

The Banya

A true story by Woody Schneider

St Petersburg yawned grayly as David and I walked out of a towering red brick cylinder called *Vadocanal* and into a shadowless, graphite day. The tour of St. Petersburg's waterworks had been interesting, at least what we could understand of it with our mediocre grasp of the language. It was bits of history mingled with urban legend, flashy displays about water pumps, old soviet era toilets and sewer maps, all glossed over with a thick coat of propaganda and set to the tune of babbled Russian spoken by a busty 17 year-old in a skimpy outfit. The outfit had been made out of bits of black felt strapped on her slender frame with thick bands of leather and shiny silver clasps: typical Russian fashion. In the blizzard of information, one point was redundantly pounded home: river water is pumped up to the top of Vadocanal and trickles down through an intricate filtration system to come out at the bottom *the cleanest water in the world*.

Filthy lies, of course. The first thing that any guidebook worth its weight in rubles will tell you is: "don't drink the water in Petersburg; it is poison." And this is generally true. Ok, sure, the water probably comes out of Vadocanal clean enough. But it then embarks on a journey through the leaky, rusting labyrinth of pipes which meander their way through the bowels of St. Petersburg. So by the time the water comes out of the faucet, you're in luck if it's even still clear.

But one of the things you learn early when living in Russia, is that one must just accept that some things will be grimy and most things will be worse. Moreover, David and I had been living in Russia for almost 3 months. We were hard. We were ready to head out and experience this newly accessible world of grime. So, fortified by a hefty dose of propaganda and big bowl of borsch from the Vadocanal workers canteen, David and I struck out to experience the notorious Russian bathhouse or banya.

By this point having lived in Petrograd for some time, we were both growing to look considerably grizzled. David is a scuba instructor and always looks as though he were wrongfully plucked from the sea and never should have been allowed to dry. His bushy redish beard extends outward from his chin in matted snarls. We both wear black leather jackets, collars flipped up against the cold. I am sporting a brand new mullet I got

from a Russian barber in Estonia. With grim expressions, we walk quickly, hunched forward slightly against a perpetual wind which somehow always blows in your face. We bathe rarely (the water comes out of the shower-head dirty, so bathing loses a little of its original functionality). In short, we look Russian.

We needed to find a Banya. We knew there were lots in the city, but we wanted the real thing, in all its disgusting glory, not some tourist approximation. This meant we needed to ask an old, preferably haggard looking, Russian man. Luckily, these are in no short supply. We walked down the crumbling sidewalk, away from Vado canal, taking turns asking likely banya regulars in broken Russian, “Is there situated not far from here a banya?” After some wild goose chasing, plenty of garbled Russian, and an encounter with one very drunk ex-professor, and we found ourselves in front of an old 3-story brick building. Steam and smoke belled out of multiple chimneys and a greasy plastic sign proclaimed in Cyrillic “People’s Banya.”

I turned to David, “This is it.”

“Yep.” We pulled the dented metal door open and walked inside.

There was a singular dankness to the place that hit us right away. Coming from the cold street, the air immediately condensed on our faces. I wiped a handful of condensation off my face and flung it to the ground. We quickly concluded that the first floor was meant for eating and drinking and not for bathing. To our left was a wall adorned with rows of identical vodka bottles backing a chipped wooden bar. A woman was taking damp, crumpled rubles from big Russian men with wet hair in exchange for foamy mugs of beer or shots of vodka, slices of lemon clinging to each frosty glass. I looked at David. “Hm. Maybe later.”

We climbed the staircase to the second floor and the dampness grew in intensity. At the top of the stairs, a hand painted sign explained, “Men: 2nd floor, Women: 3rd floor.” David turned to me, “here we go.” He pushed a rust speckled, spring-loaded door open to reveal a room filled with lockers and naked Russian men. Many of them were just sitting, staring off into oblivion. Some were wandering slowly, looking confused, while others were drinking out of large plastic bottles of cheap beer. They were all buck naked except for slippers. The Russians always wear shoes.

We were able to communicate to the man behind the counter that we were Americans and it was our first time in this type of establishment. He seemed proud that Westerners were at his banya and assured us it was no problem that we don’t have any towels or slippers. So, for a few extra rubles, we walked away with a pair of blue rubber

slippers and a couple of old bed sheets to use as towels. He stressed that before we leave any of our clothes in the lockers we were to give him all of our valuables.

Now, one may legally be stopped and questioned at any time in Russia by the police. If you are unable to produce proper identification, they can take you to jail. I would prefer to drink a gallon of Petersburg tap water than spend any time in a Russian jail. See, the proposition of parting with my documentation and money would have scared me early on in the trip, but, by this point, the act of putting my life in someone else's hands was old hat. Russia is not a safe place, even for the Russians. So one must choose to accept certain risks or stay in bed. We had no interest in napping our time away, at least not until we had done this banya thing, so we put a little trust in fate.

We gave up our wallets and stripped naked, placing our clothes in a pair of empty lockers covered with so many coats of old blue paint that they no longer closed all the way. We looked around. None of the other men seemed to be making any attempt to cover up their nakedness. So neither did we. We walked, somewhat nervously, through a maze of lockers and bulky Russians, and splashed into the expansive puddle which guarded the entrance to the next room.

David wrenched an even rustier metal door open and it choked a mournful whine. Heat poured out at us in a sweaty wave. There was an effervescence in the air which cleared the sinuses and made the eyes water. We walked forward as bravely as two naked Americans in a grodey Russian banya can. We were just barely able to discern that the walls of this room had once been green tile. Now they were caked with a black grime. One wall was studded with an uneven distribution of faucets, jutting at odd angles from the cracking tile. Many of the faucets were screaming thick torrents of water down through clouds of steam that rose from basins on the floor. The basins were made of thick dented aluminum, and though they may have once been identical, they were now mangled into every size and shape imaginable. Men grunted as they struggled to carry the sloshing loads back a formation of long wooden benches that dominated most of the room. An intermittent stream of people flowed in and out of a thick wooden door in the back of the room. To the side of the door were some blackened shower-heads jutting from dark nests of mildew. The sagging floor was marked by a patchwork of puddles, which the inhabitants splashed through with abandon. The far corner held a huge tank of water whose surface rippled with bobbing ice cubes.

What had we gotten ourselves into?

Just then, a wet hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see the man from the desk, now also naked except for his rubber slippers. His body was magnificent, bulging

muscular arms connected to a meaty torso with a sizable belly. All across this expansive canvas he wore tattoos, mostly proclaiming his service various divisions of the soviet military. He greeted us with outthrust chest and a thick stream of russian, the majority of which we were unable to grasp. Confronted with our puzzlement, the russian held up a single finger, struggling to keep the other hand behind his back, and allowed a momentary smirk to cross his lips

From behind him, he produced a thick bundle of birch twigs with fresh leaves still hanging off of them. “без платна” ; “no charge.” We watched as he wetted them under one of the many running faucets and beckoned us to follow him towards the wooden door in the back.

At first I only knew I couldn't breath. The air was so hot that too large a breath would scorch your lugs. So I sucked little breaths and squinted in the darkness. Our new guide had given up on trying to speak to us and, furthermore, no one else in this dark oven seemed to be talking. He motioned us to take long slow breaths. I began to gain control. The three of us stood in a naked circle as he conducted breathing with long swooping gestures.

I looked around. The room was made completely of wood save a section of stone wall surrounding a large furnace set into one wall. It looked like it heated the hot water for the sinks outside as well as the room we were in. A man attended it, glowing red in its light. From time to time he shoveled fresh coals from drooping plastic tub. His skin looked like old tobacco.

Our guide regained my attention with a cluck of the tongue and once certain he had our attention, began beating himself about the legs and back with the birch twigs. With each thwak, another jolt of the sinus clearing effervescence was released. David and I shared a nervous look, when we returned our gaze the man was looking challengingly at David. David made the slightest shrug and motioned with his head as if to say, “Lay on McDuff.”

After that, things became a little more relaxed. There is nothing to break the ice like standing around naked in a dark oven and beating one another with pungent sticks. We all took turns beating each other, then beating ourselves. Soon we were panting, our hot breath cooler than the air around us, standing in puddles of our own sweat. Our noses burned with the scent of birch. Now it was time for phase two.

We followed our guide out the door and back into the faucet room. He led us over to the pool of ice water. With the same sly look, he hoisted himself up on the rim of the pool and flipped over the side, disappearing under the bobbing cubes. He stayed under for

only a moment and then surfaced with an icy splash. He karate chopped the water in front of him a few times with a savage cry and hoisted himself out of the pool. Now it was our turn. David went first, attempting clumsily to mimic the hoist-flop maneuver. He surfaced a moment later with a scream and paused, unmoving in the water, hair and beard hanging off of his face in soaking tangles. Then he too began to attack the water with icy rage.

My initial plunge was not so much painful as it was pure shock. Rather than truly feeling the cold, it presented itself as a thought, almost a stern, reprimanding voice: *now this is tremendously, awfully, bitterly cold*. I paused underneath for a moment, pondering this in the freezing silence. Then the voice seemed to conclude, *and we'll have to do something about it*. Then my legs involuntarily launched me to the surface. I stood for a moment coming to grips with the rush of blood and adrenaline that rocked my brain. No karate moves for me. My pupils dilated then constricted over and over, unsure of what to do. They finally came to some equilibrium as I sat down on a wooden bench next to David.

We stared into space for a bit. The world came into focus, and then into something more intensely sharp than focus. Our guide seemed to be gone for the time being. "That was intense," I said thickly. A man next to us splashed water on his face from his aluminum bucket. Bits of spray landed in David's beard as his lips drew back in a smile, "Yeah". We leaned back against the sticky black wall.

Our guide was returning this time with a bundle of birch for each of us. "What happens now?" I asked him. "We do this twelve more times," he replied, puffing out his naked chest. I couldn't tell whether to laugh or cry. My response came out as a sort of sob-chortle. He evidently understood because he came over to me and helped me to my feet by gripping my shoulders in his large hands and jerking my unclothed body upright. He did the same for David. With a reassuring slap on the shoulder he lead us back towards the oven, "then, we drink a liter of vodka each." "Uh..." David and I had just enough time to share a look of horror behind his tattooed back before we were once again plunged into the heat and the overwhelming scent of birchwood.