



Dreams of Adoption

By Meredith Gordon Resnick

This winter marked the first anniversary of the adoption of our daughters, 14-year-old Olya, and 11-year-old Anya, from an orphanage in St. Petersburg, Russia. With two beautiful children, my husband and I have lots to be grateful for. But there is a troubling aspect to our adoption story — a secret of sorts — that haunts me as a mother: although we adopted the sisters, we left behind their half-brother. Seventeen year old Dima is still in Russia, attending trade school, learning how to repair ships, waiting to join the army.

We didn't have much of a choice at the time. American law prohibited foreign children over 16 from being adopted. Dima wasn't available for adoption, so we received little information about him from the orphanage. But when we corresponded with Olya and Anya before we adopted them, Dima played a prominent role in each of their letters. And we began to learn how important he was to them.

It would be a lie to say we would have relished adopting another child. Besides, Dima was bordering on legal adulthood. When our adoption agency told us Dima had given his "permission" (read: blessing) for his sisters' adoption to move forward, we were touched by his courage. We were also relieved.

One week after the adoptions were finalized, the Immigration and Nationality Act changed. Suddenly, any child less than 18 years old could be adopted with, or after, a younger sibling, and we faced a difficult decision. I was, at best, ambivalent about adopting Dima — and at worst, angry that the revised law could have such a direct impact on our lives.

But motherhood, I've learned, is a

delicate balance between love of yourself and love of your children. I had no interest in going through the paperwork, the homestudy, the fingerprinting, the INS, the language barrier, the culture shock, the adjustment to a fully developed personality, and the 11 time zones all over again to adopt Dima. I worried about upsetting our new family's equilibrium. But when I heard Olya and Anya speak of their brother, saw the love in their eyes as they thumbed through his photographs, and watched them pen letters to him late into the night, I knew I had to consider their needs as much as my own.

Though we had met Dima in Russia, we wanted to spend time with him before bringing up the adoption issue with the girls. With the help of the agency we used to adopt Olya and Anya, we arranged for Dima to visit us in southern California this past summer. When our girls called the orphanage to tell him, he was excited — and so were we!

I mentally rearranged our home to make room for a bed, a dresser, and a young man's privacy, hypothetically moving desks here and bookcases there, and basically surrendered to having a son. But it didn't last. Two days into his visit, Dima said he wanted to leave. Like a typical teenager, he didn't like the rules we had in our home. He preferred video games to the reading we required our daughters to complete each day to improve their English. The fact that drinking soda for breakfast wasn't smiled

upon (he liked Coke in the morning) didn't sit well with him. And even if the food, the clothes, the houses and the cars were better in America — even though he could see that life was easier here — he wanted to go back to Russia.

To stay.

To join the army.



From left: Olya (14 years old), Anya (11) and Dima (17½).

While thousands of conscripts seek to escape recruitment with beefed-up resumes, medical problems, bribes or foreign study, orphans like Dima line up to enlist. The military connotes power to these boys. They crave the status and respect they've never had, but have no idea that the army may be the last place to find it — amidst the hazings, the beatings and poor training for new recruits. Dima said he knew all about those things, and about the paltry pay that has sent high-ranking Russian officers begging for cash on the streets of Moscow. But it didn't matter to him. He's following a dream. In the orphanage, Dima told us, they have a saying that

goes something like, "Real men join the army, they don't run away." Olya and Anya translated, then nodded their lovely faces in agreement. But what my daughters don't understand, because they're too young, and naive, and because they love their brother so much, is what the military might do to Dima, damaging his psyche. I don't think Dima understands it either. He is too immersed in aspirations, in a struggle to survive, in a life defined by poverty and need, for him to understand.

Knowing these things, I said nothing. I listened. I nodded my head. I made eye contact. But now, my silence bothers me. Was I silent out of respect for a young man's beliefs? Because he wanted to go home? Because he's at that age when he has to make his own decisions?

Or was I silent because I was relieved that I didn't have to raise the issue of adoption since, in so many words, he told us he was not interested?

I have to live with the fact that it's a little bit of both. I also have to live with the fact that my

daughters, who now save allowance money to send to Dima, might not understand how I could have done this to their own flesh and blood.

Dima will finish trade school in one or two years. Then he will enter the army. His shorn head will be nicked from a dull razor, his skinny frame will be heavy with guns. Perhaps he'll be in Chechnya, or some place like it, and his sisters will learn about it in school. They will talk about Russia in social studies, write term papers for humanities.



Jon, Anya, Meredith and Olya on a family outing.

When I watch the girls' dance lessons and swim practice, I'll think how odd it is, the different turns their lives took from their brother's.

But to the girls it won't seem real. That is, until they pick up the newspaper and read the headline about corruption in the Russian military. Or about the young soldier killed in the line of fire, or aboard a submarine. They'll look for Dima's face, the fair skin, the crooked smile smudged in newsprint. They'll see the cigarette dangling from a soldier's lips, the gun hanging from his shoulder. They'll wonder if their brother is really one of them.


We may not talk much about Dima to those who might not understand. But it's no secret, however, that I'll always wonder if what we did—or didn't do—was right.

Meredith Gordon Resnick is a writer from Irvine, Calif., where she lives with her husband Jon and daughters, Olya and Anya, and greyhound, Lacey. She is at work on a book about becoming a first-time mother of two adolescent girls.

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