

Elise and I walked home in the night; the street lights were off again for unknown reasons; the garbage dumpsters had also gotten up and shifted places with one another--so the streets seemed even more unfamiliar. Giggling after a bit of beer we decided we were still afraid of the police in Ukraine. They were the only ones with weapons and that was a nervous thought. Elise carries a switchblade; she was surprised to find out I don't. Not from bravado alone to I walk night roads unarmed--but more from the certainty that anything I carry can easily be taken away and used against me instead. With enough attitude and boulders on one's shoulder no weaponry is necessary. I used to hold fists of snow in my hands in the winter to throw it in any assailant's face. I have never met anyone violent though; maybe it is an urban legend. She laughed and recalled my mid-winter boot throwing episode-- I scowled. I feel it is entirely reasonable to take off one's shoes and throw them at people when things are not going my way. Knowing Russian is also a great comfort---it is the most effective language to curse in I have ever encountered. It makes me happy to know the same foul phrases Stalin used--it makes them seem more forbidden.

I always liked the expression, "You weren't raised in a barn so don't..." followed by some directive such as put you feet on the table or eat meat without cutting it or leave the front door open. I would love to know how to say it in Russian; but unfortunately I would never get to use it; the barn being the correct location for all of my computer comrades. They stand in the doorway and chain smoke cigarettes; unfiltered, blowing the smoke into the small Internet cafe because we all understand walking exactly six inches further outside would be a tremendous strain on their sweet pre-teen legs--their average age hovers between ten and twelve. The circles of oily saliva decorating the steps inside the room show that they need a little more practice to get the spitting arch perfect--able to aim at the sidewalk or any passersby. I think it is a national pastime --spitting--although I have reports that Russians also play this game--- and you have to be careful not to slip on the top steps because of the filmy, gooey mess congealing there. Yesterday when walking home a sour glob landed on my shoe and I swung around with my fist cocked prepared to slam into a man's jugular (having decided long ago that hitting anyone in the jaw only results in bruised knuckles but the softer throat is a far more effective target) only to see a smirking fourteen year old staring back at me. I was thoroughly annoyed that I couldn't whack him but good but he was after all a child--malicious, mean spirited, poorly mannered, ill bred and obnoxious--but young yet---I worry not because there is such a thing as karma and Ukraine still has a conscription army. I spat back at him and marched away. I am decidedly far too uncivilized to ever be allowed back into America.

1. Plus another thought occurs to me--maybe spitting at people is within the levels of perfectly acceptable behavior and the labels of "rude" are just a figment of my Americanized imagination--I am glad to live here long enough to think of things like that--maybe being polite is not ramming my knee between his legs and the salutations of body fluid are happy felicitations. Perhaps my momma raised me better---but that doesn't work here. Polite and civilized just gets you pushed out of line, spat on, stamped on or otherwise abused. Instead I have decided I like rude; I like rude people; I like being treated poorly because it teaches you something customer service can never dish out--how to be snarlingly effective back to get what you want. It makes things feel more adventuresome, less certain, more exciting. It is like waking up each morning knowing you get to go screaming into battle and even though someday someone else's sword might slash you the rush winning is fiercely tangible.

The other day some Turkish men spat directly on the floor of a business and when the owner chased them out I was tempted to chase after them and make friends because they were so barbarically untrained as to the ways of the idea of "inside a building" versus "outside a building" that they must be fascinating people to know.

I also went to the bank today to cash traveler's checks, figuring I should use them before I go home. I was told that the girl was at lunch and come back at two; so I did. The line was incredible, but even more so because there was little understanding of the idea of "line." All the old people who had been kicked out the post office---a place where queues are ALSO unnecessary-- apparently set up camp at the bank. There they would stand in a line and as soon as they get to a cashier and she told them they needed another desk they rush to said desk and cut to the front because they waited in line one time and like the fast pass for an amusement park they are exempt from standing in any other lines; ever.

By the time my turn came--I had been practicing patience for an hour and a half; I was told abruptly that I must come back Monday--some policy preventing traveler's checks from being chased after three pm. I gave the girl an evil smile--I figured it was a more interesting response than a mere glare and it is good to keep them off balance--they are always out to get you. So I wandered outside and pulled out the debit card only to discover that the ONLY machine in the entire city that takes my card is "temporarily" out of service--which translates to pretty much permanently---or at least until tomorrow. Fortunately I have food. I also know a food store--many, many kilometers away which can only be reached through a complex bus regime---which takes Visa. I have random bits of foreign currency hoarded in socks that can be exchanged as well. Nine months ago the idea of being left without cash for the weekend would have resulted in a melt down--now, who cares, it is a fabulous challenge to solve. In my more melodramatic moments I think of solutions like exchanging sweaters from winter for food ---totally unnecessary but it has a charming edge. I would not be happy if life here were easy or predictable--I would have nothing to write about.

The weather is bordering on humid--but I want a thunderstorm--a vicious tirade of weather and energy to rain down and wash the streets. Pleasantville persists. I somehow think there should be a rule that says "perfect" weather must happen only once a month so it can be appreciated before it becomes wearisome. Where are my climatic extremes? I refuse to anticipate ruing the day for demanding hail and sleet and thunder and wind-- New Orleans is allegedly under mandatory evacuation order for anything above a Category 2 storm. Gone are the days of sitting on the front porch sipping red wine with my mom with the savory knowledge that school has been canceled for one day, and that the power won't come back for another two, and the only thing to do is watch the purple-brown sky swell with fury; the branches would float by in the watery currents--safely channeled by the street because our home always used to be above the flood line. Maybe it will rain tomorrow--we must always stay optimistic.

~~Meg