

It is Voikovskaya that will give meaning to it all. At Voikovskaya we will begin to understand...

“Caution — the doors are closing! Next stop, Kuzminki...”

(6)



My self-unemployment did not last long; the next day I received a call from a woman named Irina who, along with two other young semi-professional friends, wanted to improve her English once a week. The first lesson we spoke about their names. The following week we discussed America; the week after that, slavery and oppression.

This group of students was unique in that each knew English from A to Z, and would have spoken fluently if not for articles: It is so difficult, they complained. I know, I said. Can you explain it to us? they asked. I'll try, I said. Can you try again? they pleaded. I just did, I said.

But we still don't understand!

Patiently, I tried to be patient. Understandably, they tried to understand. But it was hopeless. The mistakes continued. The three women struggled, then despaired, then eventually accepted their fate, each coming to terms with it in her own way: Irina used *the*; Irina used *a*; and Irina, the laziest of the three, simply omitted articles altogether.

And a time passed. And the English improved. And like King of Clubs I led our discussions through forests of grammar, often becoming lost, but never once dying. Our fourth lesson was devoted to the color blue; the fifth to red; the sixth to measuring the intricacies of the Russian Soul. It was Irina who started the conversation:

A Russian Soul, she explained, is a very root of our society.

That's truth, Irina agreed, It is very important concept.

Have you heard about it...? Irina then asked.

Vaguely, I answered, but I still don't understand what it is specifically.

It's a...

It's the...

It's...

I can tell you in the Russian..., said Irina.

Out of the question, I said, These are English lessons so you should speak English.

Okay, It's when the... it's when the person... no no that's not right... It's when the *Russian* person... well, that is to say... no... okay... it's like this...

She stopped:

May I use the dictionary? she asked.

No, I answered.

Russian Soul, Irina blurted out in flawless Russian, etc...

I held up my finger: English only!

Irina stuttered over some English words, looked around for support, moved to grab her dictionary, but then as if realizing that there were too many words there, simply sat helplessly:

I can't say it in an English language, she said.

You can too, I lied.

I can't.

Try.

It's hopeless.

I know what you can do! said Irina attempting to be helpful, Try to explain it using gestures!

English gestures, I reminded.

But she doesn't know gestures in the English, said Irina.

Well in that case, Irina suggested, Use gestures that don't mean anything....

And so using meaningless English gestures Irina explained the intricacies of the Russian soul. I thanked them for the information. They thanked me for the lesson, paid in dollars for my time, and left for home. See you next Tuesday, they said. See you! I said.

But when they had gone I realized that I still couldn't measure the Russian Soul. I couldn't feel it... I couldn't see it...

...I couldn't even smell it.



(7)

"Kuzminki."

Are you getting off at the next stop? someone asks us from behind as the train grinds to a halt. With time we will grow accustomed to Russians' prying questions, but for now the words catch us off-guard and we stutter over our answer: Actually, we say, we're going to Voikovskaya because it is there that something remarkable will happen, it is there that... The crowd behind us listens to our long answer impatiently. Smiling, we ask them to tell us about themselves: And where are *you* getting off? we say. But it is too late. The doors have opened and before we know it the people have