

Without a Hope by Jeff Blatz

Sunday morning a young boy sat alone on the mini-bus. Actually, his mother sat next to him, but it felt like he was alone. She was weary and her head swirled from another night with another man she didn't even know.

In her drunken stupor she could no longer hold her head up and so, with her chin to her chest, her head bobbed and weaved with the movement of the bus. By planting her feet apart and while her knees knocked together she somehow managed to keep from falling over.

Nine-year-old Sasha stared out the window at the snowy streets of Kiev that passed by. He was almost used to being ashamed, but not quite. He hated to look at her when she was like this. Yet even worse was the way other people looked back at them.

The previous night Sasha slept on a concrete floor in the stairwell of an old apartment building while his mother was in the stranger's flat. It was her fourth man this week. In the morning she was thrown out with a few small bills in her hand. There was enough money for bread and potatoes, maybe even some

she didn't even know when his birthday was and neither did his mother. He quickly dismissed the thoughts as foolish selfishness, not wanting to ever put such a burden on his mother to ask for any of those things.

As the bus neared their stop Sasha put his truck on the seat and got up to look out the front window. He stood near the bus driver and watched the gray buildings pass by. Soon they came to their street and Sasha asked the driver to stop. As the bus slowed, the boy turned to his mother and took her hand.

"Mama," he said, "mama, we're here now."

She did not respond.

"Mama, we're here," he repeated.

The bus was stopped now, and the bus driver got up and came to the seat. He shook her and shouted to wake her up. Finally she raised her head and half-opened her glossed-over eyes.

"Mama, it's time to get off," Sasha pleaded. She seemed to understand and he helped her to her feet. The others looked on in shame and disgust. One old lady was heard to exclaim, "poor boy," but Sasha ignored it. He did not want their pity and he certainly did not want their attention.

They got off the bus and the cold, damp winter air seemed to cut Sasha right to the bone. Mama stopped for a moment, her upper body swayed over her legs while her knees wobbled. She took a step then stopped again to regain her balance. Quickly Sasha grabbed her arm to support her. Once again the young boy would have to help her make the last few blocks home.

But something else felt wrong in that brief moment. Then Sasha realized he forgot his toy truck on the bus. He let go of his mother and turned quickly only to see the bus speed away. As he ran after it, he reached out his hand and yelled, "Stop! Stop!" Of course there was no way the driver could hear him, and as the bus drove off he gave up. He stood silently and watched as it continued down the street, around a curve, and out of sight.



she could buy yet another bottle of vodka), lay down on top of it and pulled an old, smelly blanket over him.

I try so hard to be a good boy so mama wouldn't drink, he thought to himself. If I could be a little better perhaps she would stop. I try to help mama, but I cause her so much trouble. Then today I forgot my truck on the bus. No wonder she drinks. Perhaps mama could be happy if I wasn't here.

Sasha's young mind returned to thoughts of running away as it did so often before. The thing that always stopped him previously was that he didn't know where he would go or how he would survive. But this time his heart was so heavy with guilt he felt it was the best thing for his mother.

He was afraid. He lay there for a long time contemplating his future and his fate. Then he decided.

Sasha got up and gathered his few items of clothing into a plastic bag and wrapped his blanket over his shoulders. He took one last look at his mother, who lay passed out on their bed. She was pale and sickly looking. Her mouth hung open and her chin rested in a pool of her own saliva.

Sasha leaned over and gently kissed her on the cheek and said a soft "good bye." Then he walked out the door and down to the street below.

If Sasha had a minute or two I suppose he would have cried over the loss, but he knew mama needed his help. He turned back to her and tried to forget about his toy, but deep inside the emptiness he felt each day just grew a little bigger.

After a short walk made long by his stumbling mother, who needed help to get up off the ground four times, they finally made it home. They entered a tiny one-room apartment. It contained a small stove and an old sink on the right, a single bed on the left covered with dirty laundry, and a lot of garbage everywhere in between. Outside the door was a foul smelling bucket, which acted as their toilet.

Sasha's mother collapsed onto the bed and almost instantly drifted into unconsciousness. Sasha was tired too. He was also hungry and cold. The government cut off the heat last winter because the bills went unpaid and the cupboards were bare. The money his mother made the previous night was to be their next meal, but more likely her next drink. Sasha gathered some of the cardboard (which his mother collected to recycle so

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for milk. The thought of this should have excited Sasha, but he also knew it was also just enough for some vodka, and his mother loved her vodka. *Perhaps there would still be enough for bread.*

As he stared out the window he spun the wheels on his plastic, toy truck. He took it with him where ever he went. His mother bought it for him when he was only four years old. It must have cost a lot of money, he often thought, because it was the last time she bought him anything. Sometimes he wished he had more than just that little truck, perhaps a toy man to put inside it, or maybe even a soccer ball.

But what he wondered most often was what it would be like to have his birthday celebrated, to have a cake, gifts, and friends all on one fantastic day. But he knew that would never happen. In fact he