



Oh! The Pain

A short story by: Lawrence V. Drake

Peter sat upright and stiff from tension, gripping the arms of the dentist chair as though trying to crush them. His face grimaced in terror. Unable to voice his fear, the twenty-four-year-old Russian's eyes pleaded with me to take him away. It took all the persuasion I could muster across a formidable language barrier to get him this far. He had bravely tried to mask the pain he was enduring caused by his inflamed tooth but it had become obvious something had to be done. I wasn't about to let him get out of that chair.

Several weeks earlier, Peter and his family arrived at our doorstep after a long and somewhat perilous journey from Chernobyl, then a member of the Soviet Union. The family of six included Peter, his wife, their small daughter, his father, and mother-in-law, and their teenage son. We agreed to host refugees but were a bit overwhelmed with the size of the family delivered to our home. Fortunately, we had a furnished basement available, with our eldest daughter away at college.

Stasko, their volunteer interpreter, unloaded the family from his van along with bundles of belongings, and introduced the small clan to us.

“I’m sorry they don’t speak English except for Nadia, here,” he pointed at the stoutly built, grey-haired lady. “She understands a little bit.”

Nadia took a small step forward. “How you do,” she said with a heavy Russian accent.

They all looked weary from their journey, having just come from the airport after days of travel and wading through the jungles of bureaucracy on both sides of the ocean.

“Welcome to our home,” I said, as I reached out to shake hands with the thin, pale patriarch standing at Nadia’s side.

He smiled nervously and gave a small bow.

“Come in. We have lunch prepared for you,” my wife said excitedly.

Stasko relayed our message as our new guests who were looking around, surveying our Minnesota five-acre hobby farm complete with barns, corral, and horse pasture. The family talked quietly among themselves with Nadia shaking her head, obviously in charge of the family. She then turned to Stasko and, in a very serious tone, unmistakable even in Russian, gave an ultimatum.

“Nadia says that they cannot accept a meal without first doing work. They must earn their food.”

The family stood there, Daniel, Nadia, Peter, Svetlana, teenager Alexander, and three-year-old Marina, exhausted from their ordeal but immovable until I gave them some task to accomplish in payment for their first meal in our home. No amount of persuasion would change their minds.

I looked around at a loss for some simple work that could be performed. A small pile of old barn wood caught my attention. I had been meaning to move it to the center of the riding arena to burn.

“I suppose they could help me move that pile of wood,” I said hesitantly to Stasko.

He pointed to the pile of wood and then to the arena, as he translated. Without hesitation the entire family, little Marina included, headed for the woodpile and began loading up arms full of worn, broken, and rotted remnants of farm history.

“No, no,” I cried out. “After lunch.”

“They say they must work first,” Stasko said.

So their introduction to life in the land of plenty was as laborers. Daniel the elder, held up an old wormy worn piece of wood, and pleaded with his eyes, asking if he could save it. I told Stasko to let him know he was welcome to start a pile of his own, although I had no idea what he would ever do with junk wood. We experienced our first indication as to how hard their life in Ukraine had been. It appeared inconceivable to them that we would first, burn such a valuable resource, and second voluntarily share our home with no strings attached.

Several weeks had passed, and now Peter sat in abject fear of the dentist who had left the room to study the x-rays he had taken. The young man’s fear seemed extreme. I am not a fan of the dentist either but I had never seen anyone recoil so intensely over an encounter with the tooth doctor.

“No problem, Peter,” I encouraged. “No problem.”

“No, No. Big, big problem,” Peter said while maintaining a vice grip on the vinyl-bound chair arms.

“Why?” I shrugged.

Over the next few minutes, Peter unfolded his tale through a few words and a lot of pantomimes.

“Me Russian Army,” he said as he gave a salute. He opened his mouth wide and pointed to a missing molar deep in his jaw.

I watched as he demonstrated the best he could how the army surgeon put a knee to his chest, took a hammer and chisel, and proceeded to remove his tooth in chunks with no

numbing medicine whatsoever. The surgeon's assistant pinned down his arms so he couldn't resist.

Peter held his jaw and made a face in severe pain. "Ooooh, no good, no good."

"No problem here." I tried to reassure him as I shook my head and waved my hands in front of me. He wasn't buying it.

The dentist returned to administer Novocain around the infected tooth. Peter bravely allowed the doctor to work, his eyes betraying his deep-seated fear. As the minutes passed and the numbing spread, he patted his cheek in wonder.

The doctor came back again, this time picking up the extraction tools placed there by his assistant. Peter's eyes grew large in anticipation of the extreme torture that was about to take place. He looked at me with darting glances of confusion that seemed to say, "Have you betrayed me?"

With tools in hand, the dentist reached in, gave a few tugs, withdrew the bloody offending cuspid, and dropped it in the stainless steel tray next to Peter's elbow. A quick rinse with the water tube, a spit, some packing, and it was all over.

Peter looked at the tooth, then up at me, and shrugged his shoulders with an, "Is that all there is?" expression.

"All done," the doctor said with a smile.

Peter beamed. "Nooooo problem!" He then added, "America, excellent!"

I found Peter a good job in a cabinet shop. After a few very interesting months of living in our basement, the family got their own apartment and started their new life in a new country. A few years passed before they chose to move south to Florida where a large Ukrainian community resided. We moved west to the Rocky Mountains and lost touch with our Russian friends. That is until a week ago.

"Dad, guess what! I found Peter!" My daughter's excited voice came across my cell phone loud and clear. "Peter Gavrilenko."

“You did? How?” My enthusiasm surprised me.

“On FaceBook. I found his page on FaceBook.”

Over twenty years had passed since losing track of our Russian friend. Her discovery began a process that eventually led to a phone conversation with the young man who had trusted me enough to sit in the torture chair. He had raised a family, owned his own business, and broke into tears when we found him again. We reminisced until his emotion overcame him and he couldn't talk anymore.

That conversation has just begun the next chapter in a bond created between two families that shared a special time together—a time that changed the lives of all involved.

* * * The End * * *

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