

## Misha and Friends

*This short story is inspired by the people and places I came to know while living in Ukraine. I hope by reading this, the reader can better notice the routine but sacred customs in their own life.*

Misha lived in an apartment with his family. There was nothing overly special about where they lived. It was similar to the millions of other apartments in Ukraine. There was a set of two doors, one behind another, to enter into their apartment from the hallway. Misha's father said that there were two because it insulated the house better. But Misha believed that there were two to make it harder for any would-be robbers to break in. "Besides," he always refuted, "if the designers were that concerned about insulation, they would have put in better windows, not another door." The cold winter air always seeped in through the windows, even when they lined the edges with duct tape.

Once through the dual doors, guests were immediately met with a reflection of themselves. A giant closet with a sliding mirror door concealed the boots, scarves, hats, gloves, and coats that were stored inside. This area, Misha's mother always said, had to be the cleanest in the whole apartment. This is the first impression of the home. This is where people see what it means to be a Kovalenko. This refrain was always met with Misha's rolling eyes. *People know exactly what kind of family we are before they even step in the building. Once they see that we live in a five story slab of concrete with graffiti on the sides of it and no elevator, they know exactly the kind of people the Kovalenkos are. The Kovalenkos are just like everyone else in this damn country.* Misha never said this out loud, of course, but always thought it as he took his boots off while struggling to balance on the almost too small doormat so as to not leave any dirty boot prints on the bare wood floor.

Past the front entrance there was a hallway that led to three rooms. To the left was the kitchen with a small but always running washing machine between the stove and refrigerator. To the right was the master bedroom that also functioned as the dining room, living room, and baby's room. In the middle was Misha's room. Technically his room also served as the workspace where his mom made the jewelry that she sold, but for the most part, this space was his. This arrangement was made the year prior when his father suggested that a 16 year old boy ought to have a piece of the world just for himself. Misha was grateful that his parents had sacrificed their own room so that he could have a room of his own, but Misha, of course, never said that out loud either.

It was in the corner of this room that the radiator sat. It had been there since the building was constructed in the 60's. The old radiator clambered to life every time the heat came on. It shook and rattled like an old man gasping for breath in the midst of a coughing fit.

Thankfully this morning, the radiator had groaned especially loud. Had it not, Misha would have slept till noon. Normally he set the alarm on his hand-me-down Android everyday for 8:00, but last night he forgot to plug it in. He had been watching *Friends* on his phone and fell asleep with it, unplugged, still in his hands. He streamed lots of shows from a website that showed American series with Russian subtitles, but *Friends* had recently become his favorite. In four days he had already watched six seasons.

Now awake and realizing that his phone had died, he rubbed his eyes and plugged his phone into the cord coming from the lone outlet in the room. Hoping the battery would reach at least 20% by the time he'd have to leave, Misha made his way into the kitchen.

His mother was already at the table feeding his baby brother. "Gretchka," Misha softly groaned as he grabbed a bowl from the dish rack. He actually had always liked a warm bowl of

buckwheat on winter mornings. The added pieces of fish in it leftover from last night's dinner was something his mom has always done and the taste reminded him of his childhood. But still, it was no pancakes. That is what Joey had made everyone in the *Friends* episode last night.

Of course Misha had eaten pancakes before, but they were flat and filled with chicken and sour cream, not fluffy and topped with syrup. What pained Misha more than that, however, was the fact that they only ate their flat pancakes on special occasions while Joey was making them for just a regular breakfast. Just a regular breakfast! Ironically, this is the reason why Misha actually loved *Friends* so much. The things that he day dreamed about was just ordinary life for the six friends living together in New York City. Everything he could ever want in life, they all had without ever giving it a second thought.

Misha silently ate his breakfast, washed his dishes, and went to change out of the shorts he slept in. After getting dressed he checked to see how much his phone had charged. Only 15%. “Chort,” Misha cursed to himself. He finished getting ready, grabbed his backpack, and intended to slip out the door to go to school.

Before he could even get past the first of the two front doors, his mother called him back in to take the full trash bag with him down to the dumpster. So he went back in, tied up the trash bag, and headed back out the two doors into the hallway.

He hated lugging the trash down all five flights of stairs. *I guess the apartment in Friends doesn't have an elevator either*, Misha thought to himself. Who could forget the scene when Rachel, Ross, and Chandler tried to move a couch up stairs? *Although I bet their stairwell didn't smell like cigarettes and mildewing potatoes and had lights that actually worked*. Misha scowled and slung the bag of trash into the overflowing dumpster that sat outside his building.

Misha knew, of course, that Rachel, Ross, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe, and Joey weren't real. He knew that the apartment that they lived in was just a set. He knew it was all just a show, yet he couldn't ignore the thought that the premise of the show couldn't be all that farfetched. Surely there were Americans, and lots of them, that had lives just like a sitcom. The writers wouldn't make up *all* of it, would they? It has to be based on reality at least a little bit, right? Misha pondered these questions of reality and entertainment as he stepped onto the bus that would take him to the center of town where his school was located.

The number 121 bus was more of a large van than it was a bus. It had doors that the driver controlled and an inside that looked like cramped airplane seating. There were six rows of seats. There were two seats per row on the left side of the aisle and just one on the right. Eighteen places to sit in total. Yet during the morning commute to downtown as many as 40 people could be crammed inside. For this reason, Misha was surprised to see that a seat was open. He gladly took it and sat down, hoping to watch at least half an episode before they reached downtown.

Before his internet browser could even load, the marshrutka had already pulled up to the next stop. A swarm of people were waiting to get on. He could see that there were going to be more passengers than seats available and that most of the oncoming passengers were women. Misha huffed. He knew the drill. He had already put his headphones back into backpack by the time the bus doors opened.

The older ladies that boarded first quickly snatched up the remaining open seats leaving the rest of the passengers to find a place to hold on and stand. Men had already begun to stand up to offer their seats to the women that hadn't initially found a seat. There were probably 30 people on the bus now.

As Misha stood up he happened to make eye contact with a fair skinned but dark haired girl that looked to be his age. Had Misha taken a moment to look at her any longer he would have noticed that she looked like a young, Ukrainian Monica. Instead, he just shyly looked down and gestured to the now vacant seat. With this action he initiated a ritualistic song and dance that had been learned, passed down, and unconsciously performed for as long as soviets had been riding on tiny buses:

“Please sit.”

“No, it’s alright. Thank you.”

“I insist. Please.”

“Okay fine. Thank you.”

And with that, the first verse of the song was complete. Misha was silently taken back about how strongly the girl played her part. So many bus rides and so many tired women wanting to just sit down and not waste time with theatrics had made Misha almost forget about the unwritten rules of eastern-bloc bus culture and how they ought to be carried out.

Warmed by the girl’s reverence for tradition, Misha almost didn't even mind standing crowded in the aisle—one hand reached up onto the ceiling bar, the other at his side holding his backpack. Just then, the dark-haired girl tugged at his sleeve. It was now she who initiated the *second* verse of the song:

“Hand me your bag.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes. Give it here.”

Misha then handed over his backpack allowing him and those around him a few more precious centimeters of space on the now crowded bus. This was a very seldomly sung verse of

the song of bus etiquette but universally known nonetheless. Then the girl, having placed her own bag at her feet, set Misha's on her lap with a blush and a smile.

There was no roar of applause that morning on the number 121 that morning for such a performance. There wasn't even an audience. There were no opening credits and there were no subtitles. This was real life. And for the past year, Misha was on the verge of missing it completely. These were the real songs of the people of Ukraine and they were being drowned out by the claps of "I'll Be There for You."