

TEXAS TALES IN SIBERIA

Jeff Williams

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Publisher's Note: All scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Contents

Tumbling Down	1
Dealing with Dad	9
Elusive Destination	17
Soviets vs Russians	23
Chuck Norris	29
Soviet Style Shopping	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Say That Again	Error! Bookmark not defined.
They Sparkle Like Diamonds ...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Angels Unawares?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Williams2Russia January 3rd, 1998	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Disasteroni	Error! Bookmark not defined.
May 9th, Russian Holiday	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Open Ear Technique	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Detained by the Police	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Swiss Alps of Siberia	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Sheriff's Village	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Total Economic Collapse	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Interpreters are More Addictive than Cocaine	Error! Bookmark not defined.
defined.	
Through the Language Barrier	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Sabbath Principle	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Glory Days Begin	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Who is the Head of the Church?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Hardest Decision of My Life ...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Gulag	Error! Bookmark not defined.
"I No Monday"☺	Error! Bookmark not defined.

[Living in a Storage Closet](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Religion Kills: Jesus Saves](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Pinnacle of Achievement](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Russian Rednecks](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Forest Fires Fertilize](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[When it is Time to Leave](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Russian Authority is T-shaped](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[“Preacher - want a girl?”](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[If the KGB ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy](#)**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
defined.
[The Twilight Zone](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Trapped by my own Stupidity](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Bear Island](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[From Conspiracy to Reality](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Moscow Taxi Mayhem](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Fat Man in Little Car](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[“Bond...James Bond”](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[-45° Celsius](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Siberian Delicacies](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Little Miss Priss](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Three Years In](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[The Oldest Village](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Saint Nina](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[The Coldest Night](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Enemy of the People, Beloved of God](#)**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Tail of the Dragon](#) **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
[Don’t Take Me Out Coach!](#)..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

To the love of my life

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God... The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

—Romans 8:14-16

CHAPTER ONE

Tumbling Down

On Friday, November 10th, 1989, my life was grand. However, that was the night the wall came tumbling down...literally. Someone shouted, "Shut-up" in too rude a tone. It did the job though. "Turn it up!" was the next shout-out.

There it was. The breaking news bulletin on TV showed Germans all over the Berlin Wall. Only, they were not trying to escape. Incredibly, they were tearing it down! Some were on top with sledge hammers like mighty Bohemian Ax-men of old. Other clips showed crowds of people rocking entire concrete sections back and forth until they toppled. This was the most amazing event I had ever witnessed on live TV. What I never could have guessed was that it was an ominous foreshadowing of the changes about to take place in my own life.

In its final death throes the USSR had been conducting a series of nuclear tests. In 1989 they were trying to remind the world of their power even as it slipped away. The Soviet Republic of Poland was pulling away politically and the USSR had just lost the war in Afghanistan. They had been trying to overcompensate for the public displays of weakness. But if the Berlin Wall was coming down, then it meant the atheist regime had completely crumbled. This was not weakness. This was the end.

My Professor's living-room exploded into a dozen different debates about what this meant for our future. While they fired back and

forth, I remained silent. I had only one thought. For the first time in seventy years the gospel of Jesus Christ could be preached freely in Soviet lands. I walked out into the back-yard and looked up at the stars in the big Texas sky.

This was an amazing interruption to an evening that started out as a Texas BBQ at my professor's house in Stephenville, Texas. Stephenville is the largest dairy-producing county in the state. Such distinctions came with bragging rights and a lot of wealth. To celebrate, a monument of a dairy cow was placed on the lawn of the courthouse downtown. As a faculty member of Tarleton State University my professor was hosting a recruitment party for the speech and debate team. I was the sophomore class president at the school of 6,000 students. I was an eighteen-year-old education major, looking to possibly become a football coach, when the professor spotted me at a student government meeting and invited me to the party personally.

It was not a wild and crazy party, but there were a wide variety of beverages at this BBQ. Thankfully, they were not put off by the fact that I do not drink. They were open enough to accept me if I could prove myself. Some of the sharpest minds in our school were at this party. I was breathing rare air. This was what I had hoped for. By being exposed to the best of the faculty and student body, I hoped to improve myself. I had never been on a debate team and had little public speaking experience. But this was college life, and I was willing to try new things. My college experience had been great so far.

I was living the American dream. Tarleton is one of the best-kept secrets of the state of Texas. One other large draw for the school was that 3,000 of the students were young attractive females! In spite of this bevy of blinding beauties, by my second year I had seen enough. What I realized was that the individual aspects I appreciated about this assorted assembly of females could be found in one woman. That was my girlfriend back home. When I thought about it, I realized that my

high-school sweetheart had all of the traits that I was attracted to in a single package.

Every woman is beautiful in her own way. But by the fall of 1989 I realized that I was in love with just one lady...Andrea Rene Clark. Earlier that fall I brought her to our homecoming game and my friends on campus asked how a slug like me could get a date with a supermodel. She had long, blond hair that went down to the middle of her back. She was tall and slender. Her mother had taught her how to develop her own knock-out fashion style while remaining a true lady at the same time. She did not have to show skin to get men.

Andrea had achieved the perfect balance between modesty in appearance and drop-dead beauty. Too few women know how to strike this stunning symmetry. She could win any red-carpet fashion show for best-dressed. Referring to the imbalance in the appearance between my homecoming date and myself, I told my friends that 'while I may not look like much, I have exquisite taste'. Having Andrea on my arm proved that point. If I could have brought evidence like her to all my debates, then I would have been a superstar.

As I stood in my professor's back yard, I entered into silent prayer. I began to try to sort out the strong emotions flooding over me. I had already accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior very early in life. I knew that a Christian life began at the cross and ended before the throne of God. I am just very slow about recognizing how this lifestyle affects me in between those two great events.

I was having a great time at University until that night in November of my sophomore year. As a result, I grew very restless in my studies during the spring of 1990. I was still involved in all the same great activities. Being part of the student council I was involved in a lot of great events. It was a networking goldmine. Someone asked me if I had ever considered a career in politics. I was meeting new people and the world of possibility was opening up very wide as it never had before. I was also having a great time with the Speech & Debate Team. They

treated me like one of their own, even though I was truly the weakest link.

Inexplicably, I was restless. I could not shake the sense that something had changed within me. The fantastic experience I was having at TSU had become strangely empty for me. I grew more and more burdened for the souls of men. The people at Tarleton were incredible. Even in my social awkwardness those folks were so accommodating and friendly. Again, with me not being a drinker, when the Speech & Debate Team celebrated their successes, they bought non-alcoholic bubbly to include me. Besides, it was the Speech and Debate Team. They did not throw drunken bashes. They went out of their way to let me be part of their lives. These were great people. I could have enjoyed a wonderful life by spring-boarding from that all-American community into the great opportunities that lay ahead.

The first thing that began to chip away at this idealistic life was the fact that on Sunday mornings, as I made my way from my dorm room to Victory Baptist Church, it seemed that no one was stirring. The parking lot by my dorm was full before and after services alike. I knew that my belief in the Bible as the Word of God put me in the minority. Even in the "Bible Belt" this was the case. More and more people were abandoning the faith of their fathers and accepting a secular world-view. Tarleton is like any other institution of higher learning in the US today. It is very secular. God has no place other than honorable mention as a myth of man in these places. In a sense, while in November 1989 Russians began to emerge from seventy years of spiritual darkness, the university system of the USA was hurling us towards a shadowy future of atheism in America.

In contrast with the university system's secular agenda, God was really working in my life. Victory Baptist Church was the first church I attended where my father was not the Pastor. It was great. It was at Victory that I learned that the spirit of fellowship I had always experienced in my Dad's churches was the same in others as well. Pastor

and Mrs. White practically adopted me. They did this with all the students from the university. In those days their son Russell and Lora, his wife, were members of the church. They helped me with advice about romancing Andrea.

A common trait of Independent Baptist Churches like Victory is a very strong focus on evangelism. Discipleship takes place during the preaching and fellowship on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. Sunday School classes were the predecessor of small-groups that are typical in many churches today. So it makes sense that during my time at Victory the Bible passage 1 Corinthians 3 made such an impact in my life.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body...whether it be good or bad", 2 Corinthians 5:10. Verses like this created a burning desire to serve the Lord within me. Teachings about crowns and rewards for believers are peppered throughout the New Testament. While some try to dismiss every reference as being purely symbolic, it becomes a difficult position to defend as the verses pile up. According to the Scripture, I will be receiving some kind of reward in my hands and on my head. I am convinced from scripture that we are going to follow the example of the twenty-four elders who sit with the Lord and that we will lay our crowns at Jesus' feet. My greatest fear is that I will be unworthy and stand in that multitude empty-handed.

Thinking on these scriptures, I remembered the feeling from my childhood when I brought a gift that our family could afford to a rich boy's birthday party. We were not especially poor, but we certainly were not a rich family. The churches my father pastored provided all of our needs, but financially things were tight. Being a part of a pastor's family means that at times you will be invited to social gatherings that are far above your own economic station in life. True Christians do not respect people based upon income. In the case of the birthday party, the wealthy mother who invited me was trying to be kind to my family because she wanted to honor her pastor and by doing so serve the Lord.

Amongst the children at the party this was not the case. As I saw the lavish gifts being opened it became more and more apparent how woefully inadequate my gift was by comparison. When at last the birthday boy opened my gift he was expressionless. There was a very long pause. His sweet Christian mother jumped in lavishing me with praise and again expressing her great joy that I had come. In spite of her effort to shield me from this disappointment, I still sharply remember the uncomfortable feeling that shot through my body on that occasion.

From this experience and others like it I developed a deep desire to give a gift that is worthy of the approval of the one receiving it. Who wants to be the person who gives an unwanted gift? I want to share in that moment with Jesus by giving something worthy of Him. I refuse to go empty-handed before the throne! God help me.

Additionally, God was preparing to teach me another immutable fact. While the path of Salvation is a straight and narrow one, the road of Christian service is a winding one. We are being led in the darkness of this world, with only a lamp to light our feet, and the wind of the Holy Spirit to guide our way. Staying on the path truly does require acknowledging God in all we do. I had always stayed close to the other believers. All our lamps together provided a clearer way. The path was easier to travel. However, Christian Service often requires that we travel alone, thus making it harder to see the way.

What started out as an interruption in previously scheduled programming brought with it an interruption to my previously scheduled life. The emotions that sprang up that fateful night in November flooded my soul by the Spring Semester. These waters pooled inside me creating a great weight. The burden for the lost souls of my fellow students made it grow deeper. On top of these, the teachings of 1 Corinthians 3 pressed upon me. Finally, under heavy reality of the Judgment Seat of Christ I came to a conclusion. I had to make a change. I had to make a move that would up-end the life I was enjoying at the University. The change itself would be hard enough, but change was not the obstacle that I

feared. After much time in prayer and spending long weeks meditating, I made my decision. However, telling my very strong father was going to be a difficult task.

CHAPTER TWO

Dealing with Dad

My father was the pastor of the Boulevard Baptist Church in Burleson, Texas, a suburb of Dallas-Fort Worth. He is a tall, red-headed, charismatic man. He is a natural born leader. It is funny to watch the impact he makes on others. It is especially noticeable when I visit other churches or meetings at his side.

I followed my dad's odd instruction to go to a state university. I had already surrendered to God's will for my life at youth camp. As is often the case we surrender to following God's Will at an altar call. Many do this at youth camp or at a youth rally. Even though my dad acknowledged that I had made such a commitment, his sage advice was that if God had truly called me to full-time Christian service, then I would not be able to get away from it.

I bought a wrestling poster from Nike. One wrestler had lifted the other off the ground and was about to slam his head and shoulders into the mat. The caption read, "Wimps need not apply". When it comes to Christian service that quote is very applicable. If you are going to serve the Lord in any capacity you have to be tough. We wrestle. Ask anyone who has ever labored for the Lord.

Serving God in any ministry is also like a marathon race. Choir, small group, children's ministry, and the myriad of other ways people serve others in the name of the Lord are long races. It is not starting well, but finishing well that counts. We all know of many examples from the

Bible, preaching illustrations, and personal experiences of those who made it and those who did not cross the finish line.

Failing to finish is a fear everyone has to some degree. We are told to not think we stand, “lest we fall”. We cannot rest on past experience to guarantee future results. Furthermore, God is in the business of testing us and growing our faith. Serving the Lord is never a static thing. We cannot compartmentalize our service to the Lord. It truly has an ebb and flow. Being faithful to the end, finishing the race, being obedient even when we do not understand are all difficult tests of our faith. Even after all that Moses did, he failed greatly by striking the Rock twice. I appreciate Paul's words. I do not want to be a castaway.

As a pastor my dad has shown a keen awareness of these things. Like any mentor his desire is to help me live a life pleasing to the Lord. One must understand his position to offer such strange advice. His fear was that I would just try to follow in his footsteps. There have been those who entered the ministry not because they felt the Lord's leading, but because they did not know what else to do. They are the “Mama-called/Papa-sent” preachers he often refers to. He wanted me to be double sure about how I was to serve the Lord. God gives everyone a ministry. What was mine to be?

My dad really wanted me to have a TSU diploma in my hands before I did anything else in life. His powerful presence as a person is so intimidating. He is a very strong preacher. I learned as a little boy not to mess with him. Bucking his authority did not enter my mind lightly. To me he was “large and in-charge” and there was no doubt about it.

As a leader of a marriage, family and congregation he was very careful and wise about making plans. He had built a rock-solid reputation in every aspect of his life because of this characteristic. So every time some young person like me with little to no life-experience wanted to alter his plan, my dad was understandably not impressed. At the university, I was living on my own. Between my jobs, a Pell Grant,

a small academic scholarship and the money I had saved in high-school, I was paying my way through the university with no student loans. I had moved out of my parent's house at age seventeen. Dad still helped me with a car, books, and other things, but for the most part I was my own man.

There was one key area of weakness in the relationship between us. The challenge for him was not grasping our differences. Mom sees the differences clearly. But to Dad, I am his son and he expects me to be like him. Like him I am a driven individual. I set goals and go for them. Unlike him, I was less afraid to fail. This was not because I was brave. I had no choice. I either learned to succeed after many failures, or I would never succeed at all. Through the sheer force of his will my dad converted me from being a natural pessimist into an optimist. I began to believe that I could succeed. Unfortunately, my successes always came after a string of failures. In the midst of this repeated process I slowly learned that frustration can be built upon. Ironically, failures do have their benefits. I would have loved for building upon failure to be a theoretical and not a practical aspect of my education. I truly am a believer in the ability to succeed. But the reality is that in my life experience, success comes with a high price.

My father on the other hand has always been wildly successful. He has known tough circumstances, but God has given him the Midas-Touch of ministry. He has the amazing gift of entering into a complete mess and building a monument of achievement. My apple fell pretty far from that tree. Still not appreciating this difference between us, his advice not to attend Bible College right away was shocking. It was even contrary to what most preachers say to those who have surrendered to full-time ministry. But my circumstances were not ordinary. Preacher's kids are an exception to the rule. I tried to honor my father and his guidance in my life. That is why I enrolled at TSU.

Tarleton State had been an incredible part of my life. I gained a lot of confidence in myself there. I had become my own man while out

from under the Texas-sized shadow cast by my father. Now it was time to act like a man and do what needed to be done. There must be a clean break from the path my father had guided me down. Now, I must choose the new path. Looking back, I have to admit, that following the road my earthly father had paved was much easier in the beginning than the one my heavenly Father prepared.

In order to tell my Dad about my decision, I thought I could outflank my father's strengths and force him into a position where he had to surrender to my point of view without a struggle. I hoped to outmaneuver the master. My plan was to have my Mom and Dad bring Andrea to meet me in Stephenville: my town. They had come to visit a few times before. But this was the first time I invited them specifically. I told them I would take them out to eat and that I needed to talk to them about something important. I wanted to catch my Dad off-balance. A little misdirection would leave them pondering:

“Why had Jeff asked us to bring Andrea?”

“Why hadn't he come back to Burleson for this as he had already done several times?”

The biggest puzzle of all:

“If he is paying for dinner, then what is the catch?” (That was the easy clue I left him).

I would wait until we were in a public place to tell him. He would be in my town not his. The woman I was dating exclusively would be there. Her parents were members of his congregation. I would have him in a vise-grip of decorum. The stage was set, now I was ready to make my move.

In the late spring of 1990 the evening for the dubious dinner with Dad finally arrived. At the restaurant while my father had started in on the chips and salsa, I started making a long way around to my point. He was half-listening as he scanned the room for anyone he knew. He hardly ever went anywhere in public where he was not recognized back in Burleson. Our family had been living in these parts of Texas for six

generations. Even though we were one and a half hours away from his current home he still thought he might see someone he knew or vice versa. This distraction played into my hands. From experience he realized I would not get to the point quickly when I was about to tell him something that he may not want to hear. So he was trying to enjoy himself until I made my point.

My mother was her typical dark-haired, beautiful self. She has a naturally dark complexion that some people try to achieve by tanning. She is the sweetness and gentleness of our family. She balances out Dad pretty well. And like most of us Williams men, we need a whole lot of counter-balancing! Having her there was like having a whole medicine cabinet of comfort. If we had to create a Triage right there in the restaurant, she would know what to do. Andrea was looking great as usual. She was trying to get me to tell her what was going on, but it was pointless because we were all there around the same small table. All three of them were definitely curious to hear my announcement.

Finally it came out, “Dad, I am going to transfer to Bible College next semester”. His face went red! It is a Terry Williams trade-mark. He can keep his cool, but you can see in his face that he is not happy. This physical reaction is why his friends love to prank him so much. It is like a road flare in his cheeks.

As expected, in spite of the bright red glow that exploded from his face, in this environment he controlled himself very well. He laid into me with all of his skill of reasoning and wisdom he had developed over the years. He began making his case by pointing out that everything was going better than expected at TSU. He acknowledged that my grades were great, and that I would have seventy hours of credit by the end of my second year.

I had tried to challenge him from time to time in my past, but had always only given token resistance before caving in to his crushing logic.

He really is good at what he does. It makes no sense to argue against him but to work with him. He has helped a lot of people over the years.

However, this time I was in a different place in my life. I was still his son, but it was time for me to leave the nest completely. Even at Tarleton, it was close to home. It was a safe place to be. It was a great future if only I would take it. I knew all of this. It all made perfect sense. There was just the problem of the overwhelming burden that was about to crush me if I did not act.

In my immaturity and inexperience, I naively hoped that my ambush would have been enough to settle things with Dad. That night at the restaurant he simply retreated and waited for another day. The days of real confrontation would take place on his turf. While his patience carried him through that night, I did feel sorry for my mother. I am sure that after he simmered for a while he probably had some heated words with her about all this on the way back to Burlison.

At one point, in a future debate on the subject of my transfer, he would kick me out of the car. After about five minutes of walking on the side of the road, he swung back around and picked me up again. It would still take some heated discussions before he finally accepted that I was going in a new direction. I had to show some backbone. It was a terribly delicate balance for someone with a desire to be obedient to the Lord and reconcile that obedience with honoring one's parents. He deserved respect not only for the position he held as a father, but the way he held it. I am one of the people who are richly blessed with a great man in his home. Respecting him is everything.

After several months of wrangling with me over this decision, I had not caved in. Slowly, he accepted the idea. His son was really leaving this time. I was going to begin moving farther and farther away from his incredible area of influence. Influencing my future would still be one of his goals. It is surprising how much success he has had in this area, and how now, as a middle-aged man I appreciate it.

Learning to apply one's faith to everyday life is a mysterious undertaking. Salvation is a narrow way, but Christian Service is a winding road. Would I be able to stay on this path? It would profoundly impact the lives of all of us at the table the night I made my announcement. I was woefully unaware of the obstacles that I would face in laboring for the Lord.

What none of us could have imagined back then was just how far that path would take us...

CHAPTER THREE

Elusive Destination

As if in a trance, I sat staring into the darkness. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of uncertainty as I surveyed the Siberian snowscape for the first time. My plane had arrived in Novosibirsk, Russia, at 4:30am local time. In order to find this place on a map a person could place their finger at the southern tip of India, then move it straight upwards past Nepal, through China, then Kazakhstan into Russia where the bold capitalized letters NOVOSIBIRSK are waiting. For the first time I was a long ways away from Texas, the home of my family for six generations.

My contact from the Novosibirsk State University was nowhere to be found. He worked for a private language school called U-Tree. I made a verbal contract to study at their school, and he assured me that he would meet my arriving plane. His firm sent me a letter of invitation which was the legal document I had used to get a visa to Russia. After I cleared customs and grabbed my luggage, I took my first steps into the wilds of Siberia. I emerged from the sliding glass doors of the newly built international terminal at Tolmachova Airport.

The digital display showed a temperature of minus thirty-one degrees Celsius. It was the first week of December, 1997. Standing there on that dark and snowy morning, I had never been so cold. I had no hat. It was becoming obvious that the winter coat I was wearing was inadequate. It was dawning on me that I was in trouble. That clothing store in Texas just did not have the gear to meet my family's needs in

Siberia. Thank goodness I had come alone in order to work the kinks out before bringing my wife Andrea and our two boys, Clark and Brett.

At that particular moment, I was less concerned about being cold than I was about the fact that I only knew two words in Russian: “Da” and “Nyet”. Little did I know that “Da-Nyet” was a mysterious phrase in and of itself. The meaning of which is one that eludes most foreigners. I had no one to interpret for me. There was no map for me. All I had was American money, an address, and a telephone number. It would be hours before businesses opened. In 1997 the World Wide Web did not have a lot of practical help for Siberia. Google was still in the future.

The night sky was still pitch black. There was a small parking lot in front of the terminal. I searched in vain for a marked taxi. There was no one with a sign welcoming me. Without a hat it was obvious to those passing by that I was new to Siberia.

At that moment, I could not decide what to do next. Thankfully, a German businessman, who spoke broken English, saw how desperate I was and said that I could ride with him to the city. He believed that someone could try to call on my behalf from the hotel lobby and figure out how to get to the university from there. He told me that there were no official taxi cabs. According to him there was not even a company with a dispatcher in this city of 1.5 million people. It was the “wild west” of the taxi business he lectured. Driver and rider beware he cautioned.

He marched off into the parking lot, stopped at a van, spoke to the two men in it, and then waved me over. He told me that he had negotiated the price of the cab for the both of us. As he invited me to follow him he warned me that they would try to get money from me too, and that I needed to ignore them.

He admitted that the danger of ignoring their requests for extra money was not in offending them. If they believed I was going to stiff them, then I may be dumped out on a side road and left to fend for myself. Getting into that van we were taking a chance. They could be planning on taking us somewhere to rob us, or worse. After 30 hours of flying and

layovers, my groggy mind was not ready for the struggle of the wills that was to come.

The German showed a little sympathy for the plight of the taxi drivers. He said that they were taking a risk too. From their end, they were afraid of taking another client who would rip them off. A favorite scam was to give the driver a fake address. Then at a stop light near the real destination jump out and disappear. Counterfeit bills of all currencies were also a real dilemma for everyone.

There were no set prices. The market price was set by pure negotiation. After the German businessman negotiated the price of \$40 to the hotel, he emphasized to me that it was for the both of us. He told me that it would be about an hour ride. It would become evident that the hour required for driving was not to cover the distance, but to navigate the horrible roads.

The driver opened the sliding door with a gold-toothed grin. Great! It was cargo van and there were no seats. Without any hesitation the German got in. "Okay", I thought to myself. I got in too and found my place on the metal floor of the vehicle. It was going to be so much fun bouncing up and down on this frozen 'seat'.

There were actually two Russians in the van. The steering wheel was located on the right-hand side like a postman. Yet they drove on the right side of the road like in Texas. The two Russians had the standard look of the late 1990's for Siberian men. Big, bushy fur hats, gold Teeth, thick fur coats, and without exception, black shirts, pants, and shoes.

The first thing I noticed about the two Russians in the front seats was that they talked loudly. They were very animated and liked to tell stories to each other. The second thing that I noticed about them was that whatever they did, they did with gusto. There was no holding back. They might get bored and quit what they were doing after a while, but only after they had exhausted every possibility. While they were doing it they used all their energy in dealing with the task at hand. This is an underestimated strength of their people. The third thing that I noticed

was that they played their music really loud! Cher's new hit single was blaring on the radio. Her metallic voice crooned "It's Tiiiiime to Move On". Somehow the two Russians were able to carry on a full-blown conversation in spite of the volume.

I would have loved to look at around at my new home, but it was dark and we were sitting on the floor of the van. There were not even any stars to look as we peered from our seat on the floor up and out the windows. It was a cold, long, bumpy ride. For us foreigners in the van, the music volume killed all attempts at conversation. So I just gave up, sat there, and started letting the history and the nostalgia of the place wash over me.

I tried to let it sink in, "Dude, I'm really here". This is it. The land of Stalin and Lenin. The land where they sent the prisoners to die in the gulag by the millions. After the hour of cold hard fun was over, we arrived at the Sibir hotel in downtown Novosibirsk. The large building towered many stories over the massive Ob River. It is a river that rivals the Mississippi for size. The German was explaining to me that the city had one and a half million people and the name means "new Siberia". Originally it had been called Novonikolaivsk, after the tsar Nikolai, but the Soviets took care of that.

Again, the German told me that he had rented the van for \$40. I did not owe anything. I already had \$20 ready to force into his hand when we parted. But after he paid and brushed past the drivers they boxed me in preventing me from reaching my fellow passenger. They held up the \$40 and pointed to me. The German stepped back towards us to argue in Russian with them. I tried to offer them some of the \$2 bills I brought with me as a souvenir to give on occasion. They looked at that money then shoved it back at me shaking their heads, "Nyet"! They were not going for it. So after much pressure, I relented and paid the money. Honestly, I was happy to pay. I had the cash. But the German was so disappointed in me. I had failed my first lesson in Russian culture, but did not realize it yet.

He had been so insistent that I stand my ground with them. The confrontation had lasted too long, I was too new, and was too exposed. In my mind that \$40 bought me a sure victory out of the situation. I did not want to burn the first cultural bridge I crossed. Maybe they had extorted me, but I was in no position to argue. I thought I had passed my first test in dealing with these people. The German disagreed. At the time, I doubted I would ever see things his way.

Unfortunately, my trip was still not over. I spent a lot of time haggling with the people at the desk of the hotel to help me. They did a lot of calling to the university and yelling into the phone. They told me that the university offices would open at 10:00 am and that they would try back then. I felt very awkward to be the cause of all this unpleasantness.

The German stayed and chatted me up for a while, probably out of boredom. He told me that cell phones still had not arrived in Novosibirsk. There were no debit cards or ATM machines yet. Credit Cards could only be used at a handful of banks to draw cash at an actual currency exchange in that large city. The Currency Exchange in the Sibir Hotel lobby was closed.

Finally, the people at the desk got through to the office at the university. They said to send me in the hotel's car to Academic Town. I thought they were going to take me to the university itself. By the time I walked outside to get in the car, the sun had finally come out. Even still, it was a gray gloomy day with a thick cloud cover overhead.

The hotel's car was a small Toyota. We went for another hour ride to the south. Academic Town was built in the middle of a man-made forest. The drive was so long that I thought we had actually left the city. After what seemed like a never-ending drive on a winding road through the Siberian wilderness we arrived. My destination was so deep in the woods, that by the time I got to the next hotel, I literally thought I was in the middle of a forest. The driver motioned for me to get out. I was not

sure if this was the university or somehow connected to it, so I went into the lobby.

No one from the university or the language school met me. This hotel was probably ten stories tall. It was not as nice or as big as the Sibir. The clerk at the desk seemed less inclined to help me. I pointed to my contact sheet. I then put my left thumb in my ear, and my pinkie to my lips to mimic a phone. The clerk shook his head no and pointed down at the desk. I finally figured out that he was telling me to stay there. Acting in the hope that the people of the Sibir and the university had worked something out I checked in. It would have been nice if they informed me about it, but I could not speak their language.

I was exhausted, but at least I had a warm place to stay the night. I spent my first night at the “Golden Valley Hotel”, next to the famous Targovy Center in Academic Town. The large shopping complex was visible through the window on the back side of the hotel. It was a comfort to know that there was some civilization nearby.

My hometown of Burleson, Texas, is on Central Standard Time. Novosibirsk is exactly twelve hours ahead. After a thirty-hour plane trip, and an eight-hour transition to the hotel I only managed to get close to my final destination. I was very hopeful that the next day I would finally arrive. After enduring cold like I never knew was possible I had no energy left. The hotel room was oddly about the same size as my old dorm room at Tarleton State. One unexpected marvel were the two giant down pillows on the single bed. I took a hot shower, then crawled under the covers and passed out.

CHAPTER FOUR

Soviets vs Russians

The next day I went to the hotel lobby and the new clerk on duty signaled for me to wait. So again on faith I did. Late in the morning my contact, Arture, arrived at the hotel. He was a skinny, young, shrewd-looking businessman who was obviously very happy to have a paying client. Oddly, he offered no apology or explanation for failing to meet me the day before. Instead he began the conversation by asking me to grab my things and follow him. This was another cultural moment hitting me square in the face. It really rubbed me the wrong way.

My instincts were to protest and threaten to take my business elsewhere. If the rest of the private language school experience was going to be like the trip from the airport, then the deal was off. I was not going to subject my family to that. Having no other contacts for the moment I decided not to say anything just yet. I allowed him to lead me about like a bull with a ring in his nose...for the time being. For the moment I had no other options. Not to mention that my entire visa and letter of invitation into Russia hinged on this business arrangement.

Sadly, the callous disregard for others he showed me would become a common experience over the years. Suffering unnecessary hardship and abuse at the hands of such people created an incredible internal conflict on how to deal with them. After such treatment these types come striding in at the next meeting and completely ignore what

they had done. The additional insult of acting as if everything was just fine was nearly too much to deal with. To pour salt in the wound, they often would be in a chipper mood to boot. If you showed any displeasure in tone or attitude, or God forbid mentioned their transgression, then they acted as if you were the one with the problem.

The first time experiencing this created a lot of negative emotions within me. My need for help trumped my feelings however. I was just glad to have a smiling face that spoke English to me. He had me over a barrel. Over time this type of behavior would grate on me and ruin some very key relationships.

Following Arture out of the lobby we plunged into the forest on foot. He led me along an ice-packed trail while the howling wind whipped around us. To my delight, after a very short distance the main academic building of the Novosibirsk State University came into view. It looked good from afar. There were giant columns out front. It was a long never-ending building surrounded by evergreen trees and a blanket of snow. "That view would make for an excellent postcard", I thought. Ironically, I had only missed NSU by a few hundred yards the day before.

With great pride, while using excellent English, Arture told me that the school was the second largest university in Russia. He added that their city was the third largest as well. As we entered the university's main building I noticed how unremarkable the building itself was up close.

All the buildings were constructed with concrete panels. They must have looked old the minute they were built. As a teenager I had worked as a construction hand and realized that I did not have the knack for building. I was more of a demolitions kind of guy. From the looks of things, the Soviet workers didn't have much building skill either. That or they just did not care.

Simple things were off. For example, little tiles that were not lined up. Instead of having a perfect little grid, two or three would be cock-eyed in the bottom right corner. There might be spacing that was

too far apart or too close. It was as if the workers did not care and no one came behind them to make them do it right. There was no rhyme or reason to the sloppiness. If this was how construction was done at a prestigious institution, then how would it fare on average with Soviet 'craftsmanship'?

There was little in the way of artistic design. It was just unprofessional all around. In the long hallways, there would be little hills going up and down in the floor. Sometimes long runner rugs that were thread-bare would hide these rises and depressions. It was easy to be tripped up at first. I had to be careful with the cumbersome winter boots that I had just started wearing that morning. The door frames were all cock-eyed, leaving doors too close to their frames with huge gaps above and below.

It was gray and dirty everywhere inside the building. Light bulbs must have been 30-watt yellow. It was hard to see indoors. Between the bad lamps and the cloudy day it was almost like being in an old 'colorized' movie that had once been black and white.

Due to the poor condition of the facilities and the odd lunch counter, I got the wrong impression that day. I did not yet appreciate that I was standing among some of the elite students, at one of the most prestigious universities in the former Soviet Union. In a very short time the people in that building would begin to build a new ultra-modern Russia that would eclipse the glory of the Tsars. From their perspective I was one step past the line that separates red-neck from country, as a young man fresh off the plane from Texas. Prejudice and opinion was alive and well everywhere as I would soon find out.

On our way to the classroom, we passed by a lunch table. Students were coming down and getting fried pies. The fillings were meat, mashed potatoes, or the other variety with eggs and onion in them. There were no napkins, plates, or utensils of any kind.

Their snack bar was literally a card table with a table cloth. The food lay on the tablecloth itself in the rather cool hallway. There was no

such thing as plastic gloves, hair nets, or any other guise of sanitation. The worker took a thin piece of brown paper cut in a square and picked up a pie and handed it to you.

If you bought a drink then you were in for some fun. Holding your piping hot greasy pie in one hand, you must now pick up a scalding hot tea that was in the thinnest plastic cup possible. It was a clear plastic cup with a tiny lip that held about 150 ml or 4 oz. of tea. It resembled an oversized communion cup. Because it was so small, in order to get full value, the cup was filled to the brim. Getting to your destination was fraught with hilarious possibilities, especially travelling over the hilly hallways. If you could wind your way through the crowded halls full of students, you would still have to brave icy sidewalks outside or uneven stairs within in order to find a place to sit and eat.

The woman who served the food was pleasant enough. She was a middle-aged, blond-haired woman who was pleasantly plump. The kind of figure real men like. She flashed a nice smile, full of gold teeth. And that is when I noticed another part of Russian culture. Typically, they greet and treat foreigners extremely well. Of course they like to practice any English they know on you. By contrast, at age twenty-seven my entire foreign vocabulary consisted of “Da”, “Nyet” and “Taco”. I was pathetic. But that was what I was there to remedy.

The correlation between one’s attire and corresponding status at work was obvious. Arture was the president of a small private language school housed within the University. He was dressed in a suit and tie. The woman running the “snack bar” was wearing a thin, blue robe that reminded me of a hospital gown that went all the way around and buttoned in the front. Odder than the gown were the slippers. She was wearing household slippers. The kind you would wear in your den at night before you go to bed. This was the lunch lady’s work attire in the chilly hallway. I do not know how she could take it.

The temperature outside was again in the minus thirties that frigid day. Poor heating and large poorly built classroom windows left

the corridor where she stood all day very cool even for myself in full winter dress. Yet, there she stood dressed in glorified pajamas working for several hours.

As Arture and I started up the six flights of stairs to the facilities his private school was leasing from the university, a female janitor passed me by. She had a bandana tied on her head. She was wearing the same blue hospital gown wannabe and the fluffy slippers too. I began to wonder if even the slippers were uniform issue. She was carrying a metal bucket full of the blackest water you ever saw.

Her mop consisted of a broom handle, with a twelve-inch long piece of 1"x 2" wood nailed to the end to make a T-shape. Her mop head was a paper-thin, threadbare piece of plaid picnic tablecloth with a hole in the middle of it. She stopped on the landing below, dipped the Soviet mop into the black, oozing water, and then sloshed it on the landing and started mopping with it. It was disgusting and pointless.

As we went up the stairs, the damp smell of dust overtook us. It was like driving on a dirt road after the rain with the windows down. The foul odor was mixed in with the cigarette smoke that was trapped at the top of the stairwell with no ventilation. The cloud of acrid smoke grew thicker as we climbed. Enclosed in this windowless, dimly lit, foul-smelling stairwell we finally trudged up to the sixth floor on stairs of different heights. I kept half-tripping and sloshing scalding hot tea onto my cold fingers.

At the top we were greeted by a gigantic, wooden door that screeched on a heavy metal hinge when it was opened. It was more like a vault door than an entryway. Later I would find out that this was indeed its purpose. As I stepped over the six inch high threshold, the difference in this part of the building was obvious. The entry way was a lobby of sorts that had a clean linoleum floor and modern furniture. It stood in pleasant contrast with everything else I had seen on the way up. While taking off my coat, the heavy door was slammed shut behind me and a one-inch thick bolt was rammed into place.

The entire sixth floor of the mathematical wing of NSU was windowless. I finally figured out that it was a converted attic, and the stairwell was an addition to the original building to guarantee only one access to this learning center. Most of it had been constructed with red brick. They used remodeling and furnishings to set themselves apart from the rest of the State University buildings.

This was a key lesson that was driven home to me that day. This would be the obvious contrast between doing things the “New Russian way” and doing things the “Old Soviet way”. This struggle continues in Russia to this day. Other than voting, I have never really been much involved in politics. Not being a businessman I did not particularly pay attention to economics or business. But the contrast could not be ignored. It was that obvious.

I would tell people over and over again throughout my time in Russia, that the Soviets had it all wrong. They thought that they were going to influence the whole world with the ideology of communism. The fatal flaw in this idea was that they totally ignored the individual. The untapped potential of the Russian people still amazes me. If the average Russian family had the freedom and the business opportunity that the average American family has, I figure that they would have a wealthy class to rival any western country.

To complete the tour, Arture showed me a small break room for foreign guests. Then he led me to his office. He had a very nice desk with a computer sitting on top of it. In my email I had not mentioned my purpose in wanting to learn the Russian language. Now, face to face he asked me why. “I want to learn to preach the Bible in Russian and organize new churches”, I told him.

What I did not tell him was my motivation in choosing his school over those in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chuck Norris

The reason choosing this Siberian school in lieu of others in Moscow or St. Petersburg was my language aptitude. After transferring from Tarleton I had embarked on what unwittingly became a seven-year missionary training and development program. “Straight is the gate and narrow is the way” that leads to Salvation, but Christian service goes down a winding road. The path of Christian service was proving to be an unusual road indeed. I had been on a wild ride already, and now I was sitting in an office in Siberia, Russia. At least the winding road is not boring.

One of the parts of missionary training was to take a language aptitude test. I scored an abysmal 30 out of 100 for language learning and grammatical ability (You may have already noticed this weakness so far). Basically, our pet cat had better language skills than I did. I was strongly encouraged by those at the training seminar to go to a country with an easier language than Russian. The people advising me were very experienced and professional. One woman, Georgia Webb, had spent a long career teaching Spanish to American missionaries. Their advice was very competent based upon the facts before them.

They pressed upon me to choose to serve somewhere else. From their perspective it was the only logical choice. If I had just surrendered to go wherever God was leading then I would have agreed with them. But this is where I faced a very difficult choice. This was a hair-pin curve on the narrow road of Christian Service. Was God truly leading me to Russia specifically?

I heard no audible voice. The only visions I had seen were after some spicy food. My strong desire to follow God’s leadership in my life was directed by a series of burdens, I believe He had placed upon my heart, followed by a peace. This pattern of burden, deep searching prayer, followed by peace was what had guided me to make the most important decisions in my life. This internal cycle helped me decide to marry Andrea.

Peace in your heart does not sound like a very good explanation when said out loud. Yet it was real, and it was guiding me. Had it truly been the Lord who impressed me when the Berlin Wall fell? Had it been at His unction that I transferred to Bible College? Had it been His peace that He bestowed after I surrendered my life to serve as a missionary to the former Soviet Union? There was only a peace that came after my burden was lifted upon surrendering to the Lord in prayer.

There was a sacrifice of virtually starting over in Bible College. Because of the narrow scope of the school, fifty-five of my credits did not transfer from Tarleton. I had to start over as a freshman in what was actually my third year of college. It had been a humiliating obstacle.

Surrendering to be a missionary was another huge hurdle to overcome. I had never ever had any desire to travel outside the USA, much less be a missionary. Once I received a burden from the Lord for the former Soviet Union, my pride could not bear announcing that I surrendered to be a missionary and then not follow through. I was not going to do it. So I wrestled with the Lord in prayer until I was at peace about it. Even then, I was slow to reveal this new reality in my life.

The credible recommendation made to me after the aptitude test was at odds with God's apparent leading in my life. I felt strongly that I had a definite call to Russia. Had I misunderstood the Lord's intentions? Was I trying to read too much into a call? It was a real struggle to make a wise decision. My dad impressed into me his love of strategy, conservative wins, and a sure thing. If I went to Russia out of pride then what reward could I hope for from the Lord but "wood, hay and stubble"? I had to serve the Lord where He led. I could not just go where I wanted to go. So the aptitude test results put me at another cross-roads.

After that test my burden for Russia did not diminish. I was not at peace about any change. I was inexplicably drawn to this place. No other country impacted my thoughts or emotions. Even a language test did not diminish this feeling. This is where the biographies of other missionaries started helping me practically.

I took a play out of the Hudson Taylor playbook. I would not go where there was a high concentration of foreigners in Russia. I would strike out for the interior and attempt to live as the Russians lived. I decided that since my aptitude was so low that the best method of language learning would be to totally isolate myself from English.

Novosibirsk, Siberia, was a good place to do that. There was no English television programming, no English-speaking radio, no English newspapers for sale, and no internet service to homes yet. It was four hours from Moscow by plane. The strategy of total immersion would force me to adapt. Andrea and I were going to go for it. It was going to be an all or nothing push.

I could not have conceived of the path God had given me to travel in serving Him. I wanted to be faithful and obedient. I wanted to bring service that was worthy of Him. So I plunged into the Siberian winter-land with a faith that God would use us if in fact it was Him that led us there. Could I ever learn the language well enough to serve the Lord effectively in Russia? We were going to find out in a very practical way.

The teachers at U-Tree, like Arture the administrator, spoke excellent English. However, the majority of the people we met were just your typical, friendly Russians who only knew a few phrases. Most could only say "seet down pleeze" or "sank you very much". These phrases were invariably followed by a guilty smile that crept across their faces. My guess is they could hear their Soviet English language teachers somewhere pounding their desks shouting, "I taught you better than that!"

Arture began to ask me about signing a contract. I signed a two-week probationary contract for just myself. I gave my word that if things went well, then I would return with my wife and that both she and I

would study in his school throughout 1998. I hoped that this would give him the incentive he needed to provide me better customer service.

I sent a short email from his computer letting my family know that I was safe. After the negotiations were finished he said he would show me to my campus apartment. We left his office, walked down the six flight of stairs, and headed out into the forest in the opposite direction of the hotel. He chided me and told me I needed to get a hat.

“A Siberian is not someone who can withstand the cold, but someone who knows how to prepare for it”, he lectured. I would hear this lesson many times. The way my ears were burning, I wholeheartedly agreed. Yes, I needed a hat. A decade later I would laugh at all the westerners coming in without headgear, trying to act macho, doing exactly what I had done when I first arrived. That is a dead giveaway that you are a foreigner. Too much smiling, fancy watches, and nice shoes were the other obvious non-verbal clues that someone was a foreigner.

The snow in the forest we were walking through was hip-deep in the areas that were off the trail. The trails were hard-packed, narrow pathways through a grove of cedar and birch trees. The squirrels in this forest were a lot different than the gray squirrels in North Texas. Here they were red little devils that had about an inch of fur sticking up off their ears.

As we walked, there was a crisp, crunching sound with every step. The hot air under my coat was being pushed out the neck hole right onto my face. Icicles were forming on my eyelashes, mustache, and nose hairs. I was really starting to suffer. My ears were killing me. I instinctively tried to use my gloved hand to wipe away the icicles on my face. That action only smeared them into a nasty mess on my cheeks. Snot-sicles are a nasty side effect of prolonged exposure to such cold.

After about a fifteen minute walk through the forest we finally arrived at a humongous nine-story apartment building. It seemed that the Russians had a penchant for tall buildings. There were four entrances and 146 apartments. This was the housing for university staff and foreign students with families. My job was to spend two weeks in language school, learn my way around town, fix up an apartment and be prepared so that my family had a “soft” landing when they arrived in Russia. I was very glad I had decided to do this, especially after Arture left me stranded the day before.

The apartment was nice enough. It was about 550 square feet. The layout was two rooms, a very small kitchen, a toilet room the size of a closet and a separate room with a tub, sink and mirror. It was all connected by a narrow corridor. The rooms were furnished with one fold-out divan in the largest room, a double-wide bed in the smaller room that was accented by a giant TV. I say giant because the wooden TV frame was as big as the desk it sat on. The screen was close to 22” diagonal, the size of the average computer monitor. Most importantly the apartment was warm. Thank God!

In the kitchen there was a sink attached to the wall and an electric stove with two burners but no oven. The most disgusting part of the apartment was the toilet seat. It was made out of cork board. Let that disgusting reality sink in a while. I thought, “Welcome home Jeff”.

The entire apartment was painted in a two-tone color like an old army hospital. From the floor to four feet up the wall was a light brown paint. From the paint to the ceiling was a chalky white-wash. The old Soviet television in the small bedroom received four channels for which I was grateful. After showing

me around, Arture shook my hand and said, "Classes start tomorrow at 9 a.m. Think you can find your way back?" I said, "I hope so." Then he turned and was gone.

I went to the kitchen window and looked out at the forest from my second floor balcony. It was about 2:30 in the afternoon and it was already getting dark. The sun was setting. I sure was glad that I had eaten a fried pie earlier at the university because that was all I had had for two days. I walked into the bedroom, sat on the bed and leaned forward to turn on the television. I flipped through all the channels that I could find.

There were two news channels, a channel with a soap opera, and the fourth was some kind of Chinese all-sports channel. The sports channel was snowy and the picture jumped around a lot. But every once in a while, if you held the antenna just right and your tongue just so, you could make out the figures on the screen.

The next morning I slipped on my big, thick, waterproof, snow-boots. They listed at \$300 brand new. I bought them on sale at a ski shop for \$75 in the summer while travelling in New England. I slid on the down coat that I had picked up at Burlington Coat Factory in the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex. I grabbed the duffel bag that I had used to carry my books with during graduate school and headed off to class. With no hat the walk was going to be brutal again.

As I left the apartment at 8:30 A.M. it was still cloudy and the sun was just starting to come up for sunrise. In the forest with the dark clouds it was still kind of a twilight. I was a little bit nervous about getting lost in the forest between my dorm and the administration building. So I just started moving as fast as I could in the direction we had come from the previous day. I stayed on the well-packed trails hoping that it indicated traffic between the housing units to the Math building.

Every time I miss-stepped I fell in deep snow. The sudden stop made it feel as if my kneecap was about to be ripped off. The snow here was powdery, almost like sand. It was nothing like the heavy, damp snow that I had seen in the California Mountains as a kid. Thankfully, I did find my way to the administration building. I was so happy to find a lunch lady on duty already!

It was a different woman today. She was a little bit older than the one on the previous day. She had on the same uniform of hospital gown and fluffy slippers. She had the same gold teeth. But she was different in a few important ways.

The first important difference was her very unpleasant disposition. She was very annoyed at me because I could not speak Russian. Also, it grated on her that I did not have the correct change. I still had not exchanged money and I only had the few rubles that Arture had loaned me until I could get to the bank.

The second stark difference was her hair color. She was the first person I met who had used beets to dye her hair red. She did not have highlights. All of it was beet red. The whole mangy shock. She had it cropped off about the middle of her neck and had not bothered to comb it much either.

For my part, I am sure I looked pretty spiffy too. I had just come in from the cold without my hat or scarf. My red face was swollen having just stepped in from another minus thirty degree day. It was obvious to her that she was looking at an idiot. Probably one who grew up with a mother that did not love him very much. She started to chew me out, pointing and talking.

I did not have a clue what she was saying, but from her hand gestures and the expressions on her face it became obvious she was telling me I needed to get a hat and a scarf. Feeling miserable as I did, I was not in the mood to try to understand her concern. Her very expressive and gruff manner turned me off.

I just wanted my scalding hot 4-oz tea in the malleable plastic cup and hot pie with meat and potatoes. I wanted it without any of her lip. I am a big guy with a bigger appetite and I wanted food...now!

As I was stumbling over the hilly hallway I got my first bite of eggs and onion. I hate eggs! My mother said that even as a baby I recoiled at egg baby food. Oh I was mad. If she had spent a little more time doing her job instead of lecturing me, then I might have something good to eat. As it was, I was stuck choking down the horrid eggs. Still unskilled in the art of holding the flimsiest plastic cups in the world, my icy fingers were boiling from the scalding hot tea sloshing over the sides onto them again. After trudging up the six flights of stairs, through the smoke cloud, I stumbled into the tranquility of U-Tree.

It was well lit and nice. It held the promise of the Russia of tomorrow. My mood instantly improved. In spite of the rocky start that morning, I was elated to finally start my first lesson in the glorious Russian language. My first Russian teacher was Yelena. She spoke pretty good English and had the biggest smile and most bubbly personality that I ever met in any Russian. She loved her job. She loved her cat. She loved her kid. She liked meeting foreigners. At least she would be a bright spot in the day.

She asked how I was adjusting. I told her about the lunch lady. Yelena told me to understand that I had mistaken her sternness as rudeness. She pointed out that it was the way many show concern. It is their way she explained. While the tone and gestures were seemingly hostile to me as a foreigner, the intent was actually for good. According to Yelena, I was misreading the cultural signals. I was pretty skeptical, because at the time I naively believed that many facial expressions are universal. Yelena's declaration began to resonate with me. "Could it be that different reactions created genuine cultural misunderstandings?" I would find out the hard way.

She gave the example of grandmothers. Yelena assured me that when they are upset, nervous, or even overly concerned about something that they adopt an extremely authoritative and rough manner to drive their point home. I told her that if what she was saying was true, then it would take some getting used to. As a man it was a real turn off for me. This would easily explain the attitude many Russian men had adopted in such encounters. They just laugh, never take it serious and completely ignore the scolders.

For myself, I know that when I am in a bad mood, or have had enough of the perceived rudeness, I can respond in kind. This is a weakness on my part that I had still not overcome. My dad has this inhuman ability to bite his tongue and let out his frustration later. I always wanted that power, but it still eludes me.

Moving on to the language lesson, we opened up an old Soviet textbook that was probably printed in the 1950s. The first word on the first page was *zdrvsvooyteeya*. The very first word they wanted to teach a foreigner had five consonants before the vowel. It was like getting hit with a brick in the face. Immediately the doubts started plaguing me. If this is the first word, then what's next? "This word is the formal greeting to groups of people, first-time acquaintances and people that you say *Vee* to instead of *Tee*", Yelena explained. "Here we go", I thought to myself.

In English the word 'you' is both singular and plural. We know of whom it is speaking based upon context. Russian has two main divisions of words for 'you'. *Vee* is the formal word division. "When you pronounce the *Vee* you don't just make an "e" sound, you have to dig down deep. The proper sound is a

deep, guttural ‘EE’”, she continued. To me it sounded as if it came from a wolf that hadn't eaten in five days. Who was to be addressed with the *Vee*? Yelena as my teacher was to be greeted with the impossible Z-greeting and spoken to in the *Vee* grammar because she is an authority in my life. The *Vee* greeting is a sign of respect.

The *Tee* people are friends, family and those the same age or younger than oneself. Yelena then hopped up to the chalkboard and in her spirited manner wrote down the 33 letters of the Russian alphabet. For the rest of the class we went over the alphabet and she tried to teach me the most basic of phrases like, “Hello, My name is Jeff.”

After my first ninety-minute class Yelena said it was time for a tea break. In the break room, while waiting for the water to boil, Yelena my teacher, Arture the director and another teacher, Alona, sat down with me and began to ask lots of questions. They were as curious as they were friendly. The conversation gradually turned to the number of hours that I was taking.

I had signed up to take eight academic hours of language per day, five days a week. The two teachers said that was twice as much as a person could handle. I countered with, “You do not know how enthusiastic and anxious I am to learn this language. I have a job to do and it requires my ability to speak clearly in the Russian language.”

They said, “Your level of motivation does not matter. It is still too much. You can only absorb so much at a time.” Arture, ever the businessman, chimed in on my side because he understood the financial implications of eight hours a day. He loved my enthusiasm and my willingness to pay enthused him.

I ribbed Arture and said, “You ought to be really happy I am paying for what you call an hour, but in the contract an academic hour is only forty-five minutes.” In his defense Yelena and Alona argued that it did not matter. Again I countered with the fact that I would only be in class six actual hours a day, even though they counted it as eight academic hours. “It is not even a full work day”, I quipped. They assured me that I did not understand what I was talking about. Contrarily, Arture tried to assure me that it would be fine. Boy was I glad he had my back...for a dollar. With friends like him, I was sure to do well.

I told my teachers that I wanted to push to the limit. I wanted the right to fail. They gleefully assured me that I would fail and that I would see that they were right. The chauvinistic gauntlet had been thrown down. My pride demanded sacrifice and success in the face of their now mocking laughter. We finally reached a compromise. For the first two weeks I would take eight hours a day as per my written contract. When I returned after Christmas with my wife, we would rethink the schedule.

After such a spirited debate, I was fresh and ready to go. I was ready to prove to them that I could take it. Off I trotted to my second class in the Russian language. By my fourth one and a half hour session, I was bushwhacked. I have never been a skinny guy, but in December of 1997 I was a fat guy in good shape.

I had endured two-a-days during August when the Texas heat was at its worst. At times I had joined my teammates at the chain link fence blowing chunks of breakfast on the yellow grass. Some of us were stupid enough to eat before practice. “Orange juice going the wrong way ain't no way”, we would say.

I knew what it meant to be physically tired after a day of manual labor in the sun. Yet, I had never been as tired as I was when I left that windowless sixth floor school that day. I trudged down the six flights

of stairs and walked outside to see that at four in the afternoon it was already pitch black in the thick forest. I was tired of the dark. It was dark when I walked to school. I studied on a floor with no windows all day. By the time I left it was dark again on the way home.

I was told to go home a different route. If I would walk past the student dormitories I would find a small store where I could purchase some food for dinner. Man, I was so tired. Maybe it was the lack of food. Maybe it was the biting cold. I had to admit that class had been brutal. Especially the second half after lunch break. Even so, I was convinced that like anything else, after two full weeks of doing the same thing I would get used to it.

Thankfully, as my ears were really starting to burn the student store came into view. I fumbled around in my duffel bag for my little cheat sheet. I detached it from the volume, "Learning Russian in 15 Minutes a Day". It was a book I brought with me from Barnes and Noble. What a sucker. That book was helpful, but anyone who believes the title is a dope.

I made my way past the dormitories to the student "store". I found the door and without breaking my quick pace I slammed through it. On the other side I abruptly stopped. In the narrowest of corridors a mass of about thirty university students trying to form a disorganized line stood staring back at me. I tried to control my breathing but I was huffing and puffing as fat boys are known to do.

Steam was rising off my head like a pot of boiling water. My red swollen face was in terrible pain, but I tried to smile. My puffy coat was not stylish. Having no hat or scarf was just wrong. My thick black boots were like those worn by the police, and the tan pants I was wearing as a man was an unfashionable faux pas. They could not imagine why I was carrying a suit-case with me. I was a pathetic mess. They could not keep their eyes off the first foreigner many of them had ever seen in person.

I got in line behind them. We were packed into that little store. I could hear the whispered conversations and snickers. I grew quite self-conscious. They would rock back and forth then steal a glance in my direction with a snicker. There they stood after another typical day at university when in stumbles this stranger into their campus store. This store was actually attached to their dorm and was accessed by them through an internal hallway. Good for them. It was pretty convenient I had to admit.

When I finally focused my attention on the 'store' I did not like what I saw. I am not exaggerating when I say, the front wall and the side wall were totally covered in alcoholic products. Vodkas, wines, beers, you name it. At this time, in this particular government store, there were no cokes. They had lots of cigarettes for sale, even Marlboro, but in the way of food, all this government-run Soviet style store had was stale bread and different kinds of butter and cheese. The cheeses and butter all looked the same. It was like I was standing in some backwoods Mini-mart in the south-east corner of Arkansas. In the end, the lack of selection did not matter.

I was happy to have been surrounded by the very people I was determined to preach the gospel to. I was happy to be there. It was further motivation to keep studying the language and adjust to their culture. Yes, the narrow way was a strange one, but I was glad to be on it. These thoughts lifted my mood.

After so much staring in my direction, I decided to be bold and started shaking hands and introducing myself. Boy did they laugh hard. I must really have been pronouncing it poorly. The odd thing was that new people who were getting in line behind me kept on asking me to say it again. They wanted to hear it over and over. They never got tired of laughing at it. "Well, I thought to myself, "I must have recovered

from the strange first impression by being outgoing. Just think how many people introduced themselves to me today”.

After I got home that evening, I had a dinner of buttered bread and hot tea. My neighbors came up from the first floor and surprised me with a friendly visit. The married couple both worked at the university. Their English was very broken, but we communicated well enough. I started asking them where I could get building supplies to fix up the apartment. At that, the conversation turned to their desire to do the remodeling work for pay. Before they left that evening they agreed to remodel my apartment if I would pay for the supplies in advance. They would do the work while I was gone to get my family over the holidays. The idea was for everything to be ready and waiting for my wife when we returned, and then pay the balance after I approved their work. It was a great plan.

After they left I went into my bedroom, turned on the TV and switched over to the one channel with all the shows. Would you believe it? I saw Chuck Norris! It was “Walker, Texas Ranger”. No offense Charles, but I have never been much of a fan of the show. Yet, it sure was great to see somebody at least pretending to be from Texas, even if it was on the TV. Russians like manly men and that was their idea of a manly man. I learned real fast in talking with people that if I introduced myself as an American they were a little bit standoffish. On the other hand if I introduced myself as a Texan their faces would light up. They would shout “Cowboy”, and half the time they would jokingly ask me if I knew Chuck.

I missed my wife and kids, but I was very happy that I had come on an advance trip. Without any contacts or support it is difficult to be moving one's family into a new environment. At least my short experience would take some of the edge off the adjustment for the family.

The next day after classes I was ready for my first off-campus adventure. I did not have the best situation. The temperatures were staying below minus thirty in the daytime. I was in the middle of a thick forest. I could not read or speak the language. Without the proper head gear and winter clothing my range of exploration was severely limited. It was becoming clear to me that Russians did not wear big hats for style alone. They served a real purpose.

I went to class in the dark, and left class after dark every day. My worst fear was getting lost in the forest and facing the threat of freezing to death in the brutal temperatures on some wrong forest trail. Many bodies have been discovered after such wrong turns in life-threatening cold.

My harsh reality kept me from exploring, but that had to change soon.