

**The Robbery:  
An American Studying in St. Petersburg, Russia**

***Words To Remember: Помните!***

At my birthday party celebrating the big “1-0” (ten years old), my Aunt gave me my first purse. I remember her accompanying words of caution: “You are a big girl. You have to take care of yourself and always watch your belongings, including this new purse.” Well, twelve years later, I remember my Aunt’s words, but I don’t have the purse to show for it...

***Café Max: The St. Petersburg Internet Café - Интернет Кафе***

It was 3:00pm on Sunday afternoon, and I was working on an assignment at a popular Internet café on Nevsky Prospekt, the main street running through St. Petersburg. Many foreigners visit this café because of its central location and its English-language programs. In the last few weeks, I had made a habit of coming to the café on the weekends following my morning ballet classes.

On this particular day, I decided to work on the second floor. After logging onto the computer, I placed my dance bag on a chair beside me and my purse on the floor near my feet. I had only been working 20 minutes when I reached down to get a pen from my purse. My hand came up empty. There was nothing there. I thought I might have confused my purse with my dance bag, but that one was still sitting beside me. Maybe I had left my purse in the bathroom? No. I asked the boy sitting next to me. No. I searched the second floor, poking my nose around busy tourists who were pounding away at their hotmail accounts. No. I searched the first floor. Still nothing. My steps were quickening and I could feel my body temperature rising. I asked at the front desk. No. My Russian was quickly deteriorating as my thoughts began to race ahead and imagine all the various situations that could unfold before me. I was instructed to talk to the security guard at the café. Shockingly, there was a video camera that captured the entire period on tape, but, in traditional Russian-style, the recording was so poor that nothing could be made out. By now it was evident that I hadn’t misplaced my purse – it was stolen right out from under my feet.

***The Police Station: Милиция***

The full consequences of my carelessness were coming to fruition. I was standing alone in a café in Russia with absolutely no money, no credit cards, no passport, no visa, no migration card, no key to my dormitory, no metro pass, and no cell phone. I didn’t even have 8 rubles (25cents) to buy a subway token to get home. The security guard at the café told me to go to the central police station. It turns out this would become the worst part of my experience.

It was nearing 5:00pm when I finally found the police station. (Eventually a woman on the street had offered to walk me there as I was clearly in a state of distress.) I rang the doorbell and a metal door popped open. I walked up a couple of stairs. The entire office was completely dark except for a single lamp sitting on a desk behind a glass window. A group of young guys came out from a side door, none of whom were wearing uniforms. They looked me up and down.

I took a deep breath, and then said, with my foreign accent and a stuttering voice, “I was in an Internet café and now I don’t have my purse. Someone took it.” (It was just my luck that I didn’t know the verb “to steal.”) They laughed out loud. Then all of them left except for one man left. He asked me where I was from.

“The US.”

“What are you doing in Russia?”

“I’m studying here.”

“What?”

“I study at The Conservatory.”

“I said ‘what’.”

“I study dance and choreography.”

“You dance?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of dance?”

“Classical ballet.”

He laughed and disappeared through a doorway.

My sixth sense kicked in. It was time to go. I headed for the front door. It was locked. I searched for a button to unlock the door. I clicked one button and nothing happened. I clicked another and there was a buzzing sound. I pushed the door, it opened, and I dashed out onto the street...Now what?

### ***Kids Are Smart: Умные Дети***

My thoughts were racing a mile a minute as I tried to creatively solve this situation. Somehow I had to get back to the dormitory. A young girl, maybe 14 years old, was approaching. I took deep breath.

“Excuse me, please.”

She stopped. This was a good sign.

“Ummm...I have a problem. I’m a foreigner, and I just lost my purse.”

She stared at me. I figured there was a 50% chance that she understood what I was saying.

“Ummm...I live in a dorm near Kirovsky Zavod. I don’t have any money. I need to get home.”

“You’re American?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Ummm...Do you know where I could get 8 rubles for the Metro?”

“You are trying to go to the American Consulate?”

No, but this was a great idea! “Yes!” I exclaimed. “Where is it?”

“Wait.” She called over her friends, and they gave me directions.

Thank goodness for smart kids!

### ***The American Consulate: Американское Консульство***

I showed up at the Consulate at 8:00pm. It was closed. I spoke with the security guard, once again explaining the story, but this time in English. He said I should come back tomorrow. I burst into tears, literally. A blur of Russian and English words spewed out: “I can’t go home. Dormitory. Far away. My money was in my purse. How? 8 rubles. Metro. Where? What can I do? Why is it closed?” Well, somehow the guard got the idea. He made a phone call and a marine opened a door, handed me 30 rubles (\$1.00US) and told me to come back tomorrow. This felt like the most important dollar bill I have ever received in my entire life. One hour later, I was back at home in the dorm.

### ***The Aftermath: В Конце***

Well, it is one week later and I’m working through the process of replacing my passport, visa, registration, migration card, student ID, credit cards, and cell phone. Things are much better, and I even know the work “to steal”: *украсть*.

My “words of wisdom” for future travelers are borrowed from a distant memory: “watch your belongings.”

***To Learn More About Rebecca Davis’ travels and experiences, visit [The Rebecca Davis Dance Company website at www.rebeccadavisdance.com](http://www.rebeccadavisdance.com) or email [davis@rebeccadavisdance.com](mailto:davis@rebeccadavisdance.com).***