

## We Didn't Need the Past—Or So I Thought

Once I gave up the fear of losing my daughters, I better understood the family who had let them go.

BY MEREDITH RESNICK

**L**AST YEAR MY HUSBAND AND I were in St. Petersburg, Russia, meeting the family who had given up our daughters for adoption. I didn't want to go. I didn't want my daughters to go either.

Olya and Anya, who had recently turned 18 and 15, hadn't visited since we'd taken them from the *detsky dom*, or children's home, five years before. It was only after we had flown to Russia and signed them out that we learned that although their father had died and their mother was unable to care for them, they did have family—a rather extensive one for two kids who were supposedly orphans. Not one grandma but two; an uncle, and Dima, the half brother who was too old to be adopted.

The social worker told us their Russian relatives had given up the girls because it was best for the family financially. We'd fallen for these two blond sisters during their brief visit to the United States as part of a dance troupe sponsored by the adoption agency, and we were committed to adopting them. Now I was about to find out to what emotional depths such a commitment could take me.

At home in California, the girls settled into school and began to make friends. But then, from some of their relatives overseas came sad phone calls pleading for money and anxious letters begging them to visit. Olya and Anya felt helpless. The money we sent never seemed to be enough; there was always another problem to solve. Neither my husband nor I understood Russian, so the responsibility of communicating fell squarely on the girls—who were 10 and 13.

If the problem of their Russian family weighed heavily on the girls' minds, it felt like a ton of bricks on mine. I worried that the girls loved them more than me. We'd known other adoptive fami-

lies who intercepted letters from Russia, claiming their kids felt caught between two worlds. I'll admit, sometimes I wanted to cut all ties myself. Olya and Anya were my daughters now. As far as I was concerned, we didn't need the past.



**BIG LOVE:** I saw their grandmother fold my daughters into her arms, and it made me weep

The girls felt otherwise. They begged for a trip to Russia. They needed to go back, I understood, to bridge the gap between past and present. My husband and I decided we would go, too, in case something traumatic happened. We'd be there to wipe away their tears or drag them back onto the plane in case they didn't want to leave.

The night we arrived in St. Petersburg, Olya telephoned her family about having all of us get together. One after the other hesitat-

ed. "I don't know," Dima said. "Maybe tomorrow or the next day," one grandmother said. The other grandma was unreachable. They had all known we were coming. The girls were near tears.

I'd been so afraid of becoming an outsider that it hadn't occurred to me that their relatives might be harboring a similar fear. "Call Grandma back," I told Olya. "Tell her it will just be the two of you."

Olya cocked her head at me. "Are you sure, Mom?"

I took a deep breath. "I am."

The next morning my daughters were silent as our driver careered across the potholed streets toward the outskirts of the city. Their grandmother's apartment building was soot-covered, with broken windows patched in a mosaic of plywood. In a first-story window, a heavyset woman looked up from the kitchen table. When the girls saw her, they rushed across the mounds of snow, up the stairs and into her apartment. As if watching a movie, I saw her fold my daughters into her arms, and it made me weep.

An hour later Olya emerged and waved for me. "Mom," she said. "You come first."

My husband squeezed my hand as I left the van. I entered the small, dark apartment. The grandmother stood like a child, crying, wringing her hands in her apron. I walked across the room and folded her into my arms. She exhaled unevenly, like gasps from someone who was drowning. Finally she whispered, "Spasibo." Thank you. Tears poured down her wrinkled cheeks. My daughters huddled around us, also with tears in their eyes.

"We would never have let them go," she said, and Olya interpreted, "except for the money. It is so expensive here." I hugged her tighter. How hard it must have been to love these two girls for so many years, then give them up in the hope that they would have a better life.

Back in the van I laid my hand on the cold window. The frost felt good on my fingertips. This wasn't my fantasy of what my fledgling family should look like, but what woman can say motherhood is what she expects? I was already planning our daughters' next visit—without me.

The girls leave for Russia in August. Arranging the trip for them has been a gift to myself as much as to my daughters. I never expected motherhood would feel like this, that I'd want to let go, that it would feel so right.

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