

The Inner Workings of a Russian Samovar

"We need to stop for flowers and wine," says Alyona, smoothing her new dress while I start the car. "We can't arrive with empty hands. Besides, today is Mother's Day."

Well, who's objecting? Am I saying anything? Why the justifications? Of course we can't come to Lena and Igor with empty hands. What are we, Turks? It's not that I have anything against Turks; it's just one of those Russian sayings that became an inextricable part of every Russian. Russians and Ukrainians were always fighting the Turks. When was the last war with them? 1877? 1914? Now Russians love Turkey. They go there on their vacations, preferring cheap accommodation, edible food and a clean sea to the brotherly but service-free Crimea. But the language is stubborn as a donkey; we all grew up with it (the language, of course — it was the Turks who had the donkeys) and there is nothing to be done. Russian Armenians are stubborn too: they still refuse to bathe in Turkey's gentle waters. But they can afford Cyprus.

As I was saying, who's 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 gift for the head of a Russian household? And all that nonsense they stick on the bottles: "Elegant, crisp and refreshing, with a delicately floral aroma and flavors of citrus, apple and pear, it is best enjoyed well chilled." Why don't they write, in Russian at least: "Best enjoyed with beer"?

Ten years in this country have finally done us in. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. We don't have a similar idiom, of course. We say: if you live with wolves, howl like a wolf. Nothing personal, really. It's just that stubborn donkey raising its politically incorrect head and baring its yellow un-American teeth. Igor will accept the French grape compote without lifting an eyebrow, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be handed a bottle of it in this kind of weather.

And today it is raining cats and dogs, as they say here. As we say there: the weather whispers in your ear, "Borrow if you have to, but get yourself a drink."

I park near the Food Emporium. Alyona goes off to a Korean grocery for "a nice bouquet of roses for Lenchka." I go into the liquor store and buy a Merlot (again for Lenchka, I assume) and a bottle of Stolichnaya for Igoryok.

Yes, what would we do without our suffixes, our dear little suffixes? Igoryok is the same Igor, only with the suffix *-yok*, which 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 becomes dear and little. Our grammar books called these suffixes diminutive-endearing. We have dozens of them, and we push them 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 the Greek Elena) can take a good many: at school I was Slavik to the girls (John-Johnny is the closest analogy) and Slavka to my friends. The difference is not trivial. You play soccer or Germans-and-Russians with Slavka, you smoke with him, you go to dances and

drink wine with him — almost never with Slavik. Then there is the affectionate Slavochka, used by parents and close relatives, normally sisters. And there is Slavushka, which lovers resort to.

All of this can be confusing and irritating for an American, especially considering that Slava is short for Vyacheslav, my official, full first name. I can understand now those exasperated immigration officers on Ellis Island who Americanized the unwieldy, weird Eastern European names. I no longer laugh when my wife is addressed as Mrs. Novikov, which to a Russian ear is the same as saying "he-woman," instead of Mrs. Novikova, as it should be. And then there are the telemarketers, who dial without thinking and start out bravely: "Hi!" After which the torture begins, the tongue glued hopelessly to the first syllable of an unfamiliar though uncomplicated name. *Is this Mr. Vya... che... Va... Is this Mr. No... Novai...?* To all of which I reply honestly, and not without a tinge of sadistic satisfaction: "No. No. No." I can feel their embarrassed fury, the internal fuming: *Why don't you get yourself a normal name, you asshole, or get out of this country and stop causing us this aggravation.* "But it isn't 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 telemarketers are not alone. Almost daily you get junk mail addressed, in neat print, to Viachespak, to Novi Koh, to Novi Korr. In the end you simply get tired and give in. You sacrifice your first and last name on the altar of convenience and conformism, changing your mantra from "no" to "yes" and asking them never to call again. Your only consolation is the integrity of the patronymic (Anatolievich), which is not mentioned here in vain.

"So, what did you buy?" asks Alyona, looking at the two long shapes in the black plastic bag.

"Wine."

"And?"

"And a dear little bottle of good old vodka." Vodochka, that is.

"By the way," says Alyona, "there'll be an American tonight at the Solovievs'. Lenchka invited her friend Sveta, and Sveta's bringing her husband, who's American. So..."

"So?"

"So go easy on him."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Small talk. No lectures on the history of the Russian people or anything like that. Nobody needs that."

"Like what?"

"Like the difference between the Russian military drill and the American one that you were explaining last time at the Kolesnikovs'."

"There is no such thing. There is the Prussian drill and the British drill, and everything else is derivative."

"Are you trying to impress me now? Spare me. I just want everyone to have fun."

"Last time wasn't fun?"

"For you, maybe. You were marching around the backyard 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 learned something new. I don't say it out loud. I know all my wife's cues: people don't come to parties to learn something new, I should give up my stupid self-imposed mission to propagate the truth about the Russian people, and so on. And I should go easy on the vodka, of course.

Besides, there may be no need for my services tonight. The guests are to be treated to tea made in a samovar, that great Russian invention, a brand name as famous as matryoshka or balalaika. A gift from Igor's mother-in-law, it is not a cheap modern electric substitute but the real McCoy — or should I say the real Ivan the Terrible, the real Peter the Great, the real Rasputin? — fueled by firewood.

It is pouring. We drive up to Igor's nice little two-story house. (Now here is a question: house in Russian is *dom*, so what are we driving up to? Right — Igor's two-story *domik*. You see, you're getting the hang of it.) I can barely make out Igor's massive silhouette, blurred by the water running down the glass of the screen door. Igor can look menacing to a stranger: big arms, broad shoulders, bull neck, bald head. But there is a gentle heart inside that bouncer's body. Lenochnka clings to his muscular arm like a thin-stemmed edelweiss on the windward face of a cliff. We go in. Igor is wearing an apron; he is making lamb shashlik. The table can barely hold the spread heaped on it: smoked salmon, sturgeon, caviar, salads of every kind, herring with onions, frost-covered little bottles of vodka. The rest of the guests are due in an hour. By then I am supposed to have collected our son Alexey from a restaurant in Dobbs Ferry, where he is celebrating a friend's bar mitzvah.

"Have you had your two drinks?" asks Igor as I head for the car. "You know you're not allowed to drive in this country without two drinks first."

I come back inside and we take a couple of shots.

What Igor said is our private joke, but it is only half a joke. A driver in this country is permitted two drinks. Probably a very reasonable rule, and a humane one besides. But to permit something to a Russian is to make it compulsory. *One pair of shoes per customer*, a notice would say in a

Soviet department store. *Two bottles per two hands!* a saleswoman would shout in a liquor store. How could you let such an occasion slip by? Or perhaps Russians misread the rule out of sheer naïveté. *You are allowed to leave the country*, they are told now, and the authorities cannot work out how to stop the exodus. No wonder a Russian driver here 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 can hardly cope. Some idiot cuts in front of me without warning and the water from under his car floods my windshield. I feel no resentment, no road rage. Calmly and correctly, I change lanes, pass him on the right and get in front of him. Angry honking behind me, flashing lights. Why is it that Russians are never afflicted with road rage? Probably because we have no roads back there. Or because of the two mandatory drinks. All right, all right, you don't like my rear bumper, I'll go back to the right lane, no problem. I change lanes, accelerate and lose him.

Bar mitzvah, bar mitzvah. I am on my way to pick up my son from his friend's bar mitzvah. Who would have thought, ten years ago, that I would ever pronounce these words, let alone know what they meant? To be born a Jew was the worst luck possible where I grew up. Not that we had many of them in our coal-mining city. In our class of thirty-five there was one lonesome *evrei*, Yanovsky, who was supposed to be beaten up from time to time after school. To teach him to love the Motherland, as the saying went. But he was a clever boy and always managed to evade his patriotic education, so our righteous wrath would fall instead on our only Armenian, Stepaniantz. He had a weak heart, poor thing, and was not as nimble as his Jewish counterpart. Is he alive now? Did we contribute to his early death? Neither of them ever complained, by the way, never told the teachers, fearing a revenge far worse than those regular half-hearted, patronizing beatings, which were administered more out of a sense of civic duty than out of ethnic hatred. After all, they too belonged to that "new historical entity, the Soviet people." They simply failed to grasp the importance of the fact. But really — is Stepaniantz still living? If he were, and if he somehow found me and shot me, I would understand. Or did we kill him? Sometimes I wonder what our school would have been like if we had had black children in it. I did not wonder then. We felt very sorry for them, and indignant at the way American racist capitalists treated their former slaves. There was that old film, *The Circus*, where...

But the road. I should be concentrating on the road. I can hardly see it any more; it is all water. There will be accidents. Surprisingly, the inhabitants of this automotive country are very bad drivers. The moment it starts to rain or snow they hurry to crash into something. It may look psychological, an extreme form of refusing to accept bad weather, but it isn't. They are simply bad drivers. Perhaps they even know it, and hence the road rage. But I am reading too much into this.

I am floating. The road dips and rises like a heaving sea, and I sink and soar with it. I prefer the rises; it is like surfing up a wave toward the crest. Soon, soon I'll be there, I only have to pick up Alyosha from the bar mitzvah. I am at the beginning of this sweet curve, I am floating...

No. I am being stopped. The siren and the lights behind me are so sudden I could develop a stutter for life. One might think they had caught an international terrorist. The cop is a chubby young 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 here. 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 already have crawled out of the car and rolled onto my back begging forgiveness and hoping I had enough cash to bribe the traffic inspector.

"Stopped you for speeding." He's a decent guy, actually. His name is Kowalski, one of the most common Polish surnames. In Ukraine it's Kovalenko, in Russia Kuznetsov, here Smith. It means *smith*, a most respectable profession of the past. Does Mr. Kowalski know this? Should I greet him in Polish? Should I tell him that he shouldn't be misled by my Russian surname, that I am practically his compatriot, that my grandmother was Polish and that she and all her relatives — except her brother Napoleon, who distinguished himself fighting in the Red Army — were persecuted for the sole crime of being Polish? I am the wrong man to take revenge on for Kozelsk and the Warsaw Uprising. *Matka Boska Częstochowska!* I have completely forgotten that I am Ukrainian by nationality and have the passport to prove it. There was a time when we Ukrainians were loyal subjects of the Polish king. Then again, I had better keep my mouth shut, given all the bad blood — and there was a great deal of it — between the Poles and the Ukrainian Cossacks.

In any case, I detect no flicker of recognition in Kowalski's eyes as they scan my typical Russian surname. I might as well be Razafindrabe from Antananarivo as far as this impartial civil servant is concerned. He is probably thoroughly Americanized, and I have nothing to fear, it being well known that people born in this country lack the particular part of the brain responsible for the accumulation and storage of geographical data. Or rather the part is there, but it serves some other, probably more important function. They can't help it, any more than they can help their driving. I surrounded my younger son, Alyosha, with maps and globes, all to no purpose. We would come back from Ukraine every summer and he would tell his friends at his elementary school in the Bronx that he had been to Russia. Which isn't bad, not bad at all — but even that took years. And he was trying hard; he was eager to please me in those days. Eventually I stopped, seeing that I was only confusing him further. I remember the day I understood this. We were in Lyndhurst Park, and I pointed at the flag on the roof of a building and asked which country it belonged to. I'm certain he knew the answer — he was about seven — but he suspected a trap in every question I asked and said, "Russia?" I simply smiled. Not knowing that a few years later I would say: "Right."

Mr. Kowalski takes an age to write the ticket. And what an expensive ticket it is. But I am determined not to let it spoil my happy climb toward tonight's crest.

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

Gatsby evaporates the moment I step inside. Tables scattered around a large room; children, and even some grown-ups, sitting or lying on the floor. (Why are people so drawn to the floor in this country? I'm not generalizing — haven't you noticed? Especially in schools, where the children have plenty of chairs and still prefer, whenever they can, that beckoning floor. Is it a difficulty

coping with gravity, or is sitting on the floor dear to them as one of the few surviving vestiges of democracy and freedom?) And the music — so familiar it's unbelievable. It's "The Heart," the best Soviet prewar tango, sung by Utesov, a star of the thirties and forties from Odessa, whose hoarse voice was as popular as the Great Leader's heavy Georgian accent and as Soviet as a Kalashnikov.

On second thought, there is nothing unbelievable about it. The bar mitzvah boy has a Jewish mother from Poland, and her relatives, though also Jewish, all carry the distinctive Soviet seal of doom on their faces. They stand out. They stick together, they have the most vodka bottles on their tables, and they hide their cigarettes inside their fists — to avoid being spotted and shot by the Germans, presumably.

"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. It is always gratifying to see connoisseurs. In fact the Poles invented vodka and came up with the name, but the Russians perfected the drink by using rye, while the Poles stuck to their potatoes and produced Wyborowa — Choice Vodka — unfit for human consumption.

After telling Alyosha to get ready to leave, and after covering myself with shame by showing off the little Polish I know 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 like a brute), I go outside to admire the Gatsby view. A man and a woman are talking loudly near the entrance. I do my best not to overhear and fail.

"So you're just back from Europe, you said?"

"Yes, from Germany, actually."

"So how was it?"

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

"Oh, you mean Bosnia?" (NATO was bombing Serbia at the time.)

"Yes, it's so horrible."

"And how did you like the Germans?"

"Oh, wonderful people. Absolutely wonderful."

"And they're all blond."

"Blond? Hmm. I didn't get that impression. I don't think they're all blond."

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

Alyosha finally comes out. So does the sun. Things brighten up.

When we get to Igor's place, all the guests have arrived. The American turns out to be a nice fellow, of Jewish-Hungarian extraction. He has come with his Russian wife, Lena's friend, and her mother. He is very excited because his wife has told him that Igor will be making tea in a real Russian samovar. From the way he handles the blini and the caviar, I conclude that he has had some practice. Still, he has a great many questions about Russia, and some things remain mysterious to him — which may be why he is still keeping his Russian wife.

"It's always been a mystery to me," he says, sipping red wine and watching Igor and me knock back our shots of Stoli, "how you Russians can drink vodka and *like* it."

I explain that the problem is not with the vodka — provided it's real vodka, of course, not Wyborowa or some Katya or Natasha from Latin America — the problem is with Americans, and with all Westerners for that matter, who don't know how to drink it correctly.

I see genuine interest.

"You're used to wine and cocktails. You're used to sipping. Sipping is a no-no with vodka. Only drunks sip vodka in our country, for a stronger effect. They also pour it into a soup plate, soak pieces of bread in it and eat them with a spoon. The consequences are close to fatal. Vodka is almost tasteless and odorless. It must be very cold, and it must be thrown into the throat. That way it misses the taste buds and lands straight in the stomach. Drink it like that and you don't really taste anything and you don't get drunk too fast. So: no sipping, only gulping. And no mixing, obviously. No spoiling a good product."

I perform an appropriate demonstration. Igor joins me.

"The second important thing is food. Always eat after gulping. Something fatty and healthy. Lard, for instance."

Now, alongside the genuine interest, I read genuine horror in the American's eyes. He has a long way to go, and his wife is going to be no use to him at all.

"Lard? But that's just fat."

"It is exactly that. But they go together, vodka and lard. The lard lines your stomach and keeps it from burning and keeps you from getting drunk too soon — so you can hold an intelligent conversation with your companions. And the vodka, in return, dissolves your cholesterol and keeps your heart healthy."

Another demonstration follows.

I see disbelief. "I should try it," says the American.

I strongly advise against it. "It's too late now. You should have started much earlier — in the days of Ivan the Terrible, who introduced vodka and permitted taverns in Russia."

I am not being sincere. I'm not even sure it was Ivan the Terrible who got the Russian population onto the hook. Maybe it was Ivan the Horrible, or Peter the Loathsome, or Vladimir the Hideous, or Mikhail the Foolish, or Boris the Ludicrous. I simply don't want him to try. He's a nice fellow, really.

"Is this a Russian samovar?" The American is impressed. No wonder. The contraption looks like Stephenson's locomotive: 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 give off a very pleasant smell. The gleaming machine looks like a serious fire hazard and has been wisely installed well away from the house, in the backyard.

"So this is what Russians make their tea with? How does it work?"

A very likable fellow, this American.

"First you put the splinters in and start a fire. In the old days they used a tall boot to fan the flames."

"Really?"

"Yes. They'd take off the chimney, turn a tall boot upside down over the hole on top and pump it like a bellows."

"Really?"

Igor doesn't need to go to such extremes. The fire catches quickly. Absorbed in the kindling, however, he leans too close to the opening on top, where the chimney has not yet been attached. "Watch your head!" I shout, but too late. Igor lets out a stream of horrible Russian curses. The top of his bald head is now very pink. I try to console him: "Good thing you're bald."

We go inside for a couple of shots to kill the pain. The American drinks red wine. We come back out to the patio.

"Well, it's a lot of work," the American remarks, eyeing the samovar with new apprehension. Igor fits the chimney, which at once begins emitting a steady stream of dense smoke. He leans in to check the furnace again and comes away coughing violently. His head is now quite red. The whole procedure looks not merely labor-intensive but painful.

"All right, it seems to be going well," says Igor. "We can go in and have a drink."

"So who exactly were the Cossacks?"

I love this guy. But shame on his wife for not covering the basics. Then again, maybe that's why he's still keeping her.

I start at the beginning, which is to say with the Ukrainian Cossacks — free men who formed a kind of knightly order on the islands of the Dnieper. Their primary aim was to protect the Ukrainian population from the Crimean Tatars. It was a genuine republic. All leaders were elected by majority for a fixed term. The Cossacks not only repelled the Tatars but raided into the Crimea and across the Black Sea into Turkey, to free Ukrainian captives and to loot. Now and then they fought the Poles, or the Russians. A glorious and lengthy history, which I have to cut short because the shashliks — the Caucasian word for shish kebab — have arrived and serious eating is commencing.

"So, to make a long story short: when Ukraine became part of Russia, by hook or by crook, the Cossack order was destroyed. The Cossacks were turned into a separate regiment of the tsar's army and eventually moved south, closer to the Caucasus, to watch the border. There were Russian Cossacks too, but spelled differently — Kazaks. Not to be confused with the Kazakhs of Kazakhstan, of course, though all three words have the same Turkic origin."

I sense that I am beginning to lose my American — both the man and the language. Better wrap it up. "They lived on the edges of Great Russia: the Don, the Urals, the Amur. And though they were free men, as opposed to serfs, they were in fact the tsar's watchdogs."

The American absorbs my trivia the way a sponge absorbs froth. Only good men like him can take an interest in information this thoroughly unnecessary and useless. But duty calls. We go back out to check on the samovar.

"When do you add the tea?"

"We don't."

"You don't?"

"Nope."

"You mean you don't actually put tea inside the samovar?"

"No."

"Then how does it make tea?"

"It doesn't. It just boils water."

"Really?"

"Yep."

Just boils water. The American looks dumbfounded. A long silence follows. Igor looks at him, sighs and pours. It is the American who finally breaks the silence.

"Why do Russians make everything complicated?" He sounds weak and depressed. "I mean even little things, simple things. Why does everything have to be difficult and painful? So... so..." His voice gathers strength and takes on a note of despair. "So *Dostoevsky*? It's like his books, where even small talk isn't small. To discuss the simplest thing, some trifle, they convene a family council..."

He glances back at his wife, deep in cheerful conversation with Lenchka. Igor looks at the American, touches his glowing scalp gingerly, sighs and pours.

"So we just boil the water out here, carry it inside and make the tea the way we always do?"

"Yep."

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

"In a teapot? Like the British?"

"Yep."

Silence.