

Russian Stories

Father and Daughter

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

"Call the police," I say.

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

"Me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whew, I lucked out, I'm thinking.

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

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

She says, "He came home and wanted me to make him some soup, but I'd want to, so I bounced the can of Campbell's off his head."

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

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

Volunteer Cops

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

One night I went out on patrol with him.

The volunteer cops were helping the regular police man a check point late at night for drunken drivers on the outer ring road that circled Moscow. Cars would stop and they'd check ids and whether the drivers were drunk.

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

The volunteers and their American observer, me, pile into one Tinker Toy car and the regular cops into a Match Box Toy car.

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

You want to know how? By serious reckless driving. Our driver turns off his headlights, leaving starlight and an odd working street lamp now and then to navigate by in order to sneak up on the Benz.

Through sheer lunatic driving and luck, we end up right behind the Benz with the regular cops behind us. Our driver turns on his headlights and the Benz, trying to lose us, makes a sharp turn off the ring road zooming down a half paved, half dirt road with no street lights.

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

The Benz finally stops as do both pursuit cars and the volunteers rush out their car over to the Benz without a second thought as to whether the occupants of this favorite car of the criminal class are armed.

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

The volunteers rip open the driver's door of the Benz and pull the unarmed driver out. The regular cops see this and that the other passengers are two girls. The regular cops leave the protection of their car, grab the driver and beat the tar out of him. They take him to the stationhouse and beat him up some more there.

Disco Duck

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

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

Off it chugs down the road to Lubyanka.

McDonalds

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

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

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

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

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

Hunger

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

After the greetings, we sat down at a table. When I looked up, one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse was staring into my eyes—starvation. These two highly educated parents were

starving in order to provide their child with enough food. This was happening in the capital of Russia—Moscow, in the 20th not the 13th century.