

I want to tell you why I love Moscow - Part two.

I want to develop the idea of the matrushka and the dragonfly. They help to explain the idea that nothing is as it seems on the surface. I lived in France for two years. I left because I was bored, because I find the French are obsessed with style, but have no substance. I find Russians to be the opposite. My best friend was called Dima. He bought his clothes from the market, they were all cheap and all beige and he wore, like many Russian men, strange pointy shoes that are not fashionable in the West, and that might not even be fashionable in Russia any more. Dima was a typical Russian man, a real Russian man, not interested in fashion, or material things. I don't think I can say of any friend I ever had that they would "lay down their life for me". Dima became such a person. He taught me a valuable lesson. That once a Russian decides to accept you as his friend, he will be there for life. He does not need you for anything, does not measure friendship by what he can get from it, but because for him, friendship is the most valuable thing in life. On the other hand, a Russian will not greet you with a toothy smile and shake your hand with a big grin and make out that he is your best friend from the first moment you meet, he would never pretend or be so false. He might observe you for a while, see what you are like, what kind of person you are, before he even speaks to you. You won't know he's observing you, but he is, and if and when he decides to be your friend, you will feel as if you have grown a new pair of shoulders, an extra pair of legs and arms, or been given a big "chenille" or greatcoat which will keep you warm through cold Winters. Dima became such a friend, we spent a lot of time together, and I realized that this man would, if he had to, lay down his life for me, to save mine. This is why I love Dima, and his cheap shirts and pointy shoes. I have not seen him for two years, he had, like many Russians, to go and work in a distant part of Siberia because that's where his job took him. He has since married and had a baby, but I know that I could see him any time, and it would be as if we saw each other yesterday.

The matrushka. It means that nothing is what it seems on the surface. You think you have a curved wooden painted doll. But open it. See what you find. Keep going, keep searching inside. Somewhere, deep inside, perhaps, there is the truth. And the truth you find deep inside the centre, will be very different from the idea you had from the big doll on the outside.

For example. Sometimes you might think Moscow is a rude place. It seems in public that people are fighting each other for space, driving selfishly and aggressively, that a shopkeeper has been rude to you. You fix this experience in your mind and keep it there, like you would keep a wasp that has bitten you. You keep the bad feeling and make a generalization out of it. This is the outer doll of the matrushka, the big one on the outside. Then, some time goes by. You go into the metro and see a bald rough-looking Russian man who seems to have glazed eyes and scars on his face. You draw another conclusion, make a new generalization about him, judge him. You avoid his eyes. He's not looking at you anyway, he looks straight ahead, lost in his own thoughts. He's not interested in you. But you judge him and think perhaps he's a criminal. He looks like one of those convicts in one of those films about Siberian camps during the war. You judge him. Then an old lady gets on the train at the next stop. Her hair is white, she walks slowly, with a stick. While your thoughts are still on this man you think is a convict, suddenly you see him stand up, and help the old lady into the seat that he has given to

her. She doesn't thank him, but sits down. He doesn't seem to expect any thanks. He holds onto the rail above her head, and she sits in the seat he has given her.

This, is the second doll, when you remove the outer doll. It is your second lesson of the day.

Every day in Moscow is a story of such lessons, of the opening of a new doll, inside the other one. Each new doll is a new window onto a new truth, and the death of a generalization, the death of a wrong idea, the death of a preconception.