Lena was most insistent I phoned Australia to tell my family I was alright. She almost came all the way from her house to drag me to the institute to do that, in the first days. "You are always so calm about everything!" she said, with frustration. But it's easy to be calm there.

Marina, meanwhile, was quiet until I discovered her sense of humour. We took to criticizing each other, for fun, as a sport. She used to say the most horrible things at meetings, about me, in front of the Director. And I loved it. Nor did she mind when I suggested she must've grown up in a circus and probably had circus elephants still living on her apartment's veranda.

One day she came to work in a cardigan that fashionably featured a single button, where there might normally be two or three. I pulled her aside



Autumn in a park in Donetsk.



Winter view from my apartment, Donetsk.

and said, straight-faced, "Don't worry. I know teachers' salaries aren't much. I will ask the other teachers to donate a few kopeks and we'll buy you a couple of extra buttons." She was outraged! I was laughing.

She coined my nickname: the difficult Australian. When we returned from summer holidays Lena said to Marina that I'd missed her. "Yeah," Marina replied, "Like a headache." It was the cue to start up again.

Yet sometimes we'd sneak away to eat flatbread-rolled kebab-like zapykankas in the park or deluxe hot dogs, Donetsk-style. Such hours were precious.

Classes would end late evening but if I found energy it was a simple matter to phone Svetlana. "Shall I stop by?" I'd ask. "Sure," she said, most often, "and why not bring a bottle of red?" We used to talk into the wee hours, and dance and sing. It's a good thing Ukrainian neighbours don't bother about noise.

Svetlana explained how living in Ukraine meant always having to consider how to earn money, with seemingly endless problems – a state of