

NEVER MIND THE GULAGS

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1 SO FAR, SURGUT.

Surgut is like a massive council estate, with gangs of murderous youths roaming about, stray dogs dashing across the street and so on. The people here, who I think look similar to English people, can recognise instantly that I'm an outsider, and in the street will stare at me while their children giggle. I imagine it's like being a black man in Britain in the 1950s, but without rumours about us having big willies.

The Russian teachers and staff at the school are friendly enough. The school is owned by a construction billionaire, and the main branch is a showpiece for both his construction work and the school (which has branches around the town). It's modelled on the Tower of Westminster, and is known to all taxi drivers as Big Ben. Inside is hideously ostentatious, all marble and mirrors and what-not. Ben, it reminds me of that appalling mansion we stayed in at Silverstone with the F1 Jag in reception.

Russian women all totter about in high heels, miniskirts and tights, giving the impression that you've wandered onto the set of a hybrid production of 'Allo 'Allo (if you're lucky) and the Rocky Horror Picture Show (if you're not). English people have warned me about women who want to scam British men for visas, whilst Russians warn us that we may be robbed if we let women we don't know into the flat. I'm reserving judgement, I think it's important for a girl to have hobbies. The Big Chill that everyone promised hasn't happened yet, but the school took me out today to buy some phat jackets, fur-lined boots etc. Nice!

TOP TIPSKI: If you work at a school, and are invited to move from the English staffroom to the Russian staffroom in the interest of social and professional integration, DON'T crack lots of silly jokes to them about 'defecting to the East', or indeed any KGB / Yeltsin-themed humour. They will hate it, you ignorant muthahubbard.

The other night I was with some Russian friends in a bar and a Bulgarian casino owner overheard my English accent and proceeded to buy me tequilas all night, and try-out his ropey English on me (consisting almost exclusively of "friend" and - slightly worryingly - "children" ... an acquaintance of Michael Jackson perhaps?). He told me through my interpreters that he had only ever seen people like me in films, which I thought was brilliant. There really is celebrity status to be enjoyed here, though of course as many people hate you as love you.

Anyways, I'd better get gone. My laptop should be here shortly so communication will be easier, and I'll be able to send you stuff more often, and also some of the many pictures of this place. In the meantime, look at a postcard of Brixton, that's a good enough approximation for the moment.

TOP TIPSKI 2: If a man who looks violent and rat-like stops you in the street and demands a cigarette from your friend, DON'T 'joke' with him in Russian that it will cost him 500 roubles. It's probably more than he earns in a year, and he will go f**ng crazy.**

That's all comrades!

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2 LET'S TAKE A RIDE AND RUN WITH THE DOGS TONIGHT, IN SIBERIA.

Don't you hate it when your friends who are away from Blighty think they're it and send you long, rambling emails as if they're God's gift to foreign living? If you do, I'm well, and you can stop reading now cheers. If not, lie down and relax...

In my previous email I mentioned Russian women's love of high-heeled boots. Since a mild cold snap started here, I'm frankly staggered at their ability to negotiate icy patches in this impractical footwear. I'm in these stonking boots, treading with previously undiscovered levels of gingeriness (gingerality?) whilst they're walking perfectly normally. It's admirable. Everything I've learned in t'ai chi and chi-kung is employed as I teeter through this winter wonderland, attempting to root myself spiritually to the Earth's crust. I'm exhausted by the time I get where I'm going. The down side to their superb balance is that Ruskie women have absolutely no concept of faithfulness or fidelity. Whilst out on the town the other Saturday, I decided after a few drinks to launch some anti-Russian male propaganda. I loudly boasted to several Russian women that the native men looked like they'd kiss like they were chomping on watermelons (watermelons are really popular here). Not a single woman argued back, even after I'd explained the verb 'to chomp'. Several even agreed. On a separate occasion, my mate invited this one girl out, and she casually went, "Well, I'm supposed to be seeing my boyfriend on Saturday, but I'll tell him some lie or other"! It's pretty low.

There are only about five Russian women's names - I know six Olgas, five Tanyas (short for Tatyana), three Julias, two Svetlanas and two Ksenias. The blokes here fall into two categories, which to some extent makes the women's attitude more understandable. Do you remember that stop-motion animation of 'Wind in the Willows' from the late Eighties? Well, the first category is 'weasel', and it's based on the baddies in that show. The other category is 'henchmen', and it's based on those unsuspecting goons in Batman cartoons who are always loading crates in Gotham harbour when the Dark Knight rocks up. All five o'clock shadow and toothpicks. They're really sullen too, they make me look like Timmy Mallet.

FAKT! Russians sell milk not as Skimmed, Semiskimmed etc, but with fattiness expressed as a percentage. Having accidentally tasted the buttery hell of '3', I can only presume that '11' is recycled cholesterol.

Our local is The Pyramida, nicknamed Phoenix Nights. There's a singer on there every f****ng night (the same guy) who sings awful songs and once sang 'New York, New York' as a homage to us. His accent means all pronunciation is slightly skewed (even on some of the most famous songs in the world), resulting in lyrics like: 'Steet sprodding da nows / Im loving today / I vant toh be apardovit / New Yok, new yok'. What's really delightful is that he doesn't doubt his pronunciation one iota so this sonic mess is delivered with absolute confidence and assurance. He regularly encourages the locals to 'come, dance wiz the Americans', as if we're performing monkeys or - worse - Americans (sorry Kelly, I'll apologise now for that and all US-baiting jokes in future emails - blame George W).

Pop music here is 'unlicensed', which means that normal CD rules don't apply. For around £2.50 you can buy an artist's entire back catalogue on a handy mp3 disc, which you can play on your laptop or nifty CD walkman. In England it would cost about £80 for the Elvis collection I just bought (featuring his brilliant, sweat-soaked, shaky-handed version of 'Unchained Melody') but here, £2! The only down side to this is that occasionally (on the dodgier discs) there are spelling errors. Does anyone recall The Prodigy hit, 'Snak My Bith Up'? No, me neither.

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TOP TIPSKI #3.

If your vodka hangover symptoms include pins and needles in your right arm for around 6 hours, it's a key indicator that you might have overdone it a bit.

For some reason Dr Albarn is really popular here. Do you remember his hit, 'It's My Life' in the early 90s? The people here certainly do, they can't get enough of him. A Russian friend told me she'd ACTUALLY seen him in concert, as if it were a feat akin to having seen Lennon or Marley live or something. My diet coke-projecting belly laugh I think was enough to advise her never to say anything like this to me ever again.

Late night grocery shopping here can be done at kiosks, many of which stay open 24 hours. Something odd I've noticed is that the kiosks smell exactly the same as the 'Indian shop' in Lenton Abbey, Nottingham, where I grew up. Now, bear in mind this was the 70s, so the fact that we called it an Indian shop is neither here nor there. The proprietor could have come from Istanbul, Rio or Cardiff for all we knew, but the fact that he wasn't overtly English meant he was Indian (times were simpler then, weren't they?). Anyway, this smell which previously I attributed to incense and exotic herbs and spices seems just to be the global odour of long opening hours and grotesque overpricing. I like to go in them sometimes to inhale and think of my childhood, but I don't think the owners are so keen.

That last paragraph reminds me of a great t-shirt slogan I saw in Bristol before I came away - 'Stereotypes save a lot of time' - which I really enjoyed.

That's all comrades!



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3 ROUBLE WITHOUT A CAUSE

The greatest culture shock to happen to me as yet is visiting the Post Office. Perhaps more than any other establishment, the Post Office is a real throwback to communist USSR. A heady mix of slavish queuing and mob rule, it's an extraordinary experience. Firstly, two choice cuts from the rules of postage. (1) During winter, it is illegal to send vegetables out of the country. And my favourite - make sure you're sitting down (actually, if you're reading your emails standing-up I'd be keen to hear why) - (2) it is illegal to send bees in the post. Bees! This isn't just a shaky translation by me, I've had it confirmed by the Ruskie who teaches me Russian and speaks very good English. So sorry to disappointment all of you who were waiting for a consignment of Siberian bees from me, but it is prohibited. Now I'm wondering, since they've specified bees but no other insects, is it ok for me to send grasshoppers, butterflies, ants, daddy longlegs etc? I imagine that since this rule has been explicitly written into the rules of postage that there has previously been spates of bee sending by the inhabitants of Surgut which had to be quickly stamped-out, in more ways than one. I cannot get this out of my head. Do you know how they say, 'men think about sex every 15 seconds' or whatever, well my default thought is now about bees. Most men think about sex every 15 seconds, apart from Scott who thinks about bees. My main concern is wrapping them. I guess you'd do it as an entire hive or portion of a honeycomb, or first put the queen bee into the envelope, so that the drones followed. I've established that this would be the most sensible way.

The other thing about the Post Office is wrapping. You cannot go in with your parcel ready to send, you just take the letter or other bits and pieces you're sending in to the woman. Having checked for bees and parsnips, the woman then proceeds to wrap it while a long queue of violent, angry Russians forms behind you. She uses traditional brown paper and a thick, toxic-looking glue which she applies with a gnarled stick of wood. The whole thing reminds me of GCSE Craft, Design and Technology. The woman who served me was a great wrapper, but any slight misjudgment in the folding of the paper for example is met with sighs, boos and muttered expletives from the queue growing behind you. I'd say on the evidence I've seen, parcel wrapping - depending on the time of day you go in - could be one of the biggest spectator sports in Siberia.

Something else really funny about Surgut is that you can hail a car in the street - not necessarily a cab! If you stick your hand out and wait a bit, someone will eventually pick you up and take you anywhere for 50 roubles - just under a quid! It's funny because there doesn't seem to be that much of a sense of community here, so it's a curiously generous gesture. Taxis, cars and lifts posed a problem at first as the road I live on is called '30 Years of Victory', which - when you're a beginner in Russian language - is a nightmare to explain ("building 39, 30 years of victory street...no, not 3930 years of victory street..." etc etc). I'll be mortified if it gets renamed every year to make it factually sound.

Another funny trait is that everyone, at any time of the day, whatever the weather, likes eating seeds. You can buy them from hags in the street, and walk along munching them (the seeds I mean). You have to shell them with your teeth though, it's very tricky, and I resent casting aside as much as I'm taking-in nutritionally. It's so fiddly and wholly inappropriate for greedy glutton like myself. My favourite food so far is deep-fried potato doughnuts (also available in carrot & cabbage) which cost 20p each. Incredibly, I regularly snack on these and am some how managing to lose weight. I might write to the Daily Mail, they love badly thought-out, faddish miracle diets.

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The snow is well and truly here now. It's quite icy underfoot, and fresh snow is falling pretty much everyday. Even the kitten-heeled women are treading gingerly, which means the men are all over

the shop. I've seen two Ruskiies hit the ground very hard, and my friend Rob has fallen and sprained his wrist. Temperatures have dipped so far to -20, the same day I gauged the weather by glancing out of my bedroom window for around 1 second, declared it "alright" and proceeded to go out in my Carhartt jacket, no hat or anything. Jesus, it's like having an ice-cream headache constantly when the wind blows. The problem with checking the weather like this is that indoors we have the central heating raging on full-blast (we don't pay for it, the school does) so it's fine to pad around in a t-shirt, and a really useless way to monitor the meteorological conditions. At around minus 18, your snot starts to freeze in your nose, which is quite practical in a way, as you don't end-up with it all over your face like in Blighty (is that just me?) It does feel very weird. I think I would have lost my head if my mate hadn't already warned me of this nasal phenomenon. It's like having something solid where you don't want it. Nose-rape, if you will. There's probably a Hollyoaks advice line I can call about it.

The school mistrusts English teachers quite a lot, I think after some bad (hangover) experiences with Brits last year. There's a great set of guidelines, one of which says, 'Make sure your lessons do not consist of unrelated scraps of information'. I was really offended when I first read this, but have to admit that I was relieved they didn't observe my rush-job lesson at Halloween, 'Restaurants, Job Interviews & Ghosts'. The poor kids in that class now know as much about the supernatural as they do Cvs and dining in London ("No Alex, you're not listening. Zombies cannot walk through walls. That would be a spectre, ghost or spirit. But not a ghoul or a bogeyman"). I praise the Siberian Ice God that their parents cannot read the sh** they had to put in their exercise books that day.

Favourite silly product name so far is a soap powder called 'Muf'. Perhaps the greatest moment in my life was asking a female shopkeeper if it was her Muf. I think the other English teacher's laughter might not have helped warm me to this particular local.

Those of you who know me from Badminton School will be familiar with my Fake Laugh. Well, it now has a little brother, my new Nervous Laugh. I launched it last Saturday, when I was at a party. One of the Olgas there was with her Russian husband (Russband?), but constantly made silly, giggly jokes that she was going to leave him for me, and that we would go to live in London (I had not consented to - nor, for that matter, discussed - either stage of this plan). The Nervous Laugh involves invoking the Fake Laugh whilst keeping a close eye on the Russband, and trying to communicate to him via tone and timbre that I do not agree with his wife. He seemed disinterested in her almost hysterical claims, casually browsing bookshelves and CD racks whilst I Laughed Nervously and she spoke in some detail about 'our' plan. Overall, I think the new laugh has been a success, though I hope never to have to look forward to using it more in the future.

That's all comrades!



4 SNOWHERE ELSE I'D RATHER BE.

Thanks for the various emails from everyone, and apologies for being slow getting back to people. To answer most of the questions, I can say minus 30 is the lowest it's been but it's now fluctuating around minus 11 - minus 20. And yes, it's snowing.

Everyone here is married, and it's considered absurd if you're not by the age of 24. Of course, not only do the best-looking women get snapped-up pronto, but also the ones with the best prospects too. The women with the best prospects are the best educated, and the best educated all speak English. Subsequently, although the ratio of men to women is approximately 1:4, it's almost impossible for me to enjoy this statistic as any decent English-speaking girl is already spoken for. It's like a sweet shop with a great window display but f***-all inside. One girl who came out to dinner with me had to first get her boyfriend and her dad inebriated on vodka before sneaking out. It's so romantic. She told me this in the same way that girls in England might say, 'it took me ages to get ready tonight'. She didn't seem to mind swanning around town with me, whereas I spent most of the evening looking over my shoulder and preparing my Nervous Laugh. Her confidence perhaps stems from the fact that in cases of 'adultery' in Russia, it's the wronged partner who - as well as having had their partner muck about with someone else - cops all the blame (for the record, I didn't muck about with this one). They are considered to have failed, which I think is a bit sad. It certainly takes one or two beers to get over this enormous psychological hurdle. They say the wronged partner has 'antlers' that everyone can see (Shakespeare plays feature similar imagery, and they're 500 years old!). They have a lot to learn about counseling, psychotherapeutic healing and all that. In the event of any woman coming out with you, she'll be inundated with calls from her mum (indicating mild panic about her daughter being out with an unknown American) or her dad (indicating a potentially homicidal end to the evening). If the mum's calling, it's ok. If her dad calls, get her a taxi five minutes ago.

The results of this 'you must be married by 24' policy are twofold. Firstly, many women are with fat, ugly, belching imbeciles as they're afraid there'll never be anyone else in their lives. The men know this and don't really sharpen themselves up at all. A guy saw me putting lip balm on in the street the other day and threw his head back and laughed through his dry, craggy lips that he probably kisses a gorgeous woman with in the evening when she's finished cooking his dinner. Secondly is that they have to begin foraging early. When I first arrived I took a number of classes of adolescents and teenagers. The Russian teachers said, 'they have lots of questions about England, let them ask' so in my lessons, I did. Expecting a slew of London/Robin Hood/Beer/Kilt-based queries, I have to admit I was slightly taken aback when the young harlots instead asked: "are you married?", "do you have a girlfriend", "what's your phone number?" and "where do you live?". My flatmate Arash taught some of these classes a few weeks after me (you cut your teeth at this smaller school before moving onto the larger branch) and was so horrified by the flirty behaviour that he asked never to teach this one class again. He didn't seem to enjoy my joke that he'd been the victim of sexual Arashment.

TOP TIPSKI #5 (courtesy of another teacher, Rob). If you're aged 32+, don't try to be 'down with the kids' and tell them you fancy a Russian pop star in one of their magazines, particularly if you haven't checked the starlet's age and she's actually 14 years old.

It's time to announce the winners of my Worry, Concern and Advice Awards 2005, as my excursion has generated some interesting tidbits from you lot. In fact, the deluge of information started before I'd even left the country. The You're On Autopilot Aren't You? Award goes to the girl who served me in Snow & Rock in Bristol. At the checkout, having spent too much money on

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warm things, I asked her innocently if she thought the hat was up to the job of keeping me warm in Siberia for nine months. Without irony she told me that the receipt was in the bag and I could bring it back if it was too cold. Thanks love. Most Traditional Concern Award goes to Lucy ("are you eating properly?"), whilst Rachel earns herself the Most Ill Thought-Out Technological Comment Award for "Do they have hoovers there?". Relax, Rachel, they DO have hoovers, not to mention wheels and fire. Shahid wins Most Uncharacteristically Worrisome Email ("seriously mate, let me know as I'm getting really concerned"), but the star of the show wins the Lifetime Achievement Worry Award, and it's none other than George. Always streets ahead of the competition, George was not content with merely *thinking* I might be in trouble after my brief period incommunicado after moving, he actually *dreamt* about me being kidnapped by Siberian separatists and frolicking with Russian Bond Girls. Lovely stuff.

My only major blunder with the weather was when I needed to nip to the local shop as I'd forgotten milk. Bored of constantly dressing up in all my warm paraphernalia before heading out, I simply ran there in my jumper and jeans. It was going quite well, until I got back to the main entrance of my apartment block to find a big crowd of people. The electronic key system had malfunctioned in the 3.5 mins I'd been out of the house, and so we had to wait (the waiting was only interrupted by muttering and regular rattlings and kickings of the door - being unable to mutter in Russian at that stage, I put more effort into the rattling and kicking) for a caretaker to come and fix it. These moments are when I feel most vulnerable. And really f*****g stupid.

We have a cleaning lady for our flat who is possibly the greatest charades player in the world. She speaks next to no English, but is very interested in politics and tries to discuss themes which frankly would be over my head if I could hear them being spoken about in English, let alone see them gestured in Russian. I've understood some lower-level stuff. "Today, Mr Putin and Mr Blair will meet in London" was her opening gambit, successfully decoded by me in around four minutes (of the most uncomfortable silence ever). Recently I also decoded this one, see how you do:

- 1) Luba (cleaner) repeats phrase 'migridasher' around 19 times whilst I mentally scan my Russian vocab, ultimately finding no trace.
- 2) Luba counts eight of her fingers, but instead of saying 'one, two...' etc, she says 'ten, twenty..' etc.in Russian.
- 3) Luba 'sings' the 'Happy Birthday' song in no particular language but 'la, la-la,la..' etc.
- 4) Luba repeats the phrase 'migridasher' another 4 times, now pointing at me on some of the utterances.

I'm sure you've all guessed - as I did after about 25 minutes - that it was "Today is Margaret Thatcher's 80th birthday". Classic Luba. The great thing is that after each 'game', she just silently gets on with the hoovering and I go back to my breakfast as we both know that a whole conversation like this would be ridiculous. Until the next time, when she's apparently forgotten and begins with renewed enthusiasm.

TOP TIPSKI #6 - Under no circumstances should you apply a cooling aftershave gel moments before leaving the house. In a Siberian winter, the "sensual, cooling feeling" described on the packet will feel like a homicidal snowman slashing at your face with a massive jagged icicle while it rains liquid nitrogen.

I've discovered that the best way to obtain Russian music here is to nonchalantly announce in class that I like so-and-so. Next lesson, I will be inundated with CD-Rs that they've burned for

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me. My favourite group is these two blokes called Uma2man (their name is 'Uma Thurman'). I like them as I understand some of the lyrics as their songs are really banal. Their song 'Tennis' for example is about tennis. In English, the chorus would be "big tennis is very ok" repeated about 8 times. They call it big and little tennis here, depending on whether they mean normal or table. The equivalent of 'Pop Idol' is called 'Fame Factory'. It's been running for about 8 years and all people under 24 can tell me exactly who won in what year, who lost, any controversy, slight changes in subsections of the rules etc etc. I tried to explain to them about Michelle McManus (was that the name of that girl who won 'Pop Idol' once?) and her physique, and they all seemed really upset and offended, as if Britain hadn't played the game properly. Even the acts who come second or third in 'Fame Factory' are staggeringly good-looking.

There's a reality tv show here called 'Hunger', and it's absolutely barbaric. They take 5 Ruskies and send them to live in New York in a special apartment. They cannot speak English and have no money. In the apartment, there's no food. It's really desperate, on one occasion the housemates ate plants and flowers in the apartment. On another, one bloke thought 'enough's enough' and ran into a grocery store to steal what he could. In his hypoglycemic haste, he made off with a lemon! Never in my life have I thought, 'I'm starving, I could really do with a lemon. A really big lemon'. Poor guy. Thing is, if they win they get a salary of 15,000 pounds per month for the rest of their life! He'd have lemons coming out of his ears.

FAKT! In most Russian toilets, your waste initially lands on a ceramic plateau, giving you a deeply unwelcome opportunity to have a good look at it all before flushing it away.

Sal, you asked if there's been any translatory faux pas yet. I'm sure there has, but I'm just not aware of them. On one occasion, though, me and two other teachers were visiting this beautiful church. Inside many people were milling about, and this one particularly tiny and shabby old woman came up to us and asked us something in Russian. From her appearance and the pleading look on her face, I quickly decided she was an untrustworthy vagrant, and fuffed her away with a volley of 'nyet, nyet, nyet' and a pompous flap of my hand. A few minutes later a terrible sound filled the room, and we turned around to see the poor little woman trying to drag the most enormous sideboard you've ever seen, on her own! It turned out she worked for the church and needed the help of three strapping Americans. I may have been slightly hasty in my appraisal of her (not like me normally hey?). Of course, I did the decent thing and left whilst laughing loudly.

That's all comrades!



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5 TUNDRA THE INFLUENCE

There was an almost tangible sense of excitement at my school the other day as I walked from the teacher's room to reception. Children were gawping from the balconies, and I could hear raised voices ahead. The cloakroom people were mesmerised, and I soon realised why. In reception was the first black man I've seen in 3 months. The guy only spoke French (which bus had he *meant* to take I wonder?) and security instantly enlisted me in helping with the situation. Unless he was selling fruit and Orangina, or expressing his opinion of the discotheque, I would have been useless, but luckily he just wanted to see another teacher, one of eight Svetas I now know. I feel sorry for this Sveta. She's divorced and a single parent (both are frowned upon in Russia), and now there was a black man in reception demanding to see her. My novelty ethnic celebrity status instantly took a knock, and I was relieved when security ejected him with reasonable force. I think I'd forgotten how white Surgut is. All the adults I teach always say, 'here in Surgut, there are people from many countries'. Technically, they're right as there are people from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya etc, but they seem to think that it's a teeming metropolis like London or New York or something. Mostly, foreigners are frowned upon (a foreigner is anyone not on a direct bloodline with Lenin), apart from Brits who are related to the Queen of course. One girl in Rob's class asked him if it was true that British people stand and salute when the Queen's on TV. I suppose the correct answer is, 'I don't know 'cos usually *Temple of Doom's* on ITV', but I think Rob just laughed at her. There are 2 South African teachers here now, and the kids think it's hilarious that they're white. It's unsettlingly satisfying to see white South Africans being the victims of casual racist mockery.

TOP TIPSKI #8

If - at a Christmas party - you bump into a girl you met at a prior party, don't quiz her relentlessly in a mix of English and Russian about the whereabouts of her twin sister. She probably doesn't have one, and you were probably just smashed at the previous outing.

One of my students is this bloke called Igor (actually, about 9 of my students are this bloke called Igor). This one used to be in the 'special army' in Moscow (13th Torture and Pain division). He's 6'4" and has to stoop slightly to go through regular-sized doorways. When we shake hands he seems to deliberately crush my hand (the first time I heard my bone click), but I've come to realise that he simply doesn't know how impossibly strong he is. He's the only person to ever cracked my knuckles for me. When I first taught him, he gave me the usual warnings about certain nightclubs here, then said, "if you're ever in trouble, call me". I don't think I've ever entered a number into my mobile with such desperate glee and such painful fingers. This guy is enormous, and I have to admit that I quite like correcting him or telling him to "shush" in lessons and him going, "Sorry Scott, I'm sorry"! These power trips are why I became interested in teaching in the first place. Anyway, he and his wife (who speaks virtually no English) have invited me over to dinner "with all the family". This will be a nightmare, but for the bodyguard service I will do it. He's not normally stupid, but the other day asked me if my parents divorced before or after Mum passed away.

The glamorous celebrity status thing is really taking off. We invited a load of people over a few weeks ago and they were really excited and nervous about coming, constantly calling to check what they should bring and wear and stuff. I don't know why, but Arash and myself seem to be more famous than the other teachers. In our apartment block lives a woman who reads the news on Surgut TV. The other week a mutual friend introduced us at a nightclub and she said, "I already know them, I often see them in the lift". I'd actually never seen her before but she was absolutely giddy about meeting us properly. When other English teachers try to tell taxi drivers

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where they live, the drivers say, "ah, I know 2 English men", and drop them off at our flat (they then have a 20 minute walk back to their actual apartments).

I have been photographed in front of Surgut's "most beautiful buildings" (these generally look like 1970s office blocks and/or Hounslow library) by one of my students, whose Dad really likes architecture and regularly passes-on questions to me about Big Ben. Luckily I've known all the answers so far, but I may require some sort of book sending over eventually. I think I wowed him early on with my smarmy "actually, Big Ben is just the bell inside, the building itself is called the Tower of Westminster" fact. I may become some sort of architecture and lifestyle guru. I have also been on TV, but because I couldn't speak any Russian (it was quite early-on), they just filmed me flicking through a textbook. Even this simple action required a few takes as I kept panicking at the absurdity of it all (What was the news story? What were they saying I'd done? Why?).

FAKTS! Ready-made sandwiches and even sliced bread have not hit Surgut yet. Posters of bands, films or indeed anything are also unavailable. I don't mean that I haven't found a stockist yet, I mean that conceptually people do not want to stick such images to their walls, and are at a loss as to why I'd wish to do this.

I've seen my first van-fire (not just here, but anywhere), which was quite spectacular. I think the vehicle had overheated and the contents (miscellaneous cardboard boxes) had started to smoulder initially, but when I arrived it was in full swing. My initial instinct was to help the poor guy throwing snow onto the flames, but my cultural chameleon genes kicked-in and I joined the other twenty or so people watching and enjoying the occasion. However, after 5 minutes or so I decided enough was enough, and began aiding the effort by photographing it all in my phone. When he saw me doing this, the driver's 'mate' (and I use the term loosely, as he was standing by and smoking while this was going on) laughed, and told me in Russian, "It's normal". I think he's wrong as I haven't seen another. On the other hand, I have seen lots of crashes, albeit small-scale ones. There are a lot of shunts due to the icy weather, and very often (daily) you'll see the aftermath of something more sinister. They drive on the right, which takes a bit of getting used to. To be fair they drive as if it's unfamiliar to them too, perhaps to help me blend-in, or perhaps because every single person here is an absolutely shite driver. Ben, you'd like it here.

TOP TIPSKI #9

If you're a heterosexual man and have a heterosexual male flatmate and are both feeling homesick, under no circumstances say to a Russian colleague, "Arash and I are feeling blue, so we're staying-in tonight". In Russia, "blue" means gay.

Today it was minus 48, the coldest by far. It's supposedly a freak one-off, though some natives had already warned me that it was a possibility in winter. They're real show-offs about the weather, constantly checking with me of what I think of their climate. I now pretend not to care about the weather and just shrug and say, "yes, I suppose it is quite cold, I hadn't noticed". They seem to think that I'll pack-up and come home because it's a bit parky. Idiots. At minus 46 it is very harsh to be fair, but Arash and I decided to go for a walk to a 'nearby' (30 minute's walk) supermarket. In total, this is what I wore: 2 hats, 1 pair of long Nike shorts, 2 pairs of socks, 2 pairs of jeans, 1 pair of boxer shorts, 1 small grey t-shirt, 1 Gap sweatshirt, 1 old blue jumper, 1 Nottm Forest tracky top, 1 Columbia jacket and 1 scarf. My legs were the coldest, though I have to say that the frosting on my eyelashes was the strangest.

That's all comrades!

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6 NO MEANS SNOW

Like Britain, where trains grind to a halt and kids stop going to school in bad weather, Surgut's general life timetable is dictated by the elements. Unlike Britain, young children generally only miss school at -27 or less, though this being the Russian Federation, bureaucracy and an unfeasible amount of table consultation must come into play. Whether or not they go to school is determined by cross-referencing their age with the current temperature. The result is transferred to a new chart, where wind speed is taken into account. The whole thing is reminiscent of old astronomical charts designed to provide information on the cycle of Hayley's Comet. Mercifully for non-astronomers, everything is announced on the radio. Unfortunately the school I'm at is private, so chaos descends when the temperature is low as students are still supposed to attend, but if their state school is closed they assume we are too. This results in teachers sitting around 'cos there's no students, arguments between the administrators and parents about payments etc, which is boring for me so God knows it must be for you.

I've heard a lot via email, internet and satellite news about the so-called 'cold' which has descended on parts of Europe this year. Believe me, once I've taken-off the ten or so extra padding garments and thawed-out my eyes, my heart bleeds for you all (or it would if my blood wasn't frozen solid in my veins). What's the lowest it's been in Britain? Someone told me -7, with general panic in the news about the collapse of the gulf stream, an imminent Siberian winter etc. I told my Russian colleagues about this in the canteen the other day and we all had a hearty laugh at your expense. On Euronews yesterday it said that in Poland it was -18, and that "some locals were braving the elements", the poor little fellows. If I went there now I'd get a f****ng tan.

FAKT! All Russian cities and large towns have a street named after Lenin, and it's always the main shopping street. So, when I visit other places here I can ask, "Gudye ulitza Lenina?", and I'll instantly know where all the best shops and cafes are, and just where the centre of town is.

My latest piece of celebrity was playing Santa Claus in the Christmas play here. We had to put-on the play six times over two days. One day, Mr Barsov (the property magnate with political aspirations who owns the school) brought his kids to watch and so the TV news people came again to film us. Several Russians I've met since have said "Oh yes, I remember seeing you", though quite how they recognise it was me is beyond me. The climax of the show was me dancing whilst the kids bopped around me. It's a nice idea but the music went-on for slightly too long. Imagine doing that standard dance that all men do at wedding receptions when they haven't had enough alcohol, but with loads of cushions and sh*t strapped to you, and with about twenty or thirty foreigners staring expectantly at you, for about 3.5 mins and you're pretty close to the feeling I had. Ho ho ho.

I've found I'm slowly becoming an International American. At first I rebelled against the school's insistence on terms like 'hometask' and 'copy book', and stuck to the traditional UK 'homework' and 'exercise book', but that's been wrung out of me now. My last stand is my insistence on dressing like a British 1970s/80s games teacher (tracky top, jeans,trainers). My work wardrobe is based on that of Mr Brown, the harsh but unfair games teacher of my youth who once hurled George into someone's garden to retrieve a football, and on another occasion waited for a 'problem child' to leave school one evening before beating him up ("I'll thrash this dyslexia out of you once and for all"). Good old Mr Brown.

Falling over has become a normal activity now. I've stacked it about five or six times, the most spectacular being on the main shopping street, when my feet slipped forwards from under me and I sat down very very hard. My tactic is to not bother trying to stop myself, but just let myself fall,

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preferably landing on one of my two thighs, or one arse. Unlike Britain, where we get embarrassed if we so much as scuff a toecap on the kerb, there's no shame involved at all here in falling.

I've realised that the school - contrary to my earlier beliefs - do really rate the English teachers, or at least realise they couldn't operate without us. The other day I was a bit bored, so I sidled into the Coordinator's office and told her: "I've been thinking about this for some time (it had been around 1 minute or so), and I'm going back to England if you don't buy us more heaters for the flat". A mild flurry of panic-stricken phone calls ensued, and today we have new heaters for the flat. It's actually a bit too hot. I've been thinking about this for some time, and I think I'll go back to England if they don't get rid of all the spare heaters in the flat.

That's all comrades!



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7 RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SUN

Have you ever checked the temperature on the TV news and thought, 'Ooh, minus 10, nice and hot today'? I have, as the temperature here is steadily getting better. As the mercury rises, though, the wind gets harsher. Anyone who was in my Physics class at school will not be surprised when I say, 'I don't understand why', but apparently you can't have a really strong wind when it's -35ish or less. My least favourite temperature is -30, when you have the devilish cold and the hellish wind. -50 is actually preferable.

The Siberian approach to housing is very different to Britain. Everyone apart from the über-rich live in high-rise flats. I live at the top of such a block (the 9th floor), and revel in the luxury of not being able to hear rubbish flying down the rubbish chutes all day. All your rubbish has to be put in carrier bags and thrown down but - as far as I can tell - these conduits are not designed to break the fall of the rubbish at all. Every Sunday I feel pangs of guilt as I hurl our beer cans and bottles down and hear them shatter and clang at the bottom. I imagine it must be hell living in the flats around the bottom of the chute. Poor beggars. From the outside, and indeed in the communal areas inside, the flats seem like the domain of drug dealers, junkies, tramps and hookers. Brixton On Ice. Inside, however, is a different story. The apartments in our block are very spacious and really designed for families. Me and Arash didn't realise this, and when the school suggested moving another teacher into our flat we had very prima-donnish strops. They backed down, and I think may now view us as slightly pompous. Funny little Russians.

I went to 'Old Surgut' recently. It's a reconstruction of the first few houses that were built in Surgut, as well as other cultural exhibits. I learned some interesting traditional Siberian stuff, like the belief that men have five souls and women four, because the other one that the woman would have had is saved for her children. Another one is that when little wooden figurines were made for children to play with (everything in Old Surgut was made of wood), they didn't carve a face onto it as it was believed that the face would give it life and it would terrorise the owner! Sounds like a bad 1980s horror flick. There was also an animal exhibit with various taxidermied beasts, but I have to say that the guide's knowledge here was lacking slightly. I asked her (through Artem, my translator on this excursion) if it was true that the best way to survive a bear attack was to curl-up into a ball. He translated this very earnestly (he's a very serious guy), even miming rolling-up into a ball at one stage. She had no idea about this. Having enjoyed Artem's behaviour (and - if I'm honest - unease) during this question, I went-on to tell her that if she was ever pursued by a crocodile, she should run in zig-zags as the beast will try to follow her footsteps pace-for-pace, and - though fast - the crocodile's body is unwieldy and it will become discombobulated in trying to pursue her in this manner. I wish I had had a video camera handy as Artem translated. It must have taken around six minutes of complex Russian and elaborate mime for the poor guy to get the message across, and the blank look on our guide's face (even after he'd finished) was a delight. The word for crocodile is virtually the same in Russian, and it was amusing to hear the word crop-up among other, more cryptic utterances during his animal attack survival advice translation.

TOP TIPSKI #10

If you're doing TEFL in Taiwan, don't email me complaining that the temperature there is now 'around 5 degrees'. That's about 15-20 degrees better than here on a good day, you whining ingrate.

A lot of the casual inter-Russian Federation racism here is aimed at Muslims. One of my individual students told me that social problems (including all crime) are due to "Muslim man". I think he means Muslim people generally rather than some Islamic supervillain. Enraged but keeping a lid on it, I sketched a Muslim cake on the blackboard with a hearty chunk of 'normal Muslim people'

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gateau but a thin, sinister sliver of 'Al Queda' pie. Here I began to realise the profound limitations in trying to express a major world religion as a cake. What about the taliban? I thought maybe red and white hundreds-and-thousands scattered sparingly across the top may suitably illustrate their stealthy guerilla mentality. As for the Four Pillars of Islam, maybe four stout birthday candles, perhaps those novelty ones that can't be blown out. My advice is, no matter how thick your students, don't rely cake to prove your point. It's useless.

Valentines Day here is a sham. Everybody gives literally everyone else tiny cards that are more like gift tags than anything substantial. To make matters worse, they write their name in them. I tried to explain the real point of Valentine's Day - i.e., an amnesty day when stalkers can let their hair down and make misjudged grandiose gestures to women who barely know their name, or who were perfectly happy just being friends - but they weren't interested. Philistines. One of my students waited 'til after class then gave me a small, ceramic dog, though the significance of this is beyond me. Whenever they have a gift for you here, they always say, "I want to present something to you". For me, presenting someone with something implies an element of formality, with perhaps a guest speaker and certainly a ribbon-cutting. But here, it just means to give. Before the ceramic dog, one of my adult students had been to Egypt, and again told me that she had something to present to me. Imagine my disappointment when she produced a Pharaoh Hatchepsut fridge magnet. I expected an ancient scroll granting me the freedom of Cairo or something. Whoever teaches these idiots English needs a good talking to.

One of my students - Dmitri - told me that he plays a sport called 'Strikeball'. He explained the format of the game, and I deduced that it is similar to paintball. He agreed that there were similarities, but pointed-out that the missiles in Strikeball are "small and metal". I'm no Sebastian Faulks, but to my mind paintball played with small metal missiles is called War. I've got a horrible feeling that Dmitri is a lunatic who goes around shooting people and normalises it by telling himself that it's a sport. I'm sure Michael Ryan said something similar. I've a fear that in the future the police will catch him and he'll say, 'I tried to confess to my English teacher months ago but he just seemed interested'. Hopefully someone will retaliate and shoot him dead before that happens.

One thing I am craving at the moment is images of Britain. If any of you have the time or inclination, is there any chance you could send me a digital image or two - normal stuff like people, buildings and food? I also need pictures of litter on the street, and tramps. Bristolians might consider sending me a picture of Dave the Tramp, particularly when he's in Full Rant mode. My students all think that England, and particularly London, is some sort of futuristic, sanitised hyperdome. When I tell them that I lived there for seven years, and I've seen rats, pigeons, dirt, prostitutes, tramps and used syringes, they laugh as if I'm some naive fool. Anything I can use to destroy my home nation's tourism industry would be appreciated.

That's all comrades!

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8 SURGUT THEY NAMED IT ONCE

Have you ever seen movies set in snowy environs in which a Saint Bernard dog plods around, helping travelers in trouble? Perhaps licking their faces if they've passed-out in the snow, or snuggling up to them to keep them warm until homosapian help arrives? Maybe offering brandy from a little barrel around its neck in a bid to provide sustenance and warmth? Don't believe a word of it. I was attacked by one the other day. The cowardly canine attacked me from behind whilst I was listening to my mp3 player. I whirled round and found myself crotch-to-face with a massive Saint Bernard (it was my crotch and the beast's face, let me make that very clear). The owner was saying something in Russian (probably the Ruskie equivalent of, "Oh, he just likes you") without actually lifting a finger to help. Luckily, because of the ridiculous amount of clothing I was wearing (it was back down to -20ish here), I was virtually impervious to the attack, and spent the duration of it shouting insults at the owner, though I think the panic and adrenalin of the occasion led to me doing this all in English. I was completely fine physically after the incident, but really raging. Sometimes it can be really frustrating to not have enough language to vent your spleen. I bought a great Ruskie-English dictionary a while back, really contemporary with loads of cyber and pop culture translations, but it's sadly devoid of decent expletives. It also doesn't have 'blowjob', but that's a different story.

Those of you who've known me a while may know my theory that - on any washing machine in the world - programme 4 is always ok for anything I may be washing. It's true in Siberia, so that's another one to tick-off. Another universal truth is about hairdressers. In Russia they ask your job and 'are you going on holiday this year?' and all that rubbish that they always say in Britain. The third universal truth in the gospel according to Scott is that in any country, frowned-upon foodstuffs will always generate rumours that they're made from dog. There are these stalls in Russia which sell 'shashleek', a fairly pleasant meat snack in a kind of pitta bread. My students always counsel against eating them, and tell me quite straightfacedly that they're made from dog. I think it's funny that people say the same about kebabs and Maccy Ds in Britain.

FAKT! The Russian language includes the words sympathetic, intelligent, technique and chef, but they all mean different things to their English equivalents. Words shared by both languages which retain the same meaning are football, nonsense, tariff and - less helpfully - samurai.

Russian rap is surprisingly tolerable, and I think I may have chanced upon the greatest example of the genre. They always seek to ape American rap, but to be fair they do make an effort to look for different themes. In this particular song, a Mission Impossible-style riff lilts along, the anticipation building with the arrival of some lush orchestral strings. "We'd like to invite you to something...something huge...", the English-language introduction promises. "To something incredible. To something unforgettable". You gulp in anticipation as the drums kick-in and our treat's revealed. "To our barbeque paaaaarrrrrrdaaaay!". I love it. Snoop, 50, The Game et al may rule the roost when it comes to pimping, dealing and shooting people in the face, but no-one cooks a miscellany of meat outdoors like these charcoal-blazing muthahubbards. A majority of the remainder is in Russian, but every so often a falsetto backing vocal trembles: "welcome to the bar-be-que". A lot more palatable than the usual: "Why have you brought more sausages? You were supposed to bring the veggie burgers". If anyone wants it, let me know and I'll mail you a link for an mp3.

Recently, I went to this place near my house called the Tennis Centre. It's a general health & fitness place with a few peripheral businesses (including a hairdressers and a café) as well as a sports arena. I was with a laydee, and was mortified when we arrived to find - of all things - the

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Cuban national volleyball team in attendance, playing Surgut. When your main selling point is that you're foreign, the presence of eleven lanky black professional sportsmen who speak Spanish can really put the dampners on a date. Normally I hate everyone gawping at me but on this particular evening was feeling neglected and undervalued. Life's tough for a honky.

It's my last email, so I should take this opportunity to give a barely adequate nod to several people who have helped me out a lot from afar in my time here. I don't want to come over all Gwyneth Paltrow (I've had to reread that nine times to check I typed it right) but here goes. First up is Lucy, who has been sending my diabetic medicine over with supreme efficiency. I've never come close to running-out, so "spaseeba bolshoi " (big thanks) are well and truly due to you Luc. Sorting-out my cash, and helping with transfers from here to Blighty is Shahid, thanks mate I really appreciate it. The last few months have been stircrazytastic, so two massive parcels of salt and vinegar crisps, English newspapers and magazines, Horlicks, photographs and Marmite have almost kept me sane (never easy). For this I want to thank Sam, without you I would have been clinically suicidal as opposed to merely loopy. Thanks so much. Full marks for sorting 'home' stuff out and general friend things above and beyond the call of duty to George and Lucy, the world's greatest rapid response friendship unit. Last and sincerely not least is everyone who's mailed me or texted me. I didn't even get back to everyone, but rest assured that my inbox is a warmer, happier place with your input nestling inside. Next stop is Turkey or Moscow, so I'll be mailing again in September/October time.

That really is all comrades.

