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Talk of the Town

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan

November 1, 1996

By Adam Smith Albion

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION, AMERICAN AND UZBEK-STYLE

"Sex was invented," the British poet Philip Larkin drily reminds us, "in 1963." Sex is one of the many departments where Uzbekistan lags behind the developed world. Given the West's thirty-three-year head start, the newcomer has a lot of catching up to do. Nevertheless, this summer the first steps were taken that propelled Uzbekistan over the starting-line and into the race.

Post-communist reforms in the ex-USSR are all about becoming more like the West. The most visible symbols of Tashkent's march toward capitalism were supposed to be the new 18-story bank opposite the Foreign Ministry and the national bourse, known as the Uzbekistan Exchange and Market Center. The latter was recently established in the fanciful building that used to house the Sverdlov Theater — fanciful because of its copper-colored roof swept into a spike like a WWI German helmet. Unfortunately, neither the bank nor the bourse seems to have drawn much reaction from Tashkenters. Everyone knows anyway that the bourse is a Potemkin Village. Visiting heads of state are inevitably subjected to a tour of the place directly after laying a wreath at the statue of the poet Navoi. Uzbek TV shows the floor of the stock exchange buzzing with activity amid rows of computers and wall-screens flashing share prices. However on ferial days, when Tashkent is not graced by the presence of foreign dignitaries, the bourse is largely deserted with a padlock on its front door, and those sedulous computer technicians are bussed back to whatever government offices they were borrowed from.¹

Banks and stock exchanges fail to rouse much enthusiasm because, in the popular view, capitalism is not about numbered accounts and faceless financial transactions. For evidence that Uzbekistan is closing the gap with the West, the Tashkenters I know look elsewhere. Capitalism is about splashy clothes and cars and good eating. In a word, it is about conspicuous consumption.

America, as the epitome of "the West," is popularly understood to be the ideal that Uzbekistan is striving to attain.² But what information about America filters through the state-censored media? Nothing at all about political opposition, freedom of movement, the right to peacefully assemble... or any of the finer points of liberal democracy, which might prove threatening to a government that has firmly squelched that idea. Therefore, I must report that most Uzbeks are only dimly aware of the fact that the United States *is* a democracy, a word heard hardly at all nowadays.³ Overwhelmingly they associate the country with economic opportu-

1. Most likely the National Security Service (*Millij Xavfsizlik Xizmati* or MXX) — i.e. the newly named but fundamentally unstructured KGB.

2. President Karimov has said at various times that market reforms in Uzbekistan would follow the Turkish model of development; the Chinese model; and the South Korean model, depending on which country he had last visited. Since his meeting with President Clinton this summer, America has been established as the object of emulation, although the official line nowadays is that Uzbekistan will catch up using the "unique Uzbek model." However the government rhetoric flip-flops, the man on the street has never wanted Uzbekistan to look anything like Turkey, China or South Korea; all he wants is to be as rich as Uncle Sam.

3. By contrast, America's experience of democracy was a source of obsessive interest and inspiration to East Central Europeans in the years after 1989.

nity — that is to say, capitalism. And what impressions do they have of capitalism, gleaned from the daily fare of third-rate Hollywood films and “Santa Barbara,” now playing to Uzbek audiences for the fourth year running? America is a land of license where appetites are satisfied, lusts gratified, and — most importantly — elegance is enjoyed in the company of beautiful young women. Ask any Uzbek what three American cities he would most like to visit, and *always* Las Vegas will feature among them. Las Vegas, with its bright lights and ostentation, its be-plumed showgirls and the clink of money ever-present in the background, embodies all that is most attractive and exciting about America.

Judged from this perspective, it is not surprising that the preeminent emblem of progress in Tashkent is a swanky, slightly raunchy bar in the center of town. Bar Emir opened this summer offering an evening’s entertainment rather different in character from the Navoi State Theater and Opera House that happens to be situated directly across the road. This juxtaposition of opera house and bar is a coincidence; yet it nicely symbolizes old versus new in Tashkent, since the former rarely ventures beyond a stodgy Soviet-approved diet of *Madame Butterfly* and *Swan Lake*, whereas the latter has girls in leotards making love to an aluminum pole. There is also some dancing performed in stockings, and a stripper. History will record that sex in Uzbekistan was invented at long last by one Valerii Lyan, the proprietor of Bar Emir, in 1996.

Few in Tashkent have actually set foot in the bar or witnessed any of these edifying spectacles. Its prices (\$12.50 for a cocktail, \$31 for a snifter of Napoleon brandy) are pitched for clients who can spend money with a spade. But even though they have never seen the floor show themselves, the *hoi polloi* all know about the bar; it is already one of city’s landmarks. I myself was stopped on the street once and asked directions to the Navoi Theater. “Opposite Bar Emir,” I said without hesitation.

I was sure that the bar’s exclusivity, ensured by its long prices, would breed resentment as the economic crisis deepens and the gap between rich and poor widens. At the very least, I was waiting for someone to seize on the aluminum pole and deliver a diatribe against Western moral corruption seeping into Uzbekistan. Nothing of the kind! In fact I have heard no negative opinions about Bar Emir whatsoever. Rather, it is a subject of universal curiosity and approbation, even municipal pride — visible proof that Tashkent is catching up with Las Vegas.

Initially these reactions seemed so wrong — so out of keeping with my perception of Uzbek society (even in the capital) as rather conservative and unc cosmopolitan — that I assumed I was mishearing. So about two months after Bar Emir opened I began sounding out opinions around Chorsu bazaar, that jungle of stalls pressed up against the Old Town. It was the obvious place to take an informal poll, since I have many dozens

of loquacious mates among the bazaaris. In fact, I am flagged down every ten paces by somebody or other shouting my name amidst the din, anxious to clap my hand with that huge Uzbek handshake that is like two titans swinging at one another.

I digress to explain how I came to have so many acquaintances. My unexpected and unsought celebrity in Chorsu is the result of this summer’s weddings. A proper Uzbek wedding is a complex three-day affair that climaxes with a tremendous party at the groom’s house. Early that morning a “herald” — often a boy on a bicycle — will have threaded his way through the lanes and alleyways, inviting the whole *mahalla* to *plov* that evening at the top of his voice. Hundreds of guests pour into the courtyard, for an evening that will cost the groom’s parents literally their life savings. (Most weddings happen in summer not only to catch the good weather, but because food prices rise in autumn.) This is conspicuous consumption, Uzbek-style.

The majority of the guests have no idea of the young couple’s names, so it has become fashionable to help everyone save face by writing them on a sign above the head table lit by strings of colored lights. Beneath it sit the bride and groom, flanked by the best man and bridesmaid — the bride shy and silent, eating little, unsmiling, looking at the ground. By tradition, she evinces no sign that she is enjoying her own wedding; in her new home she is at the bottom of the hierarchy, and she is judged favorably if she indicates from the start that she will be a modest, diffident and obedient wife.

The evening is run by a Master of Ceremonies — a popular actor or singer, if the family is rich enough to afford him. In between songs and speeches lauding the bride and groom, the guests dance in their honor. Spectators approach and press money into the hands of the people dancing; at the end of the number, this money is handed over to the musicians. It never takes long for someone to inform the MC that there is an American in the audience. I cannot count the occasions I have been arrested in mid-chew of a spoonful of *plov* with the words, “Now ladies and gentlemen, this evening we have a very special guest in our midst....”

There is a short story by Chekhov called *Wedding with the General* (*Svad’ba s generalom*), about a general whom no one at the wedding knows but who is invited solely to provide lustre and distinction to the proceedings. I began to grumble in private that I was the *svadebnii Amerikanets* or “wedding American” who was always in demand as the ornament to any Uzbek party.

I struggle to my feet, wipe my mouth and am handed the microphone. Immediate hush descends on the tables. I glance quickly at the illuminated sign above the head table and launch into my speech of congratulation. If I speak Russian, heads nod appreciatively. If I speak Uzbek, the silence becomes terrific and profound. The MC recovers the microphone and nudges me to the center of the courtyard. The band strikes up, and to the

gasps and glee of hundreds of people I begin to dance. I am abandoned out there. Never once has a single person joined me; everyone is too riveted by the spectacle of a foreigner dancing Uzbek-style. (I practice at home, by the way, having resigned myself long ago to the inevitable embarrassment; Gulya-opa at the Khidoyatov Theater once gave me a few lessons under the grape-trellises.) My hands stuffed with cash, the music ends. I bow a final time to the bride and groom and make a feint towards my seat, but am always headed off by an importunate guest who drags me off to meet his friends. Then I am forced to make the round of the male tables, at each of which I am forced to down a shot or two of vodka. By the time I am released to return to my own party, thoroughly soaked, I have been invited to ten new weddings. Maybe I will attend one or two. In this way the chain of acquaintances goes on and on, like a fission reaction...

The first time a stranger in Chorsu market greeted me by name was in July. "Don't you recall? Why, we met at Makhouda's wedding only last month! You danced; I saw you...." Thus instant friends began popping up everywhere, continually offended by my failure to remember them and their names. My own name, it so happens, is easily assimilated after only one hearing. In the tradition of calling people by their first name and patronymic, my surname is always dropped, leaving "Adam Smith." Having been saturated with talk about Uzbekistan's transition to a market economy, *everyone* has heard of Adam Smith. I have been asked so frequently whether I am a descendent of the father of capitalism that I have begun shyly admitting that I am. Under these false pretenses, my reputation precedes me.

Therefore I turned to Chorsu market when I wanted to cull opinions about Bar Emir. I fully expected the hard-working bazaaris to sound off about this extravagant new playpen for the rich. The bar should be, after all, a painful reminder of the yawning gulf that has opened up between the "haves" and the "have-nots." In the general view the "haves" are mafiosi, politicians and profiteers, while the "have-nots" are industrious but impoverished law-abiding citizens whom the "haves" are ripping off. It was obvious where tradesmen's sympathies ought to lie. But, as I have already indicated, Bar Emir falls into a special category. Bazaaris directed their animus in other directions — at the private clubs reserved for members of the Foreign and Interior Ministries; at the exclusive cabaret in Yunus-Obod district where the strippers go all the way; and at that mysterious green building on Pushkin Street that is barricaded by bouncers and has become something of an urban legend. For this, I have been assured solemnly and frequently, is a restaurant without menus, where plutocrat patrons can order anything that takes their fancy — stewed zebra, fricasseed gila monster — and their wishes will be met, although they may have to eat peanuts at the bar for a few hours while the airplane arrives from Africa.

Bar Emir, on the other hand, manages to escape the

opprobrium attached to these dens catering to coarse passions and outrageous appetites. It too is offering sin for a price, but in a form that makes it acceptable and attractive, rather than dark and vicious. The bar is not considered shady, because it has cheerful lighting and awnings and bright banners advertising the drink of the week. It is not sleazy, because nice-looking foreigners (and not just "hoods") like to nurse glasses of beer at the sidewalk tables. It is clean and well-run and on balmy evenings a three-piece combo plays jazz outdoors. It is not seedy or shabby, like the operations run in the prostitute-filled government hotels. And it is not crooked — or at least it is given the benefit of the doubt — being a private concern owned by an ethnic Korean entrepreneur. Koreans are believed to be upright and honest: "If you exchange money on the black market, go to a Korean, he won't cheat you" is a piece of advice I have often received.

What common thread binds these impressions of Bar Emir? The secret of its success can be summarized in the word "sophistication." It is a relative term, of course; the bar would be considered rather tacky in London. But by Tashkent standards it offers Uzbeks their first heady whiff of "class."

Sophistication is a new concept in Tashkent, and in the ex-USSR altogether. The dominant paradigm of Soviet society was fundamentally at odds with such bourgeois ideas as discrimination, good taste, breeding and finesse — *i.e.* the key ingredients that make up sophistication. The other joints in town try to mimic sophistication in the old Soviet, heavy-handed way. They think all that is necessary to capture this elusive will-o'-the-wisp is to be rigidly exclusive and conspicuously expensive. But however much they pile on the glamour — however gorgeous their roccoco fittings, however lush their floor shows — they cannot dispel the odor of tawdriness. Their refinement is a sham, since beneath the veneer (I am repeating the vox populi here) these places are just venues for the Nouveaux Uzbeks — who yesterday were uncultured factory workers and policemen, and today are businessmen and politicians — to strut and ogle and have their grosser cravings tended to.

Clubs of this nature are seen as being an extension of Tashkent's underworld, so it is not surprising that Chorsu's bazaaris scorn them. Bar Emir, in contrast, emphatically does not fall into that category (though there are plenty of parvenu ducks-in-plumage among its customers too). The establishment is naughty, but respectable — and frankly many of the men I talked to were licking their lips in anticipation of the day when they could afford its adult entertainments themselves.

I wondered about this for a long time before enlightenment struck: Bar Emir is Tashkent's equivalent of the Playboy Club. In line with the Playboy ethos, the bar is presenting erotica as an elegant accessory to the modern, fashionable lifestyle. Bazaaris who would be ashamed to be seen at the stripshow in Yunus-Obod would be proud to carry a Playboy card in their wallet

— especially if it were written in English. Bar Emir taps into the same reservoir of consumer preferences as advertisers in Tashkent who extoll cigarettes for their “American taste” and jeans for their “American quality.” It might be said to be pitching its wares under the slogan “American sophistication and refined lifestyle, as seen in Las Vegas.” Valerii Lyan has brought erotica out of the closet, where we hide our carnal desires, and put it on the catwalk. Lust has been socialized, libido made respectable.

It is this achievement that earns him the right to be considered the inventor of sex in Uzbekistan. Prior to summer 1996 there had been no sex in Uzbekistan, just as there was none in the Soviet Union until perestroika. There had only been parturition (which does not count) and copulation (by which I mean sex seen as too dirty to discuss or enjoy openly). Only at Bar Emir is sex a slightly risqué but essentially healthy pastime, provoking the occasional snicker but all-in-all rather fun — like it is in America. This latent assumption, that the bar represents a taste of America, effectively protects it from the conceivable charge that it is undermining public morals. To put it baldly: since capitalism is the goal of Uzbekistan’s economic reforms, and capitalism = America = Las Vegas, censuring the bar would logically amount to a criticism of President Karimov’s agenda. A chain of reasoning tending in this direction has *noli me tangere* signposted all over it.

Even my contacts among the intelligentsia see the bar in a positive light. I have searched for the Uzbek Solzhennitsyn, the reactionary preaching against American cultural pollution, but in vain. At the Republican Center for Spirit and Enlightenment, a government “think-tank” devoted to reviving Uzbek values, researchers are not afraid of Western culture seeping in — if anything, they welcome it. They represent a very strange hybrid (unique in my experience), “Nationalist-Westernizers.” Nationalists as a rule draw their strength from opposing a dominant, foreign civilization, which is usually Uncle Sam and Coca-Cola. Here the priority is to not to defend Uzbekistan against Western culture but to drive Russian/Soviet culture out. “Anything that can help our country escape from the clutches of its colonial past is good,” a Professor Saksonov told me; “Our place lies with the advanced world, the West.” He was pleased to see Tashkent developing. Bar Emir was a harbinger of progress.

Great inventions never spring from nowhere; in reality they are merely quantum improvements on previous inventions. There were precursory developments that paved the way for Mr. Lyan’s breakthrough as well. Brazilian soap operas have become wildly popular, for instance; they put a spotlight on décolletage and lace lingerie. Dubbed chewing-gum advertisements, featuring Californian beach babes frolicking in bikinis, did not go unnoticed either. True, the newspapers remain utterly bland and prudish. An Uzbek boulevard press with Page Three girls is still unthinkable, and pornography is unattainable legally (though there is a black

market in hard-core cassettes near Hotel Rossiya). However, one occasionally comes across advice from gynecologists and usually self-styled “professional sexologists” in some of the magazines — articles that pander to the reader’s prurience while cloaking it decently in “science.”

Finally, there was the first Miss Uzbekistan pageant staged a few years ago. It gave most people their first glimpse of Uzbek women in bathing suits. Its outcome was rather unsatisfactory from the organizers’ point of view, since an ethnic Slav won. Nevertheless, that competition provided the inspiration for Mr. Lyan’s boldest brain-wave ever: the Bar Emir Miss Malibu Beauty Contest.

Lady Luck

Hidden behind Mr. Jitendra Patel’s tortoise-shell glasses and mild, intellectual face is a very pragmatic and calculating mind. He is a wiry Anglo-Indian, about 30 years old, and as far as I can tell has no interests whatsoever beyond doing business. He is a hell of good businessman too, almost a sharpster, for his attention never wavers from the cardinal point that his job is to turn a profit; but he sees one level deeper. He understands that, in the long run, you can bring more money in if you give a little of it away. In a word, he has fully absorbed the principle of promotion. Tashkent is peppered with instances of his charity — a \$5,000 trumpet for a musician at the conservatory, some amplifiers for a rock band — shrewdly targeted donations that he knows will earn him a return eventually.

How he hooked up with Valerii Lyan I cannot say. Bar Emir’s proprietor is a broad-shouldered, tough Korean who does not mince words. The idea for staging a beauty contest was his. He rightly calculated that his bar would immediately become the talk of the town; only one thing made him vaguely uneasy. Had Tashkent come far enough in the last five years to accept the sight of undressed teenage girls on his catwalk — not professionals but amateurs — without accusations of exploitation raining down on him? It seems to have been Mr. Patel who reassured him that the risk was manageable, as long as the affair was kept very classy. This calculation also proved correct.

Together they would pull in Tashkent’s loveliest women by offering a prize of \$12,000, approximately 300 times the average month’s salary, put up by Quick Stop Group, the firm headed by Mr. Patel. Quick Stop has the import contract to supply Uzbekistan with various alcoholic drinks, including Smirnoff Vodka. Why not tie in a promotion by calling the event the Smirnoff Beauty Contest? Mr. Patel saw farther. He was negotiating for the contract for Malibu, an exotic rum and coconut concoction that tastes of blood-red sunsets and the sea sliding up tropical beaches. It would catch the imagination of Uzbeks in their land-locked republic. He suggested that, in addition to cash, he would throw in a trip to a Caribbean island. The queen of the evening would

be crowned Miss Malibu.

Mr. Lyan assembled a very good team. For organizers he hired two impresarios from Turkeston Theater, Tashkent's premier venue for shows and popular concerts, who brought along mini-staffs of their own. They became a camarilla of advisers who soon had developed the evening beyond the original conception. Now there were to be jokes and music and an interview with the inevitable sexologist. They commissioned a "Miss Malibu" song with a calypso beat to be performed by Faruch Zakirov, Uzbekistan's answer to Frank Sinatra. His nephew Jovakhir was the MC. My landlady was paid to write the *mise en scène*, including the MC's comic patter with the girls. And I was invited to be "consultant," on the grounds that I am American, have watched beauty contests in the West and therefore must have some special insight into how they should be run, am heterosexual male, and was born after 1963.

The jury of eight was headed by Mr. Zakirov and Mr. Patel. Its members included an architect, an actress from Kazakhstan, and of course a sexologist. The most intriguing member was one Usen Khudibergenov. He was from Kyrgyzstan, a small man, and rather bald today, but in his time he was Uzbek film's most famous stuntman. I never saw him out of a tuxedo, night or day, a cellular telephone welded to his ear. One half of his face was badly burned as a result of an accident during one of his stunts. Far from marring his looks, it made him more interesting and glamorous.

It was Saturday morning, the day of the "casting call," and Bar Emir was swamped with girls — 120 of them, bringing their bathing suits with them. None was over twenty years old, since that was the age limit specified in the advertisement. All day long I watched legs go by until I felt sick in the head. It took until 5 p.m. to decide on the final cut of 25. The majority of those selected were not Uzbeks at all, but Tatars — light-skinned and thin-lipped with high, proud cheekbones. The jury's taste clearly tended towards the statuesque and Amazonian, because the contestants' average height must have been around 5'10".

Two weeks of rehearsals followed. The bar hummed with ceaseless activity, spurred on mercilessly by Mr. Lyan who unfortunately took a personal interest in everything that was going on. A choreographer was imported to stage dance numbers. The poor girls looked increasingly bewildered as they were required to don top hats and canes and hoof to Kurt Weil one minute, then were hounded into the changing room and emerged as rose-eating *señoritas* the next. Costumes were sewn, evening dresses adjusted, and the swimming costumes were standardized. A hairdresser fussed in the background as hairdressers do. Along the way it was decided that there would be not one winner, but five. The categories were Miss Malibu (the ultimate victor), Miss Charm, Miss Personality, Miss Mystery, and Miss Fortune. This last, Miss Fortune, would be chosen by randomly picking a card with one

of the girls' names written on it.

The event was heavily publicized, especially on television. The bar was hung with banners and a large board was erected on the sidewalk with photographs of the contestants for passersby to admire and compare. Mr. Lyan and his team were gleeful at the splash they were creating. Tashkent had never seen anything like it; they were making history. "You see, we're not as far behind the times as you Americans think," Mr. Zakirov said to me one day. I murmured assent, but added: "There are some aspects of the West that aren't worth imitating." My personal opinion of beauty contests is that they are demeaning and trivial, but I kept it to myself.

I also said nothing when the organizers sent complimentary tickets to all the ambassadors in town. It did not occur to them that it might be beneath an ambassador's dignity to attend a beauty contest. From their point of view, they were offering the diplomatic corps the opportunity of enjoying Tashkent's most sophisticated entertainment *ever*. Since I had once been observed chatting with the British ambassador at a reception, I was charged with ensuring her attendance. Her Excellency Barbara Haye is an incisive Scotswoman in her early forties who, being female, was initially obliged to fight to be taken seriously by Uzbek officials. Underminers would praise her frock, look over her shoulder and ask in effect, "Are you the trainee ambassador? Where's the real ambassador?" There was no likelihood that she would lend her weight as representative of Her Majesty's Kingdom to the spectacle of teenagers parading as sex objects. In the event, no ambassadors responded to the invitations, provoking consternation and incredulity among the organizers.

The day of the contest, I heard a disconcerting rumor in the bazaar. My friends, after serving me the usual bone-crushing handshake, became quiet and confidential. With hand on heart, they asseverated that the outcome of the contest had been determined in advance. Gafur's niece was to be Miss Malibu.

I dismissed this piece of information with a laugh but I returned home worried. This rumor was discomfiting because, unlike most of the crazy ideas circulating in the bazaars, it was just conceivable. Gafur is Tashkent's biggest Mafia boss, the godfather of organized crime in all the northeast districts. Of course he could put the fix in if he really cared to. And could one of the contestants actually be his niece? Then I remembered a shy, freckled girl with doe-like eyes whose features suggested she was half-Uzbek, half-Russian. She rarely associated with the others, and invariably stepped out of rehearsal into a Mercedes waiting at the curb. Perhaps she...?

All afternoon I mulled over the possibility that the evening was rigged. I did not really believe it, but I brooded anyway: a fortnight of work tainted at the source because Mr. Lyan — brusque, independent, and Korean! — was secretly beholden to a criminal kingpin?

Such chicanery was too distasteful to credit. How many times had he growled during rehearsals, "I don't give a damn who wins, I just want a good show." However, something strange *was* going on at the bar. Televisions and stereo sets were being unpacked in the backroom. They had begun arriving in boxes the day before, donated as "extra prizes" by "businessmen."

The Bar Emir Miss Malibu Beauty Contest was a smashing success. Even if ambassadors cocked a snook at it, the rest of Tashkent put on the glad rags and poured in for the party. I suppose the most eminent personage there was Shahnoze Ganeiva, the czarina of Uzbek Television and probably the most powerful woman in Uzbekistan. I cannot estimate how many of the guests had actually bought the \$100 tickets, since so many free invitations had been issued. There were complimentary spreads on the sideboards, and all drinks were on the house — though guests were naturally encouraged to order Malibu. In order to relieve the pressure of the crowd clustered around the catwalk, a closed-circuit TV screen had been erected in the garden so that guests could view the action from outside. The cameraman was my landlord, Volodya.

I spent the evening in the garden stirring a cocktail with a swizzle stick. I was too fed up with the routines to watch them, only glancing at the screen occasionally. When I did, my eyes were saved for one particular girl with freckles. When the prize-giving began, I went inside to stand near the jury.

The awards ceremony was conducted in time-honored fashion — with drum rolls, flowers and over-the-shoulder sashes. Soon Miss Charm, Miss Personality and Miss Mystery had been announced and were beaming on the catwalk, each trying to radiate that particular quality for which she had been selected. All that remained now was to choose Miss Fortune — virtually the consolation prize, given that the draw was just a matter of luck — and then Miss Malibu.

Mr. Khudibergenov, the stuntman, rose from his seat among the jury and stepped gingerly onto the catwalk. As ever, he was attired in a tuxedo. On his palm he balanced a silver tray. The white cards he was shuffling were turned face-downwards on the tray, each of them naming one of the contestants whom the jury had not selected for a prize. He took a few paces along the runway, wheeled around and extended his arm into the audience, indicating to a surprised young man that he should choose a card. He handed it to Mr. Khudibergenov, who took it up, seemed to read it with satisfaction, and announced — the name of the girl with doe-like eyes and freckles.

After that, I barely noticed the announcement of Miss Malibu, a red-headed Russian who would not have been my preference. My mind was racing. Mr. Khudibergenov had returned to his chair. He sat with both arms and legs crossed, as if he were a twisted piece of ship's rope; a che-

root was in his mouth. He was smoking it without touching it with his hands. He looked reposeful, oblivious of the applause and intermittent screams of joy from Miss Malibu.

My informants in the bazaar had been mistaken. Or had they? The stuntman's face gave nothing away. He smoked his cigar down without fiddling with it; his trick was to knock off the ash by pursing his lips. He removed invisible hairs from his dinner jacket, generally ignored the crowd and left relatively early. He appeared wholly at peace with himself. I, however, was clawed with perplexity: Could her name have been picked at random? What a coincidence! But what in fact was surprising about it — what evidence was there that she *was* Gafur's niece in the first place? Yet if not she, who? Maybe none of them. Maybe the rumor was fabricated and the information was false from the beginning. Maybe I was on a wild goose chase.

When Volodya returned home with his camera he was tired and footsore — some elements of the party had continued drinking and dancing till almost 2 a.m. He slipped a cassette into the video and we re-viewed selections from the evening. We fast-forwarded to the stuntman's light-footed prowling down the catwalk. He stops, turns, thrusts out his hand with the tray... The young man legitimately picks a card from the middle of the pile. Mr. Khudibergenov takes it from him, glances at it with a smile, reads out the name...

"He doesn't show the card to anyone before returning it to the pile," noticed Volodya.

"No, he doesn't," I said.

"Do you think it's suspicious?"

"I don't know."

"If someone wanted her to win that much, why rig Miss Fortune — why not Miss Malibu?"

"Because that would take the consent of five people out of a jury of eight. If the jury had selected her Miss Malibu of their own accord, that of course would have been ideal. Even if she won one of the subsidiary prizes, she would have gone home a happy girl. But tonight she hadn't been chosen for anything. When he stepped onto the catwalk he already knew, of course, that she wasn't going to be Miss Malibu; and the first three Misses were already standing there for all to see. So Miss Fortune was the back-up. She's a touch disappointed perhaps that she missed the big prize, but it's a lot better than being left with nothing, and she still leaves with a TV or stereo from one of those boxes."

Volodya pondered this for a moment. "Do you believe it?" he asked.

"Don't you?" I said.



Institute of Current World Affairs

Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two

years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, and manager of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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