

The Prize

A fresh wind was blowing across the Moscow River. The summer had been short and hot, the streets clogged with buses full of tourists from all over the world. Now there were fewer buses on the wide roads. Ivan breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the cool air as he hurried across Komsolmolsky Avenue toward Gorky Park. A few leaves spun in the light breeze, rimmed with the gold of coming autumn.

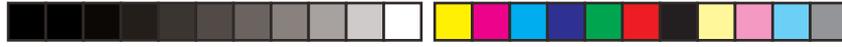
At the entrance of the park, a small crowd had gathered around the morning's copy of Pravda posted on the entrance bulletin board. People were eager to read Pravda these days since Comrade Gorbachev had brought so many changes to the Soviet Union. Now it was possible to read news never before permitted. Ivan wanted to get close enough to see the newspaper, but the crowd huddled together, resisting anyone trying to shift a little closer to the front.

Every year Ivan came to Gorky Park on the last day of summer vacation, the day before the school year started. It was his farewell to summer. He loved watching the old men huddled around the stone chess-boards in the park, elbows on the edge of the chess tables, chins cupped in hands, unmoving, as if they also were made of stone. At this time of year, the little lakes in the park were as still as mirrors and



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anyone who walked over the bridges spanning them could look across the water and see the feathery reflections of young trees.

Ivan tried to fight a rising feeling of dread that was taking hold of him. Tomorrow was the first day of September, the first day of school. There would be a new teacher who would be displeased because he did not wear the red scarf of the Communist Young Pioneers. A familiar worry returned. Every year there was the danger that he might be cut from the soccer team because he was a Christian. Christians were not considered model Soviet citizens and were rarely allowed to participate in Young Pioneer activities like sports. Only the fact that Ivan was an outstanding player kept him on the team. But one never knew when a complaint might force the coach to remove him.

Ivan sighed. The year ahead looked unpromising. And today his best friend Pyotr was late for their last meeting in the park. A stone splashing into the water a few feet from his bench startled Ivan. He looked around to see Pyotr's familiar grin.

Pyotr plopped down on the bench beside Ivan.

'So, did you see the paper today?' he demanded, stretching out his legs in front of him and looking straight ahead at the water, a mischievous smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

Ivan shrugged. 'Nobody would let me close enough.'

'Too bad, Ivan. It was very interesting today. I read it at home.'



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‘I don’t know why you’re always so cheerful when school starts, Pyotr! It’s unnatural.’

‘For one thing, I don’t have to worry about soccer as you do. And not being a scholar like you, I don’t care if my teacher doesn’t like it that I am Christian. If she grades me hard, it doesn’t make that much difference. I only aspire to pass my exams. I don’t have to be the best, like you.’

‘I don’t have to be the best!’ Ivan threw a few blades of grass at his friend.

‘In history, you do!’

‘All right, history. But not everything. Maybe history can get me into university. And especially now, with Comrade Gorbachev’s glasnost – maybe Christians really will be able to go to university.’

Pyotr suddenly jumped up, pulling Ivan to his feet and almost knocking him over with a huge bear hug.

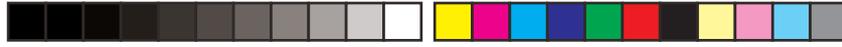
‘What are you doing?’ Ivan’s yell was muffled in Pyotr’s shirt.

‘I can’t stand it!’ Pyotr exploded. ‘Ivan! Ivan! You are going to America! You won the All-Moscow history prize! All the prizewinners are going to America for five weeks on a school exchange program. It’s in the paper today. You are going to America!’

Ivan stared at Pyotr. ‘I won the All-Moscow prize?’

‘Yes, of course. But you’re going to America! It’s in the paper.’

Ivan’s open mouth shaped itself into a slow smile.



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‘I don’t believe it. My teacher entered my essay? I don’t understand. Every year my essay is returned: ‘Not acceptable for the contest because you are not a Young Pioneer.’ How could I have won?’

Pyotr clutched his head in despair and put his face close to Ivan’s. As if he were speaking to someone deaf he mouthed the words one by one. ‘You-are-going-to-America, Ivan. For five weeks! Your essay was entered! Your essay won!’

Ivan sat down and then stood up. ‘When? No! America?’ Both boys began to laugh crazily.



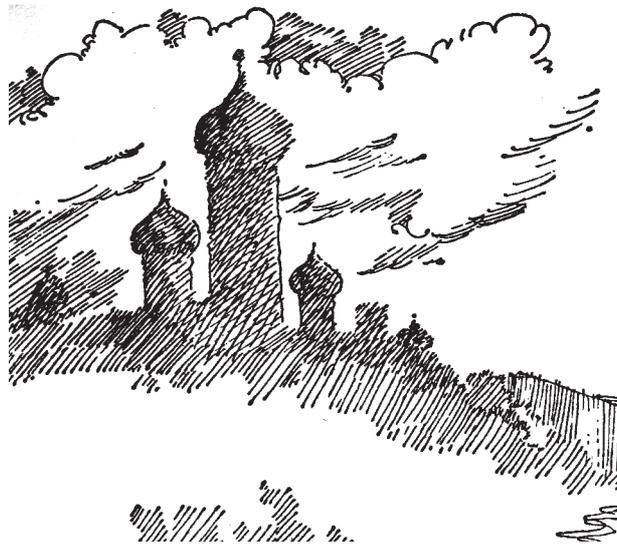
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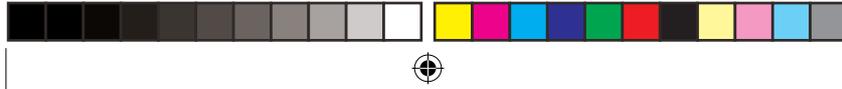
An old grandmother babushka, pushing a chubby toddler in a stroller, frowned at the noise. 'Behave, you foolish boys!' she commanded.

Ivan gulped down his laughter. 'I'm sorry, grandmother,' he managed before bursting out in a new wave of hilarity. Pyotr was holding his sides helplessly. The old woman shook her head in disapproval and passed by.

'Come on!' Ivan called over his shoulder to Pyotr.

The boys raced to the entrance of the park and to the posted copies of Pravda at the gate. The earlier crowd had thinned.





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Panting and trembling, Ivan stared at the front page. As he read, his face became pale with excitement.

The headlines shouted, 'Ten All-Moscow Prizewinners to Study in America.' An old feeling of fear clutched at him as he saw his own name in the paper. Poppa always said that Christians were to live quietly and were not to bring attention to themselves. And here was his son's name on the front page of Pravda!

The boys made their way home, Pyotr beaming with pride and excitement, Ivan with a look on his face halfway between terror and overflowing joy.

