

Postcards from Moscow **by Masha Hamilton**

MOSCOW - Valia brought over her special mushroom-shaped glass jars the other day. I watched while she wrapped the end of a pencil in a vodka-soaked cotton ball and set it afire. She held the burning stick inside each container for a minute, pulled it out and slapped the hot jars, one by one, down on my bare back.

As I lay there on my stomach, she brought a mirror so I could see red welts of my skin being sucked inside the jars. This was not a comforting sight.

“But it will warm your lungs and pull that cough right out,” she assured me.

Ask a Russian, any Russian, about folk medicine and the result is something like lifting the floodgates on a rushing river. Enthusiastic belief in these remedies seems to unite all strata of society. A member of the intelligentsia here launched into a discussion that stretched into two hours when I asked her about home remedies. Another acquaintance, an elderly retiree, responded with equal eagerness and returned the next day bearing a homemade version of something like Crisco. She promised that regularly eating as much of it as I could stand would keep my system “clean.”

MOSCOW - He glimpsed her for the first time walking to a bus stop. He leapt in his car and followed the bus, waving madly until she got out and he could introduce himself. For their first date, he appeared in suit and tie, presented her with a dozen long-stemmed red roses and took her dancing at a plush hotel outside Moscow. For her birthday, he scrimped and saved to buy her a fur coat. And to make things even more interesting, KGB agents sometimes tailed them.

“I couldn’t imagine a romance with an American being that exciting,” recalls Marjorie, 28, who I met soon after moving to Moscow nearly five years ago. She was so swept off her feet by what she saw as the passionate, impetuous Russian male spirit that she finally succumbed to Vadim’s persistent marriage proposals. The two tied the knot in February 1989 in a Russian wedding palace and Vadim surprised her with a diamond ring.

This spring, their breathtaking love affair long since soured, they divorced. Marjorie blames, at least in part, the vast cultural divide. “I think we could have dealt with our personality difference if we had come from the same culture,” she says. “Or we could have dealt with the cultural differences if we were more alike. But having both was just too much.”

MOSCOW - "Get the machine," the white-coated technician told her assistant grimly. I felt my heart begin to beat more rapidly as she thrust into my hand a pole connected by wire to a blue box the size of a mini-refrigerator. Then she moved in closer, brandishing a narrow metal probe attached to the same box. She pushed the probe into my mouth.

"Squeeze the stick in your right hand. Call out when you feel the pain. No, don't talk. Just pay attention. Say 'ah' when it hurts. Here we go."

"Ahh. Ahh. Ahh. Ahhhhhhhhh."

The whole thing hurt. With great big wads of cotton shoved into my mouth, an electric current surging up my arm and the hefty woman with post-lunch spicy breath looming threateningly over me, it felt, in fact, like a scene from a Frankenstein rip-off movie. But it was only a visit to the Russian dentist's office and a typical session with the electro-diagnostya machine, invented at the beginning of the century and still much in favor here.

Now there is probably not a country in the world where people enjoy going to the dentist. But if most people clench and bear it in the West, in Russia, they just don't go. Figures show the vast majority of adult Russians suffer from a form of gum disease caused by poor dental hygiene. Most say they would rather let their teeth fall out than visit the dentist. I decided to find out why.

Feigning a toothache, I stopped in one afternoon at my local clinic, located in the basement of a building near my home. Once in the chair, I found the glass counter to my right was smudged and dirty, while the bowl to my left held bloody cotton balls. There'd been no sign that the hygienist had sterilized the instruments she'd used on previous patients. I was taking all this in when she firmly twisted my head toward her and began pushing my lower jaw down.

"You know, my toothache isn't that bad after all," I managed to get out. "Maybe I just need a good professional cleaning, don't you think?"

"Cleaning? Cleaning?" the hygienist said sarcastically. "You're a grown woman. You know how to brush your teeth. Now let's have a look."