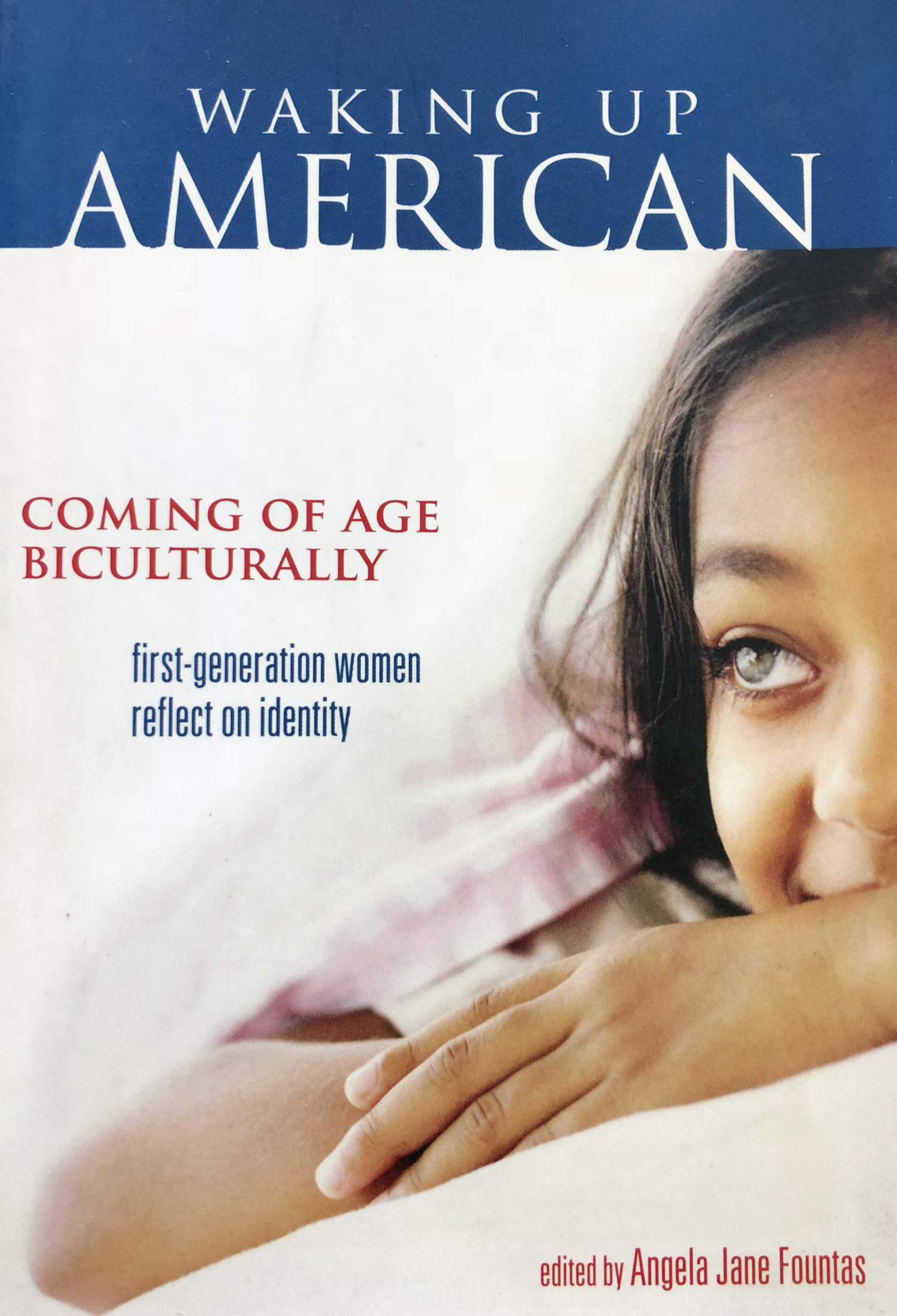
WAKING UP AMERICAN

COMING OF AGE BICULTURALLY

first-generation women reflect on identity



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BACK IN THE U.S.S.R.

Victoria Gomelsky

THE LENGTHY QUEUE AT THE Aeroflot counter in New York's Kennedy Airport doesn't surprise me. Russians have a way of making even the most basic logistical procedures enormously complicated: forms filled out in triplicate, documents stamped *just so*. They can also be brusque, cold, and a little bit crazy. As I shuffle along, I wonder how many times I will see these sides of the Russian character in the month ahead.

Don't get me wrong. I'm proud of my Russian heritage. Unlike most tourists, who travel to experience the foreign, I am going half-way around the world to experience the familiar. My family lived in St.

Petersburg back when it was still called Leningrad; we emigrated as part of the Soviet Jewish exodus in 1978 when I was five years old. This trip marks my first return.

From the moment I join the queue, I suspect that I'm in for one long homecoming. I recognize my relatives in the faces of the passengers in line. The women have wide, round Slavic cheekbones; light, almost transparent eyes; and straggly eyebrows, which my grandmother, Tamara, and my mother, Natasha, have passed on to me. As they slink toward the Aeroflot desk, the men with their hairy chests and black mustaches remind me of all the dozens of Russians that have visited my parents' house over the years, downing vodka shots and dancing drunkenly to sentimental folk songs before leaving again, not to be seen for another decade. Do they look at me and think I am one of them? If they were to speak to me in Russian, they would be disappointed. Like a dog, I understand the language but don't speak it. At least not well enough to fool anyone.

It's clear that my seatmate, Victor, is Russian long before he opens his mouth. His pale, round face and nonexistent eyebrows are dead giveaways. When he learns that I was born in Leningrad, he strikes up a conversation with me in Russian. My garbled consonants and tortured sentences don't impress him. He says that language is only useful as a way to communicate. He says it kindly, but refuses to continue speaking with me in Russian, though I ask him to help me practice.

Instead, he offers to share his Ambien. Before the drug knocks me into a deep, dreamless slumber, I learn that he was born near Novosibirsk, in the middle of Siberia, but now lives in Detroit, where he works in the finance department at Ford. The work bores him to death, but he survives the grind by throwing himself out of an airplane every weekend. With 1,500 jumps to his credit, he is a professional skydiving cameraman. He's also a champion BASE jumper, meaning he gets his real thrills by regularly parachuting off towers and bridges. These feats allow him just eight seconds of freefall before impact.

"How do you know when to pull the chute?"

"I usually wait till I'm scared and then I give it another second," he says.

"That's crazy."

"No—what's really crazy is people who live their entire lives without ever testing their limits."

Ten hours later, I wake from the blackness of an Ambien sleep feeling giddy. It was an unexpectedly easy rest. I suggest that Victor and I exchange email addresses—he has invited me to watch him compete at the BASE jumping world championships at Moscow's Ostankino tower on the July 4th weekend—but he tells me we already did that. The drug worked a little too well.

My grossly overstuffed blue Samsonite has not exploded all over the conveyor belt when I go to pick it up at baggage claim. We are in Terminal 3 of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport and I must get to Terminal 1 to catch my domestic flight to St. Petersburg. The smells of cigarettes and of freshly baked piroshkis from the corner kiosk mingle in a way that reminds me of home.

But the aggressive taxi drivers in the central waiting area quickly dispel that soothing feeling. One offers me a ride, shoving a price list in my face despite my weak protests. We haggle briefly because I don't have the energy to argue, settling on fifty dollars (dollars are the currency of choice among members of Moscow's infamous "taxi mafia") for the journey to Terminal 1, which I give the man as he hustles me into a waiting car. It's an obscenely high price, all the more so when I discover that it takes less than ten minutes. Welcome to Russia.

I arrive in St. Petersburg in mid-June, just as the white nights are getting whiter. The city is located so far north that from mid-June to mid-July, the sun never falls deep enough below the horizon for the sky to get dark. Other places in the northern hemisphere experience the same

phenomenon, but only in St. Petersburg have the white nights (*"Beliye Nochi"*) earned such acclaim.

I am here to attend a monthlong literary seminar. But in truth, the program is just an excuse. My real intention is to find my roots, although I can't help thinking this statement should have ironic quotation marks around it. How else to explain this vague quest to understand where I am from?

My spartan dorm room at the Herzen Inn, an aging hostelry located stumbling distance from Kazan Cathedral and the grand thoroughfare of Nevsky Prospekt, has seen better days, but it is safe and clean. I share it with a Kenyan writer named Andiah, who has a habit of sleeping late every morning and missing her fiction workshop. Of course, this first week we are all getting to bed rather late because it's impossible to drag ourselves away from the bars when the sky is bright and people are out enjoying themselves (and when jet lag has rendered us insomniacs). "Midnight in St. Petersburg is like lunchtime in L.A.," says Artyom, a banker whom my mother's best friend, Natalya, has put me in touch with. He is thirty-six years old, a lifelong resident of St. Petersburg, and the only real Russian with whom I have a connection.

Family members don't count. My parents read Russian newspapers, eat Russian food, speak the Russian language, but after twenty-six years in the United States, they are poster children for the American Dream, especially if you consider how they live, surrounded by all the trappings of an American existence: a house in the suburbs of Los Angeles, a Mercedes SUV in the driveway, Caribbean cruises over the holidays.

No doubt my fraternal twin sister, Julie, and I hastened their integration. As kids, we wanted nothing to do with Russia. My grandmother's thick accent embarrassed us. As did the smell of meat *kotleti* frying on the stove top, as did anything that betrayed our feelings of otherness. All we wanted was to be like our American classmates in Cherry Hill, the southern New Jersey suburb where we temporarily settled. When Jul and I entered kindergarten at the local elementary school in January 1979, we discovered the advantages of assimilation.

Having mastered English (by osmosis, it seems, because I don't recall a single lesson), we were soon playing tetherball matches during recess instead of loitering along the fence. We became friendly with Tara Elliot and Kim Edler, the popular girls in class. We earned shooting-star stickers on homework assignments. Above all, we blended in. This effort to maintain a seamless American lifestyle extended to our routines at home. Within a few weeks, we were answering our parents' questions in English and signing birthday cards as Vicky and Julie, not "Vika *ee* Yulia." We watched TV fiendishly, devouring episodes of *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *Welcome Back, Kotter* like we devoured the boiled potatoes our mom served us for breakfast. Soon, our Russianness, at least outwardly, was reflected solely in our last name.

It wasn't until college that my feelings about Russia began to change. When I was little, I would have done anything not to be different. As an adult, I began to realize that the differences are the only things that make me special.

My first week in Russia passes in a blur of jet lag and aimless wandering. The architecture of St. Petersburg makes my heart swell. It's a delirious mix of baroque, art nouveau, constructivism, Russian Orthodox, you name it. The enchanting onion-domed Church on the Spilled Blood, named after the spot where Czar Alexander II was assassinated, is located a few blocks from where I'm staying, so that I can hardly escape the sight of it. Every time I see those psychedelic spires in the distance, a smile springs to my lips.

One night, the program directors organize a midnight boat ride along the Neva River, where locals flock during the summer to see the nightly opening of the bridges, which are a ubiquitous presence in this city built on islands. Peter, as the Russians call it, was spruced up in 2003 for its 300th birthday celebration. When we glide through the maze of canals that have earned it comparisons to Venice, I notice the fresh paint. "A city of grand facades" is how Artyom described it. From the deck of

the boat, where we drink cheap beer and wave hello to the raucous party cruisers that pass us, I see what he means. The gilded eighteenth-century edifices that stand along the canals conceal courtyards full of trash and the pervasive stench of urine.

All over the city, flyers announce what every local should know by now: Paul McCartney is going to play his first-ever concert in St. Petersburg in Palace Square on the evening of the summer solstice. This is a very big deal. Russians are huge Beatles fans, probably because during most of their lives, the music was forbidden.

On the day of the show, I stop at the central ticket office to inquire about prices and learn that tickets have ballooned from around 600 rubles, or about $20, to more than 3,000 rubles. That settles that. Instead, I decide to buy myself lunch at Quo Vadis, the Internet café that's been my home-away-from-home-away-from-home this week. Just as the waitress serves my steaming bowl of borscht, which I have loved since childhood, I overhear two young women greeting each other. One asks the other how she's doing, and the first woman replies, "*Ne ploho.*" "Not bad"—as I have heard my parents say a million times. It's a classic, if banal, example of Russian pessimism. Things are never "great" like they are in America, because in Russia misfortune lurks around every corner. Think of it as self-deprecation without the irony. The only thing that alleviates the Russians' firm belief in inescapable hardship is their fatalism—the sense that whatever happens is supposed to happen. This reminds me of a joke my father once told me. At the height of the Cold War, when Americans were all busy building bomb shelters, Russians regarded their own mandated preparations with complete mockery. *What to do in case of a nuclear war: One, cover yourself with a white sheet and slowly crawl to the cemetery (so as not to create panic); or two, cover yourself with a white sheet and quickly crawl to the cemetery (to get a good spot).*

Eating borscht and listening to two pretty young women—each dressed in tight white pants and shockingly high heels—echo my parents

underscores something I'm only now beginning to understand: All the traits, sayings, and customs I associate with my family—from the moments of superstitious silence we observe before leaving on a trip to the exclamation points that pepper our letters—belong to a larger cultural legacy I abandoned in childhood. Being here is my way of getting it back.

The borscht swishes around in my stomach as I make my way onto Nevsky, which has been closed to car traffic for the day. Something draws me to the barricades set up near the Moyka River crossing. Police are checking tickets before they allow people to enter the concert venue. The sky is filled with storm clouds that don't bode well for the open-air show. They contribute to a subdued, slightly uneasy vibe among the throngs of onlookers milling up and down the wide avenue. I snap a few surreptitious photos of the grim-looking officers who manage the barricades before I hear the voice of a scalper offering tickets for 300 rubles.

Without hesitation, I hand him my money. And then I am in, following a group of well-to-do Russians (even 300 rubles is pricey for a city where the average monthly salary doesn't exceed 3,000 rubles) into Palace Square, a stark expanse of pavement that fronts the Winter Palace, as beautiful as it is daunting.

A huge stage has been constructed behind the Alexander Column, the 155-foot monument built to celebrate Napoleon's retreat from Moscow in 1812. A group of people hug the stage, but the wide square feels conspicuously empty. Sir Paul is singing "Maybe I'm Amazed" to a lackluster audience. For a moment, I have to suppress my irritation at the Russian people. Can't they at least clap?

Not sure where to plant myself, I follow a blond wearing a powder blue tank top with a pale yellow raincoat tied around her hips. When she stops, I stop. She begins to sway to the music. Her movements are drunken: Her hips move from side to side with an aggressive shake, even when the sad songs come on. She and her friend, another blond with her hands in the air, are the only two people dancing, or even moving.

The sun emerges at around 9:00 PM and this stirs the crowd. Timidly at first, the concertgoers begin to loosen up and shed some

of their earlier inhibitions. Thirteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union, an aura of authoritarianism still settles upon public gatherings here; it's as if people are waiting for permission to speak. By the time the band strikes up "Hey Jude," the mood has improved considerably. People are dancing, yelling, woo-wooing. The back of the square has filled with bodies, and the sun, bright and high in the sky despite the late hour, gives off a surreal lavender light.

To my left stand two middle-aged, mustached men. One of them has the classic Russian moon face, hidden behind a pair of sunglasses. It takes me a second to understand what's wrong with this picture. His frames are missing a lens, making him look slightly deranged.

His taller, red-headed companion approaches me and introduces himself as Volodya.

"Shall we dance?" he asks, the vodka on his breath thick and sour.

"Why not?"

We do a little jig. As we spin around in circles, he asks me where I am from. Slowly, I tell him that I am originally from St. Petersburg but now live in New York.

"Really? I can't believe it," he says, obviously delighted at the prospect of chatting up an American girl. "My cousin's friend lives in New York. What are you doing here?"

Conversation is difficult due to my poor Russian, but Volodya doesn't seem to notice. Every now and then, he turns to Vadim, his deranged-looking and equally drunken friend, and says something incomprehensible, inciting giggles from me. What a pair. Just when I think my smile can't get any bigger, Paul McCartney launches into "Back in the U.S.S.R." I feel as if he is singing it for me.

At the end of my first week in St. Petersburg, I go to dinner with some friends from the program, American writers trying to make sense of this country. On more than one occasion, I have heard them say the Russians make them feel "shut out" and "unwelcome."

How can I convince them that, in this city of grand facades, the scowls on the faces of the people they encounter on the street are only an exterior? It's true that the people of St. Petersburg don't go out of their way to make strangers feel welcome. Russians consistently rank low in studies on human happiness, and this is evident in their glum, even hostile expressions. But the moment they sense you understand something of their culture, they open themselves up to you. It happened to me after I thanked a clerk at the local convenience store using a few polite Russian phrases. Her expression softened and she quietly admonished me for not wearing a jacket, *didn't I know it was cold outside?* I tell my friends that if they get to know the Russians, they'll find they are among the warmest and most soulful people on earth.

To test this, I explain, they just need to sit down to a meal. The real essence of the Russian character emerges at the dining table, amid heaping plates of blinis, black bread, smoked sturgeon, cabbage piroshkis, meat cutlets, and *pelmeni* (boiled Siberian dumplings stuffed with ground beef and served with generous spoonfuls of *smetana*, or sour cream). This is when the public inhibitions are laid to rest. Fueled by the ever-present bottle of vodka, conversation continues well into the night. It is not unusual for a Russian dinner to begin at 8:00 PM, for the main course to be served past midnight, and for the last guests to depart by sunrise.

By the frustrated looks on my companions' faces, I know my words are falling on deaf ears. I can't convince them that just because Russians aren't as flamboyantly hospitable as, say, the Italians, they are anything but cold. And then it hits me: Russian culture isn't something tourists can easily embrace. But for insiders like myself, that's part of its charm. The Russians are not easy people to get to know, but once you get past the facade, they are delightful, crazy, delightfully crazy.

When it's time to go home, everyone else opts to walk the twenty minutes back to the Herzen Inn. But it's nearly 4:00 AM and I'm tired, so I hail a gypsy cab.

The driver is playing a dark, thumping techno-trance song that quickens my heartbeat. Instead of going around the block, he throws the car into reverse and zooms backward for about a hundred yards, giving me yet another glimpse of why people have described Russia as a wild place.

The Russians have a word for living on the edge—tempting fate and doing so with a secret, sly thrill. It is called *udal* and the fact that it is essentially untranslatable makes it all the more delicious. Here in this taxi, at this strange hour when the sky swirls with streaks of light and dark, I feel hungry for it.

"Are you Russian?" the driver asks, casting his eyes into the rear-view mirror.

"Da . . . no toje Amerikanka," ("Yes, but also American.") I say.

His silence prompts me to say more.

"My family lived in St. Petersburg," I say, avoiding the more obvious phrase "I was born in St. Petersburg" because of the difficulty I have in pronouncing the word "born." *Radeelas.* "When I was five years old, we moved to America."

"You're ours then," he declares, reading my mind.