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Six and a half years ago, between the baggage claim and Customs, in this no-man's-land that was not yet Russia which itself was not yet Russia, in a windowless corner of the second Sheremetevo Airport, something unremarkable happened: I found a two-kopeck coin.

It had been lying along a wall, but the other passengers had not noticed it. Or had not cared. The coin was thin and light, approximately the size of a lucky button. By then inflation was looming and the two kopecks were already worth slightly less than two kopecks. The metal was dirty and sticky. I tucked it into my wallet and headed on.

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At Customs the uniformed officer pointed at my empty backpack. He did not smile. He asked something in Russian, which startled me. When I did not answer, the officer asked again. This time I was less startled and told him so in English. Hearing this he looked at me suspiciously and began rummaging through my things. His fingers were fat but deft. I sensed trouble. He rummaged anyway. I looked at his fingers again: now they seemed deft but fat. This did not help either. He held up a pair of pantyhose. Yours? he asked. I nodded but did not smile. It fooled no one. You are American, he said. It was not a question so I neither nodded nor smiled. I just stood there.

Like an unborn baby I waited helplessly, dumb and not smiling.

The man stared at me but I could not speak. I would not nod. And I most certainly did not smile.

And that was it: with an annoyed sweep of his arm he waved me through. To the windowless airport. To Moscow. To Russia which in all fairness had yet to become Russia.

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Alone in my new apartment, I took out a sheet of yellow legal paper and wrote down what the German man had told me. I folded the words onto themselves until they were thick and hard, then stuffed them into my wallet.

When this was done, I stacked all the gifts in an old cabinet: pantyhose and Marlboro cigarettes on the bottom self; Aunt Helen's German-English