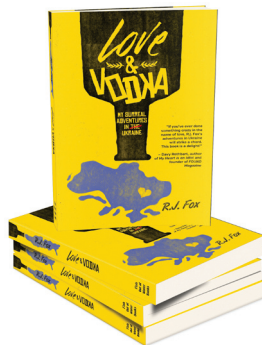


Excerpt from from “Love & Vodka” by R. J. Fox.

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

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“Goats & Milk” — an excerpt from the chapter “Dacha”

Before we went to get the milk, Katya and Elena decided that it was best for me to wait outside as they entered the small village grocery shop for some meat and cheese. While I waited, I noticed a goat chained to a fence. I decided that I had to take its picture. As I began snapping, an elderly man with a long, white beard came waddling up, angrily waving his finger at me, shouting something in Russian.

“Nyet, Russkiy,” I said, pleading my case, but the man continued shouting at me. Moments later, Katya came running out of the shop, coming to my defense, while Elena finished up the grocery purchase.

“Is this your foreigner?” the man asked Katya in Russian.

“Da,” Katya admitted nervously. “Did he do something wrong?”

“Get him the hell out of here! That cheap son of a bitch owes me!”

“What did you do?!” Katya asked me.

“No idea! All I did was take a picture of this goat,” I explained, gesturing toward the bearded animal. The man continued to yell.

“What is he saying?” I asked.

“He said if you want to photograph his goat, then you have to pay the price.”

“As in *literally* pay money ... or is he threatening me?” I asked, equally amused and bemused by the whole situation.

“He wants you to pay him money.”

“I’ll butcher you like a cow if you take another picture of my goat, you hear me you son of a bitch?” the man shouted.

Katya apologized, took me by the hand, as though I were a small child in trouble, and escorted me back toward the shop, leaving the old man grumbling to himself.

"Never do that again!" Katya scolded.

"Do *what* again?" I asked, exasperated.

"You can't just take pictures of another man's goat."

"Why? What's the big deal?" I said in disbelief.

"Stop asking 'why' Bobby! That's just the way it is," Katya said, clearly annoyed.

"That doesn't really answer my question," I replied, standing my ground.

"You'll *scare* people, that's why!" Katya shouted, as everyone within earshot watched the drama unfold.

"I'll scare people?!" I said, losing my cool. "Look! This country scares me! Nothing works right. Nothing's logical. Nothing's rational!"

"If you're looking for rational," Katya snapped back "you're in the wrong country. It might not be perfect like America, but it's *my* country. *This is how it is.* If you can't handle it, no one's forcing you to stay."

"I'm sorry ... but it's becoming more and more obvious that I don't belong here," I said, struggling to hold back my frustration.

"Bobby! Stop it! Stop talking like that!" Katya begged. "I'm supposed to come with you, remember?"

That helped settle me down.

We survived our first squabble, just in time for Elena to come out of the shop. We walked down the road in silence until we saw a middle-aged woman selling milk on the side of the road, her face worn and haggard.

"*Veчерnee moloko?*" ("Evening milk"?) asked Elena.

"*Utrennee*" ("Morning"), the vendor replied sullenly.

Elena frowned, then carried on walking. Katya and I followed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"They don't have evening milk."

"What the hell's evening milk?" I asked.

"Milk that's milked in the evening," Katya succinctly explained as we headed towards the dark and dingy apartment building, in search of the elusive "evening milk." From the outside, one could easily assume that the building was not only abandoned, but inhabitable. Yet here we were, about to enter.

"So where are we going now? The black market?" I asked, as we crept around to the back of the building.

"Shh. Don't ask questions," Katya warned.

Of course not. Why would I question us entering what I was pretty sure was Ukraine's own Amityville?

As we entered, the stairwell was completely dark, making the dimly-lit stairwell of the family apartment in Dnipropetrovsk look like a sunroom.

We made our way up several flights, trusting that each step was evenly spaced since they were impossible to see in the darkness. When we finally reached our destination, Katya reminded me again: “No English.” Clearly, we were on a top-secret reconnaissance mission.

Elena called out. Moments later, another haggard, middle-aged woman appeared through a bead curtain hanging from the doorframe.

“*Vechernee moloko?*” Elena asked the woman. The woman nodded and took the jugs from Elena before disappearing through the curtain, leaving us waiting in the dark hallway. Everything about this felt like a drug deal.

Moments later, the woman reappeared with the two jugs filled with warm, fresh milk. Elena handed over some money and we very carefully began our descent into darkness—a feat far more frightening than the way up. Each step felt as though we were about to stumble off a cliff into an abyss.

“Did she just milk a cow in there?” I asked, assuming it was now safe to speak.

“Don’t speak!” Katya retorted. I guess we were still in danger after all. It wasn’t until we were back on the village road leading to the dacha that my speaking moratorium (*moo*-ratorium?) was lifted.

After we returned to the dacha, Elena took out some glasses and began pouring milk, as everyone eagerly awaited a straight-from-the-teat treat.