

CHAPTER TWO: TRAITOR FOR HIRE

"As most of us know, the flight and fight response is a natural response in humans and animals. In times of danger the response is automatically activated and hormones, including adrenaline, are released into the blood stream. The hormones help the body prepare either to stay and fight the danger or to run away from it. This is the body's normal response to danger."

As the hormones move through our body it 'shuts down' the nonessential organs including the bowel, bladder and stomach. Our heart begins to beat faster and we begin to breathe more rapidly to help get oxygen and blood to the lungs, brain and muscle groups. This is all done so we can either stay and fight the situation or to get out of it quickly. Other physiological sensations of the fight and flight response include shaking, trembling, excessive perspiration. As a result of the bowel and bladder being 'shut down' some people feel as if they are going to have an attack of diarrhea or may feel an urgent need to urinate. Some people may feel as if they are going to be sick.

Fear as we all know is a huge part of our Anxiety Disorder. We may fear that we are having a heart attack, that we may die, go insane or lose control in some way. The fear may center around social concerns, obsessions or compulsions. It may be part of an ongoing memory of some traumatic experience or it could be constant worry about a particular personal situation.

Whatever our fear is . . . the more we think about it, and the more we worry about it . . . the more we are automatically turning on the fight and flight response. And the more we turn on the fight and flight response, the more our symptoms increase . . . as a result the more our fear is increased . . . the fight and flight increases . . . symptoms increase . . . and around and around it goes. It is no wonder so many of us feel out of control."

Pamphlet distributed by the Panic Anxiety Education and Management Service
Fullerton, South Australia



'd been out of surgery for three hours when two doctors in pink gowns entered my room. My parents, who had been slumped in chairs on either side of my hospital bed, exhausted after a long week, spun around in fright. Something was obviously wrong. Not only had the doctors not knocked, but they were wearing ominous plastic face shields—a type of mask I had never seen before, like a salad-bar guard that extended over the forehead straight down to the chin.

"We have to talk," said one of them—the male one. They'd sent one of each sex, which in my paranoid state I thought had been done on purpose, as though to soothe me.

I'd just had a radical thoracotomy, a traumatic invasive surgery to correct an empyema, which is a life-threatening buildup of infected fluid in the chest cavity. The empyema

had developed as a result of complications from pneumonia, which I'd contracted halfway around the world while playing professional basketball in Ulan-Bator, Mongolia. I'd been evacuated from Mongolia to Boston, where the world's finest diagnosticians had spent a fruitless week trying to figure out what was wrong with me. They knew I had a pneumonic

CHAPTER TWO

condition and an empyema which needed to be corrected, but they hadn't found the bug that had caused it. Now it looked as though they finally had the answer.

"You have bacterial meningitis," said the face-shield male. "A fatal strain. We may be able to correct it with antibiotics—and we may not. We have to do some more tests."

"It's highly contagious," piped in the female. "And a potential public health problem. We may have to track down all the people who were on the plane with you."

At the last news, my mother instinctively released my hand for a moment. I looked up at her in horror. Never in my life had I felt more alone. Then the doctors left, promising to return later.

After the operation, which had been extremely painful, I'd managed to cajole the nurses into improving the quality of my pain medication. The spoils of that victory—Dilaudid, or pharmaceutical heroin—were now my sole defense against the reality of impending death. When my parents left I popped a few extra pills and raised my hospital bed to a more upright position. The room was dark and there was a triple-header of Clint Eastwood spaghetti Westerns on television—the perfect catalyst for gradual, painless mental readjustment. By the third movie, *A Fistful of Dollars*, the drugs had lost their force and I was making desperate vows with myself as I watched the blue predawn light break through my window.

Never again, I thought. Never again would I be so careless in making my life decisions. Family, friends, and security would, if I made it through this illness, now and forever be my top priorities. No more asinine self-promoting trips to the middle of nowhere. It was time to say yes to health insurance and yes to gainful employment; it was time to say no to freelancing and no to bacterial disease. I regretted not having been married, not having a family of my own. I cried for the wife I didn't have, then I started crying for myself. It was time for a change. It was time to clean up my act.

Late into the morning I fell asleep, only to be woken up by the face-shield infectious disease specialists. This time they were shieldless. Shieldless man was apologetic and shuffling his feet; he left the talking to Mrs. Shieldless.

"We made a mistake," she said. "It turns out that fifteen percent of all people are carriers of that meningitis. You've probably had it for years. We'll take care of it with antibiotics today."

Rerieved!

I waited for the doctors to leave, then reached for the Dilaudid. It was time for a little recreation. When I saw my dose had been halved, I hit the buzzer to call for the nurse. Wasn't there any service in this place?

A month and a half later, all those post-Eastwood vows were old history. I got on a plane out of the United States again, this time headed for Moscow.

The expatriate mentality is a tough thing to explain easily. Any affluent or even middle-class American who renounces the good life of sushi delivery and 50-channel cable television to relocate permanently to some third-world hole usually has to be motivated by a highly destructive personality defect. Either that, or something about home creates psychological demons that in turn create the urge for radical escape.

I'd moved overseas straight out of college and been a classic expatriate ever since. I had all the symptoms: periodic unsuccessful attempts to repatriate (I had tried twice to move back to America since I first moved to Russia in 1992), a tendency to try to make grandiose foreign adventures compensate for a total inability to accumulate money; bad teeth; unhealthy personal relationships, etc. I'd been aware for years that my passion for uprooting and completely changing my lifestyle and even my career was like a drug addiction—not only did I get off on it, but I needed to do it fairly regularly just to keep from getting the shakes.

For instance: I'd missed my own college graduation. I finished my work midsemester, moved to my father's place in New York, and spent two miserable months waitressing and begging my father for money to fly overseas to Russia. During that time I was feeling down and called an old girlfriend whom I liked a lot for being bright and cheerful. We met, but I fell into a paralytic midcoital depression after a disastrous date in which I'd lost sixty of her dollars playing three-card monty in Times Square. After that afternoon ended psychotically, with both of us convinced that we would never see each other again, I quickly called another old girlfriend and, trembling, asked on a whim to revive a serious relationship I'd just broken up. It was a mistake and I knew it, but by then I was on a roll and couldn't stop. Meanwhile I was having trouble even keeping my waitressing uniform clean, and yet I was planning this trip overseas, which theoretically was supposed to be an alternative to looking for a job at home. And while speeding tickets and other old bills were rapidly accumulating, I managed somehow to weasel about \$1,500 out of parents and other sources and finally got on a plane to St. Petersburg.

The instant I set foot on the plane, my life changed. I was charged with adrenaline, alert, positive, full of plans, inner demons palliated by a need to cope with new and unpredictable logistical problems. It was a high I would have to

keep coming back to, and after a while I knew exactly where to find the vein.

Seven months after that first flight my life spun out of control again and I moved to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where I finally started selling news articles with some regularity. In another five months I was kicked out of Uzbekistan by the Uzbek secret police after a passing critical characterization of the President I'd written appeared on the AP wire, and I moved back to St. Petersburg. Six months later my life was a mess again. Racked with loneliness and insecurity, I moved to Moscow to take a job as a sports editor of an English-language newspaper there. Five months later, calmed by the experience of regular employment, I figured my foreign trip was over and moved home. At home, where I found myself alone and doing part-time landscaping work in the country, I quickly had a howling-on-the-bathroom-floor, ten-alarm nervous breakdown, started to lose my hair, then moved north and had an affair with a married woman, broke up her marriage, became restless again, and moved back to Russia to play pro baseball for the Red Army. Five months after that the divorcée and I moved back to the East Coast. I took a job as a private detective, gained twenty pounds, bought a metallic blue Oldsmobile and commuted 3 hours every day to work. There, at the detective job, I briefly developed a passion for searching public records to find welchers and hidden assets. But after seven months of listening to National Public Radio during the commute and sampling Blockbuster video selections, I freaked out again, quarreled with the divorcée, and moved to Russia to write a book about serial murder, simultaneously taking a job with my old newspaper, the *Moscow Times*, as a news reporter. After five months I returned to the divorcée and went through a long and agonizing breakup, at the end of which I left America once again and returned to the *Moscow Times* for the third time. Right away I reconsidered my decision and tried to go back to her, and she broke up yet another meaningful affair she'd developed in the meantime as we agreed that I would move home in the summer. But then when summer came, and I found myself in the middle of covering a mini-coup in the middle of a presidential election—this was Moscow, 1996—I couldn't bring myself to go home, and a few harrowing phone calls later that affair was over and I was soon after finding the vein again and heading for Mongolia, where I went completely nuts and became a professional basketball star in the MBA, the Mongolian Basketball Association. I dyed my hair different colors before every game, shaved messages in the side of my head, drew scores of technical fouls, and became known as the "Mongolian Rodman." A local radio station made me

their morning rock DJ for an English-language program. And shortly afterward I saw, but didn't speak to, a beautiful Indonesian girl at a party at the British embassy. Two days later I went to the opera alone and she appeared out of nowhere and asked me to take a picture of her and her friends. I got her address—not everyone had home phones in Mongolia—and when I went to see her a few nights later, she answered the door in a black silk robe. Score! But then the whole house of cards fell: I got sick, began to sweat feverishly, lost 15, 20, then 30 pounds, watched our team fall apart and out of playoff contention, finally began to cough up blood, and just days after New Year's, when I nearly beat up a short bald Frenchman who was trying to take my girl away, I was evacuated to the States for the operation and lost touch with everyone.

By the time I recovered from the operation, I knew I had serious problems, but that wasn't much incentive to change. Even just out of a serious illness and marked with a nasty fresh ten-inch scar, fleeing was still less frightening than anything else. After all, what was I supposed to do—stay in sexually inert, suffocating America, where I couldn't get anything going for myself, and *work things out*? No. It was better to roll the dice on another wild strike overseas and hope I got closer to getting the monkey off my back before the next crash.

After a few weeks of phone calls from home, what I finally settled on as a next move was the editorship of an alternative newspaper in Moscow called *Living Here*, a publication that was currently dead but would, my weird Dutch publisher promised, revive on a shoestring when I came back. This was a new kind of risk, a business risk and a creative risk, a job for which there would probably be no guaranteed salary and a very high likelihood of failure. So I had a final checkup and just after my 27th birthday in March I got back on a plane again.

There is a common misconception that people who lead Bohemian lifestyles are more dependable as friends than people leading respectable, rat-race professional lives. It makes sense on the surface: Bohemians don't have money, so naturally they have to value friendship more. In fact, nothing is further from the truth. The *Living Here-eXile* fiasco, which was the source of much amusement in the expatriate community, was a classic case of low-tech people acting, well, low-tech. The key figures all spent a lot of time screwing one another in the pettiest ways possible, over a very small amount of money and attention.

The short version of my complicity in all of this was that, once I got well, I called an old friend, *Living Here* publisher

CHAPTER TWO

Manfred Witteman, secretly hoping to hear that former editor Mark Ames had left, so that I could take the editing job. Manfred complied with good news. Ames was no longer with *Living Here*. I was in.

You had to have been there when I arrived to understand



Shit-faced and in disguise as the "Mongolian Rodman" at a party with high-flying sports superstar Batzaya (left), the Mongolian Basketball Association's reigning slam-dunk champion.

what a desperate group of losers I was joining up with. It was an absurd class of people: a bunch of jobless expatriate fuck-offs, scraping around to start a threepenny "alternative" newspaper in a city where practically anyone who spoke English and could keep from drooling in public could make \$50K almost overnight in a variety of professions. . . . Since I'd met him years before at the *Moscow Times* (he was the computer systems manager while I was sports editor), I hadn't ever wanted to know what Manfred's problems were, but he clearly had them. First and foremost, he was strange-looking: he had a pinched, bright-red face and a permanently tousled head of short, thinning blond hair atop a wobbly, gelatin body, with a narrow chest and short arms that were, as Gogol once wrote of a character in the story "The Coach," "less like arms than like elongated potatoes." Constantly scheming, thinking up new entrepreneurial ideas, Manfred was always a little ahead of himself—looking at income projections instead of his less forgiving current account statements, or else starting up oddly unexciting projects, like a

crossword puzzle magazine in Russian. . . . I knew all of this about him when I signed on, and I knew that his talk about finding \$6,000 in start-up money was wishful thinking at best, but I was anxious to have my own project and had my own problems anyway, so I went for it.

Manfred had somehow made a deal to put out a paper the day I arrived—some money must have depended on this somehow, I never quite heard the full story—so when I arrived I had to go straight to his apartment, which at the time was also doubling as the offices of the new *Living Here*. When I got there we had seven hours to deadline and a full newspaper to put out. Panic reigned. Manfred was already bickering with the owner, a tiny shrieking twenty-something basket case of a Russian girl named Marina, who bore a face like a canker sore and was liable to burst out crying at the drop of a hat. When I got there, they were arguing about when to take the films to the print shop—Marina wanted to stay to finish an ad,

even though it looked like we were going to miss deadline.

"Come on!" Manfred was screaming, showing her a clenched potato-fist. "I'll punch your face!" he said.

"Just shut up!" she shrieked, tears rolling down her face. "I hate you! Shut up!"

While listening to this, I was sitting in horror trying to edit the pages, which were a mess. For contributors I had people like one Keith Gessen, who a week before had called me in America to pitch the idea of reviewing classic books like *Crime and Punishment* in the book review section. He'd been very put out when I insisted on reviewing new books, because that's what you did at a newspaper. Then there was Vijay Maheshwari, a slithery and unpleasant schmoozing Indian-American, whose copy possessed the rare quality of being both pretentious and ungrammatical.

"Vijay edited some of the pages for you, since we knew you were going to be late," Manfred said, placing a hand on my shoulder and trying, I guessed finally, to reassure me. Meanwhile I was filling in huge gaps in the paper with raw

text that was both lame and completely unfunny, feeling used and ashamed.

A few days later, when the chance arose to bail on this crew and join up with Ames, who was both sane and a friend, I jumped at the chance. Marina wept, Manfred sank into a deep depression, Vijay tried to reconnect, and, meanwhile, the rest of Moscow went about its business without noticing. It was the sort of slimy, low-rent intrigue that you would have found in a Bolshevik party cell meeting in 1909—a scandal that was totally meaningless except in the context of the bloated egos of the lazy twentysomething “revolutionaries” involved.

My meeting with Ames, in which I discussed the terms of my betrayal of Manfred, was a semisecret. We held it in the Starlite Diner, a glitzy prefab American hamburger joint near the center. The Starlite was originally designed to be a sort of culinary/architectural joke, a tiny slice of high-budget over-the-top Americana smack in the middle of big bad foreign Moscow, but the humor was a bit problematic. It was, after all, hard to be quaint and imperial at the same time. The management apparently didn’t see the contradiction. . . . Whatever: in early 1997, there was nowhere else to get a good breakfast in the city, since expat Americans were still the only people around who ate out in the mornings.

Ames and I sank low in our booth. I think we were both a little embarrassed. By an amazing coincidence, the covers of both my first *Living Here* and Mark’s most recent *eXile* had come out almost exactly identical, both featuring platinum blondes in leather bodysuits. We looked like assholes: two tall, swarthy, sweaty white Americans, sitting a few feet away from identical self-promoting publications.

I’d known Mark for a little over a year through *Living Here*, which I had contributed to under the pseudonym “Don Kipines” while working for the *Moscow Times*. I’d always gotten along with him. Although he made me nervous—extensive nerd experience had trained me to be deeply suspicious of tall, handsome males who affect tragic personalities in public—I admired the fact that he was so universally loathed in the Moscow foreign community. It wasn’t hard to see why people hated him. During his career with *Living Here*, he’d published a notoriously offensive column under a cheesy, grinning beefcake photo of himself, a column in which he made a habit of taking nasty gratuitous shots at otherwise respectable people in town. There was a tremendous uproar, for instance, when Ames published a vicious article dissecting the conspicuously unattractive face of *Moscow Times* and *Independent* correspondent Helen Womack. He took



The *Living Here* and *eXile* Women's Day issues that came out on the same day, looking suspiciously alike.

Womack’s column photo, blew it up, and scanned in arrows and circles highlighting the uglier parts of Womack’s face.

It was, of course, a totally irresponsible use of the press, and as a working professional I might then have been turned off by it too—except that I’d never really liked Womack’s columns all that much. . . . Another one of his targets was the aggressively menopausal Jean MacKenzie, my news editor at



the *Moscow Times*, who was not only an office tyrant but a frankly awful writer who punished the Moscow community for years with a column (complete with grim photo) that revealed far too much about her disappointing and certainly physically abhorrent love life. Ames predicted in a “ghoul pool” list of likely upcoming fatalities that she would soon be stoned to death by her writers. There was an implicit sincere hope in this prediction’s fulfillment that everybody felt and most people were probably horrified by. What no one understood, though, was that it was the very sincerity of the article that really upset Jean, which I could clearly see was

CHAPTER TWO



Our experts agree that the hairline is showing signs of recession, unless her wig was suddenly pulled back by one of the many children she hangs out with.

The eyes betray either an enormous amount of Kazakh hashish-smoking, or else [she] has been working hard on her sex columns.

Actually, our panel of experts found her chin to be rather sexy. Sort of Sharon Stone meets Winston Churchill.

Source: Panel of Experts

worth something, even if it turned public opinion in her favor.

Before I returned to Moscow, when I thought I was going to be editing *Living Here*, I'd conceived a diabolical plan to destroy Ames. My plan was to be extremely friendly to Mark, and then make sure it got back to him that I was working round-the-clock and totally abstaining from alcohol, drugs, and girls, except for the occasional theater or ballet date. Then I would put out a newspaper that was witty in a socially acceptable way, cheerful, professional, at least slightly duller than his, and error-free, with heavy emphasis on the type of straight-news reporting that I knew he couldn't bring himself to do for his own paper. My own photograph would not appear anywhere in the paper, nor would any soul-searching or lengthy first-person testimonials. In short, I would be selling the very absence of Ames-ian human qualities to my readers. And I knew they would buy. More importantly, I knew that a prolonged-enough barrage of this kind of treatment would so demoralize Ames that it would send him careening into a Prozac prescription, if not outright suicide. Don't get me wrong, I really liked Mark and valued his friendship. But my ego was at stake.

Now none of that was necessary. Everything made sense now. No Manfred. No Marina. No playing "adult" to win market share. All I had to do was surrender and the world would be beautiful. As for the other consideration—the fact of joining the Ames operation to be the straight man, the hired journalistic square slipping on the "darkly trenchant" banana peels of Ames's "brooding artist" persona, that was fine. After all, why not.... For a manic-depressive like myself, playing the square might even be therapeutic. Besides, I had other things to worry about.

Mark didn't know what I'd gone through my first night with Manfred and therefore wasn't aware, as we sat there at the Starlite, that he held all the cards. He seemed shocked when I quickly accepted his offer of a coeditorship of his paper, with a raise of a full one hundred dollars over my *Living Here* salary. He

didn't know that I'd been nervous even to ask for that much, or that I probably would have worked for free rather than go back to Manfred.

"So that's it?" he asked, stunned.

"Sure," I said, nervously extending my hand across the table. I'd never in my life made a "business" deal before and wasn't sure whether people shook hands to complete them, or whether that was something I'd picked up from cartoons. Maybe people just snapped their briefcases shut and got up—who knew? Ames didn't care. He shook on it and then just glared at me, waiting for me to pay my half of the check.

You have to really be able to put things in perspective, to have an instinctive grasp of the weird flow of history, to understand how quixotic and absurd it was to have two men our age negotiating a \$100 raise in the secret setting of a pink hamburger joint in Moscow, 1997. This was the city where, six years before, commercialism—the "American Way"—finally vanquished its last, weird, menacing and somehow nerdly competitor. The Soviet mind-set, what Russians call *sovok*, seemed now to exist as a living emasculated souvenir, in the form of elevators that didn't work and plumbers who went on three-day vodka binges on their way to your emergency repair call. All of that was now just a charming little memory. There was a new sheriff in town—money. He was efficient and ruthless. He fixed your toilet before it was broken. And he had no tolerance for anyone who didn't want to live well.

That being true, why were two capable, well-educated Americans—members of the very imperial race that had laid the new greed ideology on Russians—haggling over play raises in what was essentially a play business? Were we kidding, just taking the piss out of someone? No, no way. No one could possibly be that obnoxious and worthless simultaneously. Something else, something much more private and sad, had to be going on.



THE TUGBOAT AND THE TUBA

By Mark Ames

The theme of this column is, "If you can't make fun of yourself, then make fun of someone else." So hold on to your sides, folks, 'cuz the Comedy Mobile is about to take you on a magical ride that you've only dreamed



When one eXile editor went on vacation, it was a tradition that the other would fuck with him in print while he was gone. Here, a hairy gorilla subs for a vacationing Mark Ames.

For my part, I was like Mark in that I'd originally come to Russia because of Russian books, which had been my chief retreat in life since I was about eighteen. That was when I got the first hint that I might eventually need to flee my native country.

At NYU, my first college, I only had one friend—my Brazilian roommate, Roderigo Lopes. Tall and sandy-haired, immensely likable, with a million-dollar shit-eating Latin smile, he was happy and willing to play any part in order to keep the flow of women to his room steady, taking advantage of incredible acting range. He even hit it off with suburban big-hair metalheads in sweatpants, a type I knew his old-world mentality secretly reviled. In less than a year, what seemed like hundreds of girls shed their sweatpants in Roderigo's bed while I waited outside in the hall with gritted teeth. And it wasn't just those dirthead girls. He also sampled pompous lit majors in black clothes, adopting a troubled soul and an occasional smoking habit to make himself credibly countercultural. There were also some repressed women's studies majors in there whom he argued with half-earnestly, half-jokingly (just the way that type likes to) before skillfully calling their bluff and feigning respectful but still uncontrollable passion for a few minutes or hours, depending on his class schedule. And despite my obvious envy and contempt for him, we got along famously, which depressed me even more. I couldn't even hate him. All I could do was marvel at his incredible patience and his total lack of angst. He was the happiest American I'd ever met, and he wasn't even American. At the time, I didn't see the significance of that.

Roderigo's presence spooked me into retiring from life for a while. I spent most of my time at my father's place in the West Village, building a fearsome arsenal of loser credentials. I spent so much time indoors that whenever I came out and tried to joke with anyone, they'd just politely laugh and leave immediately, frightened by my dark-ringed eyes and my way-too-intense laugh, which was becoming a cackle, my first adult affection. By November of that first year I was totally paranoid and unfit for any human company. I gave up even trying to talk to girls, parting so completely with hope that I wasn't even afraid of them after a while.

So I spent a lot of time reading. And since I'd learned by then to associate almost everything in America with failure, I made sure to read books set far from the States. What drew me first to Russia were the stories of Nikolai Gogol. Gogol himself had written his stories as an escape from a personality problem like mine. As a lonely clerk in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg, he made it through his sleepless panicked nights by, as he put it, "thinking up the funniest things I could

imagine." I remember reading "The Nose," his nightmarish story about a petty official who wakes up with his nose missing and chases it all over town, and thinking that I had found for the first time someone who was capable of laughing at the kind of depression I was feeling. And not only that, I was able to find that solace in a place that, since it had been crafted by a great master, made a lot more sense and was a lot more aesthetically attractive than the world I was living in at the time.

I imagined Gogol's Russia as a place that was dirty and corrupt and backward, but also charged with mischievous and malevolent life—the exact opposite of the cheery, sanitary world of beer-guzzling "young people" I lived in. I imagined happily that these same frat boys and film school poseurs would not have had it so good in Gogol's world. They would have existed as grotesque mediocrities, human mustaches, trapped in endless inane conversations about the price of snuff or their chances of being promoted to chief assistant clerk. They would never have had sex, or been permitted a single decent human quality. It was a just and beautiful world and I much preferred it to real life.

For years after that I buried myself in Russian books, and finally went away to Russia to study.

Leningrad in 1990 was obviously very different than Gogol's Petersburg, but there were enough things that were the same—the rotting buildings, the grime and the mud, the mindless, intractable bureaucracy, the seediness—that I knew right away that I'd found home. The people in my exchange program were very much like the people at NYU, cheery, with stonewashed jeans sewn into their skins, always happily planning out their next beer run. Most fell into black depressions in the absence of material comforts and that total lack of friendliness on the faces of everyone around them. They couldn't believe that the stern Russian guards at the dorm door, or the fat exhausted maids who washed the stairs with handmade mops, or the cafeteria workers who cleaned their dishes, didn't break out in gushing welcoming smiles every time they walked through the door. It was something they'd always taken for granted, while I, a self-hating geek, hadn't. I was thrilled. The place was made for me.

Russia back then was a real panacea for a depressed person. Back then, it was still grim and poor enough that almost no one thought about getting ahead or looking fashionable. Get ahead where? Fashionable how? There was no place to go in life and no one to look fashionable for. The only people who had the option of moving up were people ambitious enough to voluntarily become grotesque, i.e., people who either joined the party or were real ball-busting Soviet bureaucrats.

CHAPTER TWO

Those types were loathed by most everybody, though, which made for a weird sort of balance—unlike the States, where the grotesque people were in the majority and zealously determined to be liked.

And unlike the States, the nongrotesque and the unambitious were allowed to have lives. There was no pressure or fear of failure—failure was the guaranteed right of every citizen. Being a loser wasn't so bad, because everybody else was,

too. And despite the gray uniformity of the communist architecture, there was more of a human face on day-to-day life than there was in the States. When my computer broke, I didn't—and, at the time, couldn't—go to a clean, homogenized computer-repair center. I just asked around and found out who knew how to fix hard drives. Then I walked across campus and met a freakish amateur computer geek named Slava, who hadn't been out of his room except to buy bread in nearly six months, and drank vodka with his more mobile roommates while he did the job. It wasn't that great of a time, but it earned more points, on the scorecard of life memories, than a trip to Computer City.

I returned home that year with a Polaroid photo showing a delicious blonde lying supine and totally naked in her bathtub. This was Lena, a girl I'd dated there. Lena taught me Russian. I'd met her at a friend's birthday party and subsequently visited her house every day after class, staying in her room until about six o'clock.

We sat there with a dictionary, having extremely painful conversations—"English lessons"—until finally she'd passively lie down and let me screw her. She didn't ever seem to be enjoying herself too much, but she also didn't seem to care. It was great every time. And afterward I always got hurried out the door. She had some kind of low-level gangster boyfriend she saw at night, a guy who sold hard currency. He wasn't the kind of gangster modern Russia produces, who might have killed me with a machine gun or cut off my head, but the old-fashioned kind, who would have beat me with a pipe—a sweeter, more romantic figure.

The States would never allow me a quiet, gentle girl with an exotic face and a perfect body who would give me naked pictures of her as a heartfelt, sentimental going-away present. With time I realized that an American girl would only do something like that as a joke, or as a way of being "sexy." Americans don't do anything without irony.

Six years later, in 1996, that beautiful world I'd studied in was vanishing. That had been ensured by the arrival of the conquering expatriate community.

This was the same crowd that had driven me to Russia in the first place—the same beer-drinking, sweatshirt-wearing "think-positive"

WORKING HERE

Traitor For Hire

"Working Here," a new regular feature in this space, will also be published in the Russian daily "Trud," where it is tentatively entitled "A Correspondent Changes Professions." It catalogues eXile editor Matt Taibbi's experiences in the Russian workplace—a new job each week, in the journalistic style of Jack London, minus the muckshoes and political convictions. This first column will not appear in "Trud."

"I can't do it, Mark. I gave them my word."

from a conversation with eXile editor Mark Ames in February

I said that from my home in New York a month ago, just after I'd taken a job as the editor of the then... and now... defunct "Living Here." Mark Ames, an old friend, had called me at home to slander my new employers and try to hire me away from them to work for his new newspaper, a thing called "eXile."

My response was unequivocal. I detested the lazy morality in the modern business world. I loathed corporations which laid off long-serving employees to please shareholders, and was repulsed by sports agents who convinced players to leave teams that were already paying them millions. I would take a different path. After hanging up on Mark, I shook my head and thought: why can't we all just get along?

Of course I'm now with eXile. It didn't take much. A little more money. A few more job security guarantees. A carpeted office.

Regrettably, this first installment of "Working Here" is about Living Here. Thematically it doesn't quite fit into the column, since the editors of "Trud" and I agreed that I would

only write about Russian workplaces. Timewise, however, it's appropriate. The "Trud" people thought two shifts at any workplace would be enough material for an article—a pair of eight-hour hauls at a slaughterhouse, a roundtrip stint as a airline steward, etc. That's about how long I lasted at Living Here. A day of editing, another day of schmoozing, and then I was gone.

When I arrived two weeks ago, Living Here was in chaos. My picture had been lifted from a fax of a copy of my passport and stuck over my

ers use juvenile pseudonyms, but even some of its founders worked in the shadows, preferring to this day to remain anonymous, in order to protect their day jobs. It was committed to a policy of bad taste, being predicated on the notion that most ex-pats don't actually go to the theater and the symphony, and instead spend most of their time, as one local media mogul recently put it, "getting passed and getting laid."

Somewhere along the line—ironically, just about at the time it started making money—Living Here had an identity crisis. The same amateurish attitude that helped it distinguish itself from Moscow's other "respectable" English-language publications was now preventing it from being a viable business. There were fights about money, petty editorial disagreements, and problems with disgusted clients and advertisers (LH writers were known to complain to restaurant owners about not getting free beer after they had already been given a free meal for a review). Take that set of circumstances and add in the fact that nearly everyone involved with the paper was a borderline delusional narcissistic personality before he started working there, and you have a business that was bound to collapse in an earthquake of invective and bitterness, as LH did this winter and again last week.

My part in this was the selling of my soul for a little more money; as punishment I will now spend eternally sharing an office with Mark Ames, of all people. Ames's eternal punishment, incidentally, is his own column.

Having sold ourselves down this river of "professionalism," eXile now has no choice but to become the next step after Living Here in the evolutionary ladder. eXile will now seek to become a streamlined, market-first, corporate-friendly humor machine. We will have a sales team. For our weird practical jokes, we will use sophisticated hi-fi technology. Before running each childlike, pseudo-pornographic issue, we will consult attorneys. That upper-case "X" in our name? We hate it. It fucks up our headlines. But it's perfect for selling T-shirts, and that's what we're about now.



byline, giving readers the impression that the paper was being edited by a Rorschach test. One page was empty, the classifieds had not yet been written, and, in a sudden and extreme new symptom of the paper's psychosis, the erstwhile "Dr. Rameesh" had renounced his ethnicity, opting instead for the odd species-ist pseudonym "Thirsty Dog."

None of this bothered me—I knew what Living Here was all about and admired it, but then eXile called me out of the dugout over the weekend, and before I knew it I was saying goodbye to these good times and going to the show.

Living Here was a great concept that came along at the right time. It was an experiment in non-journalism by non-people: not only did its wr-

types whose keg parties had given me panic attacks all through college. They'd invaded Russia in enormous numbers since my student days, working as lawyers, accountants, stockbrokers, and government consultants, working in unison, with the help of massive amounts of Western aid, to help build the new Russia in their image. They announced to the poor that being poor was now officially their own fault, and that they had been mistaken if they thought they'd been having fun before. They also purged the city as best they could of the very dirt, grime, and gloom that had made me fall in love with Russia in the first place. They even got rid of the unfriendliness, flooding the airwaves with Western-made commercials full of grinning, happy Russian consumers, and preaching customer service skills, mostly by way of loudly demanding, in English, better service everywhere. Those fucking Russians would like them whether they liked it or not!

I put in a long stretch working for the *Moscow Times*, a placid publication which read like the Lincoln, Nebraska, *Neighborhood Gazette* and cheered the expatriate community's campaign against the old unfriendly days. Then, finally, I realized that the only way I could feel free again—the only way I could keep from impurifying myself with visits to McDonald's and gleaming new "Western" supermarkets—would be to move even farther away from the advance of "progress." So in a panic I quit and moved to Mongolia, which I rightly guessed would be more unspoiled than the new Russia.

But even there, in that remote Asiatic valley where the plague visited every summer and beautiful golden eagles perched on your balcony, I saw the same process beginning... cellphones, corporations moving in to teach Mongolian goatherds to gather cashmere more effectively, lots of rah-rah Uncle Sam talk about "progress." In fact, I'd been forced to write a lot of that talk myself, as the head of the English-language department in the Mongolian state wire service—acres of blather about how wonderful it was that Mongolia was gaining all of our wonderful Western values, how copper and oil deposits would finally be exploited by beneficent transnationals, how Mongolia might become the "next Kuwait."

Only occasionally did news of the old idiosyncratic Mongolia creep out on to the wires I managed. Sometimes I was allowed to send out state news releases exactly as they had appeared in the Mongolian press. A few were gems, beautiful relics of the lost world. I remember the lead of one piece:

"President Mendsaikhany Enkhsaikhan today met with his cabinet of ministers to announce to them the upcoming unavoidable fact of a total eclipse of the sun."

I sent that piece on to the wire and was reprimanded for it. My boss, an Oxford grad named Amarsanaa, sensibly decided that he didn't want his country to look backward around the world. Economically, there was too much at stake now, given the new necessity to present a "professional" image, to let that happen.

When I was evacuated out of Mongolia and left in the hospital to ponder my bad luck, I realized I was in trouble. Mongolia, the most remote place on the planet, a place where sheep were still occasionally used as currency, was no longer safe from the mind-set that I'd fled from in the first place. There was really nowhere else on the map to hide. So the only solution was to drop off the map entirely.

That's why I was joining the *eXile*. It was the end of the road. Doing just about anything else would mean getting a real job, with a boss committed to upholding all the values I'd spent so many years fleeing in despair from. It would mean total surrender. At the *eXile*, on the other hand, I would at least be able to say my piece for the short period of time we'd be able to survive financially. I didn't think it would be very long. I anticipated going home and throwing myself at my parents' mercy in half a year.

Ames, for his part, had cut the cord long ago. He had been thoroughly unemployable in Moscow for more than a year, due to his column. All he wanted now was to keep airing it out in print as long as possible, at the expense of my reputation, if necessary. I wouldn't have to worry about him selling out, anyway.

Although there was nothing really to lose, we were both frightened for ourselves. If the paper collapsed now, after we'd gone through the public comedy of joining fringe forces to earnestly pursue some vague quixotic goal of global vengeance against the "community," in the process openly taking ourselves seriously as voices who deserved to be heard, we'd be ruined—the biggest losers the city had ever seen.

That was what we thought then. But what we didn't know at the time was that circumstances greatly favored us. What eventually lifted the *eXile* above the level of an inspirational tale for a slacker group therapy session was the fact that our little effort at nerd redemption was taking place at a very specific time: alongside one of the most violent periods of social change in this half of the century.

Moscow 1997 was not only the site of some of the most Byzantine corruption the world has ever seen—with literally billions of dollars in government money being stolen more or less openly out of the budget on a routine basis—it was also

2500 R	2500 R	1870 R	2500 R	2500 R
YUKOS	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE	INDEPENDENT MEDIA	USAID	
Bonus Yukos 1 newspaper Yukos 2 newspaper Yukos 3 newspaper Yukos 4 newspaper Yukos 5 newspaper Yukos 1 book Yukos 2 books	175 R 310 R 340 R 370 R 400 R 430 R 460 R 510 R	Bonus Yukos 1 newspaper Yukos 2 newspaper Yukos 3 newspaper Yukos 4 newspaper Yukos 5 newspaper Yukos 1 book Yukos 2 books	70 R 270 R 330 R 340 R 400 R 400 R 400 R 700 R	Collect 2,000 R Collect 2,000 R
KHRAM TAX Pay 10% or 2000 R	800 R			
KOMPROMAT				
YUKOS	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE	INDEPENDENT MEDIA	USAID	
			Collect 2,000 R	
			all rights reserved	



ark Place in our version were Norilsk Nickel and Svyazinvest, the two major corporate properties that were auctioned off that summer amid a
instead of Chance cards, put money in Switzerland instead of Free Parking, and collected funds from USAID instead of GO.

KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Controversy surrounds Svyazinvest's role. If that property is owned, the owner must go directly to CRT and pay the owner of CRT SA the bribe. The owner of Svyazinvest may not buy CRT if it is unowned. If Svyazinvest is unowned, you may keep this card and produce it if Svyazinvest is sold to an opponent.	President dismisses you from the Cabinet. Go directly to Switzerland.
PRESIDENTIAL DECREE	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
You speak good English. Go directly to USAID.	PASS THROUGH YOUR POSTED ALIVE CARD!
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Your car is blown up. Discard one turn.	President names you honorary head of the National Sports Fund. Collect 4000 rubles in cigarette sales and send 1000 to Switzerland.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Sergei Lushchy uses an intercom telephone. All players who own a government official must go back five spaces.	Peace accords in Chechnya. Go to Switzerland.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Hold on to this card until BURSCHNAARSTELLE will help you out of any future Kompromat. Good for one use only.	Re-elect the President. All players pay 500 rubles for every property they own, plus 1000 for every whole Financial/Industrial Group.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Your no-interest loan from Strelkovy Bank is made public. Sverdlov Agrobank if you own it; otherwise, pay 2000 rubles to Switzerland.	President falls ill. Go directly to Amurkly Clothes. You may lay him if he is unowned; otherwise, pay his owner 2X the bribe.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Alexander Korshak publishes his memoirs. All players who own a government official must pay 3000 rubles to Switzerland.	President announces re-evaluation of loans-financial properties. Pay owner of Amurkly Clothes 500 rubles for every property you own.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
You are put in charge of building the Norilsk Nickel smelter. Pay 1/10 the price if you build on it and it is confirmed.	
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
You fail to assassinate Alexander Milkov. Discard one turn.	President allows Olegov Sons to fund your investments. Pay 1/2 price for any property.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
ANG reveals that it never received the \$200 million the government allocated. Go directly to Sergei Dubinin. You may lay him if he is unowned; otherwise, pay the power 3X the bribe.	You sleep with the President's daughter. Block the purchase of any property once.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Take a bath in a booby. All players who do not own at least 2 government officials pay 1500 rubles to Switzerland.	President appoints your opponent's friend Deputy Prime Minister. Pay 3000 rubles in taxes.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
Zvezdochka may dissociate from the Harvard Institute for International Development. Players closest to USAID must go directly to his residence.	President signs decree requiring all officials to declare their incomes. All players send 1000 rubles to Switzerland.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
You refuse to send the President's reelection campaign. Pay 3000 rubles to Switzerland or go directly to your prison.	President makes you the authorized banker for pension payments. Collect 2000 rubles, send 500 to Switzerland.
KOMPROMAT	KOMPROMAT
You fail to block the exit via for a Forbes nomination deal. Pay 900 rubles to Switzerland.	La Mondie publishes lists of all players' cases. You may not lay Gaspars for 2 turns. Owner of Gaspars may not collect rent for 3 turns.
KOMPROMAT	PRESIDENTIAL DECREE
You are caught owing the White House with \$100,000 in cash. Go directly to NTV. You may lay it if it is unowned; otherwise, pay the owner 3X the bribe.	Go to your prison. Go directly to your prison. Do not pass USAID, do not collect 2000 rubles.

OLIGARCHY

brought to you

by **exile** brothers

all rights reserved

CHAPTER TWO

the place where the Western global economy had come to finally sell its soul.

The well-publicized Western aid effort to build law-based capitalism in place of communism had fooled no one in Russia. The very people who'd been put in charge of setting up the new rules, specifically a brilliantly cynical English-speaking minister named Anatoly Chubais and his supporters, had turned out to be thieves and villains of a type that the world previously had seen only in James Bond movies.

Beginning at the end of 1995, Chubais and co. had masterminded a series of auctions of state properties which had resulted in the instant state-funded creation of an oligarchical billionaire class. In just a few years virtually all the wealth of communist Russia had been turned over to a pocket-sized group of bankers and tycoons—seven men, nearly all bald and with shady if not overtly criminal pasts. They were gangland auto distributor Boris Berezovsky, ex-black market antiques dealer Alexander Smolensky, ex-Soviet trade apparatchik Vladimir Potanin, Alfa-Bank heavy Mikhail Freedman, ex-theater agent Vladimir Gusinsky, youth communist chief and probable ex-spyk Mikhail Khordakovskiy, and Inkombank head Vladimir Vinogradov. They were all winners of oil companies, mineral deposits, media holdings, precious metals conglomerates, and other properties at cut-rate auction prices—prices they themselves often set, when Chubais designated them in charge of the auctions they participated in.

By the time I met with Mark in the Starlite, these guys wielded so much power in Russian life that virtually every Russian newspaper or magazine was controlled by one of them. They had latched on to the press as new sources of political power, and as they girded up for the fight for the last remaining public scraps to be "privatized"—shares in the state telecommunications company Svyazinvest, a few remaining state oil companies, etc.—they began to use the press to attack one another. A side effect was that a paper controlled by bald thief A would suddenly never print information beneficial to bald thief B. Thus, the newspaper *Izvestia*, for years the showpiece of post-communist press freedom, went totally in the tank for Vladimir Potanin's Oneximbank over the summer of 1997 after its editor, Igor Golombyevsky, was fired for printing information harmful to Potanin.

Law and civil liberties, the very things we were supposed to have been fighting for during the Cold War, were being rolled back in Russia. Now, if a newspaper wanted to be irreverent, it could only be irreverent in one direction—against the interests of its owner's enemies. Even NTV, "Independent Television," had shed its independence a year before, during

the presidential election, when it shut the communists out of its coverage entirely and campaigned openly for Boris Yeltsin. After the election, the station was rewarded when the state dissolved "Russian Universities," an educational station it had shared airtime with, and handed the whole channel to NTV. By 1997, it was a mouthpiece for the government, with its news programs clearly written or at least cowritten by political advisers, instead of "independent" journalists.

What's more, the people who had created this swamp of corruption and coercion had very clearly demonstrated their willingness to kill anyone who didn't agree with the nature of things. A few years before, a young reporter for *Moskovsky Komsomolets* named Dmitri Kholodov had been assassinated by an exploding briefcase while investigating corruption linked to Defense Minister Pavel Grachev. In one of his most cynical and deplorable moves as president, Yeltsin came out days after the murder and hailed Grachev as "his favorite minister." Berezovsky, the LogoVAZ auto distributor, had survived a car bombing that had decapitated his chauffeur and was himself a key suspect in the murder of Vladislav Listiyev—the director of the ORT television station Berezovsky had a controlling interest in. Muckraking reporter Alexander Minkin of *Moskovsky Komsomolets* and then of *Novaya Gazeta* was repeatedly beaten for writing vicious



"Boris Abramovich, I've Been Ordered to Kill You" read the headline in the yellow Moscow rag *Moskovsky Komsomolets* after slithery oligarch/underworld heavy Boris Berezovsky survived a car bomb that beheaded his chauffeur.

columns about public figures—once by a pair of thugs in Ninja suits who crashed through his bedroom window at night and attacked him with a crowbar.

Now, it was true that this wasn't 1937, and there was no longer a policy of political mass murder in effect. It was also true that bribery and the use of compromising information were the preferred currency for managing day-to-day political and business affairs. But the glue that held it all together was violence. By 1997 the powers that be in Russia had decreed that the press should be controlled, and one had to assume, given the history of these people, that they meant it.

It was in this atmosphere that the *eXile* planned on flipping its giant, 25,000-copy middle finger in all directions all over Moscow. I had a feeling, even before Mark and I started working together, that we were going to write things out of simple adolescent resentment that might, if we had been Russian reporters, cost us our lives, or at least our unbroken knees. We weren't going to write that Russia was "on the right path," as an official U.S. government editorial put it in September of that year. We were going to tell the truth, which was that the country was being run by killers and swine who had stolen everything they could get their hands on, and sent the whole country reeling into such total chaos that people in the provinces were eating one another out of boredom and desperation.

This was going to piss people off. Not because it injured the vanity of Russian thugs—they were too busy making money to be vain, and they weren't going to read us anyway. It would, however, hurt the feelings of the "community"—the tie-and-business-lunch expatriate crowd with the all-purpose happy smiles.

As a college student, it had always seemed to me that the lie that kind of smile had concealed was the social desperation that brought students back over and over again to those keg parties they secretly knew were twisted and sad. Here in Moscow, the smile concealed a desperation to make money so great that they were willing to support any delusion which facilitated it. In this case that delusion was that Russia was a developing democracy and they, the Westerners, were here to spread the gospel of fair play and law-based economics. Unlike the Russians, who six years into their neocapitalist history were refreshingly unabashed about their greed and unscrupulousness, Westerners still found it necessary—both for public relations purposes and, surprisingly often, for their consciences—to put a happy face on their drive to make money. I'd seen that at the *Moscow Times*, when virtually any business conflict between a Russian and an American was depicted as a struggle between crooks and honest, principled

businessmen. In order to keep that nervous smile on his face, the expatriate couldn't be open about having nakedly commercial interests, or about the necessity of making Machiavellian deals with corrupt officials in order to take part in an auction bid. Instead, he had to package every struggle as a fight between right and wrong, between progress and reaction, between democracy and communism.

And every time he did that, he robbed those big words of their meaning—at a time when, following the Soviet collapse, they were very much under the world microscope.

Looking back now, when I try to figure out how it was that the *eXile* changed my life so much, I see that it had a lot to do with accidentally latching on to those big words. The *eXile* started off as a blind, spiteful crusade to wipe that smile off the community's face, an extension of a common high school hang-up, but it quickly turned into something else. It became

Below: The actual text of a U.S. government editorial which proclaimed Russia "on the right path" less than a year before the country experienced a total financial collapse.

ANNCR:
THE VOICE OF AMERICA PRESENTS DIFFERING POINTS OF VIEW ON A WIDE VARIETY OF ISSUES. NEXT, AN EDITORIAL EXPRESSING THE POLICIES OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

VOICE:
ACCORDING TO A LEADING AMERICAN ECONOMIST, MARTIN FELDSTEIN, THE RUSSIAN ECONOMY HAS MADE REMARKABLE PROGRESS. HE SAYS THAT OFFICIAL STATISTICS UNDERESTIMATE THE RATE OF GROWTH IN RUSSIA BECAUSE AS MUCH AS FORTY PERCENT OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY MAY BE UNREPORTED.

SINCE THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM IN 1992—AND THE END OF PRICE CONTROLS—the Russian standard of living has improved in many ways. The demise of the command economy has ended widespread shortages of consumer goods, and annual inflation rates have been reduced dramatically. From 1992 to 1994, inflation soared to more than eight-hundred percent. Reforms brought inflation down to about twenty-two percent in 1996. The inflation rate is expected to be fifteen percent this year.

PRIVATIZATION OF BUSINESSES AND HOUSING HAS BEEN A KEY FACTOR IN RUSSIA'S ECONOMIC TRANSITION. OWNERSHIP OF INDUSTRY HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED FROM THE STATE TO SHAREHOLDERS, WHO ARE FREE TO SELL THEIR SHARES TO PRIVATE INVESTORS. PRIVATIZATION HAS NOT YET PRODUCED A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE IN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTIVITY, IN PART BECAUSE THE TRANSFORMATION IS SO RECENT. BUT THERE ARE OTHER FACTORS AS WELL: A SHORTAGE OF SKILLED MANAGERS, INADEQUATE LAWS, HEAVY REGULATION, AND WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION.

THE GOVERNMENT IS STARTING TO TAKE STEPS TO REMEDY SOME OF THESE PROBLEMS. BANKS ARE BEGINNING TO PROVIDE COMMERCIAL CREDIT. THE LEGAL SYSTEM IS BEING REFORMED TO ESTABLISH PROPERTY RIGHTS AND TO MAKE BANKRUPTCY AND MORTGAGE FORECLOSURE POSSIBLE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS PROPOSED AN OVERHAUL OF THE 1992 TAX CODE TO ENCOURAGE INVESTMENT AND PERSONAL SAVING, AND EFFECT A REDUCTION IN THE MARGINAL TAX RATE. IN RESPONSE, THE RUSSIAN STOCK MARKET HAS JUMPED ONE-HUNDRED FIFTY PERCENT THIS YEAR.

IN SIX YEARS, RUSSIA HAS TAKEN STEPS TO PRIVATIZE, FREE PRICES, OPEN THE ECONOMY TO INTERNATIONAL TRADE, AND BEGIN THE CREATION OF THE LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE NECESSARY TO A MARKET ECONOMY. WHILE A GREAT DEAL REMAINS TO BE DONE, THE U.S. BELIEVES THAT RUSSIA IS ON THE RIGHT PATH. BY PERSISTING WITH FREE MARKET REFORMS, RUSSIA'S PEOPLE CAN BEGIN TO ENJOY THE FRUITS OF PROSPERITY.

ANNCR:
THAT WAS AN EDITORIAL EXPRESSING THE POLICIES OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE HEARD ON THIS ISSUE, PLEASE WRITE TO EDITORIALS, VOICE OF AMERICA, WASHINGTON, D.C., 20547, U.S.A. YOU MAY ALSO SEND US A FAX AT (202) 619-1043. YOUR COMMENTS MAY BE USED ON THE AIR.

CHAPTER TWO

From the Editor

Don't Pooh-Pooh this Bear

Wasn't it Bismarck who warned of the dangers of waking 'the Russian bear'? Seemingly a sound foreign policy principle. Yet, apparently Bismarck also said that, in foreign policy, there can be no principles, just circumstances. It is interesting to consider what Bismarck would have made of our present post-Cold War circumstances, and how the West should relate to the Russian bear.



out an alliance with China as a possible reaction to the expansion of NATO.

Of particular salience is the US-led drive for the expansion of NATO, to include some of the states of Eastern Europe and the Baltics. While talking heads inside the Washington beltway (and inside the Clinton administration) are calling NATO expansion a done deal, pooh-poohing potential adverse effects on US-Russian relations, the view from Russia is quite different. Here, the expansion of NATO is increasingly seen as a very ominous threat to Russian security and to US-Russian relations. It is seen as an effort to 'kick the bear while it is down,' to encircle it once again with a hostile alliance.

In this context, even moderate Russian politicians, such as Duma deputy Alexander Shokhin, don't rule

the weird, unaccounted-for variable in a complex historical Hegelian equation—the valve through which all the moral energy of the Western "reform" movement first began to flow when it finally began to sell out its principles.

It was our first practical joke, and it was working. Hunched together in our first office, which was about the size of a Coke machine, Mark and I were giggling like schoolkids and listening in on the phone receiver.

The guy on the other end of the line was a stuffed suit named Mikhail Ivanov, editor of a pathetic English-language magazine called *Russian Life*—a publication with so little going for it that one of its employees had already taken the drastic step of coming to us to look for a job. Ivanov had come to our attention from the very first moment we'd opened the glossy, aspiring-to-be-serious magazine. He was impossible to miss: Apparently anxious to join the ranks of the self-serious blowhards who dominated the debate about Russia in academic/journalistic circles, he'd plastered a striking tie-and-grimace photo of himself (practice for his book jacket?) over his "Letter to Editor" on the inside page. And next to his ominous portrait was the headline to his obligatory cliché "whither Russia" editorial, which limped sadly across the page to read, incredibly: "Don't Pooh-Pooh this Bear."

Mark and I both recoiled from this photo as from rotting cheese. Like Mark, I had a fierce aversion to daffy mediocrities who schemed to get photos published of themselves standing in suits and ties with their arms folded; a lifetime of watching Republican Party operatives and anchormen had

ensured that. And now here was a guy who was playing Russian nationalist on the one hand, but bringing with shameless cocksucking zeal the Western tie-and-folded-arms disease to Russia. He had to pay, this guy.

Within minutes of seeing this photo, Mark and I had composed a letter to Ivanov in which we represented ourselves as overpublicized liberal-establishment Russia guru (and *Lenin's Tomb* author) David Remnick, looking for work. If Ivanov's own people were willing to submit to the professional humiliation of writing for the *eXile*, it would be interesting to see just how high Ivanov thought the standards for his own publication should be. In the letter we had a subtly vicious Remnick propose a series of "compare'n contrast" editorial pieces that would be written by Remnick and his buddy Marshall Goldman of Harvard University. Goldman was American academia's leading hurrumphing Sovietologist, the man whom every hack political scientist in the world wanted writing his preface, and dropping his name meant we were bringing an awful lot to the table.

"*Russian Life* seems to fit the format I'm looking for," we wrote. "Of course, it is a new publication, but I don't think newness is any reason to 'pooh-pooh this bear'!"

After we sent the letter we'd had Remnick's "secretary" (actually our own frightened teenage employee Tanya Krasnikova) call, explaining that "Dave" was away on business in Volgograd but wanted to know Ivanov's answer.

Amazingly, Ivanov's answer was that he was "interested," but that he "didn't want" Goldman—he thought the other writer should be Russian! Here was a first: an editor of one of the least-read publications in the world, turning down the world's leading Russia commentator. It was a demonstration of business sense we'd have to share with the community.

In any case, after Goldman's rejection, we had "Dave" come back from Volgograd ahead of schedule and, despite a fictional yet still terrible case of diarrhea, call Ivanov personally to go to bat for his unexpectedly downtrodden buddy Marshall. That's what we were doing, sitting there hunched over in the office. I took notes while



Our letter to Ivanov from Remnick. We used the same letterhead we'd used for a phony Donald Trump letter.

Mark played Remnick, using a weird East Coast health nut accent. Ivanov was fooled. We had him nailed. As the call unfolded, Mark and I both felt that something incredible was happening. For once in our stupid slacker lives, we were *wining*—finally giving it back to these people.

The transcript of that call, as it was eventually published—to Ivanov's great embarrassment—went like this:

Ivanov: Hello?

eXile: Hello, this is David Remnick. I sent you a letter . . .

Ivanov: Yes, I spoke to your secretary.

eXile: Yeah, I got a message from her. I was out of town. I just got back from Volgograd.

Ivanov: Oh, yeah? How was it?

eXile: It was interesting, but I'm not feeling so well. I've got a nasty bug . . .

Ivanov: Yeah?

eXile: A really bad case of the runs, you know . . .

Ivanov: Right, so we spoke . . .

eXile: Running back and forth, if you know what I mean. The runs . . . Jesus . . . anyway, I understand you're not interested in working with Marshall.

Ivanov: No, it's just that I think it would be better to have a sort of Russian-American exchange, instead of two Americans.

eXile: Yeah, but the thing is, I know Marshall pretty well, we like to do this sort of swinging-back-and-forth thing . . .

Ivanov: Yes, but I think it would be better, from a contrast point of view, to have somebody, you know, else.

eXile: But we do contrast. I mean, I guess Marshall's more of . . . more of a hard ass. And I was looking forward to doing a sort of Remnick-Goldman thing . . .

Ivanov: Well, that's an idea. We could do a sort of hawks-and-doves thing—not that you're, ah, one of them. [!] But still, I'd like to do something more with someone else . . .

eXile: Maybe a right-left thing.

Ivanov: Exactly. Right-left, hawks-doves, something like that. Maybe it would be better with somebody like a Solzhenitsyn.

eXile: Yeah, Solzhenitsyn would be good, I guess.

Here Ivanov tried to steer us into an intellectual discussion, but Mark wasn't having any of it:

Ivanov: By the way, did you see Solzhenitsyn on *Itogi Sunday*?

eXile: No, I didn't. How did he look?

Ivanov: Look?

eXile: Yeah, I mean he looks so good for a man his age.

Ivanov: I guess he looked good.

eXile: Gosh, what's his secret? I mean, really, a man his

age.

Ivanov: I don't know . . . Um, so listen, why don't we meet?

eXile: Sure, we should meet. And we'll talk about Marshall.

Ivanov: Sure, but we should meet.

eXile: Okay, let's say next week. And hopefully these fucking cramps of mine will be gone by then. Ow, Jesus!

Ivanov: My God, what did you drink there in Volgograd?

eXile: God knows what I drank in Volgograd!

Ivanov: Did you drink the tap water?

eXile: No, actually I try to drink only French mineral water.

Ivanov: (pause) Uh . . . okay. So we'll talk later.

eXile: Okay.

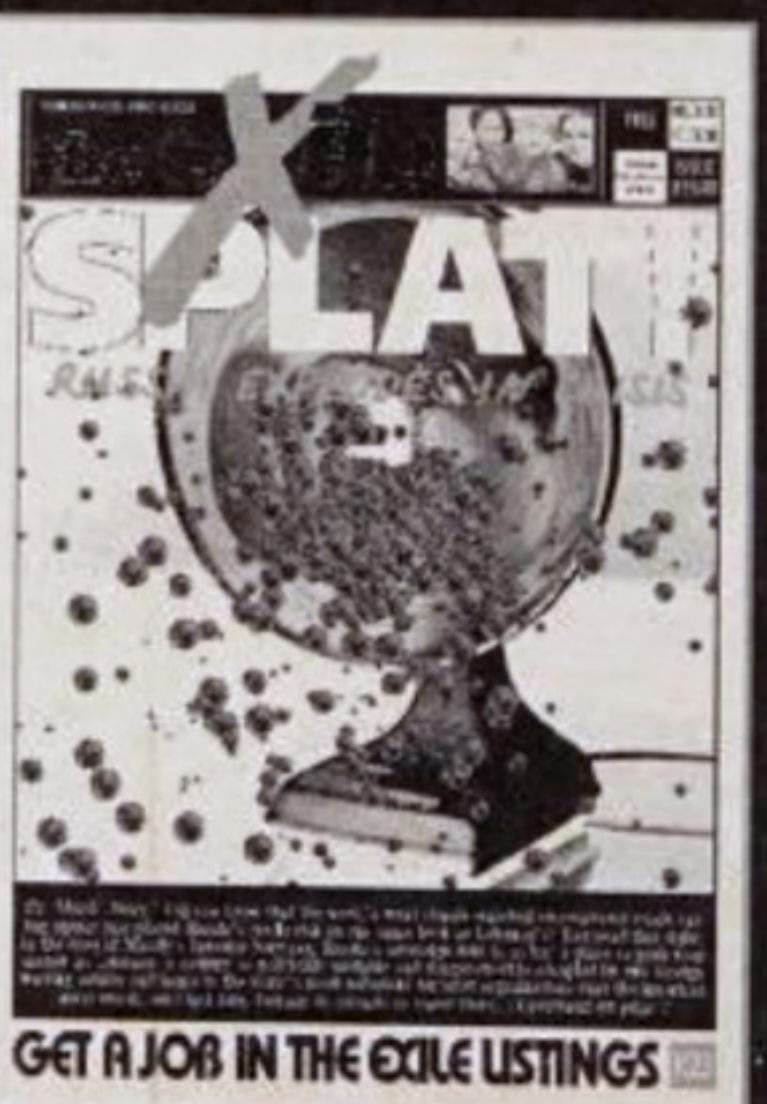
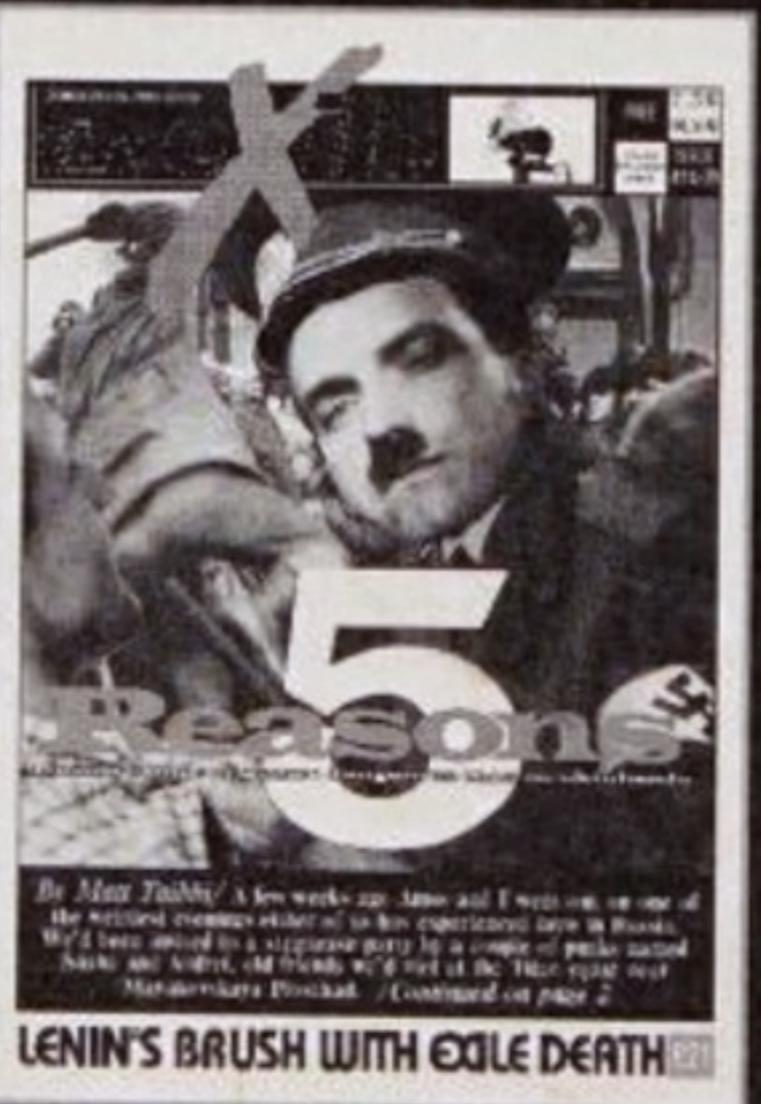
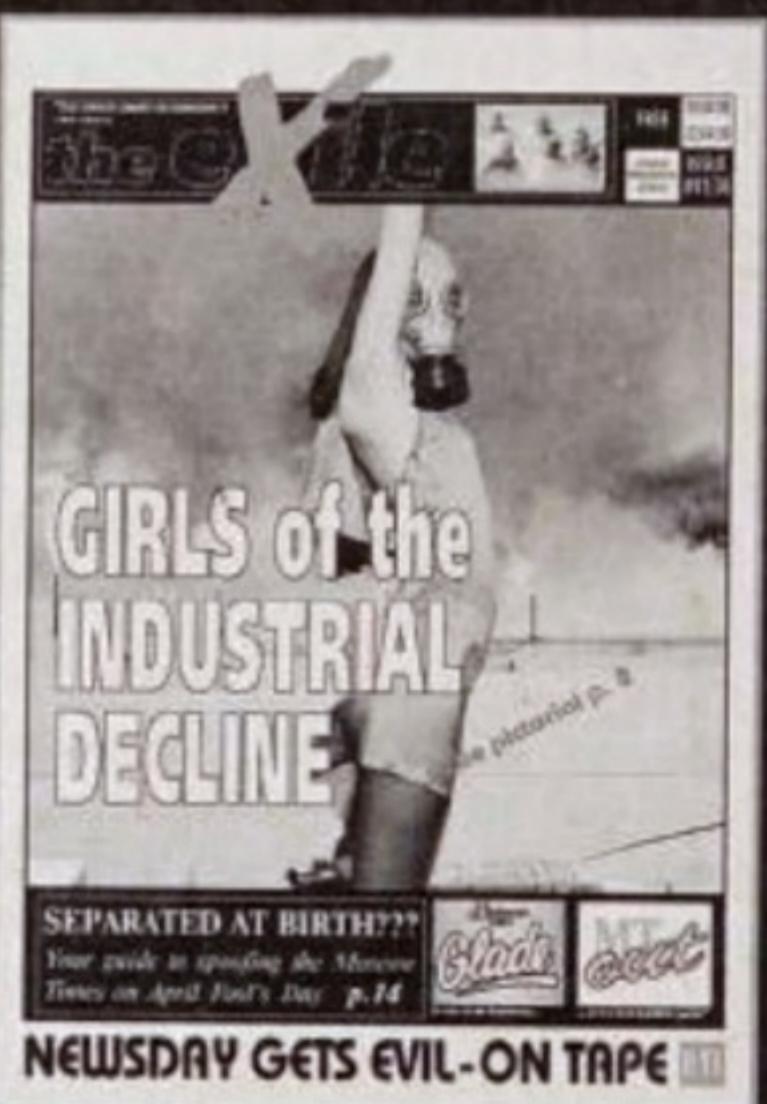
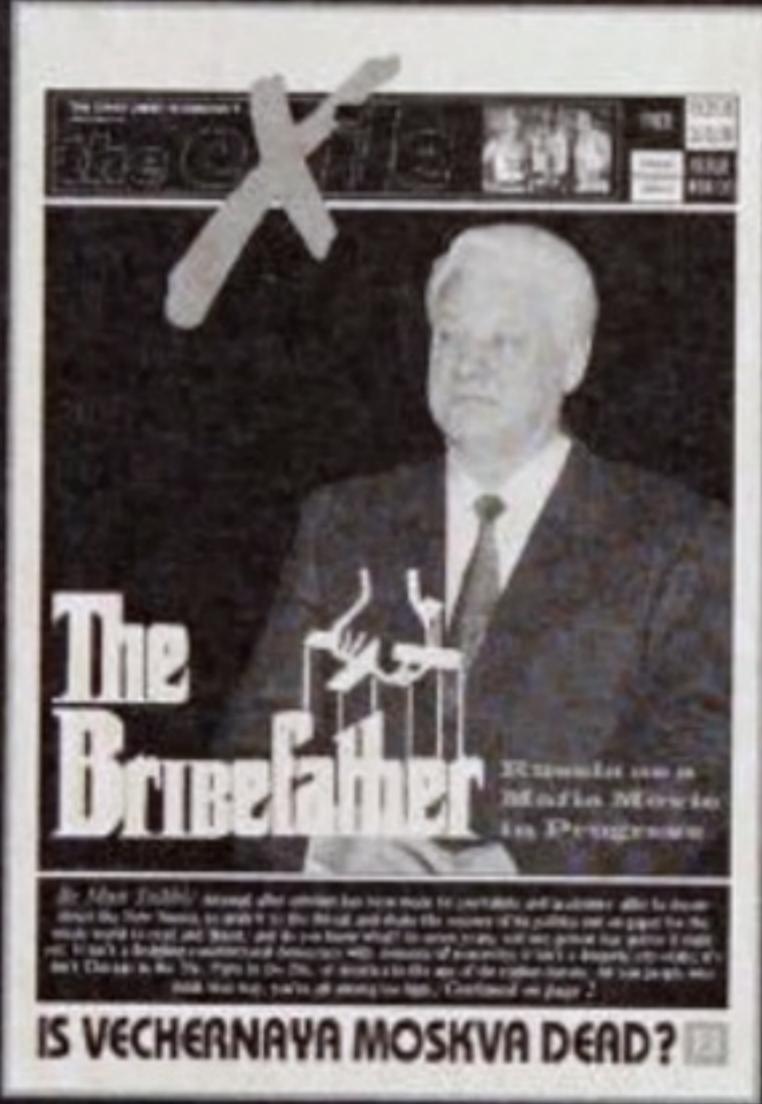
W

e published this call under the headline, "Your Investment Is In Good Hands, Mr. Richardson"—a reference to Ivanov's publisher, Paul Richardson. A spy in Ivanov's office informed us that the reaction over there was everything we could have hoped for: mute rage, unnecessarily vicious and hurtful interoffice bickering, sagging morale. A correspondent from *Time* magazine even told us that David Remnick had written him to complain about the prank. Pulitzer Prize winners don't like their diarrhea cramps discussed in public.

Before we made that call, I'd never known that it would be possible to experience such a predatory thrill as part of a paying job. I liked it. It felt like something I wanted to do over and over again.

Now I was anxious to find more twerps like Ivanov. Even investigative journalism, something I'd always avoided, suddenly seemed like a tolerable occupation if it meant getting even with these assholes.

And the deeper I looked into the community and the politics behind U.S. aid, the World Bank, and the whole structure of the Western money flow in and out of Russia, the more people I found who were worth going after. I had reasons for disliking, even hating these people, but the reasons weren't what motivated me. It was the hostility. Hostility felt good. It was better than self-loathing, anyway. And there were so many people in this city who were long overdue for some hostile treatment.



CHAPTER THREE: THE EXILE MEETS THE EXPATS



fter Ivanov, the first people we went after were our competitors, the *Moscow Tribune* and the *Moscow Times*. From ten paces they looked identical, with the same A3 tabloid paper and blue banner, but there were huge differences. The former simply sucked, while the latter was fast becoming a tyrannical corporate mini-Godzilla, stomping on the expatriate community's communication lines with its high production values

and aggressively banal news coverage.

Undermining the extravagantly staffed, liberally funded *Times* was going to be a long-term project; putting the *Tribune* in place would be easier. This was a two-bit copycat publication run by a British mama's boy named Anthony Louis, son of Victor Louis, the well-known English correspondent and reputed Soviet double agent. Years ago, Louis Sr. had brought the text of Khrushchev's secret speech and films of Sakharov in exile to the West. Now Daddykins was dead and twentysomething offspring Anthony wanted to follow in his journalistic footsteps, using the platform of an English-language paper in Moscow.

Louis's paper had actually been the first such paper in post-communist Russia, but it quickly lost almost the entirety of its market share to the *Moscow Times* through mismanagement, editorial ineptitude, and the conspicuous lack of an overall publishing concept. Historical forces had also played a role in squeezing it out. The *Trib* was a hokey British cold-warrior leftover of the mind-set which had created faux-friendly projects like Apollo-Soyuz and the Goodwill games; it had been the big paper in town when "Joint Venture" and "Cooperative" were the hot new words on the street, and people like Grigory Yavlinsky put forth pie-in-the-sky fantasies of revamping the Soviet economy in 500 days, and were taken seriously when they did.

The *Times*, on the other hand, was a product of the

next, more lasting era, in which armies of American consultants virtually took over Russian government, and smooth-talking Western corporations moved in to replace that hokey Cold War atmosphere with the efficient, calculating feel of "professional" Russia. Everything about the *Times* was corporate: the American style and spelling (despite Dutch ownership), the gleaming new computers, the high-rent start-up office in the Radisson hotel, the confident, libertarian editorial slant. . . . If the *Trib* was ratty tweed, the *Times* was creased collar and power tie, which by 1992 was the chosen uniform of much of the can-do expatriate community.

The *Trib* couldn't compete. Within a few years after its inception, its entire marketing strategy was geared toward