

## **Natalya Chernova (Moscow)**

### **On the Visit to the Capital**

The “Novaya Gazeta” newspaper, May 19, 2003

**In March, we published a report by Natalya Sheveleva “Ask for Alikhan” about Alikhan Akhilgov, who brings children from refugee camps in Ingushetia to Moscow. He finds Moscow families willing to host a child for a month or two, or three, to give them warmth, to feed them up, to see to their health problems. The Chernov family has been one of them. For two month, Natalya Chernova kept a diary of their life with the 11 years old Aslan, a boy from Groznyy.**

#### DAY 1

He kept silent all the way from the railroad station. If I asked him a question, he would just nod. I asked him, “Do you understand Russian well”. Again, he nodded silently.

When we got home, he sat himself on a chair in the kitchen. He would not look up; he did not want to wash or to eat.

The only solution was to be marshal law: orders are carried out, not discussed. He picked up the change in the tone immediately. Still, stopping in the bathroom doors he muttered, “I’m not going to take off my hat”. “All right, you can bath with your hat on”. Soon I heard the whirl of the wind-up toy boat. This is much better – there is a child in him.

The 11 years Aslan looks not older than 8. He is short, weighs probably 30 kilos and something, but his lean back is straight. First thing is to feed him up a bit, and then we’ll see.

In the whole day he uttered just a few sentences:

“I’ll sleep here tonight, but tomorrow send me back. Cannot tomorrow? Then, in a week. And don’t send me to school.”

I ask him why. “Are there any Chechens?” he asks after a long silence. I tell him I don’t know.

“Don’t send me to school. Russians don’t like us.”

On the evening news they show a *spetsnaz* detachment performing demonstration exercises before being sent to Chechnya. My four years old Dima asks, “Are they ours?” Aslan is silent. I give a noncommittal answer saying that “these are federal troops”. Dima is not satisfied: “Are they good guys or bad guys?” I tell them that anybody shooting at people is bad.

## DAY 2

In the morning, leaving home, I show Aslan how to open the door and how to use the lift.

“Why are you telling me that? I’ll not go out by myself.”

“Are you afraid?”

“I’m not afraid. Just will not go out.”

We go to the market together. The snow powder on the streets excites him. We stop by a rowan tree and he asks why the berries have not been picked up and eaten. I want to get him some, but cannot reach the berries.

All of a sudden he asks why Russian women smoke. “Well, women also may have bad habits, some even drink.” He agrees: they do drink and he knows it for a fact. “We used to have a Russian woman living in our building, so when her mother died she bought a case of vodka and invited guests to celebrate”. Biting back laughter, I explain that this is a Christian custom called wake: they don’t celebrate death, they grieve together.

Planning an outing to the Red Square next weekend.

“Is it where Mausoleum is? Have you seen Lenin?”

”I have. Not much to look at.”

”Better to burry him”.

Have to go to the sport class this evening. All of a sudden he became tense and said that he is “not going anywhere in the night“. I explain to him over and over again, twenty times in a row, that it is not night yet. He is accustomed to the life that stops at 6 P.M., when curfew begins. Before starting to eat he would cut himself three huge slices of bread and spread them thickly with ketchup.

«Have I seen you before?»

«No, Aslan, you haven’t”.

“Have you seen me?”

“No, I haven’t seen you either”.

## DAY 3

For forty minutes he sits by the washing machine and watches it spin. They used to have a washing machine in Groznyy. When the war started again and they had nothing to eat, they took it apart and sold for scrap. Copper from the motor went for 20 rubles a kilo. “When I grow up, I will buy my mom everything she wants”, says Aslan.

He spends a half of an hour playing with the automatic door of a shop, training it to open and close. He asks how the traffic light works and which light means what. He suggests we cross on red. Once, in Groznyy, he was running across the street, and to avoid being hit by a bus he threw himself in a rut in the dirt road. Without a touch, the bus passed over him. After the incident, every evening at the same time he would come and lay himself in the rut awaiting the bus. He has no self-preservation instinct. For him danger is a part of life. In the night I went to check up on him. He woke and sprung up: “Am I a Chechen? A Russian?” – “A Chechen. Go to sleep”.

## DAY 4

A hitch: can't find sausage with no pork in it. A more serious problem: he confessed that sometimes spits blood. We went to an outpatient clinic, and the TB skin test came out positive. On Tuesday, we will be going to the TB clinic. Today, for the first time, he ventured outside by himself. In the yard, together with the neighborhood kids, he was sledding down the ice run. Enthusiastically tried every swing on the playground.

We are watching TV together. Pointing at Vladimir Putin, he asks: “Is he the president in the whole world”. God have mercy on us, no... I explain that each state has its own president. He wants to make sure: “Is he the president in Nalchick<sup>1</sup> too?”. He rejects nevertheless Putin's presidency in Chechnya, “because our president was killed”<sup>2</sup>.

When he thinks nobody can see him, he runs to the phone and tries to make calls. It turns out he has never used a phone, and does not know how to use it. Now, we are learning to dial and to speak over it.

The time is a half an hour to midnight. My husband and Aslan are sitting in the kitchen. At Aslan's request, he is explaining to him why Russia is fighting Chechnya.

## DAY 7

Aslan came to the conclusion that Russia and Chechnya should unite for war with America. The

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<sup>1</sup> Nalchick, the capital of the Republic of Karbardino Balkaria, a Chechnya neighbor.

<sup>2</sup> Dzhokhar Dudaev, the first president of Chechnya, killed on April 21, 1996 by two laser-guided missiles while he was speaking on a satellite phone. It is believed that his location was detected by a Russian reconnaissance aircraft that intercepted his phone call. The next elected president of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov, was killed on March 8, 2005 during the attack on his clandestine headquarters by Russian special forces.

straightforward idea that America is the enemy number one he had picked up from the “Vesty” news program.

My fight against TV takes on the scale of a campaign. Aslan can be torn away from the dumb box only by force. Creators of the programs he watches – “Windows”, “Maiden’s Tears”, crime serials – ought to be lynched. His most innocuous passion is soccer. If none of the above is on to numb his mind, he would console himself with cartoons.

## DAY 8

Today we went to the TB clinic. While we were waiting for the results, he asked me at least twenty times what fluorography is and whether we could take the photograph home.

The red alert is off! There is nothing in the lungs but scars from pneumonia.

Though I have made the point of never asking him about anything, he volunteers sometimes everyday stories from his life back home.

“Father was taking copper to sell in his hooptie. Soldiers stopped him and beat him on the back with rifle butts. They broke his spine.”

“Soldiers came to get through our balcony into the neighbor’s apartment. They thought the neighbors were hiding dollars there. They found nothing and threw a grenade in. All the glass from our windows flew out. “

“I was collecting the empties, saved 200 rubles and bought some gasoline for my father. He let me drive twice around the house.” (His father receives disability pension, because of the damaged spine, and supplements it by selling rides in his old “Zhiguli”.)

In the whole week, Aslan lost his fighting spirit just once. When Dasha, as usual, went into a hopeless fight to shut down the TV set, Aslan suddenly left, locked himself in his room and started to cry. It turned out that Aslan was offended by Dasha raising her voice on him (and I understand her perfectly well), while Aslan (and I understand him perfectly well, too) wouldn't suffer it from anybody but his mother, and perhaps me, in the current situation.

Aslan asked to take him to the circus. He does not know what it is, but believes that “it is pretty”.

“Pretty” is almost the only adjective he uses.

Asks why I wash my hands so often and eat so little bread.

## DAY 9

Today, I have sent him to school for the first time, and anxiously waited for his return. It turned out he had refused categorically to join his class. Dasha took him to her own, the 9<sup>th</sup> “B”, and got permission from the understanding teacher to let him stay there for a while. Still, he had to endure an hour with his own class, the 6<sup>th</sup> “E”, the hour that he spent with his hands over his face.

Two Chechen boys from the 11<sup>th</sup> grade came to him during a break and told him to let them know whom he is having problems with, should there be any.

He tried to convince me that it is not possible to go to the school where there are so few Chechens. My reply that only girls have the right to be afraid of difficulties has knocked him down.

Tomorrow we will make another try.

## DAY 10

This is February 23<sup>3</sup>, and there was fireworks display in the evening, which we watched from our 18<sup>th</sup> floor. Aslan was just dumbstruck. He tried to figure out what kind of shells they were firing. The idea that shells could be used to create beauty is incomprehensible to him.

He came across an advertisement for the musical “Nord-Ost”, and after studying it said, “This Baraev is a fool. Did he want all of us, Chechens, shot?”<sup>4</sup>

## DAY 11

Several school days went by without any accidents. Aslan has established contact with his coeds, which means that they let him crib from them. His academic skills are full of gaps: almost zero English, neglected mathematics. For two hours Dasha was hammering fractions into him, while Aslan was diligently trying to follow.

Aslan brought home a foolish leaflet of some promotional competition. He started explaining that “if I write pretty about how I deal with my problems, I’ll get a prize”. I asked him what

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<sup>3</sup> The date celebrated in Russia as the Red Army Day, a national holiday inherited from the Soviet times.

<sup>4</sup> Movsar Baraev, the leader of a group of Chechens, who, in October of 2002, took hostages everybody inside a Moscow theater during an evening performance of the musical “Nord – Ost”. According to the official, and disputed, figures, all the terrorists and 129 hostages died as the result of the rescue operation. Most of the hostages died from poisoning by the sleeping gas used in the operation.

problems did he have. He fell silent, deep in thought. Then asked me, if I could help him to invent some problems for him.

We went to the Bitsev Park, sledded down ice runs. Aslan got excited as a puppy, but tried hard to conceal his emotions. He liked very much the “icesled” – a kind of a plastic bowl, with handles, to sit in, while hurtling downhill.

Aslan again had a conflict with Dasha, who, this time, forbade him to eat an icicle. The bottom line – Dasha slammed the door and said she is treated as a nobody around here. Peace was restored when Dasha presented Aslan with a personal bottle of bath foam.

Aslan has a more harmonic relationship with Dima. Sometimes he would start to order the youngest about. Dima reverses the score by responding with a deafening cry.

## DAY 12

We were drinking tea in the kitchen. Aslan again began his lamentations about the school: too few Chechens. He is extremely good, even enthusiastic, in inventing excuses for not going to school and finding ways to skip it. He confessed he did not like going to school back home either.

“What about back home, did you have any Russian friends there?”

“No... Yes, there were some. Russian soldiers – they used to come to our backyard to barbeque shashliks. Once they gave me one. They told me to let them know if anybody badgers me. They come sometimes there, and I gather wood for them with other guys from the neighborhood. They would give us anchovy tins for that. This big! I even had my picture with them taken. I hid the picture though, because my Mom would get angry with me. “

Aslan is fond of telling absurd and brutish stories, like the one about a woman who lost her eye in an explosion, and then played soccer with her own eyeball. Or he would lie on the floor by the tape recorder listening for hours to the fair tales that Dima outgrew long ago.

## DAY 14

In the subway we came upon a gruesome sight: the body of an old man on the floor surrounded by police and medics. Aslan was twisting his neck to get a better look, while I was pulling him

away by his arm: he is too young to see such things. As if he has not seen horrors worse than my worst nightmares.

Suddenly he burst. For forty minutes, pausing to catch his breath, he told me how “the soldiers came and killed my friend, he was fourteen. My cousin, he was coming home from the university, was stopped in the street. They struck him with a rifle butt and took his money. A guy from the house next door, he went out in the night and got his legs sprayed by automatic fire. Then those in masks came to where he lived and killed him.” His stories are not without embellishments: his friend was fighting back to the last bullet.

Back home, in the evening, he reported, “We saw a man who was killed in the subway”. For Aslan, “dead” means “killed”.

## DAY 15

Aslan got blues. He was on the phone with Groznyy and became anxious to get home. “You are not happy here?” – “I am. I just want to be with Mom.”

Aslan came home from school and proudly told the story of how he got there a free lunch. It turned out that there is free lunch provided for younger schoolchildren from low income families. He said that he is from a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and he could even pass for a first grader considering he weights just 32 kilos. That, and his earnest looks, earned him two franks and some mashed potatoes.

While I was away, he again got in a fight with Dasha. He is inherently unable to obey women, while Dasha categorically refuses to dance around an 11 years old kid to make him wash his hands and to drink only boiled water. “Of course, all Chechens are bad, all Russians are good”, said Aslan indignantly, as his concluding statement. “Yes. All the Chechens who don’t wash their hands are bad”, retorted Dasha.

## DAY 16

I never ask him about the war: it feels unnatural to talk about it with a child. But today he started it on his own.

«We have a good apartment. It has three rooms. When we had the second war, it was not even touched. No, we did not stay in Groznyy for the war. We went to Grandma’s place in the

country. Mom's sister and brother stayed in our apartment, because it was safer in our district. But then there was shooting there too, and they went back to their place, just for a while: to wait out the shooting and to pick up their papers. And while they were there a shell flew in through their window. My uncle got buried under the collapsed wall and my aunts cut by fragments. They were all covered with blood. Then they put some of their things in a wheelbarrow and started on foot to the Grandma's place in the village. And that was 70 kilometers away. They passed two road blocks, but were stopped at the third and asked for their papers. My aunt promised her relatives would fetch the papers, while she waits at the road block. My father went from the village to their apartment and looked for five days for the bag with the papers. He went through all the rubbish with his bare hands, but found it at the end."

## DAY 17

Today we went to the Red Square. On Vasilievsky Spusk they were celebrating the Pancakes Week<sup>5</sup>. There was a lot of delightful trivia: pancakes, tea, attractions, air balloons ... All three of us - Aslan, Dasha, and I - gave ourselves to gorging on street fare and aimless loitering. The day had the colors of unbelievable spring brightness, but Aslan kept his eyes on the pavement.

"Aslan, - I told him - up with your head, look around." - "Why? I have seen it all already."

In the Kremlin, the Tsar Cannon and Tsar Bell impressed Aslan only from a practical point of view: "Wow, if it can be sold for scrap, I would get a lot of money". In the church, I kept whispering to him for three minutes to make him remove his hat. We almost got into a fight over it.

He asked how come Christ looks the same on every icon, if nobody has ever seen him. Stopped before an old, darkened icon of a saint with non-Slavic features. "Is it Pushkin?"

## DAY 18

On the way home from school, he again kept his eyes on the pavement. Automatically, I admonished him, and then it occurred to me: "Have you seen mines?" - "Yeah." For a half an hour I listened to a lecture on tripwires, mines, and TNT. "See this house? It takes a kilo of TNT to blow it up. A matchbox of TNT is enough to blow up this car... Once, I almost got caught by a tripwire. They are not really very dangerous: they would not explode if not pulled too hard. But that time I almost did it: caught my foot on the wire and started falling. Almost pulled off the detonator. My friend pushed me aside just in time... I have a hand grenade at home, and I am

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<sup>5</sup> The last week before the Great Lent.



going to explode it on my birthday; I did it on my last birthday, too. There is an old house at the end of the street where I live. Nobody lives there. We threw a grenade in; it was pretty... Me and my friends, we have a cartridge belt, two flares, three mines, and an Uzi. When my friends move to Dagestan, they will leave it to me. I'll hide the Uzi and sell the mines to soldiers. They gave me 250 rubles<sup>6</sup> for a hand grenade."

He told me all that with a tone of superiority in his voice. When we were approaching the market, he gave me a sudden warning call. I jumped to his side, but he just laughed: "Look where you put your feet!"

## DAY 19

Aslan notion of the world, as represented by countries and continents, is vague. He knows there are Russia, America, and Chechnya. Nor has he a grasp of the world around him.

"Have any of your friends ever lived in refugee camps?"

- "What is that?"

- "You don't know who refugees are?"

- "No".

He is not interested in the world at large, apart from his desire to meet a "live Negro".

His dream is to become a banker.

## DAY 21

I decided to take him to a museum. Aslan is reluctant to go: "There is nothing interesting in the museums". The Pushkin Museum of Arts he rejected from the outset: "I don't like pictures, especially those by Pushkin".

We agreed on the Polytechnic Museum, but came there too late. As a consolation, I bought us some ice cream. In the best traditions of the Grozny market, Aslan asked the vendor if she would come down on the price.

The whole evening he continued to drone on on the theme that studying is unnecessary, the reason being his "F" in Biology. I almost resorted to force trying to get him to open the textbook, and, in the process, gave him a lecture on how academic skills influence one's fate. But how can I make him understand that without education there is no escaping the fate preprogrammed by his present circumstances?

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<sup>6</sup> About one dollar.

## DAY 22

Hooray! He got “A” in Biology. The period of decadence is over with! From his favorite monologue on how “Groznyy is the only place to live in” he has switched to musings on how lucky the Muscovites are to live here. His positive attitude has got reinforced by pancakes with sweet condensed milk.

He asked whether he could buy an apartment in Moscow when he grows up.

Went to the store by himself. The cashier, as usual, got agitated when Aslan did something out of order: “What is this? Never been here before?” Aslan explained to the woman that this is his first time in Moscow. “Where from?” – “From Groznyy”. The woman proved up to the occasion: “So, come back soon and as often as you want”.

## DAY 23

Aslan has not escaped the Pushkin Museum forever. The world treasure of art was conquered in about 40 minutes. Aslan’s questions and comments. On Antiquity: “Why all these people are naked?” On Flemish painters: “These are pretty pictures, not like you have at home.” On Matisse: “This man hasn’t learned to paint, at all.” He has again displayed unhealthy interest in iron, in particular in a mock-up of a knight in armor.

On the way back we stopped by the church of Christ the Savior. It took some convincing to make him come inside, since “we’ve seen it all in the Kremlin”. Most of all, he was impressed by the see-through charity box, full of bills. He voiced doubts as to whether the money will really get spent for Godly purposes. My assurances that they will probably lacked conviction. In subway, in a long passage way, Aslan suddenly wiggled from under my hand and started to run, so that I barely managed to catch him by the collar. When I lifted my eyes, I discovered five men in fatigues coming our way. Aslan shrunk down and kept silent for a long time.

## DAY 25

I had to leave the boys for a few hours to the care of a nanny. Valya, a women with a big heart, adores every child ever given to her care. However, when she learned where Aslan is from, she began saying that “a person should live in his own city”. What one hears at any of Moscow markets is a much stronger expression of this idea, but I did not expect this from Valya. I got

even more distressed when I heard Aslan saying: “You know, your Valya is right. A person should live in his own city”.

He shut himself with Dima in his room. Soon, I heard him singing there a patriotic pop song, “Officers, officers, guns are aimed at your hearts...”.

## DAY 27

We have put an appearance at the St Patrick Day parade that, curiously, has become a Russian folk festival. A crowd of make-believe Irishmen and their sympathizers was rolling down Arbat, hooting. Aslan stopped dead in his tracks and stood there until the street cleared. To top it all, his dream has come true: he came face to face with a “live Negro”.

”They were letting balloons fly into the sky – I wonder what the birds thought it was? “

## DAY 30

In the evening I again tried to tear him from the TV set, arguing that sleep is essential for a growing up child. Aslan put up a stiff resistance: at home, he never goes to bed before one, because he cannot sleep anyway.

“But my father, he can sleep so well he does not even wake up when soldiers come.”

- “Aslan! What soldiers? At night?”

- “Russian soldiers. They come every week to check up on the house, at about three in the night. They put on lights in every room and look who is in the house. Last time they took cartridges for my playstation ... No, they never took away Papa, they new already that he is an invalid. It is only my sister who gets scared to death every time they come and cries.”

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## DAY 33

Now, it is not every day that I feel an urge to write something down, which is perhaps a sign that Aslan has adapted to our way of life. I consider it my personal achievements that now Aslan says “thank you”, washes his hands, drinks boiled water (most of the times), and washes his socks every evening.

The gender problem, however, remains unresolved. He cannot accept Dasha as “outranking him in seniority”, and therefore all her demands, reasonable as well, he rejects out of hand.

This evening, the conflict peaked. I went to bed, while Aslan stayed on to watch soccer on TV, and Dasha went to her room to do her homework. At about midnight, the conflicting parties

entered my room in search for justice: one claimed the right to receive information, and another - the right to rest. I delivered my judgment in the way that realized my right to shout, which worked. Later, I was sitting in the kitchen expecting a sleepless night and listening to sobbing coming from Aslan's and Dasha's rooms.

## DAY 34

This morning, Dasha called from the school: "Come quickly, Aslan, it seems, broke his leg."

I found Aslan in the school yard throwing snowballs, with one leg in the air.

We were told in the infirmary that there is no fracture, but that he needs sea salt baths for his leg. Aslan was delighted: never before his leg was getting so much care.

In the evening, we were watching news on the start of war in Iraq, every news program, in turn.

Aslan asked if there was a war before in Iraq.

"Somebody told me that there will be no more war in Chechnya after this one. Right?"

- "Of course, Aslan."

- "When this war is over, there will be new houses built in Groznyy. It will be pretty... Will you come then?"

I nodded. Then the boys sat down to draw. Dima drew the cave of an evildoer, and Aslan drew the Chechen flag.

## DAY 36

Aslan came home from school and fumbled for a long time in his schoolbag. Finally, he produced from it a paper flower he made from a notebook page specially for me, and put it in a vase on the refrigerator.

The war in Iraq is again in the "News" program. Aslan comments: "They should fight in the desert, where there are no people, just one army against another. You see, they bomb cities and common people get hit."

"If they made me fight, and I did not want to, I would shoot at my commanders."

- "Aslan, soldiers just follow orders, they are not allowed to decide for themselves whether the orders are just or no."

- "Still, I would shoot."

Incidentally, Aslan has a curious attitude to life and death. On one hand, he sincerely feels pity for a tree with a broken off branch: "It is the same as to break off the tree's arm!" On the other hand, he is completely emotionless, at least outwardly, in respect to death and injuries suffered

by people he knew. Is it a kind of a defense reaction?

## DAY 37

Another foray into civilization. This time the victim was the Polytechnic Museum. Aslan managed to touch everything within his reach, despite my lecturing him on the Museum rules. The only restraining influence that worked was the cry of an old lady, a custodian, who suddenly awoke when Aslan was about to enter the space station “Mir”. Thank God, the space food tubes were protected by glass panels.

Anything that requires mental efforts bores Aslan. The exhibits that required more than 30 seconds to figure them out did not make any impression on him. Most of all, he is attracted by spectacles, spectacles of any kind. In the Museum he got glued to a microscope: spent 20 minutes watching some bacteria thrashing about under the glass.

...In the evening, I was passing by the boys’ room and saw them standing by the window, their noses pressed against the glass.

— “Dima, do you like living in Moscow? “

— “I like it, and you?”

— “I like it a little bit, but Chechnya is prettier...”

## DAY 38

The circus made him quietly ecstatic and thoughtful. He was so deeply impressed that even stopped arguing with Dasha for a while. Though, he tentatively suggested to her that pythons were inflated rubber, and the bear who juggled a pole was actually a man in disguise. Perhaps he needed to lower the emotional impact of the show. About the tigers’ trainer, Aslan said that “he is a very kind man, because he keeps tigers in his own apartment. This must be very inconvenient for him.” To add to the excitement, Aslan has had the fortune to pet a camel. The camel’s owner would not allow it, but Aslan managed to pet the camel surreptitiously on the knee. “He stinks!” commented Aslan with satisfaction in his voice.

## DAY 39

Aslan’s aunt called from Grozny. After talking to her, he cheerfully announced that he will be going home in two weeks. “I would have stayed with you, but I want to see my Mom... I wish I

could go there for a while, and then come back... I'll write you letters. A hundred letters. Could you read a hundred letters? I'll send you a picture of my sister. Do you think a puzzle for Dima would fit into an envelope?"

For God's sake, why should he go to this damn Groznyy? What is there for him?

We went to a barber, and Aslan himself decided on the style of the haircut. He left the barber shop looking proud, radiant, and funny. Generally, Aslan is not satisfied with his looks. He is not happy with the slight curliness of his hair and with his cross-eyedness that shows sometimes. He told me that his eyes "used to be pretty, but then, when there was the war, the apartment was hit by a shell. I got scared, because I was then only four, and my eyes went wrong." Now, when he is excited he gets cross eyed. Also, he cries out in his sleep. Perhaps he should be getting a tranquilizer before bed. Though, what kind of a tranquilizer should it be to keep him from reacting to the nightly shoot-outs?

## DAY 40

Today we went to the Moscow Zoo! An hour and a half, out of the three, Aslan had spent by the orangutan cage. The orangutan had been completely psyched out by curiosity of the visitors. He had embraced his head with his hands, his nose pressed against the glass. Aslan's nose was pressed to the other side of the glass. He was whispering to the orangutan, who would sadly close his eyes and mutter something in response. In the end, I had to tear off the "human cub" by force, pulling at his jacket from behind.

On the way back, a professional panhandler, a young woman with a child, boarded our subway car. The cardboard she carried read: "Sorry to bother you, but my husband has gone missing, and I have no food for the children..." Aslan looked at me to see if I would give her money. When we got out, I explained to Aslan the young woman's business.

- "Why then you give money to the old man who plays accordion at our market?"
- "Because he is old, and he does not beg, but works for it."

Aslan likes to hang around me while I am cooking. He would volunteer for peeling or cutting jobs, and would not miss sticking his nose into a pan to see what is cooking, and how it goes. He told me about his method to fight hunger pangs: "If I am very hungry, I buy a pack of instant noodles, they call it "Rolton", you know? And I chew on them dry. Try it, it is very tasty." There is a candle that I keep on the kitchen table, and light it occasionally, in the evenings. "Do you like this kind of lighting?" asked Aslan. "We used candles for two years, and I got tired of them."

## DAY 43

This evening, we had guests. They brought with them their children; the boy was about the same age as Aslan. All the children had gathered in the children's room. Aslan silently left the room and sat to watch TV. Then he refused to come to the table. After the guests had left, I asked him to explain his behavior.

- "It was awfully improper what you did. The guests ought to be entertained."
- "I did not want to be with them, because they would have been looking at me."
- "Of course, they would have been looking at you. How else can people socialize?"
- "You don't understand! I am different from them. That is why they would look..."

Before going to bed, I went to check on the boys. They were lying on the sofa, embracing each other. Without really much hope for my consent, since it was late, Aslan pleaded with me: "Could I tell him the tale about the princess and the pea? I'll tell it real quick."

## DAY 44

There was mutiny on the ship. Vacations ended and Aslan tried to skip the first day of school. His argument: "I cannot go, I threw away my notebooks."

The only justification for my outburst that followed was that my anger was righteous. Next morning, he was the first to wake up and to leave for the hated school.

He has got into the habit of watching TV news. Surprisingly, he does not show any interest in news on Chechnya. "This is on the road that goes past my house", was his only comment on the blowing up of a shuttle bus by terrorists. On the contrary, events in Iraq elicit in him a most lively response. "Just think of it, they dumped 200 thousands tons of flour from the planes for them (the Iraqi civilians). Now, they'll make cakes for themselves."

Paradoxically, Aslan is increasingly sympathetic toward the Americans. Moreover, his support for the armies of President Bush rises in direct proportion to success of the operation.

- "Aslan, but the Americans have attacked Iraq, and civilians are dying?"
- "So what? I am for the Americans, because they are winning."

What the hell is wrong with him?

## DAY 50

They called from Grozny and told me I could send Aslan back, in a few days, with the shuttle traders. Aslan became excited by the news and ran to pack his bag. Then he found me in the kitchen: “I wouldn’t go, but I miss my Mom...”

We went for a walk around the Bolshoi Theater.

- “Is it the biggest theater in world?”

- “No, just our main theater.”

- “Then it is not so interesting.”

By the staff entrance, we saw Volochkova standing there.

- “Look, Aslan, this is a famous ballerina.”

- “She is so ugly.”

Both of us are having blues. Even the ice-cream we had in the GUM Mall did not cheer us up.

– “Do you think there will be time when I could come to live here?”

- “Certainly. You just need to study.”

- “I will. You tell me what I need to do, and I’ll do everything. I don’t want to live in Grozny any more. I want to live here.”

I want him to live here, too.

## DAY 52

This is our last weekend together. I asked Aslan where he wants to go. Aslan chose the Red Square. There, Aslan decided to enlighten Dima and pointed to the Kremlin: “See? This is where Putin sits.” But Dima objected vigorously: “He cannot be in the Kremlin, because he is in the ‘News’.”

In the evening, having finished with the packing, we were standing by the window.

“Don’t collect no more hand grenades, OK? And don’t go in this old house... Watch were you put your feet, and don’t get caught in ...you know what. Drink boiled water...”

I am petting his crew cut and dropping tears on his head. He turned to me: “Do you remember I didn’t want to take off my hat? Is not it funny ?”

\* \* \*

*Time to get over with this war. I am sick of it.*

Natalia Chernova



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