Summer comes late to Moscow, and then barely at all. Windows fling open as the city breaks winter’s half-year clamp. Locals burst from dank living quarters, and crushing darkness gives way to high-latitude sunshine that extends well into the evening. Vardan Kushnir returned to his third-floor apartment in central Moscow on such a summer night last July, his head lightened by several rounds of top-shelf booze at a dark cliché of a club where female patrons often danced topless on the bar. It was time for a last drink or two in the company of several young women, one of them reportedly 15 years old. In the life of Russia’s most despised Internet figure, this was just another night.
Although he never came to love his adopted city, Kushnir had created a comfortable existence for himself here. His business, the American Language Center (ALC), which taught English to Russian nationals, was thriving on the back of a relentless spamming campaign. Twenty-five million emails a day generated enough new clients to subsidize Kushnir’s heroic bouts of clubbing and sex, indulging himself in a way that was remarkable even in a city known for its profound lack of shame.

Kushnir dreamed of becoming a famous software developer – “like Bill Gates” – but instead took a more inglorious path. His endless spam and boastful escapades made him a source of irritation throughout Moscow. He battled government officials and exasperated everyone else, especially his own employees. But his faith in Scientology gave him a peculiar calm. Even as his cash-and-carry lifestyle plunged him into chaos, he never raised his voice, never appeared to anger. All the loathing only amused Kushnir, as he managed to keep his enemies at distant remove.

Until that hot night. Kushnir shared an apartment on Sadovaya-Karetnaya Street with his mother, Olga, and the alley cats he always seemed to be taking in. As she always did when her son brought...
later, they still won’t disclose the exact course of events. According to news reports, the 35-year-
old entrepreneur returned home in the early morning with three young women, one of whom he had encountered at the Hungry Duck, a club on the unsubtle end of Moscow’s meet and greet. Cocktails were poured, and the girls slipped a tranquilizer into his drink. Soon enough, Kushnir was out cold. But the dose didn’t keep him down long. When he came to, the young women struck him on the head.

Kushnir was in trouble, and it was about to get worse. Several males – friends of the girls – arrived. One newspaper describes them scaling the drainpipe and entering through an apartment window. The group now numbered at least five, and some of them began to beat Kushnir savagely, smashing his skull and leaving him immobile on the floor, blood silently flooding the tiles.

When Kushnir’s mother discovered the body in the morning, it was already chill to the touch. “There was so much blood,” she says.

After the cops had come and gone and the corpse was on a slab at the morgue, one of Moscow’s yellow journals headlined the episode with triumphant cynicism: “THE SPAMMER HAD IT COMING.”
Moscow Technological Institute of Light Industry. After graduation, he spent a year in Los Angeles and returned to Moscow speaking English—almost no accent. In 1994, he opened the ALC, tapping US expats to teach English to Russians.

Russia in the mid-'90s was plagued by open gang warfare and unchecked theft of state assets. Getting rich—billionaire rich—had less to do with working diligently or coming up with ideas than it did with brute force. The overt signs of privilege were the black Mercedes and impudent swagger of an oil baron. It was in this era of conspicuous wealth that Kushnir launched a new company he hoped would make him a ton of money.

Kushnir diverted his attention to Sophim, a US-based company he founded with a partner in Florida. They developed an application, Edifact Prime, based on a pre-Internet, business-to-business ordering standard. But after several years and many trips to Florida, Kushnir saw his seed money chewed up by costly trade shows. By 2001, the venture was all but shelved, and Kushnir returned his focus to the ALC, which had been providing enough income to support him and his mother while he worked on Sophim.

This time, though, he had a new weapon in his arsenal: spam. He had used bulk email to sell
entrepreneur. “He would change his thoughts and decisions every couple of hours,” a longtime ALC office manager says. “He had too many ideas. He wanted to do everything all at once, as fast as possible.”

After bouncing between servers in Russia and Germany, Kushnir hooked into the Chinese market, where $1,000 pays a month’s rent on a server that can send 7 million emails a day. While administering the ALC’s daily operations, he obsessed over beating spam filters, locating new servers, buying email lists, and anything else that would widen his web. It worked. By 2003, a year into the onslaught, company revenue had doubled. The ALC had more than 110 students, and it was clearing as much as $13,000 a month. With minuscule rent and overhead, Kushnir bagged the lion’s share. It was hardly a fortune by US standards, but in Moscow, where the average salary is about $2,600 a year, it vaulted him into the minor aristocracy.

Igor Vishnevsky removes a metallic Bluetooth nugget from his ear before sliding onto a leather couch in Le Gâteau, a poor imitation of a French café. He casts an eye through the window and onto the movements of Tverskaya, Moscow’s glossy main avenue, a blur of billboards and hot lights. Almost a year after Kushnir’s death,
Vishnevsky says, blowing on his espresso, “then he means he hates advertising, which he sees everywhere.”

The ALC’s spam operation was crude, but effective: Vishnevsky would send spider software to crawl the Net, collecting email addresses and adding them to the rolls several hundred thousand at a time. He also worked with suppliers – paying a few hundred dollars for a million addresses. To fool spam filters, Kushnir would insert random spaces between words in the subject line, or turn the body into a GIF or JPEG. At its peak, the operation was generating an average of 15 interested would-be ALC students every day.

But the system was as buggy as it was crude, sometimes sending emails to the same people more than 50 times a day. Complaints streamed in. People swore, threatened, raged – anything to eradicate the nuisance. “They used the word fuck much more often than other words,” Vishnevsky says.

Kushnir shrugged off the grievances, often finding solace in one of the Scientology books scattered around the office, muttering that opinions mattered little in the face of financial growth. For him, spam was effective: everything
called the Anti-American Language Center – 
sprang up on Russian-language Web sites.
Kushnir had become widely despised, but his 
resolve only stiffened into a schoolboy’s 
smugness. “It was classic Soviet linear thinking,” 
says Mike McAtavey, a former ALC instructor. “I 
get 250 customers and a billion nuisance calls. If I 
triple my input, I’ll get 750 customers.” And, of 
course, 3 billion nuisance calls.

Spam was so cheap that Kushnir began using it 
simply to attract attention to the ALC – even in 
places where he couldn’t hope to generate 
business. He spammed far-off countries like 
Israel, Spain, France, and the US. “There was no 
concern for being liked,” says Rick Farouni, who 
worked at the ALC for two years.

Then Kushnir began attracting the wrong kind of 
attention. In 2003, his spam reached Andrey 
Korotkov, then Russia’s deputy minister of 
communications. Soon Korotkov was getting 10 
ALC emails a day. When he tried to unsubscribe, 
the messages doubled and started arriving 
addressed to him by name. “I took it as a joke,” 
Korotkov says, “to show me that there was 
nothing I could do to stop them.”

In 2004, Korotkov raised the issue at an Internet 
symposium held in Moscow’s Central Telegraph
what could be done to stop Kushnir. The only solution anyone could offer smacked of the ALC’s own tactics – revenge by inundation. The following morning, the ALC was flooded with 1,000 prerecorded calls featuring Korotkov’s booming voice: “I want to warn you that if you continue your illegal activity, then the necessary measures will be taken, not just by me.” It was only a scare tactic, and Kushnir knew it. “We just laughed at him,” Vishnevsky says, noting that the episode prompted Kushnir to boast that no spam operation had ever generated such negative response.

Kushnir acknowledged the counterattack by toying with Korotkov, sending still more emails to the minister’s inbox, but with a new theme. “You very badly need Viagra,” they read. “And we have girls here waiting to serve you. We are going to give you a special test to check your sexual potential. You must buy one ton of Viagra.”

A defeated Korotkov merely deleted the messages. “What else could I do?” he says, likening himself to a caged animal. “You can make faces to a bear in the zoo, and he will never reach you. He will just spoil the air.” Kushnir reveled in the trouble he was causing. “Vardan sent me a link about the conflict between him and the deputy communications minister,” says Mikhail.
The night might begin at Mio, a club not far from the ALC office, where impressing the insecure teens behind Fendi sunglasses was as easy as explaining to them the contents of the California rolls they just ordered. Against this backdrop, a successful Internet-entrepreneur would be king.

At 35, Kushnir’s blond hair had receded in a wide scoop across his scalp, sticking up in wisps that he did little to contain, and his face wore the evidence of many late nights. But as a man of inscrutable international experience who never ran low on ruble notes, Kushnir didn’t have to work hard in places like Mio to attract young women. He would glide around, introducing himself as the director of the American Language Center, until he found a taker. “Most of the girls had heard about his spamming,” Vishnevsky says. “They found him fascinating.” If that wasn’t enough, he’d tell stories about how he owned a big house in America, where he was a man of great consequence.

But Kushnir soon grew bored and began looking beyond the usual club scene. Former employees say he slipped into a dark void of orgies, prostitution, and whatever happened to be past the edge. He relied on a network of whore joints that ring the city. Sometimes he’d head to a gambling boat moored on a canal along Moscow's...
morning wearing a smirk, recounting another tale of strange accomplishment. One afternoon he exclaimed, “Finally, I found it,” and summoned an employee to his desk, where he pointed to an online ad for a mother-daughter sex team.

Employees were put off by Kushnir’s behavior, but they were far angrier about the fact that he withheld their salaries. Many of his workers were expat thrill-seekers, Moscow short-timers who eventually figured out the situation and quit the ALC with a lesson in the ways of Russian labor.

When an employee did confront him, Kushnir grew oddly pacific. “Why are you putting all this pressure on me?” he asked, adopting the even tone of a superior conscience. “Why are you getting so angry? You should read some L. Ron Hubbard.” He then offered a volume on Scientology from his bookshelf.

The nobility of such gestures was lost on most. “His only authority was L. Ron Hubbard,” Vishnevsky says. “He didn’t consider other people as friends. He considered himself above them.”

While those around Kushnir fumed at his sanctimony, he remained oblivious, descending into ever-stranger behavior. “He was spending all he earned,” McAtavey says, explaining how Kushnir, between headlong binges on sex and...
says. “That’s what I remember – the silk ascot and not getting paid.”

“When Kushnir died, there were some people around here who were not disappointed,” adds another former employee. “He had enemies. There’s no question about it.”

The tallest Lenin statue in Moscow stands in October Square. Lenin strides with his chin up, greatcoat trailing behind him, caught up in the rushing wind of what was supposed to have been progress. A short walk from the statue, the American Language Center occupies a third-floor office in a redbrick schoolhouse. It’s a rec room of Americana. A poster of the Brooklyn Bridge hangs beside an American flag and a topographical map of the US. The ALC still operates today, albeit with reduced fanfare. There are far fewer students, no spam campaigns, and the occasional phone call handled by whoever’s around. Kushnir’s mother runs the business now. She’s a lonely figure deep in middle age, sharing photos of her son and memories of his last evening.

The night of the murder, his assailants reportedly swiped a few items from the apartment, including a laptop, which led the Moscow prosecutor’s office to suggest the event may have been a botched robbery. His mother doesn’t believe it.
Part sanctimonious sexual adventurer, part ruthless spammer, Kushnir left a wake of displeasure as he waded through life. In a well-ordered world, he would have been a social outcast. But Moscow has its own kind of order, and it’s easy to imagine how Kushnir’s brash gestures could have pushed the wrong person too far. There may be little shame in this town, but there are certainly consequences. By crossing the line from entrepreneurial hustler to remorseless nuisance, Kushnir made himself vulnerable.

Not long before his death, even Kushnir began to ache over his own excesses. He told one employee that he wanted to restrain his desires, that he needed some self-control to become, in his words, “a strong man.”

In August 2005, Moscow authorities detained four people in connection with the Kushnir murder. No names have been released, no trial date set. Russian police officials and prosecutors have officially embargoed- all information about the case. And so, a year later, everything is playing out behind closed doors. Or not playing out at all. As time goes on, the killing only recedes deeper into memory. After all, dozens of people meet a violent end every week in Moscow. Kushnir was buried a half hour’s drive outside of town, amid tall grass and unregimented tombstones.
too much even for Russia to bear.

Brett Forrest (www.brettforrest.com) is a Moscow-based writer.

Kushnir was bludgeoned to death in this Moscow apartment building.

BRENT HUMPHREYS
St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow's Red Square.  BRENT HUMPHREYS
Kushnir with a companion at the ALC. COURTESY OF OLGA KUSHNIR
Kushnir often started his night at the Mio club, where he'd pick up young women to take back to the flat he shared with his mother.

BRENT HUMPHREYS
Kushnir's mother, Olga.  

BRENT HUMPHREYS
The back entrance to the American Language Center.

HUMPHREYS
Andrey Korotkov, Russia's former deputy minister of communications, tried to stop the ALC's spam campaign.  

BRENT HUMPHREYS