and tell her to sign it—while unwaveringly, and even somewhat accusingly, staring straight into her eyes. She would fall to pieces, start babbling about her family and sign it. Then I'd simply turn around silently and march out. It was brutal. There was enough brutality

around already. I liked the candy approach much better. Deep down inside every cranky old lady was still a woman, albeit a pissed off one.

Interesting to note in passing that getting attests from rental places was very easy. All the clerks there were men who, as everybody knows, simply do not give a hoot about anything. They would just as well sign anything to get rid of you and get back to doing nothing.

One of the more difficult things I had to do was getting out of Comsomol, which was a mandatory communist youth organization. You turn fourteen, you join Comsomol and at the age of twenty-four you get taken off the list. I was not going to wait for five more years to turn twenty-four. Unfortunately, in order to leave the country I had to be expelled from my Tech School Comsomol Corps first.

I was a student at the Culinary Technical School at the time. I thought I wanted to be a vending machines technician when I grew up. I enrolled in that program because, supposedly, no university would accept me on account of me being a Jew. Don't really know, though, I never tried. Anyway, I went to our tech school Comsomol secretary, as she was called, and asked her to expel me. She just laughed.

Okay. I went to see the regional secretary. After a long wait I was finally ushered into his office. I might have entered the hub of a very important and busy operation, like a factory or possibly a department store or something. But what was he producing there with all that business? What was the end product? Absolute zilch. I presented my case and asked him to please expel me from Comsomol. He laughed in my face too.

I went to the City of Kiev Comsomol secretary. Never even got admitted. The big shot didn't have time to see me. He was too busy. Getting into Comsomol was easy, getting out seemed impossible.

I was trying to leave the Soviet Union for the West. Wouldn't that be a betrayal of Comsomol principles? There must have been a certain ideological backbone to Comsomol, it was a communist youth organization! I went back to my school Comsomol secretary and asked her for a formal hearing, like a court. As a member, I was entitled to express grievances and be heard by a special jury.

There were four members of the court and I. One of them, a good looking young woman, asked me to be brief. I was. I told them very briefly how much I hated them all, wretched anti-Semites, and that I was immigrating to Israel and did not want to be a member of their moronic Comsomol any longer. That was pretty brief, I thought. Silence. Bulging eyes and slack jaws. Then one of the guys got up, smiled wide, went around the table and slapped me on the back.

"Come on, Misha! You fool! You are playing us! I thought you were serious for a moment. Let me ask you a question just to show you how

far off field you really are. If you were an Israeli soldier, sitting in a trench, looking at the Arabs attacking your position, let's say Syrians or Jordanians or any other damn rag-heads, would you actually shoot at them? You realize of course that Arabs can't fight worth a coat button as an army. They are the worst possible soldiers because some of them want to die and the others only want the pay but heavily frown upon the actual fighting part. How sane and battle worthy could they be as an army of soldiers? So, naturally, those soldiers attacking your positions would most likely be Russian or Ukrainian boys wearing Syrian uniforms, like in '67, just like your buddies that you grew up with here. Would you really kill them? Honestly now."

"Are you kidding me? Honestly?! Of course I would kill every one of these imbeciles with all the bullets I had! And if I ran out of bullets, I would jump out of my trench and hack as many of them as I could with my bayonet! Death to the anti-Semites!"

Dropping jaws and bulging eyes again.

"Do you now believe me when I tell you that you must expel me? I am totally wrong for Comsomol! Do you all want to get in trouble because of me?"

They all concurred that I had to go. I was out in a hurry.

There were other things to handle, such as turning our apartment over to the government agency *Zhek* that was handling living arrangements. It was its own comical nightmare, blown way out of proportion by the local bureaucrats, driven by their insatiable greed—in full accordance with the universal and eternal bureaucratic tradition.

Finally the application was submitted. In about four months we had permission to leave that hellhole.

Our housemates, by the way, bribed the appropriate authorities and were able to expand into our two rooms, thus having the entire three-room apartment to themselves. A big whoopee-do and more power to them!

Meanwhile, we were allowed to exchange enough rubles to have a hundred and thirty US dollars and one suitcase per person and leave the rest of our possessions, jewelry and money behind forever. We did. We also had to give up our Soviet passports. Those were burned. We were briefed that we were banned from the Soviet Union forever as traitors.

With that heartfelt goodbye we got our train tickets. We would travel to the border town, appropriately called *Chop*, go through customs there and travel by train to Vienna with 390 dollars and three biggest suitcases in the known universe as the totality of our assets.

As rumors had it, Chop was besieged by immigrating Jews and waiting in line for customs inspection could take a week.

On August 22, 1979, my parents sent me to Chop to get a place in line and let them know when they should come. I remember that day because

it was my birthday. I turned nineteen. To celebrate that momentous occasion I got senselessly drunk on the train with some guys I met there. I had three bottles of vodka with me and some food. They did not come entirely unprepared, either. Our jubilations went on till morning. Can't say I remember anything that happened that night or in Chop during the first day or two. But apparently I did alright. I rented a corner in some old barn for enough money, probably, to feed an entire African village for a month, signed up in the customs line and called my parents with the estimated time and date of our customs inspection. It was supposed to be in six days.

The customs went okay—for me and my father, that is. We had nothing to hide, except, of course, a bunch of rubles that we were both smuggling in our shoes and underwear. We thought we'd stash a bit of money for a rainy day. We didn't know that nobody outside of the Soviet Union accepted rubles at all. We had nothing except each other. But there, at the customs inspection, we were illegally carrying rubles. Nobody searched us. We got through very fast with all our useless rubles.

But not my mother, oh, no! My mom must be the straightest, most honest, prim and proper lady in the world. She has never as much as jay-walked in her life. She would have a fit if she found out that her slip was showing a bit and any time any man would try to get a second glance at her—as often happened because she was a beautiful woman—she was immediately certain that there must have been something terribly wrong with her appearance, possibly even a run on her stockings or, God forbid, a stain or a lost button or something equally cataclysmic. You get the idea. So my mother was strip searched at Chop. That is not all of it. The bastards found something on her. She hid a worthless string of coral under her blouse, just for sentimental reasons. They confiscated the coral.

I don't know what exactly happened at that search but she kind of froze as a result, some kind of a shock reaction. We were helping my mother and dragging the suitcases into the train, sweating and cursing. We were dirt poor, bitterly frustrated and dead tired. An appropriate ending for our life in the Soviet Union, the most humane country in the world.

PART TWO

INTO THE RAINBOW

Chapter One

VIENNA

AFTER AN ALL-NIGHT sleepless train ride we arrived in Vienna, Austria. The Free World! What multitudes of people lost or completely ruined their lives trying to get to this very spot where we were standing now!

While my father helped my mother out and carried a suitcase, I was struggling with the other two huge suitcases. In all the hubbub, I did not immediately notice a very tall guy who was hanging around. I only noticed him when he leaned over me and asked softly if I had on me any names and addresses of people who wanted to leave Soviet Union. He spoke Russian with an unpleasant accent which I could not immediately place. I suddenly remembered Vitia's story. This was the guy! Now I could solve the mystery of the invitation letter!

"Just a second!" I yelled, "Who are you? Hey, wait a second. I just want to ask you a question! Who are you?"

With not a word, the tall man turned around and walked away from me along the train. "Hold it right there!" I yelled, running after him. "Answer me! Answer my question!" He suddenly stopped and turned around so I ran straight into him. He was about a foot taller, so he bent down, looking straight into my eyes, and said softly, "I do not answer questions."

As he leaned over me, his jacket hung down and I saw a butt of a gun in a shoulder holster right in front of my face. There was nothing I could do, or even wanted to do, to him. He helped get us out. As far as I was concerned, he earned the right to keep his secrets.

"I understand. You do not answer questions! Makes perfect sense to me, man! Why didn't you say so before? No problem. Thank you very much for all you are doing, whatever it is!"

The tall guy walked away. I went back to my parents and the luggage. I still had no idea who he was and how we got here.

By the time we made it into the waiting area we were sweating profusely. My father was angry for a variety of reasons.

"What now, genius?" he hissed, "Where do we go? And where is breakfast?"

I stared around grappling with the situation. Indeed, now what? Wait a minute! I found myself staring at our own family name written in bold English letters on a large sheet of paper. A neat old lady was holding it over her head. What the hell? We all walked to her. The old lady introduced herself in Russian as Madam Betty. She was a volunteer for HIAS, a non-profit international Jewish organization that helped families to unite across all kinds of borders. Not just Jewish families either, just any families, even Vietnamese and Laotians. While she drove us in her Mercedes to her house, she explained that she gave refuge to several Soviet families in her house. Apparently she had some room for us, too.

As soon as I got over the fact that I was riding in a Mercedes—and boy, what a nice ride that was—I got totally absorbed by the scenery around me. Vienna is just such a magnificent city, an embodiment of human esthetics and history.

Here I was in Vienna, in person! The city of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Johann Strauss. Vienna, my dream city of romance—I did have a well-developed romantic streak. We drove past narrow medieval alleyways and across imperial squares. We caught a glimpse of the grandiose Hofburg, the Imperial Palace and marveled at the majestic architecture of the Ring Boulevard. I have made it out, I really have! Freedom!

Madam Betty's house was located in the red light district, nothing fancy, not the Schonbrunn Palace. It was just a large three-story mansion stuffed wall to wall with Russian immigrants. There must have been at least two hundred people there! Old folks, children, men, women—all kinds of people. There were also several large and tough looking Israeli soldiers in battle fatigues armed with Uzis. I noticed gun ports in the steel entrance doors and in the steel plates of the first floor windows. There were bars on the second story windows. There was a surveillance camera aimed at the entrance door, too. The front of the house had concrete bumpers so no car could slam into it. A fortress of sorts.

"So, do we get breakfast here?" inquired my father appropriately.

"Yes, you do," Madam Betty consented in a friendly manner.

"What about lunch and dinner?" kept pressing my father.

"No, I am sorry, honey, no lunches and dinners for right now. Our funds were cut. But I can show you where to buy very cheap food, like perfectly good chicken and turkey feet, for example. People buy such things here for their cats and dogs, but that is actually good food. There is also bread and bananas that are a bit stale or moldy but still good—things like that. There are also some food donations sometimes from local Jews. Okay?"

"Yes, yes, okay, Madam Betty," I butted in as I thought I perceived an opening. "Could you explain such security? Are we at war with anybody in particular that we should know about?"

"Oh, sure, honey, of course we are. We are always at war. We are Israelis! These soldiers are here to protect you. By the way, there is a curfew. They lock up at 10PM and do not open till 7AM for any reason. I am supposed to brief you on that, so here you go. It is for your safety. Do you understand?"

"Sure."

"Such a nice family. You are going to Israel, aren't you? You will be on the plane out of here tomorrow. If you don't, you are pretty much on your own with no money and only one meal a day for several months here while applying for the US visa."

Her obvious recruitment pitch with a dash of arm-twisting did not go unnoticed but it didn't mean all that much to us. Despite all the appearances, we did not really need her to survive. We only needed each other. Many thanks for all the help, of course, very much appreciated, but . . . The crucial point she brought up was "Were we going to Israel or not?" That was an excellent question. I thought about it before and had to decline. I did not want to go to Israel. Being a Jew was shoved down my throat to my detriment; I resented that. Also, I have to admit that all the hoo-ha with the Arabs was a bit distasteful to me. Palestinians lived there for millennia but then Jews forced them out. True, Jews bought the land in 1948, actually paid a lot of money for it, but instead of paying it to the Palestinians they displaced, they paid the British. Who'd take care of the Palestinians? Didn't they need a home? I definitely sensed a moral dilemma there and, right or wrong, I wanted to stay as far away from it as I could. My father answered for all of us.

"We don't know yet, Madam Betty, we still have to figure it out as a family. We may end up going to Israel but most likely we won't."

Madam Betty looked startled and hurt as if he slapped her. She nodded and silently wondered off. I was impressed by her love for Israel. Grand old lady!

"Dad, don't you want to go to Israel?"

"No. Why kill Arabs? I would only kill things that I could use in my sandwich."

My sentiments exactly. My dad is a great guy with a keen sense of humor. He is so Jewish, he is even circumcised. I heard the story of his circumcision many times, mainly at parties in front of a crowd of moderately drunk people. Some over-zealous Jews apparently caught him in a little village in Ukraine when he was twelve and circumcised the hell out of him somewhere in a barn. It was, from all I gathered, a very trying, not to mention inadequately hygienic, experience. My dad, however, did not hold grudges and was actually very proud of being more of a Jew than most other Jews we knew. I think he liked being a Jew. I suppose he could learn to be a Jew in the US, too, if he wanted to.

The next hurdle was surviving while we were applying to the US Consulate in Vienna which would supposedly take a few months. Fine! Bring it on!

Chapter Two

MADAM BETTY'S HOUSE

WE GOT A corner in some room on the second floor. People were sleeping on the floors everywhere. There were three bathrooms with constant lines to each of them. There were women, little children, old people. The conditions were worse than I could imagine and the place smelled bad. But I knew we'd live through it alright. This too shall pass. A little BO never killed anybody yet. And let's face it, Building Number Three, where we lived in Kiev, was only marginally better. Having settled down, we had breakfast and went out for a walk.

Vienna must be one of the most beautiful cities on Earth. We wondered around staring at all the awesome European architecture and foreign cars hissing by. I observed with astonishment how beautiful girls in garters and high heels—and not much else—were sweeping in front of their bordellos, smiling and waving to sensibly dressed, polite natives who were walking their cute yellow spaniels. Hey, lady, nice tits . . . I mean shoes! I knew I was right about coming here! Then the dog-walkers stole the show. These smug locals—undoubtedly all millionaires—were diligently picking up dog poop after their dogs! Boy, a morning in Vienna was sure different than a morning in Kiev on a number of levels!

We returned to the Madam Betty's house by lunch time. There was no lunch. That hurt. My father was unhappy, too.

I wondered around looking at other Russians. People seemed overwhelmed and unhappy. And hungry. I asked some slouch from Odessa, about my age, how they got here.

"Oh, a cousin found us. Can you imagine, man, when he was just a little boy in 1941, he got separated from a train around Odessa some place. It turned out he survived and found us now! So he invited us to live with him in Israel."

"That is totally incredible, man! You are very lucky!"

What the hell was going on here? Why did everybody's cousins get separated from the trains all the time?

Some chubby old lady in the kitchen was cleaning up a freshly plucked chicken at the sink. Various random body parts, including a chicken head, were stacked neatly next to the sink, probably for a soup, judging from the pot of water boiling on the stove. Hell will freeze over before anybody in this house throws a chicken head into the garbage. Anything even remotely eatable gets eaten. The lady, up to her elbows in chicken gizzards, introduced herself as Aunt Faina.

"Have you been here long, Aunt Faina?"

"Oh, yes, over a month."

"So I guess you did not want to go to Israel either, hah?"

"Of course not!" Aunt Faina laughed, wiping her dirty hands on her even dirtier scraggy apron.

"Nobody here wants to go to Israel. Those who wanted to go are long gone. We are all stuck here, Misha. It is no picnic, it is very rough. Nobody has any money. And there are people everywhere all the time! You remember the word "privacy"? You can forget it now. You have to stay in line all week to take a shower! Did you notice how it stinks here? People just can't wash or do laundry! But you know, you can always change your mind and go to Israel. They'll accept you right away, they need soldiers. They want more Jews."

"Okay, Aunt Faina, I'll remember that. And how did you manage to leave Russia?"

"Just like everybody else, you silly boy. A long-lost cousin finds you. Masad got us all out. Have you seen Ronny, the tall guy at the train station? He is from Masad. You better not piss him off, he has a gun."

"Yes, thank you, I met Ronny and his gun. Who or what is *Masad*?"

"Masad is Israeli Intelligence, kind of like Israeli KGB."

"Really?! Why?"

"Nobody knows for sure but we think they are trying to create a stampede and overwhelm the Soviet immigration system. It is designed to be a very weak system, you know."

"But why would they want to overwhelm the system?"

"Who knows?" Aunt Faina shrugged her sizeable shoulders. "Maybe trying to smuggle some important people out or just want to embarrass Moscow. Israelis are like that. Do things just for fun or out of spite. You noticed, they do it openly? Russians definitely know about Ronny—how couldn't they, he is right there in their face—but nothing they can do. The letters are authentic, only the content is false but nobody can prove it false. The Russians could kill Ronny but there would be another guy there next day anyway. Some political game, I guess. Just say thank you and let it be."

Sure! I'll say thank you and let it be, no problem. Masad, hah? The weirdest thing.

A couple of years later, already safe in the US, we contacted Vlad Hertzal, our fictitious cousin in Haifa, Israel. He was very happy for us. He said that the single occurrence that changed our lives forever was a visit by some government guy who asked him if he wanted to help bring a nice family out of the Soviet Union. He did. So he was instructed to just remember to say that he had relatives, a cousin, in Kiev, Ukraine, if anybody ever asked. And to never agree to give any names or details about those relatives. Then a couple of months later he received a phone call from Netherlands Embassy, supposedly. They were doing some demographic study locally and asked him to please answer several questions. He agreed. The survey was about twenty questions long. Tucked in the middle of them was a question if he had any relatives in the Soviet Union and if yes, where. He almost answered negative but caught himself in time and answered yes, he had a cousin and his family in Kiev, Ukraine. And that was all.

I found out later that over fifty-four thousand people left the Soviet Union in 1979. I don't know how many of them were gotten out by Masad. I would guess that most of them were, if not all. All immigration was cut off completely in 1980 when the Afghanistan meat grinder started. My hat is off to Israel and its soldiers, regardless of the purpose of their operation. Thank God for them!

Chapter Three

THE GODFATHER

AS I WAS struggling to make sense of it all, I ran into a guy in the hallway who offered to sell me his Russian Zenith photo camera for 600 shillings. That was roughly \$60 at the time.

"What a goddamn comedian!" I laughed. "You know exactly how much money I have. Same as you. How could I possibly afford your Zenith even if I wanted one? And why would I want one? Go outside, sell it to the locals. They pick up dog poop from the sidewalks, I bet they would buy your camera, too."

"No, man, it is not allowed." The guy looked around nervously. He was skinny and wiry, a worried kind of a dude. "We can't go outside and sell stuff. You need a license for that around here. Cops will arrest you, beat you senseless and deport your ass back to Russia!"

Nonsense! I mean the deportation part. The Russians burnt our Soviet passports. They would never allow any of us to cross back to the Soviet Union. A business opportunity suddenly started to congeal right in front of me.

"Okay, give me your camera. I will go outside and sell it for you."

"You are crazy! It is too risky." His eyes turned large and round.

"Watch me." I winked at him. His jaw suddenly dropped. He was just staring at me, speechless. What a strange guy! I went outside.

I must have waited for, oh, maybe about a minute before some respectably dressed older gentleman with a dog walked by me. I

stopped him, shoved the camera into his hands and scribbled “800” on a scrap of paper that I providently brought with me. He studied the camera for a while, clicking his tongue and grunting approvingly and then showed me his watch indicating with his finger that he’d be back here in thirty minutes. I nodded, took back the camera and he walked away with his spaniel.

A small crowd of Russians gathered nearby, gesticulating and whispering excitedly. I could only catch something about mafia. I wondered idly what no good they were up to.

Finally the Austrian man came back with the money. Eight hundred shillings! I went directly to the now well-to-do former owner of the camera and gave him six hundred shillings. I gave the rest to my father. My dad took the money happily and ran away. Probably ran to buy some dog food and rotten bananas—my best guess, if he had a chance to talk to Madam Betty some more. She’d teach him all about having a very difficult life. There was no need to suffer. For two hundred shillings we could buy some hundred and fifty pounds of chicken feet if we wanted to. Or even more. Hmm . . . Should I set up a chicken feet business?

“Here he is! This one!” I was in our room surrounded by the excited crowd that I saw outside a minute ago. The former camera owner was yelling happily, pointing at me, “He is the gangster, he bribed the police! He will sell the stuff!”

About ten of them literally jumped me and proceeded to drag me outside—none too respectfully, I might add! Fully realizing the absurdity of the situation and not wanting to hurt anybody, I was fighting back the best I could. Suddenly I heard my mother’s quiet voice, “I gave birth to a gangster. I should’ve had an abortion.”

“Mo-om!”

The delinquents dragged me out, set up a rickety card table right in front of the house on the sidewalk, piled up souvenirs on the table, all the while restraining me. They wanted to force me to sell their trinkets, totally disregarding my very vociferous, yet subtle but strangely offensive rejoinders and witty insinuations in regards to certain utterly reprehensible sexual habits of their closest relatives. They were beginning to really piss me off. While we were fussing and carrying on that way around the table like a flock of overgrown sparrows, suddenly a nicely dressed couple, the locals, walked right up to us. The woman picked up one of the Russian wooden dolls, a *matreshka*, and the guy smiled and dropped some money on the table. Then they just strolled away! We all froze, staring at the money. Twenty shillings! Could somebody remind me what I was so upset about just a moment ago?

“Hey, idiots! Whose *matreshka* was that?”

"Mine! It was my matreshka! I am Iliusha!"

"Okay, Iliusha, here is twenty shillings. Go, bring me back five. Run!"

"Yes, no problem, Misha. Thank you! Thank you!"

He ran off with a happy smile on his face, full of hope.

I don't know about all this hardship of immigration life. It was my first day here and I already made 205 shillings not even half-trying. Lots and lots of dog food! Of course, man does not live by dog food alone. We also lived by chicken, fresh fruits and vegetables, delicious bread and butter, excellent juices, absolutely incredible dairy products, coffee, pastries and other extremely tasty things.

I will never forget the first time the three of us went to the local supermarket called *Billa* (we called it *Sila* which in Russian means "Strength"). That was my first glimpse of what the West would be like. ABUNDANCE, pure and simple. The fairy-tale-like, implausible, unbelievable and ridiculous abundance with strong hallucinatory overtones and undercurrents. We were speechless. As soon as the first shock wore off we grabbed a few things, paid (the fact that our groceries were placed in a bag for us further enhanced our astonishment, but luckily we survived once again) and hastily relieved the locals of our presence.

The detailed examination of our first ever shopping bag in the safe and smelly confines of our refugee house brought forth the necessity for better shopping organization, including recon and intel. Our booty piled on the kitchen table consisted of a couple of boxes of some kind of cookies, a jar of fake mayonnaise, some bread dough, a loaf of tasteless sponge-like bread, a frozen pizza, iodized salt, a bottle of cooking wine and a bottle of something totally unrecognizable that offended the palate in much the same way as, for example, donkey piss would, I am sure. The last item turned out to be soy sauce and yes, it was undrinkable. We also had a package of yeast and three apples.

"They went shopping," explained a bald and portly middle age gentlemen in boxer shorts, socks and grimy tank top to an elderly woman in a flowery house coat standing in a small, silent crowd of our roommates gathered in the kitchen. The old lady just nodded in understanding and shook her head bitterly, clacking her tongue.

The first shopping was a dud, but, unfamiliarity notwithstanding, I'd take roughing it out in Vienna over good times in Kiev any day! I was selling souvenirs and occasionally Russian gadgets, cigarettes, vodka and champagne. I wasn't making much but I was always bringing home something. We started putting some money away for the airfare to America and we still did not touch our treasure of 390 US dollars that we left Russia with. We even took some city bus rides around town and to the famous Vienna parks and beautiful palaces.

Then two local cops elevated me in the eyes of all the citizens of our Madam Betty's commune to the unattainable by mere mortals grandeur of Godfather, Al Capone, Billy the Kid and the like.

I was selling my wares one day when a young Russian guy ran to me, wild eyed, screaming that cops were coming and I had to drop everything and run, run, run!

Oh, no! Cops! I got all flustered, thinking feverishly what to do. Most of the stuff was not mine. I could leave it and run, I would not lose anything much . . . except my pride—not such a small thing to lose. Furthermore, why did he keep urging me to leave so insistently, hmm?

So I was still standing there when a police car pulled up right in front of me. It was a police Volkswagen bug. You know, I thought to myself, if these cops here drove such funny little cars, they were no match for me. They have not seen a real criminal in their life! They were nothing but children playing in the sand against a hardened criminal such as myself. You know, I was right!

There were two of them, a young skinny guy about my age and a bit older, very pretty blond woman with a very nice ass. She was almost unbearably attractive to me. I immediately noticed—and stared—at her delicate face, taking in her bright, beautiful eyes full of life and laughter, the nice way that the golden curves of her hair set off her pleasantly rounded feminine shoulders, wrapped in starched uniform shirt—that same shirt that hugged her chest ever so tightly. My lascivious stare caught her unprepared. She instantaneously noticed it, quickly adjusted her hair slightly and put on that cold and forbidding mask that beautiful women reserve for our chauvinistic brethren to discourage ogling. But was that a spark of amusement in her eyes? Yes, I'd say she was amused.

All the ding-dongs on her gun belt did not do her any justice. Of course, one could conceivably remove the ding-dongs . . . the shirt . . . and pants . . . yeah . . . and the boots . . . and definitely her bra and panties, yes, DEFINITELY the bra . . . the silky, supple softness . . . I mentally slapped myself back to the realities of my current predicament. I was about to be crucified for my crime and what was I thinking about? Concentrate, you fool! Focus!

It turned out they were not real cops, they were Community Relations cops, and my pretty lady cop was not even that. She was a future criminalist, whatever that meant, who needed some police experience for her internship or something—but I only found that out later.

Both came to me smiling, girl's eyes sparking mischievously as she bravely fought to maintain her forbidding frown. I smiled back, very politely, and waved. The guy politely said something in German. I answered politely

in perfect English that my pencil was long and yellow. I remembered that much from some old school exercise. They smiled and he politely explained to me in English that I had to pack my merchandize and leave. I explained in English, Russian, Ukrainian, a bit of Yiddish and with a lot of gesticulation and facial expressions that my mama, my papa and I, as well as several hundred of our closest roommates, we all liked to eat three times a day. We just kind of got hooked on that over the years and now had a habit to support. But here we only had breakfasts so, obviously, we had to sell souvenirs to eat. Naturally! I think they understood. They both nodded but the cop kept trying to politely convince me to leave anyway. I kept politely refusing and glancing at the woman, avoiding staring directly into her eyes or at her lips or breasts. Not to mention her ass. Oh, did I mention her ass?

We were all politely smiling at each other and nodding. The guy went so far as to lift the corner of my card table a bit with his finger. I slapped his hand hard. He yanked it back with a shocked look on his youthful face. His pretty partner doubled up in laughter, her eyes watering, so he also started laughing.

They politely talked in German between themselves for a bit. Then the girl stepped to the table smiling, and bought a souvenir from me! I asked her name, she said "Clara" and gave me a dazzling smile. Wow! Thank you for the smile, Clara!

Somebody just had to be kissing those lips on a regular basis. So why not me? Just because I was a short, pudgy, unwashed, stinking of BO, penniless Ukrainian immigrant sleeping dressed on the floor in a room full of strangers? So? Nonsense! I told her in Russian that my name was Misha and I would like very much to spend a couple of weeks in bed with her just to start on the path of getting to know her a little better. Of course, she could not have understood a word I said, although, as I found out later, one could never be sure on that with Clara. She could understand way beyond mere words. She looked straight into me and laughed, her eyes sparkling most delightfully. They waved to me, smiled, got back into their VW Bug and drove off. I did not want her to leave. Who could have ever thought that Clara was such a wonderful name?

From that point forward, even the most skeptical Russians at Madam Betty's house were totally convinced of my mafia connections. The word was that I bribed everything that moved on this side of the Rhine River. Fools! Nobody bothered to look at the facts. I was making pathetically little money. I could not possibly afford any bribes! Not to mention that I would not know how to even start approaching anybody with a bribe. How do you actually bribe somebody? Where do you start? Dealing in facts seemed to be way too confusing for these people.

Some shy teenager covered in acne came to see me, asking if I could please help get him launched into his criminal career with the mob. That schmuck! Then some granny dragged in her three-year old grandson and told him that now Uncle Misha himself would tell him that if he wanted to grow up to be a real gangster he must listen to his parents and grandparents and eat his cream of wheat. Then they both looked at me expectantly.

"Listen to your parents and grandparents," I mumbled woodenly, "and eat your cream of wheat and you'll grow up a real gangster."

"See?" exclaimed the delusional granny triumphantly, thanked me and towed her poor wide-eyed progeny away.

I felt very bad about this whole gangster thing, but it was much better than eating dog food all the time, I assure you! Not that I had to eat dog food often but that ugly scepter was in fact hanging over my head at the time.

My father was a top-notch professional house painter, famous in Kiev. People waited for many months to have him paint their apartments. He knew how to make his own patching materials, primers and paints from scratch. He mixed his own colors. He even taught me how to make an anti-allergenic, anti-bacterial, spot blocking, insect-killing primer. He drilled me on the ingredients and the procedure. He could make any faux finish under the sun, moon and blue sky. He could paint a wall to look like any expensive wallpaper, wood, marble, granite or anything else. He was a true professional. So he managed to find a small job in some private house where he made in three days more money than I was making in three weeks. My mother managed to sew something somewhere and also made money. We were sure doing alright. We applied for an interview with the US Consul and were patiently waiting for our appointment, which was scheduled for us about two months down the road.

Chapter Four

MY ANGEL CLARA

THE BEAUTIFUL LADY cop Clara, the cause of my severe sexual tensions, came back to see me a few days later on Sunday morning. It was her day off—one of the brightest days of my life. She found me inside the house, she saw how we lived and how we smelled. She even exchanged a few words in German with a soldier. That was embarrassing but the way she looked quickly made me forget all about that. Dressed in an open, simple, light-colored summer dress to just above her knees and nice open shoes, without the gun belt and all the ding-dongs, the sight of her, the golden waves of her beautiful hair, her eyes and her smile just made my head spin and my heart flutter somewhere in my throat. No idea why I kept reacting to her that way, I was normally much calmer in that department. Not with her! There I was once again, hiding my erection. And she wasn't even picture beautiful and a bit too plump, objectively speaking. But who wanted to be objective? She said she wished to ask me a few questions and I followed her to her small Renault. I did not know what to expect. Police station? Interrogation? Incarceration? Nope. She drove me to a very nice café for breakfast! I knew right then it was going to be one hell of a great day to remember.

She did have a question for me. Communication was difficult at first since I did not really speak much of any of the languages she knew. But miraculously enough, we communicated well with the few words we had in common and with a lot of hand gestures, facial expressions

and especially eye contact. She asked me, essentially, if I had anything specific in mind when I kept staring at her the other day instead of being duly scared of police, considering my precarious legal footing at the time. I explained the best I could that, yes, I liked her very, very much and would have liked to make mad, passionate love to her right then and there but I was a little worried about getting shot. She just stared at me smiling and obviously pleased. Having found a rather receptive audience, I pressed on, asking her politely if today she happened to leave her gun somewhere very far away, by any chance. She laughed and affectionately stroked my face sending electric currents to all kinds of organs. She told me that she liked me too and, yes, she did, in fact, leave her gun at home! Yes-s-s-s!

Clara was a graduate student and needed police experience to graduate. She was not a real cop. This made me feel better. Buying souvenirs from an illegal street hustler whom she was supposed to put out of business, just to help him? I rarely met a person less suited to be a street cop.

Clara showed me her beautiful city. We stopped by a gorgeous lake to feed swans and enjoyed a tasty snack at a quaint restaurant nearby. Later we had lunch at a charming street café with a funny name "Babenberger." She kept buying treats and paying for me at the restaurants. I was upset because I could not afford any of this. This gigolo setup was very uncomfortable. I explained, as we were relaxing at that Babenberger Café, that I was not comfortable with her paying all the time and that I could possibly afford to pay here, at least for myself. She understood and explained that this was not about money, money just did not matter. She simply wanted this to be a happy day for me and her to remember. She then elaborated further, a little louder than absolutely necessary, if you ask me, that she was willfully raking up a huge bill for me, plunging me ever deeper into the fiscal abyss. I was then expected to repay my debt with wild and passionate sex.

She got up and made a few indecent hips-thrusting motions just to illustrate the point. The din suddenly subsided. People at the neighboring tables were staring at us. Somebody's spaniel yapped most disapprovingly. I blushed.

"Eat your schnitzel!" I snarled at a guy at the next table in Russian. Clara laughed. The din resumed.

Was I dreaming? Was this just a figment of my fevered imagination? I ventured to suggest to Clara, in a lowered voice, to commence the pay-off procedure immediately, since I had a lot to pay back, judging by the sheer volume of all the pastries, Alpenwurzn sausage and sauerkraut or whatever it was that she kept feeding me all the time.

Clara laughed. We drove home holding hands. The feel of her hand in mine turned my back bone to jelly. I kept melting until my entire insides achieved a uniform maple-syrup consistency. I did not want to let go of her hand. Clara's small apartment was very cute and smelled fresh and nice. There was a very thick carpet on the floor, a homey furniture set—everything was tasteful and cozy. Ah, home . . . someday I will have one too. The *matreshka* that she bought from me occupied a prominent place on one of her Bose speakers that looked expensive. She told me to get comfortable while she'd make some coffee for us but immediately changed her mind, came back from the kitchen and pushed me on the couch, her lips on mine, insistent and passionate, with one hand inside my pants. I was not wasting any time, either. Well, I suppose I did not want coffee all that much right then anyway.

We made love for some hours first in the shower and then pretty much everywhere else. It was just one incredibly sweet, hot and intensely pleasurable blur.

Clara was easy to please. And she had an abundant supply of both raw lust and sweet love that she just showered me with. I bet if she had a husband and kids, they would never go around unkissed, unhugged and unsqueezed! She was on the wild side at times but mainly liked it gentle and slow. Finally, I begged for timeout on the grounds of running out of quarters to continue for now. We smoked, lying naked on the floor, her precious head resting on my chest, my hand on her heavenly breast, exhausted and incredibly happy.

"Sweetie, how am I doing on my debt for all the bratwurst and strudel?" I asked Clara in our weird mixture of assorted languages and hand gestures.

She explained with a smile that she got paid in full by the time we were half done with the shower but didn't want to tell me so I would continue. What an irresistibly adorable woman. She sure knew how to make a guy feel eight feet tall!

Clara gave me her very nice, thick wool scarf as a present to keep me warm. She also gave me a gold Star of David on a gold chain for good luck but asked me to promise to come back and find her in about ten years and give it back to her. She wanted to find out about all my incredible achievements in the US by that time. And I did! I was back there on a business trip in 1991, some twelve years later, and looked her up. She was married, had two boys, six and nine. She was in her late thirties then, looked soft and happy. To be honest, she looked even more beautiful. She was obviously much loved and allowed to love back with her usual abandon. How do you even find a man good enough for this angel? Well, I guess she found one. She loved her hubby dearly and adored the boys. We

had a couple of drinks, I paid this time. She was now a “criminalist” but, most importantly, she did not do anything very strenuous or dangerous at work. I was very pleased to hear that. She told me I sounded just like her husband. Of course I did. I even know why!

That beautiful day was the gift from Clara. It is mine to keep forever. And the scarf she gave me has always been the warmest scarf in the whole world!

Chapter Five

ON AMUSEMENT PARKS AND TERRORISTS

WITH CLARA GONE, Vienna temporarily lost most of its luster. But then somebody told me about a fascinating place, an “amusement park.” There was one in Vienna, the Pratter. Restless, I finally decided to go take a look at the Pratter. I was so happy I did! There were all kinds of rides, video games and even a porno theater there. I never even imagined so much fun. My favorite was an interactive shoot-out game with a cowboy. The life-size cowboy riding a horse on a large screen in front of me would suddenly see me and draw his gun and I had to draw mine and shoot first. If he was faster or if I missed, he’d smile smugly, blow smoke from the barrel of his Colt and ride on. If I won, he’d fall off his horse most picturesquely and the bolted horse would drag his dead body away with his foot stuck in the stirrup. There were several variations of that including prolonged shoot-outs where he was trying to get me from behind a horse trough while I had a stack of barrels as my cover. I had a wonderful time for hours and completely forgot about the curfew. It was after midnight when I finally got home. The doors were locked, nobody responded to my knocking. The place was buttoned up for the night.

I cringed at the prospect of spending the night outside. I wanted to be inside, snug on the floor with my parents. Next thing I realized was that a couple of window washers were carrying a long ladder a bit down the street! The third story windows were open and they had no bars. One of them was behind the entrance surveillance camera in a blind zone.

I ran after the window washers and wrestled the ladder from them. Wrestled? I grabbed it and they simply let go. Just as their police, they were not prepared to deal with the Russians. They were simply too civilized for their own good! I set up the ladder. It barely reached the edge of the huge rounded third story window ledge but it would have to do. I carefully climbed to the ledge, got on it with my hands and knees and crawled slowly to the window. Suddenly my hand slipped inside the room and I tumbled in head first.

In total darkness I landed on something soft and squishy. Felt familiar. What the hell was that? Whatever it was under me suddenly shuddered and let out a blood curling yell, "A-a-a-a!" Damn, scared the living crap out of me! I landed on a very fat woman! I scrambled to get off her in panic but I couldn't, I got totally bogged down. It took a second for my eyes to adjust a bit to the darkness inside the room. I saw bodies all around me starting to wake and stir. There was no room to step! I had my knee on the woman's chest now and tried unsuccessfully to get some footing to stand up when suddenly I glimpsed a huge fist coming at me fast from the right. I only had time to turn my head slightly to the left and lean away a bit when the fist connected with a crunch. I rolled over several bodies, with my head spinning and ringing and the right side of my face numb. I got on my feet and stumbled toward the door, stepping all over these people.

By the time I reached the door, there was a total mass pandemonium all around the room. I heard the words "terrorists" and "the Arabs" shouted several times over the screaming noise. Some guys were already swinging at each other in the darkness. In this confusion I flew out the door into the third floor hallway and immediately heard soldiers running heavily up the stairs. I got on my feet, turned, skidded, jammed through the bathroom door and locked it behind me. First of all, I checked my face in the mirror. It was numb and half of it was getting red and a puffed out. I knew it would get much worse soon but for now it did not look too incriminating. My head was spinning. I wetted some paper towels with cold water and pressed them against my face, as if drying it, and walked out as calmly as I could.

The hallway was full of screaming people. Three soldiers armed with Uzis were lining people up and checking the rooms one by one. They were exchanging brief commands and responses in Hebrew. They were calm, fast and professional. I would not recommend anybody pissing them off for any reason whatsoever.

The soldiers evacuated everybody out of the rooms. Lots of sleepy people in their pajamas and slippers, disheveled, shivering and scared ladies of all ages, kids with their teddy bears and pacifiers, most of them crying. A nuthouse! The soldiers lined us up against the walls in the hallways and stairwells in order to get the head count. I found my parents.

My mother was terrified that I wreaked all the havoc and whispered wildly to my father and me, "If they ask, Misha was with us all night!"

The soldiers counted us until 3 AM that night. They kept getting a different count every time! The old folks and toddlers with their mothers would wonder off to any available bathroom or their room, come out and join the lineup in a different place after the count, some would fall asleep somewhere and get missed at counting. Things like that kept messing up the body count. I was terribly sorry for all this trouble, I really was. Looking at the bright side, however, we had an intruder drill! Presumably we expected an intruder so it was probably a good idea to have an intruder drill. Unfortunately, we all failed. The soldiers didn't quite cut the mustard because I managed to get in so easily. The Russians flunked because we were like a herd of cats.

The soldiers finally succeeded in counting us. They shepherded everybody onto the second and third floors and then, after carefully making absolutely sure the first floor was totally empty, they started sending people downstairs one by one to be carefully counted and then kept under guard. They finally got an accurate head count that way, and we were all allowed to get some sleep.

I was woken up around 7AM by a soldier who asked me to follow him. He led me to the Security room in the basement. Their sergeant was there at his desk. He read my name and some other things from some file and told me as a matter of fact that I created a lot of extra work for them and upset the other Russians by violating curfew and climbing through the window. He threatened me with disciplinary actions. What could he possibly do to me? I told him to kiss my entire ass. We both stared at each other for a while. Another soldier was observing this from a cot in the corner. He finally got up, came over.

"Hey, Surge! How about I just take him out and shoot him? I have not killed anybody for several days now."

"No," Surge cut off flatly, staring hard straight into my eyes.

"Ple-e-e-se, Surge, please, please, please!"

"Well, okay, *tsidreiter*. Just keep the noise down. We don't want to upset the neighbors!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Surge!"

The soldier stuck his Uzi into my chest and ordered me to turn around and walk to the door. What an asshole! Of course I knew they were just joking, but I hated it just the same. I stepped to my right, grabbed the tiny barrel of his gun with my left hand and yanked it forward past me while stepping in with a punch into the guy's kidney. I figured solar plexus was a hopeless target—inconveniently positioned from where I stood and, besides, he was too heavily muscled. These guys, unlike me, were in pretty

good shape. Of course, I was way off on the kidney too, I was not close enough—his arms were longer. So I botched it and ended up with the left side of my already throbbing face slammed down hard on the desk and my arms twisted painfully behind my back—even behind my neck, I would say, by the feel of it. Had no idea they could bend that far. They probably couldn't!

"Let me go!" I drooled viciously all over the desk with my face pressed hard against it.

The Israelis laughed, helped me up and patted me on the back. "You are alright, man. Would be a pity to have to shot you if you did it again."

"Okay, okay, I won't do it again."

"Alright. Good luck to Americans! They will need it when you get there!"

I came out of that basement with my pride severely hurt, pain in most of my bones in addition to the pain in my face. Hadn't I told myself not to mess with these guys under any circumstances? I sure did. I wasn't even smart enough to listen to myself!

Breakfast was an hour later. The right side of my face was totally swollen, blue and painful and the left side was not left entirely unblemished by the soldiers either. I could not chew. Looking that way, I came down for my usual coffee, eggs and two slices of toast with butter and jam. At Madam Betty's we had not been pampered with excessive breakfast menu diversity. Eggs and coffee slid right in, the rest was not for me right that very minute. While I was gnawing at my egg gingerly, a big burly guy of about fifty or so approached me, examining my face with a great deal of interest.

"You know," he shared with me conversationally, "those were no terrorists last night."

"No? Who broke in then? And how do you know?"

"I saw what happened, I was there. Some guy jumped my wife! Wanted a piece of ass, I guess. But I was right there! And boy, did I whack him a real good one! By the way, he looked about your size, that guy, a little runt."

"Is that right?!"

"That's the truth." He eyed me suspiciously now, "Do you know anything about that?"

"No, no idea."

"Where were you last night?"

"Sleeping, of course. Where else?"

"I don't know where else. What happened to your face? Looks like you got royally smacked around."

"Who, me?! Oh, this? Ha-ha! No, I just fell down the stairs last night in all the excitement."

"I see." The big guy chewed on his lip for a while, assessing the situation. "I'll tell you what," he finally uttered with gravity, "If you ever see the pervert who tried to jump my wife last night, please tell him from me that if he comes anywhere near her again, I will kill him with no further warnings. Okay?"

"Okay, sure, man, take it easy."

He walked away. Jump his 400-pound wife? Flattering. My hat is off to any man who'd measure up to jump that piece of ass. Relax, bud, your treasure is safe with me—regretfully.

That same day the Israelis had the second camera installed in the blind spot and the bars went up on all the third story windows.

Chapter Six

VIVA ITALIA!

WE FINALLY HAD our US Consul appointment. It went okay, I suppose. As the first action, each one of us separately was called in to talk to a couple of guys—the security check. I am pretty sure they were Israelis but spoke fluent Russian and worked for the Americans. They seemed remarkably well informed about my life and asked a lot of very pointed questions. They knew who I saw in Kiev, what time and what day. They were especially interested in all of my meetings with the KGB Lieutenant Vasily. They knew about him! I could not remember nearly as many details of my life as they seemed to know. Probably they made up a lot of stuff on the spot just to confuse or overwhelm me. They tried to catch me contradicting myself or appearing to be in two places at the same time. It was definitely a professional interrogation—bright lights, lots of yelling, a good-cop—bad-cop routine, accusations, threats. When the show was finally over, they smiled, apologized for any discomfort they might have caused, shook my hand, wished me good luck and escorted me out of the room. I came out shaking and disoriented. Discomfort? Getting ambushed by a bunch of Arabs felt more comfortable than this. If I were hiding something, I would have most likely spilled the beans.

After we all passed the security check with flying colors, we were reunited and routed to see the Embassy Consul. He looked over our application and said that all we needed now to be admitted to the USA was a physical examination and we were all set.

We knew the routine. It wasn't pretty but other Russians went through this already. There was no way of getting a physical exam in Vienna without having to borrow a huge amount of money from HIAS. Their loans were low interest and had no set repayment schedule but nobody wanted to get into debt from the get-go anyway. Medicine was just way too expensive in Vienna. If you were a citizen of Austria, you had all medical expenses paid for you, but if you were an outsider, like us, you were totally screwed. A physical examination in 1979 was over a thousand dollars per person in Vienna. An astronomically high price for us. It would probably take us a year to stash away three grand.

The worked-out procedure for the Russians was traveling to Rome, Italy, where some hospital near Rome conducted free physical examinations for poor immigrants one day a week. The waiting line there was six to eight weeks, as I heard.

We were in pretty good shape financially so we just bought the cheapest train tickets and traveled to Rome.

I believe there is absolutely nothing on Earth more astonishing than Rome. Some places in Rome are so beautiful and so ancient that they seem absolutely unreal. I loved Rome! And I loved Italians—always engrossed in an interesting and temperamental discussion with somebody, sometimes with several people at once. The discussion had no beginning and no end. It just kept on going, all parties picking it up at any point and carrying it forward through time, possibly ever since Romulus and Remus suckled the wolf-mother.

We settled in Ostia, a charming seaside town of some 80,000 people on the outskirts of Rome. Ostia, also called Ostia Lido (*lido* in Italian means "beach"). It is the only district of Rome on the Tyrrhenian Sea, and many Romans spend the summer holidays there. I loved Ostia Lido's pleasant Mediterranean architecture, cobblestone streets and long wooden promenade. The place is relaxed and peaceful—a good tourist place, a paradise. Alas, we were, as usual, strangers in this paradise.

We shared a cheap one-bedroom apartment with another Russian family that we knew from Kiev. The apartment was carpeted, had a modern kitchen and a very nice bathroom—an improvement of magnitude over Madam Betty's House or our apartment number 38 in Kiev. For one thing, the lobby and the stairways were clean and well lit.

We registered with the hospital and buttoned down for a long wait. We met quite a few other Russians there. It turned out there was even a Russian community center of sorts organized by local communists in the basement of some Baptist church. There was a guy always hanging around by the name of Alberto who, as it turned out, was in charge of us. He belonged to a communist gang and was there to help and take care of us the best he could.

Ostia Lido was politically divided into two warring camps—fascists and communists. Fascists supposedly disliked us because we were foreigners and came from a communist country and the local communists were helping us for the same reasons. It did not seem to bother anybody that we left the communist USSR and came here to a capitalist country despite danger and considerable hardship. We were not communists, not at all, not even a little!

Our resources were severely depleted by the train ride and the apartment rental. So, walking down the beaten path, I found other Russians and put together a souvenir stand on the promenade. A promenade is just a wooden walkway, really, not particularly interesting in itself. However, dozens of street vendors imbued it with color, life and character. There were street musicians, craftsmen, some food vendors selling tasty things such as hot chestnuts, caramel apples and cotton candy, and there were souvenirs from all around the world. Beautiful sea, good company, and business was okay. I loved it! For a few days. Then we were raided by carabinieri.

Carabinieri are a branch of Italian police armed with short rifles called “carbines.” God knows why Italians need carabinieri. They don’t, if you ask me. Of course, nobody asked me.

Carabinieri raided the promenade in force with rifles on the ready one evening. They must have had about a dozen police vans there! They beat people up with rifle butts, confiscated stuff, arrested everybody. It was ugly. Glaringly different from Austrian police. I could not even imagine Clara behaving this way or ever hurting anybody like this for any reason.

As soon as I saw the vans and cops with their silly little rifles, I immediately walked away from my souvenir table. I just left it all there and took a few unhurried steps away from the table. I did not get roughed up or arrested. I watched from the sidelines how the cops were beating the neighbor of mine on the promenade, an old black Moroccan guy by the name Joseph, the roasted chestnuts seller, a very nice old guy who treated me to his chestnuts all the time. He had to go to the bathroom a lot, so I watched his stuff, even sold some chestnuts to the tourists for him. Now the cops confiscated his burner and skillet and threw his chestnuts all over the promenade. Then they dragged old Joseph with a bloody nose into one of their vans. What has he done? Nothing. How sad. And I lost all my merchandise and my income source. The dog food specter was dangling right in front of my nose now.

There was also the day labor route.

Next morning at 6AM I was standing by the Central Post Office in a small crowd of Russian men waiting for the locals to drive by and hire us for the day to do different chores. It was humiliating. Nobody liked it, but what are you going to do?

Some old lady picked up a guy for some garden work or something. Nothing else was happening. Some Russian told me that he was there every morning for two weeks but only worked two days. Around 8AM suddenly an old rickety bus stopped next to us, enveloped in the cloud of noxious diesel fumes. We all hopped in and went to a different town about ten miles away. Somebody was building an eight-unit apartment building there. We had to dig the foundation by hand. There were about a dozen of us. Some local genius must have finally recognized that it was more economical to hire a dozen Russians than one backhoe with a driver. We each were promised two thousand lira an hour (about two dollars at that time) and additional four thousand lira for each of us as a day bonus if we met our collective target for the day, plus free sandwich, water and cigarettes for everybody.

The bone dry clay-and-rocks ground was very hard. What countless millions of people toiled in this very dirt in the last 3000 years of local civilizations? What about prior to that? We were using picks and shovels, probably about the same tools that Roman slaves used. Of course, they had three square meals and a free place to stay . . . Western Civilization seems over-rated sometimes.

The mornings were cold and unpleasant. But work is just work. As always, it was up to me to make my work fun. I might as well for damn sure make it fun if I had to do it anyway.

The first three days we each received our sixteen bucks a day (about sixteen thousand liras) but no bonuses, although we met the daily targets every day. We had our cigarettes but no lunch, just water. We kept working regardless because 16,000 lira would buy enough chicken feet and rotten apples to survive for several days for the whole family.

On the fourth day, around noon, a small Fiat drove onto the job site with four guys inside. The guys in their twenties looked like workers—jeans, T-shirts, dusty boots. They climbed out silently and went directly to the manager's trailer. First, a briefcase flew through the window, shrouded in glass fragments. It was followed closely by the phones, staplers, blueprints, binders, phone books, other crap, then a chair and finally a typewriter. Then the manager flew out the door and landed in a puddle with a splash. The four guys came out of the trailer calmly and proceeded to methodically kick the wet and dirty manager for a while. Then they overturned his Mercedes and bashed in all its windows and lights. Then they cut the bus tires. They worked unhurriedly and silently, never looking at us. We just stood there huddled together, taking it all in and not believing our eyes. On the way back to their little car, one of the guys said two words to us, "*Brigate Rosse.*" They drove off.

Great. The Red Brigades! The violent Communist faction, the terrorists. Damn! They started out as a subversive group with an objective of taking

Italy out of NATO but it seems they eventually degenerated into a usual workers' paradise communist operation, kind of like a criminal labor union with mandatory membership. Believe me, I would not mind at all if Italy pulled out of NATO. Who cares? But no, it stayed! One of us must have complained about the bonuses to Alberto. Who complained? Kill the snitch!

The manager got up limping, smeared dirt and blood all over his face and announced that there was no more work for us here. He could not even take us back to Ostia because the bus tires were slashed.

He paid us in full for the fourth day—no bonuses as usual—and we walked back ten miles, mad as hell. The entire way home we were trying to find the traitor among us. If we had found him out, we would have killed the bastard right then and there, that's a fact. How the hell did we just manage to lose the only job in town?

The next six weeks I had a forced vacation. The beach, Tom and Jerry cartoons at the Baptist church, chicken feet dinners and usually breakfasts and lunches too, stuff like that. Blah! My father and I did a bit of painting. My mother managed to find a job in the olive processing plant once. We were surviving but this unproductive tourist life was making me sick. And I missed Clara. Nothing I could do about that either.

We spent the entire October in Ostia and then most of November. It was rainy and getting very cold. I wore Clara's scarf a lot—it still had her smell on it at first, but it eventually disappeared. And the beautiful sea now looked ugly and downright boring.

One evening there were cartoons scheduled at our community center. I was busy doing nothing and left home late. My parents did not want to go, others already left, so I went alone. Along the way I caught up with a girl by the name Lena and her little daughter Stella walking to the same place. We walked together. Lena's husband and a few others found a construction job up north by Milan for a couple of weeks. Lena was very happy that I was walking with them. Ostia was not an especially dangerous place but nobody would call it a very good neighborhood either, especially for us, since we were so vulnerable and the fascists supposedly hated us so much.

It was about a forty-minute walk, already getting dark and raining. Conversing pleasantly with Lena and her little daughter, I noticed a guy hanging back behind us. Yeap, there he was. I took a glimpse of the guy once again in a shop window. We were being followed. We turned a couple of corners to make sure. Yes, no doubt, this guy was following us. We had absolutely nothing that anybody could possibly steal from us. So what was the attacker after? Lena got very scared for herself and her little girl. Damn! I told Lena to pick up Stella and start running. I figured I would use them as bait to ambush the attacker. It was risky because if I went down

there was no way Lena could outrun the pervert while carrying Stella in her arms, we were still a mile away from the church. But that was the best solution I could offer at the moment.

We ran down the street and then turned the corner to the right into a narrow side street with the attacker in hot pursuit. As soon as we turned the corner, I found a comfortable-size stone and hid behind the inside corner, while Lena kept running clutching whimpering Stella to her chest. The guy turned the corner at full gallop and I smacked him with a rock right on the forehead. He went down cold. I frisked the pervert, took his wallet and ran after Lena. Robbery was not my intention. I just wanted to know who he was and, especially, I wanted him to know that I knew who he was. Both Lena and Stella carried on hysterically at first but quickly calmed down. We stopped at a small café that was still open, had some juice, ice cream and pastries. That took all the money the hoodlum had in his wallet. Out of all the criminals in Ostia I had to rob the one with five bucks on him! Pathetic!

We then watched funny American cartoons where a certain psychotic rabbit repeatedly brutalized and seriously mutilated various other animals and even people. Daffy Duck was also a hit. Deth-th-th-picable but funny, nonetheleth-th. Then we walked back home. We all lived in a large apartment building. I escorted Lena to her entrance and then went home myself. By my entrance I ran into a group of locals. I recognized Alberto among them. One of the guys had a huge bloody bump on his forehead. Could he be . . . ? He was.

"Hey, Micolò!" I suddenly heard. The rest was in Italian but I recognized some swear words and hand gestures. Oh, yeah?! Damn pinkoes!

"Porko dio! Avanti catso! Bandidos! Vafunkulo!"

The tirade exhausted my knowledge of Italian except for my "rigalo per bambino" phrase that meant "present for the baby" from my few nostalgic souvenir selling days—but it did not seem appropriate.

I gave our injured defender his wallet back. He checked the wallet and seemed disappointed that his money was gone. He started yelling at me in Italian again, calling me crazy. Maybe I was crazy but I was not the one with a bump on my head . . . this time! I looked around and found a pretty good size rock. When he saw it in my hand, he quit cussing and stood behind Alberto, very, very still.

It turned out these idiots sent this guy to protect us on our way to the community center but I knocked him out with a rock. And robbed him. The schmucks tried to make a huge deal out of it. Could happen to practically anybody!

When Lena's husband Igor returned from Milan, all three of them stopped by our place with a bottle of vodka and some pizza and we had us a party. Little Stella danced for us. It was fun!

Chapter Seven

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

SOMEHOW WE LIVED to see the day of our physical examination.

It was a Saturday. Every Saturday this hundred-year-old hospital held an open doors day for poor immigrants' physical examinations.

When we came in the morning, men were separated from women. Men, right wing—women, left wing. I entered the right wing with my dad. This was an experience of a lifetime that I sincerely wish I never had.

Over a hundred guys of all sizes, colors, shapes and ages were waiting in a large hall. Then a stern looking old nurse came in and ordered us to completely undress and line up in one line. She spoke in Italian and then repeated the same message in English and then in French. We did not really understand any of these languages but the meaning became excessively clear when all the guys stripped butt naked and started forming a single file. Nobody was looking at each other. We took off our cloths and lined up with the others.

Did you ever notice how deformed naked male bodies usually are? Where are all the Apollos? Most men—overweight, normal or emaciated—have bowed skinny legs with large badly kept feet and ugly toe nails, for example. I much prefer looking at women because they take much better care of their bodies and they are prettier and more interesting in many other ways. All things being equal, I would much rather have been looking at a hundred naked women right that moment and I am sure I saw eye to eye on that point with most of the men in attendance.

We received our folders and just kept moving single file from the large hall through some long corridor into another large hall. All along the way nurses and doctors were doing their thing on all of us at the same time. I was given a small empty jar with my name on it for the urine test. We were supposed to piss in it right then and there while walking and holding a file folder in one hand. I saw some guys turning in their jars empty. My dad and I did okay. Then we all walked by a doctor who looked in everybody's throat and ears, then we walked by a doctor who listened to our lungs and hearts. At some point another doctor examined our genitals. At another point a doctor ordered us to face the wall and bend over and he examined our rectums. Then we went through the blood pressure stations.

Nurses were all dressed like nuns. That made things a bit easier, I am sure, but did not prevent a few embarrassing accidents since some of these nurses were young and pretty. All these accidents were being laboriously ignored by the nurses and the rest of us, not as embarrassed at the moment. We were all upset and humiliated but very determined to get through.

Just as all things in life, the physical examination eventually ended. We came out of there just as the second shift of guys was assembling in the big hall for their physical. Some were laughing and horsing around. They had no clue what was in store for them. And what about the doctors and nurses? Damn, what a crazy job they had!

My mother too made it through okay. We later got the results. All three of us were healthy.

The next step was seeing the clerk at the US Embassy in Rome with our examination results. He said we were all in good health and asked where in the States we wanted to go. We wanted to go to San Francisco. No, no admittance to San Francisco. New York? Nope. Los Angeles? Sorry. Miami? 'Fraid not. Dallas, Texas, where everything was big? Wrong again. Chicago, the windy city? No. We ran out of cities we knew and asked him to just tell us where we wanted to go. He made a phone call and announced that we really wanted to go to Pittsburgh, PA!!!!

"Pittsburgh what?! Where the hell is that?"

"Oh, it is just north of West Virginia," explained the Clerk in an off-hand manner.

With that clear understanding, we paid everything we had to the last penny for our plane tickets, borrowed the balance from HIAS and left Italy. I had mixed feelings about Italy but, in any case, Italy was in the past. The whole huge bright future was waiting for us in Pittsburgh, PA, the magic and mysterious land just north of West Virginia, wherever the hell that was!

We were up and away to our new Motherland to immediately become fat capitalist millionaires like all Americans! Red, white and blue! Jingle Bells, Bob Hope and Johnny Carson, Atlantic City and Los Vegas—America! My love for baseball, mama and apple pie suddenly had no bounds. It *was* happening! I *was* going to be an American!

PART THREE

AMERICA!

Chapter One

ARRIVAL

WE LANDED IN Pittsburgh on November 20, 1979. Not such a small step for mankind! The entire trip, including twisting librarians' arms and all the other silly things we had to do, took about nine months, about the same as it took most people to get born. An interesting parallel.

At the airport we were met by Aunt Rachel, a volunteer for the local Chapter of Jewish Family and Children Services, a very neat and immaculately groomed lady of about seventy. She was a Russian Jew, spent most of her life in Pittsburgh and raised three kids. Her husband had died a couple of years back.

In her huge Buick on the way to our new home, Rachel briefed us on a few things, such as taking showers, changing clothing, using deodorant daily and always answering "Fine" and smiling whenever anybody asked "How are you?" It was all very interesting but not entirely relevant to us at the moment.

She also got us fully politically versed in the life of the country by explaining the three branches of US government and briefing us on the lame duck President Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer who wanted to destroy our great country. I asked why she thought so since it seemed unlikely that such an evil person would have gotten democratically elected. However, according to Aunt Rachel, no Democrat ever amounted to anything and peanut farmers were a particularly conniving bunch. Apparently Democrats were all *ganif* ("bandits" in Yiddish) relentlessly bent on destruction of

America, covetous cowards and losers, wishing for nothing more than to see a red flag flying over the White House.

Sounded primitive to me, to say the least, so I pried Rachel to elaborate a bit more on that peculiar point. It turned out that this profound wisdom was imparted to us by her late husband Itsah who was, God bless his soul, an absolute genius. Rachel was not an excessively bright person herself, but she must have loved her old man dearly and had been a great wife, probably much better than that undemocratic boob deserved.

We were driving down Route 60, then I 279. That manicured highway did not seem to belong in real life. It was just too perfect, like in a movie. It even had esthetically shaped and neatly painted guard rails on each side and there was a similarly manicured ravine between us and the opposite moving traffic. Wow! Rachel's huge Buick purred lazily down the asphalt river, effortlessly doing seventy-five *miles* an hour. No more kilometers. A real American car on a real American highway! And I was in it!

"Damn potholes everywhere!" Rachel suddenly muttered. "Why do we even bother paying taxes to these morons? Look at this!" Rachel pointed to some insignificant blemish on the surface of this otherwise perfect road. "You call this a road?" Rachel shook her head sarcastically. At first I thought she was joking. What potholes? I did not see any potholes. But she was serious. Poor American woman has never seen a pothole in her life. She thought this road was bad?

"Aunt Rachel, you are mistaken. Coca Cola must have constricted all the blood vessels to your brain and clouded your judgment. These are not potholes. These are pockmarks. A true pothole is when you step in it and need CPR to get all the water pumped out of your lungs and your heart started again. You see a car drive into one of those occasionally and you never see it come out! It's just gone! Entire communities vanish! The authorities frequently have to drag the bottom . . ."

Rachel reached back to me with unexpected agility and slapped me a good one on the mouth, adding, conversationally, that she threw the last smart ass, may he rest in peace, out of her car at full speed on this very highway. My parents laughed. I liked this old lady very much but I crossed the Monongahela River in silence.

"Look, that one is the Fort Pitt Bridge," explained Rachel. It was a strange looking, yet beautiful bridge. "There are many bridges in Pittsburgh, some four hundred or more. It is called 'The City of Bridges' or 'The Steel City.' There are dozens of steel mills here. It is the metallurgical center of the country."

Fascinating! A metallurgical center for the entire United States! I was proud of my new home already. Downtown Pittsburgh presented a very impressive skyline. Skyscrapers! Aunt Rachel pointed to us Three Rivers

Park with a huge stadium and two more rivers, a multitude of bridges straddling them most remarkably. Rachel explained that in addition to Monongahela River we also had Allegheny and Ohio Rivers here, all in the same city. Such wonderful names! "A-lle-ghe-ny," "Mo-non-ga-he-la," "O-hi-o." In Kiev we had only one river—Dnepr—which, of course, was probably wider than all these three put together but the name! How can you even compare "Dnepr" to "Monongahela"?

We drove through downtown. I was duly impressed. The university part of the city, Oakland, was dominated by the cathedral building. The entire scene was just perfect with its vast spaces and beautiful buildings. She drove us proudly through some expensive residential areas of Shadyside.

Never a metropolis of divine beauty, Pittsburgh in late autumn was not particularly at its best, but I liked it. My parents, however, were not impressed with Pittsburgh, although they, too, found some parts of Pittsburgh rather pleasing. European cities are prettier. Pittsburgh looked altogether different, but I was okay with it. My attitude was that the USA was just exactly what it was. It was not how it compared with this or that other place or our feelings. It just was what it was and it was exactly where we wanted to be, and here we were!

Rachel brought us to an apartment building in Squirrel Hill, a nice Jewish area of Pittsburgh, on Beachwood Boulevard. The apartment building was surrounded by trees, lots of squirrels, some raccoons and even deer, as we were told—a nice and quiet place, perfect for us. It turned out we had a one-bedroom apartment, all furnished with brand new furniture, down to a brand new 13" black-and-white TV set—all paid for six months for us by the Jewish Family and Children Service and funded by private donations by local Jews. I had tears on my eyes when I found out. These people didn't even know us but they all helped. They were including other people, whom they did not even know personally, into their plans, into their lives. Their value as human beings was so much higher than mine, that I couldn't even see that high!

Rachel showed us around the apartment. It consisted of two rooms, just as we used to have in Kiev, but these two rooms were larger, had wall-to-wall carpeting, nice furniture and no roommates! The whole place was ours, the kitchen, the bathroom, huge balcony—everything! I loved it.

Then Rachel wanted to take us shopping for food to show where the supermarket was and how to shop there. She pledged to fill up our fridge at her expense and give us a hundred dollars cash to get us started, as a donation from her. I despise donations but what can you do if you are dirt poor? I stayed home.

"Misha lock the door and use the chain," Rachel told me on her way out.

"Why the chain, Aunt Rachel? Such a nice quiet place . . ."

"Just do it. Nice place! You don't know." She waved her arm in the air dismissively. "I know better how nice and quiet it is. Can't walk out of your house without getting attacked any more. My friend Lidia got almost raped in her own house just last summer, poor Lida!" Aunt Rachel shook her head. "So I know."

"Did Lidia tell you about the rape? And why almost? She has probably been decorating her window with fried chicken ever since trying to lure the rapist back but no luck so far, ha?"

"Is this *ganif* really your son?" Rachel asked my mother incredulously. "Such a nice couple and such a hooligan for a child." She shook her head sadly.

My mom just glanced at me in passing blankly and asked my dad, "Who is this?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you, honey," my dad chimed in, "This is a comedian. He comes with the carpeting . . . no extra charge . . . and he can wash dishes . . ." I heard my father already outside in the hallway.

We finally made it, the three of us as always. We'll be fine.

I locked the door and used the chain. You know, I always try to keep my own council. I make up my own mind about things instead of listening to advices, especially negative, I really do. These advices are based on generalities and there is usually a vast distance between advised reality and the truth. But in this case, I stupidly agreed that sleepy Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh, PA, was a dangerous place full of criminals.

I was unpacking when the doorbell rang. My parents and Aunt Rachel returned from the charity shopping. I unlocked the door but could not for the life of me undo the chain! It just wouldn't come out! I kept yanking it and sliding back and forth. Nothing! My mother was getting hysterical, "Open up, Misha! Open up! What is going on there!? Are you hurt?"

"No, mom. I am okay! I am okay!"

"Open the door right now! Stop fooling around! Why are you not opening the door?!"

I hate when this happens! My father and Rachel were yelling, too. A zoo! I went to the kitchen, came back with a butter knife and just unscrewed the damn thing off the door!

About five minutes later, when all the snorting, hooting and honking noises of Aunt Rachel's laughter finally subsided and she was pretty much done smearing mascara all over her face, she showed me how to push the thing in and the-e-en slide it over. Duh!

That was my first experience with vastly superior American technology. It occurred within hours upon our arrival and I was already in way over my head. Although I guess I could pat myself on the back for confronting the superior technology with agility and resourcefulness, quite successfully, just as any other uncivilized barbarian would.

Chapter Two

THE COCONUT

THE NEXT DAY was very eventful. Rachel took us to the Social Security office located downtown. I came back from there overwhelmed by the skyscrapers and all the new scenery. I had a splitting headache and felt completely lost. It was good to have Rachel with us.

Then she started us on a free English course at Jewish Community and Children Services. About fifty people were milling about in the classroom—the friendly foreigners category, our comradely overstated, stressed and underlined. All of us totally lost, in other words. Only about half of the people were Russians and Ukrainians, the rest were all kinds of other people. I definitely felt a lot more of a Jew with the right to be there than a lot of the others, including Asians and black people from Africa. All in all, I'd say there were precious few real Jews studying at the Jewish Family and Children Services. The instructor, James, was a young bearded guy, extremely friendly. His English was slow and impeccable. I was amazed to discover that I could pretty much understand him. My English was better than I'd thought.

Later, I met up with Alex, a guy I knew in Kiev and later in Italy. He had already been here for a couple of months. We spent some time walking around the neighborhood, looking at the cars and the girls. We found a fascinating note stuck to an overpass handrail "For good time call Connie, your place or mine" and a phone number. We translated it with a dictionary. Wow! What a country! I loved it here already!

In the evening my mother sent me for some milk and Alex tagged along. We studied the supermarket like a museum. We had never seen such an abundance of stuff! We found strange looking hairy fruits that, upon closer examination, turned out to be coconuts.

We stared at the coconuts in amazement. We had heard about them, but I guess we never really believed they existed! So the palm trees, sexy sun-tanned girls in bikinis, warm turquoise oceans and pina colodas were also true? It suddenly dawned on me: I WAS FREE! The whole world was open to me from here. Just an incredible feeling!

Obviously, instead of milk we bought a coconut just to see what was inside.

After my mom was done letting me have it for wasting our precious money on coconuts, we sat down with Alex in the kitchen to figure out how to open ours. We tried various kitchen implements with no success. Then we banged it a few times on the floor until my mom lost it, "Out! Both of you! And take that hairy thing with you!" she yelled.

"Okay, mom!"

Outside we banged it on the pavement some more. A small group of Russians surrounded us, giving advices. We tried them all, including running over the coconut with a car. Nobody had a car but somebody had a relative with a car. The relative was urgently summoned. He proudly drove in on his huge Chevy. We placed the indestructible coconut on the road carefully and Chevy drove over it. First forward—bump, then in reverse—bump. Nothing!

Somebody suggested we squeeze it in a vice and cut the top off with a hacksaw. None of us had a vice or a hacksaw. Then it turned out somebody had a relative across the river in Homestead who was renting a house with a basement, and there he had a workbench with a large vice and a hacksaw.

We raised a buck each for the bus ride to Homestead and took off. We returned after eleven that night with the coconut intact. The vice wouldn't open nearly wide enough and the hacksaw was an old broken piece of junk with the blade that rusted through.

The next morning Alex was at my bed at about 7AM, staring at me with wild maniacal eyes. "I know what to do with the damn coconut, Misha! Let's go downtown and throw it down from a skyscraper! I am telling you, the sucker will break!"

Alex found a receptive audience in me, as breaking the sucker was on top of my agenda as well.

We had to raise a buck more each, miss the first English class and ride a bus downtown. There we had no problems finding a tall building. I was carrying the coconut in a plastic bag. We walked into the first tall building

we found. I waved at the security guard and smiled just as I did in Kiev during my black market days. It worked again! Nobody stopped us or asked anything. We took the elevator to the top floor, found an entrance to the mechanical floor above, went up the catwalk to the maintenance level and then ended up on the roof!

That was my third day in the United States, I did not speak English, I had no connections or money. But I could sure find my way to the roof of a skyscraper in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during rush hour!

We went to the parapet and looked around. Everything looked very different from the roof of a thirty-five-story office building! Very clear, blue late autumn sky, clean crispy air, little toy cars with wisps of smoke trailing behind them, tiny people zipping between the cars—a usual rush hour pandemonium in the downtown of a major industrial city.

I took out the coconut, waited for the red light, calculated the trajectory, so it would land in the middle of the street and threw it down.

We ran back through the motor room, down to the elevators, took an elevator to the lobby and ran out of the building!

There was a small crowd of people milling outside for some reason. I heard sirens blaring in the distance. We pushed our way through the crowd looking for the coconut. We found it. Right in the middle of the street there was an empty space with a huge wet spot in the middle of it. The coconut had disintegrated, leaving a large wet spot. There was nothing else there! We looked at each other totally disappointed. What, just full of water?

A mile-a-minute chatter around us—totally incomprehensible—was punctured by occasional hysterical exclamations that we understood, such as “Terrorists!” and “Bomb!” What we had done started to dawn on us. We looked at each other. Alex cleared his throat, “Hey, listen Misha, do you think the natives still need us here?”

“No, I think they have it all under control now. Let’s go.”

We were both anxious to get the hell out of there before the cops arrived. In the bus I was thinking about the six o’clock news. I knew the coconut was going to be on the news, and it sure was! I watched the news with my parents. When I said we did it, my mother jumped off a couch and became extremely agitated on account of our imminent arrest.

“First thing is first. Flush the drugs down the toilet, fast!” I suggested immediately prior to getting smacked by my father, who obviously did not like the joke. Not sure why.

Alex was very happy about the whole thing, too. “Wow, man! Nothing happened here for two months! Then you show up and we make the news right away!”

Thus, our coconut attack found its rightful place in history. The wet-spot aftermath was recorded for ages to come.

Chapter Three

BENJAMIN MOORE

A COUPLE OF DAYS later after class we were studying English words at home when my father suddenly came up with an outrageous idea. "Hey, Misha," he said, "You know, somebody told me that here in America they have some stuff for men that they put on their faces after they shave. Kind of like perfume but it also soothes the face, relieves the irritation."

"No way! Perfume?"

"I am telling you, it is true! It is a special after shaving perfume. I would like to try it. Could you go find me some?"

"How do I find it? I don't speak English, we don't know what's it called, what it looks like, where to look for it and . . ."

"Yeah, but your English is better than mine, so off you go!"

Well, alright. That mission was lavishly financed with three bucks from the family coffers, disbursed reluctantly by my mother. Out I went in search of the illusive substance that men on this side of the Moscow River allegedly put on their faces after they shave. I wandered along Murray Avenue, the Squirrel Hill main drag, stopped at a few places. A profusion of stuff, yet nothing looked familiar. I talked to a few proprietors. Nobody could understand what I wanted. Hell, even I could not understand what I wanted! Finally I resigned to walking back home empty handed.

On the way back I saw a colorful looking store that I had passed by earlier. The cheerful sign on it read "BENJAMIN MOORE PAINTS" in bold,

bright and cheerful letters. What the hell was that about? I decided to look inside, see what they were selling.

They were selling paint and painting gear. Definitely not the place I'd expect to be selling aftershave. On my way out I ran into the proprietor, a dark-haired guy of about forty with a huge handlebar mustachio. He called out to me in English, "Can I help you?"

"I don't speak English." You know, the standard dumb immigrant reply.

"What do you speak? Russian?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I speak a little Russian, too!"

He switched to pretty good Russian. It turned out his grandparents were Ukrainian Jews who came here some seventy years ago. He was born here but knew Russian pretty well. His name was Steve.

"So what are you doing in my store?" Steve asked me in Russian.

"Looking for some kind of liquid which you put on your face after you shave."

"Aftershave? Why?"

"Why what?"

"Listen, man, this is the stupidest thing I ever heard! You come here to my paint store in the middle of working hours, which is when most people are actually working, but not you, oh no! You come to my paint store looking for aftershave! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I am new. I just got here five days ago."

"So you already lost five days of production!" It was clear by then that Steve was an easily excitable type. "Get to work! Stop bumming around! Screw aftershave! Who cares about the freaking aftershave?! Do something with your life! Be somebody! Why don't you, for example, become a painting contractor? What do you say?" Steve stared at me fervently.

"A painting contractor . . . I am okay on that, Steve. But I don't speak English, don't know anybody here, don't have any tools, don't have any money . . ."

"Any more excuses?" I found his hand gestures and body language, exaggerated by his incredible mustachio, very funny. Now he pointed his finger solemnly in the general direction of Alpha Centauri in Centaurs constellation and uttered in a dignified manner, "God will show you the way! Well, okay, you idiot, listen," he proceeded in a significantly less dignified manner, "What do you need to start a painting company?"

"I don't know. I never started one before! I guess God will show me the way, right, God?"

"Okay, fine! I will tell you what you need! We'll put together a painting contractor's starter kit for you here!"

Steve started pulling out stuff that I would supposedly need as a painting contractor from all around the store, piling it up in front. The pile

contained several extension ladders and step ladders, a pair of sprayers of different sizes, several canvas tarps, an assortment of the most expensive bristle brushes, lambskin rollers, poles, hooks, a walk plank and a bunch of other stuff. He neatly wrote the entire list on an invoice form, including prices that added up to over \$1600. The top of the form was blank because he did not even know my name and address.

"Hey, Steve," I caught him by the lapel as he was running by, dragging something to the pile, "Did I tell you I only had three bucks in my pocket?"

"Did you tell me? Why would I listen to you? You look for aftershave in paint stores! You want me to listen to you? Shut up and stay out of this!"

He had a point there. I shut up.

Steve and I loaded the entire pile onto his pickup truck. He drove me and the tools to our apartment, and we unloaded it all onto the living room floor. The extension ladders had to go in diagonally. They would not fit otherwise. My mother was not happy about the whole thing.

"What is this?" she scolded me. "Give him three dollars and send him out to buy some aftershave, he brings back a pile of junk and dumps it in the middle of the living room floor!"

"It's okay, mom, it's okay. I will make money with this junk later!"

My dad came over and whispered into my ear, "Did you get the aftershave?"

"No."

"I knew it," he shook his head sadly and walked away.

We unloaded the starter kit. Steve took my phone number and name, gave me the receipt for \$1600, wished me good luck and walked out.

"When do you want your money, Steve?" I shouted after him.

"Don't worry, you'll know!" was his answer. "Just get to work!"

Chapter Four

STARTING IN BUSINESS

IN A COUPLE of weeks I received a phone call from an old lady from Squirrel Hill who spoke broken Russian, generously sprinkled with Yiddish. She needed her kitchen repaired and painted. Steve from the Benjamin Moore store gave her my number. I had to take a bus to get to that kitchen. With a sentimental pang I beheld the peeling paint and crumbling lath-and-plaster, just like we used to have in Kiev. I let that nostalgic moment pass. That job took me two days and when I was done the old lady gave me thirty dollars. I thought I did pretty good, basically the same pay as in Italy but the work was much cleaner and easier—and no commie terrorists to contend with.

Next week I had a call again, another kitchen, two days of work and forty bucks that time. I thought I was doing splendidly indeed! In those days, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in our family, with my mother at the helm, seventy dollars went a very long way.

A few days after I was done with the second kitchen, I received a phone call from a Russian guy who introduced himself as Albert the Plumber. Albert the Plumber was a self-appointed leader of the Pittsburgh Russian contractors' community that at the moment consisted of six unlicensed contractors. With ill-concealed irritation Albert asked me if it was true that I was contracting work for two bucks an hour.

"Yes, I guess so. I made seventy dollars in four days. That is about two bucks an hour."

"Listen you, schmuck," the irate plumber retorted in his own subtle way, "I don't know if you are retarded or doing this as a hobby or whatever, but there are other people here who are trying to feed their families doing this kind of work! You are underbidding the crap out of everybody! Knock it off!"

"Okay. How do I do that?"

"Just charge a hundred dollars per day and that's it! It is a fair price. If they don't like it, screw them. Do not work for any less. You can charge more but not less. Clear?"

"Yes, I understand, Albert, but what do I do if the customers refuse to pay more?"

"Do you speak English?"

"Not much. Just a few words. Why?"

"That's what I thought. Okay, Misha, I will teach you some business lingo, very important. If you tell the customers a hundred a day and they refuse, you tell them the magic phrase. Ready? The phrase is "Up yours." Repeat it back to me."

"Up yours. What does it mean?"

"It does not really mean anything. It is just business lingo. You are in business now so you need to know the lingo. 'Up yours' is a great start. And if you have a hard time finding work, I will hire you as a helper. We will clean sewers together! That'll teach you to never bite your fingernails ever again!"

He wished me good luck and hung up. Well, great, a hundred dollars a day! A fortune! Was that even possible or was he pulling my leg?

Next day I had another referral from Steve, another old Jewish lady who wanted to paint her son's room. I told her that I worked minimally for one hundred dollars per day. She got upset. Her point was that I should be grateful if anybody paid me half that much since I was new, did not know the materials or English and so on. I told her "Up yours." She hung up.

Steve called me a few minutes later all upset that I told his customer to fuck off.

"I did not tell anybody anything of that kind, Steve, I swear!"

"Yes, you did, you idiot! Mrs. Feldman just called me very upset that you told her to fuck off! Are you crazy?!"

"I said 'Up yours,' I did not tell her to fuck off!"

"That is the same thing, you idiot! What is wrong with you?"

"That is what I was told to say! I am supposed to work for one hundred dollars a day. Otherwise I am underbidding other Russian contractors. And you knock off calling me an idiot or I will tell you to fuck off, you idiot!"

"Well, don't get all tight-ass with me, boy! You wanna hundred a day? You got it, genius! Should've told me earlier!"

I called Albert and told him to fuck off. He just laughed.

Chapter Five

CHINESE RESTAURANT

MY PARENTS AND I decided to celebrate our arrival to America by a dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Why Chinese? Two reasons. First of all, it was in a way a symbol of freedom. Chinese people were allowed to come to America and open a restaurant, and we were also allowed to come to America and have a dinner at their restaurant. In the Soviet Union, Chinese could not have come at all, and nobody could open a restaurant. And there were shortages of food there all the time. Therefore, we had never tried Chinese food before, which was the second reason.

We found a very nice Chinese restaurant nearby on Forbes Avenue. Of course, we couldn't read the menu but we could competently operate within the three basic food groups: beef, pork and chicken. I had chicken.

We liked the food a whole lot. It was absolutely delicious! Everything! We never tried anything even remotely similar before or suspected the existence of anything that tasty.

We were sitting discussing these matters after dinner when it slowly dawned on us that nobody was coming over with our check or anything. In Russian restaurants the waiters usually show up right away to ask if you wanted anything else and bring you the check. Here nobody came to us. We couldn't easily explain that phenomenon and had no idea what was customary among the natives or what was expected of us.

"Are they ignoring us, these bastards?" my father asked a bit annoyed.

"Don't be silly," shrugged my mother. "I bet they just have different rules here."

"Yeah. Like we just get up and leave without paying, for example." My father grumbled.

"No. That is not what I meant. Probably, you know what? They are probably waiting for us to take our plates to the kitchen to signify that we are done! Misha, could you take the plates to the kitchen, please?"

"No problem, mom."

We collected the dishes and I carried them to the kitchen. There was a stainless steel counter inside. I just set our plates on it and went back to our table.

Then we observed with considerable dismay how several waiters and who knows who else were running around us, chirping away excitedly about who-knows-what in who-knows-what language.

My father finally ventured with his best guess, "Somebody probably stole something and now they think we did it. They will call the cops now. Probably already have."

Mom got all indignant. "But we never even left the table, except Misha with the dishes! How could they possibly accuse us of stealing anything? Misha, what exactly did you do in the kitchen?"

"Nothing, mom! I just put the plates down on some counter and left."

"And didn't touch anything? Didn't say anything to anybody?"

"No, I swear!"

"Strange."

My father was getting increasingly more nervous. He had had enough.

"Well, okay, let's try to just walk out."

"What about paying?" my mom has always been a virtuous and decent person, even in the face of terrible danger.

"Okay. How much do we owe? I'll just leave a twenty on the table. Should be more than enough. We are leaving as soon as we can! Misha, get ready. I go first, you bring the rear."

He placed twenty dollars under a bottle of soy sauce, as we surveyed the surroundings cautiously.

"They are all looking at us." Mom commented, her voice cracking with fear.

Yes, we were being watched. By that I simply mean that we were not being ignored, as the locals were actually talking to us. How do you escape from the place under such a scrutiny? A good diversion was in order but nothing came to mind, except . . .

"Telephone ring!" I yelled in English, jumping to my feet and pointing emphatically at their phone by the cash register. People looked that way, bewildered, while we made a dash for the entrance with my father in front and me bringing the rear. Some skinny Chinese dude in a black suit and

tie seemed to have attempted to stop us at the exit. Big mistake! My dad bounced him off the wall in passing, I tackled him on the rebound with my shoulder, sending him over the counter dramatically and noisily, his legs flailing. Then we ran down the street expecting to hear sirens and cops shooting at us any second.

That kind of dining experience tends to create a very warm spot in your heart for home-made meals. We did not go to restaurants for a while after that. We especially stayed away from Chinese restaurants. Too much MSG.

Chapter Six

FRIENDS OF FRED

THE WINTER DRAGGED on. I had not been getting any more painting calls. It seemed that Steve had forgotten me, but I knew he couldn't have—he was my friend. I also owed him a bunch of money. A lot was going on in the meantime. We were studying English. I was preparing to enroll into the University of Pittsburgh to eventually become a civil engineer. Meanwhile, we were getting our food stamps, my mom was sewing every once in a while, my dad was painting at times. I worked for Albert a few times as a plumber's helper shoveling shit for five bucks an hour, cash. Albert was right. I never had an urge to bite my fingernails ever since. Life packed a lot of hope for the future, but it sure did not have an abundance of good tidings in store for us at that very moment.

My father got a referral from one of his small painting jobs that he did that winter. The manager of Morgan Building in downtown Pittsburgh called him. He wanted to see him at his office. If you are truly a professional, you'll never starve! I tagged along as an "interpreter." The manager was a tall young guy with a broad smile and a firm handshake. His name was David. I immediately liked David. He wanted my father to work for the building as a painter for six-fifty an hour! My father's little communication problem did not seem to matter much. Upon some consideration, however, David offered to hire me too so I could translate if needed. He proposed to hire me as an electrician helper for four dollars an hour, twenty hours a week. Easy money and not very much of it, either!

I never understood electricity. I hated it. They say electricity is a flow of electrons, except nothing is actually flowing anywhere and nobody has ever seen an electron. If these electrons flowed anywhere, they would all run away from over here and bunch up over there or run out through the far end, but that never happens. Ever. And, of course, you can't see anything happening, either. Anybody who claims to fully understand this subject is a liar, and the whole thing is a giant conspiracy, if you ask me. "Electrical current?" That's what THEY want us to think! And what the hell was an electrician helper supposed to do anyway? Not the slightest idea. Of course I took the job.

The Morgan Building was a twenty-five-story, very posh office building with lots of marble, bronze, mahogany, etched glass and leather. A totally fascinating place, luxurious and dignified, quaint and comfortable in its own way. Not only the various doctors', lawyers' and jewelry offices and stores were fascinating, but also the basement, the storage rooms and loading docks, the boiler room, the elevator motors room, the roof. It was a huge building. So much to see, so much to do! And being on the inside, I was in on the inner workings of this huge old building, I saw so much more than other people who merely visited the place. I felt the building was mine! It was my little America.

It turned out that the electrician helper was a person who changed light bulbs, starters and ballasts on fluorescent light fixtures. Who knew? Let me clarify technical matters here. Light bulbs are simple and self-explanatory. We all know what a light bulb is. Right? I'll tell you anyway, just in case. A fluorescent light bulb is a vacuum sealed glass tube filled with mercury vapor. The inside walls of the tube are coated with phosphorus. How the hell do they get mercury vapor inside a hermetically sealed tube? And how do they get the inside walls coated with phosphorus? Mind-boggling. Electricity in the tube excites the mercury vapor, which, when excited, produces a certain wavelength of invisible ultraviolet light, which in turn causes phosphor to emit visible light. Isn't it amazing? Can you believe somebody thought of all this? That must have been a real, honest-to-goodness, full-fledged goddamn genius. And we are using these bulbs our entire life, but I think it'd be safe to assume that pretty much none of us even knows what they are.

Ballasts are black, heavy boxes with some wires, located inside the fixture. A ballast is basically a resistor, just a mass which maintains constant current through the bulb. It cuts down surges and fills the low spots. A starter is a small screwy switch on the fixture that helps establish the initial flow of electrons to get the mercury all excited. An external starter does not really do much of anything useful that couldn't be done internally within the hermetic confines of the bulb. Technology advanced and the external

starters have not been in use since about 1984, I think, the second Reagan term. Might have just been a coincidence.

The building tenants would drop their Service Requests into the Service Box in the lobby. I would go through that box every morning, pick out the ones for me and go at it. I was reasonably busy, although I had some time to hang around the building and learn things from Fred, a very old black man, the Chief Janitor. I shared Fred's custodial room in the bowels of the huge building. Fred was very hospitable. His easy manners and permissive attitude made me feel right at home.

Fred must have been at least eighty when I met him. He was kind of stout and carried himself with considerable dignity. What was left of his hair was cropped neat and short, he was always cleanly shaven. Fred's usual greenish janitors' uniform with his name sewed onto the front pocket of his shirt was always clean and neatly pressed, his black shoes shining.

The building was built in 1920 and that is when Fred was first hired there as a janitor. And here he still was, sixty years later. People coming and going, all the drama, marriages and divorces, the succession of children of children taking the helm, the Great Depression, World War II, Hiroshima, Joe McCarthy, Korean War, assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War, civil liberty, equal rights, the crazy '60's and bitter '70's—Fred was still here, on his post, cleaning the bathrooms, sweeping the floors and polishing brass.

Fred was a local celebrity of great stature, broadly loved and admired. Not because of his wealth, his powerful position in the society, his impeccable breeding and education, his far flung personal connections or his incredibly vast and witty intellect. No. Fred was just an old janitor.

We all loved Fred for who he was, a very decent and kind person who loved people, understood them and wanted all people to do well and be happy. Nobody would ever think of firing old Fred. He had not done much cleaning personally for some years but he would train the janitors and inspect their work. Fred was an executive over the cleaners and, as such, he definitely kept the building spanking clean. Fred was a competent man with a heart of gold. He was also very smart, patient, a great listener, always ready to help. I guess for that reason some of the Morgan Building tenants would come down to his little custodian room in the basement on a regular basis just to chew some fat with old Fred, tell him their stories, ask for advice. He knew whose children were doing what and where, who was dating and who broke up with whom. He had time to listen and a good word of advice for everyone.

Personally, I am convinced that by taking any advice from anybody, you are playing a losing game. People can be motivated by the strangest things in their efforts to help you. They may not be high achievers in the

area of life that they advise on—kind of like confession stories written by virgin nuns. They may merely crave the feeling of self-importance or want to appear intelligent—or at least more intelligent than you—or they may have a fixed idea that they had already successfully ruined their own life with and now want to ruin yours. They may not even have enough information to make any intelligent decisions about your problem. But they absolutely *will* give you advice anyway. They may even have their own self-interest first and foremost in their mind when they are “helping” you. I am not being cynical here. I am just pointing out that, first of all, to be your advisor a person must be qualified. Second, he has to hold your well-being and happiness as his genuine and foremost concern and objective. And third, the person has to have all the relevant data to make a decision. Per my observations, usually all three of these points are out to such a staggering degree as to make you the only person really suited to give yourself any advices.

Not so with Fred. He was, first of all, qualified. He was a well and happy human being, a successful husband and father, an employee of sixty years. He was held in such high esteem that he was literally untouchable. Fred was also genuinely interested in the people around him. He really wanted you to do well and you knew it. One of the most life-changing and shocking realizations I had as a direct result of observing Fred, was his attitude of understanding and tolerance towards the ever-pervasive human foibles and errors. In the process of living lives, people sometimes make decisions and take actions that later do not pan out as pearls of pure wisdom and that was fine with Fred. For him, the only people who never erred were those who never did anything—the only people not worth bothering with.

And Fred knew how to listen.

The mornings would normally start with a cup of hot cocoa brought to Fred by Larry, a stock broker from the twelfth floor. I was curious as to what Larry could possibly have in common with the old black janitor. Larry was Jewish, white, twenty years Fred’s junior and filthy rich.

“Larry, why are you hanging around Fred?” I asked once. Larry just laughed and asked me why I was hanging around Fred. I guess he didn’t see that much difference between him and me either, not just between him and Fred. Another mind-blowing revelation! Larry, a multi-millionaire, accepted me as his equal and Fred as his mentor. How could I, a young Ukrainian nobody working part-time for \$4 an hour, possibly be compared to a wealthy American stock broker? Well, I could. By the wealthy stock broker himself!

Larry was the first person to ever formulate the lesson that Fred taught us all: “It is not what you do, it is not what you have, it is WHO YOU ARE.” Fred was the Man! Larry jokingly told me that there was a secret society of people in the world who Fred considered his friends. Larry called that

secret society Friends of Fred. He promised that I would also belong to that society if I were a good and kind person in my actions toward others. But I had to remember that the membership was not so much a privilege but a responsibility, that it could be revoked at any moment with no warnings by my own decision to do harm. If I lost that most important membership, I could regain it easily by simply making decisions in life that would help other people and contribute to their well being, as well as my own.

Obviously, that attitude was not confined to any religion. It never was for Fred. Neither was it confined within certain human activities as opposed to other activities. No. Kindness and understanding toward people, desire to listen and learn, willingness to let people be—all these attitudes permeated Fred's makeup as a human being, dictated all his actions, indeed, creating an aura of sanity and calmness around him that people perceived and wanted to be a part of, wanted to come to bask in the warm glow of Fred's understanding.

Larry was an amazing man in his own right. He had a huge office with twenty or more employees on the twelfth floor. He had a mahogany desk in his office as big as our bedroom. His armchair was the size of a small car. He was running a multi-million-dollar business from that chair. But he would come by every morning with a cup of cocoa for old Fred, a newspaper and cup of coffee for himself to talk about news, politics, kids, have some laughs and this and that. They had known each other for about forty years. They even knew each other's families personally. Larry showed me his first tiny office in the same building, currently occupied by a young and eager travel agent. Larry started his financial business before WWII in that office.

Fred joked a lot. One of his jokes that I remember was that he and President Reagan had one thing in common: they both had beautiful wives. He showed me the picture of his wife, an old, ugly hag bearing no resemblance whatsoever to Nancy Reagan. But Fred considered her beautiful and so she was—to him. It is all in the eyes of the beholder, isn't it? Fascinating! Together they raised two sons and two daughters, who have now grown up to be grandparents themselves. Both of Fred's sons had long and successful Navy careers, fought with Japanese through WWII. Fred is definitely one of the people whom you remember for the rest of your life—kind of like Clara but in a grander way. Every time I think about Fred, I am very happy I met him.

Fred would never say anything bad about another person. Ever. But he did distrust one of the security guards by the name Cal. Fred never mentioned him but I saw it. There must have been something seriously wrong with Cal as a person to earn Fred's distrust. I kept Cal at arm's distance for that reason too, but it turned out that I did not distrust him nearly enough.

Chapter Seven

THE ROOF

A COUPLE OF MONTHS at the Morgan Building were life-changing. I was learning the ropes, learning English, learning about life, making a bit of money and savoring the company of my friend old Fred.

The manager, David, called me to his office one morning with an offer. They were planning to wash and scrub the grime off the building with water and vinegar, a restoration project. They needed a helper up on the roof at nights with a radio to make sure nobody tampered with the safety lines and also to help the workers lower down anything they needed and do whatever else was necessary. I received fifty cents an hour bump in pay and worked eight hours at nights on that duty instead of four hours that I had as an Electrician's Helper. It was supposed to be a temporary three-week job.

Fred's friendly old face hardened when I told him about my "promotion." Something was wrong. He explained about unions and that the workers the building hired were non-union. Pittsburgh was totally a union town. It seemed David had a good reason to hire a "helper" to guard his two workers. Fred advised me against taking the job but if I decided to take on the responsibility, I had to treat it as such and be ready for trouble at all times during my shifts. So unions were my enemy? No. He explained that union members also had families to take care of; we all wanted the same things from life, actually exactly the same things.

What an astounding new viewpoint! He told me to remember that, but he also stressed the point that I had my right to defend myself if

that was actually called for. Just for me to remember that any force used against another should be comparable to the force used against oneself. He insisted that it was far saner to underestimate the force to be used against another than to overestimate it. This opened up a whole new world for me. Russians are not at all famous for their correct estimation of force they use against others. In fact, using measured force is nowhere in their view of the world. The entire idea was to deliver the biggest blow faster and to obliterate any opposition entirely.

When I was growing up, I would always fight anybody who'd call me "*zhid*," an insult for a Jew. I guess, since these were mere words and nobody was hurting me physically, I probably used too much force against the offenders. I was less than sane. Wow! Come to think of it, I guess my tormentors in Kiev were not really my enemies, either. Not real enemies. They just seemed to be through lack of communication and understanding. We were just kids. How could a child really be your enemy solely and exclusively on the account of the word *Jew* written in your passport which he had never even seen? So what about other enemies such as war adversaries? What about criminals? Interesting questions. Regardless of anybody's agreement or disagreement with the philosophical concepts at hand, if you stop and think, it is shocking how deep the philosophy of this old black janitor reached into the entire meat and potatoes of our existence!

I decided to take the job on the roof. I was curious and I needed the money. It was fun at the beginning. We rigged the motorized scaffolding platform, safety lines, closed off the sidewalk and one side of the street every night. The work itself was boring. I was walking around the roof, sitting around, looking at the stars, walking around some more, sometimes talking on the walky-talky, releasing some more slack on a hose or lines when needed and helping the guys to get in and out. It went that way for a few days.

One night it was Cal's turn as the night security at the entrance door in the lobby. Around 4AM I received a call from him on the radio. He wanted me to call him using the landline. Strange. Why landline? Because our two workers could hear any conversation on the radio. Cal did not want any witnesses. I understood that later. Cal's request, however, did not ring any alarm bells in my mind at the time. I simply walked over to the roof maintenance shack and called him on the phone. Cal told me that something fell off the scaffold and I had to come immediately to clean it up before we got in trouble with the cops on account of the imminent rush hour, traffic obstructions and all that. He said he'd turn on one of the elevators for me. I got down to the lobby. As I came out of the elevator I accidentally glanced at the bronze elevator controls board, noticing that freight elevator was moving up. That was odd. Cal opened the entrance

door, I looked outside when he suddenly pushed me out and tried to lock the door behind me. That did not come totally unexpected. I forced the door open, punched Cal in the nose, ran to the elevator that was still sitting at the lobby level and pushed the "25" button frantically trying to get back to the roof. It is amazing how fast things change sometimes. When shit hits the fan, we are forced to do zero to sixty instantaneously. We usually meet such challenges with various degrees of incompetence.

The elevator went up but then abruptly stopped a bit short of the twenty-first floor. I guess Cal managed to get his fat ass off the marble floor and turn off the elevator. Screw human understanding, I sure hoped his schnauzer hurt like hell. Having pried the old elevator's doors open, I climbed out and ran to the stairwell. My attempts to raise the guys on the radio failed. Nobody was answering. I finally made it to the roof. There were two men whom I had never met before running toward me, away from the rig.

"Stop! Face down on the roof!" I yelled. Yeah, right! The two guys rushed at me, eyes wild in the stark white light of our construction lanterns, one of them swinging a bolt cutter. I was caught in a tight spot with the steel catwalk steps behind me, the two attackers in front of me and steel structures on both sides. The first guy came out with a left into my face. I saw it coming and blocked with my right, checked him in the shin and smacked him a good upper cut in the jaw with my left. My fist connected with a truly satisfying crunch and he went down as if his legs were cut off. The second hoodlum was upon me, swinging his bolt cutter. I jumped back a bit trying to avoid the bolt cutter and banged my head on some steel beam pretty hard. The pain momentarily blinded me and I slumped down as my legs simply went out of my control and bent under me. The perpetrator jumped over me, dragging his disoriented and stumbling partner with him. They ran away. I did not feel like chasing after anybody right that very moment. I became aware of warm blood trickling down the back of my head and ripped Clara's scarf off and stuffed it in my jacket. Head wounds bleed a lot. Then I got up and staggered to the rig to assess the damage.

The acid-wash and scrubbing of the building was being done using a motorized scaffolding rig. It had two motors, each one of them a wench—a simple contraption. Each motor either winds the steel cable onto a drum raising its side of the scaffold up, or unwinds the steel cable lowering it down. Both motors have to be controlled simultaneously in order to keep the scaffold leveled. It is difficult to always keep it leveled. For that reason everything on the scaffold gets tied up to it and the workers' harnesses get tied up by independent lines directly to the roof. The ropes attached directly to the personnel are called "safety lines." If the scaffold fell down,

each of the workers independently would end up dangling on their safety lines scared out of their wits. There were two more safety lines attaching each end of the scaffold to the roof. This technology was outdated even in 1980 when these events took place.

The union guys cut one of the steel cables, the corresponding scaffold safety line and the cable on the other side. This left the scaffold hanging vertically on one safety line. The hoods did not tamper with the two safety lines attached to the workers. My guys were not answering the radio so I had to figure out what floor they were on, open the window and help them in. I estimated they were dangling at the sixteenth floor level, about five windows over from the corner. I ran down to the sixteenth floor, taking several steps at a time, figured it must have been the second office from the end, broke the office door and opened the window. The guys were dangling a bit lower so I pulled them in one after the other. Boy, were they pissed at me! They thought I had sold them out!

They were in no mood to listen to my explanation, even if I could make coherent sentences in English at the time—which I couldn't. They did not even want my help with lowering the scaffold to the ground. They just wanted me out of there! That hurt. I went home.

Later that morning I came back to talk to the manager. I knocked on the open door of his office and looked at David sitting at his desk, expecting him to invite me in. He didn't. He just kept staring at me silently. My heart fell. Then he spat three words hatefully: "You are fired!" I walked in and tried to explain what happened but he did not want my explanations.

"Cal already explained everything to me! How could you? Traitor! You attacked him and broke his nose! And you let the union goons in!

"But, but . . ." Lying bastard! Once again this was so unfair and upsetting that I could not squeeze out anything sensible in English!

"Old, fat Cal had to fight with you and shut down the elevator to save the workers' lives! Their lives, you murderer! Get out!"

I finally formulated in my mind something coherent to say in English and asked David, "Why didn't Cal call the police when the security of the building was breached?"

"Get out, you scum!"

David escorted me to the basement to get my stuff. He no longer trusted me and wanted to keep an eye on me. I went to the custodian room to empty my locker. Fred followed me around his "office" with sad eyes.

"I am not a traitor, Fred. Cal sold us out."

"I know that," Fred replied mildly, "But why wouldn't you tell that to David?"

Filled with self-pity and the beautiful, self-righteous sadness, I didn't answer.

“Don’t you go and learn any wrong lessons from this, boy!” Fred got up, walked to me, gave me a big hug and wished me success. David snapped at him for that. Fred responded with a verse, could be from the Bible, I guess, or some poem. Unfortunately, the meaning of what he said totally escaped me. Fred walked out of the room. That was the last time I saw him. David looked very upset. What did Fred tell him? Then David mumbled, looking away, that if I wanted to explain anything to him or apologize before I leave, he’d listen. I did not feel like explaining or apologizing and just walked out.

I lost my job but I never really lost Fred. Just like Clara, he is with me when I need him.

The last thing Fred told me was not to learn any wrong lessons. What did he mean by that? I went home. Not being able to sleep, I tossed and turned on my couch thinking about it for a while, about various lessons that I could possibly glean from this disaster. I was supposed to learn the right lesson or lessons. What could I learn?

Was not trusting anybody the lesson I was supposed to learn? Not a good lesson since it was a generality. Anybody at all? Really? Generalities are always wrong and that is the only true generality. You know, all cats are just not black. That wouldn’t work.

Not risking my life for four-fifty an hour was another possible lesson to learn. Not a good lesson either. A very wrong lesson, actually. Despite the appearances, I knew that I did not risk my life for four-fifty an hour. I was doing my job simply because I promised to do it—simply by the fact of accepting it. Nobody forced the job on me. I promised to do it and others relied on me keeping my word. Four dollars fifty cents an hour had nothing to do with it at all.

David did not give me any data about a possible attack or sabotage, although he hinted on it. So a lesson could have been to always get all the data I needed to operate. Good, but . . . Honestly? I had the data; I got it from Fred. But I knew I was onto something important here.

The fact that I had no security procedures of any kind, no codified rules or protocol for the job, was not a small error on my part either. What do you do, for example, if you need to leave the post to use a bathroom? There was no definite job protocol worked out. So if I wanted to have definite procedures, wouldn’t I ask David? I should have asked. I never asked.

Finally, I came up with the only intelligent lessons to learn: I should have warned the guys on the scaffold before leaving my post. I could have verified if they dropped something. I could have told them about the call from Cal. And I should have gotten a job description from David even before I started on this job. I did not communicate with them at all and I did not communicate properly with David before I took the job and

at the time he fired me. The bottom-line problem was communication. The lesson was to (A) communicate and (B) communicate adequately and properly. This was an awesome lesson to learn. A priceless lesson! If it were not for Fred, I would have just walked right past it. This did not mean that my communication abilities suddenly made a tremendous somersault, instantaneously turning me into Socrates. No. But I definitely gained some valuable understanding of life there. The easiest thing in the world would have been just to blame Cal—ineffective but at least self-righteous. Did you notice where Cal was in my final calculations? Nowhere, right next to the two perpetrators. Nowhere. Interesting, isn't it?

Fortunately, my father was not fired. He stayed at Morgan Building for about a year longer. He then joined the union and started his long and productive career as a union painter. He retired in 2003.

What really stunned me was that shortly after this incident David referred my mother to her first real job in America, also at the Morgan Building. Go figure! She was hired as an electrical draftsman. From there she went to an electrical designer position and then electrical estimator. She retired in 2003 after a very successful and long industrial estimating career in the United States. She traveled the world working for some of the largest American companies building subways and factories in places like Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Canada, China and all over the United States. My five-foot tall mother in a hard hat would chase construction crews around to bring the projects home within budgets that she'd work out. It all started with my dismissal and David's desire to help my family.

Chapter Eight

“FRIENDS OF FRED” PAINTING COMPANY

MARCH 1980, OUR first spring in America. It was a so-so spring, as springs go, but it held a great deal of hope for me. My plan was to enroll into the University of Pittsburgh civil engineering program. Meanwhile I would get going on my painting business and make money to live the American Dream!

Steve called me with a heads-up on the coming season and to once again reiterate for me to stop insulting his customers. Steve had bestowed his painting treasures on me in early December 1979. Now four months later he still never asked for any payments. What a guy!

A few days later a lady called. She needed the exterior of her house painted. I told her that I would have to stop by, take a look and give her my estimate. I saw the house, figured out a hundred dollars per day plus materials and gave her the price. I think it came to \$1500. She agreed! It turned out Steve already told her that I would probably charge about that much and highly recommended me as an honest person. How did he know I was an honest person?

I barely started when I landed another house to paint, then another one. I was suddenly booked for the next two months and the calls kept coming!

I paid Steve back for his starter kit. When I first showed up at his store with five hundred-dollar bills in my hand, he was happy but not surprised. He introduced me as his good friend to a couple of old Jews who were hanging around the store. I was pleased to hear him calling me a friend,

especially since he normally called me an idiot. I also got a driver's license and bought a huge old Buick to transport my ladders and pick up girls. Did I mention that it has always been my firm belief that nearly all good things in life come from women? Well, they do, think about it. And I do not just mean sexual gratification and food.

It was bothering me that I was not contributing in any way to this country of my choice. USSR was not the country of my choice, but this US of A definitely was. Neither was I organized to do much work, it was just me alone. As the first step to expansion I registered a company. I called it Friends of Fred Painting Company.

In order to expand, I also needed to hire a helper. How does one find a reliable helper? I asked around. The few Russian guys I knew did not want to paint houses. Alex, the aspiring cook, worked as a waiter in a diner; he flatly refused to do any dirty manual labor. I went to the University, found their notice board and dug up a note from a painter who was looking for work. His name was Abdul. I called him right away.

Abdul turned out to be an Arab from Syria, about my age, a freshman electrical engineering student. He was not an experienced painter yet, but neither was I. What a coincidence! We could become total professionals together! He was the first potential employee I interviewed. I could probably interview at least one more to have a choice. Why rush into employing somebody you don't know, especially an Arab? But I liked him. In my estimation, he could be trusted. I decided to hire him right then and there. It was the second great decision in my life. The first one was coming to America.

Chapter Nine

ABDUL

I HIRED ABDUL AT four dollars an hour. I liked him. He was very hardworking, polite and cheerful, a pleasure to work with. He did not pray to Allah facing Mecca all the time or anything like that. The customers liked him, especially old ladies.

I remember a scene I observed on numerous occasions where some old Jewish lady would be feeding Abdul a kosher lunch while showing him her old family photographs. Our repeat customer Mrs. Lieberman even taught Abdul a song in Yiddish about a "*sheine meidele*" (a beautiful girl). Abdul used to croon that song while working for several years to come. These old ladies loved Abdul. I guess they fed him because he was so skinny. They just liked to mother him to death! Nobody ever fed me; I just wasn't skinny enough.

I started making more money and I had some time to estimate other jobs and get some more work in. While I was out, Abdul kept plugging at it like clockwork. He was totally reliable.

I made him my partner after this fearless little runt stole the show and saved the day. We started working together and then, a couple of months later, toward the end of spring 1980, we were just starting a new job when the trouble hit. We brought in and set up the ladders in the morning, spread the tarps and got started on scraping the house. A car stopped in the driveway. An older guy in painters' overalls stepped out, approached me across the front lawn and politely asked me to pack up and leave their

territory. He warned me that tomorrow at exactly 9AM his buddies, some local painters, were going to throw us and our ladders the hell out of here if we were foolish enough to still be around. I was so upset that the only thing I could master in English was "Up yours!" He shrugged, turned around with not a word, got into his car and drove off.

"Who was that?" asked Abdul cheerfully. "Anything important?"

"Not particularly. Tomorrow at 9AM his buddies will come here and try to throw me and the ladders out of here. It's okay. You stay home tomorrow, Abdul. I'll handle it."

"Why are they throwing you out?"

"He said this is their territory. This is everybody's territory because this is a free country, so I am staying. You have a day off."

"No, I'll be here. I'll come early to get the best seat!"

"It's okay, Abdul, take a day off. I will still pay you. It's a paid day off! You will just get in the way. Stay home."

"You are paying me for staying home now, *Sadeeqy* (that's 'friend' in Arabic)? I should get a raise for staying home! You want me to stay home for a lousy four bucks an hour?! No way, Michael! I know my rights! I want at least five bucks an hour or I will go on strike and keep working!"

Abdul had a lot fun with the idea of being paid for not working. It seemed totally ridiculous to him, didn't fit his view on life. I guess he was simply not familiar with our welfare system yet.

In any case, I just did not want him there tomorrow. I am 5'7", the only person who ever considered me a big guy was my darling wife Olga, but that was much later. I am really a short guy, nothing special, but I am hard to back down and can usually hold my own, to a degree. Abdul was even shorter, a skinny little runt, delicately built like a girl. What could he do in a fight except get hurt? I was his employer. There were liabilities to consider.

Next morning Abdul showed up before I did. He really didn't want to miss the show, as he said.

"You are a dirty Syrian dog, Abdul! I told you to stay home!"

Abdul panted with his tongue hanging out, "You are a crazy Ukrainian. You are going to Heaven this morning to meet Allah," he laughed. "I just wanted to pick up my pay before 9AM!" He really thought it was funny.

"Abdul, you are to stay on the ground at 9AM. Understood? No ladders. What if they throw you off the ladder? Stay on the ground! That is an order!"

He saluted with both hands, clicked the imaginary heels of his old sneakers and went to work.

At 9AM we were both high up on the ladders working away. I kept an eye on the driveway, though. As soon as I saw a van pulling up, I yelled to Abdul to get down, quickly got to the ground myself and ran toward the van.

The van stopped and half a dozen guys in dirty painters' uniforms jumped out and rushed toward me. I dropped the first one I could reach to the ground and started rolling around in the grass with him—totally ineffectually. The others ignored me completely. They kept running toward the house. I heard one of our ladders falling down, Abdul screaming and cursing in Arabic. I kept fighting with the guy, managed to get a couple of good punches through.

I could hear Abdul yelling in Arabic like he really meant it, somewhere behind me. It sounded like a lot of blood curling "k" and "kh" sounds, exactly as I would expect a suicidal Muslim terrorist to sound like! I could not see the house from where I was, but my opponent could. Suddenly it dawned on me that instead of fighting me, he was desperately fighting to get away from me! I let him go, of course. I did not particularly want him here to begin with. He immediately bolted to the van followed by his terrified buddies with Abdul in hot pursuit. Abdul was cursing them in Arabic from the top of his lungs and whacking them anywhere he could reach with a broken roller stick!

The terrified painters piled up into the van and drove off, zigzagging erratically over the curb through the flowers.

Abdul yelled some last curse in Arabic, shaking his fist after them, came over and helped me up. We sat down on a porch step to have a cigarette and calm down. I looked at Abdul with different eyes now. There was a strong spirit in that small body. Good man. I slapped him on the back. "Thank you, Abdul, you did great! Now explain why you were risking your life for four dollars an hour? I always thought you were your mama's smartest son."

"Four dollars?! It is nothing! Ha! I spit on four dollars!" Abdul spat to illustrate the point. "But nobody can just come and tell me to get out! I work here! I do a good job. Those infidels! They can take my four dollars and stick them up their fat asses! But they don't tell me to get out, Michael! You understand?" Abdul yelled echoing my sentiments exactly.

Impressive! Abdul knew Fred's secret. It is not what you do or what you have, it is who you are. He understood pride. What a guy! Abdul was a friend of Fred and did not even know that!

"I understand you now, Abdul, thanks. Hey, listen, would you like to be my partner?"

"Would I make more than four dollars an hour?" he immediately calmed down and asked me slyly.

"Sure! 50-50, man!"

"Okay. Allah willing, we'll make good money together, my wise infidel partner!"

"I am wise now, am I? What happened to the 'crazy Ukrainian'?"

“Who?”

We were best friends and partners for the next five years that it took us to get our bachelors degrees. I was never sorry I hired Abdul or made him my partner. How many of us would give half a kingdom for an honest and reliable partner?

Abdul was as reliable as a brick outhouse, totally loyal and totally honest. He was a truly honorable man. He was generally a very civilized person, too, although there were a few situations over the years where I could see a certain wild and unpredictable streak in him.

For example, a couple of years later we were doing a demolition job. We were contracted by the absentee owner to take down his old brick house on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, out in the fields. There were no other houses around and this house was supposedly vacant, ready for demolition. We arrived early in the morning as usual. We had to start early because we both had classes starting at 5PM. I was driving our old demolition truck which we lovingly called the Red Monster. It had a railroad tie chained to the front, great for ramming things. I rammed into the house just to get things started, backed up a bit and got out. It was a cold, wet and miserable morning. I left my coffee cup on the dashboard. Abdul was still inside nursing his coffee, chewing on some pastry and shivering. He couldn't stand cold weather, although he liked shivering; he considered it good exercise.

I walked to the hole I had made in the brick wall of the house, bent down and looked inside. It was totally dark, with light from the break in the wall reflecting a bit—in some strange way. I peered some more and finally realized that I was looking down a barrel of a shotgun!

With my heart fluttering in my throat, I backed off slowly, followed by a crazy looking black dude with a shot gun, single barrel, one shot. The guy was yelling and carrying on about us destroying his home. Something about the Homestead law. I was not a lawyer and didn't even want to be, but I was certain it wasn't his house. Just a squatter! But he sure was the most heavily armed damn squatter I have ever seen! I was looking into the yellow whites of his crazy eyes, feeling very unhappy about this entire morning.

As I was backing off slowly alongside our Red Monster and sweating profusely, I saw Abdul from the corner of my eye. He strolled unhurriedly around the front of the truck and was directly behind the gunman now, still chewing on his twinkie! He just walked casually to the guy from behind, reached over to his ear and gave it a quick tap.

“No!”

Too late! What is the guy going to do if you unexpectedly tap him on his ear? He is going to squeeze the trigger, of course! I ducked at the last instant as the gun! went BOOM above me!

As I ducked deep and the Homestead law expert fired his shotgun, two things occurred to me simultaneously. The first one was that his shotgun was no longer loaded. The second was that I had certain vulnerable parts of his anatomy right in front of me as an easy target. Of course I immediately punched him in the vulnerable parts. Abdul quickly wrestled the gun from his weakened hands. We had it all under control in no time. Having tied the guy to a tree with rubber cargo ties, we sat down on the step to have a smoke and calm down. I mean *I* sat down to calm down. Abdul remained unruffled through the ordeal and still chewing something!

The future judicial industry professional was further upsetting me with his incessant screaming, so I wobbled over to him on shaking legs and taped his mouth shut with a lot of masking tape. A little better.

"Abdul, you crazy bum! Why did you have to startle him? Didn't you know he was going to squeeze the trigger?"

"Sure. He unloaded the gun. I thought that was the idea," Abdul continued in a sensible tone of voice. "You know, he shoots his shot, we take the gun away, tie him to a tree with rubber ties and tape his mouth shut with a lot of masking tape. No?"

"What about me, you crazy son of a bitch?! His gun was six inches from my nose! Did you think about that?!"

"Oh, that! I don't care about that, man! You are too smart to die like that, Allah willing. You always land on your feet."

"I always fucking WHAT on my fucking WHAT?!"

"Well, didn't you?"

What are you going to say to that? A wild streak. You can take a Bedouin out of the desert but . . . Take a Jew out of Kiev but can't take Kiev out of a Jew—and sometimes it may even be a good thing, too. We went to work. The future attorney remained tied up to the tree. We let him go after lunch, gave him ten bucks, our leftover lunch and some water and told him to run along. I kept the shotgun in the truck for a while, finally selling it together with the truck to some Mexican contractor. He didn't really want the gun either.

PART FOUR

THE WINTER OF UNDERSTANDING

Chapter One

LOST

LATE FALL OF 1981. Two years in America were like a lifetime. Many things changed. I was truly living the American dream now.

The Club Zebra Zoo—the usual. Lucy was there. A cacophony of sound and colors, unbearable noise. There was music, dancing, bar full of drinks. I saw Victor there, too, the Flaming Dick. Everyone was there.

“Hello, Lucy,” I shouted, avoiding looking into her eyes. This set-up was not intended for humans. I was surrounded by grotesquely twisting extraterrestrials. Only about half of them were interesting, the ones with female genitalia.

“Hello, Jacob.” Lucy stared at me coldly. Yes, I know, my name is Michael but she didn’t know that. “I tried calling you. You could’ve mustered enough common decency to at least tell me off in person instead of leaving me hanging.”

Bla-bla-bla. Lucy was as interesting to me now as yesterday’s lunch.

“Lucy, I am sorry. You are a very beautiful girl and a nice person but I feel that I must move on. It is a phase I am going through. You helped me get closer to my inner self and I am profoundly grateful.” I heard this idiocy somewhere before, probably on TV. Now I shouted it into her ear, hoping it made more sense to her than it did to me. What I really wanted to say was, “Go away, bitch! You are here on the same conditions as everybody else. Get over it!”

Lucy shot me a glance that was supposed to turn me to cinders but didn't and walked away. She'd find somebody else here tonight, if that's what she wanted.

I glanced around the place. There were some people I knew but wished I didn't and a lot of people I didn't know and didn't care to meet. I went to the bar for a drink and set next to ravishing extraterrestrial with just the right type of genitalia.

I tapped her on the slender shoulder. "Excuse me please, I came recently from Denmark. You will help me with these dollars, no? I want gin. *Danke.*" A little snotty but a great pair of legs and tits on her. She was obviously after any interesting extraterrestrial with a penis. Well, I fit the bill at least on some of these points.

She looked me over coldly with her incredibly blue eyes, puckered her bloody lips and told Bobby, the bartender, to give me a gin and tonic and threw some of my money at him.

"*Dunke!* My name is Lars. What is your name, beautiful woman?"

She smiled, relaxing almost despite herself to the unpretentious complement, "I am Sophie."

"*Mine Got!* Sophie as in Sophie Loren?!"

"No. Sophie is in 'Sophisticated.'" That she definitely was. "And you are Lars as in Lars Ulrich from Metallica?"

"Yes. You recognized?" Modest smile. Eyes down. Pause. Eyes up. Smile. "No, just joking. I am Lars as in 'Larceny'."

She laughed. I laughed.

We ordered more. I hate gin and tonic, it tastes like aftershave—although I never tasted aftershave, so who knows? Sophie paid Bobby for both of us from my pile of dollars.

We shared our stories. Mine was fully invented, hers probably mostly wasn't. I was really a Ukrainian refugee studying to be a civil engineer and painting houses for a living. Naturally, I told her I was a Danish exchange cinematography student at Carnegie Mellon. She was apparently a psychiatric nurse student. We had several drinks and I got Sophie to pay after the third one and put the rest of my dollars back into my pocket. She was in no condition to notice at that point.

"Is it cold in Denmark?" She asked slurring her words noticeably after about an hour.

"Very cold. But our Danish women are very warm. Are American women warm?"

"Some are."

"What about you, Sophie? Are you a warm . . . bird?"

She laughed. "Chick! Hot chick! Yes, I am hot! Well, what do you think? Am I a hot chick?"

"Yes, I think. I can feel heat from between your legs all the way to here. Do you like me?"

"If you are submissive and full of sperm." Wow, not all that sophisticated.

"That's me!" I nodded vigorously, "Except I am not very submissive."

I felt her tongue in my ear and her delicate hand on my crotch. My breath caught. It suddenly got very crowded in my pants.

"You'll do." Sophie was pleased.

She looked at me strangely now, kind of like a predator looking at a prey. She got up unsteadily and led me out. In the car she unzipped my pants and fondled my balls till they ached. Needless to say, driving was as hard as everything else at the moment.

Sophie lived in a brassy part of town, the Shadyside, in a small house all to herself. When I parked the car Sophie ignored the pompous entry, went straight to the kitchen window and climbed in, sexy legs flailing.

I climbed after her. Odd, yet intriguing.

She had a white carpet, untrotten as yet by human feet, it seemed, which explained the window entrance. "I got to pee!" She kicked off her high heels, squeezed out a quick fart and danced off on her pretty little feet. "Sophisticated" my ass.

The walls and ceiling of her bedroom were painted red and black blaze shapes reaching onto the ceiling to a huge frightening face of a punk rocker, possibly Gene Simmons from Kiss. There was a dildo on her night stand.

Sophie's slender body and cleanly shaven pussy were erotic as hell as we went down on each other. I was never this worked up in my life. Then she suddenly dug her nails into my leg. I yelped but she did not stop scratching me. There was blood on her delicate fingertips now. Sophie was beginning to breathe heavily as her eyes glazed over. She liked causing pain. Or did she get off on blood? One crazy bitch!

"Do you want to see why I want to be a psych nurse?" She whispered seductively in my ear, rubbing her heavenly slick pussy against my leg.

Did I really want to see why? Not really. "Sure" I replied uneasily.

Sophie reached under the bed and handed me a whole wad of handcuffs. I suddenly noticed the well-worn circles around the bed posts. This lady was so creepy that I actually felt fear.

"On your back, Lars, now!"

"No, stop! This is too weird, Sophie."

"You dare disobey Sophie?!" she yelled, pulling out a red velvet whip from under the pillow and whipping me with a scowl of pure insanity on her beautiful face. She drove the dildo deep inside her body, barking hysterically, like a puppy. Boy, how weird but incredibly arousing! And scary.

I let her cuff my wrists and ankles. Sophie was riding me, thrashing around and yapping. I was bleeding and smarting slightly all over.

When she finally went limp, I made her free me and handcuffed her ankles and one of her wrists to the bedposts. She thrust her swollen genitals toward me, begging for stimulation.

"Self-service time, babe," I muttered getting up and wincing. She immediately stuffed most of the fingers of her free hand up her engorged snatch and resumed moaning.

I pushed the phone within her reach, got dressed and walked out through the front door followed by her renewed barking. Sophie was lost in her sweet oblivion again. Sophie, the Sophisticated. And Lars as in Larceny. That's me.

At home I took a shower right away. I was still bleeding a bit so I threw my old bedspread on the bed and stretched out on top of it. There I lay in the darkness—thinking.

American life went to my head like champagne bubbles. Like a poison. An overdose. I had OD'ed on America—not an uncommon condition. I was not doing well as a person, I could see that. I had more money than I ever dreamt possible (although I didn't even have much, objectively speaking). I had credit cards, a new car, new exciting sex any time I wanted. It seemed I had it all. I even tried smoking pot, though I hated it. I even had a future now, I was going to be a civil engineer! This was way too much for me, actually. I was a different Misha now. In fact, I wasn't even Misha anymore, I was Michael! Or was I Lars? Or Jacob? For some extraterrestrials I was not even Michael! I was not sure myself who I was anymore. I did not like what I had become. Certainly my parents, Fred and Clara wouldn't like me right now, either. Boy, was I lost! Things absolutely had to change.

Around the end of October 1981 the work stopped and I completely crashed and burned by November. It was getting cold. Painting and remodeling work is majorly seasonal in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and this was going to be a hell of a cold winter. I kind of knew that but never took it seriously.

I was a twenty-one-year old engineering student at Pitt. I lived in a nice small apartment of my own in Oakland, the campus area of Pittsburgh. I lived in the moment, kind of like a humming bird or a butterfly, not thinking about the future. I was spending all my money on one-night stands, other forms of entertainment and, generally, things I did not need or even want. I bought a brand new car with almost no money down, I rented an apartment and bought expensive furniture and a nice stereo.

It was all supposed to be great fun. I was splurging on the American dream—kind of. But this kind of life did not bring me any joy. It just wasn't

much fun at all. Furthermore, this way of life created all kinds of problems for me. The most pressing one at the moment revolved around the fact that I had some two hundred dollars left to my name and some twelve hundred in monthly bills as the cold settled in and my work dried up. It was also the beginning of the Pittsburgh Great Depression of 1981-83, when all thirty-four steel mills closed down, devastating the city beyond recognition. Pittsburgh was dying. It would get much worse later, but it was already bad enough in November of '81. And there was no work. None.

I did not believe it at first. How could there be no work? Nonsense! Of course there was going to be more work! But there wasn't!

By then I had managed to cut all ties with my parents, too. I stopped talking to them and moved out. At a certain age all the excrements usually rush up to one's head bringing about a serious debilitating condition of acute dorkiness, a plague afflicting youth all around the world. That appalling malady usually strikes its victims at the tender age of fourteen or fifteen. I caught that bug at the ripe age of twenty-one. I am not proud of that period of my life in the least, and I am not trying to justify anything. These circumstances are simply relevant to the terrible yet miraculous events that followed.

In October, after the work ran out, Abdul took off for Syria. He just did not want to tough it out through the coming winter in Pittsburgh. The meteorologists shoved off a record cold winter on us and there was no work. Abdul wanted to see his parents and other relatives anyway. He told me many times that he missed them and was putting away some money for his trip.

I was totally alone when the disaster struck.

Getting increasingly alarmed, I decided to call Fred for advice. I scraped up enough for a call. It was great to hear his quiet and reassuring voice. He went through eighty-some winters so far, some of them were probably just as cold as this one, if not colder.

Fred was happy to hear from me. I did not share the entire depth and breadth of the situation with him and even presented the problem as if it happened to a friend of mine. No work, no money, no friends. He thought about it for a while, invited me to come visit him. I refused. He finally gave me the scoop.

"Your friend," he said slowly, "Done himself into a hole fair and square. You see that? He is now looking at the bottom of the pit, boy. There just ain't much more to go any lower, this is about it. He will perish or he will pull himself up and out. But he can only pull himself out by changing right now, this minute, by becoming an honest man. I ain't talking any better explanations or excuses here. I am talking honest man. You hear?"

I got it, I really did. Thanks old friend!

I had had enjoyed several short-lived sexual escapades over the past months. I was certainly not proud of them. I despised that moronic disco meat market, one-night stands, the pseudo-life. But now I was considering going back with a cup in hand to any of the girls I left. Or go back to my parents with a cup in hand. Or go to Steve, the Benjamin Moore store owner, with a cup in hand. Or go to the government with a cup in hand.

I decided against it all. Screw cups in hands. As Fred pointed out quite correctly, I lost my friends and relatives fair and square by my own doing. I dug myself a good size hole and fell into it. Now was the time to climb back out, but Fred warned me that I could only do it by being an honest man. Made sense. I knew I couldn't dig myself out by piling up more and more dishonest and dishonorable actions on top of my earlier screw-ups. I had to get back on the rails. I had to become an honest man again—and soon.

Practically speaking, how would I crawl back up out of the hole? First and foremost, I had to immediately knock off any low-life nonsense and, secondly, survive the winter, that's how. I knew how to survive. I was pretty good at that. I tried various things such as calling my old customers looking for work, asking Steve for any referrals and hanging around his store talking to people. When the phone got disconnected for not paying my bills, I drove around knocking on doors, asking for work. Every once in a while I would get some small jobs—ten bucks here, twenty bucks there.

Meanwhile, in December, the already cold weather got much colder. It was a 100-year winter, as the experts called it. The temperature would drop to minus thirty at times, strong gusty winds. My new Ford froze up and that was the end of it.

After careful consideration, I scraped up all the change I could find and bought some bread and an onion. Russians know that onions are rich in Vitamin C, they are the easiest cure for scurvy. When things get this rough, it is a good idea to have an onion around. I had no money left. I was officially flat broke and had no electricity, no phone and no car. And no work. I lived in an old building with gaps and cracks, freezing drafts were whistling inside the apartment.

A couple of days later I woke up to an absolutely incredible, insane cold. There was ice inside my apartment, my aquarium was frozen solid all the way through with my beautiful fish frozen inside in various picturesque positions. The temperature inside quickly hit the bottom, same as outside. Apparently the old water heating pipes froze and burst. They could not be repaired in this weather. This was going to really hurt, I could see it now. Our small apartment building consisted of four one-bedroom apartments. The other three tenants moved out right away. I stayed and kept looking for any work but could not find any.

I heard from other students in those days that I was lucky because I was used to this kind of weather being from Russia and all. The truth, however, was that I had never experienced this kind of temperatures and for so many days non-stop—ever. Forget Siberia, the coldest place on Earth is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania! Or so it seemed that Christmas season.

You know, if you view our present condition at any given moment in life as the outcome and sum-total of our past decisions and actions, then obviously I have been as wrong as could be in living through my past. How much wronger could I possibly be? Look at me now! To get this deep into this much crap? There is missing the boat and then there is missing the entire ocean.

I have to admit that my courage faltered. Things looked bad. I had not eaten at all in a couple of days. I had a very bad feeling about all this. My parents loved me dearly and would do anything for me, but I was too stupid and arrogant to understand that. I decided to go see Alex—my coconut buddy, remember? He was then a cook at a diner and lived with his parents. It took me over three hours to walk to his place. I did not even know if he was home. He was. I explained my situation and asked if I could spend the night at his house. He just shrugged and told me not to be silly, we all had our problems. He gave me two bucks that he had on him and shut the door in my face. Probably went back to watching TV.

Well, he did not actually owe me anything—not to mention I had never helped him in any way or even stayed in touch with him. Damn! Looking at the bright side I had two dollars now. I thought about it for a while. I was within some hours of walking distance from my frozen apartment. Not that I had any reason to rush back home. It was getting dark. I went to a pizza place down the street, bought two slices of pizza, then went to their bathroom and disabled the alarm on the bathroom window by closing the contact with a piece of foil.

I ate my pizza slowly and then walked to the local supermarket, Giant Eagle, it was warm there. The pizzeria was open till 9 PM. I went back there at ten. Everybody was gone. The place was buttoned up for the night. I climbed in through the bathroom window and spent the night there. I washed in the bathroom sink the best I could, it was great! Warm, clean. I did not touch anything much, just got an awesome night of sleep and some pizza crumbs and got out in the morning with the plan to come back next night.

The next night the window latch was locked. Somebody undid my innocent ministrations. My walk home took half the night. I still do not remember most of that walk, but I obviously made it.

I spent a couple of days trying to find any work again. At some point I was walking along some side street and saw a snow shovel leaning

against somebody's garage door. I took the shovel and tried to find any snow shoveling work in that neighborhood. I was unshaven and haggard. People saw me and refused to let me do any work for them, though some old lady tried to give me some change. Screw her and her forty cents! I walked back to the house where I found the shovel and leaned it against the same garage door. Or maybe it was a wrong garage door, who knows. Things looked increasingly hopeless. What started as an emergency situation escalated to a full blown disaster in a matter of a couple of weeks and went downhill from there. Things were deadly serious now.

I knew I was going to die if I didn't do something effective right away. The problem with a cold environment, in the absence of special equipment, is that you don't dare sleep. You fall asleep for any appreciable length of time, you die. But how long can you go with no real sleep? No food and no rest? I was running out of solutions.

I could no longer survive through a long trip on foot. I had to find some solution close by or leave my apartment and go sleep on some warm manhole cover like a homeless person. I just couldn't cross that threshold.

Chapter Two

DIMA

SIFTING IN MY head through all the people I knew, I remembered Dima, a Ukrainian guy from Kirovohrad, about my age, maybe a year older. He was an engineering student, too. We were not close friends (I had no close friends), but I knew where he lived. Dima was driven, he was consumed by the overwhelming desire to graduate with a perfect GPA. Despite an occasional bilge or two, his general rule was no girls and no parties. He lived for peanuts in a dilapidated house with no water, heat, electricity or phone. A block from his house was Lawrence Hall, one of Pitt's buildings with gym showers and bathrooms that he used.

I had visited Dima only once; it was not a happy occasion then either. We took a class together. To everybody's amusement, that day Dima showed up to class dead drunk. I decided to get him out of there before somebody else did, like campus police, for example. I asked him where he lived and helped him home.

From Dima's drunk mumble I gathered that he took the dreaded northern route out of Russia. Rough terrain and extreme weather conditions made that track formidable, even deadly, but there were few border patrols in that area so it was safer than other routes in that regard. He partnered up with another dissident. While walking through the snow across some ravine in a blizzard, his partner fell and broke his leg. Dima tried to pull him out of the ravine but failed and finally left him there to die and walked on

alone. Dima made it to Finland. I wonder what that guy was thinking while freezing to death, all alone. And for how long?

Most importantly and to the point, *Dima had a fireplace*. The house was condemned, but Dima set up his living room nicely enough as his living area. He had a bed, a dresser, a desk with a chair and some bookshelves, there were even curtains on the windows. He had some photographs on the fireplace mantle. He used an old kerosene lamp and a couple of homemade oil lamps for lighting. You know, these oil lamps work somewhat but not really.

In that living room Dima had a fireplace. He lived only a couple of blocks away from me. I took my onion and went to see Dima.

Full of hope, I knocked on his beat-up entry door. No response. I kept knocking for a while before Dima opened the door. Damn! Did I look that bad too? He looked like a French POW from Napoleon's army near Moscow, circa 1812. Those prisoners were wearing anything they could find on top of all the other rags they had to survive the winter. Dima was probably going through neighbors' garbage on a regular basis. He was also very skinny, unshaven with dark circles around his eyes. My heart fell. His fireplace couldn't have been working if he looked this bad.

"Hi, Dima! Remember me?"

"Sure, Misha, what do you want?"

"How is your fireplace?"

"Bad."

"Can I come in and see it?"

"Okay." He stepped aside reluctantly, letting me in.

We went to his living room. Damn! Everything was gone! He only had a mattress sitting on four bricks and a few text books on the floor. The desk, chair, books, shelves, bedposts, even the fireplace mantle were all gone! He burnt it all to stay alive. And there was a pile of snow in his fireplace! All the dampers and spark arresters or whatever the hell he had there probably rusted out to nothing and so now snow was falling unobstructed straight through the chimney into the living room. And there was this incredibly dark, thick and uneven ice all over his floor. What was that about?

I sat down on the icy floor with a sigh.

"You know we are going to die very soon if we keep going this way?" I asked Dima quietly.

"Have to die someday anyway, Misha. I am tired."

"Listen, Dima, get a grip on your inner child or whatever you can grip, okay? We will survive."

"Go home, Misha. Leave me alone."

He wanted to die. That pissed me off.

"Is that why you walked through the snow for two weeks to get here? To die in this pitiful dump? Freeze to death in the middle of a huge city with a million people all sitting home watching TV right now?"

"Maybe. Anyway, how do you know about me walking through the snow for two weeks?"

"You told me when you were drunk."

"What else did I tell you?"

"I am very happy you made it here, Dima. Now listen, dick, it is not your time to die yet! You are only twenty-two years old! Knock it off! You should be making love to a beautiful blond right now! And what are you doing? Look at yourself!"

"Brunette."

"What?"

"I should probably be making love to a beautiful brunette right now."

"Okay then, a brunette! I like that! You sure know your women. Do you have a brunette in mind? M-m? What's her name? Does she have a sister?"

"No, no. I don't have anybody. You see how I live. Who would want to hang around with me? I am a total loser."

"You sure are a loser if you say so, Dima. Listen, you decide who you are, not them. Okay? You made it through Hell. None of the smug brats you see walking around here ever came even close! So let's live! Let's make mad and passionate love to beautiful brunettes! Somebody will! Why not you? What do you say? Are you with me on that? Come on, let's do it! Don't make the girls wait, you loser!"

"What do you want from me, asshole?" Dima suddenly snapped back and pushed me in the chest. "You come here, you insult me all the time! Fuck off!"

I liked that. Pissed off. Much better. He was just about ready to roll over and die a minute ago. Boy, I was good!

"I need your help, man. I want to survive through this damn winter. You keep studying all the time, you are very smart. So use your brains and figure out how to get us through alive. Start!"

"Start what?"

"What is the frigging plan?! Brunettes are waiting!"

"I did actually have an idea or two . . ."

"I knew it! What is the easiest one?"

"The easiest is probably to steal some phone books from the payphones around here and burn them in my fireplace and cook some soup but . . ."

"You are a genius! Let's go!" I grabbed him by the collar and literally half-dragged him out.

We went around the neighborhood stealing all the phone books we could find. It was exhausting but we felt much better, because we were doing something productive. We arrived back to his place with about a dozen fat phone books.

I knew that the few books we had would not run sufficient interference against Uncle Frost to afford us some time to sleep. The wind was blowing through this place. You could stick your fingers between the walls and window frames. There was no way to really heat it up.

"So. Dima, you just want to cook your soup, is that it?"

"That's about it. We'll also get twenty or so minutes of warm weather."

"Okay, sounds great! What's the soup of the day?"

"Tomato soup!"

"My favorite!"

Dima took out an empty ketchup bottle with remnants of ketchup frozen inside here and there. He had obviously found it in somebody's garbage. Some day we would remember all this and laugh. But not today. Today we were not laughing. He also had a handful of onion peelings with bits of actual onion among the yellow peels. He would most definitely know about onions, scurvy and survival in the cold. I took my onion out of my pocket and gave it to Dima. He looked at me wide eyed. There was a bit hope in his eyes now.

He even had a pot to cook in. We went outside and loaded it up with snow, avoiding any black and yellow snow the best we could in the darkness, compacted it, came back, made a fire in the fireplace and set the pot to boil on a metal grid of some sort that he rigged over the fire. He'd obviously drilled the routine down.

When the water boiled, Dima poured some of it carefully into the ketchup bottle, slashed it around vigorously and poured the pink ketchup water back into the pot. He added chopped onion and in a couple of minutes we had about half a gallon of the most delicious tomato-onion soup I ever tasted!

Meanwhile, all the snow in his fireplace melted. Rivulets of very dirty water ran all over the uneven floor of his living room creating ponds here and there. In a couple of minutes all that water froze. The black ice. Nothing esoteric, a simple scientific explanation. We could play hockey in his living room. I used to like hockey when I was a kid. Now things were very different. If I had a hockey puck, I would have eaten it by now.

As soon as the phone books turned to ashes, the temperature dropped like a brick back to our normal minus twenty or thirty. But now we felt a whole lot better! We were sipping our delicious soup and chomping on boiled onions. The warmth was flowing all through my body, clearing my

mind and bringing hope. I was right about Dima, he was okay. We will make it, "Allah willing," as Abdul would say.

"Hey, thanks! That was awesome!" I slapped Dima on the back and wrestled him around a bit. He was so skinny and light . . . damn! "Hey, what was the other plan you mentioned?"

"Ah . . . There is an abandoned house a couple of houses down the street. They left some furniture on their porch. I was thinking about stealing it and burning it but I couldn't do it alone."

"You are not alone now! Let's go!"

We finished our soup and went down the street to steal the furniture. It was wicker furniture, very light. We just grabbed a wicker sofa and carried it to Dima's house. Wicker burns way too fast. I wandered in passing how much the owners paid for this useless piece of junk. At least we got six foam sofa pillows that we could possibly use to stay warmer or sleep on or something.

It was almost morning. We had made it through another night.

Chapter Three

ALKA

WE WERE SITTING in Dima's living room on the icy floor, puffing on some cigarette butts we found and thinking. Obviously, our solutions so far have been inadequate. Yes, by some miracle we managed not to freeze to death another night. How long could we keep it up? We gained a bit of a short-term advantage but our solutions really did not change a thing. Instead of tactical solutions we needed a strategy. I explained my line of thinking to Dima. Of course he knew that already. He said he had a strategy, though it was a bit farfetched. I assured him that our situation was so bad that it, in fact, demanded a farfetched strategy. No conventional strategy would do.

His farfetched strategy was finding a girlfriend and moving in with her. Yes, I had to admit that under the circumstances it was a bit farfetched. Still, given our circumstances, we could not rule out any possibilities. I cleared my throat and asked him carefully.

"So . . . do you know some girl who likes you?"

"No, I don't. That is why it is a farfetched strategy."

"I see. And how do you propose we implement this strategy, Dima?"

"I figure, we just walk to Squirrel Hill on Friday night, crash a Russian party, meet a girl and move in with her."

"Who is we?"

"You. Me. We. Doesn't matter. The main thing is that the girl must have an apartment with above freezing weather in it . . . and a mother."

"Why mother? This strategy is already full of holes. Why are you adding more holes?"

"Well, sure! Have you seen any girls cook? I'll re-phrase that: Have you personally ever witnessed any girl in the process of cooking?"

I thought about it carefully, sifting through my memories of various girls I met in my life, mostly pleasant memories.

"No, I never have. I personally witnessed girls having fun in various ways or doing their nails."

"See! They eat but they don't cook! Where is the chow coming from? Their mothers cook! So we need to find their mother."

"Brilliant! I like that thing on your shoulders! What's today?"

"Friday."

"How do you know it's Friday?"

"I kept track. I was considering trying it on my own."

"Okay. Dima, listen. We are out of time. We will most likely get one shot at this. We have to go in today, one of us picks up a girlfriend, we either both stay with her or at least one of us does. Then the lucky one takes care of the other. Agreed?"

"Yes, agreed."

We spent most of the day cleaning up, brushing teeth, shaving and getting ready for our wilderness track to Squirrel Hill. By about 4PM we looked much better. Still haggard and exhausted but now at least shaven and acceptably dressed.

We walked to Squirrel Hill the shortest route, through Schenely Park. It was not all that much fun. Dead cold, lots of snow and somewhat rough terrain. Trudging through the snow half-unconscious and frozen stiff, I suddenly understood what made Dima leave his comrade to die. Schenely Park in the middle of a large American city was not much different except for the warmth and food that were waiting to be won on the other side.

We made it through in approximately three hours.

We finally staggered onto Murray Avenue, the Squirrel Hill main street. It was getting close to Christmas. The street was bustling with shoppers and cars looking for parking spots. We could hear laughter and *Jingle Bells*. La-la-la-la—la-la—la-la.

"Okay, Dima, where is the lucky woman?"

"Don't know yet. Let's find some Russians and ask them about any party. Somebody must have a party tonight, it's Friday."

We eventually met a Russian guy by the name Sergey on Murray Avenue. He was also a student at Pitt.

"Hey, man!" Dima greeted him in an off-hand manner. "Where are the women?"

"I beg your pardon?" Sergey was startled a bit by such an unexpected greeting.

Dima backpedaled, "Well, I mean . . . You see, we were invited to a party by some girl but we can't remember her name or the address. Who is having a party tonight? Do you know?"

Sergey thought about it for a moment. "Must be Alka, then. She usually does a little get-together on Fridays. Don't know about any other party tonight." He finally said, "I don't recommend Alka's, though; she has a couple of really weird girlfriends, real man haters. They just sit around all evening watching TV. Nobody else but these creepy girlfriends there. And her mother is a freaking hussar, a monumental woman! Each of her tits . . ."

Dima slapped him on the back most patronizingly. "Son, you have a lot to learn about women! If you get them to watch TV, you got them right where you wanted them! And as far as the tits go—the more the better! What is Alka's address?"

Sergey gave us the directions, wished us good luck and we were on our way to meet Alka.

We found the place, a rundown house on a side street. There was light in the windows. People lived there and they had electricity. The setup had some potential. Not too presumptuous, kind of down to earth.

We went up the crumbling steps to the rickety entrance door and knocked. The door was finally opened by one of the largest women I have ever had a privilege of scrutinizing—about 6'4", 350 pounds. A monumental woman. Sergey was right about her breasts, too. You could get lost between them or get smothered to death and nobody would find you for days. Her arms were much thicker than my thighs. The lady's prominent mustache did not make her any less intimidating. I had to admit she'd make a great hussar. Give her a saber and a horse! My heart fell. Pull some wool over her eyes? Who were we kidding? She'd eat us alive!

"Who are you boys here to see?" boomed the monumental woman about a foot above our heads.

"Alka," squeaked Dima. He was also intimidated shitless, I could tell. Damn chipmunk! Now what? Walking back through Shenely Park? We were doomed.

"Is she expecting you?"

"Not very much," replied Dima stupidly.

"I am sure she would if she knew us better!" I yelled hurriedly trying to correct the situation. Too late.

The hussar lady was already closing the door. No! We are dead! Suddenly Dima jumped to the door and stuck his foot in, preventing it from closing.

"How dare you?!" he barked.

Good start! Kick ass! Go get her, tiger!

"How dare you throwing your guests out into the cold?" Dima raged on looking straight up at the monster lady's double chin right over his face. "You are violating all the laws of hospitality! How dare you? We are *zemliaki*!"

Zemliak is kind of like a brother. The plural is *zemliaki*. It is a very interesting Slavic concept having to do with the mystical comparison of Mother Earth to a womb of a woman. Brothers are people who come from the same womb. *Zemliaki* are people who come from the same geographic location. There are all kinds of traditional laws of Russian hospitality having to do with *zemliaki* and they are usually followed. Being *zemliaki* means a lot to people. In this case Dima implied that we were all from the same country, USSR, which was stretching it quite a bit. *Zemliaki* are usually people from the same town or village.

"You are not my *zemliak*!" replied the lady noticeably taken aback. "I am from Kirovohrad!"

You know, NOBODY is ever from Kirovohrad. You could live your whole life in that country and never meet anybody from Kirovohrad. It is like Greensboro, North Carolina, for example—a rather insignificant city, although most people have heard of it. But how many people from Greensboro, North Carolina, have you ever actually met?

"Kirovohrad?!" exclaimed Dima. "I am from Kirovohrad, too! Where did you live there?"

The lady opened the door tentatively with a large grin beginning to form on her huge face. That made for a rather hopeful grin.

"We lived downtown on Lenina! And you?"

"Right there on Tovarna! Neighbors!"

"No kidding! What school did you go to?" The hussar lady asked all excited now.

"Number 14, of course!"

"Alka went to Number 14, too! Did you also have Irina Sergeyevna?"

"The math teacher? Absolutely! She sure was one mean hag! I bet Alka was glad to get rid of her!"

"Very true! Such a witch! Well, boys, come in, come in, it is cold outside! I have a table set up, Alka invited a few girlfriends over. Eat with us."

Zemliaki! The huge mama already led Dima inside with her arm around him. I tagged along. The warmth and the smell of food almost brought me to my knees. Well done, Dima! It was not a freak of fate that he made it alive to Finland through that snow. No, Sir! He was a true survivor!

A dark and creaky hallway with coats hanging on the wall brought us into a modestly furnished living room with a pre-historic looking TV set on a bookshelf. More to the point, there was a dinner table there with some incredibly awesome looking, even if a bit greasy, dinner leftovers! Then

I noticed four girls sitting around the room staring blankly at the TV set. I heard canned laughter and something about Inspector Fish. Must be the Barney Miller show. Why would young and reasonably pretty girls sit around on Friday night watching Barney Miller instead of getting laid or living it up in some other satisfying way? Beats me.

One of the girls was, uh . . . large. Yes, she was a big girl indeed. She had a pretty face and very intelligent and penetrating green eyes. The rest of her body was on the heavy side. She wore an unmistakable resemblance to Big Mama. That had to be Alka.

The girls, except Alka, glanced at us briefly and went back to watching Barney Miller. The show could not have possibly been more interesting than two new boys appearing to join them out of nowhere. Must be real man-haters. That attitude was not exactly what we needed as our purpose for being here was to pick up a girl and move in with her.

By an incredible stroke of fate, Alka was not a man-hater. That saved our skinny butts. Alka greeted us, looking straight inside me with her piercing large eyes, and told us to get something to eat. She asked no questions, expressed no surprise and did not waste any time on idle chatter or introductions. She simply told us to get something to eat. What a wise and observant person! At that time I didn't even know half of it. I just got my first glimpse of the miracle we were dealing with here.

We walked to the table. Dima exchanged some pleasantries, politely took a plate, put a bit of this and that on it and went to sit next to Alka, nibbling delicately (while salivating like a rabid dog) and introducing himself. I, on the other hand, at the sight of food immediately forgot all the manners that my mama taught me and started shoving everything edible into my mouth and then into my pockets. Some greasy potato dumplings called *zrazi*, beef cutlets, potatoes—everything! M-m-m. I closed my eyes, savoring the forgotten taste of a Ukrainian home meal. Grease was dripping down my chin. I suddenly felt something wrong and looked around. Everybody was staring at me. I hurriedly wiped my grease-dripping chin with somebody's dirty napkin, then with my coat sleeve.

"He is hungry," explained Dima, "He missed lunch today. He is a good guy really, he just can't help it, being from a very small village in Carpathian mountains . . . well, you understand."

They understood.

"What is your name?" inquired Big Mama politely.

"Misha."

"Misha, would you like me to bring you more food?"

"No, thank you very much. Sorry."

I felt terrible and quite apologetic for my unbecoming behavior. Nobody was looking at me anymore. People with bad manners are shunned in any

society. I felt really bad about all this now. And really sleepy, too. So I set down on the sofa and immediately passed out. Russians have a saying which could be loosely translated as "Seven crimes—one punishment." Since they already chalked me off as an uncivilized hillbilly, might as well get some sleep on their couch!

I was woken up by Dima's insistent nudging. He was sitting next to me on the couch. I opened my eyes and focused on the clock in the shape of a cat's face on the wall right across the room from me. It was after 1AM! I felt like a truck hit me . . . but a very-very nice truck! Horrified, I realized I was drooling. Damn, did I snore too? One thing is to just drool in public, but drooling while snoring . . . well!

The table was now pushed to the sofa where I was sleeping in sitting position. Dima was sitting next to me. Big Alka sat across the table from Dima with her elbows on the table and her chin resting on her hands. She was looking at Dima with unmistakable affection in her beautiful green eyes while Dima was bullshitting her about something funny. The TV was still on; I heard characteristic voices of Lucy and Ricky.

"Stop pushing me, Dima. What's up?"

"Can I talk to you right over there, Misha?" replied Dima politely.

"By all means." My smile was lost on Alka who kept staring at Dima adoringly. Good news.

We got up and stepped into the hallway to talk. "What did I miss?" I whispered, stretching.

"Nothing, man, we are leaving. It is just not working out."

"What do you mean? What is not working out? It has already worked out for six hours straight just now! Did you see how she was looking at you? You should have practically married her already if you were an honest man! And she has a mother too, a huge one! So what's wrong?"

"Yeah, but she is fat!"

"WHAT?!"

"I'd rather die! I will not go out with her!"

"Just a minute, shithead! It was your bright idea. We never talked about her being skinny. And nobody talked about going out, either!"

"I know but I can't! I just can't!"

"You can't? How would you like to say that with a broken jaw?"

"Screw you."

"How about a broken collar bone, then?"

"I am leaving."

Now what? Walk back in the middle of the night? For what? To freeze along the way or to freeze back home? Steal some more phone books? I had to think of something fast.

"Just one last thing before I kill you, you schmuck. I am just curious, what makes you think she is fat?"

"Of course she is fat! I can see that, I have eyes!"

"I have eyes too but I do not see her as fat. She is not a small girl, true, but she is a very pretty girl."

"I can see! She is very fat!" Dima hissed, spattering. He was really worked up about all this.

"Hm-m. Strange. We just see two different girls. Let's compare notes. Dima, is she pretty?"

"Well, yes, she has a nice face but . . ."

"Check! What color are her eyes?"

"Green."

"You noticed! Check! Do you find her eyes beautiful?"

"Yes."

"Three out of three! Now, focus! Does she have nice tits?"

"Well . . . I guess they are big . . ."

"And soft? And warm? Nice for a winter like this?" I prodded him along.

"Well, sure, but . . ."

"I take that as a yes, and that is a check again! Four out of four! Next question, ready? Is she a brunette?"

"Well, kind of, I guess, but . . ."

"And I take that as a yes again, and you have six out of six!"

"Five out of five!"

"Shit, man," I said with mock awe, staring, "You are so smart, sometimes it frightens me. Five out five it is! We are fully tracking!"

Dima was smiling now. He liked this game because he knew I was getting him closer to the actual truth here. Fat-shmat.

"One last, decisive question, Dima. It is totally subjective, just for you. Be honest. Did you or did you not enjoy talking to her for the last six hours?"

"I sure did." His answer was immediate.

"Good for you! So what's the verdict?"

"Well, I don't know. I just think she is a bit . . . she is kind of, you know . . . overweight . . . or something."

"Again?! Listen, idiot, you know that 16th century artist who used to paint naked, very fat women all the time? What was his name? Rubens?"

"Yeah? Yeah?"

"Well, he would never paint Alka naked! Never! Imagine Alka naked! Did you? She is just not fat enough! Look at her! Nothing but bones!"

Dima craned his neck and looked at Alka, then at me, incredulously, "Do you really think she is not very fat or are you just pulling my leg?"

"I really think she is a very pretty and intelligent girl, a brunette, has large accommodating tits—definitely something soft and warm for the winter—and, most importantly, she likes you. And she should! Now, are we staying or going?"

"Well . . . We'll come back tomorrow, see how it goes."

"Tomorrow? Let's stay here tonight! Do you really want to plow through the snow again half the night?"

"Sorry, can't stay here. She is a virgin. Have to respect that."

"How do you know she is a virgin? I have not seen a virgin since the 6th or 7th grade!"

"You did not grow up in Kirovohrad. Plus she told me herself. She is very real, you know? I feel like I've known her all my life. I want to be respectful to her."

"Well, a thousand corpses and a bottle of rum, man! What are you gonna do? Let's go home then."

Dima just walked straight back to Alka, leaned over, turned her face carefully, lifted it up and kissed her gently on the lips. And he was in no hurry to pull away, either! She did not expect that at all and turned dark red like a beet but didn't try to discourage him in any way. Man, they liked each other! And what was there not to like? Dima was a good looking guy with curly blond hair to conceivably run one's hand through. Alka was pretty and smart and had a few nice places of her own to run one's hand through. She was a little overweight—so what? There is a lot more to human beings than many and varied body peculiarities that we all have.

We walked home. It was a very difficult hike but it was a hell of a lot easier now after several hours of good sleep and some food! We ate everything I had in my pockets by the time we got home. I smelled like a Ukrainian restaurant, but I liked that, too.

We spent the next day preparing for our return visit to Alka—shaving and such. We decided to go early that day with bags stuffed with sports clothing and lie that we had a Phys Ed class just prior to coming over and did not have a chance to take a shower. That way we could take a hot shower too!

We made it to her house in two hours this time! Big Mama greeted Dima as a long lost son (or possibly as a much-awaited son-in-law) and nodded to me amicably but rather indifferently. I didn't mind. You can call me a mountain goat as long as you let me take a shower and give me some food!

This paradise lasted for only a few days. I regained some of my strength and moved back to my own apartment.

Then Dima came over one day, just as I was getting ready, and told me that he did not want me to visit Alka with him anymore for now. He

explained that he and Alka hit it off really well and they were going out tonight. Big Mama apparently gave Alka ten dollars for their date.

"It's okay, Dima, I can just stay home with Big Mama. I won't bite her, I promise."

"No. You can't stay there. She asked me not to have you there if I was not there. She is okay if we come together, but not just you alone. You have bad manners and all . . . you know."

Terrible disappointment tasted bitter in my throat. "Well, okay, man. I won't go around ruining things for you. Have a great date! Don't forget about me here in the trenches. You know how it goes."

"I won't, Misha. Thanks!"

He left! I stayed at my frozen apartment waiting for him to come back and save me as we agreed for what seemed like an eternity. Really it was just a few days but they were the longest and most terrible few days of my life. It was all extremely depressing. All my courage evaporated. I could not go on. There was nothing left anymore for me, no time, no space, no hope, no future. Just deadening, unchanging, overwhelming cold. I guess I was delirious or sleeping. Not sure. I saw my mother and father, my old friends, Ludmila, Nadya, Clara gently kissing me on the lips and smiling, old Fred. I did not feel any emotions at all. I was just looking at them. Then a strangely inapplicable sensation of walking woke me up.

I opened my eyes and focused laboriously. I was walking! Then I realized that Dima was walking me around the room, just dragging me, really. I mumbled, struggling to turn enough to see him, "You came back, you bum, or am I dreaming?"

"Yes, yes, I came back. Sorry, I had to break the door."

"You are sorry?! Fix the door!"

"Okay, okay, later. Right now Alka is waiting for us. She sent me to get you, I have a taxi waiting."

"She gave you money for a cab? You must have told her the whole truth then, hah?"

"Yeah. She gave me five dollars and told me to go get you immediately. Boy, was she pissed that I didn't tell her earlier about you and left you here! Can you walk?"

I tried walking but my legs did not hold me and my head was spinning something terrible. I couldn't feel my body much, either, except for some pain here and there. I think it was all frozen.

Dima half-carried me outside and loaded me into the back seat of the cab. The air inside the cab burned my cheeks and throat as if he stuck me into a convection oven.

"Why did you tell her?"

"I needed her help to get you out."

"So why didn't you tell her earlier, you schmuck? You like funerals?"

"I wanted to tell her, man, but I wasn't sure she wouldn't just kick me out too. That wouldn't help you at all."

"And what changed today?"

"We had sex last night, you know, we slept together. Alka put it up to the family council, can you believe it? I promised to marry her. Big Mama blessed us and all that. I didn't think she would kick me out anymore so I told her about you this morning. Now I think I should have done it earlier. She understands things. But I was only gone for three days! Or was it four? How did you get so messed up so fast?"

"Thanks a lot anyway. Don't worry about it. Did she give you a blow job?"

"None of your damn business, Misha! Seriously!"

This was a very good sign. Men only talk about their sexual experiences if they don't care about their women. Dima didn't talk.

We arrived at Alka's. Big Mama, Alka and Dima unloaded me from the cab, carried me into their apartment, stripped me butt naked and threw me into a bathtub full of tepid water. And left me in it! It was all very embarrassing. I was sloshing around in the tub trying to get out, but I couldn't. Kind of nightmarish, like a turtle on its back. My whole body started hurting like hell, too.

Finally my tormentors came back into the bathroom, fished me out, wrapped me in a huge towel, rubbed me vigorously all over and brought me to bed. I was objecting profusely, screaming that I usually charged good money for such things, when first Alka and then her mother rubbed my genitals with a towel but nobody was listening to me. Then Big Mama and Alka fed me delicious chicken soup with a spoon. It was very humiliating, but I drank the soup. It occurred to me at that moment that I had found new friends for life.

I spent several days there basking in attention and chicken soup and regaining my strength.

Several days later Big Mama assembled us in the kitchen for a family meeting. The agenda was limited to one subject only—money. They didn't have any. They had practically no money for the next two weeks, the Holiday Season, and then for a few days after. I could not stay here any longer. Big Mama asked us to find a real and workable solution for getting me through the winter. She left us in the kitchen to decide.

"Well, thanks a whole lot, guys. I guess it is time for me to move on."

"No!" replied Alka. "Mother wants us to find a REAL and WORKABLE solution. Freezing to death in your apartment does not fit the bill. You know what? We should find you a girlfriend! How about Rita? She is a nice girl, homely, a bit shy but . . ."

"Forget it, Alka. I can't even sit straight, I can't even talk straight right now."

"So? Look at Dima! He completely swept me off my feet, the handsome rascal, but he still can't sit straight or talk straight, either!"

Dima rolled his eyes, "Yeah, but can I fu . . . ?"

"Shut up!" Alka yelled at him. Then to me, "See what I mean?"

I just laughed. I didn't like the idea of going out with Rita and declined at first.

"What about your parents?"

"I won't go back to them like this."

Alka thought about it for a bit. We only recently met her but we already knew that when Alka was thinking, the best was to just shut up and wait quietly. She finally announced that, in her opinion, the best solution was . . . to find me a job.

"Hello? Don't you think I tried that for the last couple of month? There is no work, Alka!"

"I am sure you tried but your communication skills are vastly inadequate for the problem at hand, Misha, no offense. You have no contacts and no network. I am going to get on it right away and find you a job by this evening."

"You are just full of it, Alka! What do you want to bet that you won't find me a job?"

"Bet? How fun!" Alka clapped her chubby hands in delight, "Okay! If I lose I cook you anything you like, an incredible dinner . . . later. If you lose, you will be Dima's Best Man at our wedding! And, yes, okay, I'll also cook you an incredible dinner later. How is that?"

News about his wedding turned Dima's gaunt face even more pale. He mumbled softly with horror in his suddenly still eyes, "But I wasn't planning to get married . . . just yet . . ."

"And now you do," explained Alka in her most patient and reasonable tone of voice.

He shut up like a good boy. Honestly, he could have done a hell of a lot worse even if he were a multi-millionaire with a twelve-inch dick! And I am sure he knew that.

Not believing for a moment in Alka's ability to find me a job, I reconsidered a date with Rita. I simply could not figure out at the moment if it were ethically acceptable for me to go out on a date with a girl while harboring my own secret agenda of using her as the means of survival through the winter. I'd say that it would constitute a lie and a false pretence. Such behavior was not up to the high moral standards that I set for myself after my conversation with old Fred. However, looking at Alka and Dima, I had to consent that since they honestly liked each other and even were about

to get married, it was possible to combine various agendas into one highly satisfactory and honest arrangement.

I agreed to a date with Rita. Now, how would Alka convince Rita to have a date with me? Not my problem. Alka was supposed to organize it all, and she did. They spruced me up, Alka ironed a shirt and a pair of pants for me, even helped tuck the shirt in. Have to admit I liked the attention.

The family, having no money, scraped together five bucks for my outing. I loved these people. Unfortunately, that was only enough for coffee which limited my choice down to a couple of nice coffee dives on Murray Avenue a couple of blocks away. We would just walk there, chat, have some coffee and walk back.

The old doorbell's nasal cough indicated that the moment had come. Rita was at the door. I opened the door and my eyes popped out of my head—or so they felt.

The only thought that went through my mind as I stared at Rita was *Is this all for me?* Rita was true centerfold knock-out material. Gorgeous. The long, impeccable legs wrapped in soft leather boots that hugged her slender calves, a sexy mini-skirt and a cute short jacket, miniature waste line, ample chest, long unblemished neck and beautiful delicate face framed within gentle curves of blond hair. And those bright fun-loving eyes! And lips! Where is the homely and shy Alka's girlfriend that I was expecting? *Is this all for me?* My heart sank. I could not possibly handle such a once-in-a-life-time date at the moment.

"Misha? So nice to meet you!" She smiled brightly, her eyes sparkling most enjoyably. "It is so interesting! I have never met a real life professional race car driver in my life!" Rita chirped excitedly. We started walking toward Murray. A race car driver? Who, me? Alka, I'll kill you!

"M-m-m," I muttered noncommittally, yet significantly.

"No, really, you must tell me all about car races! You just must!"

"M-hm-m," I had to agree as she slipped her lovely hand into mine. "I'll be happy to answer all your questions at Zicky's, Rita, we are almost there." I needed a minute to think. What have I ever read about car racing? I mean, besides all car racers being rednecks who hated foreigners, especially commie Jews, such as myself.

"Zicky's?" Rita asked incredulously. "That's just coffee. No, no, Misha, let's go to a disco! Let's dance! And where is your car? I am not dressed to walk! It's too cold!"

Damn! My car was frozen stiff at the moment on the opposite side of Sheneley Park. "Sorry, Rita, but we are going to Zicky's for a cup of coffee. It is very close. It'll be fun. And you are not 18 yet, so a night club . . ."

"I am 18!" Rita stopped and stared at me. "There is something wrong here. Misha, who are you? What is the problem with taking a car? Do you even have a car?" Incredible eyes. And a smart girl, too. Gorgeous and smart—all at the same time.

"Sure I have a car. I just wanted to walk for once, you know? I am always sitting behind a wheel. Sick and tired of driving already."

"No!" Rita wouldn't budge. "I said I was cold! What kind of a gentleman are you? Show me your car. Where is it parked?"

I was getting upset. "Rita, calm down. Let me explain."

"Who are you? Why are we meeting here?"

"Rita, calm down, please, let me . . ."

"What do you want from me? How could Alka do this to me?"

"Do what to you?" she finally pissed me off. "What do I want from you? I'll tell you what I want, you spoiled brat! I want a blow job! Right now, behind that trash dumpster! Let's go!"

A sonorous slap on the face confirmed my suspicion: I was not about to get a blow job from Rita behind the dumpster. I watched her running away from me gracefully on her high heels. My slapped cheek felt hot. Well, getting ANYTHING from such a beauty was a miracle for a man in my position. I marched back to Alka's.

"Are you out of your frigging mind?" I yelled at Alka upon my return. "A homely, shy giirl?! A cup of coffee? Who? Are you crazy?!"

"Oh, Misha-dear, back already?" Alka smiled. "Look at you! Color in your cheeks! Fire in your eyes! Gr-r! Back to life! I thought you were ready to die here."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look into my eyes and tell me that you are sorry you met Rita. Come on now, I dare you!"

"Well . . . gee, Alka, but this Rita of yours . . ." I tried explaining unconvincingly.

Alka just laughed, "That definitely was the fastest relationship I've ever heard of. You two love birds really did not waste any time, did you? The entire romance from start to the bitter end lasted—what? Ten minutes? You met, you fell in love, you hit some snags, you tried to work them out, you found your differences irreconcilable and you parted ways. All in ten minutes! You are a genius. I assumed the end was bitter. Was it?"

"Kind of bitterish. And it was not a ten-minute relationship, Alka. More like five or six minutes." I was chilling out and now looking at the adventure as kind of revitalizing and comical. "Then she got all upset, slapped me on the face and ran away huffing and puffing. Why go through all the mushy stuff and sex and all that? We just went directly to the exciting conclusion."

"That's Rita for you!" Alka shook her head. "Such an airhead! Why did the silly girl slap you?"

"I told her to give me a blow job behind that dumpster a few houses down the street from here."

Alka laughed so hard, I thought she'd conk out. I just bring people joy and happiness wherever I go.

"Is that all?" Alka asked through tears when she was able to speak again. "What kind of a relationship did Rita think she was in? Where is the real commitment? Where is 'thick and thin and hail' and such?"

"I know . . . Well, thank you for your support, Alka. I am going to lick my wounds and face the big world again despite my recent devastating losses."

Dima walked in and did not look surprised to find me back so soon. He asked how it went.

"Misha told Rita to suck his you-know-what and she slapped him and ran away." Alka reported as a matter of fact.

"Silly girl! And that is modern women for you!" Dima shook his head sadly with a sigh. He didn't seem surprised at all. I didn't know if I should've been insulted or let it slide.

"Guys, I haven't always been this crazy! This was the first time I pulled anything like this, I swear!" The scoundrels just laughed.

By the evening Alka found me a job . . . in New York City. She really did! It was a remodeling job for some Israeli guy. It paid a thousand dollars cash and was supposedly a two-week job. She organized me a place to stay in New York for free, too. Alka just saved my life. Again! Profoundly grateful, I hugged Alka and kissed her warmly on the lips.

"Hey, you! Sir! Keep your hands off my wife!" yelled Dima waving his hands in the air.

I loved these guys.

Chapter Four

FAR ROCKAWAY, NEW YORK

ALKA FOUND ME a job in Manhattan and a place to stay in Far Rockaway, pretty far, across a paid bridge. I was supposed to live for free in a basement of a duplex that belonged to some Russian friend of a friend of Alka's. Basements are good because they always have hot water pipes in the ceilings that make them relatively warm. Apparently there was a bathroom, no shower. Somebody was supposed to set up a bed for me.

All three of us revived my car by pushing it down the street to Alka's friends' house where we used five or six table lamps to thaw things a little. Then we jump-started it.

Alka also managed to borrow seventy-two dollars for me from some other friends. She had friends everywhere. I thanked Dima, Alka and Big Mama and left for a 350-mile drive to New York.

I liked driving—the limbo time. You leave something behind and you are going somewhere but you are not there yet. You are in limbo, kind of recharging. Nothing is required from you, nobody is expecting anything. You just drive. I took 76 North and then 80 all the way to New York. It was a bit further this way but the drive was nicer and it allowed me to give Philadelphia a wider berth.

Having arrived in New York toward the end of the day, I went to see the owner, the Israeli guy, first. He lived in Brooklyn.

Dark, grimy, neglected squalor seemed to be the hallmark of certain parts of New York and the Boroughs. I looked around and knocked. The

door was finally opened by a sour looking, disheveled and unshaven hairy slob in a dirty unbuttoned shirt. He just looked at me and grunted. Something was very wrong.

"You must be that fucking Russian from Pittsburgh . . ."

"Yes, I am that Russian. You are not Shloyme, are you?" I asked, hopeful.

"I hate Russians. You are all criminals, you know? Convicts. Fucking Mafia. The whole fucking country is one fucked up prison. I would never allow you to work for me if it wasn't for Naum. You know Naum?"

"None of your business who I know, slob!"

"Yeah, and you are all fucking rude, too."

"And you are a Miss-fucking-Congeniality!"

"So what are you going to do about that, Russian? You fucking shut your trap if you want the job!"

"Your job, you piece of dog shit? Never! Shove it up your fat ass!"

"Do you know Naum? Ah! Doesn't matter. You'll probably quit anyway, even if you start, what am I worried about? You'll just steal something and take off!"

"Screw you!"

Believe it or not, carrying on in that particular manner we somehow reached an uneasy understanding! We sure shared some of the same views on life at the moment. Practically soul mates! By Alka's arrangements this moron was supposed to pay me half up front and half upon completion but, as a direct result of my perfect handling and unsurpassed communication skills, I did not get any money up front. Not a penny. There was no written contract, either. I just didn't feel like bringing that point up. Shloyme gave me a key and a piece of paper with typed-up address and scope of work. Then he scowled menacingly and closed the door in my face.

That scope of work contained removing a wall, replacing over 1200 square feet of hardwood flooring and all new baseboards, a bathroom remodeling, some kitchen work, a bunch of new drywall and painting of the entire house inside. Two weeks? I'd be happy to get out of there in six weeks! Or eight! How am I going to survive? I had about forty-five bucks left but I needed most of it for the bridge and gas, maybe all of it. Starving again? Is this terrible winter going to ever end?!

I drove to Far Rockaway to see my basement. It was alright as basements go. A few rats and cockroaches never rained on my parade too much. Alka's friends set up a bed in the corner for me, clean sheets, good blanket, even a night stand with a lamp and a dresser next to it! I never met the person who set it up for me but I was profoundly grateful. The kindness of strangers never ceased to amaze me. I had no idea that this was just the beginning.

I walked out of my new home to see the neighborhood. It was a Puerto Rican ghetto at the time, full of gangs, drugs, prostitutes, fires burning on sidewalks in huge drums here and there, noise and music all around and no police at all, anywhere. I walked around gawking like in a museum. I never even suspected such places existed. Wow, what a shithole! Way worse than Kiev.

Wondering around and staring that way, I ran into a guy, a Puerto Rican, who shoved me in the chest to stop me. When he had my attention, he told me to pay him two hundred bucks rent for the basement that I just moved into. I did not understand at first and explained that Alka already arranged everything so I did not have to pay any rent.

"No, man, you don't understand. You live here, you pay rent, we protect you. You don't pay, somebody kill your ass, maybe we will. Very dangerous."

"Who says it is very dangerous?"

"Pedro say."

"Oh, is he the retard I met earlier? Kind of looking like this?" I did my best imitation of a retarded person who was also a paraplegic.

The guy got offended, "Fuck you, man! You pay or no? I go back, tell Pedro."

"You do that. Tell your retard owner. See if you can remember to relay to Pedro from me that he is a blood sucking criminal parasite, and tell him to just go fuck himself. Will you remember all that or should I write it down for you, moron? Can you even read?"

"Yeah, don't worry, I remember. But you are making a mistake, man, big mistake. So easy—just pay, but no! You stupid, man!"

Yeah, sure, just pay, easy! Right! I kept walking around, taking in the extremely picturesque and unusual set up they had here, kind of like a set for a bad movie that I would never believe. Do people really get blow jobs right here on the street in parked cars? Why fall so low? Why? Why?

A small crowd of Puerto Ricans suddenly converged on me out of nowhere, about eight of them with my friend moron as their main speaker, "Yo, cabrone! Pedro want to see you!"

Well okay, if Pedro wanted to see me, he would definitely find a way to see me sooner or later. So might as well do it now and get it over with.

"Okay, cretins, lead the way."

We turned a few corners and ended up in front of a fire-barrel and a group of twenty or so Puerto Ricans milling around it, including one very pretty girl dressed like a hooker. They sure make fine looking women in that part of the world. A wiry guy with a greasy pony tail turned out to be Pedro. He approached me. The guys who brought me to him moved behind my back unobtrusively. Pedro asked, "So you refuse to pay rent and insult me in my home, hah, cabron?"

"Guess so."

"Why not just pay two hundred? You want to die? You will die, don't worry. Why you so stupid?"

"I don't have any money."

"You are white, you have a nice new car. You tell me you no have a couple hundred bucks for me and my amigos?"

"Yes. I am white and I have a car and no, I don't have any money. That's why I will live in that basement with rats and cockroaches—for free. Clear now?"

He gave me a long stare trying to decide how to take this. I guess he finally decided to get all pissed off and insulted. He turned red, suddenly pulled out a knife and started waving it in front of my face yelling something in Spanish. I found a good moment and pushed him hard with both hands. He stumbled backwards and slammed hard into the fire barrel, dropping the knife. They had a good size fire roaring in that barrel. Pedro grabbed the barrel with both hands to steady himself and burned his hands a bit. His men were laughing, although I couldn't help noticing that I was fully surrounded and watched. They looked at me with amusement. I was the entertainment for tonight. There was no animosity in their eyes but I was certain they would kill me with no hesitation if Pedro said so. The girl was meanwhile cooing in Spanish, blowing on Pedro's hands and kissing them while he was cursing loudly. He finally got a grip and walked back, looking straight into my eyes.

The moment of truth. To be honest, I could not even bring myself up to the point of giving a damn. It was such a hard winter already. I was dead tired, couldn't go back to Pittsburgh and had no idea how to make it here for a couple of month, anyway.

Pedro came over and silently stared into my eyes. His gang stopped laughing. Everybody was quiet. I said silently goodbye to the few people I loved and asked my mom to forgive me. Suddenly Pedro asked in a totally different tone of voice, "So you really no have no money, hah?"

"No, I don't."

"What's your name?"

"Michael."

"Miguel. No Michael here! Okay, Miguel?"

"Okay."

"So, Miguel, what you will eat, hah? No money, no eat."

"Don't know, Pedro. I'll come back and tell you as soon as I figure out how to eat with no money."

"Miguel, here is your problem, man, right here! You see it? This is the 20th century, man! Wake up! People no starving no more, man! I am talking to you! You hear these sounds? That's me talking to you! And you what?"

You no talking to me back, man! No communicating! You are fucked, man, you no communicate to people! You die because you no communicate! Try again. You have no money, how you will eat, hah?"

"I honestly don't know."

"And so . . . ?"

"Well . . . and . . . and . . . do you . . . I mean, could you . . . give me an advice on what to do in such a situation?"

"Help you? Si! Finally, man! You communicate! Miguel okay, Miguel communicate now!" he announced to his crew.

They were all laughing. I felt like a complete idiot. A bunch of Puerto Rican hoodlums were teaching me about life and THEY WERE RIGHT! I couldn't stand it. So now what? Pedro continued, "We are here every night, around nine, eight or ten or something. You come here, eat pizza with us. Sometimes we have other things. You like pizza?"

"Yes, Pedro, I like pizza very much."

"Okay. See Giselle here? She is a hooker, you like her? She always bring us pizza, every night. Sometime subs, you know, sandwiches. You like subs?"

"I sure do. With pickles."

"Okay. So every night! If you don't show up, man . . . We know where you live!"

"Thank you, Pedro, thank you. I will come! Listen, are there any rules I should know? I am really grateful. I don't want to accidently piss you off or something."

"Don' worry! You already pissed me off too much! You insult me, you burn my hands! It will get better now!"

I was very happy that I found so many new friends that first night in New York as I knew I had to face a new battle for survival, the new battle which was just starting—an uphill battle all the way.

I started working in Manhattan all day and eating a couple of slices of pizza every night. Sometimes there were other things to eat, even fruit. I liked these Puerto Rican gangsters very much. I have not seen anybody treating Giselle or each other with any real disrespect, the usual horsing around notwithstanding. There was definitely discipline and hierarchy in the gang. Pedro was the undisputed King, High Priest and God Almighty. He had a couple of lieutenants. Everybody was pitching in the best they could. I was a guest. I was impressed and very grateful to these bandits.

I told the guys that I was remodeling a house to survive through the winter. The Puerto Ricans solemnly nodded, glancing at each other gravely. They looked kind of like family members gathered around the bedside of their terminally ill relative. They could not imagine working for a living

but did not try to change me either. How could you help your terminally ill relative except by just making him a bit more comfortable? They were making me a bit more comfortable.

One time one of the guys, Pablito, brought me a sandwich with some special salsa and asked me if I wanted a bite. Of course I did—surprise! So he stuck his sandwich into my face and I bit as much as I could possibly bite, doing my best to kind of unhinge my jaws like a snake. So somehow his thumb got in the middle of it all and I bit him a little on the thumb.

“Oy-yya!” yelled Pablito.

Pedro saw it, came over, raised his finger like a teacher and delivered a short but passionate sermon in Spanish.

“What did he say?” I asked the guy standing next to me.

“Pedro say,” the guy replied solemnly, “If you give man a bite from your sandwich, no keep your fingers so close to the end!”

I laughed so hard, I got hiccups. Giselle came over to slap me on the back and tickle me so I stopped hiccupping. They were all laughing.

Going was rough but survivable. The work was moving along, and the owner Shloyme was surprisingly easy to work for. He was a total jerk on a personal level but at work he was not particularly picky. He even brought me his wife’s cookies a couple of times, at her request, apparently. Shloyme even offered me an advance payment of a hundred bucks once. I refused, just out of spite.

This epic struggle would just end that way, quite happily, if it weren’t for the tragedy almost at the very end—cops impounded my car. With the survival margin this thin, any minor inconvenience, such as a towed-away car, becomes a matter of life and death.

Chapter Five

THE GREAT JOURNEY

I WALKED OUT OF the house I was remodeling around 9PM. It was at the end of January or early February, over four weeks into the job. I completed the scope of work Shloyme gave me and was already working on the punch list, the last-minute corrections and touch-ups. I was sure looking forward to a really good dinner in a few days!

I went outside and walked to my car. It wasn't there! I was a bit delusional from exhaustion and starvation so my first thought was that I simply forgot where I parked. I ran around the neighborhood for a while until it became abundantly clear that the car was gone. Then I noticed a rusty street cleaning sign hiding behind a tree. It had a phone number to call. Street cleaning? Damn cops! They ruin your life but give you a phone number to call. I had no money to even make a call. This was going to hurt, I could tell already.

I found a pizzeria nearby that was open, explained the situation to the proprietor, a Romanian Jew by the name Peter, and asked him to use his phone. He started by scolding me for being so stupid. Ah, New York! People there are very special. They will not hesitate to get all over your ass for things that don't seem to be their business at all. They participate in your life that way. It is kind of charming in a hostile kind of way. Peter fit right in—he was a certified New Yorker now!

I called the number and talked to a girl at the tow place where they had my car. I learned that my Ford was there waiting for me, but I had to

pay a hundred bucks in cash to get it out. They did not accept any other form of payment because they did not trust their "customers." I did not care. I was equally screwed no matter what they didn't accept. The girl gave me the address. The place was far away, she told me to take a cab. I asked for walking directions. she just explained, laughing, that I could not walk there at night as it was way too dangerous. I thanked the girl and got directions from Peter, the pizza man.

"You must take a cab, *dum kopf*. You must." Peter insisted. "You don't know! Those places are death. You will never make it out of there alive, never!"

"Thanks, Peter, I understand. I just don't have any money for a cab and I can't wait. Besides, have you ever walked there at night?"

"Of course not! Do I look like a *mishuge* to you?" Peter snorted indignantly.

"See? Then how do you know it is death? Listening to all kinds of assholes telling you fairytales? At your age?"

"Bah! I never jumped off the Chrysler Building either! So what?"

"Goodbye Peter. Thank you for the phone."

"Here, you schmuck, take some pizza. I am crazy! What am I doing wasting good pizza on you? You won't need my pizza in the morgue!"

I thanked Peter, took the pizza, my usual survival food, and went on my way. At some point the scenery changed drastically. Broken bricks and glass and all kinds of garbage under my feet, no electricity in some areas, gaping black windows, stripped or burned cars, loud music and screaming here and there, fires burning in barrels with some weird shapes hanging around, stench of urine and defecation. Nobody paid any attention to me. I wandered around and around, very obviously lost. It was after midnight already.

Could people really live this way? Evidently so. But why? They spoke English, they had their roots here, family, friends. They were sure better off than we were when we arrived! They were just probably too tired. Like Dima and I just recently. They just gave up, that's all. Giving up is a no-no! No, sir, giving up is strictly prohibited! Verboten! Step-step! Chop-chop! Right-left! Keep moving! No giving up!

A sudden voice brought me out of my reverie.

"Hey, white boy! Come 'ere!"

There was a barrel with a fire and three middle age black dudes stumbling around it with a bottle in a brown bag that they were passing around. I came over.

"Hello," I said politely.

"Hi there, dog!" one of them replied. "What the hell white boy doing here in the middle of the night? White boys don't come here even during the day! You lost?"

"Yes, I am lost. But I am not a white boy. I am a Russian. There are whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, Russians and drunks. I am a Russian. And you?"

"I am a drunk! You are full of shit, man. You playing me!" We both laughed, "My name is Moses. I live here. Who are you?"

"My name is Michael, I am from Pittsburgh. I am walking to the tow place to get my car. Cops towed it away."

"Oh, no! Don't say! Damn cops! All the way from Pittsburgh and they what? You know, the bastards are after me from when I was born! I never did nothing! Just stand there and don't do nothin' and shit, and I go to the slammer! Were you on the inside?"

"You mean in jail?"

"Yeah, I mean in jail."

"No, never. How long did you spend on the inside, Moses?"

"Too long, man! Too long. It's bad! The food was alright, though. They feed you there, you know. You want a swig?" He offered me their bottle.

"No, thank you very much. Do you have any food on you, guys?"

"We just got this banana, man, is all. Here, take it. Right?" He looked at his friends, they nodded drunkenly. I took their banana gratefully.

"Well, okay then, thanks a whole lot, guys! Better keep going. Do you know by any chance the way to that tow place? Here is the address."

They knew where it was. I got detailed instructions that bordered on surreal. Like walk about a hundred paces that way, turn sharp left between two brick buildings, walk straight back to a chain link fence, go right till you find a hole in the fence about yea high, crawl through it, cross the concrete water drain channel, go back up on the other side, find a hole in the fence, keep holding the large tower to your 10-11 o'clock, then sharply right at a dead tree then to a burned car . . . And so it went. Then Moses wanted to hear me repeat the instructions back to them just to make sure. I eventually did that to his satisfaction. Finally he said, "Okay, man, be cool! Don't let'em give you any shit! If anybody stop you, tell'em Moses sent you! Everybody knows me here!"

I thanked Moses and his friends and started counting paces as per instructions. What do you know! Some twenty minutes later I found the damn tow place! The instructions took me straight to it.

I walked around the lot once to get a feel for it. The place was brightly lit. It consisted of a small building, and a parking lot, surrounded by a single heavy chain. The only exit was blocked by a tow truck. I saw my car parked there. The keys were in my pocket, of course.

I went inside. They had a tiny office in the corner, surrounded by bulletproof glass and a waiting area with a fake leather sofa and a coffee maker. Wow, coffee!

My inquiry regarding the car did not bring me any happiness. I had to pay a hundred dollars cash to get it out. No deals, no extensions, no exceptions. Just cash!

I poured myself some coffee and settled down, sipping my aromatic java, savoring the half-forgotten taste. Just a couple of months ago my life was totally different. Seemed like a lifetime ago. Funny how quickly things go downhill. Now I was just enjoying the coffee.

The solution was obvious. I had the car keys and my car was parked outside. I was to ram through the chain, escape to New Jersey before morning, find a place there that would lend me some money for a few days keeping my car as a collateral, get back to New York on a bus, finish the job, get paid, buy my car back and go home. The plan was not entirely bulletproof, but I couldn't think of anything better at the moment.

The time was almost 1AM. I had to get going but I really didn't want to move. The place was cozy and warm. I enjoyed the coffee. I was reluctant to leave all this warmth and comfort behind and plunge into who knows what. How pissed will the cops get? Will they chase me and shoot? Who knows. And what about ruining the front of my new car in the process?

I decided to go at exactly 2AM. Now I was just enjoying the calm before the storm.

At about 1:45 the door opened and a slightly drunk Chinese boy walked in, sporting a fifty-dollar hair cut. He was very fashionably dressed and smelled of expensive aftershave. He looked about fourteen, but with some people the age is often difficult to judge. He must have been older if he was driving a car.

"Hi!" He smiled to me and waved, "My name is Mike. What's yours?"

"Hi. My name is also Mike."

"No kidding? Isn't that incredible? We are two Mikes meet here in Harlem in the middle of the night! We are both here now, we are not somewhere else in different places! Isn't that incredible?"

"Yes, Mike, it is kind of incredible, come to think of it."

Mike told me his story. He attended a party that ran late. Per his description it was a rather kick-ass party. He liked some girl there by the name Grace and finally talked her into going to his place to listen to some music. They went out and realized that his car was towed away. Grace went home with somebody else to listen to his music instead. She was very interested in music, apparently. Mike took a cab here to wait for his brother, who was expected to bring the cash for the fine.

"My brother is rich," Mike explained. "He is a fashion designer on Fifth Avenue. What's your story?"

"Oh, a similar situation, Mike. Walked out, no car. Since I don't have any money or a brother, I will just ram through the chain and get out of town fast."

Mike got very serious. I suddenly believed that he was older than fourteen.

"Can't do that. Very bad idea, Mike. You must be from out of town, you don't know. Around here the cops will just shoot you! They will just set up spikes and a road block and shoot you dead."

"They might miss! And where do you get off, telling terrible things like that to somebody you just met? Go sit over there!"

"No, do not do it. I mean it. Just don't do it. Call somebody or something. Do something else. Do you know anybody you could call?"

"Yeah. I know an Israeli guy who hates my guts. I also know a Puerto Rican gang but I have no way of reaching them and don't want their money anyway. So here I am. Thanks and all that. Now leave me alone." He did.

Mike's brother arrived. They looked almost identical. Same excellent cloths and expensive haircuts. Mike wished me good luck, his brother paid and they walked out.

I figured I had nothing else to do here, it was 2 AM already. I walked out to the parking lot and ran into Mike. He was standing there in front of his BMW talking to his brother. Mike came to me and handed me two fifty-dollar bills!

"Here. From my brother. I told him your story. He wants you to have this."

My breath caught in my chest. I took the money and walked over to the brother. I did not even know his name. I really felt like crying.

"What is your name?" I asked Mike's brother.

"Phillip."

"Thank you very much, Phillip. Do you have a business card with your address? I will pay you back within a week or two."

"Sure, Mike, here is my business card. But I do not want you to pay me back. It's okay."

"No, I insist. I am not a Cancer Research Foundation. I do not accept donations."

Phillip and Mike laughed, and Phillip said something that finally got me weeping for real: "I am helping you simply because I can, Mike. All I want in return is that you also help people, whenever you can. Deal?"

"Deal, Phillip. I promise!"

Chapter Six

FRIENDS OF FRED

I GOT MY CAR out, finished the job and received my thousand dollars from Shloyme. I actually received more. The brute gave me a hundred bucks tip! He said I was alright for a Russian and affectionately called me a *gunif*, a “bandit” in Yiddish. Then I went to see Pedro and the gang one last time. I had spent about five weeks with them, I loved these guys.

“Hey, Pedrito!” I was so happy that I was literally dancing around. “I am done! I got my money now! I am going back to Pittsburgh! I wouldn’t have made it without your help, guys. Muchas gracias!”

“Per nada, Miguel!”

“Hey, guys,” I suddenly remembered, “I can pay you the two hundred now!”

“No, it was a pleasure, man. Come back any time and visit us!”

Pedro was happy for me. The other guys were slapping me on the back, Giselle hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. I kissed her on the lips for once to her delight.

I returned to Pittsburgh a different man and paid back the seventy-two dollars that Alka borrowed on my behalf, as the first thing. Then I went to see my parents and asked for their forgiveness. They were more than happy to grant it. It was a joyous family reunion! There was so much love around!

Dima and Alka got married. It was a traditional Jewish ceremony. Alka was the most beautiful bride in the whole world! Every woman is. I was the best man. It was a very modest but happy wedding.

Abdul returned from Syria in the spring and soon found a bride of his own, a strikingly beautiful and very outgoing Jordanian-American girl by the name Gada. She was into fashions. Alka and Gada hit it off very well and became good friends.

I started dating a wonderful girl by the name Tanya, who fit in perfectly with Alka and Gada.

When all the dust settled, later in the year, we all met for a little party at Dima's and Alka's apartment. Alka cooked up a storm! There was no room to put any more dishes on that table. We ate, drank Smirnoff vodka, talked and joked a lot and sang songs in various languages—the usual Russian party. Although of course we actually were four Ukrainian Jews, a Syrian and an American-Jordanian. There were no Russians present. But we sure had no problem having a great Russian party together!

For the first time ever I told the guys about my adventures, about Clara, Italian carabinieri, the Morgan Building, Fred, Phillip, Mosses and all the details of my recent winter experiences. I told them that I considered myself a Friend of Fred and always wanted to remain such. When I finished the story, the table was dead silent for a while except for Olga's quiet sobbing. Then Dima spoke to nobody in particular.

"I abandoned my friend to die in the snow. He broke his leg. We would've both died . . . It was just way too much. You know, the snow, the cold, the wind and all. So I just left him. He was still alive." Dima started crying. Alka came over, hugged him tightly. She was also crying. Dima continued through sobbing, muffled, into Alka's ample chest, "I will never be a Friend of Fred now!"

"Thanks for telling us, man." I replied. "You had an extremely tough decision to make there in the snow, and you made your decision. We were not there. We will not be judging you sitting here all warm and cozy and drinking vodka. That said and being true, still, you definitely left your comrade when he needed you the most there. Not because I say so, you understand? That is just what happened. But you definitely show remorse now, and you turned around as a reliable friend. That is most important. You promised to come back for me and you did. And you promised Alka you'd marry her and you did. That fully absolves you of what you did and qualifies you to be a Friend of Fred! Any other votes? All in favor raise your hand."

I raised my hand. It took some seconds but all the guys raised their hands one by one. Abdul was the last one to raise his hand, reluctantly. I know, Abdul, I know. You would never leave your friend to die in the snow. But what can we do now? How is Dima supposed to live? Have to care for the living. Thank you for reaching out to Dima, friend.

"Dima, by the power invested in us as your friends, we declare our unanimous decision that you are hereby forgiven for the death of your comrade. It's over!"

Dima was staring at me and others with wide open unbelieving eyes.

"Can you . . . ?"

"Yes, we can."

Tears were rolling down his cheeks. Alka kept hugging him and weeping. A smile started forming on Dima's face.

Abdul sighed sadly. I asked him if he also wanted to be a Friend of Fred.

"Of course I would," answered my best partner in the world. "But I probably can't, I am supposed to be a Muslim and all that."

"So what?"

"Well, I am different. Old Fred is a Christian!"

"So? How are you different? You got two dicks?"

"No, he doesn't!" yelled Gada, a bit drunk and always happy to do mischief. "Abdul, show them!"

"Well, I am sure glad we sorted that out!" I quickly closed the subject. "So, Abdul, tell me, do you usually include others in your personal plans?"

"Yes, he does!" Gada pitched in. "He is such a sweetheart!"

"Abdul, do you deliver on your promises? Do you help people when you can? Are you a decent and honest man? I'll tell you, you are an honorable person, Abdul, I am very happy I've met you. And Gada is happy, too. I think you fully qualify for the Friends of Fred Secret Society. Allah willing, of course."

Abdul nodded happily and was grinning wide now.

Tanya and Gada yelled "And me! And me!" jumping up and down and waving their hands. They also wanted to be Friends of Fred. They said they were good girls and happy to help other people. And they were! Alka was silently shaking her head. She finally said:

"Look, guys, don't you get it? EVERYBODY is a Friend of Fred! We are all basically and potentially Friends of Fred. That is the whole Secret Society! It is just EVERYBODY! Just look at the people from Misha's story. Very unlikely people were falling all over themselves trying to help him! Some of them were hardened criminals and others have never even met Misha. So here is the truth: deep down inside we are all Friends of Fred.

Amen and a thousand cheers! Let's drink to that! There is hope and there is future for us all. You know why?

Because—

DEEP DOWN INSIDE WE ARE ALL FRIENDS OF FRED!

* * *

The Moscone Center citizenship ceremony was over. I passed the test by learning the ropes, surviving, graduating and living my life for the last seven years. And I gave the sworn oath. I am now officially a Citizen!

I walk out with a spring in my step and a smile on my face. What a feeling! Bursting with pride I take out a twenty dollar bill and hand it to the very first homeless person walking by.

"You don't got no more?" is his disappointed reply.

That's right! Always striving for more!

I love this country!

* * *

PREVIEW OF THE UPCOMING SEQUEL

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

By Michael Priv

FOREWORD

EIGHTEEN YEARS AFTER

LOS ANGELES, JULY 2005

SPURRED BY ADRENALINE rush and pure desperation, I dashed to the back emergency door marked DO NOT OPEN, ALARM WILL SOUND and slammed into it. The sound of the alarm tore through the hospital calm with insane intensity. I afforded a quick glance back as I bolted out of the bellowing door. Nothing but a couple of oblivious nurses and medical equipment along the hallway walls. There was no pursuit. Yet.

Momentarily blinded by the sunlight outside, I raced across the parking lot toward the concrete wall, grabbed the top, pulled myself up and over and ran across a busy street on the other side. As a lousy runner, I wanted to put as much distance as possible between me and the expected pursuers. I had to assume that the guards, alerted by my absence and the insane hospital door alarm, would chase after me. A terrifying thought. With my heart clucking somewhere in my throat, I ran into a shoe store across the street and looked back just in time to see one of the guards clearing the wall across the street. He looked around and sprinted to his right, along the wall.

I hurriedly marched all the way through the store in long strides toward the back door, soliciting quizzical looks from a couple of Latino sales girls in attendance. I smiled at them, panting with exertion. A long time ago somebody once told me that I had a nice smile. The moment seemed right

to try it now. The first door I encountered at the back of the sales area of the store stated DO NOT ENTER in large cheerful letters. I entered. The back door read NO EXIT, ALARM WILL SOUND. It did—with now familiar ear-splitting intensity. Another parking lot, another wall. A glance back confirmed that I was not being pursued.

I ran across an overpass bridge, then along some street lined with warehouses and auto repair shops and turned into a grungy alley. Keeping at a brisk clip, I labored to get a full breath into my burning lungs. No resting on my laurels just yet. Freedom was too close to take any chances. Several turned corners later, completely out of breath, I ran into a liquor store ironically named “AA Liquors.”

“Can I use your phone, please?” I wheezed, fighting for a breath, to the middle-age, hefty blue-eyed sales lady.

“No,” curt but to the point. “Customers no phone,” she added sternly with a heavy Russian accent.

“That’s okay, then,” I replied in Russian with an attempt on a smile which probably came out tortured, “I am not a customer. I don’t want to buy anything from you. So I am okay.”

“That completely changes things! For a moment there I thought you were a customer!” The lady replied in Russian, laughing. “My name is Anna. Sure, use the phone in the back,” she waved her hand vaguely. “You are all huffing and puffing. Hey, you want some?” She handed me her bottle of Gatorade which she was drinking from and I downed the half-forgotten chemical sweetness hungrily.

“Thanks, Anna. I am Misha.”

“You are welcome, Misha. Russians must stick together and help each other, right?”

I nodded despite being a Ukrainian. Who wanted to split hairs? Good to be a Russian if you wanted a favor from a chubby, blue-eyed Russian lady by the name Anna.

I discovered a tiny office in the back with a phone on a table cluttered with papers, a bunch of loose change, torn up bags of potato chips and mangled soda cans. With shaking hands and trembling voice I placed a collect call to my parents in San Francisco.

“Hi mom, it’s me.”

Silence.

“Me who?”

“Your son, Misha.”

“Do I have a son?” mom started crying.

“You do! I just ran away.”

“What?!”

“I am out, mom!”

"How? Where . . . ? Are you okay?"

"I am okay, I am fine . . . How are you and dad?"

"Never mind that, you scoundrel! Are you in any danger? Are these Scientology bastards chasing after you?"

"Bastards? Mom, listen, there is Scientology which is good and then there is a Church of Scientology which is . . . Never mind. I am alright. I am in a liquor store in LA. They won't find me here."

"What happened?!"

"Well, as you know, I finally refused to continue working at the International Management Base, and they sent me to LA for a special rehabilitation program . . ."

"They put you in jail!"

"Well, it is not exactly . . ."

"Shut up, Misha! They threw you in jail and you escaped!"

"Well, pretty much, I suppose."

"I hate these Scientologists!"

"Mom, that's unfair. The corrupt Church of Scientology is one thing but tens of thousands of Scientologists who . . ."

"Shut up! Just shut up! Stop this nonsense! Get on a bus and come home!" mother yelled, "Or are you too brainwashed to do at least that?"

"I have no money, not a penny."

Silence.

"Okay, hang on, honey!"

Then I heard my mom yelling to my father, "He escaped from that damn prison!" It sounded as if she dropped the receiver and moved further away from the phone. In a minute my father picked up the phone, "Hey, idiot! How are you?"

"Pretty good, dad. How are you doing?"

"Better than you right now, that's for damn sure! Eighteen frigging years you gave them! Eighteen best years! You were twenty-seven when you started! And now what?!"

"Not now, dad, please."

"Okay, okay. Stay where you are. We are getting somebody to pick you up. Call me back collect in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

The line went dead.

"Who are you?" a quiet voice behind me. I turned around and found myself staring into Anna's blue eyes. How long has she been standing in that door?

"Who are you?" she asked again, wide-eyed.

Who am I? An interesting question. Who am I? A Ukrainian? A man? A Jew? A US citizen? A human being? A fool? A Scientologist? A

brainwashed victim of a hateful cult? A holy man? A soldier? A traitor? A hero? A loser? A former member of Sea Org, the elite paramilitary management corps of the Church of Scientology? A former executive, a member of the International Management of the Church? A convict? A coward? A fugitive?

I looked deep into Anna's pretty eyes and replied, "I am a friend of Fred."

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