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columns

### What Mama Didn't Think Of: The One Who Got Away

Technically Dima was just a half-sibling, but only on paper. I should have understood from the beginning that half-siblings of his genre are real siblings. To deny the fact is akin to espousing the myth that adoptive moms aren't real moms because they didn't give birth.

Dima was the oldest, the big brother, the *braht*. On the day we picked up Olya and Anya—his sisters—at the *detsky dom*, he was, according to American law, too old to be adopted. Back in 1999, an "orphan" had to be younger than 15 years, 364 days for that. At 16 years, 166 days, Dima was months beyond the cutoff.

I'd promised myself that if we went all the way to Russia to find children whose parental rights were terminated, the last thing we'd do was sever existing bonds between siblings. I'd met families who had, and saw it was nothing but heartache. There was something completely, permanently, upside-down about it, no matter how hard the parents tried to right it with phone calls, explanations, gifts and apologies. The longing to see and touch the child left behind, not to mention the guilt and confusion their adopted children suffered at being "chosen" while their sibling hadn't transcended logic, law, even love.

Before we adopted I'd looked down on those parents. How could they put their kids in such a predicament?! I judged them, believing that falling in love with a child who had an older, unadoptable brother or sister should be avoided for these exact reasons.

Until I couldn't avoid it, couldn't help that I and my husband knew Olya and Anya were meant to be our family, too. We knew from the moment we saw them, when they came to the US as part of a dance tour to promote adoption, and never stopped believing it even after we were told about Dima.

Four months later, on the snowy Monday when we got them at the orphanage, we met the skinny boy with a shaved head and sprig of grassy bangs that fringed his narrow face. He watched from afar as we greet his sisters. One of the orphanage workers told me that *staying home from school made Dima, very very happy*. She winked at him, then at me. But I thought Dima didn't look happy at all.

One week after we returned from Russia then President Clinton signed H.R 2886 into law so the Immigration and Nationality Act was officially amended so any child less than 18 could be adopted with, or after, a younger sibling.

We not only had the younger sibling, we had two of them.

#### Meredith Resnick

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My ambivalence shocked me most. For so many reasons, motherhood was harder than anything I'd ever imagined it might be: the instant intimacy of nonverbal communication, the way my life was no longer my own, the stunning realization that even though the girls were older, because of the language barrier they were totally dependent for things that back in Russia they had been doing for themselves.

Still, this was Dima and we decided to have him visit; our adoption attorney would help arrange it, and with the visas he offered this caveat: that we should keep in mind that Dima may not want parents, that he may see himself as too old to need them.

Again, I couldn't believe it. My mind just didn't process that way.

Early into his 18-day visit, Olya called me to her bedroom where Dima slid from the blue bedspread to the beige carpet, making room for me to sit. He stuffed a yellow pillow beneath his neck and lay his long body across the floor much like a kid would plop down to watch an after-school movie.

"Dima knows it would be good to live here," Olya translated, with a tiny shrug.

"He's been so quiet," I said. In fact, he'd barely made eye contact with me or Jon.

"But he's afraid you wouldn't let him live his life," she went on. He didn't like the rules or that we required the girls to read to improve their English, to tell us where they were going to be for the afternoon.

Was this typical 17-year-old-stuff, an age-related gesture of independence? Or was this something deeper, what the attorney was talking about?

"He wants to go home," Olya said. "To live."

Even though the food was better, the clothes were better, the houses were better, and the cars were better here, Dima wanted to return to Russia where he could do what he wanted, which included no less than joining the army, a prerequisite for his job: to become a police officer.

Olya looked so proud, as did Anya as she translated all this. Proud and a little sad. Dima nodded solemnly as if to say: *please believe what they are telling you.*

I knew there was a compulsory military draft of all 18-year old Russian boys. And that the government had begun a recruitment campaign toward underage orphans after ruling that wards of the state who were at least 14 years old could enlist. Recruitment letters arrived at some orphanages, with the siren call for boys to become big and strong, heroes for the country.

I also knew that many Russian mothers of boys Dima's age tried to outwit the draft board with beefed up reports of their son's medical problems. *The New York Times* reported that some mothers shipped their boys off to their *dachas*, or summer homes, or universities abroad. Others simply, willingly, desperately, paid bribes. These Russian mamas were good mothers, I thought. Stoic, loving, protective.

Which made me—what?

I should have grit my teeth and convinced him he was wrong. So far as I knew Dima had no medical problems, no *dacha*, no shot at a university degree, no cash for even a teensy bribe. I should have been furiously waving my hands, as if to back him and his sisters up to the very beginning and telling them, *no, no, no*.

But somehow, that would have felt wrong, too.

Maybe Dima didn't want parents, or at least this parent. Or maybe it had nothing to do with me. And even if it did there were plenty of young men who enlisted in the army against their parents' desires, and did plenty of other things against the will of the family they loved. Or maybe not so much against the family's creed, but for the sake of carving out their own place. The only way out of military service for Dima would be if we forced him to be adopted, and I knew it. Suddenly, as a mother, I saw my place. Or, more accurately, I saw there was no place, or rather, not the place, or the influence I dreamed I was supposed to have.

I nodded. I listened. I asked more than once, *are you certain?* I prayed any letter the government might write to Dima got lost in the mail, because while thousands of their conscripts did anything possible to escape military service, too many Russian orphans were intrigued by the possibility of military service. It connoted power, something these kids didn't have. A dream most of us go searching for in the wrong places until we realize it was inside all along.

Dima didn't move here. We didn't adopt him. So far he has stayed out of the army but I still wonder if he will become a soldier. If he will have his body cloaked in camouflage and military-issued boots, his shorn head nicked from a dull razor, his skinny frame heavy with guns. He might, someday, land in Chechnya or Georgia, or some place like it, and his sisters will learn about such conflict in school. Talk about it in history class. Write papers for humanities. Between their dance classes and jobs and dates think about how odd it is, what different turns their lives took, but to them the dream their brother had won't seem real until they pick up the newspaper and read the headline about corruption among the ranks. They'll look for his young face, the fair skin, the dark eyes and crooked smile smudged in newsprint. They'll see the cigarette dangling from a soldier's lips, the gun dangling from his hand. And then it might be real.

Just like it is for me now. I never wanted any of this for Dima at the same time wanting for him exactly what he desired. Before I could not comprehend that sometimes good mothers do things—or don't do things—that other good mothers use to judge or condemn them for. And that it hurts, no matter which side you think you're on.

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