

One year in a Russian family

Craig Ashton

Один год в русской семье

Крэйг Эштон

Translated from Russian into English by Altshuler Aleksandr  
Перевод : Альтшулер Александр



On the first page of the book Anna Karenina, Tolstoy mentions a certain "Englishwoman" who quarreled with the housekeeper. Once I also worked as an Englishwoman in a Russian family.

The list of Russian people who changed my life is long. I am fortunate in Russia. It's even indecent... It is so sad that I did not dare to write about this part of my life for a long time. Suddenly everyone will hate me for my luck. But the day after tomorrow is Easter, and memories do not allow me not to tell about what Russia gave me nine years ago in the far, noncovid 2012.

At that time, I had almost nothing but worn-out clothes and growing debts. There was no job, no visa. There is such an expression, "do not have a hundred rubles, but have a hundred friends..." Well, it's good when one of them is the Honored Artist of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Dmitrievich Meshiev. He was then my student and sometimes my foster father. I noticed, by the way, that the Petersburgers (or is it all Russians?) it's hard to pass by homeless cats on the street. It hurts. Perhaps all those who have ever saved me saw something homeless-like in me and could not leave me in trouble. I think that was the case.

Dima once introduced me to another Craig-saving person-costume designer Nadezhda Vasilyevna. I remember how he introduced us.

"Nadezhda, dear, this is our Mr. Craig. Craig, this is Nadezhda Vasileva. She is looking for a teacher for her son. Will you take him? "

"Uh, yes... "

"Great! Friends, talk to each other, I have to go! "

And left. Dima is a **"business sausage."** (1)

Nadezhda explained the situation. I needed a good grade on the Unified State Exam in English for my son to go to university. The grades are not very good now, could I help?

"Yes. I will try my best."

A week later, I came to their apartment on Vasilyevsky Island. Nadezhda introduced me to Peter. A teenager whose height is 20 cm higher than me, long hair, a T-shirt with a rock band logo that I don't know. The look is bored-teenage, and the voice is deeper than mine. "Oh... it will be difficult," I thought.

Long story short: it wasn't difficult at all. Peter turned out to be intelligent and capable. We did 10-15 lessons, and he passed the exam for 5. The Job has been done, time for tea and biscuits.

On the day of the results, Nadezhda called and invited us to drink tea. Her friend Marina Mikhailovna, a language teacher with a braid to the waist, was also with her. We solemnly sat at the huge kitchen table, and Nadezhda poured me tea.

"Craig, what kind of jam do you want in your tea, raspberry or blueberry?"

I didn't want either or the other in the tea, but since this option was not offered, I answered "blueberries" and sadly looked at how Nadezhda happily put jam in my cup.

It turned out that I was a good guy. The Petya's teacher is happy, Nadia, Petya's Grandmother Inga Alexandrovna, and Peter himself were really happy, every-every-everyone was quite pleased.

Maria wanted to know about my way of language learning. I said that I was delighted, but Peter did all the work, not me. No one paid much attention to this. So, we sat for probably two hours and talked.

Russian kitchens, with a table, have such a magical feature that if you sit down and start drinking tea, you will probably sit there for a long time and drink a lot of it. The whole world and the universe are disappearing around us. Only this separated space remains, like a small illuminated stage in a large dark theater. There is only a table, cups on a tablecloth, jars of honey and jam, cookies and **sushki (2)**, and people talking happily.

Suddenly Nadia said, "Meshiev told that you are looking for accommodation, is that right? " " Yes."

"So, I thought... how do you like the idea of living here? With us? You will have your room, and you will talk to Petya in English. What do you say?"

I was so surprised that I asked for a day to think about it... Not everyone is happy to live with an entirely unfamiliar person. Yes, I do not like guests to be at home for more than three hours!))

When I came "home" to the communal apartment on Grafsky Lane, I quickly decided that yes. Yeah! I've always wanted to know what it's like to live with Russians. When I first came to Russia, several of our people lived with Russians and told about how they were fed fried pasta. . . Well, I didn't want fried pasta at all, but I eagerly wanted to know how Russians live. And here, Nadezhda Vasileva offered me my dream.

And that's it. I moved in after two weeks.

I had a room with a giant movie screen and an old sofa. The old sofa is my bed. I suspect that when it was created, the Romanovs were still quietly dreaming of a bright future. But I loved this sofa, and my room, and this whole apartment. I was told, "This room is Alexey's installation room, but he will be away for a long time" I didn't understand a thing, but "you can sleep here, not on the street, or, worse, in a communal apartment on Grafsky Lane."

My new home is used to be a communal apartment—a large one with a corridor. I do not know how to describe the style of their apartment, my Russian is not capable of this, and I began to cry thinking about it. It had the atmosphere of a passing era preserved for eternity. The color palette is red, brown, in places, for some reason, blue. A Soviet communal apartment turned into a family apartment. If I had to choose one phrase, it would be "lived in." It was a place of life, soul, and movement, a photograph of a twirl in the dance of humanity—a real home. Sorry for the drama. This apartment was a shelter for me. A large kitchen, a vast solid table (so massive that its presence in the kitchen is a mystery. How was it brought here through such a small door? Was it built here? God himself built it right here?), on the table, there were all sorts of jars with jams from berries unknown to me, tulips, a basket with an endless stream of Sushki, boxes of teas and a refrigerator with an inexhaustible supply of food.

And every person in the family is a real one. True. Not pretentious... I don't know how to explain it. They "accepted" me. Imagine a group of puppies and a mother-dog, and a homeless kitten is given there... The puppies sniffed, and that's it, then a kitten-puppy, just with small ears. Everyone there is real, Nadezhda, Peter, his brother Fedya, Grandmother, all the guests, every-every-everything.

In the beginning, I sometimes felt like a kind of "plastic" among them. I was taught in England to be "correct," not to express myself, to behave quite carefully. And there, almost immediately, they addressed me as a person who has the right to be there and to be himself. Over time, I found the courage to be myself.

It was a lovely time. Before that, I lived alone for a very long time, and I got used to being alone. There, on Vaska, I realized that I should not have lived like this. When everyone gathered after work and study in the evening, I was invited to the kitchen, where we chatted, ate dumplings, cabbage rolls, cutlets, and everything Nadezhda had cooked for us. Home cooking..... I love it so much, so much! I didn't even know until those days that I missed home-cooked food... Ohmygoddable, as they say)) I especially loved the cutlets!))) Once, I unsuccessfully asked, "Are there any more cutletov (in Russian)?" and immediately acquired the nickname "Cutletov" "Good evening, Cutletov!" I was greeted that way when I came to dinner. Or "Who threw away fresh green onions??" "It's Cutletov!" "Cutletov, why did you throw away the green onions??" . It turned out that you Russians eat the tasteless part of the onion, these green leaves, and we English (at least me) eat the white part, which is an onion. . . I was shocked by this. Btw I am delighted with the new nickname!)))

Well, that's how we lived, and all the time, different guests came (so many guests!) to a large kitchen to drink tea at a large table, and they were introducing me: "This is (dramatic pause...) our Englishman, Craig. He helps Peter with English, helped him a lot with exams, teaches well, takes lessons" I felt respected and needed. Desirable. People were genuinely happy that I was there. This feeling has rarely happened since I told Mom and dad, "Alright, see you soon!" at Manchester Airport all these years ago...

Petya's brother, Fyodor, lived separately but often came to visit. Once, he hosted a mafia evening, at which I realized that it was not worth playing Mafia with these brothers. Petya as Sherlock, Fedya as Hercule Poirot. When I was a Mafia, Peter immediately killed me because he caught me smiling. The next time Fedya killed me with a long explanation, he watched everyone and recognized three mafias at once. I hate Mafia! Why do Russians love it so much??

One day, Peter and Fedya and I went to the "Ginger" Bathhouse.

There Peter, having beaten me with a broom, said

"My Dad used to come to this banya, and he filmed a scene from his film here. Did you see my Dad's films?"

"Have you seen..." I corrected. "What films did he make?"

"Maybe you know the film 'Brother'?"

"I'm not sure..."

"In Russian 'Brother.» 'Brother Two'"

Processing. . .

Processing. . .

"'Brother' - Brother? Your dad is... Alexei Balabanov?"

"Yeah, man. You didn't know?"

No, Peter. . . I did not. . .

Processing. . .

I . . Can't. . . Even. . . No one has ever told me about this...

"He will come home soon. You can meet with him"

"He's coming"... "Meet him"... I'm correcting it. . .

I . . Can't. . . Even. . .

(If you are interested, the bathhouse is located here: 5th line Vasilyevsky Island, 42. There is a memorial wall with his photos. Alexey went there to the bathhouse).

A couple of weeks later, Alexey Balabanov arrived. Immediately, the number of people in the apartment doubled. Cameramen, installers, screenwriters went back and forth, sat in the kitchen, eating all the cutlets and sushki...

I don't remember our first conversation with Alexey. . . Something like " Aah, you are our Englishman! Nice to meet you! Nadya, poured some tea!". There were mugs, sushki, and jam. Alexey asked: "How is Petya? Studying? Is everything okay?"  
"Everything is perfect! Stronger and stronger every day."  
"Prrrerfect! Well, shall we play chess?"  
"Uhhh, yes, let's play."

Suddenly, a chess set, a counter appeared from somewhere, and the game began. I opened the game with my favorite, sneaky 4-move-checkmate, but it turned out that Alexey is not eight years old, and my childhood pranks did not work... Long story short: I almost won! I needed another 30 seconds... But win is win, and lose is lose. And I'm a loser. Alexey shook my hand, then one of his sons came to us. Alexey immediately scolded him for playing worse than me. A harsh Russian father.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Alexey spoke in English

"So, I hear you are from Manchester."

"Uhhh, yeah, from near there, yeah."

"I've been to Manchester, you know. And Sheffield and Liverpool too. What do you think about Liverpool?"

"Well... I hate it, actually. Although I don't really know why..."

"Hah! Yes, I heard about that! Here, the English, eh!?"

Alexey Balabanov spoke fluent English. He lived there in his youth and visited America when he was shooting a movie. He told me that those scenes in the movie Brother 2, where Danila rides in a truck with an American and speaks English, are based on his experience in England and how he learned the language. Review this scene, imagine a young Balabanov in Manchester, starting to talk to the British))

One day, Alexey came to me in his editing room, and asked "Craig, will you watch my films? I am interested in the opinion of a foreigner who speaks Russian." He said it as if it was not my honor to get such an opportunity but his... I said, " Yes, of course!" and Alexey gave me a pack of disks. The first time I watched the movie "Morphine" was because it is my favorite Russian book. I was delighted with it, the first scene is just as I imagined, and a lot of the film is just as I imagined when I read it. Well, except for the blowjob scene ... ah, Balabanov... Then I watched The Castle, a film based on Kafka's book, everything there is also as I imagined and even with no blowjobs. The third film is Cargo 200. This was my last Balabanov film for a long time. The film kicked, like a decisive blow to the stomach, then directly to the liver, \*ohhithurtsasf\*\*k. There is an expression we have "too close to the bone" - too close to an unpleasant reality. And there are such moments in Georgia that are too close to the harsh human reality.

After that, I asked Nadezhda - what is the film about. It seemed to me that it was a metaphor for the collapse of the Soviet Union, about corruption and the rape of the country. Nadezhda: criticizing "Alexey is an ego-tripper. Each of his films is about him." The film has remained a mystery to me... But a few scenes are stuck in my mind forever...

At that time, Alexey was shooting his last film, "I Want to, too» He left for the shooting, and life in the apartment became the same. It's a pity that I did not tell him my English opinion about his films...

Suddenly, Peter also left for the shooting. Nadezhda allowed me to stay, although I was no longer of any sense. Well, you never know, so that someone eats cutlets... Peter starred in the film. By the way, if you haven't watched it, but you are interested in Balabanov's films, take a look at "I Want To, Too" (Rus. Я тоже хочу) The film is mysterious; I have a certain feeling that Alexey knew that this was his last film and wanted to sum up and say goodbye to everyone. But I actually have no clue.

In April, Alexey and Peter returned. Once Alexey came up to me and, very much in Russian, asked me the question, "Craig, are you a religious person?". His tone conveyed to me that the correct answer is "yes." But, being an Englishman, I decided to get out of it, saying nothing. (English mode enabled) "Alexey... \* dramatic exhalation\* I have been looking for an answer to this question for a long time..."

But Alexey, being Russian, decided that he needed a clear answer.

(Russian mode enabled) "And what is the answer?" "

Fuck... errr...

I admitted that I was a believer, but I was lost, and Alexey agreed that I was like that. Then he explained to me why I need to "find myself" and that I don't need to be lost. I promised to look for it.

On Easter Day, I was honored to be invited to a festive dinner. I remembered how Peter came and said, "Man, come on dinner." And I was like, "but it's Easter... it's like... a family thing..." to which Peter replied in Russian, "Do you want to eat with us?" To which I answered in Russian, "Want."

We all sat down at the table, chatting and laughing. The red-brown kitchen somehow shone that day. On the table, along with all sorts of jars with berries, there were also vases with hyacinths and tulips, cakes, rolls, plates with caviar, fresh vegetables, fresh garlic, colored eggs, and a mysterious-to me – **Kulich (3)** Alexey told us (Nadezhda, Grandma, Peter, Fedya, Craig) to close our eyes and read a prayer. In the end, he shouted, "Christos Voskres!" and they all said, "Voistinu Voskres!". Well, except for the "Englishwoman," who pretended that he was telling the right words. "Vastine-vakrez..."

After reading the prayer, we began to eat. Then Alexey said the last words that I remembered from him. He bit off a large piece of fresh garlic clove and suddenly became indignant. "**It's wicked(4)!** Bi\*\*h, WICKED!"... He was indignant as if shocked by the injustice that in a world where all sorts of devastation are happening, even garlic is wicked. Then, after chewing it thoroughly, he decided that it was necessary to check whether the others were wicked or not, and he bit off another piece of garlic clove... "BI\* is also Wicked!". Everyone at the table smiled, did not pay much attention, continued to eat, and passed dishes to each other. "Cutletov, take the garlic, just watch out... it's wicked."

I do not know why precisely these words of the great director remained in my head, but... That's what I remember exactly-he said. The words and the indignant tone are stuck in my head forever.

Soon Alexey needed an editor room to do his job. I said goodbye to my beloved old sofa and left. Nadezhda, saint Nadezhda, gave me a place in her apartment on Belinsky Street. I was alone again, but I didn't have to get used to being alone again because I was always welcome there - on Vaska.

In 2012, there was a film festival, to which my foster father Dmitry Meshiev arranged me to be an interpreter. The film "I want to, too" participated, and this family of generous people did not

forget me... I was given an invitation to a place next to Peter and Fedya, in a row in front of Alexey. After the film, the entire film crew went to Karavannaya Street to celebrate. Fedya and Peter took me with them. On the way, two elderly women recognized Alexey and said something like, "I see you are already bonkers! We didn't like the movie at all!"

I don't remember his answer exactly, something like, "It's good then that I created it for myself!!!" Firmly, but with no malice. Peacefully.

Since then, this year of my life has been one of the happiest ever. Nadia gave me a priceless gift, a whole year in an honest, loving Russian family. Without her, I would not only be able to stay in Russia. I would know anything neither about how Russians live nor that you can bravely be yourself. And there would not be this family that knows me so well and even as I am. I will remember this huge kitchen table for the rest of my life, these jars of jams made from now-known berries, cutlets, tulips, pancakes, sincere conversations, and wicked garlic.



- 1) Business sausage (rus. Деловая колбаса) – A really busy person who is always in a hurry. (eng. Delovaya Kolbasa)
- 2) Sushki (rus. Сушки) - a dish of Belarusian, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian cuisine, a solid ring-shaped product made of dough (usually sweet wheat), One of the snacks for tea.
- 3) Kulich (rus. Кулич) – the Russian name for Easter bread.
- 4) Wicked garlic – Usually, garlic has a pungent taste, but not as a wicked one. It is called that way because it is much spicier than the usual one.

Translated by : Altshuler Aleksandr  
Перевод: Альтшулер Александр

Altshuler Aleksandr

“It was such a pleasure for me to read Craig’s spectacular story. I am honored and super excited to translate it to English and even read it in my native language. Thank you, Craig”



2021 Summer Project of Club "Pyramid".

