

Rope Trick

by Joshua K. Hartshorne

The local government unexpectedly sent Volodya along on my organization's trail-building project near Lake Baikal in Siberia – not the first last-minute surprise they'd sprung on us. With Volodya came his taped-together double-barreled shotgun and four mangy dogs. Before knowing his name, we referred to this dark, gaunt and bestubbed man in fatigues as our “minder.” As the local representative of a government that was treating us more like Gulag inmates than volunteers, there was a fair amount of distrust directed at Volodya. One of our crew-leaders, trying to be upbeat about it, managed, “He should at least add some color to camp.”

And he did.

Volodya spoke only a few words of English. As the project's official translator and one of the few Russian-speakers in the crew, I had about the most opportunity to get to know him. Opportunity is not success, and his ready and unabashed ability to contradict himself in successive sentences meant that the more I talked to him, the less I understood.

Approximately in his 40s, he was born in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic north of Iran. However, he considers himself Russian, despite his olive skin (in Russia, the word “Russian” has a racial and ethnic – not geographical or political – meaning). He

left Azerbaijan as a teenager and has not been back in a long time, having only one remaining relative there.

After leaving home, he served in the army for a dozen years. His last assignment was to a small team which cemented over the site of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant meltdown. Of his 15-man crew, only 4 are left alive. He attributes his survival to two years of heavy vodka drinking afterwards. Russians use vodka to treat nearly any ailment, including liver failure.

A widower, he sent his son and daughter to live with his sister in Krasnoyarsk after his wife died. Volodya grew unusually quiet whenever the subject of his wife came up. Krasnoyarsk is a day's train ride away, and I have no idea how often he sees his children. A man who spends his summers deep in the wilderness cannot easily raise kids, and I cannot imagine him visiting a city, much less living in one.

Volodya is a consummate outdoorsman. A couple friends and I went on an overnight camping trip with him. He didn't bring a sleeping bag or tent, even though the balmy summer temperatures in that part of Siberia regularly drop to freezing during the night. "What do I need those for?" he asked. "I'll build a fire, cover myself in moss. What more do I need?"

As grizzled as he was, as much a wild-man as he was, he was also an incorrigible flirt, an occupation in which he had a good deal of success. Both the girls on our project seemed to find him surprisingly adorable.

At first, I did not spend a great deal of time with Volodya. Perhaps even more than the rest, I viewed him with not a little suspicion, not really knowing why he was with us and trusting his employers about as far as I could throw them. It was only during

the overnight camping trip towards the end of the project that I had time to really get to know him. I was surprised what I learned. The first surprise was that he was in full favor of our organization's goals, which is to bring more tourists to Baikal. I had not expected a man used to living along in the wilds to want more tourists trampling through his backyard. "Maybe there will be lots of tourists near Irkutsk and Listvyanka," he explained. "But Baikal is big. There will always be plenty of empty space."

He sees tourism as the solution to the area's problems. "The region is poor and needs to develop economically," he explained. He also thought more tourists would mean fewer poachers, his main enemy as a park ranger. A better economy would mean fewer reasons to poach. He hoped that many poachers might choose to instead be wildlife guides, bringing tourists to shoot pictures rather than bullets. Finally, he noted that tourists tend to scare off poachers. I was surprised to hear all the arguments we in the city use to pitch our projects from a man who lives in a shack in the woods, especially since many of us figured that the government had redirected us here to build trails specifically *for* poachers.

Where he truly won my gratitude was by making sure I could eat dinner. Not all the cooks on the project had bothered to respect my dietary requirements and more than once I faced a long day of backbreaking work without lunch. "Of course I'm not going to cook something you can't eat," Volodya said. "If you go hungry, you aren't going to be happy, and my job is to make sure my tourists are happy. I want you to go back home and tell people what a wonderful time you had here. That's how we get more tourists." Volodya, a backcountry ranger, knew far more about how to run a tourism business than his boss, the head of the Department of Tourism for the region, who clearly cared not a

whit whether we enjoyed ourselves. *His* idea had been to make us work from dawn to dusk...quite a proposition near the Arctic Circle in summer!

There was one thing that Volodya would simply not tolerate, however much it angered his tourists. People were not to go out and about alone. Jon, one of my friends, went on a hike alone through the woods. Volodya was furious. For his part, Jon didn't think Volodya had any right to tell him where he could or could not go on public land. Jon found Volodya's insistence that the woods were "too dangerous" insulting.

Now on good terms with Volodya, I decided to talk to him about it. It turned out that his main concern was liability. He was legally liable for our safety while there – not just civilly, but criminally. "I have two children to support. I can't go to jail," he said. He was reasonably skeptical as to whether Americans who'd never camped in Siberia were really up to the challenge, whatever experience they had from back home. He himself had been to Alaska and found it tame compared to the Russian taiga. However, if tourists signed forms saying they took full responsibility for their own safety, he didn't see any problem with them wandering about (and getting eaten by bears).

While there were still subtle points of disagreement, Volodya and I agreed that if the decisions were left up to the two of us, we could find a common ground. I explained all this to Jon, who was soothed.

Meanwhile, Volodya asked to borrow some rope of mine for his fishing nets. Knowing that my poor memory often leads to leaving things behind, I said I agreed as long as he could remember to give it back. As it turns out, when our ship came to take us to the other side of the lake, I did remember, but the rope was still out in the water. "Don't worry," Volodya told me. "I'll get it for you." Volodya ferried people onto the

ship with his little canoe. Each time he returned, I expected him to stop along the way and pick up the rope, but he didn't. Finally, he returned for the last trip out to the ship. I considered not boarding until I had my rope – not because I didn't trust Volodya, whom I rather liked by this point, but because I thought the ship's captain might not wait for some piece of rope. I didn't want to make an issue of it, so I decided to trust my new friend.

As soon as I was on the ship and he was back in his boat, Volodya shouted to the captain, "That's it. Take off." When I reminded him about the rope, he at first tried to pretend he hadn't heard and then finally said, "Sorry. I can't get it now. Forgive me."

As we were sailing away, everyone – with a single exception – was waving goodbye to Volodya. Jon said to me, "You know, Volodya wasn't such a bad guy."

"Yes he was," I grumbled. "He's a very bad guy."

Captions:

Picture 372: Volodya (back) and his taped-up gun guard a trail-worker from "teddy bears."

Picture 383: Volodya (right) relaxes with the trail-builders after a long day of watching them work.