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The Blue Door

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The Blue Door

Jamie Hoey

Her name was Ira. That's all she knew. That's all anyone knew. Russian. Pale skin. Orphaned, abandoned, no one knew, no one asked. Four years old. Yellow wispy hair fluffing around her face pocked with open red sores. She was just another discarded kid. Muddy gray eyes surrounded by a halo of green. She was defiant, tiny, and strong. Alone. Her elbows poked like pencils under the purple sweater, too big. She didn't play with the other kids, only took what she wanted or what was left and played by herself in a corner.

I hadn't planned on coming here. Not to the orphanage. None of us had really. We were just a group of ten Minnesotans who'd hopped a plane to Russia in the middle of November. We were going to help out a church our pastor, Wade, had started there seven years before. The Vladimir orphanage wasn't part of the initial plan. And yet, here we were. In the dirty white concrete building surrounded by a rusty iron fence.

We'd come bearing gifts. Boxes of donated blankets, canned food, and clothes. We'd come through the iron gate, through the yard of muddy snow, trampled with little footprints, and then through the dirty blue door.

"What's her story?" I asked Ksusha, a caretaker at the orphanage. I pointed to Ira. Ksusha shrugged.

"There is not way to know. The children," she paused, her blue eyes darting to the wall over my head as if the wall itself contained the answer she needed. "The children...ah...drop h-here?" Ksusha studied my face for approval, a wince on her own.

"They just get dropped off?"

Ksusha smiled broadly then, "Da, da!" she said nodding.

"So the police bring them, when the parents...die?" I whispered the last word.

Ksusha sent me the look. That, *you stupid American* look.

"Most of the children here still have parents," she said. And walked away.

I stood there stunned and tried to make sense of what I'd just heard. They still had *parents*? What kind of place was this?

Despite the November cold, the Vladimir orphanage was warm. I wondered if they turned the heat up just for us. Most of the kids were dressed in layered sweaters. Ira's had a tattered Christmas ornament adorning the front. We met the kids in the big main room. White paint was peeling off the concrete walls and the floor that looked like wood but was linoleum, bubbled under my feet. There were few toys. Mostly tables and chipped painted chairs all shoved against the walls. The only décor, were crayon pictures colored by the children and taped up to cover the big spots where the paint was missing.

I looked at Ira again; she was the only one who could walk that didn't run to us as soon as we entered the room. She hung back, wary. Odd gray-green eyes circling the room like hungry wolves. Even now the rest of the kids were standing in a circle, teaching the rest of our American group a Russian song. They were jumping, blushing, clapping.

Not Ira.

She was kneeling on the floor, a chair safely shielding her from the rest of the children. Playing with her hands. Walking her fingers like little people across the chair's seat. One person fell off, the finger-legs kicking as they fell in slow motion to the floor.

"Ahhhhhh!" Ira yelled. She slapped her hand on the linoleum, spreading her fingers wide. The finger-man was obviously dead.

I walked over to her. She glared at me and scooted away. I almost smiled, and my mouth froze halfway. Here in Russia, smiling at a stranger meant you were either mocking them, or a whore. I learned that earlier. Pretending to ignore her, I sat down and we watched the other kids clapping and singing. I recognized the tune. Haunting. Gypsy-sounding.

"King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Glory," *clap*. "Halle-lujah." Only in Russian.

I felt a lump in my pocket. An idea. I pulled out the candy. Candy is the universal language of children.

"Ahh, *konfeti!*" I announced, holding a roll of tart, chalky, smarties in my palm where Ira could see them. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ira's head snap to her left, like an owl who just heard a mouse under the snow. Her black shoed heels inched toward me and her butt scooted across the floor behind, eyes locked on the candy. I pretended not to notice, until her little face popped in front of mine. Eyes wide. A little white stick hand darted from the sleeve of her purple sweater toward the candy, then retreated. Forward. Back. Forward. Back. She froze. Blinked.

"Pozhulsta?" A little voice squeaked through her lips. Please.

I nodded, “Da.” Nudged the candy toward her. It disappeared from my hand into hers. I watched her. She devoured the candy instantly. She had to; tossing hurried glances over her shoulders at the other children. Worried they might come over.

How did you get here Ira? I questioned her silently. Did your dad lose his job? Come home one day, plodding over the cobblestone streets, head down. Did your mother scream at him? Berate him? Dissolve into a pile of tears on the kitchen floor where you played? Was there no work for him? Did they have to sell off the furniture, the bedding, the dishes just to eat? And finally, did they sell your home? The little house all painted bright to look like a gingerbread house? Ashamed, sad, hungry, did they bring you here? Walk up to the dirty blue door and drop you off? Are you waiting for them to come back for you?

She looked at me. Grinned. Gray teeth speckled with pink and orange candy bits. I smiled back. Friends. Ira stuck out her hand.

“Pozhulsta?”

I found a piece of taffy in my coat pocket. Handed it to her. She ate it. Used the palm of her hand to wipe the sticky pink off her face. Held my hand right after. Like a spit handshake. We were friends.

We joined the other kids for duck, duck, goose, or the Russian equivalent. My fluency in the language did not include naming animals. Ira was on my team. Duck, Duck, goose, isn't a team sport, but Ira ducked when I ducked, goosed when I goosed and ran when I ran. Once she goosed when I ducked and giggled when I got caught. But she joined me in the middle anyway.

She sat on my lap when Pastor Wade stood up and told some stories. I don't know what he said, but the kids were still and silent. A miracle. Alyona and Nastya clustered on my left and Vlad and Nikita sat on my right. Ira tried to kick and scratch them away from me but I told her 'no' and held her arms so she couldn't. She relaxed. Her little blonde head bobbed back against my shoulder and I looked at the four Russian women standing in the doorway.

The caretakers. Thin, wiry. The oldest all gray, the youngest, Ksusha, looked nineteen. They were smiling, happy for the break. But they didn't leave the room. One had a sleeping child tucked against her chest; another was tickling a black-haired toddler. The children here are probably neglected, but not out of cruelty. It's a ratio of fifteen to one. There's just no time to love all of them. Orphaned kids don't cry. As babies they learn not to. There's no point in crying when no one can come to help you.

They don't keep babies here. The babies are kept somewhere else in the city. Babies get adopted fast. These kids don't. If they're still here by sixteen, they get kicked out onto the streets. Little education. No skills. Crime. Prostitution. More abandoned babies in the orphanages.

Ira took my hands and pulled my arms tight around her. Maybe her mother was an orphan. Kicked out. Sold her body for food. Got pregnant. Maybe she tried to raise Ira. Keep her out of the orphanage. Give her a better life. Couldn't. Maybe they walked to the park one day, pigeons hopping on the sidewalk. Maybe she set Ira on a park bench, told her to wait. She'd be right back, but she wasn't. Maybe the police found her after dark, curled up on the bench. Took her to the orphanage where her name was Ira and that's all they knew.

It was time to go. We'd been here all day. I wanted to stay. To call home and tell mom I wasn't coming back. Pastor Wade said I could. Someday when I wasn't sixteen, or his responsibility. Ira clung to my hand, her eyes growing round and worried when everyone started saying goodbye. I pulled my hand from hers and gave her a hug.

"Do svidaniya," I said. Goodbye.

Ira erupted into a tangent of frantic Russian. She threw herself at me, wrapping her tiny body around my legs. Ksusha pulled Ira away, the little girl kicking and writhing in her arms.

"Pozhulsta! Pozhulsta! Pozhulsta!" Ira begged. I took two halting steps.

"Please! Please! Please!"

And the dirty blue door shut.