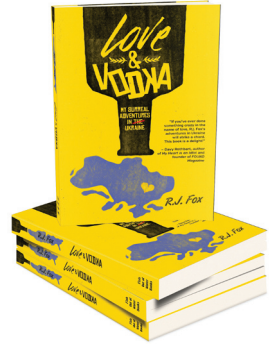


Excerpt from from “Love & Vodka” by R. J. Fox.

Published by Fish Out of Water Books, www.fowbooks.com.

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DESTINATION: DNIPROPETROVSK

I headed toward my assigned gate, stopping for a bouquet of flowers along the way. When I arrived at the gate marked “Dnipropetrovsk,” I immediately noticed that everyone in the crowded waiting area appeared sullen; no smiles, no laughter. Not a word of English was spoken. Not a word of German, either, for that matter. The atmosphere felt intimidating and I felt as though I stuck out like a sore thumb.

I managed to find a seat between two middle-aged men who either apparently had never heard of deodorant, or simply ran out a long time ago. They both glared at me as though I had just announced that I had slept with their mothers.

I took the ring case out of my pocket and examined it for the hundredth time. From the corner of my eye, I felt someone ... *something* staring at me from across the aisle. I looked up. It was an old Ukrainian “babushka woman.” Carrying a cage. A cage containing a chicken. This image begged the requisite questions: *Why a chicken? Did she come to Germany just to get this chicken? Was it for her? Was it a present? A pet? A future dinner? Both??* As I continued staring at her chicken, I realized she was staring at me. More specifically, *glaring* at me. *Was I being cursed?* But what had I done? Is staring at someone’s chicken a crime in Ukraine? Unable to come up with the answers I so desperately craved, I simply stared down at the ring. But I could feel the woman’s glare intensify. *But why? Do old Ukrainian babushka women hate rings? Hate Americans? Hate Americans who carry rings?* I figured that her glare would subside, that she would return to minding her own business. But each time I looked up, there she was, glaring, as if to say *come on, just try it, I can take you down any day*. I put the ring case back into my pocket. She continued to glare. Thankfully my imminent curse was curtailed by a loud announcement. It was time to board.

I headed through the tunnel, assuming that it would lead to a plane. But it simply led to a stairwell. The stairwell led to a shuttle. The shuttle finally led to another terminal, where our Dniproavia plane awaited. *Should I be worried?* I convinced myself that at the very least, if it was an airline with a habit of crashing, then I'm sure I would have heard of it.

Our plane was one of those small, propeller planes that looked like its best days of service were during the Cold War. We boarded through the rear. The sound from the propellers was deafening.

I struggled to find my seat. A flight attendant—demonstrating no ability to speak English—looked at my ticket, then led me down the crowded aisle. I couldn't help but notice the tattered upholstery and torn, dirty curtains. Not to mention the blistering heat that magnified the smell of body odor.

Upon reaching my seat, I glanced through a complimentary Ukrainian newspaper, pleasantly surprised by full-color nude photos, along with the occasional fully-clothed, dour-faced diplomat.

A woman to my left held a crying baby—a problem which was remedied by her swiftly whipping out a supple breast upon which the baby could feed.

As the plane began to taxi, the passenger to my right did the sign of the cross repeatedly. This action intensified upon take off.

A man across the aisle covered his head with a newspaper. Another man took a swig of vodka from a bottle. I simply clutched my broken armrests for dear life and closed my eyes, joining my neighbor in intense prayer.

I knew that I could finally relax once my fellow passengers began to pull out their baskets of food and bottles of vodka, filling the cabin with the nauseating stench of pickled herring and smoked fish—the scents of which were compounded by the dirty diaper that was being changed next to me. I had no choice but to lift up my shirt to cover my nose. And of course, *I* was looked upon as the weirdo ... as the freak. *Weak American*, their stares seemed to be saying.

I reclined back in my seat, only to be immediately kicked at from behind. Something, presumably nasty, was spoken by the bearded face that slithered in from behind me. I interpreted this to mean *pull up your fucking seat now, asshole!* I took his friendly advice and did just that. I then took out my Russian-English phrase book in a vain attempt to translate what I had just been told. All I gathered was how much the Cyrillic alphabet resembled drawings of tables and chairs.

A stewardess with a purplish bee-hive, make-up plastered on her face in the manner of a circus clown, and a deep smoker's cough, came by with a refreshment cart. She handed me what bore some vague resemblance to beef stew, a rock-hard bread roll, and a can of what appeared to be apple juice. I tried to pull down my tray, but it was broken. So I balanced the items on my lap and dug into the mystery *stew/goo*—trying to ignore the little voice telling me that I was making a big mistake.

After the stewardess had collected my stew tray and empty can, by some divine miracle, I felt myself slowly dozing off to sleep, until I was interrupted—*by the sound of a drill*. Startled, I looked around the cabin. It didn't take long for me to focus in on a wild-haired mechanic with several missing teeth who bore an uncanny resemblance to Doc Brown from *Back to the Future*, drilling into the ceiling of the plane.

I didn't sleep another wink.

Two hours later, the plane began its descent. I looked out of the window—half-expecting to see a Ukrainian gremlin on the wing—at the sparse countryside, finding it hard to believe that we were approaching a city of 1.5 million people.

A stewardess passed out what I gathered to be a customs form, but it was in Russian so I couldn't be sure. I raised my hand and blurted out down the aisle: "Excuse me!" Based on the reaction of every passenger, I might as well have threatened to blow the whole plane to smithereens, so apparently startling was my foreign tongue to their ears.

The stewardess approached, all but asking me to quiet down. I showed her my customs form: "English?" I asked.

"Da, English. Minute." She hastily took the form from me. Moments later, she returned with an English one. I couldn't help but feel a slight tinge of shame for not learning at least a few basic Russian phrases in the months leading up to my trip.

Finally, the plane touched down in Dnipropetrovsk. Unscathed.

The passengers exploded into wild applause. I was taken aback. *Aren't we supposed to land safely? Was this a major feat for a Ukrainian flight?*

I had a feeling we weren't in Michigan anymore.