

...But if you still have some doubts, Olya, about whether his drinking is sincere then why don't we ask him?

Okay, says Olya, Let's ask him.

Okay, says Boris, Let's ask him!

Okay...

Olya turns to me:

Hey James, she says, You don't like vodka, do you?

But before I can answer Boris objects again:

What kind of a question is that?! he scolds Olya, You're phrasing it all wrong. Here let me try...!

Boris turns to me:

Hey James, he says, You *do* like vodka, *don't* you?

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When I was younger I had a friend who would give his dog beer. The dog would lap wildly at the foam and the rest of us would laugh and laugh because it's funny to see a dog drinking beer.

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Of course, I say.

Boris smiles broadly and pours me another shot of vodka.

By now each person has pronounced at least one toast — many have already said their second. And each time a toast comes up, the others implore me to contribute. With each shot of vodka, I feel my body relaxing, becoming weaker. Like it or not, my defenses are coming down. I have forgotten my fears. I can ignore my inhibitions.

Hey! I yell out suddenly.

The other guests look at me, surprised.

I just remembered... I just remembered a piece of English poetry! I just remembered a poem that I like a lot... some people wouldn't consider it serious poetry, I suppose, but I like it anyway...!

And when the other guests are listening attentively, I recite it with feeling:

Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear..., I say.

But Boris interrupts me:

Not so fast... not so fast... I want to see if I can understand it myself!

And so once again I begin to recite my poem — this time just as fast...
but louder:

Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear.
Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair.
Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't fuzzy, was he?

But again nobody can understand.
Do you have any idea what he said? Boris says.
Not a clue, says Vadim, When he speaks fast like that I don't understand
a thing...

Yeah me either... but it sounds beautiful.

It is! I say and translate the poem for them:

You see, I explain, Fuzzy Wuzzy used to be a bear... but because he
doesn't have any hair we can't really continue to call him *fuzzy*, now can we!

There is an awkward silence. Then, suddenly, my fellow wedding guests
bristle, as if I have insulted them:

Maybe so, Boris says, Maybe so... but you just wait and see... one
of these days Russia will rise up... one of these days Russia will be a
superpower again!



(70)

And with that the conversation turns — as it always does — to politics.
But even when someone suggests drinking to Mikhail Gorbachev, I
refuse to make a toast.

C'mon James, someone says, Make a toast for us!

Yeah, says someone else, You're in Russia now and now you have to
play by our rules!

But I refuse.

Go on James, says Olga, Make a toast! We're all interested in what you
have to tell us!

But again I refuse.

*Why is she baiting me? Could it be that she really wants me to make a
toast? Or is she just trying to prove something? Can it be that she knows me
that well? I myself don't even know whether I'll make a toast or not! But for
some reason she seems to know...!*

And each time I refuse, someone else assumes the toast for me.

At some point Vadim comes out with a guitar: