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Shannon O'Connor

Only in Russia (excerpt from *JESUS NEEDED MEDICATION*)

For Sunday dinner, we went to McDonald's, as did everyone else in Moscow that day. The line went around the square. The McDonald's was brand new and the entire country was excited that they could finally get American hamburgers and French fries. We hoped we didn't have to wait too long to get inside because it was cold.

About a quarter through our wait, we saw protesters in the middle of the square. We didn't know what they were saying, but they were holding signs and yelling. The Russians were interested in what was happening. Demonstrations of the kind were new.

"Are you Americans?" a tall sandy-haired young man asked.

"Yes," I said. "How could you tell?"

"Everyone can tell," he said.

I laughed.

"I've been to America. I went to a camp in Maine."

"That's not far from where we live," I said. "We're from Boston."

"My name is Max, and these are my friends, Ivan and Alex," I smiled at the other two. I didn't think they could speak English very well. "America is such an amazing place. I went to a mall there and it was like a museum to me, so many beautiful things you can buy. Here, we have nothing."

I didn't know what to say.

"Do you think I look Russian? In America, everyone asked me if I was Russian right away."

"I'm not sure." Of course, right there, everyone looked Russian to me.

"I read in the newspaper this morning that a dog bit a man and the man went around biting people. Only in Russia could something like that happen."

I wasn't sure about that, either. I heard people say things could only happen in America all the time. The line inched forward. I saw someone run ahead.

"Do you see him?" said Max. "People say they have a friend in front of the line and they go further. They don't want to wait like everyone else. It's not fair. People like that are liars."

"I hate liars," I said. I liked this kid and I didn't want him to think I was a liar, even though I was. I lied to my parents. I lied to my friends. But the problem was that I didn't know what I wanted to be. I was starting to think I was weirder than everyone.

"I decided to take my friends out to eat today because I wrote an article for a newspaper and I was paid."

"That's really cool," I said. "How old are you?" I figured he was about twenty-five.

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"I'm fifteen," he said. He was younger than me, but he seemed so much older and wiser. I figured a lifetime of waiting in lines and being hungry aged a person. I felt sorry for him.

We got closer to McDonald's. The people around us were getting excited, jumping up and down. "Hamburgers," they chanted.

When we went in, we rushed to the counter. The people behind the register knew exactly what we were saying when we spoke English. I ordered a few hamburgers and French fries because I hadn't had a decent meal in three days.

Our group sat with Max and his friends. The McDonald's was beautiful. Each section was designed to be a different part of the world. We sat in the Asian section, with pagodas.

"When are you girls going to Leningrad?" Alex asked.

"We're leaving tonight," I said.

One of the boys said something in Russian and I gave them a look because I could tell what he was saying beneath his words.

"Do you speak Russian?" Alex asked.

"No," I said, but I think I knew what he said. He asked Alex if he was hoping to get laid. I had heard that Russian men prize Western women, but treat their own like dirt. I wasn't definite about what he said, but I could sense it like I could the smell of cold.

"Could I have your address so I could write to you?" Max asked. I thought that it wouldn't hurt to give it to him. He lived so far away he could never find me.

Mary had drawn a picture of Elvis to protect us from the devil. I wrote my address on the back. I hoped Max would write to me. He seemed smart, not like the other boys. He was fifteen and had been published in a newspaper. I didn't ask him what the article was about, but I was impressed.

On the way back to the train station, I thought I lost my gloves. I looked in my bag and I didn't see them. I went back to the restaurant, but they weren't there. I wondered if the little weasel Alex took them as a souvenir. I didn't trust him. There was something wrong.

"I can't find my gloves," I said.

"Did you take them with you?" Mr. Swenson said.

"I knew I had them." I lost my breath. I pulled everything out of my bag, my camera, my hat, my notebook.

I looked, and they were on the bottom of my bag. I was relieved. I didn't want to go through February in Russia with nothing to cover my hands.

On the street, we saw some people that looked homeless. I thought there weren't supposed to be any homeless people in Russia, but the people begged and blessed themselves with nothing on but rags. They didn't even have shoes. They could tell we were Westerners by our clothes and

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the way we smelled. They swarmed around us. One girl tried to give them a hamburger and they surrounded her. I didn't know what to do.

Later in the underpass, on the way to the subway, two women in our group, April and Cindy, made fun of the homeless people. They were laughing at people who had nothing. These women weren't high school students; they were friends of my teacher. I was embarrassed to be from the same city as them.

I thought I said something to them. I wanted to say, show some respect, those people have nothing and you're mocking them. Stupid bitches. Ugly Americans. Hideous Americans. An embarrassment to our country. We have so much and we shouldn't make fun of people who don't. Those people have no shoes and you're laughing at them. Can you imagine what's it's like to have no shoes in Moscow in February? I should rip your shoes off and give them to those people right now.

I don't know if I said anything to them. That moment is buried beneath the snow.