

Excerpt from “Love & Vodka” by R. J. Fox, (ISBN: 978-0-9899087-0-2) to be published in 2014 by Fish Out of Water Books, [www.fowbooks.com](http://www.fowbooks.com). © 2014 by R.J. Fox. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced without prior written permission of the publisher.



## FIRST TOAST

Dinner that evening consisted of a large spread of traditional Ukrainian dishes, which reminded me a great deal of the more familiar Polish cuisine: *borscht* (beet soup), *Kotlety* (a cross between meatballs and hamburgers), black bread (*chernyy khleb*)—rye bread that I mistook for chocolate-flavored, *Kartoplia* (boiled potatoes with no shortage of butter and dill), an assortment of salads, pickled herring and an endless supply of vodka. Vodka, of course, was the one, constant staple of any Ukrainian mealtime.

Katya and I were seated on the couch side of the table. At first glance, the couch appeared comfortable, but in reality, it was far from it. It wasn't the couch itself, which was rather stiff, but rather, its low height and overall proximity to the table. This put an enormous strain on my back. I couldn't help but feel like a child in desperate need of a booster seat. No matter how I shifted my position, I could never get comfortable. Not wanting to come across as a weakling, I didn't make an issue of it. I simply chose to eat uncomfortably for the duration of my trip. When my back began to ache too much, I would sit all the way back on the couch for a few moments until I had finished chewing. I learned to take full advantage of this back-and-forth strategy by taking a big bite of the slightly stale, dry

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bread, which afforded me more time to rest my back before I needed to reach for my plate again.

Seated with us at the table was Katya's Babushka, her grandmother on her mother's side. To describe Babushka succinctly, she was a brawnier version of the apple-offering witch from Snow White ... only less pleasant. Her once strong, stocky frame had been diminished through illness, but her inner strength overshadowed everything. From the moment we met, Babushka didn't take too kindly to me. Being that I was a foreigner didn't help matters. She stared at me with suspicion as though I were a spy sent to report on her every move.

As Babushka watched me fill up my plate with what I carefully considered to be helpings that were neither too little, nor too large, she shook her head, saying something in Russian that I was pretty sure translated into "asshole."

"What did she say?" I asked.

"Let's eat," Katya interpreted.

I wasn't convinced.

Katya advised me not to take anything she said to heart. It was "her illness talking." But I couldn't help but feel judged; despised; inferior.

Sergei lined up the glasses and poured out hearty shots of vodka. Considering my low tolerance to alcohol—especially straight shots—I initially considered politely refusing it. But in another effort not to appear weak or ungrateful, I decided to "give it a shot." This was my first mistake.

I noticed that everyone had a shot but Elena. "Your mom doesn't drink?" I asked.

"Somebody has to stay sane," Elena replied after Katya's translation.

I sniffed my drink, as though I expected it to smell like something other than alcohol. Sergei stood up, regally holding his glass aloft. His presence, even his most jovial moments, filled the room with shadows, demanding to be listened to.

Everyone else followed suit by raising their glasses, with me being the last to join in.

"This might take a while," Katya sighed.

Sergei began his toast, with Katya translating:

"Today, we celebrate the arrival of a visitor from the United States—our former enemy—into our home. Fifteen years ago, this occasion wouldn't have been possible. But if there's one thing life promises more

than anything, it is change. Bobby, if you need anything at all, please let me know and your wish will be our command."

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

"Say '*Spasibo*,'" Katya said.

"Placebo?" I asked, confused.

"*Spasibo*! Thank you."

"*Pozhaluysta*," Sergei replied.

"My dad says 'You're welcome,'" said Katya.

Sergei continued his toast in Russian as Katya rolled her eyes, signaling with her hands for her father to hurry up, seemingly already tired of having to translate, or, rather, knowing from past experience how long-winded he could be.

"Bobby, I wish you a great trip, great health, great memories and a great learning experience."

"Sergei! Let the poor boy eat," Elena retorted.

Sergei gave in, offering his glass for me to clink.

"*Za vashe zdorovie*," he said ("to your health").

Everyone joined in, then downed their shot.

I held the glass up to my mouth. I wasn't quite ready.

In an instant, however, all eyes turned toward me. I had no choice. With the pressure building, I lifted the glass up to my mouth, downing less than half the shot, trying to remain calm and collected, but making a face like a baby taking medicine. Babushka rolled her eyes in disgust, helping herself to another shot as though trying to show me up. My eyes immediately watered as the vodka burned my throat, then my chest. My face turned as red as the borscht in my bowl.

Babushka glared, presumably putting a curse on me. Sergei tried his best to hide what I was pretty convinced was disapproval for the shame I had caused, as I sat back down, wiping the tears away from my eyes.

"Are you okay?" Katya asked, concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said, barely able to get the words out.

Katya poured me a glass of mineral water. I raised it to my mouth, choking on the effervescence. At this point, I was struggling to down even a glass of water.

"I'm just not used to drinking it straight," I said.

"Cock?" Sergei asked, staring directly into my eyes. It came across eerily like a command.

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I froze. Perhaps, I heard it wrong. I *hoped* I had heard it wrong.

"Why did your dad just look into my eyes and say 'cock'?" I asked.

"Not 'cock,'" Katya said, laughing. "'Kak'. It's Russian for 'why.'"

"Oh!" I said. Now it made sense. Sergei was equally confused by my odd reaction to his innocent question. I finally answered "Well, in the U.S., most people mix their vodka with something else. Like juice."

"Like for child?" Sergei asked.

I thought it was a joke. *It wasn't.*

"Well ... the more practice you get, the better you become," Sergei added.

"At what ... being an alcoholic?!"

"A Ukrainian!" Katya said. "Can you handle it?"

"Bobby, you don't have to finish it," said a concerned Elena.

"No, that's okay," I replied "I have to finish what I started."

Feeling the full weight of Ukrainian expectation and honor firmly on my shoulder, I grabbed the remainder of my shot ... and took a baby sip. Then another. And another. And finally it was all gone. My first shot! Everyone—with the exception of Babushka who simply rolled her eyes—applauded as though I were a toddler who had just used the toilet for the first time. I took a bow. With everyone else's attention directed at me, I noticed Babushka eagerly helping herself to yet another shot, for good measure.

Sergei promptly held the bottle up to my glass, simultaneously flicking his neck with his forefinger, adding, "Bobby, *chut-chut*?"

"Papa, no," said Katya.

"What's a *chut-chut*?" I asked.

"He's asking if you want more," Katya replied.

Wanting to redeem myself and restore what was left of my manhood on the heels of my shower, I flicked my neck in return, proudly proclaiming, "*chut-chut!*"

I then lifted up my shot glass for Sergei to pour more vodka into it, but he rather forcefully demanded that I put the glass down.

"You're supposed to keep the glass down when pouring a shot," Katya explained. "And you're also not supposed to pour a shot for just yourself. It indicates you're an alcoholic," Katya explained to me.

"That's too many rules for something involving alcohol."

"It's our culture," Katya further explained.

Smiling with pride, Sergei poured another shot for him and me both. Not wanting to be left out, Babushka thrust her shot glass in front of her son-in-law.

“Papa!” begged Katya, who turned to me and pleaded: “Bobby, please don’t.”

Boastfully, I replied, “When in Rome . . .,” defiantly flicking my neck.

“This isn’t Rome. This is Ukraine,” reminded Katya.

“One more can’t hurt,” I said.

“Don’t do it. You’re not Ukrainian.”

As wise as it would have been to follow Katya’s advice, I knew there was no turning back. I may have already won Katya over, but I knew my greater mission was to win over her parents—especially her father, who held the keys to my possible future with his daughter. So rather than helping my cause by demonstrating the ability to stand by my convictions—I gave in, staring into my shot glass as though preparing to dive off the edge of a cliff.

“I’m warning you,” Katya said. “This stuff has a way of taking over you when you least expect it. And trust me, you don’t want to know what my father would do to sober you up.”

I looked at Katya, then at Sergei, who raised his glass in my honor, proclaiming, “To Bobby!”

Realizing there was no turning back, I raised my glass to his, before managing to down at least two-thirds of the shot this time around. Once the burning subsided and my tears were dried, I polished off the remainder of my shot, a mini-buzz already taking hold of me.

“I’m going to need a new liver if this keeps up,” I said.

“I’m not translating that,” Katya said, one of many times she felt the need to censor me—a key advantage when translation is necessary, albeit against the code of translator ethics.

Sergei then said something excitedly to Katya and turned toward me, nodding and smiling, gesturing toward the now half-empty vodka bottle. Katya turned to me and in an exasperated tone, said “he says perhaps you would like to give a toast’?”

“Sergei Andreovich, compared to your toasts, it would only be a disappointment,” I said, hoping to dodge a bullet.

“Well, a man must first know how to drink a toast before he gives a toast,” Sergei joked in reply. *Bullet dodged.*

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"Bobby! Eat!" commanded Elena. "We're not expecting any more guests."

As I began to eat, I could feel Babushka's eyes watching over me. She bluntly declared in Russian and with great disgust: "Too skinny." She then slammed another shot for good measure. Surely this had to be an illusion, or some sort of parlor trick.

Sergei offered me more vodka. This time, I politely refused, to the relief of both Katya and Elena. I took a bite of bread and leaned back against the couch to relieve my aching back.

After presenting the family with the gifts that I brought from Michigan and sharing family photos, it was time for dessert, adding at least another hour to our total couch time. In Ukrainian culture, meals are not intended to be eaten quickly. They are to be savored. And at the centerpiece of every dessert is tea. An average Ukrainian consumes five cups of tea a day.

As Sergei poured honey into his tea, he looked me squarely in the eyes and proudly—and loudly—proclaimed, in broken English:

*"Bobby, I love honey!"*

I nodded, smiling awkwardly, trying to make sense of what he was telling me. I turned to Katya, "Did he just say he loves honey?"

"Sure! He might not know English very well, but he definitely knows how to say his favorite treat," Katya replied.

"Honey is his favorite treat?" I asked.

*"I love honey, Bobby! Sometimes! Yesterday! Today and tomorrow! I love honey! I love the United States! I love Ukraine!"* confirmed Sergei in a heavy Russian accent.

"My dad just demonstrated the full extent of his English vocabulary," Katya said, laughing.

"Very good!" I said, as Sergei popped an entire lemon wedge into his mouth, which he proceeded to suck dry before swallowing it whole. Nothing about the process seemed to faze him.

"Did he just eat a lemon?" I asked Katya.

Katya responded by eating her own lemon wedge just as Sergei had. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing.

"We have a saying in Ukraine. Only when you eat a lemon do you appreciate what sugar is," Katya said. "Try one."

"Oh, no thanks," I said, adding "So how do I say 'I love honey' in Russian?" I asked.

*"Ya lyublyu—I love—myod—honey. Ya lyublyu myod,"* Katya explained.

I decided to give it a shot, totally butchering it. “Ya lyublyu myod! Ya lyublyu Ukraine! Ya lyublyu Dnepropetrovsk!”

Everyone burst out laughing at my Russian hatchet job particularly the way I pronounced—or rather *mispronounced*—Dnepropetrovsk.

Katya corrected me. “Knee-prop-e-trovsk, remember? Knee...prop...e...trovsk!”

I repeated after it her, improving slightly. Katya kept coaching me through it, along with Sergei and Elena’s assistance. Sergei moved his hands like a conductor— “*Knee...prop...e...trovsk! Knee...prop...e...trovsk!*”—until I proudly exclaimed, in a strong Russian accent, “Dnepropetrovsk!”

Sergei, Elena, and Katya burst out in applause. Babushka gave me what I quickly surmised to be her patented glare.

“There you go!” said Katya. “Easy! Now you have truly arrived!”

“Molodetz, Bobby!” Sergei proclaimed (“Well done!”).

“Dnepropetrovsk! Dnepropetrovsk!” I chanted over and over again like a delirious fool.