



# HAIR OF THE DOG

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s through the 1980s, a group of American fishermen and businessmen teamed up with the Soviets to form one of the only joint Soviet-American companies in the world—Marine Resources Company. In this Joint Venture, Americans were to catch fish within the newly defined 200-mile limit, then pass them off at sea for the Soviets to process. To serve as translators, Marine Resources hired a dozen or so American speakers of Russian: university students, mostly, with a sprinkling of adult children of Russian immigrants thrown in. They were to live on board the Soviet trawlers and keep tabs on the amount of fish brought on board so that the fishermen would be properly reimbursed.

The relationship between Americans and Russians has tended toward volatility at best, and fishermen everywhere are among the most independent, obstinate, and hard-nosed of people. In reality, therefore, the company representative's main function was to grease treads: ensure that the Soviets and Americans maintained a smooth working relationship. This could be a daunting task in a world of mutual suspicion—a good representative needed a nimble command of both Russian and English, a strong streak of diplomacy, an

ability to elude and subvert the machinations of the KGB, and perhaps most importantly, an endless capacity for booze.

Alcohol, prejudice, paranoia, and deceit, all set on a rusted out stinking hulk of a boat, manned by an inept, drunken, demoralized crew. The evidence of the death of the Soviet system lay all about me on the trawlers as I worked, yet even I did not realize the meaning of the notes I scrawled as I lay hungover and seasick on my bunk. The demise of the Soviet Union was, for most Westerners, an overwhelming shock—a sudden and historic schism predicted by few. Even trained Sovietologists were taken by surprise. And so I did not realize what I was chronicling in my whiskey-stained journals: the end of an era.

And even I did not realize how that past era would reflect, refract, and coalesce in modern form. Good people struggling against the blinders of one-sided, bigoted, totalitarian regimes—regimes that cry wolf even as they destroy their own people. The experiences of the Joint Venture are more relevant today, in our post 9/11 world, than they were in the last millennium.

So climb aboard the trawler with me and read on.

## *Arrival*

The captain invites you to his cabin for tea,” said the man in Russian. He stood awkwardly at the cabin door, averting his gaze from our nightgowns. I glanced at Laura. She tugged at her gown, then scratched her belly.

“It’s close to midnight, Barb. I don’t think people ordinarily have tea at midnight.” She grinned. “I know what else they have, though.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy.” She nodded to the crewman and shut the door. “Come on.” In seconds she was dressed and out the window.

It was my first evening aboard the *Muis Yegorova*, a Soviet

trawler that had put in at Seattle to stock up on supplies, refuel, siphon off wastes, and pick up several observers from the National Marine Fisheries Service, along with another translator: me.

My knowledge of Russian had been instilled during a thirteen-month stint at the U.S. Army’s Defense Language Institute five years before, and honed to a dull edge of rustiness with two quarters of third-year Russian at the University of Washington in the months prior to my departure on the *Yegorova*. Somewhere in the back of my mind I’d carried an image of a few romantic months of dreamy work at sea. As Laura, my new cabin mate and fellow translator had put it only hours before: “Welcome aboard, sucker.”

I clambered out the window after Laura (it was easier to get to the bridge on the messy walkways outside the window than through the labyrinthine passageways beyond the door), and we picked our way forward, climbing over ripped-up planks, hefty chunks of metal, and bits and pieces of gear. The *Yegorova* was a 270-foot combination trawling and fish-processing vessel of a type referred to as a “Big Mother” by the American fishermen. It was also a rat’s nest. Peeling gray and white paint was everywhere, often covered with a bloody patina of rust. I made my way forward with trepidation. Every ship, as the old saying goes, is a reflection of its captain.

I’d met some of the ship’s crew earlier, as I boarded. The deck crew had been standing near the railings, huddled in surly little groups and smoking the industrial-strength cigarettes called *papyrosi*. They had eyed me wordlessly as I lugged my baggage up the narrow gangplank, then jumped to assist as the fleet commander, Anatoly Petrovich, appeared.

“I want to meet you,” Anatoly said, in heavily accented English.

I think you just have, I thought, and shook his hand. At about five feet, Anatoly Petrovich was short even by Russian standards. He was also dumpy and beetle-browed ugly. I later learned that most of the Russian women in the fleet had a pas-

sion for him, which goes to show what power will do for a man.

Having exhausted his store of English, Anatoly switched to Russian: "Welcome aboard the *Muis Yegorova*. I'm sure you will enjoy your stay here."

I mumbled something to the effect that I was glad to be aboard. Mumbling is a potent resource when one isn't sure whether one is saying things properly.

We both stood uncomfortably for a moment, Anatoly unsure of what to say, and I unsure of both what to say and how to say it.

"You should have something to eat. I'm sure you're hungry," Anatoly said.

I protested in vain that I wasn't; then watched helplessly as my baggage was ferried off without me, while I was led off through a Byzantine maze of stairwells and passageways to the officers' mess.

The mess, located in the forward area of the ship, contained a long, empty table, obviously designed to hold most of the officers. I was seated alone at a small stand squeezed into the side. It was covered with leaflets and brochures, all in English, expounding the virtues of communism. I shuffled through them nervously, then glanced about at the walls plastered with banners and pictures of Lenin. At last a waitress darted in with a bowl of cold and greasy fish soup. She smiled.

"Would you like to come down to our cabin when you're through?" she asked shyly.

"Yes, I'd like that." I gulped a bit of my soup, hesitated a few moments out of politeness, and got up.

The woman, Klavdia, was on her third voyage, and as we made our way to her cabin she explained some of the workings of the Soviet pay scales. Each job in the Soviet Union, she explained, had a set salary, but multipliers were used depending upon how far away from Moscow you were. The Ukraine had a multiplier close to one, Soviet central Asia a multiplier around two, and Siberia had a three. The *Yegorova*, she explained, was considered to be even tougher duty than Siberia,

and as such merited a multiplier close to four. Therefore, she told me proudly, even though hers was one of the lowest paying jobs on the ship (indeed, the women held all the lowest paying jobs on the ship), she made more money than most college professors in Moscow.

We arrived at her cabin and she opened the door with a flourish.

Inside, perched on inadequate-looking chairs, were three of the stoutest women I'd ever seen. Although none of them could have topped five feet, each was enormously rotund, with fat bursting from tiny frames. They must have weighed around three hundred pounds apiece.

They smiled happily. "Come in! Come in! Have some coffee; have some cookies!"

The women were Klavdia's roommates: the head cook and her two assistants. The obesity, I later learned, was an occupational hazard shared by cooks throughout the fleet. They were often ferried on and off the ship by deck cranes, being unable to climb ladders and unsure of themselves on the narrow gangplanks.

All three were busy eating cookies from a box. "Here, have some," said the head cook, thrusting a handful in my hand. "I'm Alla Nikolayevna, this is Katerina Lvovna, and this is Yelena Sergeevna. You've already met Klavdia Yurevna."

I nodded, munching nervously on a cookie. The Russian custom of using both first and middle names in ordinary speech tended to leave one bogged down after a while.

"Do you happen to have a Sears catalog?" Alla asked.

"No, sorry."

"Too bad." She pointed to the walls plastered with pictures of fashion models torn from American catalogs. "Beth gave us these last year. They're out of fashion now, no doubt. Ali, well."

Someone thrust a mug of coffee in my hand. It was Soviet instant coffee—even worse than American instant coffee.

"Here, have some sour cream. It's delicious," said Kate-

rina, waving a heaping spoonful in my direction. "Don't be shy, now."

I hesitated. What did one do with a spoonful of sour cream? I took it and stirred it into my coffee.

"No, no, no!" The cabin filled with laughter. "You're not supposed to drink it, silly. You're supposed to eat it!" I looked up. All three cooks had spoons full of sour cream in their hands and were licking them as if they were ice cream. "It's fresh. We just got it here in port, and it's thick and sweet as can be." They poured out my coffee, still laughing, and gave me a refill.

The women chattered happily, and I listened carefully. Although I understood most of what they said, the speed of the conversation was much faster than I was used to; in class the professors had always been careful to speak slowly and clearly. And there was a strange lilt to the speech: a Ukrainian accent. The ships in this fleet, they told me, were based out of Nakhodka, a town near Vladivostok in the far eastern reaches of Siberia. Many of the inhabitants had moved there from the Ukraine during the thirties, for reasons unspecified.

We passed the better part of the evening exchanging bits and pieces of information about each other while the cooks stuffed themselves on cookies and sour cream, and Klavdia drank tremendous amounts of tea. At eleven I excused myself to hunt up my luggage, my cabin, and a little sleep. Or so I'd thought, anyway.

Laura knocked loudly on the captain's door, with a wink toward me. A Harvard graduate with a mass of curly red hair, Laura was working her way through Harvard Business School in her own unorthodox fashion. This was "her" ship-she'd already been on board for a week, and would serve as *Muis Yegorova's* translator throughout the fishing season. I was to be transferred to another vessel, the *Izumrudny* ("Emerald") to serve as translator when we joined back up with the rest of the fleet near the Oregon coast.

The door swung open. "Laura! You have come!" Laura was suddenly enveloped in a gigantic bear hug.

"Barbara! I am pleased to meet you." The captain transferred his embrace to me. "Call me Captain Alex. We will party, okay?" he asked, his bloodshot eyes only inches away.

"Okay!" said Laura enthusiastically. We stepped inside.

The cabin was appointed in a style straight out of the fifties. The furniture was spindly proto-Scandinavian, the walls covered with ersatz wooden paneling. Red velour curtains hung over the portholes. A television set with a small and nearly circular screen stood in an oak cabinet under a porthole; water stains showed white on the wood. A black and white picture of polar bears, probably torn from a magazine, hung framed on the far wall.

"We are ready, then," said the captain in careful, tipsy English. "What will you have?" He spread his arms toward the table.

I glanced over, glanced away, and then looked back again. The table, a large Formica contraption bolted sturdily to the floor, was completely covered with bottles of every conceivable shape and size. Whiskey, brandy, and tequila bottles mingled with large green bottles of "Bear's Blood" wine; Armenian cognac stood before stacked six packs of Buck beer. In the back, marching in a seemingly endless row, stood bottles of vodka, punctuated with splits of Soviet champagne. A number of empty bottles lay in a box on the floor.

"I'll have cognac," said Laura. "And tequila."

"Okay!" said Captain Alex, turning toward me. "Barbara?"

"Guess maybe I'll start with a glass of champagne." I'd sampled Russian vodka, but I'd never even heard of their champagne.

"Good. Soviet champagne much better than French stuff," the captain said. He reached over to brush aside a curtain and open a porthole; then sat down and grabbed a champagne bottle, aiming it, bazooka-like, toward the window. With a pop the plastic cap sailed into oblivion.

"Hope nobody walking by outside," he said, pouring the champagne at a practiced angle. "Here." He handed me a

large glass and quickly poured himself a shot of tequila. Laura was already going after the cognac.

"Toast," he proclaimed. "To Soviet and American fishermen. And good season." He downed the shot in a gulp and poured himself another. "Say, Barbara, did you bring Sears catalog?"

I allowed as how I hadn't.

"That's okay. Sears-alright," Captain Alex said, waving his hand in a gesture of ambivalence. "K-Mart-Number One." His thumb shot up in the air. "Too bad no K-Mart catalogs."

"Yes," I said. Laura was working on her second shot. I gulped at my champagne.

"Here you are." Klavdia, the waitress I'd met earlier, came bustling into the room with steaming platters of potatoes and fish balanced on her arms. She set them on some chairs. "Alexei Vasilievich," she said, clapping the captain on his shoulder, "You need to eat something."

"Eat?" Captain Alex said in Russian. "Have I ever told you the one about the pickles?"

"Yes," said Klavdia. "You have." She picked up the box of empty bottles and headed out of the cabin.

"There was this bunch of Muscovites," said the captain, oblivious. "They were sitting at a table with a Frenchman. On the table were ten bottles of vodka and a bowl of pickles."

The captain paused to down his second belt, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He poured another shot as he continued.

"The head Muscovite, Ivan, poured a round, and everyone downed his shot without saying a word. Nobody touched the pickles. Ivan poured another round, and everyone drank again, still silent. Still, nobody touched the pickles. Ivan picked up a new bottle and poured another round. Even so, nobody touched the pickles."

Captain Alex stopped to refill my glass.

"Ivan poured once again, and everyone drank. Then another round, and another, until finally the very last bottle of vodka was reached, with still not a pickle being touched." Cap-

tain Alex looked down abruptly, as if he had forgotten something important. He located the shot glass in his right hand and upended it into his mouth, then leaned over to fix me with a glazed stare.

"Ivan poured again, and everybody paused for a minute, getting ready to drink, when the Frenchman, Jacques, reached out-and took a pickle."

"Jacques," said Ivan, finally breaking the silence. "Are you here to eat, or to drink?"

Captain Alex guffawed heartily. "Funny, okay?" he asked, switching back to English.

"Funny, okay," I said, laughing. Actually, everything was beginning to be funny. And my understanding of Russian seemed to be getting better by the minute.

"Barbara, you must also try this cognac. Armenian cognac is best."

"Don't mix drinks," whispered a tiny voice in the back of my mind. "You'll be sorry." I swirled the remaining champagne in the heavy wine glass. It went down in two bubbly swallows. "Okay!" I said.

Captain Alex whipped a shot glass under my nose and extended a palm. "Give me five, baby!"

I slapped his palm and took the glass.

"He's my best student of American idiom," said Laura, her eyes watering with a plastic sheen.

I took a sip of the cognac and wrinkled my nose at its strength.

"No. No good, Barbara. Is bad luck not to finish glass all at once. Like this." Captain Alex poured himself another hefty shot and downed it in one large gulp.

I stared at him, stared at my glass, and took a breath. I wasn't ordinarily a heavy drinker, but there was no graceful way out of this. Not that I could see, anyway. The cognac went down in a burning swallow.

"See-is easy," he said, pouring me another shot.

I nodded, blinking.

"Here," slurred Laura with consideration. "You'd better

eat some of these potatoes." She pushed a plate of greasy fries in my direction. "Besides, they've been out of potatoes here for the last month. This is a real delicacy."

I grinned stupidly and grabbed a fry.

"Laura, yo-yo is yes, where?" said Captain Alex.

"Maybe we'd better switch to Russian," she said in Russian.

"Gdye tvoyo yo-yo?" Where's your yo-yo?

"I left it in my cabin-why, do you want it?"

"Of course I want your yo-yo," he said. "I love your yo-yo."

"Russians don't have yo-yo's," Laura explained. "I showed him mine today and I think he liked it."

"I love your yo-yo," said the captain again. He began to make yoyoing motions with his hands, swaying from side to side. "Barbara, would you like to thumb wrestle?"

"Sure," I said. I was beginning to feel very cheerful.

"Shame on you," said the captain, eyeing my glass. "You should tell me when you're all out." He poured me another shot and dribbled the bottle over to his glass, pouring himself one while he was at it.

"*En guard.*" He extended a fist, thumb cocked.

"Hey," said Laura, "I've got to get a picture of this."

"No," said the captain. He suddenly looked sober. "Just a minute." He reached over to the bottles and began to turn the labels away from Laura, swinging each bottle around so that its contents could only be guessed at. Easily guessed at, but still guessed at.

"Okay!" he said, all smiles again. "Cheese!" Obviously Laura had been working hard on his English lessons. We mugged for the camera, toasted each other, and mugged for the camera again. Captain Alex poured another round.

And another.

And another.

And another. . . .

"Hey," Laura said, "whamph?"

"Huh?" I replied.

"I said," she spoke slowly now, trying to enunciate, "what time is it?"

The hands of my watch bleared into focus. It's six o'clock. In the morning.

"Oh," Laura said. She looked at the captain. He was out cold on the floor, his head pillowed in his hands like a sleeping baby. An empty bottle rolled in the slight swell, bumping him every few seconds. "Maybe we'd better go."

I thought for a while. "Yeah. Where?"

Laura thought for quite a while. "I don't feel so good," she said, finally.

"Neither do I"

"Maybe we'd better go get some fresh air."

"Yeah."

We stumbled out of the cabin, carefully shutting the door, and meandered in the mist toward the back deck. It was cold and dank, and the gantry over the stern ramp loomed out of the fog like an archaeological artifact.

"Hey, look," said Laura. "The deck has a hole in it."

Sure enough, a trap door hidden in the planking gaped wide on the deck before us. We tripped down a set of stairs and wandered up to the edge of the hole, gazing with bovine vapidity toward the holds thirty feet below. Ice vapor curled fuzzily out toward the gray husk of morning.

"Look at these hooks." A set of steel hooks were slung onto a gantry that rode like a swing set over the hold. "Wanna play Tarzan?" Laura grabbed a hook and swung herself out over the hole, legs dangling. "Wheee!"

"Stop that! What are you doing?" A tall man appeared from a room tucked away toward the front of the deck.

"Stop what?" said Laura, kicking the edge of the deck to swing wide again. She began to spin. "Look out below!"

"I think you'd better get her," I said to the man. "Otherwise she might fall down." He looked at me strangely. I realized I was speaking English.

The man stationed himself by the edge and nabbed Laura on her next swing, manhandling her away from the edge. "*Mokroye odehyalo,*" she said. The man looked confused.

She'd called him a wet blanket, and a wet blanket isn't a sport in Russian. It's a soaking bed covering.

"Maybe it's time for you to go to your cabin," said the man. "My n' V ame's olodya, by the way."

"Cabin?" we asked in unison.

"Come on."

We trooped back up a set of stairs. I bumped heavily against the davits of a lifeboat as the deck began to weave. God, I thought, I'm drunk. I watched as the horizon began to bob and tilt. The queasiness I'd been feeling suddenly worsened. Wait a minute, I thought. Is it me or the ship?

Laura grabbed for some handrails. "Everything keeps moving," she complained. "I don't feel so good."

"Just wait," Volodya laughed. "We'll be out of the Strait of Juan de Fuca pretty soon. Then it's open sea. This rocking is nothing compared to that."

Laura and I looked at each other, faces tinged with green.

"There's a big storm out on the coast," Volodya explained. "It's supposed to be the worst one we've had this year."

"I have a bad feeling about this, Laura," I said. My left foot shot out from under me on the slippery deck and my hands splayed ineptly toward a bulkhead. I was definitely having steering problems.

Laura moaned. She had a distant look in her eye, like an animal coping with private pain.

We arrived at last at our cabin.

"Let me get you some suchari. It'll help," said Volodya.

"What are suchari?" I asked. Volodya was gone.

"It means rusks," Laura murmured. "I looked it up."

"What are rusks?"

"I don't know. I didn't think I'd need an English dictionary out here."

I glanced around our cabin, the former dispensary. The glare of the naked light bulb on the stark white walls was downright nauseating in the swell of the approaching open

sea. I couldn't remember how much I'd drunk. I wasn't even sure what I was doing here.

Volodya returned with a plate of dried-out stale bread. "Suchari," he said.

"That's okay," said Laura. "We don't want any."

I looked at the plate and my stomach bulldozed into action.

"You will," said Volodya.

"Where's the bathroom?" I asked.

"The bathroom." Volodya paused for a moment, thinking, then turned to point. "Climb down these stairs, then turn right and go along the passage about twenty feet. Turn left, go down that set of stairs and turn right. Take a left at the end of the corridor, walk about a hundred and fifty feet down to the other end of the ship-and there they are." He smiled apologetically.

"What?" I asked. "Where?" I needed a bathroom. I would need a bathroom continuously.

"Here, I'll show you."

"That's okay," I said. I wasn't sure I could walk anymore.

Laura moaned again and stumbled back out the door. "Let's go," she said to Volodya.

I lay down on the bunk, trying to focus on a chip of white paint as the cabin broke slowly into a spin.

Welcome, I thought, to Mother Russia.

I passed out.