

*My  
Journey  
the  
to Ocean*



Lena Mikado

# My Journey to the Ocean

Lena Mikado

Brave New Worlds  
ST. SIMONS ISLAND, GEORGIA

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*I dedicate this book to all daring travelers and globe-trotters, who strive to see every corner of our beautiful planet. I dedicate it to my mom, dad and Nan. I dedicate it to my family – my crazy husband and my lovely boys Liam and Max. I dedicate it to my Dalmatian Tex – I miss you very much. And, finally, I dedicate it to my friend, who inspired me to go ahead and finish this novel – to Sylvia Tourkey. I wouldn't have done it without any of you. Thank you!*

*One's destination is never a place, rather a new way of  
looking at things.*

— HENRY MILLER



# Prologue

What else can be said about love? The poems have been written, the songs have been composed. It seems that anything we might want to express has already been done for us. But I think I'll give it another go.

All of us start this life as tiny, helpless babies, who explore the world around them, make their own mistakes, and come to their own conclusions. And isn't it fun? If we simply followed what has already been learned by the previous generations, with no attempts to contribute little bits of our own experience, life would be so dull and so unavoidably status quo.

I've recently become a mother. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying this to get the usual, "Oh, how sweet! What a cute pumpkin! Sweetie pie!" I honestly do believe that majority of people couldn't care less about somebody else's children unless they have their own offspring of approximately the same age. I sure didn't care. But once you emerge on the other side and become a parent, you can then relate to a lot of notions you previously considered alien. You can even relate to your own parents!

These thoughts are crossing my mind as I follow my 15-month-old son up and down the steps of our friends' house. It's his ninth trip back and forth, and, honestly, never in my life have I imagined

that I would be ready to exhaust myself to such an extent for a male human being. And here I am, readily performing Kung Fu jumps over the sofa to prevent him from a bad fall. Why do kids take such big risks? Why are they so reckless? Doesn't he realize what consequences his actions will have? The questions are rhetorical. No, he doesn't realize it. Just as I didn't realize that a person can't be smoking two packs of cigarettes a day without drastically shortening their expected lifespan. How can I communicate to him that he can't be doing this? You can't, Elena. He'll just have to learn on his own mistakes. Now I can clearly see the picture. If you managed to happily survive your adolescent years without causing much harm to your health or criminal record, you might as well get ready to spend the rest of your life wondering how in the world you can protect your children from making the same mistakes you've made. Nobody tells you this when you're getting ready to become a parent. Nobody warns you: "Beware, you'll be tortured by the dilemma forever!" I suspect it's a global conspiracy invented to persuade inhabitants of planet Earth to procreate.

Young people consider themselves immortal and invincible. They are always right and there is nothing you can do to prove them otherwise. It's horribly dangerous, but for some reason, when I look back at my very young self, I only want to smile. My reader, let's imagine that we do have access to the greatest invention ever – a time machine. Let's hop on board and head over ten years back. I want to see myself again – young, naïve, full of life, when the world was definitely my oyster and nothing could take it from me.

# 10 June, 2004

“Three packs of Marlboro, please!”

I squinted at a plump and grumpy big-haired sales lady as dazzling Moscow sunshine bounced off my eyes. I had to stock up – I heard that cigarettes are extremely expensive in New York City. I was not really dependent on nicotine, but smoking out in the open with no risk of being seen by my parents, relatives, parents’ friends, or distant relatives of my parents’ friends made my head spin with happiness and freedom. No, it was not the first time I was going abroad alone. I already visited Germany two years ago, just for three weeks. But this time, we were heading over to the United States for

four months! I took a deep drag of my cigarette – the second one in the last ten minutes – and closed my eyes in utter enjoyment. As it happens, my fiancé did not know that I smoked either. Oh, didn't I tell you? I was engaged to get married next August! Finally! We had been together for three and a half years and soon we would be tying the knot. I was going to miss him terribly. This was the longest we had ever been apart, and to be honest with you, I was having second thoughts about this trip. But this summer was my last chance to visit the U.S. on the Work & Travel Program for college students. I had only one year left before I graduated, and then, adulthood, here I come! I glanced at the girls standing in line for an airport shuttle right next to me – my travel companions – Diana, Vera and Sonia. I had never even seen them before we were informed by our agency that we would be working for the same company and share an apartment in the U.S. The girls seemed nice, but they were just eighteen years old and all single. Or something along those lines.

I frowned. "Hey, by the way. When we are in the States, puhlease... no making out in the living room."

Every time I traveled somewhere with my single friends, they would bring over their new boyfriends or whatever they were, and make me feel lonely and stupid. I didn't really understand why people couldn't find just one person to dedicate their lives to. They wasted their young years on multiple partners and meaningless affairs. Not me - I definitely knew what I wanted.

"Whatever," said Diana, tossing her bright blond hair. "I'm going to party all summer long till I drop."

When we went to Moscow two months ago for the Work & Travel orientation program, Vera and Sonia were late for their train back to Voronezh, a large but provincial city all four of us called home. As Diana and I were comfortably seated in the train compartment, we stared at each other in disbelief: did the train just

move, and the girls were not back yet? Diana mumbled: "If they're that irresponsible, I think I'll be mainly hanging out with you this summer." That was the moment I decided that Diana was definitely funny, in her own wacko way.

My main goal of this trip was to see as much as possible of America – I absolutely loved traveling. I would never forget the moment when I received the visa in the United States Embassy in Moscow. It was a sunny April day. I'd been strolling along Novinsky Boulevard and admiring impressive Moscow high-rises. Early-spring fresh air was gently caressing my hair and filling my mind and body up with the invigorating energy of the large city reawakening after the long winter sleep. I couldn't believe that soon I would see New York, I'd walk Carrie Bradshaw Streets, and I'd take a ferry to the Statue of Liberty. And then... then I would go to Georgia. Georgia and I had a very long history together. I was twelve when I first read *Gone with the Wind*, and I fell in love. With everything. I was so obsessed, they actually mocked me at high school and called me Scarlett O'Hara. I didn't mind it a bit. I only wished I would be that pretty. I'd never considered myself beautiful: nobody ever told me so, and I'd always seen a very ordinary girl staring at me from the mirror. Alex, my fiancé, liked me, and that was all I cared about. I lit the third cigarette.

"Oh my God!" yelled Diana. If you are going to smoke like a chimney, you'd better do it outside of our apartment.

"All right." I shrugged. "I don't care."

"You look silly," giggled Vera. "With this cigarette stuck between your teeth."

"Oh!" It'd just dawned on me that while I was looking for my cell phone to text Alex, I let the cigarette just hang out of my mouth. Not too lady-like. But then again, Scarlett wasn't a lady either. I couldn't help but smile. Soon I'd see Margaret Mitchell's land! I'd

see it with my own two eyes. Believe me, for a middle-class girl from Russia, it was equivalent to a flight into outer space. I was so happy, I felt like my head was going to explode into kaleidoscope of multicolored expectations.

"Ouch!" Somebody elbowed me so hard I nearly flew out of the line. In reality, a notion of a "line" doesn't exist in Russia. It's typically a crowd of very aggressive people who are always looking for some space to squeeze any part of their body into in order to get closer to their destination. I guess I happened to be in somebody's way, as my foot got also suddenly attacked for no reason.

"Easy!! Watch where you're going!"

I turned to look at the evil hooligan and saw a tiny wrinkled old lady – babushka – who was maliciously eyeing me up and down.

"Sorry," I muttered. I was brought up to respect older generations under any circumstances, even though my foot was about to fall off.

"Young people these days!" screamed the babushka. "So rude and promiscuous!! Look at what this brat is wearing!" I caught a few accusing glances from around the line and already got prepared to defend myself (all of us were wearing yellow Star Travel T-shirts with the blue Work & Travel USA 2004 logo – what was wrong with that?), as I saw the shuttle pull up. "Hurry!" screamed Sonia and started elbowing her way to the shuttle through the "line" of people. "The shuttle is here. We've got to catch it! We can't be late for the plane!"

Diana and I exchanged the understanding glances. I really started liking this crowd.

CHAPTER ONE

# On Top of the World

I had always been afraid of being eaten by sharks. Or, to be more precise, of my plane crashing on the way from Europe, me falling into the abyss of the Atlantic and then being consumed by sharks. No, no, darling reader. I am not going to get into the intricacies of airplane crashes with you. I know that I probably would not be alive by the time my wretched body hit the non-forgiving waters, but... it is my number one primordial fear, and I have all the rights to drown in the self-pitying waves of my own misery.

I shuddered and grasped at the chair armrest as the plane took yet another tummy-turning cloud dive. My knuckles turned white. I glanced sideways without daring to turn my head and saw that the girls were carelessly snoozing away. Lucky heifers! How can some people sleep during turbulence?

I already thought I was going to die on that plane without involvement of any sharks, when I heard the flight attendant announce that we were beginning to land in the JFK airport. I felt my heart flutter in anticipation. It always does that at landing, my heart. It's a combination of fear and elation, the fizzy sweet taste of future adventures on my lips. I finally got some courage up and peeked out into the window.

Right there, floating under the bubble bath of fluffy clouds, was New York. The new land, an entirely new continent, was right there, sparkling and glittering in the pink evening sunshine.

"Girls! Bitchezzz!" I whispered. "We've arrived! We are here!"

"What? How much is that in rubles?" mumbled sleepy Vera as she yawned and slowly opened one eye.

"Forget about rubles! At least for the summer." I beamed. "We are in America, baby!"

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"Okay, let's just try to focus and relax. Find your inner Zen and exhale. It didn't go exactly as planned, but I'll be just fine! The only thing I have to do is to calm down..."

We had three extra days in New York City before our employment contract in Georgia started. The girls decided to save some money and take a Greyhound bus down south. Not me! Leaving New York City thirty minutes after arriving didn't fit my idyllic picture of the date with the glamorous metropolis. I figured I could borrow extra \$400 from my Dad for a plane ticket and crash at my high school buddy's place in Brooklyn. I'd have to work a bit harder to pay my parents back, but so be it. After all, it was the trip of a lifetime. The high-school "buddy" had called two days before my departure date and casually informed me that she'd be out of



town. Now... I stopped for a moment and let it sink in. I had all the tickets booked, I was stuck in New York City for three days, and I didn't have a place to stay. It proved impossible to book a decent hotel room without a U.S. billing address. I already started to believe that I'd have to either sleep on a bench in the Central Park or forget about my mini adventure in New York and join the girls on the bus, when I finally found a pleasant hostel in the middle of Manhattan, whose owner kindly agreed to reserve a room for me without the credit card info. Voilà! Whatever happens, happens for a reason, and in my case, the reason always works in my favor. Ha! I'd be staying in Manhattan! It was a "Sex and the City" dream come true.

Except... here I was. On the floor. Of the hostel living room. With a big cockroach casually strolling by my side. And the worst thing was that I was so tired, upset, and lonely, that I didn't even care about the roach. The "Sex and the City" theme interrupted my thoughts, as if in mockery. I stared at the TV screen without blinking. How many times had I watched the show in Russia, trying to close my eyes and imagine myself thousands of miles away from home? Well, I was here now, and it was nothing I'd imagined it to be.

To start with, the cab from the JFK was the most expensive ride I'd ever had in my life, and the driver wasn't the most polite person in the world. Mind you, I am from Russia, and I deal with militant babushkas on a daily basis. I'm not that easily intimidated by rude people, but once you're in a foreign country, you feel just a touch less secure and more sensitive. When I saw the glittering lights of the Manhattan skyline, my heart jumped once again. I was here, after all; I had made it! I tried to chase the loneliness away as I remembered the quick good-bye with the girls at the airport. I didn't even know them, and it was just for three days. What was wrong with me? Enjoy the glam, Elena!

"We're here!" barked the driver. "50 bucks."

I handed him a new, crispy note in disbelief and quickly calculated how many drinks I could get for it at one of the best Voronezh night clubs. "Don't compare the prices! You're in America now," beeped a tiny, greedy voice inside of my confused head. I walked out of the cab and found myself in the dark street of what seemed to be... Gotham City. The street was pitch-black except for a few streetlamps that were casting ominous shadows on the building walls, and a group of not-particularly-friendly-looking guys were slowly cruising the alley and pounding a basketball on the ground. One of them turned around and looked me up and down. Terrified, I quickly picked my luggage up (it didn't even have the rolling wheels!) and scuttled into the hostel entrance. "Elena Markina checking in!"

The person behind the counter gave me a blank stare.

"We're overbooked. But you can sleep in the living room on the floor, if you like. We might have a room for you tomorrow."

On the TV, Carrie and Miranda were having their usual light and witty conversation and enjoying a stroll. As was my roach. I sighed, turned the TV off, and rolled over on my mattress. Loneliness morphed into a crystallized rock in my throat, but I was too tired to cry. This was the first time I wished I'd never left Voronezh.

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As the famous proverb states, morning brings wisdom. I couldn't agree more. I woke up, had some breakfast (even though the bread was strangely soft and goeey – what do they make it from here in America?), and climbed out of my batman cave to explore the big shiny city.

After going up the Empire State Building and buying souvenirs for my parents and Alex, visiting the amazing Metropolitan and

checking out designer shoes in shop windows, I started to feel better. I was just overwhelmed by the weirdness of the situation. Now everything was back to normal.

Gotham mood started coming back to me when I realized that I was too late for the Statue of Liberty ferry. I took the ferry to Staten Island instead and managed to sneak a closer peak at the famous monument. After the ferry got back to Manhattan, I was definitely back to the dark side of the moon. Where did the pleasant hustle of the Wall Street go? In fact, where were the people? Oh, yes, they were probably with their families... or friends. I wiggled my nose, desperately trying not to cry. I had never got that emotional and home-sick before, and I had to learn to tackle this challenge somehow. I ran towards the flashing yellow lights of the bus and jumped on. The glittering reflections of skyscrapers were racing each other in the window. I had just one day left. One day. And then I would be heading to Georgia. Was it also going to be disappointing?

What I didn't know was that the main surprise was waiting for me back at the hostel.

"We have the room for you!" exclaimed the owner.

"Fantastic!" *I guess my roach will have to enjoy the loneliness of the night without me.*

"The only thing is – it's a men's bedroom. We didn't have any room in the girls' section, but we figured it's better than the living room floor."

"Mhm..." That was the sound I managed to utter as I was contemplating on which of the evils was the worst: sleeping with the harmless roach or a bunch of dudes I'd never met before.

I should have stayed with the roach.

I woke up in the middle of the night from a funny noise coming from the bunk bed above me. I wasn't sleeping well, since I'd been

under a very powerful impression of illegal human trafficking stories told me by my grandma. I think she must have watched at least a few hundred of crime shows prior to my trip to the U.S. Even before I left Voronezh, I'd already imagined myself in some dump in Brazil or Asia, miserable, helpless and doomed for the most horrible fate. This could happen to girls simply because they didn't keep an eye on their passports. I'm telling you all this, so that you could clearly see the picture: I was completely dressed (in case I had to quickly run out of the room and scream for help), clutching my precious Russian passport in my hand under the pillow and alert to the point of ridiculousness. And then I heard the sound. It was quiet, repetitive, and remotely familiar. It sounded like... I covered my face with the pillow, refusing to believe the cruel reality. The guy above me was jacking off!!! I opened my eyes, and I swear to you, my friends – I did not close them until dawn. It could only happen to me! Under any other circumstances, I would have died laughing, but I was too busy being petrified. Exhale, find your inner Zen... It's one thing to try to survive a minute of being scared. Spending all night without moving a muscle is a totally different cup of tea.

With the first rays of sunshine I was out of the hell bedroom, still holding the passport in my hand and sprinting towards the restroom. I typically wake up to pee three or four times a night – yes, it's weird, and the girls had already commented on that one on the plane. They said they'd save up some extra money this summer and would donate the money to buy me a new kidney. Whatever.

My third day in New York City went by as if in the haze. I remember chatting with a very talkative Russian guy I met in the hostel kitchen over breakfast. I told him about my adventure, and we laughed and agreed that the bread was indeed made of a very strange substance. Then he invited me to go to the JFK with him to pick up his friend, who was flying from Ukraine. I joined him, since

I was already feeling strangely lost and could not think of anything better to do, and we saw a rat the size of a fat cat strolling on the rails of the New York City subway. (Do all creepy crawlers in NYC take it easy?) In the evening, we had dinner at a sidewalk pizzeria, and it was, actually, quite nice. And that's all I remember. I've heard that people tend to clear their memory of all unpleasant stuff. Perhaps this is why I can't really recall the last part of my "glam city date." Please, don't get me wrong – I'm not trying to offend NYC fans. I honestly think that if one already feels lonely, any big city will only intensify the feeling of being a lonesome green monster in the hubbub of nonstop life and entertainment.

As I was quickly getting on the airport shuttle to La Guardia, Sting kept singing in my head: "I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien..." I was happy to be leaving New York. Maybe one day, I'd be coming back here with a bunch of friends and we'd rock the city like there's no tomorrow. But for now...

As the plane soared over the silky beige clouds, I left Carrie and New York behind me. The first coolest part of my trip was over, and it didn't turn out to be cool at all.

## CHAPTER TWO

# We Are Not in Voronezh Anymore, Toto

In Voronezh, only in a sauna can one experience the heat that intense. I just walked out of the main arrivals' building of Jacksonville International Airport in Florida, inhaled, and didn't quite believe that human beings could live, eat and breathe in such a hot and humid climate. But then with the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of bright-green palm trees beside the road, and a big silly smile came over my face. I was in the south, the sun was rampaging like a crazy lunatic, and I was about twenty minutes away from the beach. What could be better? The beach is a very exciting idea for anybody born and raised in central Russia: you don't visit it often, and if you do, the trip doesn't typically last long enough to fully enjoy it.

Our employer was responsible for picking me up from the airport. And let me tell you – we'd been much luckier than your average Work & Travel students. We were hired by an exclusive and super-chic resort – Ocean Isle Company – to be working as servers at one of its restaurants. My Dad was a touch skeptical about my summer work. I believe his exact words were: “You're not even capable of bringing a cup of tea from the counter to the kitchen table without spilling it. What makes you think you'd manage to wait tables?” What could be more reassuring?

Naturally, I'd done a bit of research about the resort, and I was quite impressed. Just three days before, Ocean Isle Company was hosting a G8 Summit – the annual meeting of the world leaders. Imagine that! Celebrity visits were not an unusual occurrence, and judging from the website pictures, the place looked like a Mediterranean palazzo. Compared to the majority of students who were going to work for fast-food companies and share apartments with fifteen of their buddies, we seemed to have drawn our lucky ticket.

I'd been corresponding back and forth with the Human Resources coordinator, Sandra. Sandra hired the four of us after an uncomplicated phone interview at the Voronezh Star Travel office. She was extremely nice, but quite possibly thought I was not all there, since I'd been e-mailing her non-stop with all kinds of different questions. Like, where exactly were we going to work? What would the pay be? Where would we live? And would somebody meet me at the airport? Come to think of it, I didn't get the proper answer to most of my questions, but they were probably very busy with the G-8 and all. The only thing I knew for sure was that there would be somebody picking me up in Jacksonville. I'd even printed Sandra's e-mail confirming the arrangements.

"Excuse me!" I smiled sheepishly and tried to articulate my words better, as I noticed the first signs of "What the hell kind of an accent is that?" on the information booth clerk's face. "Somebody's supposed to be meeting me here. Where would they be?"

"Right there." The girl nodded and studied me suspiciously. "They should be holding a 'meet and greet' sign with your name."

"Oh, okay." I frowned. I'd already looked at the signs, and there was definitely nobody waiting for me. "Thanks!"  
*That's ok! I'll resort to plan B – I'm going to call Sandra. Brighten up, Elena.*

"Good afternoon. Ocean Isle Company. Sharon speaking. How can I assist you?"

"Oh hi! My name is Elena Markina. I'm a J-1 student and I was hired to work as a server for the summer. I'm in Jacksonville Airport, and I was supposed to be picked up, but there's nobody here. Could you help me please?"

"Absolutely! May I place you on a brief hold while I'm checking on your transportation arrangements?"

"Sure!" My spirits were suddenly up. The lady was so polite and eager to help. The background classical music had already started putting me to sleep – I was still suffering from the jet lag – when the operator's voice pierced through the monotonous melody: "Unfortunately, we do not have your name on our transportation records. May we ask you who took care of it for you?"

"Yes, sure. It's... it's Sandra Hendricks from Human Resources. Can I speak to her?"

"Ma'am, Human Resources is closed on weekends. We suggest that you stay at one of the hotels in Jacksonville and call us back on Monday morning."

"But..." there was so much I wanted to say at once, that the words just congregated into one big confused question mark in my head. And what could I say? "I don't know where the hotels are"? "I'm afraid I don't have money for a hotel"? "I'm freaking thousands of miles away from my home and I'm absolutely, utterly, and totally terrified?!"

"Is there anything else we can help you with, Ms. Martina?"

"Markina. No, thank you."

I hung up, briskly walked outside, sat down on the curb, lit a cigarette, and burst into tears. I'd heard stories of Work & Travel students that were ditched by their employers. I just didn't expect it to happen to me. And I didn't expect to be sitting alone outside of the airport an ocean away from my home. I was half the world away from my parents, my fiancé, and my friends - with only 300 bucks in my pocket. *What should I do?* Through the slumber of my despair I heard an airport announcement, and it seemed as if they called... my name. It couldn't have been right. I must have been hallucinating as a result of three extremely stressful days. Hostel, masturbating roommates, rats and cucarachas of cosmic proportions would do it to you. I turned to my left and realized that there was a guy sitting right next to me. He was staring at me as if I was a run-away nut job on the loose. No wonder. I bet he'd been there all along witnessing me running out of the airport and having a hysterical heavy-smoking fit.

"Did they just say 'Markina'?"

"Yes. Is that you?"

"Yes," I managed to mumble through my clenched teeth. "Would you mind telling me what the announcement was about? I didn't pay attention and I really need to know what they said."

"They said you need to come to the information booth." The guy shrugged. He seemed to have lost all the interest.

"Thanks!"

This time, the girl at the counter was definitely unsure of what to think of me, but she did tell me that there was a vehicle waiting for me in the parking lot. I followed her directions and almost ran to the location.

Has it ever happened to you that all of a sudden you feel like you've walked out of a movie theater room that was showing a horror movie and walked into the room with the romantic comedy on the silver screen? If you have, you'll know exactly what I'm going to tell you about. In the parking lot, I saw a dark green Lincoln sedan with the words

“Ocean Isle” engraved in perfect golden italic. Your quintessential driver with graying hair, spectacles and matching dark green uniform was holding the door open for me. He looked at me and gave me a warm Santa Claus smile.

“Are you Elena? I’m sorry, I was assigned to take some of our guests here to catch a flight to DC, and they were late.”

“That’s okay.” *Of course that was bloody okay. A minute ago I was imagining myself sleeping in the airport for a day or two, and now I was about to take a luxury ride in this car with leather seats and mahogany ashtrays.*

I climbed in my glamorous “carriage” and started chatting away. That’s what I do when I get overwhelmed. My mom told me that once when I was five and she took me to the dentist’s office, the dentist couldn’t stop me from talking for good thirty minutes. He finally had to ask my Mom to hold my mouth wide open.

The driver’s name was Emmett. After Emmett heard all he could possibly hear about my family, my fiancé, and my brilliant plans for the future, he started telling me about the area and Ocean Isle. I was honestly listening to the first part, but then I started dozing off a little. The stress of the past days had finally let go of me, and I felt secure and happy.

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“I’m not quite sure where I should be taking you, so I guess I’m going to drop you off at the Beach Club.”

Emmett might as well have given me a short presentation on subquantum physics and aether theories – I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Okay. Are my friends going to be there? Do you know?”

“No. I thought it was just you. But I’m sure the folks at the Beach Club will take good care of you!”

“All right!” I beamed. “If you say so.”

We pulled up in front of a very pretty and cozy building in the Spanish colonial style. The sign “Private Beach Club. For Members Only” in the same perfect golden italic adorned the entrance. I stepped inside dragging my big old bag with no wheels and stopped in admiration. I wouldn’t have called the place luxurious or opulent, but it was definitely the most charming and upscale location I’d ever been to.

Elegant people dressed in Ralph Lauren and Gucci were rushing through the hallway and stopping to take a look at the wall with photographs that had been taken the night before. To the right there was a large pool, and you could see the orange sunset flickering on the surface of the turquoise water. Pool servers were skillfully maneuvering between the lounge chairs and delivering amazing-looking tropical drinks to the guests, relaxing in lounge chairs. You could hear kids giggle with happiness and you could see dressed-up people heading towards the dining room. And right in front of me, through the Mediterranean arch, I saw the Atlantic Ocean – calm and immense. I could feel the hot and humid breeze on my face and I could taste the saltiness of the ocean on my lips. I love water. Ocean fills me up with the great energy and gives me inspiration to live my life to the fullest and enjoy the ride. I even like the whispering sound of the word – “OCEAN.”

“Oh wow! You’re from Russia! You’re the first Russian I’d ever met.” The exclamation came from an enthusiastic looking African-American lady. She had a very attractive smile – one of those that make you like the person at the get-go. “My name is Roxanna. I work here, at the Beach Club Reception Desk.”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen the ocean,” I said quietly and smiled. “There’s always first time for everything.”

“And isn’t it the truth, honey! Come on, let me get you something to eat. You must be starving! Just look at you – skin and bones! Are you all skinny in Russia?”

I’ve never thought of myself as skinny. I was quite a plump child, and I believe I still suffer from the fat-kid complex. I started liking Roxanna even more.



“Okay, darling, have a seat right here and choose whatever you like from this menu. Kelly, would you please take care of Elena? She’s going to work with us this summer!”

Kelly gave me a polite, but empty smile and nodded. In any other circumstances, I would have been upset that my future coworker didn’t seem to be particularly friendly. But at that very moment, I was too busy trying to figure out how much I’d have to pay for this unexpected dinner. I mean, in the place like this it might have cost me all 300 bucks I had. I sighed and ordered buffalo chicken wings (whatever that was) and a Coke.

“Elena? Hi! My name is Rob Dwight. I’ve been working with Tatyana Bomaricheva on arranging your employment for this summer.”

“Oh, hello! Very nice to meet you.” I was extremely happy that finally there was somebody who actually knew who I was and what I was doing there. I tried to ignore the fact that my throat was on fire. At least now I knew that “buffalo” stood for “very fucking spicy” – for future reference. I choked and took a huge gulp of Coke.

“So how was your trip?”

Mr. Dwight was a very polite gentleman in his mid-fifties with an easy-going demeanor. I figured he was probably Sandra’s assistant or something like that. In just a few minutes, Rob and I were chatting away like two old BFFs. Apparently, we would be working right here, at the Beach Club Dining Room, all the way through September. We were not the only foreign students working at Ocean Isle that summer. There were also a few guys and a girl from Slovakia. Sounded like fun! The more the merrier.

“Well, it looks like you’re done? Kelly, I’ll take care of the check. Would you like me to take you to your friends?”

“Yes, please!” I wasn’t sure what I was mostly relieved about: the news that the girls had made it there safely and I’d see them in a mere moment, or the fact that Bob would pay for the horrible dinner.

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The monsoon came out of nowhere. One minute it was bright and sunny, and the next – the skies opened up, and down came gallons of water.

Rob and I had been driving around for what seemed to be an eternity. He first took me to our apartment complex (which was gorgeous, by the way), but the girls didn’t seem to be in. Rob thought that they might have gone out to grab a bite to eat and kindly took me to approximately ten restaurants to look for them.

“Okay, Elena. I’ll just have to take you to the apartment for the last time. If they’re still not there, I could drop you off at Monika’s. The J-1 student from Slovakia I told you about. She’s very nice! Maybe you could share an apartment with her?”

I nodded out of politeness. I wasn’t in the mood to make any new acquaintances, and I definitely wasn’t inclined to have new roommates.

We ran out of the car and knocked hard on the door. All of a sudden, the high-energy beat of a popular Russian song deafened both of us, and we saw Vera standing in front of us. She was wearing dark-blue boy shorts PJs and was holding a hairdryer.

“Elena! You’re finally here! Where have you been? We were worried for you!” Vera nearly knocked me over in her attempt to give me a hug.

“Where have three of YOU been? We’ve been looking for you all over!” I tried to sound angry, but I was so happy to see her, I couldn’t help beaming like an idiot.

I know what you’re going to ask me. Why would you be missing somebody who you didn’t even know before the trip? And that’s a very good question. I only remember that I’d never been happier than on that particular day in June,

in Southeast Georgia, in the midst of the tropical rain, when I got reunited with the only three people that connected me to my home, my life, to my own self.

“I was drying my hair,” laughed Vera, “and we’ve been dancing. Oh come on, Elena! Relax, have another cigarette.”

“Okay, girls! Now when Elena is here safely, let me get back to my duties.” *Oh, gosh! We were so excited we even forgot Rob was still there.* “If you ever need anything, please don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

Rob handed me his business card, smiled and quickly ran to his car. Vera and I glanced at the card and froze for a second. The card read: “Rob Dwight. Ocean Isle Company. Vice President.”

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Later that evening, all four of us laughed and talked and told each other the stories of our adventures. We couldn’t believe how lucky we were to work at such a high-end place. We danced to the crazy Russian music, sang folk songs, and roared with laughter because we sounded like our grandparents. I guess that was the beginning of a serious friendship, but as it goes in life, we didn’t know it back then. As Chris would say, we just rode the wave. But hold on... I’m getting a bit ahead of my own story line.

I found a pay phone at the MacDonald’s parking lot about two minutes away from our apartment and called Alex. His voice was so comforting, and I felt a familiar gnawing sense of guilt at the thought that I’d left him all alone. If only he could be here with me, if only we could share the excitement of discovering the new world together, everything would be different. I had to chase these thoughts away. They were not helping me in any way... I slowly walked back to our apartment through the warm darkness of the cricket-filled night. I looked up at the stars and tried to imagine what Alex was doing at the moment. He just woke up, was probably making him and his Dad a cup of tea.

“Elena!” Diana’s blond head showed up from behind the door. “Are you smoking again? Keep it up, you might get lung cancer before we go back home!”

She was annoying, but my spirits were well up, so I laughed.

“We’re going to bed. Are you coming?”

I inhaled the sweet aroma of magnolia trees for the last time and nodded.

“Sure, Diana-Banana. I’m on my way!”

One of the girls who had been renting the apartment before us wasn’t moving out till the next day, and all four of us decided to sleep in one room. We were lying in our beds in complete darkness, listening to the heavy drops of rain hitting the windows, and sharing our dreams and expectations. There was a whole new world ahead of us, and – oh, my! – wouldn’t it change our lives forever.

***Thank you for reading!***

**If you enjoyed the first two chapters, you can purchase the book by clicking [here](#).**

