



### **Kazakhstan, Short Story #3**

During my 20-day trip to Almaty, Kazakhstan in 1994, I worked for the U.S. investors in a joint venture "Western-style bank", the first in the country, it had recently been established. My American boss and his wife were excellent hosts, and invited me for home-cooked food and great conversations many evenings. The hotel was full, I stayed in an apartment, and there were virtually no restaurants nearby at the time.

One of my "solo" evenings, I was buying my staple bottle of vodka, a jug of orange juice and some crackers at a kiosk, when a man behind me said in perfect British English: "Sir, pardon me, but may I suggest a different vodka?" I thanked him and bought the vodka he suggested. He asked where I was from, and when I told him Houston, he soon said: "Well great, if you don't have any plans, why don't we go to my flat and have a chat."

If this had been almost anywhere on the planet I would have curtly said "thanks but no thanks", but he seemed sincere, I had no plans and I decided that I would accept his invitation. At that age I was also fully confident that I could outrun or out-fight him if I had to!

We walked more than a mile down a main street which gradually got darker and less-populated, and I took careful mental notes of how to get back to my apartment. His apartment was fairly nice, and filled with books, record albums and cassette tapes. We drank a few screwdrivers, he provided snacks, and we listened to Beatles music. I soon realized from our conversation that he had been educated in London and in Berlin, he was a senior exec in a semi-precious metal processing business, and that he knew much more about American history and government than I did. For example, he had studied Thomas Jefferson's letters, but I had never seen them!

At about midnight I decided I better walk back to my rustic apartment while I was still able to. At about that time there was a loud knock on the door. My mind raced to potential bad scenarios, but he opened the door and in walked a good friend of his, who by sheer coincidence, I had already met at the bank I was working for in Almaty.

We proceeded to have a few more screwdrivers, and at about 2:30 a.m. I made it back to my apartment, up four flights of stairs, and into the sagging single bed. Just another of many days and nights spent on the road!