



Kazakhstan, Short Story #2

During my 20-day trip to Almaty, Kazakhstan in 1994, there was only one hotel, and it was full. The bank I was working for rented a rustic apartment for me on the 4th floor of an old, Soviet style apartment building near the bank's office, occupied by local families. I spoke no Russian. There were no "convenience" stores or supermarkets to be found. Fortunately there were many street-side kiosks, every one of which seemed to stock the essentials: Vodka, orange juice, cookies, crackers, apples and chocolate.

One night I worked late at the office, and walked home at about 9:00 p.m. I was more than ready to open a new vodka bottle I had left on the counter, and to eat an apple and some crackers. I trudged up four flights of dark stairs and then 100 feet down a dark hallway to what I thought was my apartment. The key worked and as I opened the door, I spotted a large paper bag on the floor, that wasn't mine. I looked in cautiously and spotted the long legs of a woman lying on the bed, in laced stockings.

I assumed it was the wrong apartment, and thought perhaps I was on the wrong, unmarked floor. I walked down to the ground level, back up four flights, down the hallway, opened the same door, saw the same bag, and the same sleeping lady in stockings. As I entered, I noticed the new vodka bottle was now 90% empty, and there were cookie and chocolate wrappers on the counter.

I concluded that this may have been an arranged hospitality gesture, but as I approached the passed-out woman I could tell that was not the case. I woke her up, pointed to the door, and said "you have to go." She understood my intent (to kick her out) and said "nyet". I repeated myself a few times, and she rolled off the bed, onto the floor and started crying. I didn't want to use force, so I went to the neighbor's door and knocked. A stocky woman in her 50's answered, and I was able to gesture enough to get her to come see what was going on. When she saw the woman in my apartment she laughed, and in broken English told me to wait.

Soon after, she returned with two more women and they gently forced the woman out, down the stairs, and into my neighbor's old car. They were able to explain to me that the woman in my apartment was homeless, that she frequently picked the locks and slept/ate in apartments. They knew her by name, and they were very kind to her, allowing her to sleep in the car, where I saw her the next morning as I walked to the office.

After the events that night, I bought a new bottle of vodka and more crackers, then watched one of three available television stations, featuring Veronica Castro, a very popular star in the FSU, speaking Russian.