

Copyright © 2000 by Mark Ames and Matt Taibbi

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, or the facilitation thereof, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. Any members of educational institutions wishing to photocopy part or all of the work for classroom use, or publishers who would like to obtain permission to include the work in an anthology, should send their inquiries to Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 841 Broadway, New York, NY 10003.

This is a work of nonfiction. While all of the characters and events depicted in this book are real, certain names and identifying details have been changed.

*Published simultaneously in Canada*

*Printed in the United States of America*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ames, Mark 1965-

The Exile: sex, drugs, and libel in the new Russia / by Mark Ames  
and Matt Taibbi.

p. cm.

ISBN-10: 0-8021-3652-4

ISBN-13: 978-0-8021-3652-7

1. Ames, Mark 1965-. 2. Exile (Moscow, Russia) 3. Tabloid  
newspapers—Russia (Federation)—Moscow. 4. Newspaper publishing—  
Russia (Federation)—Moscow. 5. Journalists—Russia (Federation)—  
Moscow—Biography. 6. Americans—Russia (Federation)—Moscow  
Biography. 7. Taibbi, Matt I.Taibbi, Matt. II. Title.

PN5276.A82 1999

077' 31—dc21 99-25071

CIP

Design by Ilya Shangin and Yevgeny Raitzes

Illustrations by Roman Papsuev

Contributors: Edward Limonov, Kevin McElwee, Johnny Chen

Moscow Publisher: Konstantin Bukarev

Grove Press

an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

841 Broadway

New York, NY 10003

Distributed by Publishers Group West

[www.groveatlantic.com](http://www.groveatlantic.com)

08 09 10 11 12 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
	FOREWORD	IX
	Chapter 1 INTO EXILE	by Mark Ames.....1
	Chapter 2 TRAITOR FOR HIRE	by Matt Taibbi.....29
	Chapter 3 THE EXILE MEETS THE EXPATS	by Matt Taibbi.....45
	Chapter 4 MICHAEL BASS	by Matt Taibbi.....91
	Chapter 5 OUR GOD IS SPEED	by Mark Ames...105
	Chapter 6 THE WHITE GOD FACTOR	by Mark Ames...131
	Chapter 7 VANITY AND SPLEEN	by Mark Ames...171
	Chapter 8 HACKS	by Matt Taibbi...199
	EPILOGUE	235
	NOTES	237

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like first and foremost to thank the members of the *eXile* staff, who put a lot of work into this book and received absolutely nothing in return:

To Eugene, the *eXile* pit bull, for killing that annoying dog;

To Konstantin Bukarev, for taking a chance on a totally unsalable product, for giving us complete editorial freedom, and for keeping us shackled to a wretched and penniless existence;

To Ilya Shangin, the Jedi designer, for his brilliant drunken innovations, and for sacrificing his health to pull all-nighters with us because we could never finish our articles on time;

To Krazy Kevin McElwee, our genuinely insane voice and uncredited managing editor, for filling holes in the paper, for filling in when we're in rehab, and for losing scores of restaurant and movie theater clients with his gratuitously vicious reviews;

To Vlad Kousraev, for putting our business back in order, for keeping us alive during the crisis . . . and for not stealing our money;

To Svetlana Negrustuyeva, for making us all that money, and for putting up with two years of relentless sexual harassment;

To Roman Papsuyev, for his great cartoons;

To Dmitri Shalya, for making us look like experts on Moscow nightlife;

To Tatiana Baklastova, for helping arrange all those barter deals we later welched on, and for bringing in wagonloads of new clients with her sexy year-round tan.

Thanks also to Dar, Nkem, Liz (for writing for free), Dasha, Tamila, our accountant Tanya, and the Ne Spat crew, Artur, Gabriel, Sergei, and Olgas 1 and 2.

To Jason Mayhew, our masterful web geek, for recording our shameless exploits on his cyber-goat skin and spreading the *eXile* Word across the globe faster than a new strain of genital warts.

Thanks also to our non-*eXile* friends:

To Claudia Cross, Jane and Charlie Bausman, Brendan Cahill, Richard Emery, Calvin Walden, and Morgan Entrekin, for their invaluable assistance, patience, support, and hygiene; also, to David Johnson, for his dedication and backbone.

And to Rick Stevenson, Mitch "Blood" Green, the Reverend Sung-Yung Moon for his insights, Drew Anderson, Wilbur McGillicutty, Sparky the pet fire ant, Mo Snideman, Helen "One Brow" Schwartz, John Loopman, Jennifer Butterknees, and the late Jonas Bernstein, whose loving memory we cherish, for all the nutty times.

# FOREWORD

**T**o the charming city of Paris an American literature is obliged of formation such exotic international writers as Henry Miller and Ernest Hemingway. Both men in some way may be defined as non-American American writers. (In fact they wrote exclusively about Exiles.) In same way Mark Ames and Matt Taibbi may be defined as non-American (or even totally anti-American) writers. Both men been formed by Moscow, our ugly lady of frost, concrete, and macabre violence.

To become big an American should leave America?

Both Ames and Taibbi have agreed that to publish the eXile on American soil would be virtually impossible task. If such newspaper as eXile will ever occur somewhere on territory of United States, its publisher and writers will be arrested in space of three days by FBI agents, I guess. Also probably that Ames and Taibbi will be taken away by crowd of psychiatric hospital attendants. Obscene, rejecting, screaming, howling, eXile is totally unacceptable for common sense people, in other words, for majority of U.S. population. Poisonous newspaper eXile can be compared to only one publication in European history: to radical L'Idiot International, edited in French by Jean-Edern Hallier from 1989 to 1992 in Paris. I was a member of editorial board of L'Idiot. Every week I wrote an article in broken French for that illustrious publication. It was really "bad" newspaper. We were first to find about extramarital daughter of Iv'e Montan, we managed to oust out of power French Minister of Defense Claude Herrue. . . . Now, in broken English, I am writing for eXile while editing my own newspaper, Limonka, in my beautiful, gorgeous Russian. So, you see, I am a veteran of poisonous, extremist publications. And as a veteran, I am asserting with all qualification given to me by time and experience, "Yes," eXile is really "bad" newspaper. No, Ames and Taibbi are not pretending, they really hate common folks, they are perfect anthropologists, they are dangerous.

The irony of sort and uniqueness of position of eXile consist in fact that they are victimizing entire population of Moscow's expatriates, without asking their permission. They are forcefully given, distributed not amongst the brothers-in-soul, but amongst the enemies and amongst few friends. It looks like a forceful distribution of Saddam Hussein's anti-American pamphlets to the staff of White House. I believe poor victims look at freshly printed issue of eXile with some horror when they notice it on some bar's counter or restaurant table, or worst—in his or her letterbox.

*Speaking about "her". . . female condition in eXile is worst than in poorest Bedouin family wandering in the deserts of Israel. Women are badly beaten, raped, and mocked of. The eXile's crew is also arrogant, and making fun of authorities. They have questioned Russian men: How much money would you have to be paid before you'd fuck Madeleine Albright? Russian men declined proposition.*

*What are political beliefs of Ames and Taibbi? They are totally politically incorrect. They are extremists of a new brand: leftists and right-wingers in same time, they are racist red communist agitators worst than three-key people, bloodthirsty as Chikatilo, about women you know.*

*Logical thing would be to ask now: Why such dangerous people are not yet arrested? Ames and Taibbi are not yet arrested because they act on the small neutral territory between two laws. An American law is not applicable on Russian land and Russian law doesn't read an American publication. (I doubt that Mister Laptev, head of a State Committee for a Press, knows English. He is an old Communist functionary.) But if somebody reads English, anyway Russian law didn't give a damn. Because English readers are not Russian voters. Because only a voter's brain purity is bothering Russian law and its lawmen.*

*Dirty newspaper the eXile is extremely rare phenomenon. Like "yurodivi," or "holy fool," the eXile in its obscene language says the very truths that normal, "sane" press would avoid to tell. Long before financial crisis, the eXile's lonely voice screamed that Russia is fucked up economically, that we live here in monstrous, ruthless, bloody world of catastrophe. Life in Russia is a horror movie, says the eXile (Mark Ames compared it to the climate of a Blade Runner). But it is real, so real that everyone who falls under the spell of that macabre beauty will never leave Russia, charming land of Chikatilo and police violence.*

*Story of the eXile is worth a book. It is like a diary of a German lieutenant, what he kept in Stalingrad's ruins.*

Edward Limonov  
March 14, 1999

# the eXile

ISSUE #0 [000]

-FEBRUARY 6, 1997 - FREE

Bigger!  
Faster!  
Ames-ier!



It's the end of Christmas, and he cherishes every moment at the close of Edward Limonov's new, original newspaper.

Will They Ever Pay Me?

LIVING HERE

ISSUE #24, OCTOBER

EX-ATLANTERS

NEW!  
Living Legend!  
Page 4!

THIS

MOSCOW

win the big  
back with  
out  
plenty

and great  
the whole  
space

Mark Ames tells the  
whole, sordid truth.

## LIVING

Issue #21, September 6, 1996

THE SOURCE FOR LIFE IN /

# Toilet Tr



**MUTINY AT LIVING HERE!**  
Why everyone jumped ship  
for the eXile.

Mark Ames

2-3

BAR-DAK

5



LIMONOV'S COUPS  
D'ETAT

15



# CHAPTER ONE: INTO EXILE

*"There's nothing more boring than a man with a career."*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn



The *eXile* was the perfect name for our newspaper. I consider myself an exile from California. I wasn't forced out of my homeland in the classic, victim-of-tyranny way, but I was forced out nonetheless. "The *eXile*" also carried an ironic meaning, especially considering that most Western expats in Moscow spend their off-hours whining about the lack of Western conveniences, the surface ugliness of the Soviet architectural remains, the vulgar decadence of the new rich, the lazy and unreliable work habits of the natives, the rude service — everything that their cozy native lands trained them to resent.

They're the kind of people who actually prefer the predictable, convenient lives they left behind, and so for them, Moscow was a punishment, only a grossly overpaid punishment.

There is also a very unhumorous side to the word "exile." To most Russians, few words conjure as much tragedy and cultural/historical pain. Most of the great figures of Russian literary and philosophical history were forced into exile, from Pushkin to Lenin to Solzhenitsyn. Even Limonov was tossed out in 1974. The entire aristocracy, what was left after the butchery and counterbutchery in the Civil War, was exiled. With Stalin, exile was socialized, taken to the masses. It didn't matter how clever or rich or dangerous you were—all were welcome! Entire nations were exiled: the Crimean Tartars, the Ingush and Chechens, Volga Germans, Baltic peoples, Jews.... And here we were, a pissy, free, biweekly English-language newspaper, selling the national tragedy as a joke, with the kitsch e.e. cummings lower case "e," and the uncool appropriation of the capital "X" from Generation X just to hammer the point home. We wanted to start off on the wrong foot with our readers. All of them.

The name "The *eXile*" was part of a list of about ten or twenty suggestions emailed to me by Dr. John Dolan, from his dungeon at the University of Otago, on New Zealand's South Island. He sent the list to me when the newspaper was just starting up, in January 1997. Whereas I loved my place of exile—Moscow—

for Dr. Dolan, exile retained its classic, painful meaning. He always referred to the South Island as "Alcatraz." He's been cooking up failed plans to escape New Zealand ever since he landed.

I knew Dr. Dolan from when I was a student at Berkeley in the late Reagan years. We had a lot of ideas back then, big dreams about getting famous and destroying the "Beigeocracy" that we thought stifled and controlled American Letters. We were going to impale the "Beigeists"—another Dolan coinage—on the very pens they wrote on. We were sure we were going to prevail. Everything seemed possible then: world war, literary fame.... Anyway, something Really Big, with us at the center of it all. He was a local cult poet, whereas I was sort of a conscript, part of a small circle of reactionary intellectuals at Berkeley. We'd ridicule the boring lefties, our enemies. We'd drop all sorts of drugs and go to the underground shows: Scratch Acid, Hüsker Dü, Sonic Youth, Big Black. It felt like something might happen, and soon.

Then something happened. As in, nothing happened. At all. And then I graduated.

The Bush years marked my decline, the Fall of my empire of dreams. When Bush and his golfing buddies got tossed out in '92, I started thinking, hey, Bush and I have a lot in common, getting overrun by progress and all. Except in one small respect: Bush was a filthy-rich historical figure, whereas I was an unem-

# CHAPTER ONE

ployed, barely published, aging zero. I'd written screenplays that ended up in unmarked piles. I had an agent in Hollywood, but he insisted that I move down to L.A. if I wanted to succeed—something I didn't have the stomach to do. My short stories were said to be too undisciplined and violent for a market that expects subtlety and epiphany. "Read Raymond Carver or Alice Munro," they'd advise me. I could never get past page two of their cringing, careful stories.

My circle of reactionary friends did what all reactionaries do: they either enlisted in the corporate world, since to do otherwise would be hippie-ish; or they became epic losers. Dr. Dolan, who wrote his dissertation on de Sade, wound up in New Zealand, on the South Island, teaching English Composition to freshman med-students. One friend became a corporate lawyer; another, the smartest of our circle, who peaked too early, went on welfare, became a crack addict, and joined Pat Buchanan's Crusade For America. He fell off the radar screen a few years ago. We think he's dead.

I began to notice something during those years of sliding insignificance. Strangely enough, even though I lived in California, the yardstick by which all cultures in the world measure themselves—even though I was a citizen of Pericles's Athens and Augustus's Rome, my country was, paradoxically, becoming increasingly inaccessible to me. I felt more and more foreign as the months went by. Spending five years in Berkeley can give you a pretty skewed, useless understanding of America. When you get out, the rest of the country is a real shocker. Berkeley isn't winning anything, never did: it's just a tiny nature preserve, a showpiece of dissent, a summer camp, a Potemkin Village of harmless radicalism, a campus stacked with college DJ quippers. I took a belated trip to Europe, which included a two-week stay in Leningrad, just after the failed August coup in 1991. That fourteen-day, Homeric adventure on the streets of Leningrad really made an impression—I briefly fell into a world



The apartment bedroom in which all the bitterness and frustration that fueled the *eXile*'s inception was born.

of prostitutes, pimps, petty thieves, and high embassy officials who had to fight with the OVIR police to extend my visa and allow me to leave the country. Several months after returning home, my slow-working mind began to process it all. I didn't yet realize, consciously, that I belonged in Russia. I didn't understand that I had the right to move there. So instead of staying in Leningrad, I returned to the Bay Area in late 1991, and, in one of those classic career moves that marked my pre-Russia life, I checked into a care home for old women.

The care home was also the residential home where my Czech émigré girlfriend and her mother lived. They'd turned the back wing of their house into a care home, and named it "The European Care Home." It was about as close to Europe as I dared to move. I didn't have a place to live when I returned from my trip to the Soviet Union, and I didn't have the money to rent. Jobs in California were hard to come by in 1991. Also, I'd contracted an epic case of scabies sometime during my vacation, an infestation that would define the next nine months of my life.

I spent almost an entire year holed up in the European Care Home, in Foster City, a decaying 1970s suburb built on landfill on the peninsula south of San Francisco.

At this point, I'd like to take you on a little tour of suburban California. By reminding you of the bland hell that exists before your eyes on a daily basis, you will better understand why I defected to Russia.

Foster City was a scary place, even by suburban California standards. On the west side, closest to Highway 101 and San Mateo, Foster City had a cluster of '80s-style 10-story iridescent-green glass skyscrapers. It looked like a brochure for a "new high-tech industrial park," complete with watercolor-drawn humans in suits and beige skirts and sleek American midsize cars in the parking lots. It was the result of a failed attempt to remake Foster City from a commuter suburb to a high-tech center.

When I moved there in 1991, Foster City was neither high-tech mecca nor residential dreamland. You saw it when you drove past the half-abandoned silicon-chip midrises, and into the one-story, residential eastern half, closer to the bay. Every garage seemed to have a second-rate sports utility vehicle with "Ross Perot for President" bumper stickers plastered on the bumpers or on the smoked hatch windows. This was the "angry middle class," and they didn't look all that angry to me: just dull and stingy. In spite of the constant heat, you never actually saw people. And even when you did, they avoided looking at you. They'd check their mail or work on their cars while listening to classic rock. But they'd never look at you.

The European Care Home was located at the end of a cul-

de-sac deep within a maze of lanes and streets. Ours was called Sand Hill Court. The care home was really just a suburban house, not too different from the seven suburban houses and condominiums I'd lived in from birth until defection to Berkeley. Only, everything was older and sun-aged, like the people inside. The European Care Home's lawn had been overrun by crabgrass, with the occasional sprout of sour grass jutting out. The swimming pool in the care home's backyard was unusable: brackish, leaf and bug-filled. The pool sweep was upside down and rusted, like a dead kelp monster.

We had two old patients living in the European Care Home. I lived in one of the five bedrooms with my girlfriend. Her mother lived in another, next to ours. Four patient beds lay empty.

The money earned from the two patients barely covered the care home's mortgage payments. I was no help; in fact, I'd moved there in large part because I had no money. Meanwhile, my scabies infection only got worse and worse. It baffled the doctors. First I was told it was a simple rash, and prescribed Cortisone. That made it spread. So I was given stronger Cortisone. I'd squirt the white cream on my ass, but the relief was only temporary. As I later found out, there's nothing scabies mites love more than Cortisone-treated skin. It makes the flesh softer, chewier. Applying Cortisone was like tilling the soil: all the mites had to do now was fuck, and they'd create one of the largest human scabies settlements on planet earth. And fuck they did. When I couldn't stand the itching anymore, I took my ass to another doctor. He diagnosed me with scabies, so he gave me a tube of Elimite. I spent the next week in itch-agony. That Elimite was like napalm. I couldn't tear my skin off. I was like that Vietnamese child from the war posters, crying and running naked down the rice paddy avenue, only I wasn't in a rice paddy. I was in the European Care Home, on Sand Hill Court, and no weeping hippie was going to hold up an anti-arachnid protest placard of me scratching myself.

The world was caving in on all sides of us. The bank called my girlfriend's mother every week, and soon, every day. The telephone's long distance service was cut off. Once they even cut off our gas. Then one of the patients, Lydia, who looked like a dehydrated old hippopotamus, collapsed and couldn't stand up. She shat all over her room. She must have weighed 250 pounds. Even I had to pitch in to help her up, although I wasn't allowed to get too close to anyone, due to my scabies.

I might have felt more sympathy for Lydia, but my scabies infestation had entered a new, unprecedented stage—and so had my selfishness. They transformed into what are called

"nodal" or "Norwegian" scabies. My mites were the Albert Speers of the arachnid world. They constructed about thirty or so bunkers on my ass: hardened, red nodules which rendered the Kwell lotion and Elimite lotion useless—mere defoliants, causing my ass-hairs to fall out. Each bunker-node, as I later learned, could house up to a thousand mites.

We needed a new patient, before Lydia croaked on us. Mrs. Klausova, my girlfriend's mother, was willing take anything that still twitched, so long as it had deep pockets. She hit up some shady agency that locates potential care home patients. They reached for the bottom of the barrel and came up with two insane "clients." No other Peninsula care home would consider these two. They should have had those electric-shock collars locked around their necks and kept in a basement under a trap door; you'd throw them a raw piece of meat every so often, and that's it.

The minute they moved in, Lydia was tossed out. She was demoted to a nursing home in a neighboring Peninsula suburb, Millbrae, where she later died. I would have hugged her goodbye, but I didn't want to give her my scabies. Living in that care home made me meaner than ever.

So now we had three patients: two new ones, and the old reliable veteran, Joanne. One of the crazy new patients suffered from some kind of advanced form of emphysema. She needed an oxygen tank in her room. There was a red plastic "No Smoking" sign pinned outside of her bedroom door, on orders from her social worker. She smoked anyway. When she talked, it sounded like she was gargling broken glass. She had a way of escaping the European Care Home with regularity. I couldn't understand it. It wasn't like she was Papillon or anything. You could give her a ten-minute head start from her bedroom to the front door, and you'd still be able to stick her midway down the hallway and put her on injured reserve for 4–6 months. But somehow, she'd slip out, only to be brought back by her social worker, who'd lecture us all.

The other patient, Doris, suffered from an extreme case of Panic Attack Syndrome. I'd never heard of Panic Attack until she moved in. She'd wake up almost every night in fear. Her attacks began with a long, drawn-out moan, like some *Exorcist* demon. That went on for the first hour or so. Then she'd call for my girlfriend's mother. "Eva... Eva... Eva? Eva?... Eva! Eeee-Vaa!!!"

Mrs. Klausova handled it all pretty well at first. She'd been a nurse back in Czechoslovakia. She'd probably seen much worse out there. Her only problem was that she didn't understand America too well. She couldn't fathom the concept of "patients' rights," for example. As in, "Thou shalt not beat thine patients."

# CHAPTER ONE

I almost never left my bedroom. I put on about 30 pounds, and lost all my color. I'd read Russian novels, dream about that two-week vacation in Leningrad, about the street punks I'd hung out with during that two-week incursion, or the girl, Olga, who became my temporary girlfriend and with whom I'd traded love vows. Olga, the half-Estonian, petite redhead. We met at some metal-head's party on Vasilyevsky Island. She asked me to dance, which was strange: his apartment was just one room of a communal flat. And the music was something like Slayer or Megadeth, blasted so loud that the speakers distorted. But I danced with her anyway. The next time we met there, Olga took me into the corner for sex. My friends were in the same room; the "bedroom" was really just a corner of the room partitioned off by some cheap shower curtains. He and his friends blasted his television on the far side of the room while Olga and I fucked in his bed. I think I caught the scabies from her.

One thing I learned about Russians during that vacation was that they made every day count. They weren't looking to relax in front of the television and watch ESPN and talk about their mutual funds and eat at ethnic restaurants. They were looking for action. It seemed as though there, in Leningrad, in 1991, things were possible. You were always on the street, running into someone who'd just had some problem with so-and-so; girls would bump into you, and you'd make plans to meet up later; your bandit friends would hassle you, then split without a word. It was so alien, and yet, I felt more at ease there than anywhere I'd ever been. The air was cold and wet in Leningrad. They didn't oppress you with their pod-people smiles and affected self-confidence the way they did in California. In fact, they looked every bit as miserable as I'd felt inside for, oh, as long as I could remember. And yet, oddly, they were so much more alive than, say, the neighbors in our cul-de-sac on Sand Hill Court. In Foster City, you just never saw those people.

With the addition of the two new patients, the European Care Home looked solvent again. After about six months, my scabies infection began to recede. My dermatologist prescribed a tar ointment to apply to the node-bunkers on my ass. We'd dissolve their armor, then gas the nest.

We tried sedating Doris. Nothing worked: not lithium, not Valium, not Xanax, not Lorazepams. Every night, she'd panic.

Once, at about three A.M., Mrs. Klausova barged out into the hallway and slapped Doris in the face. And slapped her again. I remember hearing everything go quiet.

Then Doris, with a hurt tone, said, "You just hit me."

"Yes I did!" Mrs. Klausova said. "Now, go back to your room!"

Doris quietly returned to her bedroom.

Two days later, a social worker arrived with a police officer. Then another social worker came. They evacuated all three patients and closed down the European Care Home. Mrs. Klausova was threatened with criminal prosecution. My girlfriend and her mother were a mess. Not since they escaped Communist Czechoslovakia, spending two days and nights sneaking through the northern Austrian forests, slipping into Germany, had they been so frightened. Not since the Czech interrogations that Mrs. Klausova had endured had authorities put her through so much hell. She didn't know that in California, there was an equally evil, insidious Securitate: social workers. She threatened to commit suicide. So did my girlfriend.

The bank foreclosed the house and put it on the auction block. It sold for less than they'd bought it for three years earlier. They were ruined. We all were ruined.

The only good news was that I'd finally killed off the last of the scabies settlements on my ass, some nine months after they'd first colonized me. The flesh was pockmarked and scaly; the hairs brittle and dead. It looked like Verdun. Verdun in victory.

**M**y first aborted attempt at fleeing California was a nine-month stint in Prague, from mid-'92 to early '93. After the European Care Home was closed down, Mrs. Klausova borrowed money from her friends in the Bay Area Czech émigré community, and packed up for her homeland. Not like they were UNICEF, these Czech émigré friends of hers. When the European Care Home was seeing good times, the Czechs did everything to destroy her. They spread ugly rumors about Mrs. Klausova and her daughter. Now that she'd failed, they were all willing to finance her humiliating return to Czechoslovakia, a country whose very name made these immigrants cringe in shame. That should have said something to me about Czech culture, but I didn't pay attention. I figured that anything—literally *anything*—had to be better than Foster City.

Prague sounded like a great option: it was cold, alien, polluted, lumpenprole-ish, and yet European—ingredients for a minor epic. With my connections through my girlfriend, I was bound to find some success! I even decided that I didn't mind working a "job" there to make money. We'd cooked up a few schemes. We were going to import used, broken cars from West Germany, fix them up using mechanics from Mrs. Klausova's village in Nova Puka, in northern Bohemia, then resell them in Prague for a profit. The whole thing seemed foolproof. Not because I knew anything about business, but

because they made it sound foolproof. I bought a Berlitz book to learn Czech. I read up on the history. It didn't compare to Russia, but I tried to be enthusiastic. I thumbed through travel books at the local bookstore. I read some of Marina Tsvetaeva's poems from when she was an exile in Prague. I began imagining myself, anonymous, wealthy, bundled up in sweaters and an overcoat and gloves. . . . Cold, alone, wealthy. That sounded nice. I'd be able to write in peace. It would be a kind of minor epic exile. Lonely, true, but at least I'd finally get away from the country that gave me so little.

Then we arrived. My girlfriend found us an apartment in the center, in an artist's attic studio, on the seventh floor of a turn-of-the-century Art Deco, late-Austrian Empire building. We bought a two-inch foam pad, laid it on the floor, and used it as a mattress. Once again, we were together. Like a couple. That's when I realized how little I cared for her. In fact, she sickened me. Her evil femme fatale stance had excited me at once, way back when, before all the scabies mites got between us. Then it bored me. And now, it plain sickened me. Every night in that Prague attic I found myself cooking up newer and newer ways of avoiding having to fuck her.

It wasn't just Radka who was at fault. There was something about Prague I began to detect, something that didn't quite jibe with the intelligence reports I'd submitted to myself back in Foster City. For one thing, there were tourists everywhere. The more I looked, the more I was shocked. Then the shock turned to terror. I was sure that I even saw American students. Must be tourists too, I thought. But I was wrong.

Half of America's youth had already moved to Prague before me. They'd scooped me. I'd not only NOT escaped America, I'd landed smack in the condensed thing-in-itself, everything horrible about my generation and the generation about-to-be, the generation named after Billy Idol's bubble-gum punk band from the mid-'70s: the I'm-like-lost-you-know? Generation X. There were an estimated 30,000 young, nose-ringed, torn-jeansed English-speaking students squatting in the center of Prague, and there weren't a thang I could do about it. I'd come there to make a quick, hot buck with my Czech girlfriend, and wound up getting squeezed out by grunge-hippies half my age. I paced our attic, cursing, "They've gentrified my paradigm! They've gentrified my paradigm!"

It was as if they'd taken a huge needle, sucked the genetic material out of Foster City, and injected it straight into the nucleus of Prague. As for the Czechs: mere groveling Uncle Tomas's, West German wannabes.

Nothing was going to happen here, in Prague. It was the anaesthetized '90s. The European Care Home of the world.

My obsession with Russia only grew. The difference between Prague in 1992 and Russia of 1991 was the difference between some silly art house film and *Terminator*. I'd tell that to the few bohos I met, and they were shocked in a condescending way: Why would anyone want to go to Russia? was their unanimous reaction. That only made me more determined—because I realized that, if everyone in Prague shuddered at the thought of heading to Russia, where the people were cruel and savage and gunning each other down in the streets, where food couldn't be found and phone calls couldn't be made, then . . . that would mean . . . these people WOULDN'T BE THERE! Every day, my anger grew, anger at myself for fucking up yet again, and at these people for gentrifying my paradigm.

I took it out on my girlfriend. Her used-car scheme fell apart. Her mother had run off with an abusive ex-boyfriend from Germany. I resented her and I resented her insignificant dump of a country.

She was no angel herself. Nearly every Václav in town was tapping into her the second I'd turn my back. I even met a few of them. One had a ponytail and tried emulating the American grunge-hippies. Another bragged about his Audi car and the shopping sprees in Stuttgart. I dumped her and

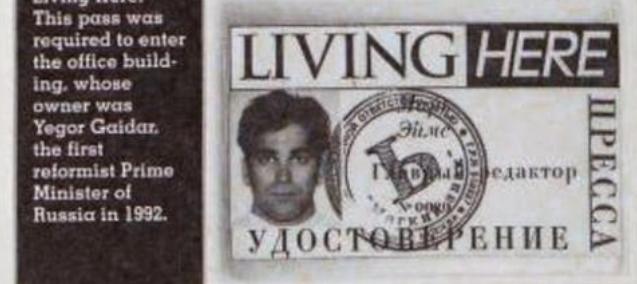
**Top:** Caught in the moment as a fattened-up lackey in a coat and tie. Because SUN Group had half of its equipment stolen by the cops who guarded its offices, SUN's bosses instituted a doomed pass system to protect themselves.

**Below:** Doped-up editor of *Living Here*. This pass was required to enter the office building, whose owner was Yegor Gaidar, the first reformist Prime Minister of Russia in 1992.



SUN Group

Марк Эймс  
Mark Ames



# CHAPTER ONE

moved out on my own, into a dark, ugly apartment that reeked of urine and old tea. I'd go out to teach English to Czech businessmen. They wanted to impress upon me how Westernized they were, which made me loathe them even more. They all stank of beer and cheap deodorant. Then I'd come home and dream about Russia: violent, sexual, chaotic, too authentic for these fucks. Russia had become legendary in my mind, the more my own life diminished. The memory of those two weeks in Leningrad transformed into epic poetry: the all-night drinking and pot-smoking, the young petty criminals who took us into basement hangouts for more pot-smoking, the beautiful girls in their cheap clothes, sitting quietly... Russia was the antimatter that the physicists of my mind had been searching for all those years. I had to get back there. But how?

Do you know how difficult that was to imagine—that "I" had the "right" to "move" to Russia? It may seem easy to a lot of people, but not to me. I couldn't imagine that I had that right. So I moved back to California, to a situation far more frightening than even the European Care Home.

Unable to imagine that there was an easier way, I figured that the door to Russia led through the burning fire of California.

Russia... Russia was like the deep ocean floor. Almost totally undiscovered, inaccessible, and unappealing to the crude, space-obsessed Western mind.

My stepfather was diagnosed with brain cancer, giving me the perfect cover for retreating from central Europe and regrouping in the south Bay Area.

Glioblastoma, the most lethal brain cancer of all: tumors that grow as if in a sped-up time-elapsed film, ensuring a quick and ugly death. About 13,000 die of it every year in America. And he'd been chosen.

I moved into my father's house, in a suburb in San Jose, and commuted ten minutes away, up into the foothills, where my dying stepfather and my mother lived. I offered to help as much as I could, on the understanding that somehow, fate would pluck me from that baking-hot, smog-stuffed valley, out to Russia.

My stepfather and I never got along. I resented his successful crawl up the middle-class rungs. For him, it was an escalator ride. Now he was pretty much at the top, in a two-story house on the valley side of the rolling Santa Cruz foothills—God's own real estate.

He never liked me either. As far as he was concerned, I was an arrogant intellectual, a morbid creep. Then he got sick, and, suddenly, he wanted to understand me. When I returned from Prague, he greeted me with that new, radiation-sculpted mohawk, not all that different from the half-assed mohawk I once had in my punk days, a haircut he'd once mocked incessantly as proof that I'd never amount to anything.

Shortly after I returned home to help him, it seemed that he was on his way to a quick death. Then, miraculously, he pulled out of it and went into remission. His cocky instincts resurfaced and told him that he'd licked the glo. Recovery made him the same selfish, crocodilian bastard I'd always remembered him as. The first thing that upset him was that I was driving his Jeep Cherokee. He wanted it back. He accused me of running up 30,000 miles on it in a single month, even though all I did was drive back and forth between the flatland suburbs where my father lived and his hillside manor. One day, he took the Jeep keys from me and told me that if I wanted to drive a car, I'd have to get a job and buy one for myself. Until the tumors started to bloom again, my only wheels were a borrowed ten-speed.

I'm recounting all of this to put my defection into context. In America, it wasn't so much that life was boring and I



standard, sauna, video, concierge. DELIGHT, 926-4222.

OKTYABRSKAYA, 120 sq.m., Westernized, jacuzzi, 549-5385, 961-0687.

PATRIARSHY, Western, unfurnished, equipped kitchen, concierge, 915-4000.

KROPOTKINSKAYA, concierge, Western, furnished, 915-4000.

TIERSKAYA, Western, unfurnished, intercom, 915-4000.

ARRAT, 180 sq.m., luxury family residence, two bedrooms, sauna, \$8,000, 155-7901/7702.

ARRAT, 130, 180, 200, 260 sq.m., new prestigious building, 956-2461.

BEATRIX.

OPPOSITE MARRIOTT, 150 sq.m., 2 bathrooms, \$6,000. EVANS 232-6703/04.

ROSINKA: 3 bedrooms, 2.5 baths, a/c, pool, garage, \$6000, 940-5838.

## SIX ROOMS AND UP

KROPOTKINSKAYA, BESTI, 6 bedrooms, 956-2461.

KUTUZOVSKY PR., 150 sq.m., after renovation, quiet, \$3500, 916-3182.

CHRISTIE FRUDY, 260 sq.m., 2 levels, Western standard, 3 bathrooms, sauna. DELIGHT, 926-4222.

1000-2000 sq.m., exceptional executive

My mouse-infested \$150-a-month dacha where I lived before returning to Moscow to start up the *eXile*. Above: a sample of apartment prices in Moscow in spring 1998.

needed something exciting—"boredom" isn't something I've ever suffered from. You don't have time to be bored when you're afraid and failing. It was so cold. Cold and terrifying. And the worst part of it all was that everyone around me seemed to think that nothing was wrong, that this was all NORMAL.

Those Berkeley dreams I once had of shaking up the Begeist world were long gone. I may as well have declared war on dust. I'd given up. I just wanted to get the fuck out of this inverted madhouse. Out to Russia.

My stepfather's close friends couldn't deal either, but for different reasons. Seeing their golfing buddy slumped in a wheelchair with the fear of death scrawled on his sallow face was too much to bear. They couldn't "deal," as we say in California. There was always this odor around him, a metallic odor, that smelled like death. It was, to use another local expression, a real bummer. One was too busy with his start-up software company. Another, who had followed my stepfather out from North Dakota to California with Control Data Corp., didn't see him more than three or four times. He lived in the maze, down the hill, a five-minute drive away. He may as well have been living in Tasmania.

My stepfather's eyes developed this creepy glaze. They looked fake, like gag-store marbles. That was partly from drugs, but also from fear. His breath had a sour, metallic odor—a cocktail of tumor-shrinking steroids and death.

As for my mother . . . all of her friends had abandoned her; her husband's friends disappeared; his company downsized him and slashed his health benefits. She was really alone. My mother's way of dealing with it was tennis, and her golden retriever, Nicklaus Palmer.

My stepfather grew to hate Nicklaus Palmer—even though he'd bought it and named it. He'd try kicking the dog when he had the strength. The dog didn't really care. Nothing bothers a golden retriever. Even when the dog lost 20 pounds from a pancreatic disorder, he was still happy. And hungry. Niklaus Palmer would always sit next to my stepfather at the kitchen table, knowing that he was too sick to finish his meal. Mammals have that sixth sense; they can smell weakness in a fellow mammal. The cancer killed my stepfather's appetite. Once he'd leave the table, Niklaus Palmer would lean up and swipe the barely eaten food. He was a real ham, that dog.

For all of my own mean, selfish traits, one thing I was equipped for was tragedy and death. When it came to the theory side, I was a Ph.D. I'd always been attracted to the grotesque, to human ugliness, everything that the suburbs hid. Not like I had much practice. In fact, I'd never seen a corpse before my stepfather's. CalTrans road crews work

quick. They don't even have the courtesy to leave a few bloodstains on the center divider after a head-on car crash. Everything unpleasant gets sandblasted.

My stepfather's death didn't horrify me the way it did everyone else. What scared me was how effortlessly he'd been pushed out of their world. That part was impossible to prepare for. I just figured that in some way, I deserved to be marginalized, whereas he—he was the embodiment of California: successful, cocky, a die-hard 49ers fan with framed watercolors of the 49ers and golfers and yachts in piers hanging on the walls . . . As it turned out, even my stepfather was expendable, and that really scared me. You couldn't just argue that life was some beret-capped, meaningless Camus novel anymore.

The accumulation of this suburban nihilism led to a severe mental breakdown, about the worst I've ever suffered. As I later learned, I'd come down with Panic Attack Syndrome. Doris from the European Care Home had moved into my mind, scratching at my skull. For about two months, I couldn't breathe or look anyone in the eye. I had to bottle it up. I drank a lot and read a lot: especially about serial murderers. Russia's gold-medal mass murderer, Andrei Chikatilo, loomed large in my reading and rereading habits.

It's funny, but as I'm writing this chapter, the trendy Russian magazine *Ptyutch* has asked me to write an article about the "craziest" day or experience in my life, and I know what they want to hear: something to do with sex, drugs, or death. But I look back at those six months I spent in the solitary confinement of my mind, in the boiling-hot suburbs of Silicon Valley, cooped up at my father's—twenty-seven years old, unemployed, unemployable—and I know that few could survive that. On the crazy-scale, nothing could compare to those long, baking-hot days in the San Jose suburbs, taking a bottle of milk over to my stepfather, listening to him blather, demanding from me an accounting of the mileage I'd put on his Jeep Cherokee, then groaning from pain and groveling for forgiveness for the way he'd once treated me . . .

For the most part, I did my best to help out my stepfather. I'd walk him to the toilet to piss. That wasn't easy: he weighed about 210, though his wilted legs looked like Gandhi's. I'd drive him to his chemotherapy appointments in Palo Alto. He'd sit in a small room hooked up to an IV that slowly pumped some kind of toxic Hawaiian Punch into his arm. It took about six hours to drain the chemo bag. By the end, he'd be wiped out and in pain. As if bees were slowly stinging his arms, as if wasps had crawled into his veins. I'd walk him to the Cherokee, and drive him home. I'd buy him his protein chocolate drinks and cartons of milk from Long's. That was

# CHAPTER ONE

all he could keep down, even if he popped fifty Zantacs. I'd battle his company and health insurers to keep them from cutting his benefits. He appreciated it. When his tumor popped up again in his frontal lobe and quickly mushroomed, pushing him back onto his deathbed, he gave me back the Jeep Cherokee keys and told me to drive it as much as I wanted. It was his way of repenting.

I was good, but not selfless in the least. See, Control Data (renamed Ceridian Corp after the "restructuring") was famous for its Carter-era détente business relationship with the Soviet regime. They were one of the few companies, particularly in the high-tech area, willing to and allowed to work with the Soviets. There was, as they say, a connection.

My stepfather made his living selling defense electronics equipment to corrupt Southeast Asian generals, but his friends had started up a few small-time ventures in the Soviet Union, which meant . . . which meant if I help stepdaddy through his death, he could lean on his friends and help deliver me to the Promised Land. A classic "I scratch your back, you scratch mine"; or, in this case, I mop the piss up from your bed, and you line up a Russian visa for me!

From the minute I came back from Prague, my stepfather used his contacts to try to line up a Russia-based job for me. He hooked me up with a shyster named Bob Winfrey, some flashy right-wing Southerner who sometimes snared government funds for his ventures, owing to his 1/16 Native American blood. Winfrey went so far as to fly me out to Virginia to meet his Russian counterparts. He had charisma, the gift of the gab. Silk hankies and three-piece suits, even in the middle of the swamp-humid D.C. summer.

I failed him badly. He'd assumed I already spoke Russian, and asked me to interpret a meeting between himself and three Russian scientists on a deal, using U.S. government funds, to set up a computer-aided design lab in Moscow. I'd barely even cracked my first "Learn to Speak Russian in 40 Days" book open when I arrived. The only word I understood was when the little red-bearded fascist referred to me as a "zhid." At night, we ate at the Mannassas, VA, Red Lobster. The Russians all ordered three lobsters apiece, tearing them apart like rabid sea otters. I hid my admiration, and quietly endured the American side's condescending whispers.

Within a month, Winfrey's project died.

Then I was introduced to Al Parker, my stepfather's childhood friend. He had a stake in some small wine-trading company in Russia. He couldn't understand why I'd want to move to Russia. He thought they were a bunch of fuck-ups and savages. Then again, you could sucker an easy buck out of them, he told me, laughing. Ah, that was music to my ears:

please, God, let them be fuck-ups and savages! My kinda people!

My stepfather finally died. I'd avoided him the weekend before, because I had gone half-insane myself. He spent the last weekend of his life screaming in pain. He begged my mother not to let him die—he was afraid.

When I finally got my courage up to see him, he was already in a coma. By that time, he was just a gurgling torso. The barrel-torso convulsed with every breath. He'd contracted pneumonia from being bedridden so long. Breathing in, he gargled lightly. When he exhaled, the gargling was amplified, a water bong of lung fluid, like the *Eraserhead* baby. He died while I was in another room calling Delta Airlines to book my ticket to Moscow.

Out of sympathy for me, Al arranged my Russian visa. He got me the necessary letters, which I took up to the Russian Consulate in San Francisco, in Pacific Heights. I was sure they'd deny me. But they didn't. In fact, it went as smoothly as possible, smoother than most American government agencies I'd dealt with. I finally had it: a lavender visa, with the Cyrillic letters, specifying actual dates that I was allowed to enter.

That was how I finally got into Russia. From my first trip there in September 1991, to my move in September 1993.

Of course, it all could have been done a bit easier. I didn't know at the time that all you had to do was contact a local travel agent, pay a \$200 fee, and you'd have a one-year, multi-entry visa. One or two simple phone calls, with the words, "Hello, I'd like to purchase a visa." I thought I was cunning, even coldly ambitious, by taking that 2-year roundabout scheme, from the European Care Home to Prague, then back to my dying stepfather, in order to secure a three-month single-entry visa. I thought that suffering a needless mental breakdown, those long Panic Attacks, were the war wounds necessary in order to achieve my objective. No pain, no gain.

Two weeks after I moved to Moscow, Yeltsin disbanded the parliament and civil unrest began. By chance, I happened to move to a dirty little apartment only five bus stops from the White House. The administrative parliament in my district, Krasnopresnensky, voted to side with the rebels. That meant I was living in rebel territory, in the very center of the Russian empire! I lived in a dirty Khrushchev-era apartment building, one of zillions of block-buildings planted as if haphazardly on any open piece of land in Moscow. There were no suburban zoning Nazis in Moscow. Just build 'em where you can! My neighbors warned me about the Azerbaijani refugees, who'd jump and mug me if they knew I was an American. They were ashamed of the decaying state of their apartments.

The courtyard was a mess of weeds and ditches with exposed pipes, and a broken monkey-bar set.

"It must be so much more beautiful in America, in California," the old Tatar woman next door would tell me with a mixture of sadness and shame.

But it wasn't. This was the surface life that I dreamed of. While the few expats I knew sneered at how the Russians fucked everything up and spoke of Western beauty—the kind of familiar, clichéd beauty of European travel books and suburban development brochures—I treasured these sites, these Socialist ruins. And then a week later it snowed—in my neighborhood, outside my window, covering the monkey bars and the sickly birches and the courtyard blemishes. Snow in September!

A week after that, in my very own neighborhood, civil war broke out. It started on October 3, my 28th birthday. The rebels stormed out of the White House and seized surrounding territory, disbanding and beating Yeltsin's riot troops. They fanned out from the Novy Arbat, down to Smolenskaya Ploschad, then raced down to the Ostankino TV tower. I was watching the television as the battle there began. The announcer was terrified. And suddenly, just the way it happened in *Dawn of the Dead*, my TV went blank. The old Tatar woman from next door invited me over. She couldn't stop crying. I couldn't understand a word she said. She had a full set of metal teeth that wouldn't stop crunching. Through those teeth, she went on about World War Two, I think . . . something about having to evacuate Moscow to Kazan . . . her dead husband. . . . That night, I could barely sleep. It wasn't just my birthday—it was as if I was finally born on that day.

The next morning, October 4, I awoke to the sound of a cannon boom. Tanks! I stuck my head out of my window. The weather was warm and sunny, with a light breeze. All the snow had long since melted. I dressed in very conspicuous California clothes: shorts, T-shirt, hooded top, and black beat-up Nike low-tops, then headed outside, into the symphony of gunfire. I figured that my Nikes might act as a sort of foreigner-shield, a medieval cloak. I only intended to "check it out," but I wound up spending the entire day touring the war zones in the Krasnopresnensky Park, the naberezhnaya, the Sovincenter, the deserted Sadko Arcade shopping mall. Everywhere around you, there was a choir of small-arms fire, sometimes picking up, sometimes subsiding. A gun battle breaks out, somewhere behind a building . . . the crackling of small-arms is followed by an answer—then the whole orchestra picks up, subsides, then builds into a crescendo, before disappearing, only to reappear in another

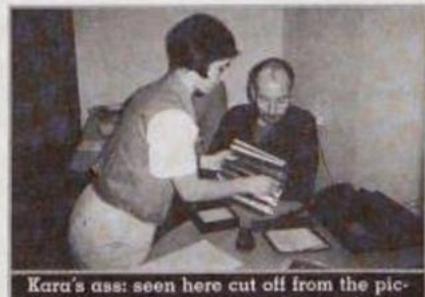
zone. Tank fire boomed from down the road, at Kutuzovsky Most. Helicopters flew overhead. Nervous militiamen manned posts on the streets. Some retreated to their stations. I couldn't stay indoors. It was as if Russia was offering me this reward as compensation for all the bland hell I'd been through. I'd waited twenty-seven years for this. I spent the entire day, heart pumping, walking from one end of my district to the other, watching the BMPs fire their machine guns and the trucks carrying troops.

On the naberezhnaya, I gathered with a crowd of Russians to watch the tanks fire into the White House. Snipers took aim at us. Bullets were ringing off the lamp-posts and the heavy cargo trucks parked on a lot behind us. We scattered for cover, although I was the last to actually hide. Meaning . . . I was tougher than the Russians! Or stupider. Either way, I was proud. At one point, while war-strolling in the park, I stood next to a crack OMON soldier as he knelt behind a half-finished cement wall, firing his automatic. He had to be the coolest-dressed soldier I'd ever seen: silk-black jumpsuit uniform, with the yellow "OMON" patch on his back, polished black boots, and spotless Kalashnikov in arm. I had no idea what he was firing at. There must have been infiltrators in the park. I wanted to get a better look. I stood up on the slab, and balanced. The OMON soldier looked up at me, in shock, grabbed my shirt, and pulled me down, swearing. Elsewhere in the park, while gunfire rattled, a group of men drank vodka and played chess. On a bench farther down, a woman lay on her back, reading a book.

Within a month, I saw my first dead body, lying in the metro. People passed it as if it was mere trash. Then, later, on the streets, more corpses. Two in one day!

Besides corpses, I began to notice a sexual pulse that I'd never experienced. The girls were stunning in their cheap imitation Italian-style clothes, their lace see-through blouses and garish pink or purple coats, and the overdone makeup on their faces. They looked at you—actually *looked at you*, invitingly. No one looked at you in the Bay Area.

People stumbled on the streets, drunken. Police



Kara's ass: seen here cut off from the picture frame, nevertheless you can make out almost 1/8th of its volume. The bald, shriveled man in the foreground, photographer John Reynard, is afraid to look up.

# CHAPTER ONE

openly beat the weak and extracted bribes, even from me. Nights were dimly lit: the headlights were dim, the storefronts dim, the apartment-block windows a dirty gold-yellow of cheap lighting. No more cheap sentimentality, no cover-ups or impressions of a brighter future.

In early December, I went with some friends to a concert by the punk band Grazhdanskoye Oborona. The minute we arrived, three busloads of low-rent OMON riot police pulled up. A crowd of perhaps a thousand punks crowded on the far end of a long field between some darkened apartment blocks and the concert hall. The OMON troops were carrying shotguns and truncheons. Everything was sloppy and careless. Even the rickety buses looked like they'd been commandeered from some junkyard lot. Then they lined up and fired the shotguns. The punks backed off, and retaliated by launching bottles. A riot broke out. We almost got the shit beat out of us by the cops. One threatened me with his truncheon. My friend Vova ran up and convinced the OMON soldier not to crack me over the head.

The punks attacked, got beaten to a bloody pulp by the middle-aged redneck troops, then hurried away. Trams were set on fire, windows smashed. I saw one kid get beaten literally unconscious, his nose exploding like a thin balloon from a blow of the truncheon. Another held his snapped arm, but didn't cry. It was such a contrast to the poseurs in the punk world of San Francisco, with their harmless, body-pierced stances and kitsch nihilism. The evening ended in failure, but a kind of heroic failure.

I had finally arrived home. This was it: the anti-California. True exile.

**T**here is no meaningful, linear time graph to trace the period between my defection from California to the *eXile*. In between, there were "jobs." My first job was selling wines for Al Parker's company. I soon quit, then went into trade with a Mauritian Indian who lived in southern Russia, in Krasnodar. He knew buyers; I knew some expats who were importing goods like medical supplies and stereo equipment. I'd put on a suit, fly down, and act like a serious American businessman. That snowed over the local Russian buyers. We'd tack on 50 percent margins, kick part of it back to the Russian purchaser, then split the rest for ourselves. Then I spent almost two years as the whipping boy of a Pakistani entrepreneur who'd set up a big investment operation scam in Russia. I'd signed up to be his personal secretary, thinking it would give me a steady income while I wrote; instead, I wound up dedicating my every waking hour to his needs. The job was a wild, painful ride through the worlds of

investment banking, conferences, petty scamming, social climbing, and lackeydom. Heavy on the lackeydom. Somehow I put up with it all and then some. I had to do things like make sure that his maid had cooked him dinner, or that his witch-mother was escorted from the airport to her apartment. I'd take a verbal lashing almost every day. I learned something about myself: I'd make a damn good slave.

I finally quit when a startup newspaper called *Living Here* offered me a job as their feature columnist. It was my way out. The main expatriate newspaper, *The Moscow Times*, had just printed an old article of mine, "The Rise and Fall of Moscow's Expat Royalty," which caused a minor scandal among the colonialists. *Living Here* didn't really have any direction, but they thought that if I wrote more articles like that, they'd at least have some readers.

*Living Here* was an accident. The idea for starting up a third expat newspaper in Moscow to compete with *The Moscow Times* and *The Moscow Tribune* came from Manfred Wittman, a failed Dutch musician who had spent years slogging around the *Moscow Times'* offices, fixing computers and playing the feckless alcoholic comic relief. Somehow he convinced his rich, squat 23-year-old ex-girlfriend, Marina Pshevacharskaya, to pony up \$10,000 to start up a newspaper. Marina was a classic "Westernized Russian," a squealing suck-up to any expat. Marina drove a Volvo and hung out at expat parties. She made her money quick and easy, acting as an agent for expats seeking apartments. She'd take a month's rent in commission, in a city ranked as the third most expensive city in the world, after Tokyo and Osaka.

*Living Here* was originally conceived as a real estate and community newspaper for expatriates—that way, Marina would get an immediate return via free publicity for her agency—but the idea was lame, and it fizzled. It just didn't make much sense. Manfred finally hooked an editor, a young Oxford-grad journalist desperate to be hip, who turned *Living Here* into a kind of rudderless *Time Out*-style nightlife guide on the inside, and a real estate newspaper on the outside. He quit after a few issues, and I took over as editor.

Under me, *Living Here* transformed into both a sniper's nest from which to pick off personal enemies, and an irresponsible chronicle of everything vulgar and grotesque. The one thing *Living Here* aggressively lacked was straight journalism. I had a prejudice against the very concept—and I was too lazy to give it a go. The newspaper was a totally uncensored, sloppy, irresponsible take on the violent culture of modern Moscow. Since no one covered that side of the story—everyone was too interested in top-level politics and economics—we wound up claiming a little chunk of turf. I

was pretty sure there was nothing like Moscow in the world. Everyone who lived here felt that; and yet, for some reason, the official Western-reported version of events always made it seem more familiar than it really was. Simple, decent people's struggle to transform Russia into suburban California. And the difficulties they encountered.

You only dreamed of places like this back in California. You listened to your Lou Reed albums and read your Philip K. Dick books and watched *Blade Runner*, trying to scrape some of the experience off the edges of the medium. But from out there, in the flattest, cleanest, most comfortable coastline on earth, a Moscow wasn't even imaginable. The only Moscow imaginable was the Moscow as measured by the American/European yardstick: how close or far, and at what rate, Russia was approaching Palo Alto. From my point of view, Russia was to be celebrated for everything outside of those measurements.

Before quitting *Living Here*, I'd moved out to a small village about 1½ hours outside of Moscow. I had to get away from Manfred and Marina, and their incessant petty squabbles over money and title. I rented an *izba*, a dilapidated old cottage on an unpaved dirt road, just across the street from a crumbling white church. I'd take two-hour baths in the tub in my kitchen, next to the gas-fed heating pipes, while snow collected outside the windows, covering all the rusted debris in the backyard. No one bothered me except for the mutts in the neighbor's yard, always yelping, or the huge construction trucks making a racket on their way out to a new site, where they were building grotesque million-dollar dachas for bankers and customs officials. Those construction trucks would tear up the road, churning up mud and spitting it in every direction.

Weekends, I'd bus into Moscow and stay with my friend Andy. It was a bus ride from peasantry to baronhood. My *izba* cost \$150 a month to rent. Mice gnawed on the floorboards at night, and usually wound up dead in the bathtub in the morning. The windows didn't open. There was no toilet, just a Porta Potti that I kept in the kitchen.

Andy's place couldn't have been more different. He was on the expat package, living in a huge one-bedroom apartment in the Dom Na Naberezhnoy, where Stalin had set up most of his top officials, right across the river from the Kremlin. A lot of slumber parties were ruined by the ol' knock-on-the-door here during the '30s. The building must be jammed full of Bolshevik haunts. From the outside, all you saw was this massive block of Constructivist granite and concrete and gray. But inside, at least in Andy's apartment, it was pure Western luxury. Freshly lacquered hardwood floors. Gaudy black

leather Italian couches. Late-'80s industrial-black halogen lamps. A home theater surround sound stereo system (Andy was a consumer-electronics pedant with bad spending habits). Even a \$13,000-dollar Jacuzzi. All thanks to his hilarious expat package at his investment bank, a package based on the theory that Russia is such a miserable, uncomfortable place to live that you have to sweeten any offer in order to attract even vaguely qualified experts. So the \$3,500-a-month rent was picked up by his bank.

Andy and I would laugh about his "hardship" package: he also had no intention of returning to America. He was a colonialist of the most nihilistic sort: he wanted to milk his package for everything it was worth, fuck as many young Russian girls as he could, then retire as early as possible to some undiscovered Southeast Asian island and drink himself to death, Russian teenage wife chained to the hut. As he often explained, the disadvantage to marrying a Russian teenager is that they're bound to cheat on you; but because Russians (particularly girls) are so congenitally prejudiced against *uzkiglaziye*, or slant-eyes, he wouldn't have to worry about his teenage wife cheating on him if she was stuck on Gilligan's Island. That way, he could drink himself to death with peace of mind.

For most of the Christmas holidays, Andy was out of the country. He gave me the keys to his apartment, and I took full advantage. I should have been writing and working, but instead, I'd found, for the first time in my life, a steady supply source of some of the finest china white I've come across in my life. I took a major step: I went from sniffing to shooting. You had to, just for bragging rights. And it was easy. You could buy needles at any corner store or kiosk.

Kolya, one of my first close Russian friends, whom I'd met a few years before in his alterno-kiosk on the Novy Arbat, was the one who shot me up. He was an expert at hitting the vein, whereas I could barely stand to watch. But I had to do it—snorting heroin was getting annoying and wasteful, especially after watching Kolya shooting and getting that direct heart-pump rush.

Shooting clean china really put you in the penthouse of the drug world. We'd pop a *tchek* of china, tightly wrapped squares of paper that held about a tenth of a gram, then we'd melt into one of the gaudy Italian black-leather couches, while thick white flakes of snow fell outside the row of windows, and the snow-powdered Kremlin cupolas and domes and crenelated red walls and pine-green towers melted to create a kind of religious background, a song.... As if this was staged just for us. So few people, particularly postcard-brained Westerners, appreciate Moscow's beauty. Cold beauty,

# CHAPTER ONE

with a volcanic pulse underneath: that's Moscow. The quaint, harmless familiar of Prague's Old Town: that's what most people are trained to worship.

But Moscow—there is no city like it in the world. Half-ruins from the cruel dreams and super-wills of the century's most successful tyrants: all granite and severe. The later, kinder socialist block apartments from the Brezhnev era. Massive turn-of-the-century imperial government buildings and office blocks, with pink and green candy colors. All mixed together on one block. All officially failures, and yet all somehow working. And inside these buildings, a people far warmer, far more naive, than calculating, Quicken-brained Americans.

If California is, to use a Russian expression, "honey on the tongue; ice underneath," then here was its inverse: "ice on the tongue; honey underneath." Sometimes, after that first knock-down rush, I'd stand up against the windowpane and stare down below, just for a few minutes, and focus my pin-pupiled eyes across the east end of the Kameny Most on to an abandoned late-Tsarist building. Abandoned real estate at the very center of the world's last, great empire! How can you resist feeling a chill! Someday, if the West has its way, all of this will be gone. Nothing will be wasted. There will be corner stores and monuments and reconstructed Disney World Tsarist ruins. But not now, not for a while, anyway.

To the right of the abandoned building, a simple, severe "park": just some tall birches and poplars, frosted over. A simple rectangular square, with a frozen fountain. A few pedestrians. Cars with their headlights on, even though it's only midafternoon. . . . To the right, the river, frozen and covered in a blanket of snow, like a bed of cotton. And then, kitty-corner to the Dom Na Naberezhnoy, across the river, another imposing central Stalin building, with its gray granite dungeon tower. And the best part—the part that's always good for a sneer from the expat colonist—is the huge, gaudy "El Dorado" neon sign, yellow and blue, with a massive video screen below, advertising the supermarket and restaurant for the new rich banditay. Here it is, *Blade Runner*. The real thing.

Kolya and I spent a lot of time banging jones and watching vids. I must have watched *Army of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* twenty times in the last week of 1996. I was sad to see that year evaporate. It was the best year of my life. I had acquired a tiny plot of fame from editing *Living Here*, and dividends of that little plot were paying off in the form of long afternoon-evenings floating a few inches above the Italian couch, the Kremlin lights filtered through the flurries. I was working on a novel that was going well; I'd just broken up with my girlfriend of six years. A new year was beginning. It was as if everything was possible.

Then *Living Here*'s publisher, Manfred, fucked me over. It's a petty story, I guess, the culmination of a lot of lame shit that I couldn't deal with anymore. It began months earlier with the bitchy sniping and attempts to "put me in my place" with little comments about how I'd screw this or that up. It got worse when Manfred, once the clown of the expat community, would show up to parties, hog someone's liquor, then say, "I'm the publisher of *Living Here*. What makes you cool?" Then he dicked me in the last issue. He attached my byline and picture to a piece he'd written. He did it just to piss me off. When I saw that issue, with my annoying picture in that article, I freaked. It was the last straw.

Andy was out of town the day I quit. And it's a good thing. After I quit, I was jarred awake from that long opium slumber I'd fallen into over the previous few weeks.

I'd made a wreck of Andy's apartment. Needles scattered on the living room carpet, blood squirted in the kitchen sink basin, wads of bloodied cotton. . . . Kolya had this habit of taking his used needles, dipping them into a pinkish glass of water, then squirting the diluted, infected blood across the room from the syringe. It always made me cringe, and when Kolya was later diagnosed with Hepatitis B and C, my cringe-reactions were justified. Luckily, I never shared my needles with him or anyone else. That's from my California training. Good training. Californians generally have a lower tolerance for death than Russians.

**W**hen I left *Living Here*, I hooked up with their last sales manager, a young American named Kara Deyerin, and her Jell-O-spined boyish husband, Marcus. Kara and Marcus had quit *Living Here* a month before me out of frustration. We also stole my replacement at *Living Here*, Krazy Kevin McElwee, who hadn't been paid for several issues, and Tanya Krasnikova, the shy, apple-faced journalism school student from Tula who had been with *Living Here* from its inception. That was the entire staff.

We had several potential investors: everyone from the famous liberal weekly *Moskovsky Novosti* to the trendy-tech-no magazine *Ptyutch* to a couple of rich expat entrepreneurs. Kara and I whipped up a business plan—just a bunch of false promises backed with numbers and graphs. We settled on a Russian nightlife guide publisher, *Ne Spat'*, or Don't Sleep. The reason was simple: their publisher, Kostya Bukarev, was ready to pony up the money and staff and print right away. He didn't get too involved with the details. He just said, "Davai!" "Let's go!"

The weekend before our first print run, I found out that Manfred had assembled a new team of scabs, along with help from friends of his who published the Russian version of *Elle*. The reconstituted *Living Here* was threatening to sink us even before we started. I panicked. What if they won? What if, in this ugly public battle, my newspaper was sunk? I'd never—and I mean literally *never*—work in this town again. The columns and articles I'd written for *Living Here* had made me the town villain, particularly among expat directors and expat human resource managers. I'd have to tuck tail and run. But where to? Not California. Never. I began to consider Belgrade: a pariah city for a pariah guy.

It was the middle of winter in Moscow, my favorite time of the year—the time when I don't sweat. It gets dark by 3:30 in the afternoon. The snow covers many of the city's blemishes: unfinished construction sites, weeded parks, dilapidated Soviet ruins. . . . The pedestrians wear a kind of weary expression during the wintertime, dragging themselves along the ice-layered sidewalks, doing a kind of Marcel Marceau mime act to keep from falling on their faces, or into the piles of blackened slush. My spirits are highest when it's darkest and coldest outside. Unlike the German or French armies, my own armies fight best in the winter.

Even though I was boiling with adrenaline and rage, I'd still crash every few hours. In my moments of dejection, I'd play back the tapes of my pre-Moscow life. Fear. That was how I rallied my mind's troops. I knew that if I lost, it meant I was through in Moscow, and I'd have to return to that horrible plot that I'd fought so hard to escape.

Now the question was which newspaper would survive to tell the horrible, blood-and-semen-soaked story of life in the center of the last apocalypse of the 20th century: *Living Here*, or the *eXile*. Everything came down to the wire, in the first week of February 1997. Whoever put out their newspaper first basically won the war, and we both knew it.

At first Manfred and his partners at *Elle* didn't believe that we could design a new newspaper, print it up, take it to the printing press, then arrange to have it driven around to distribution points across Moscow. They focused mostly on me: I was just a fucked-up, egotistical, spiteful junkie, in their estimation, who had no idea what he was doing. They didn't believe that we could get the registration, that we knew who to speak to at the massive Pressa printing plant to allow an "O," or unregistered first issue, to run. They didn't believe that we could maintain contacts with advertising clients that Kara knew from before, or that we could write articles. This, in spite of the fact that we had the entire editorial staff, the production manager, the sales manager, and a Russian publisher with two

years' experience and a team of the best computer designers in town.

We weren't dealing with geniuses here.

Our new designer, Ilya Shengin, a gray-bearded '70s intellectual whose crack always poked out of his cheap jeans, is, to this day, the greatest designer any alterno-newspaper could possibly dream of. Our publisher, Kostya Bukarev, had been doing nothing but starting up, registering, and distributing newspapers for the past three years. These minor details were left out by our competitors in the planning sessions. They were like the Germans on the eve of Operation Barbarossa: "It will be over in a few weeks."

Here I better introduce Manfred Witteman. If you've been abroad, you might know his type: a Dutch bohemian with an affected slouch and a flat Cabbage Patch doll face that masked a cold, cunning soul. When he was younger, he'd wear an "A" with a circle around it. Now, at age 30, he showed his disdain for authority by, for example, not combing his hair, riding the bus without paying, or breaking his empty beer bottles on the sidewalks.

On Monday, February 3, Manfred and Marina suddenly got nervous. So they did what they thought everyone in Russia's business world does when they get nervous: they began to wage a dirty campaign. They called the printing press—the only press in Moscow that we could use, Pressa—and warned them not to print us, or else they'd file a lawsuit. They called the Moscow City registration office for printed press and warned them not to register us. We countered with a few bottles of Martel V.S.O.P. to the right people, and it worked.

Then Jennifer Biggs, marketing manager for a top local advertising company, threw her hat in the ring.

Like many expats in Moscow, Jennifer was playing way above her head. Aged 35, former state agency employee from the English Midlands, she had transformed herself into a typical Eurotrash yuppie with the trademark tight leather pants and the requisite cell-phone in her front pocket, and the requisite chop-stash in her back pocket. . . . Those leather pants were a fucking embarrassment. You just can't wear leather pants with a middle-aged woman's saggy ass, especially when that ass leads directly northward to a turkey neck.

Jennifer and I had known each other for three years out here. Her boyfriend was my junkie-friend Kolya, whom she met through me. Jennifer and I argued a little bit about the *eXile/Living Here* war just as it was heating up. She'd become a real arrogant twat ever since she'd climbed the ladder from issuing driving licenses to Big Swinging Tit in the local advertising world.

# CHAPTER ONE



Above: Krazy Kevin as a starving Ukrainian child on the first, mega-shameless *eXile* cover.  
Below: Our first official letter to our readers, telling them absolutely nothing.

Feb. 6-20, 1997 • P. 2

## Respected Readers!

Welcome to the first issue of "the exile," the newspaper with the "X." Using an "X" may be clichéd, but hell, we couldn't call the paper "the exile." Besides, you couldn't have come up with a name tamer than "Living Here," the paper that I and the rest of the staff abandoned a few weeks ago. Why'd we leave? It wasn't just the name. It was the money. No one ever paid us. And we figured, hell, we can do it a lot better without the "senior management" at Living Here. So here we are, back together again: me, Limonov, Kino Kevin, Mascha Bratikova, Kara and Marcus... plus more, including the notorious Russian journalist Alexander Minkin, a new column by super-bitch Cherie Miller, sex tips from the Second Couple, pseudonymous special guest stars, and a whole bunch of new, exciting, useful, stupid pages to pick through. But don't be afraid if the rotted corpse of Living Here reappears for one last time. Our sources tell us that our ex-boozes are in a panic and are rushing out a low-grade issue at this very moment, employing the dross of Moscow's unemployed journalists... which will make them the

"I mean really, come on," she said. "Manfred is a publishing genius."

There were a lot of expats just begging to see me take a fall, after all the shit I'd written. They objected to the very concept of *Living Here*. Since it was distributed for free, they'd had no choice but to read me. The only way to shut me down was... well, to shut me down. The last thing they wanted was to see me succeed on my own.

Our new shared office with *Ne Spat'* was way too cramped with all of us there. The office was located on the fourth floor of a turn-of-the-century five-story building across the river from Red Square. One part of the building was owned by an arm of the Defense Ministry. There was always some gaunt young recruit in a spiffy two-tone green and lighter green Defense Ministry uniform standing outside. When you walked by, they'd either stare you down or beg for a cigarette. Usually the latter.

The far side of the building, facing the canal, housed a department of the GAI, or traffic cops. Twenty or thirty beat-up Lada cop cars always crowded into that side's entrance, along with the odd Ford Taurus or Volvo cop car. Those were for the lucky cops who successfully racketeered a local Western car dealership.

Our building wasn't kept up well. Rats ran up and down the stairs in the late hours. The interior had changed little from the early Brezhnev days: cheap beige and faded gold colors, worn thin carpet, cheap walls, cheap old doors with plastic handles that had snapped at the ends.... In one office, a tiny space partitioned in two, we gathered on a Monday for the final countdown, and literally didn't emerge until Thursday morning.

There were enough intrigues those three days to keep us from sleeping. On Monday afternoon, Kara's husband came running into the office, holding a fax.

"Did you read this?" Marcus asked, handing it to his wife. "I got it from Jake at Gold's Gym. He was shocked, so he gave it to me. Don't worry, honey. He didn't believe a word of it." Marcus sat down, cupped his hands, and put his fingertips to his lips, as if meditating. Kara took the letter, hid her fear, and sat down next to the computer to read.

Kara and Marcus Deyerin. Maybe back in America they make sense, but out here, they seemed like the creepiest couple I'd ever met. Not "strange" in an interesting or cool way, but rather in an icky Generation X personals-ads in the back of an alterno-newspaper sort of way. They both came from the same Seattle suburb. She went to college at some midranking small private school, while he served in the army. They married at age 21. After two eventless years in Seattle, dreaming of opening their own funky coffee shop, they skipped to Moscow.

Among other things, they were real pedants about their names. Marcus couldn't be just "Marc," while Kara always made a big deal about how you pronounced her name. Not Kara as in "Care-ah," like most Americans would pronounce it, but rather "Car-uh." As in "car." As in, you know, European. Different.

I remember people—mostly women—having those dull suburban identity crises manifested through their first names. They'd either change their names to something "unusual," or else force you to pronounce it in some obscure, difficult way. One girl from my high school officially changed her name from Renee to "Jenee"; college fling changed her name from Rosetta to Brianhan. Nothing upsets them more than when you mispronounce their name. Euro-packaging over the same bland product.

The three of us would hold our strategy meetings at my apartment. I took a tiny, spare, Brezhnevian two-room on the top floor of a brick apartment block building in Oktyabrskaya Square. We met at my place almost every night. They were like a pair of Northface mannequins in their matching midnight blue and black Gore-Tex parkas, matching Timberland boots, and matching midnight blue Gore-Tex gloves. Whenever they entered your apartment, you had to endure the ripping of Velcro tabs for like twenty minutes. There were tabs on the sleeve ends, then on the necks, on the pants, on the hats, on the gloves, on the boots, the pant cuffs, the gaiters . . . everywhere. The ripping and tearing didn't stop. It would build into a crescendo at about the ten-minute mark, then slowly subside as the layers of Gore-Tex were removed. It made you want to take a board with a rusty nail sticking out, and swing it wildly until the stuffing and Gore-Tex shreds filled your hallway. . . . Manfred, to his credit, used to refer to them as "the Mormons." He didn't get them at all.

Kara and Marcus worked at *Living Here* for a little over a month, then quit after enduring the storm of pettiness that raged between Manfred and Marina. They stuck around Moscow, trying to put together financing for their Seattle-style coffee shop idea. And then we began the *eXile*.

Actually, only Kara was my official partner. Marcus was too much of a community-college moron, and Kara ruled over him with an iron fist. He was an invertebrate, a disgrace to the male gender. At first Marcus attended our *eXile* business strategy sessions, but we must have lost half our time having to humor his baloney-brained suggestions. I could never tell if Marcus made those suggestions out of the absurd American ideology that you should always try to "pitch in," but it was getting painfully annoying.

He'd sit in our meetings, hands clasped thoughtfully in prayer, deep in concentration, then suddenly blurt out, "Why don't we try . . ." He even began making editorial suggestions and telling me what was wrong with the newspaper. In his view, we should appeal to everyone, give all points of view, and reach out to the community more. When Marcus even opened his mouth, you knew that the next twenty minutes were gone forever in the waste bin of time.

Kara finally banned her husband from attending our meetings during the crucial last two weeks. She'd send him on errands instead. It was embarrassing.

They came to Moscow with dreams of opening up a Seattle-style coffee shop, the kind where you sell Afro-Costa-Samarian coffee in those glass filter jars, where artists hang their quasi-primitive Swatch paintings on the walls for sale, where you have open-mike readings, to the background of world beat music or some lesbian folksinger. . . . Part Indigo Girls, part *Friends*. . . . A quaint dream that died along with the tales of other dead dreamers in Moscow, all those stories of expats who'd had their businesses requisitioned by bloodthirsty flatheads and Chechens. . . . I sometimes imagined Kara and Marcus's quaint little coffee shop getting visited by a Mercedes full of Chechens. . . . A group of five unshaven, leather-coat-wearing Chechens kick open the café door, grab the first flannel-shirted customer by his scraggly goatee, and snap his little Swatch neck like a stick of incense. Screams, aromatic coffee spilling off the tables, bran muffins flying across the room. . . . "Ze owners. Bring zem to us." A small, bespectacled folksinger with a stud in his eyebrow approaches the Chechens, hands up. "Hey, come on. Let's talk this out—" The head Chechen, half-confused, punches the

*Moscow Tribune* of the alternative newspaper world...

So why call our revamped *Living Here* "the *eXile*?" Well, first and foremost, we get to exploit the overused "X": as, in, you know, Generation X. Or, Generation X-Pat. Or, Generation Mademoiselle X-Pat. It's called merchandising. (Also, we'll have a field day mixing our name up with The X-files.)

We've read our *Business Weeks* and we came to the startling conclusion that there's a huge, untapped market out there for young, semi-alienated Westerners... and we'll be damned if we aren't going to X-ploit it! But there's more to the name than that. It's also the derivative thing we like. "Generation X" derives from the name of Billy Idol's late 70s bubble-gum punk band, Generation X. Billy Idol was known as the Neil Diamond of spiky-haired rebels: a glazey, cheezy Elvis-in-leather. Fifteen years later, Douglas Coupland (notice the "oup" in Coupland?—just a coincidence?) swiped the name of Idol's defunct, derivative band, and wrote a quirky book about semi-alienated Westerners called "Generation X." The subject? Yep, you guessed it: another lost generation. The author? Right again: a citizen of Canada, the only derivative nation on earth. The whole *Generation X* thing is derivative so many times over—the adulterated "X" passing like a yellowing baton from one tainted band to the next with each succeeding lost generation—that you need an engineering calculator to make sense of it all. Either that, or a newspaper. A newspaper? What a great idea! Let's call it "the *eXile*!"

So we did.

But let's be fair, the name fits our situation here in Moscow. We expats are in effect *eXiles*, post-Cold War *eXiles*. We expats are sort of the free market Solzhenitsyns of our time. Like him, we've suffered in our own special, Western way. Consider the facts. Whereas the Nobel Prize author couldn't get his books published in his homeland, we couldn't find gravity overpaid jobs which we were totally unqualified to handle; whereas he was reviled and persecuted in the official Soviet press, we were ignored at bars and clubs in our native lands; whereas his basic human rights were severely restricted, our rights to such base human desires as male chauvinism and sexual harassment were so oppressed that we had to keep it all to our sick little selves. So we did what the great author, and so many dissidents like him, did: we became *eXiles*. We packed our bags, loaded up the truck, and moved to Beverly. Not the city, of course—but the Chuck Norris nightclub...

# CHAPTER ONE

singer in the eye, tearing the entire stud out along with a flap of eyebrow-lined flesh. . . . The folksinger screams, hitting notes he'd never dreamed of, like an early Robert Plant, silenced only by the irritated Chechen, who unloads an entire clip from his TT pistol. Marcus crouches behind the espresso machine, trying to channel his tai chi master to offer some kind of non-evasive advice. "Bend like the reeds in a slow-moving stream . . ." the irritating ghost-voice whispers. Marcus struggles in vain to make sense of one single haiku-aphorism, but nothing works. Kara, after some quick thinking, decides that the best way to tackle problems with men is to confront them with resolute confidence. It's worked with Marcus, it'll work with these punks too. She marches out from behind the kitchen door, but is stopped midway past the glass display case for muffins and croissants by a burst of Kalashnikov gunfire. Marcus recoils, crawls from the espresso machine to the milk steamer, then crouches beneath the steel sink. He thinks he's safe, but then . . . *Khwwwwwrp!* His Velcro sleeve cuff catches on a table leg, tearing open at 100 decibels. He reaches to stop the tearing, but then *Khwwwwwrp!* *Khwwwwwrppppp!* The entire Velcro apparatus is coming undone. It's too late. Once it starts, nothing can stop it! First the sleeve cuffs, then the under shell cuffs, then the gaiters. . . . The Chechens perk up. Out of sheer impatience, they fire a rocket-propelled grenade over by the milk steamer. Hours later, when the investigators arrive, all they find is a streak of pink milk foam, leading from the espresso machine, through a burned-out hole in the wall, and straight back into the kitchen, where a blob of unidentifiable flesh is topped by a twisted pair of wire-rimmed glasses.

. . . No, opening up a coffee shop in Moscow just somehow lacked that *Friends je ne sais quoi*.

Kara, with her squat, hirsute body, was no catch. Her ass was something to behold: it'd already consumed half of her back when I first met her, and was poised to conquer the bottom half of her thighs. When you're about five-foot-one like her, and your ass looks like something from a Mardi Gras float, you've got to move quickly to marry. What really gave me the heebie-jeebies, though, was her body hair. Ugh, even now, when I think about it: those white stockings she was fond of wearing, smearing her thick, vinelike shin-hairs: like hundreds of fly's legs smashed into her stockings! I never understood that white-stockings thing of hers. Was it a kind of Beauty Myth rebellion? Naïveté? A desire to sicken—I mean physically sicken—everyone within eyeshot of those legs?

They figured they'd come to the Wild East to take advantage of the opportunities that they'd read about in their cheery, eco-friendly Seattle daily. When the coffee shop idea

lost its luster, the newspaper idea caught their attention: it was small-time enough to confuse any Mafia-type, yet it had the "intellectual" appeal of a coffee shop with enough salary thrown in to make it worth it. They realized as well that the newspaper could get them connections in the restaurant biz to get it up and going if they lost interest in the newspaper. It was, as those people say, a no-brainer, a win-win.

But for all their alterno-Seattle pretensions, Marcus and Kara wanted nothing more than respect in the local business community, just like every other yuppie and shyster that came to Moscow.

For that reason, a smear letter sent out to the expat community blackening Kara's reputation meant ruin. She read the letter Marcus had brought her with muted hurt, even shock. When she finished reading, she looked up at me with the chalkiest mulatto face I'd ever seen. Even her notorious mustache blanched. She tossed the letter aside, smiled, then sat back down at the computer to design an ad. I'd never seen her crack before—she had balls of steel. Hairy balls of steel. At least I'd thought so. I admired her balls. I was sure hers were eight times the size of mine: all bristle pad and hormones.

I could see that she was on the verge of tears. She was an ally of mine at the time. I've always viewed life in quasi-military terms, and she had to be defended.

So, to prepare for battle, I picked up the letter and read:

"Moscow Business Alert! This letter is being sent to you as a WARNING not to do business with Kara Deyerin. She is leaving a trail of destruction in Moscow, destroying Westerners' businesses that she works with. Deyerin seems nice and professional on the outside, and has earned the trust of some expatriates, but her Hitler-like ambitions lead her to try to steal other people's businesses. Foreigners remember what happened to Paul Tatum. Deyerin is like the people who killed Paul Tatum: she uses foreigners to learn about their successful business, then she steals it from them and ruins their lives. Foreigners, haven't we suffered enough from people like Deyerin, stealing OUR businesses that we worked so hard to build up? It is time to draw the line. We are asking you DO NOT DO BUSINESS WITH KARA DEYERIN or her new newspaper *The Exiles*. The author of this letter would sign it, but Deyerin once told us that she had good connections with the Chechen Mafia, and so we are keeping anonymous out of fear."

We knew exactly who wrote that Moscow Business Alert. Martin MacLean—a sleazy expat from Tempe, Arizona, with a greasy forehead that receded so far back it had nearly joined the greasy bald spot on the back of his head. He had been

ostracized by even the lowest rungs of Moscow's expat community, and not just because he was such an obvious fraud, but because he was simply hideous to behold. Martin had a lot riding on the success of *Living Here*, since a coupon business that he and Manfred set up used the *Living Here* bank account. They drained money from the coupon business for personal use, then funneled *Living Here* profits into producing the coupon booklet product. The whole pyramid would come crashing down if *Living Here* collapsed.

Martin was the type of guy who watched those cable-access programs about how to get rich quick in real estate. He was a sucker's sucker, the kind who paid \$125 fees to attend those seminars they hold in Ramada Inns, in low-ceilinged banquet rooms that reek of stale cigarette smoke. He wore these Ross Superstore suits and cloth ties and carried a fake leather briefcase. He always dabbed the beads of sweat on his boil-infested forehead. He used to leave these sales cassettes in our *Living Here* offices when I was there. "Selling Made Easy" and "Selling Against Adversity" were some of the titles.

Somewhat MacLean managed to marry a Russian girl—that "somehow" was his passport, which canceled out the forehead and then some. She was fairly cute in a malnourished sort of way. On the day she went into labor with their first child, Martin had a meeting with a client for his coupon book. He put her in a taxi, tossed his pager onto her lap, and sent her off to the hospital alone.

MacLean can only be understood in the context of the expat community. Calling us "expats" is another one of those linguistic whitewashings, just as snappy catchwords like "reforms" and "shock therapy" have masked utterly sinister events. We were in fact somewhere between colonialists and an occupying force, a force made up almost entirely of losers so fourth-rate that we didn't even have the guts to commit real crimes and wind up in jails back home. We forced upon the natives our ideology and threatened them with economic ruin whenever they didn't satisfy our demands. Even when they acceded, we ruined them—but always with the best intentions.

On a micro level, in the workplace, Russians were forced to adapt to the American "can-do" attitude. It was no less sickening than the missionaries breaking the backs of native populations until they accepted Christianity, all the while turning them into slaves and destitute town drunks. What sort of people were Moscow's colonialists? A good half were low-rent eels like Martin MacLean. Moscow's colonialists could only read one thing: bank statements. And even that was difficult for most.

Martin composed and circulated the letter to all the top expat businesses in Moscow, hoping to destroy us with his

petty villainy. Why not? There was no way Kara could sue. This isn't America. You can do whatever you want here. That's what the Russians are like—lie, steal, cheat, and kill if you have to—right? This is the Wild East, where savagery is the rule. Here is another feature of the expat-colonialist: at once pious, and yet, crudely adopting degraded versions of the worst of the native people.

Just a few months earlier, assassins had pumped eleven bullets into Paul Tatum's ass for not giving up his business interests in the Radisson Hotel. Frankly, Tatum had it coming; he'd taken advantage of Russian gullibility in the early '90s to land himself a deal that was far sweeter than what he deserved. Paul was a hustler and a middle-aged tanning-booth pervert, frequenting striptease bars and whorehouses; moreover, he thought he understood "the game." He couldn't believe that an American could get capped, especially in such a high-profile fight with the Mayor's office over an international hotel. We were barons, gods, immune to Russian savagery.

Murders, plunder, libel, insider-dealing. . . . What's a little smear letter in the big scheme of things? Everyone was doing it.

"We have to kill Martin MacLean," I suggested. "We have to get ski masks and lead pipes and beat that fucker's greasy head in."

Kara looked up to me from her computer with big wet eyes.

Her husband, Marcus, purported ex-82nd Airborne, wiry, tai chi expert . . . declined. "No, I have a better idea," Marcus said, adjusting his round wire-rimmed glasses and adapting the tone of a wise Zen master. "I want to talk to Martin in person. I'm supposed to meet him soon anyway."

"What?" I was ready for blood. I'd barely slept for a week already. I was dizzy with so much paranoia about our paper failing that popping one of Martin's forehead boils with a crowbar seemed to be the perfect solution to all my problems.

"No, I want to talk to him first," Marcus persisted. He paused, smiled, and said, "I want to hear him admit it."

Marcus smiled knowingly, as though he was cooking up something a thousand times more vengeful than crowbars. Some kind of Confucian death ray that would pierce the core of MacLean's alleged conscience.

I guess that's what this Northface generation is all about: "honesty is the most painful medicine." Uh, no it isn't, guys: *pain* is the most painful medicine, far's I can tell.

"Watch this: I'm going to call Marina," Marcus said, keeping that calm, Zen smile of his. "I'm going to ask her where I can find Martin." He dialed. We gathered around to listen. The Russian employees in our office were

# A Triple Dose of Dumb & Dumber:

Coincidence, or Russia's Fate?

**The last Tsar and Tsarina of Russia are known to have been a pair of comically dim-witted figures, sort of like Dumb and Dumber... and a lot like—according to staff that fled—the "management" team at *Living Here*. In these weird times, we've got to believe that there's more to it than mere coincidence... something strange and mysterious is going on: sort of like in the X-files... oops, we mean the *eXile*!**

**Check out the following graph, and see if you don't get a few goosebumps!**



	ROYAL RUSSIANS	LIVING HELL	DUMB AND DUMBER
<b>TRANSPORTATION</b>	Royal couple rides royal train to Crimea every year for holidays	Wittenman rides train from Moscow to Odessa in order to renew his multi-entry visa	Dumb and Dumber ride 1984 sheepdog to Aspen in order to return heroine's briefcase
<b>WITLESS</b>	Tsar-Nicholas II said to be dim-witted, made several bad decisions which led to his overthrow	Wittenman said to be dim-witted, made several bad decisions which led to his overthrow	Dumb and Dumber known to be dim-witted, made several bad decisions which led to side-splitting comedy
<b>BAD ADVICE</b>	Empress Alexandra relied on the mystic Rasputin for advice, which had disastrous consequences	General Manager Marina Psch-relied on dim-witted Dulceman for advice, which had disastrous consequences	Dumber relied on Dumb for advice, which led to side-splitting comedy
<b>ZION</b>	Lenin rumored to have a Jewish mother	Amis' mother's maiden name is "Schwartzberg"	"Dumb and Dumber" executive producer named — Robert Meyeran
<b>WRATH</b>	Tsar crushes 1905 revolution, thousands die	Manfred storms out of <i>Living Here</i> offices on several occasions, threatening to quit	Dumb gets mad at Dumber, dumps turbo laxative in his drink
<b>REPRESSION</b>	Tsar's infamous secret police rounds up political opponents, has them shot	Manfred hangs up the phone on Marina, calls her a "Tutting bitch"	Dumb and Dumber call "dumb" but this is bad guy's hamburger, turning his tongue
<b>RULERS</b>	Tsar and Tsarina rule over a vast Russian empire	Wittenman dreams of ruling over a vast publishing empire	Dumb and Dumber dream of owning a worm farm
<b>MONEY</b>	Tsar wastes Russia's vast natural wealth to uphold lavish lifestyle	Wittenman coaxes money out of his ex-girlfriend to start a newspaper	Dumb and Dumber take heroine's money and buy \$250,000 Ferrari
<b>RANSOM</b>	Tsar and Tsarina arrested by Bolsheviks, no chance for ransom	Marina's hard drive and \$6,500 held for ransom by Wittenman, no chance of getting money back	Hardeke's husband held for ransom, Dumb and Dumber inadvertently help win his release
<b>THREATS</b>	Tsar threatens revolutionaries with harsh measures, crackdown	Marina threatens Monica Deveraux with an unreturned "phone call"	Dumb threatens to leave Dumb, NIMIKE, back to Providence, Rhode Island
<b>VICTORY!</b>	Lenin wins!	the <i>eXile</i> prints!	"Dumb and Dumber" earns a sequel

shocked and surprised by it all. They didn't get it. We were Americans, after all. What the fuck was going on?!

"Hi Marina, this is Marcus," he said in that cheery Northface voice of his. When I think about Americans and their honey-tongued voices—I don't know how I'll ever return home. "Yeah, this is Marcus. I'm wondering if you can tell me where Martin is, I need to speak with him."

"I don't want to speak to you," Marina snapped.

"That's fine," Marcus said. "If you could just tell me where Martin is."

"I want you to stop spreading rumors about *Living Here*," she said. "You're ruining our reputation."

"Marina, I think you're ruining your own reputation."

"I want you to know that some people will be contacting you about this," she said, adopting a menacing tone. We all heard it—Marcus looked up and smiled, as if he'd won something.

"Excuse me—what?" he asked. "Could you—I didn't quite understand that, Marina. Could you repeat that clearly?"

"Some people will be contacting you, and you won't like that," she said.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"You'll find out soon enough!" Marina hung up the phone.

Marcus kept that Seattle coffee-shop Zen calm, while the others, including our Russian coworkers, laughed nervously.

Expats in Russia. Fighting over a small newspaper, circulation 25,000 . . . an investment of \$35,000, a potential profit of

about two or three thousand a month, max. And it was already turning into a game of death threats and slander. It was hard to know if Marina meant it. On the one hand, she works in real estate, which everyone knows is dominated by flatheads—those crew-cut, thick-headed Russian thugs. . . . I asked our publisher Kostya if our *krysha*, or roof, could protect us. He laughed and told us not to worry. Kostya's a big linebacker-sized guy. He's seen a lot. He takes a blasé attitude toward everything, including my death. Nothing upsets Kostya. Ice-K.

Marcus somehow got Martin MacLean's phone number, called him up, and arranged to come by and pick up a VCR he'd loaned him when they worked together at *Living Here*. Later, Marcus proudly recounted how he'd calmly showed up at Martin's, without fear, and asked Martin if he'd written the letter. Martin denied it. Then, as Marcus narrated with quiet satisfaction, he told Martin that if he'd ever found out "for sure, and without a doubt," that Martin had written the smear letter, that Marcus would make him "answer for it." And that was it. I found out later, conclusively, from insiders, that Martin wrote the letter. Even Manfred told me. I relayed that to Marcus, but Marcus would just smile, nod his head quietly like a wise old kung fu master, and say, "But I want him to *admit* it. That's when it will really hurt."

**T**hat evening, Jennifer Biggs paged our production manager, Tanya. Jennifer had already been hard at work sabotaging our sales. She'd called all of our potential clients, asking them not to place ads in the *eXile*, and now she was going to deliver the final coup de grâce. Stealing our production manager, Tanya.

Tanya was only 19 years old, a student at the Journalism Faculty at Moscow State University. She came from Tula, a midsized town about 200 kilometers south of Moscow. Tanya was a bespectacled, quiet, apple-faced nerd. I really liked Tanya. Life must have been difficult for her: to come to Moscow and eke

# Break A Leg

by Mark Ames



"I'll write stories that will make them come from the ends of the earth to kill me... then at last it will be over, and that'll be fine with me."

Celine

I have a contract out on me. Not an employment contract with all kinds of expat benefits and a \$3000 apartment—but the other kind of contract. The bad kind of contract. At first I was told that "they," or rather a "she" and a "he," wanted to have me killed. Then my sentence was reduced to having my legs broken. Not as in, "Break a leg, Mark! Good luck with your new 'paper'." But as in, "I'm a-gonna break ya' fuckin' legs!" She can have it arranged, as she let one too many persons know. See, she's in the real estate business, which in Moscow means: flat-head central.

The threat is so serious that two well-known journalists have even placed a gauze pool bet on my legs. They each put fifty bucks on the line over whether my hairy drumsticks will be snapped sometime in the next four weeks.

Only Myself Jesus Christ, do you know how much pain I'd have to endure for a lousy

fifty bucks, guys! Fifty dollars barely gets you a couple of Provencal pizzas at Jack's! I'd be screaming like a newborn baboon as the IMC doctors drill stainless steel rods into my shins, and all that's on the line is a goddamn pizza?

Breaking someone's legs isn't an easy job, and for that reason alone, I deserve a higher wage. The femur, or thigh bone, is an especially large, Fred Flintstone soap bone protected by layers of muscular padding. A six-foot three, one hundred and ninety-pound target such as myself would require more than the average thrashing just to produce a slight hairline fracture. You'd need to get things like pulleys, ropes and heavy cement blocks to really snap my thigh bone. In Peter the Great's time, they would have had me to a rack and pulled on my leg until the hip joint snapped; then, they would have cut deep incisions into my dislocated joint, and poured in molten lead, while taking heavy mallets to my thighs. A horse and a pair of heavy logs would have been employed to snap the femur—marrow and blood would spurt out of the compound fracture, and I'd likely pass out sometime around the twenty-minute mark.

Times have changed, and so have the methods. I've been spending my free moments trying to imagine how a pack of flat-heads will break my legs, and here's a partial list of what I've come up with: pinning me down to the asphalt and slowly driving over my thighs with a Volvo; tying me down to a table and taking a pair of baseball bats to the top of my thighs until the repetition of blows causes the bone to crack; dragging me to a sports gym, isolating a leg, then dropping 20kg bench-pressing plates edge-wise, to concentrate the force on the femur—but the truth is, my methods would probably take too much time, and too much energy.

If my assailants are in a rush, and they're obliged as per the contract to "break any solid bone in that area between the pelvis and the ankle, commonly known as 'the leg,'" then they'll probably go for my ribs—the "thin bone"—or else its even-thinner neighbor on the outer part of the lower leg, the fibula. As leg bones go, these two are far more vulnerable than the femur. I've heard a fibula crack during football practice in high school. It actually sounded like a dry twig snapping, which was scary, considering that the wounded guy was a nose guard nick-named "Fireplug." Fireplug fell down on his back screaming and grasping at the air, then he started doing the wiggly bacon dance, while the rest of us stared in horror, thinking, "Thank god it was him and not me."

The sickest thing ever shows on American television was when Joe Theismann, the former Washington Redskins quarterback, had his tibia snapped completely in half by a rolling, 300 pound defensive end. One lineman had fallen down on Theismann's foot, trapping his leg in an awkward, vulnerable position; then a defensive end came hurtling out of nowhere, slamming into Theismann's isolated shin. The laws of physics just didn't work in the quarterback's favor. When Bubba tumbled onto Joe's leg, the center of his shin whipped around like a well-greased hinge; it was as though the quarterback had suddenly grown a joint where no joint had ever existed on man—a joint that allowed the lower half of his shin to bend ninety degrees forward, and not just backwards, like its more primitive cousin to the north, the knee. Thankfully for American sports fans (and me), ABC Sports had just introduced its Super-Slow-Mo Cam, so that you could actually watch Theismann's tibia bursting out of his gross-stained sock like the bled snake-shit-in-Alen... over, and over, and over, and over, and over. Until even people like me began to get nauseous. "Let's get another shot of that career-ending injury," Frank Cio, gosh! That's gotta hurt, huh?" "Yep, that'll do it, Dan. Hey, can we get a review on that? I want to show our viewers out there just one more time..."

Still, the award for the most savage way to fuck up someone's legs for life has got to go to the Hell's Angels. Like a lot of things the Angels do, their method is crude and audacious—and highly effective for those very reasons. The Angels seat their victim in a chair, then secure his heel onto a second chair placed in front of him, so that his leg is suspended and perpendicular to the floor. The entire area between the hip and the heel hangs high over the floor like a creaky old bridge just waiting for King Kong to smash it apart. Which he does. An Olympic team of 220-pound grease bags get up on a table, and jump onto the victim's knees, thighs, and shins, one after the other. Over, and over, and over, and over, and over. Four or five beef-beasted, graying goats in steel-toed boots jack-knifing feet-first onto the victim's legs. Until the ligaments and cartilage and tendons pop out of the joints like springs in a cheap mattress, and the bones snap and splinter, and the hip cracks, leaving the leg so mangled that even Peter the Great would be impressed.

...The most horrible thing about this contract hanging over me is how cool everyone thinks it is. Which makes me realize that I've missed out on the best pick-up line going in this town. You wouldn't even have to have a real death threat hanging over you. You could just fake it. People are so desperate to be part of the drama here that they'll eagerly employ the old fiction reader's "suspension of disbelief" and buy anything you say. So that they can claim some of the drama from you, head to the next party, and go, "Yeah, a friend of mine, some guy I know? He like, he has a contract out on him. I feel so awful..." That one always gets a sympathetic ear from the opposite sex. I keep forgetting what a brilliant strategy faking it is. As usual, I'm too slow and too late to pick up on that fact. Instead, I had to do the Ames thing and wait until a real contract was put out on me before I realized I could've just faked it. Story of my life.

I can see the ending to all this even now. Once my legs are hammered into pretzels, my friends will have a great story to tell... and they'll walk off with all the female kids, while I'll become the Christopher Reeves of Moscow, curled into my wheelchair, groping for my nurse's skirt. She wipes the drool from my mouth, stops my hand away, then calls her expat boyfriend to tell him how sad she is that it all had to turn out this way.

## CHAPTER ONE

out a living working with people like us, while studying at school and keeping your small-town head high in the cruel Big City of money-grubbing babes.... Underneath her naive, large gray eyes, though, there was always something else going on. You could tell that she kept a lot bottled up. Several months later, when the *eXile* was already on the road to success, she discovered sex and flew off the deep end. She started fucking anything that moved, especially African students. She traded in her poorly fitting brown nerd slacks for a pair of tight red-silk hooker pants, gold halter top, and black platforms. She looked like a street ho' from the Tenderloin in San Francisco. She'd take long cigarette breaks in the design room, and talk fashion-talk with the gay designers who worked with our Russian partners. That phase lasted about three months. Then Tanya withdrew into a kind of bizarre catatonia. She dropped 20 pounds. She developed these scabs on the sides of her face, near her ears. We told her to take a paid leave and go back to Tula. She checked into a sanatorium and was diagnosed with some nervous disorders, anorexia.... But all that came much later. When the *Living Here-eXile* war was at its peak, Tanya was still easily manipulated and among the sane. As much as she was loyal to Kara and Marcus—for reasons I could never figure out—a small-town girl is going to look up to the marketing manager of a top French ad agency like a god. Tanya came running to me after Jennifer paged her.

"What should I do?" Tanya asked after telling me that Jennifer had paged her.

"Call her back," I said, suspecting what might happen.

I sat next to her during the phone conversation. I couldn't hear what Jennifer was telling her, but I had a good idea by reading Tanya's face. She was half-breathless, but trying to contain herself as well. You could see she was being seduced. She didn't say a word, just "uh-huh" and "I understand." The conversation lasted five minutes.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She wants me to meet her tonight," Tanya said. "She said there's a job opening." You could see in her eyes that she'd been completely snowed over. It wasn't difficult to read. So I repeated to Tanya exactly how I imagined Jennifer's spiel went: *I'm sorry about all this business with Mark and Manfred—they're both friends of mine, and I don't want to get caught in the middle—but anyway, we need to hire someone as marketing assistant, we can pay you really well—the only thing is, you'd have to start tonight. We can't wait until tomorrow or another week, so I have to meet you tonight....*

Tanya nearly burst out crying. "You mean she lied to me? I can't believe she did that to me," Tanya repeated. "I've always looked up to her so much. Working for her company is my

dream. I can't believe she'd do that to me, Mark. I mean she's... she's a *foreigner*."

I apologized to Tanya on Jennifer's behalf. She was really devastated. She went home early, stunned that an adult, a Westerner, would play with her life like that.

Brits—congenital back-stabbers and arrogant schemers, all of them! You'd think their dismal 20th-century record would inspire them to change their ways, come up with new tactics. But no—like Al Davis, they'll never change, no matter how many losing seasons they have.

We got our revenge on Jennifer: we threatened to out "that marketing manager with the nosebleed" in the second issue of the *eXile*. When our first issue came out, she had something akin to a mental breakdown. She turned to heroin as a source of relief. After a few weeks, Jennifer found she couldn't just walk away from the heroin. She kept doing more. And more. Until she became a full-fledged junkie. It got worse and worse. Nothing would help. She finally had to quit her job. She tried and failed to seek help. In the end, she abandoned Russia. She will never be the same again. All because of getting involved in the smallest little war in 1997.

If *Living Here* suffered from one thing, it was that it lacked any noticeably serious journalism. It was wild and sloppy and grotesque, but lacked meat. So we decided to beef up our newspaper. The *eXile* expanded from 12 to 16 pages, and added more writers. In order to try to gain some respectability, I tried to land one of Russia's best-known journalists, Alexander Minkin. Minkin has a reputation as an insufferable prick, but I liked his writing style. Of all the angry-disillusioned-liberals in the Russian press, he at least had an edge. And he was well-known, which meant that if we landed him, we'd look good. His exposés on corruption had to be admired for sheer balls. There were all kinds of rumors as to why Minkin was even still alive for the things he'd written: some said that the FSB, the KGB's successor, kept him alive as a conduit for compromising articles on enemies. Others said that it was because of squeaky über-villain Boris Berezovsky, who, it was widely alleged, also used Minkin. When trying to judge who protected which journalist in Russia, you first looked to who that journalist attacked. In Minkin's case, most of the attacks were on Berezovsky's enemies, the so-called young reformers.

I met Minkin the first time in the lobby of the Baltchug Kempinski Hotel, the very center of activity for EBRD, IMF, World Bank, and every other useless, overpaid schmoozer who made a living by offering Russia economy-killing advice.... The lobby and upstairs restaurant are what I imagine to be a modern equivalent to the Raj. Packed with manicured young Westerners

exchanging business cards and holding power lunches, served by an overcompensating Russian staff overseen by strict German managers. . . . Outside, cringing Russian doormen in green and gold lackey costumes, with those flat-topped monkey hats, beam obsequious, gold-toothed smiles at anyone speaking a foreign language. For the European or American, stepping out of his Russian-chauffeured car under the portico, the heated glass doors are hurriedly opened with a welcoming, heavily accented "Good day, sir!"

The Westerner doesn't notice a thing as he enters the hotel, except perhaps the pasty hair or sallow, malnourished complexion of the Russian face that holds the familiar monkey cap in place. For Russian visitors, it's a little different. If a Russian tries entering the Baltchug, the lackeys stiffen up like henchmen. Their expressions turn to scowls. Those lackey-suits suddenly aren't so comic, not to the Russian. The doormen step in front of the Russian—easily identifiable by his poorly knotted tie, or his cowering, guilty slouch—and coolly ask their fellow countryman if he is a guest of the hotel. Usually, at that point, most Russians will scurry away, even if they've arranged legitimate meetings in the lobby with their Western partners. I've seen parties of Russians stopped and led off to the side, while Western businessmen, laughing and slapping each other's backs, are escorted right past by lackeys speaking ungrammatical, bootlicking phrases learned during their video training sessions . . . .

Once, when I worked for the Pakistani banker, I was supposed to interview a potential Russian recruit at the Radisson-Slavianskaya, the hotel favored by American businessmen. Ruslan was half-Russian and half-Georgian. Unfortunately for him, his swarthy Georgian complexion dominated the pale Slavic blood. I waited for him in the lobby. And waited. And waited another forty minutes, then left, figuring he'd shined because someone had warned him that my boss was a two-bit swindler masquerading as an Eton-accented banker. A day later, I heard what had happened to Ruslan: The doormen stopped him, asked him why he was entering, demanded documents. . . . Ruslan, who had spent a year at Harvard and who once made a hobby of roundhouse-kicking guys who didn't respect him, argued. That led to a quick whistle-blow, a rush of *militia* men, under pay from the hotel to club and jail any Russian undesirables. . . . Which is exactly what they did to Ruslan. He only got out of jail the next morning, with a broken nose and torn suit.

The only Russians who get by the door-hops are the most threatening ones. The lackeys don't dare to do anything: they neither obsequiously open the door, nor ask to see their documents. Instead, with threatening rich Russians in Italian boutique overcoats, they take the Sergeant Schultz approach: *I see nuh-tzink! I hear nuh-tzink!* The trick is simple: If you're really

threatening, if you can really cause problems and make someone disappear with the snap of a finger, then you don't even acknowledge the doormen's existence. You breeze past them but through them. Understanding that, the doormen step aside and, assuming the worst, look the other way. If, however, a Russian trying to enter were to even graze the eyes of a doorman, or if, like nearly all Russians, his face betrayed a slight lack of confidence or fear that he'd be stopped, it was hell to pay.

Most Western hotels, and even the Russian hotels like the Intourist, have a similar policy. Once, a friend of mine and I took a pair of gauche Russian dates into the Intourist for a dinner date at their top-floor Mexican restaurant. Just as we were being served our margaritas, two flathead doormen interrupted us, leaned into the girls' ears, and accused them of being whores who didn't pay their cut to the door. They grabbed the girls' elbows and tried lifting them out of their seats. If I hadn't intervened, the girls would have been taken into a basement office, beaten, raped, then arrested and hauled off to jail.

So I wasn't sure why Minkin, a bearded, natty journalist, thought he'd get through the lackey-gauntlet . . . unless he really was some kind of star.

Minkin stood out in the lobby. He was the only guy in the hotel with a beard—a big, messy beard. His cheap wool pants and Warsaw Pact synthetic down parka stood out among all the pressed and ironed and groomed plutocrats. Minkin loomed over a table of free breakfast snacks. There's nothing a Russian journalist loves more than free food. He must have used his fame-voodoo on the doormen to get in, I thought.

We met. He quickly called his bodyguard on his mobile phone, told him that everything was okay, then followed me out the door, across the street, and to our building. When we left the hotel, the doormen turned their eyes.

Minkin and I mostly talked literature. He wanted me to know that he wasn't a "yellow journalist." He'd started out as a theater critic with literary ambitions of his own. Nabokov was his hero. I mentioned my love for Platonov, especially *The Foundation Pit*, calculating that a literary snob like Minkin would be impressed. He bit.

I was worried that Minkin would be frightened off from our newspaper, especially since our style was unashamedly "yellow." I couldn't explain to Minkin's raw intelligentsia ego that yellow, irresponsible journalism was a better path to the truth than following J-school rules. So instead, I played on my sensitivity to Russian literature as a way of hooking him. And after a long talk in our offices, he was convinced. He even asked me to call him "Sasha," although I still used his full name and patronymic.

We already had another widely hated Russian writing for our newspaper, Edward Limonov, leader of the fascist National-

# CHAPTER ONE

Bolshevik Party. When his banned book, *It's Me, Eddie*, was finally published in the Soviet Union in 1991, it sold over 1 million copies. Limonov wrote for *Living Here*, and he'd agreed to continue on with me at the *eXile*.

The coupling of the bitter ex-liberal Minkin with the extremist Limonov into one newspaper was a coup by any standard. We kept it a tight secret, even from our own friends and staff. There were too many rumors and leaks going around. Including the rumor that Manfred was cutting a deal with my publisher Kostya and *Elle* magazine to drop me and back him. It was a preposterous rumor, but that didn't keep me from puking more saliva noodles and wasting a lot of time panicking.

The last piece in our puzzle was the design. Our vodka-sucking designer, Ilya, gave the newspaper a far busier and more tabloidish look than *Living Here*. Shengin was a monster: he slept even less than I did those last three days, and drank himself into a garrulous frenzy. Ideologically, he was one with us. When we designed our first cover, about the collapse of *Living Here*, I wanted it to feature an emaciated Ukrainian child, photographed during the famine in the early '30s. It was supposed to represent Krazy Kevin, and the fact that *Living Here* hadn't paid him for four issues. At first, Ilya was a little shocked that we'd dip to such tasteless lows for a quick laugh. But then he quickly apologized, scanned the picture, and hammered it up. He unscrewed another bottle of vodka, and gave the concept two bottles up. Ever since, Ilya's always been a step ahead of us in the area of yellowness.

We finished the newspaper early Thursday morning, February 6, and delivered the hard disks to a Macintosh design and development center in the same building. The designers all had pointy beards and ponytails, which made me nervous. Their job was to take our Quark files and print them out onto films. At around noon on Thursday, Tanya picked up the films from the design people, who stayed up all night especially for us just to get them perfect, and ran them down to the massive Pressa building on Ulista Pravdy. I'd doubt that printing presses get any larger than this building. It's where they printed up the old *Pravda* newspaper, as well as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the world. The equipment and building are all very heavy 1950s industrial revolution; the people look and smell Soviet. The women who run the presses are all generally older, wearing faded blue aprons and scarves over their heads....

I should have slept that day, but I couldn't. I was burning filthy, low-grade adrenaline fumes.

When we arrived at the printing press with the films, the director told us that he'd received a call from an American warning him not to publish our newspaper. I brought a fifty-dollar

bottle of Martel Cognac to the director, just to warm him up.

"Please take this gift," Kara and I told him.

He smiled, took it without looking at it, and placed it in a locked drawer. That sleight-of-hand was real smooth. It looked like he'd done it a few times before: grabbing a bottle, opening a drawer, and slipping it in, all the while staring straight into your eyes. Like some kind of ventriloquist trick, where they drink water while the puppet talks.

"You didn't have to do this for me in order to get the paper printed," he said, mildly reproachful.

"Oh no!"

"I'm going to share this with all my employees. It's for everyone."

"Of course, gospodin . . .!"

"Just so you know, I like you both, and I wish you luck. Don't worry about problems from our side."

"Thank you, gospodin!"

They printed up a test run of ten copies. It looked fine. Then they went to press with the 25,000. We returned to our apartments for a nap. Our distributor was expected to come by later with a truck, load up the 25,000 copies, take them to a storage shed, then distribute them to his fleet of six Volga cars, which were sort of like '60s Goofy cartoon/Soviet gas guzzlers. The Volgas would then spread around Moscow. We'd heard rumors that Manfred's last-ditch act of sabotage was to find all our distribution points, grab our papers, and throw them away.

Again, I tried to rally Marcus for some violence if Manfred tossed our papers, but Marcus always gave me that quiet Zen smile of his.

We allowed ourselves a few hours of sleep, then returned to the Pressa building, to the large docking stations where they store the printed newspapers, at around five o'clock on Thursday evening. I still expected something to go wrong. We hoped to have all our bases covered. We arrived at the printing press, and went looking for our bundled and packaged *eXiles*, the very first *eXiles*. One woman led us in one direction, another in another direction. They took us on a catwalk, up above the printing presses, green and rust metal above the clunky, clangy machines . . . then up another catwalk and ladder to the loading docks, where they stored the *eXiles*. We searched around. In the far corner of the storage area, we spotted a lone packet of newspapers wrapped in brown paper. We tore it open . . . wait . . . there's only 200 copies here. Where are the rest?

Kara and I ran downstairs into the offices and nearly tore the floor manager's head off.

"What happened to our newspapers?"

The woman suddenly went pale. "A man came in saying he worked for your newspaper. He took them all away in a truck!"

I nearly collapsed. It couldn't be. "Wait, what did he look like?" I asked.

"I don't exactly remember," the floor manager said, blushing. Now she's trying to save her ass.

I described Manfred to her: blond hair, about five-foot-nine. Manfred could have done it, too: foreigners get away with all kinds of shit in Russia. All he'd have to do is demand that this old Russian give him the newspapers, and she'd have to concede. Russians allow foreigners to walk all over them, especially at a place like this.

"Did the guy who picked up our newspapers have blond hair?" I asked. "About this tall?"

"Yes!" she eagerly agreed.

"Oh shit!" Kara and I stared at each other in shock. He could have shown up, speaking English, and claimed that he worked for the newspaper. Then loaded all the *eXiles* in a truck, taken off for the outskirts of Moscow, and dumped an entire sleepless month's worth of work in the forest—an entire month of plans, meetings, intrigues—all down the drain!

"Was he a foreigner or a Russian?" I asked.

"I don't know," the woman said, terrified. She was afraid to answer—she didn't know which would be safer. So she gave us the familiar "I don't know, it's not my fault."

We panicked, then called our distributor, hoping it was him. He wasn't available.

I ran to the toilet, the familiar toilet, and puked more saliva noodles, mixed with orange juice. Then I started thinking about murder. Real murder. The kind that makes a "Self" headline.

A long, long half-hour later, we heard good news: it was indeed our distributor, who, I remembered, was blond and Manfred's height. He'd already started delivering the first *eXiles*.

One packet was delivered to the Irish Supermarket, a popular Western-style supermarket located in the building where *Elle* was located, and where *Elle*'s publisher, George Nikides, lived. Word reached him that the *eXile* had come out. Suddenly, all hell broke loose! After he saw a copy, he called Manfred and let him have it. Manfred had lied! He said we could never do it! Nikides demanded to have his name taken off the *Living Here* masthead for the edition that Manfred was still preparing, a day late... a crucial day too late. The acting editor of *Living Here*, Ben Aris, bailed as well. There was no one left.

A couple of journalists who were at *Living Here*'s office the night the *eXile* came out told me about the mad circus that followed our publication. Manfred was slumped over the computer desk, sucking down cheap vodka. Marina paced back and forth, slamming the door, screaming and crying in hysterics. She called her *rebyata* friends in the real estate business to see how she could arrange to have me killed.

"I'll have his legs broken! I don't care what it costs! I'm going to kill that fucking Ames!"

That confederacy of desperate losers, holed up in their unheated office on Gazetny Pereulok, was like Hitler's bunker in the final days, as Zhukov closed in on the Reichstag: Manfred, Marina, Martin, alone with their dumb plots, doomed.... I'd have paid anything to have seen the video.

In a way, I couldn't blame her for wanting to kill me. Worse than her lost investment was the lead story I wrote about our split in the first issue, titled "Living Hell," in which I portrayed her as a willing, mango-brained rape victim, and Manfred as the greedy rapist, detailing all the mistakes, the thefts, the insults, the threats, down to the last. It lost me a lot of respect in the community, but it lost her everything. Just in case anyone was wondering whether or not I was a spiteful prick, I made a chart comparing Manfred and Marina to the characters in *Dumb and Dumber*, scanning their faces into Jim Carrey's and Jeff Daniels's. The whole expatriate community had a laugh at their expense. Well, not really. I still hear it from people about how gratuitously mean that was of me.

I usually don't start these things, but once they get going, I believe you scrap the Geneva Convention and aim for total victory.

Two nights later, I bumped into a cleaned-up Manfred at the nightclub Ne Bei Kopytom. I tried avoiding him. I'm a real coward when it comes to low-grade face-to-face confrontations. I ran back into the club and hid, even though I'm about six times his size. Don't ask me why. Anyway, my ride home was waiting for me on the other side of the Manfred moat. I had to face up, be a man.... Jesus, what was I thinking? It would be like MacArthur being afraid of the Japanese Emperor during the surrender-signing ceremonies! I walked back towards the exit, hoping not to be seen, when...

"Mark!"

God, I hate socially adjusted people. Don't they ever feel fear?

Manfred graciously shook my hand and congratulated me. "I didn't zink zat you could do it," he said. He was considering leaving for home. I was exhausted and exhilarated and ashamed. I couldn't stand and I couldn't sleep.

Kara, Marcus, Tanya, the designers, the publisher, and I all celebrated. It was over. We'd won.

**I**n the run-up to the *Living Here-eXile* war, Kara and I had spent a couple of weeks drawing and redrawing business plans and meeting with potential investors and publishers. Her inclination was to use "conservative" figures in terms of sales revenues and profits. I didn't quite understand all

# CHAPTER ONE

the details of our business plan, but from my limited experience in the business world, I understood one thing: A business plan is an advertisement meant to sucker greedy people into believing that their wildest fantasies will come true.

Kara thought that a business plan should be conservative, so as to avoid problems later. But that's not how businessmen attract money. I convinced her to ratchet up the revenue and profit projections by a good 50 percent. The investor would be committed to a cash investment of a mere \$13,000. We estimated that the paper would see profits of about \$50,000 in the first year and \$150,000 in the second year. It was a bit high, but if we'd said the "conservative" numbers, I figured they'd cut them in half in their heads anyway and assume that the whole thing wasn't worth it. Investors expect you to lie on your business plans: they factor that into their decision. For us, we worked out a profit-sharing plan with the investor that vested over time according to profit earned.

I'd held a few jobs already in Moscow: as a sales manager for a liquor distributor, as a middleman in trade of electronic goods and medical supplies, and as the personal assistant to a megalomaniac Pakistani businessman who was stripping Russia of its third-tier assets—broken-down provincial breweries, butter factories, confectioneries.... I learned a good deal from the Pak on how to draw up a business plan. He'd succeeded in suckering the Western investment banking community into buying his beer holding company, raising tens of millions of dollars from Russia's first-ever Global Depository Receipt program. I was with him all the way on that. In mid-1995, the Paks snowed the Luxembourg stock exchange into listing the stock, whose price was based on assets that the holding company owned only on paper.

In my various jobs in Moscow, I've been involved in everything from theft to kickbacks to bribery. I'll write about it someday, just my personal experiences. A handbook: *Your Guide 2 Business in Russia*. It may land my ass in jail on two continents, so I'll wait for the right time. America has a law forbidding its citizens to engage in bribery or kickbacks overseas, punishable by jail.... It's absurd, of course, and would land 95 percent of the American expats in Russia in Lompoc or some minimum security joint if they really meant it. Someday, I'll give them all the evidence they need.

Most Western businessmen in Moscow are dirty. I mean caked-in-shit dirty, filthier than even the most savage Russian *biznesmen*, who at least has a frame to work within. The expat has no context, just hearsay, a crash course in corruption. They didn't grow up with a set of unspoken rules of conduct and combat; our rules are very clear in the West. Once we're here, where it seems that anything goes, the expat loses all sense of proportion; his moral rudder is swinging wildly. He's never

sailed in these seas, and even as he's about to capsize in a storm of bad decisions, he's convinced that he's the most clever, cunning little cracker that Eurasia has ever seen. It's the arrogance of a colonialist. That's what makes him so reckless and idiotic: that mixture of undeserved hubris, inexperience, and neophyte evil, projected through the average mind of the average expat.

Later, even my own partners, Kara and Marcus, who went through so much with me to start up the *eXile*, who were there through thick and thin, built up a deep resentment toward me and my editorial partner. They left our paper thousands of dollars in arrears with four issues' worth of uncollected receipts, turned our publisher against us, then abandoned Moscow. Russians grow up scheming and cheating each other, to the point where it has a logic and morality of its own, a sense of justice. With expats, it's an affectation.

The Moscow expat is a creature who should be regarded with extreme suspicion by the border police of any Western country. The expat can't bring any good back home with him. He should be treated like a monkey with Ebola—seized, boxed, locked up, and incinerated... then take those ashes, seal them in a titanium container, and fire them off into space, somewhere beyond Saturn, so that mankind will never be infected by us expats.

I once suggested this to Moscow's U.S. Embassy spokesman Richard Hoagland, but he just laughed. "Why Saturn?" he said. "I think the remains should be fired off into a black hole. That way, they won't even infect our dimension. It's mankind's only hope."

Dick knows what he's talking about. He's seen how Moscow attracts the dregs of America, who come here to strike it rich, and transform into low-rent Huns in double-breasted suits. He's seen the perverts that have come and gone. Dick understood where we were coming from. In mid-1998, when he packed up for a stint at the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan, he requested an *eXile* subscription.

"To the various uses of the paper you offer," he wrote us, "I'd add that I'll be able to roll it up to use to plug cracks in the window frames to prevent radiation. Cheers, Dick."

Even Americans who came here young, green, and full of idealistic enthusiasm leave a year later with hair on their knuckles, fangs, and yellow eyes. It's Russia's revenge on the latest invading force: poison that will eventually filter its way back to the West, and corrode the alleged victors from within. They brought down Hitler and Napoleon; they can bring down anyone.

**W**e won the war, and it looked like everything was over with *Living Here*. I expected Manfred to split town with his tail between his legs, go on the dole in his annoyingly liberal little Holland, then drink himself

to death. But people like him never go away and die. Too selfish.

Two days after he'd conceded, I ran into him at the Hungry Duck, the most notorious, disgusting bar in the world. The Duck was just beginning a new Monday night program called "Countdown Nights." Between eight and nine, you got five drinks for the price of one; between nine and ten, four drinks for one . . . and so on. A dangerous formula in a country where alcoholism is a national religion. We were on our third cheap whiskey cola, then up walks Manfred, a mischievous grin on his face. I couldn't believe he'd show himself in public, not after what I'd written about him, calling him a rapist with the IQ of a hagfish. But he had an agenda.

"Mark, I have very, very bad news for you," he said, savoring this moment. There was something too confident in his voice. I could tell that he wasn't bluffing—that at least he believed what he was saying.

Kara whispered in my ear: "Manfred's already been talking to me and Tanya—he told us that he was going to hire us back in a couple of weeks, that we had no idea what was going on."

I got nervous. That stomach-acid paranoia returned.

"God has blessed me," Manfred said, with viscous, beer-soaked irony. "You have no idea. I got ze phone call from someone just last night, asking me if he could be my new editor. And Mark, he is thousands times better zan you! You are through."

"No one is better than me, Manfred," I said.

He laughed drunkenly, then put his hand on my shoulder to comfort me. "You have no idea who's coming, Mark. You have no idea what's going to happen to you. You're through. Your publisher Kostya and I unt ze *Moscow Times* people . . . you're through. You're going to have to leave zis town in two weeks, it will be zo embarrassing. He is ze best editor in ze world."

I later found out that the owner of the Hungry Duck had told security not to interrupt us if we should break out into a fight. I should have clubbed Manfred. I could have used a bottle, a weapon of some kind, to keep his blood from getting in my eyes. But I didn't. Maybe I'm the one who's all bluff . . .

Only after he left did the real paranoia kick in. Deep, stomach-enzymes paranoia. When I found out that my rival would be Matt Taibbi, who had written for us at *Living Here*, my paranoia went into overdrive. I knew Matt fairly well. I had an idea what to expect, and it didn't make me happy. I assumed that I was doomed. I didn't know why, but I assumed the worst.

We put out a second issue. The feature story was about how easy it is to kill or maim an expat, and how common such contracts were. Most people agreed that you can hire some *rebyata*, young punks, to bust a cap in an expat for about a thousand dollars, and have his legs broken for about

half the price. I thought it was relevant to me, since Marina's contract on my legs still held firm. Two journalists even put a 50-dollar wager on my femurs. One of those journalists was supposed to be my friend: the balding, potbellied 24-year-old Brit, Owen Matthews. He took loud delight in his friends' misfortunes.

My sensors detected and collected more and more grist for the paranoia mill. The week of our second issue, Kara and I got a strange phone call from a couple of Americans who wanted to meet us and discuss investing in the *eXile*. I thought the whole thing was strange. For example, they called us just before our planned meeting and asked Tanya for our passport details. They asked her for everything: where the passport was issued, date of expiration—really weird stuff. When Kara tried to take the phone, they backed off, said there was no need, and agreed to meet us at a restaurant. If someone has your passport details, he can arrange a payment in the foreign ministry to have your visa revoked. Or he can refer you to the tax ministry. I called the American embassy. By then, they'd already opened up a file on me, because they agreed that I was in some danger.

"It is very strange that anyone should ask for those kind of passport details," I was told. "Don't give them out."

The two American investors turned out to be pretty typical fare: young, arrogant, in starched white dress shirts, matching wire-rimmed glasses, matching TV-anchorman voices. . . . They claimed to want to invest in the *eXile*, that they were media experts themselves. To this day, I'm sure something was behind them. Either the *Moscow Times*, Manfred, Marina . . . or maybe the expat community was taking donations to take over the newspaper in order to shut it down. I wouldn't be surprised.

D-day was ticking down for Taibbi to come to town. I started hearing more and more rumors. Manfred had hired a top-flight designer from the *Moscow Times*. He had money. He and Marina were telling clients that they'd worked out a deal with the *Moscow Times*. Clients were starting to leave us. Even Krazy Kevin was planning on bailing, at least temporarily. He had his reasons. Manfred owed him \$1,400. They bumped into each other at a bar. Manfred promised to pay him back everything if he joined *Living Here* again. He was slobbering drunk and he told Kevin that he was going to sink me and drive me out of town. He'd gone insane with the desire to crush me.

I was losing my will to fight. No sleep, and all that post-adrenaline exhaustion, had sapped me. And now Taibbi was coming. People were calling me, asking me if I was nervous. Hell yes I was! I'd lost twelve pounds just from fear. I still couldn't sleep. I didn't know what Taibbi had up his sleeve, but I was sure he was going to produce the greatest newspaper in the history of mankind. The very print would be like nothing ever seen before.

# CHAPTER ONE

I was even contemplating surrender. Of fleeing to a pariah state, like Serbia, or Serbian-held Bosnia. . . . I was serious. I'd even called the Yugoslavian Embassy to start making preparations.

The week before Taibbi arrived, I ran into one young American woman at the opening of a new club, Parizhskaya Zhizn.

"I heard that Matt's coming into town," she said with a vengeful grin.

"Yeah, it's exciting, isn't it?" I said.

"Aren't you worried?"

"Of course. Matt's very talented," I said.

"Well, the difference is, he's a *real* journalist," she said, looking away as if suddenly distracted. "I'd be worried if I were you."

Matthews told me roughly the same thing. He enjoyed it, though: the thought that his two friends might tear each other to bits. He told me that he "had to" help Matt out, since he knew Matt before me. He was angry that I didn't include him more in the *eXile*. And he enjoyed, in that cheesy Oxford way, playing the double agent.

I began to hate Taibbi. I remembered his jockish looks and backslapping good-guy demeanor, and it drove me nuts. I even recalled a particularly painful memory, one of the few times we'd hung out together before he left Moscow to play basketball in Mongolia. It happened the previous summer. I was at my studio apartment, having just finished some very unsatisfying sex with my always-dissatisfied half-Belgian girlfriend, Suzanne. Matt stopped by unexpectedly with Owen. They brought some pot with them, stuffed it into a papirosi cigarette, and smoked us out. Then we "chilled," as they say.

Although I far from chilled. In my THC-induced paranoia, I observed Suzanne taking an interest in Matt. They sat on my bed and talked. The very bed-couch where we had just had our unsatisfying sex. The bed of shame. She softened her voice, and laughed at everything he said. I was on the far side of my studio apartment, sitting on a chair, trying to pretend that I wasn't noticing, nodding my head as Owen recounted some alleged orgy he'd had with two 16-year-old Russian teenagers from Archangelsk.

Matt and Owen soon left, in a cloud of youthful laughter. Before leaving, Owen had made a quip that Suzanne didn't look satisfied. "Aren't you fucking her well?" he sneered. Suzanne and Matt were saying good-bye at my door. "She doesn't have that look on her face, Ames. She doesn't look like she's been taken well care of." He snickered, and they were gone.

Suzanne and I were alone, and I was stoned. I hate pot—the most terrifying of all drugs, worse than acid. But it was too late. I'd have to ride out the three-hour paranoia marathon.

Suzanne suggested walking to the McDonald's on the Arbat.

She was starving and bored, stuck in my apartment. On the way there, on a warm summer night, she kept asking me questions about Matt. What does he do? Why hadn't I introduced them before? Does he have a girlfriend?

Finally, she blurted out, as if ironically, "God, he's so good-looking."

I tried arguing with her. Him? He looks like a caveman! A jock!

But she was persistent.

"Nooo, not at all. Matt looks like Elvis Presley," she said, giggling. Then, softening her voice, she added wistfully, "And he seems so nice. In a simple way."

Yes, I had good reason to hate Taibbi. When he left for Mongolia a month after that humiliating stoner-session, I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that there was at least one less guy in town to cuckold me. In Mongolia, he came down with what some thought was tuberculosis. He dropped 40 pounds and lost his voice. When he was medi-vac'd to Boston, I was even sad. He was a truly gifted comic writer and a decent guy, and by then Suzanne and I had broken up.

Now that he was coming to Moscow to take my job, the resentment returned. I shook my fist at the sky and demanded an answer to a burning question inside: *Why the fuck didn't he die in Mongolia?*

The Sunday before Taibbi arrived in Moscow, I got a call from Kara. It was three in the morning. I'd lain awake in my bed, twisty-black scribbles of paranoia going from my face up to the cheap Soviet overhang lamp above the bed. It took me three hours to fall asleep. And then the phone rang.

"I'm sorry to wake you," she said, "but . . . well, maybe I shouldn't say this, Mark, but I'm really worried."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Matt's a *real* journalist. He's going to be able to add a serious journalism side that you . . . won't do. And that's going to hurt sales. People complain about one thing: it's that we don't have any real journalism. I think that unless something goes wrong, they're going to beat us."

That phone call really pissed me off. My own partner, getting ready to desert me even before the battle began. I told her not to worry, that I'd rise to the occasion.

She didn't sound convinced. She apologized, in that affected business tone of hers, then hung up. And panic set in again. Three more excruciating panic hours, staring up at the weak light above me, thinking, this is it, it's all over. Even Kara doesn't believe.

What scared me wasn't so much that Taibbi was a *real* journalist, even if I personally loathed the concept. What scared me was this: He was a likable person who'd probably write

likable articles. I always tried to make readers pay in some way. At my age, it was a little late to change. Age: that was another problem. I was already 31, and he was a tender 27. That's a lot of years, body-wise. And, worst of all, I knew that he was a workaholic. And he'd be fresh from a two-month rest. I, on the other hand, was exhausted. I couldn't even write the stupid Gore-O-Scopes, a cheesy fake horoscope column written supposedly by Al Gore, as if he'd suddenly been demoted to emceeing a failing Vegas comedy club. Nothing seemed funny anymore. Funny? There was another area that Taibbi excelled in. His last pseudonymous Don Kipines piece, a column he wrote about me for *Living Here*, was devastating and about the funniest thing our newspaper had ever done. I hadn't seen that side of Matt, and now that he was going to compete against me in public, I realized that I was fucked: he had my troops surrounded.

Yes, I thought: I can hate him. No problem. Just wait till I'm on my Aeroflot flight to Belgrade, bags and boxes in tow, grumbling to myself like Yosemite Sam, whiskers singed from the dynamite sticks of failure . . . I'll hate 'im real good-like then!

I tried calling Matt in Boston to dissuade him from coming, but he was standoffish. He didn't understand all the shit we were going through, and probably didn't care either. He'd figured, if it worked out, great; if not, he'd find something else. It wasn't a life-or-death thing for him.

The week our third issue was coming out, our spies confirmed that *Living Here* was putting out a rival issue on the same day. I tried motivating, but it was hard. Two days before printing, we suffered another blow. Alexander Minkin left a message on my machine telling me that he was "imposing an embargo against the *eXile*." He was fuming pissed. His colleagues at *Novaya Gazeta*, a liberal-minded newspaper, were shocked that he'd appear on the same pages as their nemesis, Edward Limonov. And we had naked women

plastered on a page next to his. Minkin's complex about being taken seriously as a modern-day Nabokov had been stirred. And lastly, what really irked him was that we didn't thank him at the beginning of each article in large enough print, nor did we clearly specify that these were reprints approved by Minkin, by his graciousness, and offered to us for free. I tried convincing him not to pull out, but he hung up on me.

... So this is how the ship sinks, I remember thinking.

Our third issue of the *eXile* was a disaster. The lead—a Women's Day article about how an American woman woke up and found herself transformed into a Russian girl—sucked so badly that we had to make it all pictures and cartoons. Even the cover, featuring a 30-year-old American pseudo-diva, was nauseating. If this was how we were going to compete against real journalism, we might as well close up shop and head for the hills.

We came out on the same day as the new Taibbi-run *Living Here*. It wasn't the blowout that I'd feared. Their cover was better, and they had some better articles, but otherwise it was a mess. It looked like the old *Living Here*, only with more text and a messier design. Still, I was completely exhausted from two months of sleeplessness and paranoia. I wanted to cut some kind of a deal. This was only Taibbi's first issue, and I'd heard that he barely had time to put it together.

The next issue would be ten times the work for both of us, and I wasn't capable of much more.

Matt agreed to meet me when he came into town. I was ready to cut any deal possible with him just to end the sleepless nightmares and Defcon-4 paranoia. I was exhausted, plain exhausted. I was ready to retire, like some sad old emperor. I was ready to offer him anything he wanted. Just let me retire to my little column in the corner of the *eXile*, a small pension, the odd concubine drawn from the villages, the occasional ceremonial appearance. . . . Anything but ignominious exile.

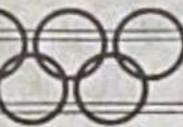


Alexander Minkin's collected works, which he modestly titled, *I Merely Enlighten*.

Limonov's latest book, *Anatomy of a Hero*, traces his revolutionary activity from Bosnian-Serb partisan to Russian radical.

**АНАТОМИЯ ГЕРОЯ**

Эдуард ЛИМОНОВ



Basketball

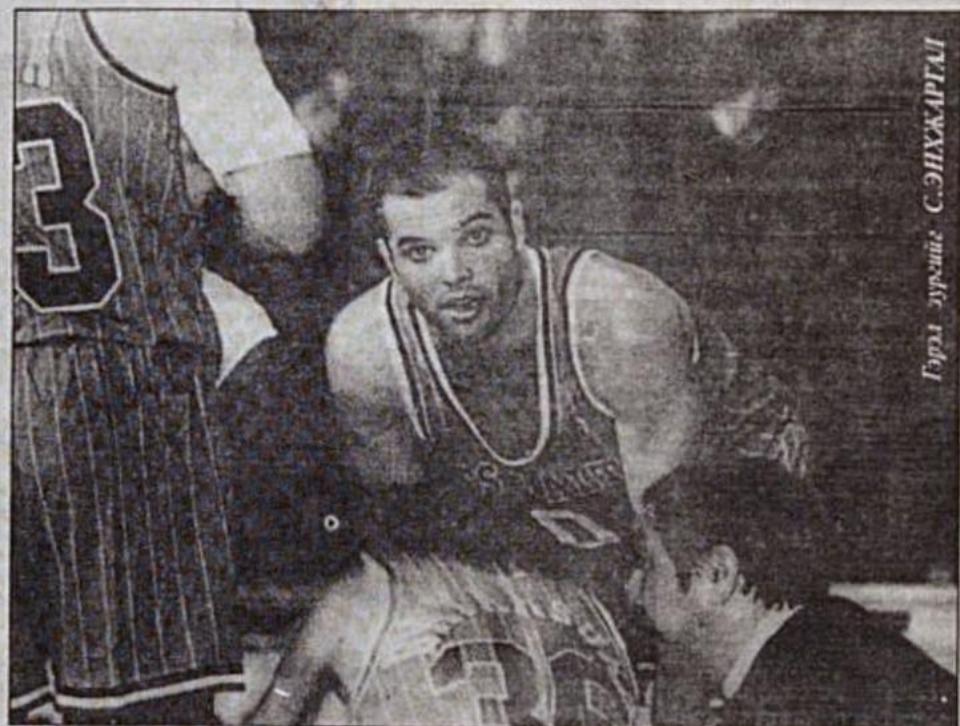
# Монголчуудад хачирхуулахын тулд үсээ Родман шиг засуулсан

«Алтайн бүргэдүүд»-ийн гэртээ буцсан легионер Мэтт Тайби Оросын «Комсомольская правда» сонинд энэ өгүүллийг нийтлүүлжээ

## Д ГАЛ

Өнгөрсөн жил Москвад срохийнлогчийн сонгууль болж өнгөрсний дараа гэнэт уйтгар төрөөд явчихсан. Бичих сэдвэгүй тул зутагаа гаргах зүйлгүй болов. Тархиа гашилт бодсонь дараа хаашаа ч юм нэг тийшээ явахаар шийдлээ. Ингээд Монголыг сониж авав. Ягаад гэвэл тэнд сагсан бөмбөг шинээр үүсэн хөгжж байгаа тухай надад найз маань нэгтэнэ ярьсан юм. Ер нь би сагсан бөмбөгт сэргүүл зүйгээс илүү хайртай юм л даа. Ингээд «Москоу Таймс» сонинд хамтажилж байсан нохцгээгээ салах ёс гүйцэтгээд галт тэргэнд суун Улаанбаатарыг зориоо. Монголын тухайд өргөн их тал, гэр, хонины мах, инээд хүрмээр малгай өмссөн намхан хумуус гэсэн төсөөлөл байв. Бусад нь нэг л толгойд буухгүй байсан гэдгийг нуух юун.

Гэтэл монголчууд сагсан бөмбөгөөр жинхэнэ овчилчихоод байсан үетэй таарлаа. Майкл Жордан, Чарльз Баркли, Хаким Олаждьюон нарны ирийг андахгүй юм. Гэвч тэдний чихэнд оврийнх нь үндэсний баатрууд буюу Монголыг сагсан бөмбөгийн холбооны «одуудын» иэр нь арай илүү дотно байлгүй яахан. Уг холбоог төвчлон МБА гэж иэрээдэг. МБА-гийн «дарга» нь парламентын гишүүн (Мэтт түүний албыг андуурчээ, Б.Донжил УИХ-ын замгын газарт ажилладаг.



гавихгүй байгаагийн гол шалтглан нь тэдний намхан нуруу. Манай багийн хамгийн ондор тамирчин 194 см нуруутай байв. Хэрээ Америкийн сагсан бөмбөгтэй зүйрэх юм бол молтогчин туулай л гэсэн ёт. «Бүргэдүүд»-ийн удирдлага оврийнхөө багийг нэлээд хүчтэй болгохыг эрмэлзэхдээ Монголын хамгийн ондор бөх Оргилболдод санал талсан. 208 см ондор түүнийг Монголын Шакил О'Нил болгохыг хүссэн хэрэг. Гэвч Оргилболдтой хийсэн хэлэлцээ амжилтад хүрээгүй.

Ингээд оорийнхөө ивээн тэтгэгчдийн хүсэлтээр бибагийнхаа албан ёсны бус алиялагчийн үүргийг гүйцэтгэх болсон юм. Тогтолт болгоны омни Денис Родман шиг үсээ хийз бүрзэр буддиг болов. Талбай дээр орсёлдогництэйгээ тулхэлцэж, заримтай нь зодолдож эхэлсэн. Үүнийхээ зэрэгцээ хараалт урсгал ялангуяа орос ярианы нарийн ширийнгийн ойлгодог нэгнийг нь бүр ч муухайгвар хараана. (Бараг бүх монгол хүн орос хэл мэднэ) Багда бөмбөг цагараганд хийх тоолонд би-

хүрчихнэ. Ийм нөхцөлд эрүүл байх асуудал тун эргэлзээтэй биз дээ. Хүмүүс тоос залтиж, бие бидээз ханиад хүргэчихгүй тулд амандаа хаалт хийж явна. (1996 онд нийслэлд тахал, холер овчин дэлгэрсэн). Өвчний улмаас «Алтайн бүргэдүүдийн» сагсан бөмбөгийн шуд унах, ихээхэн түрж эсэн. Талбай дээр гарах нь ч их цөөрсон. Биднийг ялалтва гэмдэглэн архи уун, тамхи баагиулж суухад эсрэг багийнхан маань бэлтгээ хийсээр л байлаа. Үү-