

ГІОЛІ КУІВ ТО КЕНТУККУ

California native Katya Cengel contemplates whether living in Ukraine prepared her for life in the South.



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Katya Cengel | Longreads | December 2019 | 10 minutes (2,513 words)

I punched a series of numbers into a cordless phone, waited for a prompt and then punched a dozen or so more. Before Skype there was PennyTalk. The phone card saved you money, not time, requiring the input of a long account number, followed by an equally long password, and a no less extensive foreign phone number. At present I was using the cumbersome process to my advantage, trying to figure out how I would break the news to my Ukrainian fiancé that he would be joining me not in California, but in Kentucky.

Dima was from Kyiv. He photographed news and fashion in the Ukrainian capital. He was sweet, funny — and a snob.

The voice that picked up on the other end was distant and distracted.

“Hi Dimka,” I said, hoping the use of the further diminutive of the diminutive of his name would somehow make up for what I was about

to tell him.

"Katiushinka!" His voice softened in recognition. "How are you? How is the job hunt?"

My search for a job in journalism was the topic we began most conversations with back in 2003. I had returned to the U.S. several months earlier after having spent the first few years of my career in the former Soviet Union. Back home I thought I would land a reporting job easily; after all I spoke the language and knew the culture. What I had not anticipated was how difficult it would be to convince U.S. editors that writing about retired dancing bears in Bulgaria and mass graves in Ukraine really had prepared me to cover school board meetings and cop calls.

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Smaller publications told me I would be "bored." Larger ones said I needed "U.S. newsroom experience".

Now, finally, I had good news.

"I found a job!" I told Dima.

"That's great. Is it close to your mom and Trevor?"

Trevor was my British stepfather and Dima's chosen western role model. I hadn't had the heart to tell Dima earlier that I had slowly extended my job hunt from California to Washington State to Texas to pretty much anywhere in the U.S. that would offer me a reporting gig. That designation now included Arkansas and Kentucky.

"Well, not exactly," I said. "It's in Kentucky."

I kept talking, hoping the words that followed would make him forget the Kentucky part.

"It's a good job, a features position. They have a strong photo department. I talked to the photo editor and they might be able to use you as a photographer."

He cut me off, "Kentucky?"

"Kentucky."

We were both silent. There was a delay in the connection, which necessitated waiting several seconds after speaking in order to give the other person a chance to respond. The seconds stretched into a minute, then two.

A California native, I met Dima while living and reporting from Ukraine. I had made my way to the country via Latvia, where I took a job at an English language newspaper right after college. Following my experience in the Baltics, I decided to take a job at an English language newspaper in Ukraine, which is where I met Dima. Since we had been together I had taken him to visit family in the San Francisco Bay Area, London and Paris. Now I was asking him to relocate to Louisville, a city whose name I was still learning to pronounce, Loo-a-vul. I was grateful the job wasn't in Versailles, I couldn't imagine telling my French relatives I was living in Ver-say-elles.

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My Parisian uncle had already warned me about the south, citing a visit he took to Virginia 30 years before, during which he got in trouble for kissing a girlfriend in public. My mother recommended I buff my nails because, "Women in the south care about those kinds of things." She was one of the few members of my family who had actually lived in the South, having studied at Virginia Tech.

To Dima, anywhere in the U.S. that wasn't New York or San Francisco didn't exist. I tried to explain that I had chosen Kentucky for him, believing he would feel more at home there than in Arkansas. The truth was I was the one who had felt out of place while interviewing for a job in Arkansas.

Little Rock was one thing. Rural Arkansas was another. Yet that was the position I had talked the editor into considering me for, a job in a one-person bureau in a rural county where the last editor had either been shot at, run off, or had to wear a bulletproof vest to work. I no longer remember the exact details, but I know the circumstances were a bit more reminiscent of the unrest I had experienced in Kyiv than I cared to repeat.

I am not entirely sure what I was thinking when I applied for the position other than that I really, really needed a job. Touring the county, even the Little Rock crew I was with — Todd, the editor, and a young female reporter — seemed uncomfortable. We spent more time seeing the "sights" — long stretches of countryside dotted with trailers, satellite dishes and churches — than interacting with anyone.

"It's a dry county, that won't be a problem for you, will it?" Todd asked.

Dry wasn't the word I would have used to describe the lush landscape. Unsure how to respond I kept silent. Todd must have taken my silence for acceptance and continued talking.

"That's good, some people really don't like living in dry counties. I know it can be a bother having to go to another county to buy beer, but it's doable."



Dry counties, alcohol, the realization that he wasn't talking about the weather — it all came to me slowly. Just as I was starting to catch on, Todd mentioned "moist counties". The look of confusion on my face launched Todd into a tutorial on the various terminology surrounding the sale and consumption of alcohol. To make up for my ignorance I decided to mention my teetotalism credentials.

"Actually I don't drink," I said.

For good measure I threw Dima in as well. "My fiancé doesn't drink either." It was a strange quirk we shared, a lack of appreciation for the taste of alcohol.

"I thought he was Russian," said Todd.

"Ukrainian," I corrected.

"And he doesn't drink?"

It was true, neither Dima nor I drank, but I realized too late that mentioning that Dima did not drink was not the best way to fit in. Not only did I have a Ukrainian fiancé, I had a Ukrainian fiancé who didn't drink. Even in Arkansas it is common knowledge that Russians and Ukrainians drink.

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While interviewing in Kentucky I stayed away from the topic of alcohol entirely and instead decided to compare the state to Ukraine, a country most Americans equate with corruption and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The unfortunate comparison occurred to me when I was sitting in the office of one of half-dozen mid-level editors I was scheduled to interview with.

"You know Kentucky reminds me a bit of Ukraine," I said.

When the editor didn't answer I took it upon myself to explain.

"In Eastern Ukraine there are crumbling coal mines that are highly dangerous and poorly funded just like in Eastern Kentucky," I said.

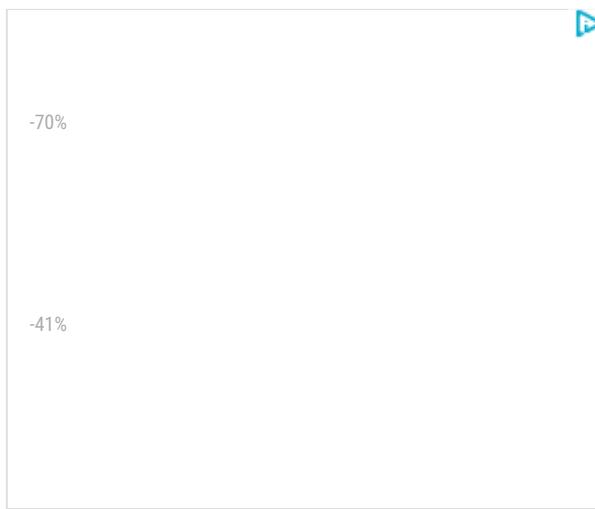
"Have you been to Eastern Kentucky?"

I replied in the negative and decided it was better not to question his Ukrainian credentials.

"I am not sure I would compare the mines of Appalachia to those of Ukraine," he said.

I am pretty confident he has not had occasion to utter that sentence since.

Despite my blunders I ended up with two job offers, one from Arkansas and one from Kentucky. Rural Arkansas felt more foreign to me than Ukraine so I decided Louisville would be the better fit. I bought a car, rented an apartment and started work. I made friends with an intern — not a smart long-term move considering his time at the paper had a clear end date.— and got to know the photo department. I learned to say Loo-a-vul and the names of the past and present University of Louisville basketball coaches. Lord help the next newcomer who spells Denny Crum with a "b" at the end. I started wearing a lot of pink, a color that had never featured much in my wardrobe before but which seemed to be a bit of a staple for women where I now lived, or at least where I shopped.



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It wasn't just Kentucky that was new to me. This was my first full time writing job in the U.S. I had been warned about the stingy American vacation policy. In Ukraine, things were a bit more flexible. If you were sick you stayed home until you were well without worrying about how many sick days you had. When you wanted to take a vacation you asked for one, and your editor usually granted it. Paranoid that my early career abroad had set me behind, I made a point of showing up early on New Year's Day. When the reporter who had been delegated holiday coverage for the day showed up an hour later she was as confused as I was.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"Why isn't anyone else here?" I replied.

The next day I found a printed copy of the official holiday schedule on my desk.

Outside of the office things were no easier. After hearing my name, people wanted to know where I was from. I am pretty sure they were expecting something exotic. California seemed to suffice, although it inevitably led to the follow up, "Why are you here?" and, "What does your family think about you being so far from home?" I wasn't sure how to explain that my mother was thrilled to have me in the same country again with only a three-hour time zone difference and no language barriers, not to mention phone calls that did not include complimentary rudimentary wiretaps. But that got into talk of Ukraine, and Ukraine talk led to even more confusion.

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For a community that identified people by where they went to high school, Dima and I were anomalies. In some ways more for me even than for him. To leave Ukraine for Kentucky made some sense. To leave California for Kentucky did not. Yet because I had not been back in California for long, it was as if I had left Ukraine for Kentucky as well. I remember talking with Dima about speeding tickets before his first U.S. visit. Dima drove fast in Kyiv. I warned him he would receive a ticket for speeding in the U.S.

"What is a speed limit?" he asked.

"It's the speed you can't go above or you will get a ticket."

"A ticket?"

"Yeah, you have to pay money."

"What if I offer to take the cop's picture?"

When I explained that wouldn't go over well, he asked if he could slip a little money with his license when he handed it to the cop. I don't think he got it.

Strangely, it was not Dima who got in trouble with the cops in the U.S. but me. I was traveling in a rural region outside Louisville with a photographer named Pam. At a gas station Pam used a credit card to pay at the pump. Several miles later I noticed that we seemed to be passing a number of cop cars. A bit further along, one of the cop cars

turned on their siren. I looked to see whom they were pulling over only to realize it was us. It turned out the pay-at-the-pump feature at that particular pump did not work, and we were now being stopped for not having paid for our gas.

"Please follow me back to the gas station," said the cop.

We were already late for an important interview so I pulled a \$20 from my wallet and tried to hand it to the officer.



"What are you doing?" the officer demanded, stepping back as if I was offering him leprosy, not money.

"We are really late," I said. "Can you please just take the money and give it to the gas station attendant?"

Pam, a middle aged woman who had been raised on a farm, was too mortified to say a word. We traveled back to the gas station in silence.

Dima had it harder. When he told people he was from Ukraine there was often no follow-up question. Politeness outweighed curiosity. Although he could be charming when he needed to be, Dima could also be harsh. He described the locals as fat, ignorant, and lazy, and wanted to know when we would be visiting my family in California. I struggled to find something he would like, and settled on the world's largest machine gun shoot.

I found the annual multi-day event fascinating and foreign. I didn't really see the thrill in blasting machine guns into a large, open space, or shooting an Uzi at targets in a mock jungle, but Dima loved it. The flamethrowers that were fired at old appliances, the tracers that lit up the sky, the teenage girl who had near perfect aim with a pistol. Dima had finally found something he had in common with Kentuckians: a desire to blow things up.

The machine gun shoot was one of the few assignments we got to work on together. The newspaper used Dima as a freelancer, but when a full time position became available they didn't offer it to him. Dima always sweet-talked the tough, bow-legged, alcoholic who gave out assignments, and his photos were beautiful — too beautiful. Later a friend told me that Dima wasn't considered for the job because there was a suspicion he posed or manipulated his subjects. It was a habit that he had no doubt developed in Ukraine, where attitudes toward the truth were more flexible.

By then I had finally become friends with someone other than the intern. I didn't exactly blend, but I had learned a few things about fitting in. I now knew that you could use and throw away the flower patterned paper hand towels left in restrooms, and that a "charger" was a completely unnecessary decorative plate that went under another plate.

I even made it to Eastern Kentucky while Dima was back in California for a visit. It was a work trip, and I traveled with Bill, a photographer from a county near the county we were visiting. When I got stuck in an interview, unable to understand the man's thick accent and unfamiliar word choices, Bill stepped in to "translate".

"Where you all from?" the source asked. The question was for both of us, but he was looking only at me.

I thought for a minute. Where was I from? I was born in California, had lived in Ukraine, and now called Louisville home.

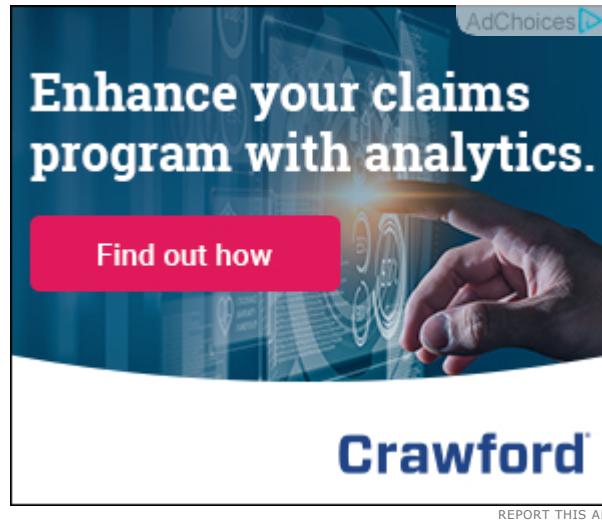
"Loo-a-vul," I said.

The man nodded. "Figures," he said.

* * *

Katya Cengel's memoir From Chernobyl with Love: Reporting from the Ruins of the Soviet Union is out now from Potomac Books. You can find her work for the New York Times Magazine, Marie Claire, and others at katyacengel.com and on Twitter at @kcengel.

Editor: Sari Botton





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