

The Inner Workings of a Russian Samovar

“We need to make a stop to buy flowers and wine, - says Alyona tidying up her new dress, while I am starting the car, - we cannot come with our hands empty. Besides, today is Mother’s Day”.

Well, who is objecting? Am I saying anything? Why the justifications? Of course, we cannot come to Lena and Igor with our hands empty. What are we, Turks? It is not that I have something against the Turks; it is just one of these Russian sayings that became an inextricable part of every Russian. The Russians, the Ukrainians always fought the Turks. When was the last war with them? In 1877 or 1914? Now the Russians love Turkey. They go there on their vacations, preferring cheap accommodation, edible food and clean sea to the brotherly, but service-free Crimea. But the language is stubborn like a donkey, we all grew up with it (the language, of course, it is the Turks who had donkeys) and can do nothing about it. The Russian Armenians are also stubborn: they still refuse to bathe in the Turkish gentle waters. But they can afford Cypress.

As I was saying, who is objecting? I am simply wondering: flowers for the lady of the house are a must, who would argue, but wine? When did wine become mandatory as a present for the head of a Russian household? All this nonsense they stick on wine bottles: “... ” Why don’t they write, in Russian at least: “Best if served with beer”?

Well, ten years of living in this country have finally done us in. Do in Rome as Romans do. We do not have a similar idiom, of course. We say: If you live with wolves, howl like wolves. Nothing personal, really. It is just this stubborn donkey that raises its politically incorrect head and bares its yellow un-American teeth. Igor will accept the French grape compote without raising a brow, as if it were the most natural thing to do in this kind of weather. And today it is raining cats and dogs, as they say here. And we say: The weather whispers in your year: “Borrow, if you have to, but get yourself a drink”.

I park the car near Food Emporium. Alyona goes to a Korean grocery store to get “a nice bouquet of roses for Lenchka”. I enter the liquor store and buy a Merlot (again for Lenchka, I guess) and a bottle of Stolichnaya for Igoryok.

Yeah, what shall we do without suffixes, our dear little suffixes. Igoryok is still the same Igor, only with the suffix “yok” that generally makes things smaller and dearer and in this case turns him into “my good old buddy Igor”. Lenchka is his wife Lena, of course, but with “ochk” she is now “dear and little”. Our grammar schoolbooks called these suffixes “diminutive/endearing”. We have dozens of these suffixes that we insert inside the names of living creatures and lifeless things for one purpose – to make them little and dear. My typically Slavic name (unlike the Scandinavian Igor or Greek Elena) can take many of these suffixes: at school I would be called Slavik by girls (John – Johnny would be the closest analogy) and Slavka by my buddies. The difference can be quite significant: you usually play soccer or “Germans and Russians”, smoke, go to the dances or drink wine with Slavka, almost never with Slavik). Then we have the affectionate Slavochka used by the parents and close relatives (normally sisters). There is also Slavushka, resorted to by lovers.

All this can really be confusing and irritating for an American, especially considering that Slava is short for Vyacheslav, my official, full first name. Now I can understand the exasperated immigration officers on Ellis Island who would Americanize those unwieldy, weird Eastern European names. Now I do not laugh any more when my wife is addressed to as Mrs. Novikov, which to the Russian ear is the same as saying “he-woman”, and not Mrs. Novikova as she should be. And all these poor telemarketing people who call you unthinkingly and start bravely: “Hi!” And then the torture begins, the tongues get hopelessly glued to the very first syllable of an unfamiliar, though uncomplicated, name. Is this Mr. Vaya... che.. Va.. Is this Mr. No... Novai...? To all these questions I honestly, and not without a tinge of sadist satisfaction, reply: “No. No. No.” I sense their embarrassed exasperation, their internal fuming: “Why don’t you get yourself a normal name, you fuck, or get out of this country and stop causing us this aggravation!” “But it is not so hard, you arrogant fools, - I fume back, - just spare a second of your valuable time to look at it before you dial, that’s all it takes.” No – noh, vi – vee, kov – kov. Is it really more overwhelming than Geoghegan or Colquhoun...?

The telemarketing people are not alone. Almost daily you get all this junk mail addressed to neatly printed Viachespak, Novi Koh, Novi Korr. In the end, you simply get tired and give in. You sacrifice your first and last name at the altar of convenience and conformism by changing your mantra from “no” to “yes” and asking to never call again. Your only consolation is the integrity of the patronymic that is not mentioned here in vain.

“So, what have you bought there?” – asks Alyona looking at two long shapes inside a black plastic bag. “Wine”. “And?” “And a dear little bottle of good old vodka”. Vodochka, that is.

“By the way, - says Alyona, - there will be an American tonight at the Solovievs’. Lenchka’s invited her friend Sveta, and she will bring her husband who is American.

So...”

“So?”

“So, please go easy on him.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Just have some small talk. No lectures on a history of the Russian people or stuff like that. Nobody needs things like that.”

“Things like what?”

“Like the differences between the Russian military drill and the American one that you were trying to explain last time at the Kolesnikovs’.”

“There are no such things. There are the Prussian and the British drills, and the rest are the derivatives.”

“Are you trying to impress me now? Spare me, please. I just want everyone to have fun.”

“Last time was not fun?”

“Maybe for you only. You were marching in the backyard at least for half an hour in front of that nice American couple who were too polite to tell you to march to hell.”

At least, they learnt something new. I am not saying this aloud. I know all my wife’s cues: people do not come to parties to learn something new, I should give up my

stupid self-imposed mission to propagate truth about the Russian people, etc... And I should go easy on vodka, of course.

It is pouring. We are driving up to Igor's two-storied nice little house. (Now here is a question: house in Russian is "dom"; so what are we driving to? Right! Igor's two-storied domik! You see, you are really getting a hang of it!) I can barely see Igor's massive silhouette blurred by the water running down the screen door glass. Igor may look menacing to a stranger: big arms, broad shoulders, bull's neck, bald head. But there is a gentle heart in this body of a bouncer. Lenochka is clinging to his muscular arm like a thin-stemmed edelweiss on the windward slope of a steep rock. We enter. Igor is wearing an apron: he is making lamb shashlyk (shishkibab). The table can barely hold the plentitude of delicatessen heaped upon it: smoked salmon, sturgeon, caviar, various salads, herring with onions, big frost-covered nice little bottles of vodka... The rest of the guests are to come in about an hour. By that time I am supposed to bring our son Alexey from a restaurant in Dobbs Ferry where he is celebrating his friend's bar mitsva.

"Have you had your two drinks? – asks Igor while I am going to the car. "You know that you are not allowed to drive in this country without having two drinks first?" I return to the house and we take a couple of shots.

What Igor said is our private joke. But it is a half joke, really. A driver in this country is allowed two drinks. Probably, it is a very reasonable rule, besides being a very humane one. But to allow something to a Russian means to make it mandatory. "One pair of shoes per person" – a notice would say in a soviet department store. "Two bottles per two hands!" – a saleswoman would yell at a liquor store. How could you let those happy occasions slip by? Or maybe the Russians misinterpret the rule because of their naïveté? "You are allowed to leave the country", they are told now, and the authorities do not know how to stop the exodus. No wonder a Russian driver in this country simply must have his two drinks before getting behind the wheel. In order to be allowed to drive.

The rain is not letting up. The wipers are hardly coping. Some jerk cuts in right in front of me without any warning. The water from under his car floods my windshield. I do not feel any resentment, any road rage. Calmly and properly, I change lanes, pass the offending car on the right and get in front of it. Angry honking and flashing the lights behind. Why don't we, the Russians, get afflicted with this road rage, I wonder? Probably, because we don't have any roads back there. Or maybe because of the two mandatory drinks... OK, OK, you don't like my butt, I'll go back to the right lane, no problem. I change lanes, accelerate and lose the guy.

Bar mitsva, bar mitsva, I am going to pick up my son at his friend's bar mitsva. Who could have thought only 10 years ago that I would ever pronounce these words let alone know their meaning? To be born a Jew was the worst possible luck where I was growing up. Not that we had many of them in our coal miners' city. In our class of about 35 there was one lonesome evrei (Russian for Jew), Yanovski, who was supposed to be beaten up from time to time after classes. "To teach him to love the Motherland", as the popular saying went. But he was a smart guy, he somehow would always evade the patriotic education, and our just wrath would fall on our own only Armenian, Stepaniantz. He had a weak heart, poor thing, and was not as agile as his Jewish counterpart. Is he

alive now? Did we contribute to his premature death? They never protested, by the way, never told the teachers, fearing revenge which would be much worse than the regular half-hearted and patronizing beatings that were executed more out of a sense of civic duty than of ethnic intolerance. After all, they also belonged to the “new historical entity – the Soviet people”, they just lacked understanding of that important fact. But really, is Stepaniantz still living? If he were, and somehow found and shot me, I would understand. Or did we kill him? Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like at our school if we had had black kids. I did not wonder then, though, we felt very sorry for them and even indignant at the way American racist capitalists treated their former slaves. There was this old movie “Circus” where ...

But the road, I should concentrate on the road. I really cannot see it any more, it's all water. There will be accidents. Surprisingly, the denizens of this automobile country are very bad drivers. As soon as it starts to rain or snow, they hurry to crash into something. It may look like something psychological, like the extreme form of non-acceptance of bad weather, but it's not. They are just bad drivers. Maybe they even know it, and hence the road rage. But I am reading too much into this.

I am floating. The road which slopes down and up looks like a heaving sea, and I sink and soar accordingly. I like the rises better, it is like surfing up the wave to its crest. Soon, soon, I shall be there, I only have to pick up Alyosha from the bar mitsva. I am at the beginning of this sweet curve, I am floating...

No, I am being stopped. The police siren and lights behind my car are so sudden, I can develop a stutter for life. One might think they caught an international terrorist. The cop is a young chubby fellow with an acne-covered face. I lower the window. What can I do for you, officer? I am all politeness. I am all ears, as they say. And he is all pimples. I am disgusted with my own thoughts. Democracy has made me brazen. Had I been stopped in my own country, I would have already crawled out of the car and rolled over begging for forgiveness and hoping that I have enough money to bribe the “traffic inspector”. “Stopping is for speeding”. He is a nice guy, actually. His name is Kowalsky, one of the most common Polish last names. In Ukraine it is Kowalenko, in Russia – Kuznetzov, here – Smith. For it does mean “a smith”, a most respectable profession of the past. Does Mr. Kowalski know about this? Should I greet him in Polish? Should I tell him that he should not be misled by my Russian last name and that I am virtually his compatriot because my grandmother was Polish, and that she and all her relatives, except her brother Napoleon who distinguished himself fighting in the Red Army, were severely persecuted just for being Polish? I am the wrong man to take revenge on for Kozelsk and the Warsaw uprising. Matka Boska Chenstokhowska! I completely forgot that I am Ukrainian by nationality and have the passport to prove it. There was a time when we, the Ukrainians, were loyal subjects of the Polish King. But then I'd better keep my mouth shut given all the bad blood (and there was lots of it) between the Poles and the Ukrainian Cossacks.

In any case, I detect no recognition in Kowalski's eyes scanning my typical Russian last name. I may just as well be Razafindrabi from Antananarivu for this impartial civil servant. He is probably totally Americanized, and I have nothing to fear, it

being well known that people born in this country do not possess that particular part of the brain which is responsible for the accumulation and storage of geographic data. Rather, the part itself is there but it serves some different, probably more important function. And they cannot help it, like in the case of bad driving. I surrounded my younger son, Alyosha, with maps and globes, but to no avail. We would come back from Ukraine every summer, and he would say to his friends at lower school in the Bronx that he had been to Russia. Which is not bad, not bad at all, but even that took years. And he was trying very hard (he was eager to please me at that time). But eventually I quit trying seeing that I only confuse him more and more. I remember the day when I understood that. We were in Lindhurst Park, I pointed at the US flag on the roof of a building and asked what country that belonged to. I am certain that he knew the answer (he was about 7 at the time), but he suspected a catch in each of my questions and said: "Russia?" I simply smiled. Not knowing that several years after I would say: "Right".

Mr. Kowalski has taken ages to write a ticket. And what an expensive ticket it is! But I am determined not let it spoil my happy upward curve to the very crest tonight.

Here is the restaurant. It has something of Great Gatsby: colonnade, fountains, terrace with dramatic views of the Hudson, a spacious patio.

Great Gatsby evaporates when I get inside: I see tables scattered around a large room, children and even some grown-ups sitting or lying on the floor (why are so attracted to the floor in this country, really, I am not generalizing, haven't you noticed, especially in schools where kids have plenty of chairs that they prefer, whenever they can, to that beckoning floor; is it because they have a difficulty in coping with gravity, or is the sitting-on-the floor dear to them as one of the few vestiges of democracy and freedom?); I hear music which is so familiar, unbelievable, it is "The Heart", the best soviet prewar tango performed by Utesov, a star of the 30-s and 40-s from Odessa, whose hoarse voice was as popular as the heavy Georgian accent of the Great Leader and was as soviet as a Kalashnikov rifle. Well, on a second thought, there is nothing unbelievable about it: the bar mitzvah boy has a Jewish mother from Poland, her relatives, though also Jewish, all bear the distinctive soviet "seal of doom" on their faces, they really stand out, sticking to one another, having the most vodka bottles on their tables and hiding their cigarettes inside their fists (to avoid being seen and shot by the Germans, probably).

"My heart, you do not want any rest,
My heart, how good it is to live ,
My heart, how good it is that you are the way you are,
Thank you, my heart, that you can love so."

"The Poles" have Russian vodka on their tables. Well, it is always satisfying to see connoisseurs. Actually, Poles invented vodka, came up with the name, but Russians perfected the drink by using rye, while Poles stuck to their potatoes making their Vyborova (Choice vodka) unfit for human consumption.

After telling Alyosha to get ready to leave and covering myself with shame showing off the little Polish I knew to Danuta, the bar mitzvah boy's mother (Do you remember this song, Danuta: Ah, hahary zhion, vodke z nami pion... The song is obscene, Danuta nods and looks at me with pity, I feel such a brute), I go out to admire the Great Gatsby view. There is a man and a woman talking loudly to each other near the entrance. I try my best not to overhear their conversation but fail.

So, you are just back from Europe, you said?

Yes, from Germany, actually.

So, how was it there?

Oh, I loved it, absolutely loved it, but now, with this war, you know...

Oh, you mean in Bosnia? (The NATO was bombing Serbia at that time.)

Yes, it is so horrible!

And how did you like the Germans?

Oh, wonderful people, absolutely wonderful!

And they are all blond.

Blond? Hum, I did not get this impression, I do not think they are all blond.

Well, they were when I was there, it was a long time ago...

Alyosha is finally coming out. So is the sun. Things brighten up.

When we arrive at Igor's place, all the guests are already there. The American turns out to be a nice guy actually, of Jewish/Hungarian extraction. He came with his Russian wife, Lena's friend, and her mother. The American is very excited because his wife told him that Igor would make tea using a real Russian samovar. By the way he handles the blini and the caviar, I conclude that he has had some practice. Yet he still has a lot of questions about Russia, and some things look mysterious to him (maybe this is why he is still keeping his Russian wife).

Well, it's always been a mystery to me, says he, sipping red wine and watching me and Igor gulping our shots of Stolichnaya, how you, Russians, can drink vodka and like it?

I reply that the problem is not with vodka (if it's real, of course, not Vyborova or some Katya or Natasha from Latin America), the problem is with the Americans, and with all Westerners for that matter, who do not know how to drink vodka correctly.

I see genuine interest.

"You are used to wine and cocktails. You are used to sip. Sipping is a no-no with vodka. Only drunks sip vodka in our country, for greater intoxicating effect. They also pour vodka on a soup plate, soak pieces of bread with it and eat them with a spoon. The consequences are almost deadly. Vodka is almost tasteless and odorless. It must be very cold and must be virtually thrown inside the throat. This way it misses the taste buds in the mouth and lands right inside your stomach. Drinking it this way, you do not really feel any taste and do not get drunk too soon. So, no sipping, only gulping. And no mixing, of course, no spoiling the good product."

I perform an appropriate demonstration. Igor joins with me.

The second important thing: food. Always eat after gulping. Something fatty and healthy, like lard.

Now besides genuine interest, I read genuine horror in the American eyes. Oh, he has a long way to go, but the wife will be useless in this case.

Lard? But it is just fat!

Yes, it is just that, but they go together quite well, vodka and lard. Lard lines your stomach and prevents it from burning and you from getting drunk too soon (so that you could have an intelligent conversation with your companions). In its turn, vodka dissolves cholesterol and keeps your heart healthy.

Another demonstration follows.

I see disbelief. I must try it, says the American. I strongly recommend against it.

“It is too late now. You should have started much earlier, in the times of Ivan the Terrible who introduced vodka and allowed pubs in Russia”.

I am not being sincere. I am not even sure that it was Ivan the Terrible who started to get the Russian population on that hook. Maybe, it was Ivan the Horrible, or Peter the Loathsome, or Vladimir the Hideous, or Mikhail the Foolish, or Boris the Ludicrous. I just do not want him to try. He is a nice fellow, really, and I already had this unfortunate experience with Ricardo, my Puerto Rican landlord, my first landlord in this country....

It was a nice two bedroom apartment. On the evening we moved in there, we invited Ricardo and his wife Nancy to come down (they lived upstairs) to celebrate the event. Ricardo turned out to be a very handsome man. His posture and gestures showed that he realized his own significance (he was a psychiatrist). At that time I was not yet familiar with the concept of macho. Ricardo brought his younger son who was seven years old. The son was also very handsome and extremely well-groomed. I had never seen a more immaculate haircut: it looked as if each hair on his head had been individually trimmed and carefully placed in its own place.

While the three of us were sitting at the table and talking about the usual – perestroika, nukes and Gorbachev (at the time I had not yet given up my attempts to convince “foreigners” that Misha was a fake and an idiot), Nancy was trying to talk to Alyona in the kitchen. She was doing a very good job, by the way. She understood very quickly that though Alyona knew quite many words in English, she had difficulty in recognizing them in actual conversation. So Nancy spoke slowly and distinctly. Mitya, who was 4 years old and our only son at the time, was not involved in any way in the celebration. Indifferently, he was watching TV cartoons, being in the state of stupor that would continue for some time. He was very confused then, and in the kindergarten he would mostly weep. I think he feared and resented the inevitability to learn everything anew only after having begun to get his bearings in his native Kharkov. I must give Mitya credit: his inner resistance would never really break.

I asked Ricardo’s son about games he and his friends played. Not video games, but the games you play in the street.

- You do not play with your friends in the street here?

- No, I do not have many friends here, but back in Puerto Rico we sometimes play “cowboys and robbers”.

- Oh, we had a similar game in Russia – “Cossacks and brigands”. But mostly we played “Russians and Germans”. Don’t you have anything like this – “Americans and Germans”, for instance, where everyone would want to be an American in order to kill Germans? No? Interesting...

For me, it was the time of euphoria, everything was new and interesting.

Naturally, vodka was on the table. The conversation, bound to become typical, began. How can you, Russians, like vodka. It is not even tasteful... The appropriate explanation with demonstration followed. Ricardo could not but take it as a personal challenge. He gulped down a shot and put a good face to it. Caviar helped. I was very content. The good old Russian rule was upheld: to show respect and to establish good relations, especially with people you may depend on, you must “stand a bottle” and zakuska (food to go with vodka).

Then very good four years followed. Nancy turned out to be a very nice woman, she taught us many things about life in America. She would willingly help us to adapt to the new reality, readily and patiently communicate with Alyona trying to alleviate her struggle with the English language. They actually became good friends. She would join in our joy when Alyosha came into being.

Nancy was really very nice. Some day I should write her a letter.

The relations became tense in the 4th year, after Ricardo let the apartment to a young married couple of his co-islanders. They were remarkably well-groomed and were planning to become parents, for which they needed absolute peace and quite. Alyosha had just mastered the use of his feet and was test driving them every waking moment. Which disrupted the process of preparation for parenthood. The complaining began. Poor Nancy. After having been prepped by Ricardo, she would come to us, embarrassed, and mumble something about Alyosha who was breaking the concentration on the preparation downstairs. Finally, we decided to move.

But before that there was the carpet thing, which, as it turned out later, aggravated the noise situation.

Our apartment had the wall-to-wall carpeting that was installed immediately after the surrender of Nazi Germany. Needless to say, it was impregnated with the dirt and smell of several generations. No matter how often we washed it, the carpet remained dirty and stinky. In summers, it would suffocate us, especially Alyosha, to whom it was particularly close. Finally, I asked Nancy to allow me to remove the smelly relic. After a pause, she agreed.

We did it together with Igoryok on a balmy July day, adding our sweat (the lease provided for air conditioning in the bedrooms only) to the several cultural layers already contained in the carpet. The hardwood we revealed underneath blinded us with the shining virginity of its lacquer. It had never been soiled by a human sole. “When the original owner first saw it, he must have been so struck by its beauty that he immediately ordered to cover it”, said I to Nancy who did not seem as enthusiastic as we were and would cast nostalgic glances at the heap of the rotten fabric.

We moved out in January. On a bitterly cold evening, we came to see them for the last time with flowers and a little nice bottle of vodka. They were in our former apartment.

It was Ricardo who spoke. He said, or rather blurted out that they could not return the deposit because of the losses we caused them. I was so taken aback that I barely followed him. The word “carpet” was mentioned more than once. I embarrassed myself by saying something ugly. Alyona put the flowers on the table and left the room without saying a word. In the doorway, I turned back and saw tears in Nancy’s eyes.

The letter from Nancy was strictly business and nothing personal. It explained in minute detail the damage I made to the sound insulation by removing the carpet, the costs borne by Ricardo and herself to have the floor re-carpeted, as well as the losses they incurred in the form of the rent they did not receive from the tenants downstairs who also had to move out because of the lack of the said sound insulation. The strictly-business-nothing-personal bull was emphasized. The biggest surprise awaited me at the end. It was a phrase written en passant: “By the way, as a result of your “lesson” when you showed Ricardo how to drink vodka, he developed a chronic stomach condition for which he has to take medication regularly.”

I wrote an indignant reply which was strictly personal.

“Is this a Russian samovar?” The American is impressed. No wonder. The contraption looks like Stephenson’s steam locomotive: it has a long chimney attached to a brass barrel with a built-in furnace. The furnace is fed with wood. Igor has ordered special cut-to-size pine splinters that produce a very pleasant aroma. The shining machine looks very fire hazardous and is wisely placed away from the house, in the backyard.

“So, this what the Russians make their tea with? How does it work?”

A very likable fellow, really, this American.

“First, you put those splinters in and start a fire. In old times, they used a high boot to fan the flame.”

“Really?”

“Yes, they would remove the chimney, put the boot upside down so that it would cover the hole on the top and pump the boot as if it were bellows”.

“Really?”

Igor does not have to go to such extremes. The fire starts quickly. Absorbed by the process of kindling, however, Igor gets too close to the hole on the top to which the chimney has not been attached yet. “Watch your head!” I shout, but it is too late. Igor utters a stream of horrible Russian curses. The top of his bald head is very pink. I try to console him: “It’s good that you are bald”.

We go into the house to take a couple of shots in order to kill the pain. The American drinks red wine. We return to the patio.

“Well, it is a lot of work”, remarks the American, now looking at the samovar apprehensively. Igor attaches the chimney which immediately starts emitting a steady stream of dense smoke. Igor looks inside the furnace again and coughs intensely. His head has now turned quite red. The entire process looks now not only labor intensive, but also painful.

“OK, it seems to be going well”, says Igor. “We can go in now and have a drink”.

“So, who exactly were the Cossacks?”

I love the guy, really. But shame on his wife for not covering the basics. On the other hand, maybe this is why he is still keeping her.

I start from the beginning, i.e. from Ukrainian Cossacks, free people who formed a sort of knight order on islands in the Dnepr river. Their primary aim was to protect the Ukrainian population from the Crimean Tartars. It was a real republic. All leaders were elected by a majority for a limited period of time. Cossacks would not only repel the Tartars, but also conduct raids into the Crimea or – across the Black Sea – into Turkey to release Ukrainian prisoners and to loot. Occasionally, they would fight the Poles or the Russians. Well, they had a glorious and long history which I had to cut short since shashlyks (the Caucasian for shish kebabs) are brought in and serious eating commences.

“So, to make the long story short, when Ukraine became, by hook or by crook, a part of Russia, the Cossacks’ order was destroyed. The Cossacks were transformed into a separate regiment of the Tsarist army and eventually moved closer to the Caucasus to watch the border. There were also Russian Cossacks, but they had a different spelling – Kazaks (not to be confused with the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan, of course, though all three words have the same Turk origin).”

I sense that I am beginning to lose my American, both the person and the language. I’d better wrap it up. “They lived on the outskirts of Great Russia –the Don River, the Ural Mountains, the Amur River. Though they were free people (as opposed to serfs), they were actually the Tsar’s watchdogs”...

The American absorbs my trivia as a sponge does froth. It is only good men like him who can be interested in such absolutely unnecessary and useless information. But duty calls. We return to the backyard to check on the samovar.

“When do you add tea?”

“We don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope.”

“You mean you do not actually put tea into the samovar?”

“Then how does it make tea?”

“It does not. It is just for boiling water.”

“Really?”

Yep.

Just for boiling water? The American looks dumbfounded. A long silence ensues. Igor looks at the American, signs and pours. It is the American who finally breaks the silence.

“Why do the Russians make everything complicated?” He sounds weak and depressed. “I mean even little, simple things? Why has everything to be difficult and painful? So... so...” His voice now becomes stronger and tinged with despair. “So Dostoevsky? It’s like his books where even small talk is not really small. To discuss the simplest things, some trifle, family councils are gathered...” The American looks back at his wife engaged in a merry conversation with Lenochnka. Igor looks at the American, touches gingerly his glaring pate, sighs and pours.

“ So, we simply boil the water here, take it inside and make tea as we always do?”

“Yep.” My poor good American, so naïvely hopeful of a miracle, so stubbornly unwilling to accept the cruel reality...

“In a tea pot, like the British do?”

“Yep.”

A silence