

Sample translation from

BAM - A Journey from nowhere to nowhere by Jelle Brandt Corstius

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It is December. We're at Schiphol, wearing identical coats and shoes and carrying exactly the same bags. Aldo and his charms have helped hustle Fjällräven and Hanwag in as sponsors, so we've now got jackets on that we're unlikely to wear again for the rest of our lives: the Fjällräven's heavy-duty variant, lined with fur and weighing a ton. I'm sweating like mad and we aren't even through security yet. My feet have got it worst: they are steeped in perspiration, from huge boots that will keep us warm in the Siberian cold, but are totally inappropriate for indoors. They make us look like a trio of young lads who are one stick short of a bundle; the security bod talks to us extra slowly.

It always feels good to be going back to Russia. I'm addicted to the place and have to yield to that addiction every now and again. I lived there for five years and am glad that that's over. But I do want to be there just occasionally. There's a personal reason for that: I need a dose of absurdity, adventure and adversity. Also for journalistic reasons: since the annexation of Crimea and western sanctions, the tensions between East and West have been rising again. Russia is constantly in the news. I try to take a trip there every year. War in Ukraine and Syria. Bringing down MH17. Two Russian secret agents in Salisbury who say they were there on holiday, but actually came to poison a former spy; their absurd cover story was that they had come to Salisbury for its 123-metre spire, a line that they turned out to have lifted word for word from Salisbury's Wikipedia page. If you've never been to Russia, it can resemble an absurd movie with black humour. Yet it's a real country with flesh-and-blood people and at times I miss them.

I get no further than Moscow airport, where we have to change flights, before having to digest my first portion of absurdity. Is that a caviar vending machine? I walk to the machine, one in a line between others filled with soft drinks and chocolate bars. Yep: you can buy all kinds of caviar there. Even a tin of black sturgeon caviar from the Black Sea, officially banned in Russia, should you happen to have a hundred and fifty euros in your pocket and fancy a tin.

The meal on the next flight is somewhat less glorious. We get instant coffee, an undefinable hot meal of buckwheat or bulgur with gloop, and a slice of dry brown bread in a plastic bag. Aldo grubs around in the gloop.

‘What’s this?’ he asks.

‘I think it’s chicken,’ I reply.

‘Nah, it’s fish, surely?’ says Fabian.

They leave the meal untouched and eat the slice of bread with the instant coffee. For safety’s sake, I eat all three trays because when you’re travelling you never know where your next meal is coming from.

To get to the BAM, we’re on a night flight to the city of Bratsk, five hours east of Moscow. Bratsk is one of the few cities along the BAM that has an airport. We’re cheating a bit: Bratsk is 280 kilometres east of Tayshet, the first station on the BAM railway. The next town along is called Ust-Kut. I look out of the plane’s window. It is December and there are no clouds. During the five minutes that I stare outside, I don’t see a single light. And this isn’t even the quietest part of Siberia! If Siberia were an independent state, it would be the biggest country in the world.

I look across at Aldo and Fabian, who are now asleep. Is this going to work? I don’t know them all that well. They already found the meal difficult enough, despite Aeroflot being Russia’s flagship and the fact that the meal was undoubtedly prepared with vast quantities of patriotism.

Arriving in Bratsk, we go straight to the market to buy plastic sandals for Aldo and Fabian, because I know they are important on Russian trains. Slides are preferable to flip-flops because you want to keep your socks on for when, every now and again, the train staff let you pop outside on the platform for a moment. Bare feet and minus forty don’t mix. Inside the train, though, the heat is tropical – maybe 25°C, day and night, even in winter – and the windows don’t open. That can sometimes be pretty awkward: passengers have often been travelling en route for a couple of days in the same clothes and there are no showers. In third class particularly, the stench can be overpowering. Everyone does have somewhere to sleep in third class, but there are no partitions: it’s a kind of fifty-four-bed dormitory. When you get into the carriage, there is a penetrating odour of sports school changing room with a dash of garlic sausage, the preferred in-train sustenance for most Russian men. That’s the moment when you’d really quite like to open a window, but the train staff won’t allow it – and it’s rarely even technically possible.

For eight months of the year, it’s too cold to be outside in Bratsk. Even the market is indoors, in a large roofed hall. Tables of pickled vegetables, pieces of meat, mushrooms. There’s a bird tweeting up in the hall’s rafters, no doubt waiting there for eight months for the brief summer to start, when it can fly outside again.

Fabian and Aldo wander around a bit while I take a quick nap in the train station's 'rest room'; we lost a night in the plane and I'm feeling lightheaded. Every major station in Russia is blessed with 'rest rooms' where you can shower and sleep. The fan in the shower sounds like a screaming woman being sawn into pieces. Which is convenient, because I intend to record sounds during the journey for our Gesamtkunstwerk. I don't know how those sounds will ultimately be used – I'll just wait and see. Which happens to be my attitude to life: starting things without fully understanding the consequences. It's caused me trouble often enough. For example, the time I thought it was a good idea to present the Zomergasten talk show without first watching the clips. But that approach to life has also brought some good, for instance my rather impulsive decision to go and live in Russia. People often say to me: 'I've always wanted just to pack my bags and go too.' So why don't you? I always think.

Fabian and Aldo are too excited by seeing Russia for the first time to fall asleep. Later, back home, Fabian told me he had been approached a couple of times because he wasn't wearing a hat. Makes sense to me: you always wear a hat outside in Russia, even just to walk around the block. When I lived in Moscow, I noticed for the first time what the cold can do to you. It wasn't really cold, only -15°C, but I'd forgotten to put my hat on. Being bald to boot doesn't help much either. After walking for ten minutes, I no longer knew where I was going or who I was. I dived into the nearest shop, which turned out to sell lingerie. It took a few minutes among the bras for my brain to get back into gear.

After a quick nap, the three of us wandered around some more. We queued for food at the railway station's cafe.

'We're going to be on that train for fourteen hours,' I say, 'so let's get something decent to eat while we can.'

I see Aldo and Fabian looking doubtfully at the food in the display cabinet. 'Get me a bag of crisps,' says Fabian.

I try to look at the food through their eyes. The salat Olivye, one of Russian cuisine's great institutions because everyone had the ingredients at home even during the shortages of Soviet times, must look to them like a tub of mayonnaise with a few vague pieces of meat and gherkin floating in them. Kompot, produced from pickled fruits, is freshly made and deliciously refreshing. All they can probably see is a glass of murky water. Not helped by the fact that there's some genuinely horrible food there too. Like a bowl of soggy, luke-warm chips.

'What's that?' asks Aldo, pointing to a stack of pirozhki.

'They're a sort of deep-fried bun, stuffed with cabbage or potato.'

'Get one for me with potato, then.'

The lady in the canteen puts the pirozhok in a sandwich bag and chucks it in the microwave. A short while later, we're sitting at a table with hot, doughy rolls and plastic beakers of Nescafé. As always in Russia, we're sitting under a telly showing Russian video clips with the volume turned up full. Our 'clogs' are starting to get sweaty again. A down-and-out customer who's shat himself is booted out of the café. Aldo and Fabian's non-verbal communication is screaming out: what on earth have we let ourselves in for? This is a decisive moment. They are still in civilisation. They could still fly back. But I don't want to go back – I want to travel across the page of my atlas. Aldo takes a bite of the soggy roll and spits it straight out again. Much too hot. Then he has to smile: 'A bloody potato roll! What will they think of next?'