



LIFE AFTER '91

written by **ILLYA LAPKO**

SASHA

My uncle always told me that change was a part of life and we all had to accept changes. I never really understood what he meant by this. He has been living in America for 7 years now and he told me many stories about what life was like there. I was always curious and it has been my secret dream to live in America some day. My name is Sasha and I just turned twelve a week ago. I live in the suburbs of Moscow, Russia and I've lived in one apartment all my life. My uncle says that Americans move all the time, sometimes even just across the street. I thought it strange to move like that. My uncle comes to visit us every year and he brings with him stories from America and many gifts. I am more interested in the stories than the gifts most of the time. Actually the stories *about* the gifts are what really interest me. Uncle Vanya tells me of enormous stores that are called 'malls' where you can buy anything you want. He says this is where he buys my family presents. The only person that knows my secret dream about going to America is Uncle Vanya and he told me that someday he will take me there. I wish that day isn't a long way away.

We've been learning a lot about Russian history in class the last few weeks. Stories about how Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo because of the cold and how almost 200 years later, the German Nazis were defeated trying to come into Russia for the same reason. In the winter, it is very cold in Moscow. It's November of 1991 right now and everybody is already wearing heavy jackets, scarves and long underwear. I am not afraid of the cold, but it does annoy me sometimes. Especially when it is raining and you have to walk through the dirty streets of Moscow. Snow mixes with mud and it becomes a very bad surface. Water freezes and you slip and slide all over the place. I was walking to school this morning and it read 7:32 on my new digital watch. My uncle bought the watch for me in New York for my birthday. It was my best present and I don't want to lose it, especially not in this mud-snow mixture. It is waterproof so I don't have to take it off when it is raining or snowing. It's lightly snowing right now. In the winter, I always wear boots to school so my feet don't get wet, or cold. The walk from my home to school is about 30 minutes by foot. In the summer I use my bike to get to school. Uncle Vanya tells me how there are big yellow buses in America that take students to school every morning and bring them back home too. It would be nice to ride on a big yellow bus today.

My school is 3 stories high. It is a large school with grade 1 to 11 students. Right now I am in grade eight, where there are a lot of big guys who like to pick on small kids, small kids that are otherwise known as me. I am short and skinny, the smallest kid in my class and I am shy. I don't have anyone to stand up for me in school when the big guys are picking on me because I don't have any friends. No friends at school and no friends in my neighborhood. My school isn't exactly the friendliest place on earth. The teachers like me though and they are friendly with me. All the teachers in my school think I am smart and that I am a very hardworking student. That's probably one of the reasons why I don't have any friends. Nobody wants to be friends with a student who is adored by teachers. These types of students are considered teacher lovers and that they would tell on a friend if he or she did something bad. So I had no friends in school. But I had a lot of enemies. Well, they made me the enemy. Three big guys really hated me. There was Dmitri and his gang, Rozha and Nikita. Everyday, it is my goal to escape from them or just to never face them.

The day at school went well – almost. I was picked to go up to the board in math class to do an equation and I got it right. The teacher praised me but the other students looked dazed and like they didn't understand a thing I just did. Then there were the kids who didn't understand and didn't care either, all they cared was about pulling pranks on me. And today was one day they got lucky with one of their pranks. After I came back from the board and sat down, I had realized I sat down on something, something very sticky. When the bell rang, I was still stuck to my chair. I tried struggling to get out but had no luck. By now everyone in the class was looking at me. The teacher came over and told me that my pants were glued to the chair and that I would have to take off my pants. Everybody heard the teacher say this and giggled. The big guys who glued me to the chair sneered and walked out of class. It was not a nice feeling and I was obviously embarrassed. I had my gym clothes with me so I was able to change into those and go home. I really have to do something about those big guys who keep pulling pranks on me.

Going to school was one thing, but coming back home was totally different. I come to school early and there are no big guys around to mock me because they all come to school really late. Most of the time, I was able to run halfway home. I am a good runner and that is probably what always saves me from the bullies. But there is only one of me and three bullies. I didn't see the three big guys anywhere so I decided to just walk home. I had a lot of books with me anyway, and I didn't want to tire out. About halfway home, I encountered them. Dmitri, Rozha and Nikita were standing there holding fist sized stones in both hands. I didn't have to think hard to know what was about to happen. It was time to run. The first stone was thrown by Rozha. My back nearly missed it when I turned to the left. Then Nikita threw a stone. It hit the back of my foot but it didn't hurt at all. Rozha and Nikita threw more stones but they all missed. Finally, when I was pretty far away, Dmitri tried to throw a stone. He was the strongest and most powerful of the three bullies. The stone flew through the air and hit my shoulder. It hurt but I had to keep running. Once I was safe at home, I noticed just how much damage Dmitri had done to my shoulder. There was a large bruise and a cut on my shoulder and it hurt a lot to move my arm. My mom put some alcohol on the injury. That really stung and I wanted to scream, but I knew I would sound like a little kid. After dinner, I went to my room, locked the door and spent what seemed like an hour crying into my pillow.

“In 1945, World War II ended with the allies winning and Germany, Italy and Japan succumbed to defeat.” My History teacher stood erect like a skyscraper as he told us this. He was a tall and skinny man, Mr. Alexandrevich. Of all the teachers in the school, he was my favorite. Not only because of what he taught, but the way he taught it. He taught history with passion and almost like it was a long story. He didn’t give us much homework, but when he did, it was always very interesting research or reading from a book. His class lasted an hour and I had him on Mondays and Fridays. Today was Friday, the last day of school before the weekend. Mr. Alexandrevich told us that he had some news of modern Russia. He said that countries in the Soviet Union that are led by Russia are signing papers saying they will no longer be part of the Soviet Union. He also told us of how there are many rumors that the whole Soviet Union will break up soon. The class listened carefully to this and wondered what this meant. They were all wondering this: countries don’t want to be part of Russia and run by Russia anymore, why? But I didn’t care. I never liked the Russian government anyway. After all the stories Uncle Vanya told me about America and how good the government treated the people there, the Russian government seemed really stupid in my opinion. Well, if countries break off from the Soviet Union, so be it.

My dad works all the time. He works as an attorney on weekdays and on the weekends he spends a lot of time in the library researching things for his cases. I don’t see him much because he works most of the time. But today, when I came home, my dad was there. He usually comes home at 8 or 9 in the evening, but right now it was only 3:45. He was in the kitchen, with beer bottles around him. My mom was also there, obviously upset. I had no idea why everybody was upset. Had somebody in the family died? What happened? My mom noticed me and took me to her bedroom. What she told me next was the biggest surprise I have ever had in my life. Dad was fired from his job as a lawyer. I couldn’t believe it. He works so hard, how could he be fired? Millions of questions raced through my mind, but I couldn’t even open my mouth to ask them.

Since my dad lost his job and my mom did not work, my dad had to find other jobs. A while after my dad was fired, our bank account was frozen and all of our money was lost, most probably gone to the government so that they could enjoy life. My dad could no longer be a lawyer even though he tried really hard to find a job as one. Right now my dad works for a packing factory. It’s definitely his worst job ever but he doesn’t complain because we need the money. Even though our apartment was given to us by the government for free, we still had to pay for things like electricity, gas and water. We tried to use as little electricity as possible, relying on candlelight at night. We no longer watched TV in the evening or call our friends on the phone. We read books or just talked now. School was out for the winter holidays so I stayed at home. I wanted to help my father get money, but I was too young to do that and nobody would pay me money. We not only had to limit our power usage to have money, but we also had to sell some of our expensive things. My mom sold some crystal vases we had. The TV was useless to us now, so we sold that too. We kept the car my father had, just in case we had to go somewhere and we kept the phone, so we could call Uncle Vanya or my grandparents if necessary.

On December 1st, 1991, Ukraine officially broke off from the Soviet Union. Other republics soon followed suit. I was happy that the countries did this because of how terrible the Russian government was. There was a new figure in Russian politics whose name was Yeltsin. Gorbachev was gone and I was happy about that. I just hoped that Mr. Yeltsin was a good man and that he would make Russia a better country. I hope.

VANYA

“...Ukraine has officially ... Soviet Union and is now an independent republic. Officials in the country are overjoyed with ... declaration and say Ukraine is better off without Russia...” My car radio really needed to be changed. That’s why I was going to a new place that sells car radios. The place was called Thompson’s Automobile Audio Center. It was down in New Jersey. I live in New York City, but I usually go to New Jersey for fixing my car. For one, it’s much cheaper and there’s a lot more space there too.

It was almost time for me to visit my sister and her family in Moscow. I hadn’t heard from her in a while. I go there every Christmas and spend about a month with them. Right now, I am buying presents for them. Sasha, my sister’s son, told me of how much he wants to leave Russia and live here in the US with me. I live by myself, no wife or children of my own. I guess Sasha is like my son. Last year, I bought him a digital watch and he really seems to like it. He was wearing it everyday I was there. I think he even went to sleep wearing them a few times. This year, I wanted to get him something special. I am going to get him something to do with America and New York City. First, I went around Manhattan and took pictures of buildings like the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center. The Chrysler building was his favorite. He loved the top of the building because he thought it looked like a medieval soldier’s helmet. It was shiny and layered. I got him a model of a New York City taxi. But the thing Sasha liked most about America was the Statue of Liberty. He is amazed by the size of the statue and thinks that the woman is very beautiful. I had to get him something to do with that statue. I went to Liberty Island to see what they had in the gift shops. I found a bronze replica of the real statue that was 18 inches tall. These three gifts together would let Sasha feel as if he lived in New York City.

“Misha lost his job? How? I thought everyone at the office liked him. No, no, Anya, of course I will come and help you. Don’t say that. You are my family, the only one I have. I’ll come as soon as possible.” I could not believe what I had heard. My sister just called and Misha, my sister’s husband was fired from his job as an attorney, the family lost all their money that they saved in the bank and now they had barely enough money for food. I changed my flight to tomorrow and packed all my stuff. My family was in need and I can help them.

I own a restaurant in New York City and that is where all my money comes from. It is a Russian buffet type of restaurant and it is doing pretty well. I live in a small apartment because I live by myself and don’t entertain. I have many friends here in New York, some of them also from Russia, trying to live a better life here in America. My friend, Alex, moved with his family to New York when he was only 6. He has lived here for almost 40 years now and knows both English and Russian very well. My English is also very good but I have an accent. I’ve lived here in New York for 10 years but only started my restaurant business 2 years ago. When I first came to the US, I worked in a restaurant as a chef. That’s my profession, I’m a chef. My specialty is European food. Whenever I come to Moscow and cook for my family there, they love my food. Sometimes, Sasha even helps me cook. I miss Sasha and I am worried about how he is living there, with no money. I know he has no friends in school or in his neighborhood and that many kids tease him and bully him. The plane was about to takeoff. I am on my way to Russia.

SASHA

My uncle was finally coming to Moscow. Mom and Dad felt bad about having to ask Uncle Vanya for help, but knew they had to. Uncle Vanya said he would help his family no matter what. We are going to go to the airport to meet him at 5 P.M. This is one of the reasons we kept our car. Other forms of transport from the airport were very scarce and taxis cost a lot of money. Our car was new, my dad had only bought it a few months ago when his job was paying him well and everybody was happy. We first went to a gas station to fill up because the airport is pretty far away from our home. When we finally arrived at the airport, we quickly parked the car outside and went into the building. It was very dark in the airport. Inside it was brown and black and it looked very ugly. Uncle Vanya had shown me pictures of the airport in New York. It was really beautiful. There were huge windows everywhere and it was white unlike this one. I was always interested in the planes at the airport. I have never been on a plane before. I looked everywhere for Uncle Vanya but didn't see him.

Finally, I saw him. He was wearing a heavy jacket but it looked very nice. Uncle Vanya was a strong, tall man. He didn't look that much like my mom. He was a hardworking person, always happy to help someone who wasn't able to do something. And now he was helping us. When he finally came over to us, my mom hugged him and she cried. My dad looked sad as always and gave a strong hug to my uncle. Then it was my turn. My uncle picked me up and hugged me. "I will take you and your family to America. I promise." He whispered in my ear so no one else could hear him.

It was my first time on a plane. My parents had never been on a plane either. I was afraid at first of what might happen. I had seen plane crashes on TV and they scared me. And then we were up in the air. But it isn't the plane ride that excited me the most; it was that my family and I were going to live in America with Uncle Vanya. I guess change is a good thing after all.

THE END