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## When the Adopted Can't Adapt

By Kate Pickert

As their mom Marianne cut up celery and opened a tub of hummus, the three Massi boys alternately darted and drifted through the kitchen. In between snacking, one took the two family dogs into the backyard to play. Another wandered in from the living room and leaned against a counter, a pair of iPod earbuds slung around his neck.

Late afternoon sunshine bathed the Massis' white colonial house in suburban New Jersey. The words "Together ... a great place to be," painted in script, adorned a wall in the kitchen, where Marianne scooted from the chicken cutlets sizzling on the stove to consult her recipe on the counter. Her husband Ray, a former police captain, arrived home from his job at the U.S. Attorney's office, and the family settled into their chairs around the dining-room table and held hands. Ray said a short prayer, and they dug in. [See TIME's video "Adoptive Mother: 'I Was Prepared to Send Ali Back.' "](#)

The only clue that the Massis are different from most other American families is visual. While Marianne and Ray have dark complexions and black hair, their boys are fair-haired. They were born in Russia and adopted by Marianne and Ray in the years after the pair wed in 1995. It was Ray's second marriage; Marianne was a 40-year-old first-time bride.

Around the dinner table that night, as on most other nights, the easy flow of the Massis' conversation obscured the painful challenges confronting them. Shain, the eldest son, has been diagnosed with a severe fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Adopted at age 6, he is now a 16-year-old ninth-grader at a special-needs school. He cannot tell time on an analog clock, and his words are tinged with a speech impediment Marianne believes is a result of his inability to hear much as a small child. Shortly after Shain arrived in the U.S., a doctor discovered an impenetrable buildup of wax in his ears that had to be removed surgically while he was under general anesthesia. Shain also steals money from Marianne and has punched holes in walls. "When he goes into a meltdown, you have to leave him alone," she says. ([See more about adoption.](#))

Ilia, the smallest of the Massi boys, is startlingly outgoing. His slight stature and rosy cheeks make him look younger than his age, 13, and the trauma he suffered during his early childhood seems long behind him until he brings it up unprompted: "Do you know about my old mother?" He has described in graphic detail how she hanged herself in front of him when he was 4.

Roman, also 13, is the quiet one, with blue eyes that look as though they could cut glass. He was adopted

from an orphanage in southwestern Russia in 2004 by another New Jersey couple, who relinquished their parental rights to the Massis after just a few months. The couple was disturbed by Roman's wild behavior and the lack of affection he showed them. When he first arrived in the Massi home, he hated being touched. "He would turn his back to you and back into a hug and only with me and my husband," Marianne remembers.

The Massis are, by their own account, an imperfect unit, propelled forward by report cards and movie nights but held back by destructive patterns and behaviors that Marianne and Ray never expected when they decided to start a family through international adoption.

Among those who have adopted school-age orphans from Russia, the Massis' experience is not atypical. For a host of reasons, children adopted from that country some 58,000 in the past two decades tend to be older and more likely to arrive in the U.S. developmentally behind their American peers and in many cases reeling from the effects of substandard orphanage care and trauma suffered at the hands of their biological parents or fellow orphans.

For a generation, American adoptive parents of these children have coped, suffered and in some instances given up hope in relative obscurity, silenced by a popular adoption culture preaching that love can heal all in "forever families" a term used to describe families formed via adoption.

In April, [Torry Hansen](#), a single parent and registered nurse in Tennessee, gave voice to those families' experience through an act both desperate and cruel. Sparking an international scandal, Hansen sent her adopted Russian-born son, age 7, alone on a plane to Moscow. In a note addressed to the Russian government, she wrote that the boy was "mentally unstable." She was promptly and brutally condemned by the Russian state and the American public.

[Read TIME's 1989 cover story about adoption.](#)

[See pictures of Moscow.](#)

Hansen should have called her adoption agency, her social worker or even the local police. But even if she had, it's not clear what help she would have been offered. Despite a broad understanding that parents often face enormous challenges after bringing home foreign orphans, no official infrastructure exists in the U.S. to help families postplacement. (The Russian government requires agencies to submit written postadoption reports, but these are seen as bureaucratic formalities, not a means to help struggling families.) The note Hansen wrote said, "I no longer wish to parent this child." Most adoptive parents won't go that far. For those unwilling to simply abandon their children, what's next?

### **"He Became the Enemy"**

"The agency's job is to process your legal paperwork, not help you take care of your child when you come home," says Joyce Sterkel, an adoptive parent who founded the Ranch for Kids. Sterkel's year-round nonprofit camp in Montana houses mostly Russian children whose American adoptive parents have chosen not to keep them at home because of their behavioral problems. The agency that facilitated Hansen's adoption, World Association for Children & Parents, offers support to families postplacement, but it's clear that most agencies do not devote nearly as many resources to struggling families as they do before

the adoptions are complete. ([See "Going Abroad to Find a Baby."](#))

Organizations like Sterkel's have sprung up to help parents cope. About 300 children adopted from abroad have spent months or even years under Sterkel's care since she opened the ranch in 2004. Some return to their adoptive families, others are adopted by second families, and still others stay at the ranch until they are adults.

In Kentucky, Lucy Armistead, executive director of All Blessings International, an adoption and humanitarian-aid organization, remembers encountering a set of parents who were horrified by their adopted son, who was sexually abusing other children. (His adoption had been processed by another agency.) "As social workers, we're not used to not being able to find resources for any given need, but there was nothing for them." In response, Armistead started Mending Hearts, a program that provides support to parents considering disrupting or dissolving adoptions. (*Disruption* refers to an adoption halted before it is finalized; a *dissolution* happens after an adoption is complete.) Mending Hearts has assisted more than 30 families across the U.S. since December 2008.

But these organizations, while laudable, can hardly handle all of the adoptive parents overwhelmed by behaviors that in extreme cases can include violence, hoarding, suicidal tendencies, catatonia, inappropriate sexual behavior and pyromania. These behaviors are not the norm, but they have been reported in hundreds if not thousands of international adoptions.

One suburban mother from the Northeast says she was warned about hoarding before she adopted a 6-year-old boy from Siberia in 2003. He exhibited the behavior and seemed to lack a sense of remorse when he misbehaved, but the family managed at first. Eventually, though, the boy began collecting sharp objects and started a fire in the basement. "He became the enemy," remembers the mother. Other family members noticed that the dog stiffened when the boy approached; they wondered if he was hurting the animal in secret. For safety purposes, the family installed an alarm on his bedroom door so they would know if he was moving freely around the house.

Five years after the boy arrived in the U.S., the mother, through a Yahoo! group, found a family in the Midwest with experience parenting foster children. The family eagerly took the boy in, fully aware of his dangerous behavior. He's happier now, according to his first adoptive mother, who says she's thrilled he was able to become part of a new family. But she remains "very bitter" toward her agency. "I do think people need to be more informed beforehand," she says. "Their philosophy is just get them here save these children and we'll worry about the rest afterward."

### **From Russia with Risks**

In the past decade, Russia has consistently been among the top three countries from which U.S. families adopt internationally, and it is one of the few major sources of foreign orphans who are white. Nearly all Russian children adopted by American parents have come from orphanages, where children 3 and under lose one IQ point for every month spent inside, researchers say. Russian orphans are more likely to have fetal alcohol spectrum disorder than those adopted from elsewhere. They are also, on average, older than adoptees from other countries and have spent more time institutionalized the factor that most impedes adjustment to life in an adoptive home. (Doctors and agency workers who have visited the worst of these facilities in Russia have described zombie-like toddlers who sit alone, rocking back and forth, staring

blankly or banging their head against walls.)

[See "Adoption: In Whose Best Interest?"](#)

[See the world's most influential people in the 2010 TIME 100.](#)

Recent guidelines instituted to encourage domestic adoption make Russian children ineligible for international adoption until they've spent six months or even a year languishing in orphanages. In 2009, just 5% of Russian orphans adopted by U.S. parents were younger than a year old. (In contrast, 86% of all children adopted from South Korea in 2009 were under a year.)

In most cases, Russian children end up in orphanages because they were abandoned, abused or neglected. Some are lucky enough to land in private institutions with adequate staffing and nutrition or to come from biological families that, though ravaged by poverty, aren't abusive. Experts say nearly all institutionalized children must catch up to their peers developmentally and academically once adopted, but in extreme cases, even remediation and counseling aren't sufficient to get adoptees on track.

An international adoption treaty, which Russia is not a party to, requires that adoptive parents complete 10 hours of preplacement training. But this baseline training often takes place via the Internet, and even the best-prepared parents can be caught flat-footed. With Russian adoptions in particular, parents eager to learn more about the children can be left in the dark. Medical records for adoptable children in Russia are widely known to contain misinformation or omit vital clues that trouble lies ahead. (Much of this is due to inaccurate translations of records and medical terminology.) "Especially in older kids, the little things that are going to stress families, like emotional and behavior problems, are very poorly described most of the time," says Dr. Dana Johnson, a pediatrician based at the University of Minnesota who has reviewed medical records for about 20,000 foreign orphans since 1984.

Hansen, for one, claimed to have been blindsided by her son's problems. "I was lied to and misled by the Russian orphanage workers and director regarding his mental stability," she wrote in the letter she tucked into her son's backpack. In response, Russia's Foreign Minister said in a statement that "adopted children from Russia are defenseless against irresponsible American adoptive parents" and called for a temporary halt to all foreign adoptions of Russian children. The 3,000 U.S. families in the process of adopting children from Russia are panicked over whether their cases will be permitted to proceed.

There has been irresponsibility on both sides. Armistead, of Mending Hearts, says there can be a wide gulf between "what parents were told and what they actually heard." After failed efforts to conceive or to adopt domestically, stories abound of American birth mothers promising their baby to a couple only to change their mind at the last minute. Some parents who adopt internationally simply choose not to be fully aware of what difficulties may ensue.

A 2008 study co-authored by Johnson surveyed 1,834 Minnesota parents who adopted foreign children in the 1990s and found that 58% hired independent U.S. physicians to review medical records preadoption. But just 31% of parents who adopted children age 5 or older—the ones most likely to bear the scars of institutionalization—did so. Nowadays, Johnson says, "more and more families are having their records reviewed," which some agencies require. But, he says, "there are agencies that discourage this type of thing

because they think it's negative or they're very interested in placing the children." International adoption is big business, with costs ranging from \$20,000 to \$50,000, including fees to agencies, governments, social workers, orphanages and doctors.

Contrast the information typically available about Russian orphans with that of orphans from China. Sara Lang, an adoption-agency professional based in Delaware who specializes in China, began working in the field after adopting two biological sisters from Russia in 2000. "We've had as much as 10 pages on children from China — blood tests, urine tests, growth reports. With my own children, we got half a page on each one. We didn't know anything about their birth parents or reason for abandonment. We had no medical test results, no psychological information, no developmental information. We had nothing."

Lang's elder daughter is now struggling with behavioral issues caused, Lang believes, by neglect she suffered during early childhood. As a toddler, she was often left alone to care for her infant sister.

"When she's been really bad, I've thought, I'll send her back to Russia, but I would never have actually done it," says Lang. "To me, that's not an option. It's the same as birthing a child. They're your child, and you deal with whatever problems they have." When Lang adopted, she took a leap of faith. "If you're not someone willing to accept all of the risks," she says, "Russia isn't where you should be going to adopt your child." In her job, however, Lang has helped find new American families for three East European children rejected by their first adoptive parents.

[See "Adoption: Nobody's Children."](#)

[See the best pictures of 2009.](#)

### **The Case for Dissolution**

Adoptive parents who experience the agony of giving a child up for re-adoption are often reluctant to broadcast their stories, out of shame or worries that their former children will forever be mired in the past. Rebecca and Jeff Johnson, who spoke to Time on the condition of not publishing their real names or their former daughter's, are one such couple. Their experience indicates that the challenges associated with parenting older adoptees are not limited to those from Russia.

The Johnsons realized quickly that Katya, the 9-year-old girl they adopted in 2006 from an orphanage in Ukraine (where the institutional culture resembles that of Russia), was not the blank slate they were hoping for. Days after she arrived in the U.S., Katya began sharing disturbing details about life in her home country: before she became an orphan, her birth mother, a prostitute, extinguished a cigarette on Katya's ankle and tried to drown her; she was left alone for weeks as a young child; she witnessed the killing of a family dog; she was sexually abused.

"We had great empathy for these stories and how wounded this child was. Our hearts were breaking for her," says Jeff, a digital sound designer living in the South. Katya was racked by violent nightmares and would sometimes scream for hours or become catatonic.

Just five weeks after Katya arrived home, an event took place that some adoption professionals would say sealed the family's fate: Rebecca gave birth. After years of failed fertility treatments and miscarriages, she

had miraculously brought a pregnancy to term while Katya's adoption proceeded.

"She felt she would never be as loved" as the baby, says Rebecca. "We figured the newborn was going to be the most time-consuming child," says Jeff. In fact, it was the opposite. Jeff and Rebecca spent nearly every night in bed debating how to help Katya, who confessed that she had never wanted to be adopted in the first place. "How do you parent a child who doesn't want to be parented?" Jeff asks. In addition to consulting with professional therapists, Jeff spent hours each day counseling Katya about right and wrong and how to function in a family all to no avail. "It was crisis management all the time."

The torment and turmoil continued for three years. Once, Katya held a knife to her throat. The police were called; she was hospitalized. "We felt like we were prisoners in our home," says Jeff. "We were paralyzed."

Katya was no happier. She demanded a new family. She dog-eared the section of the phone book for adoption services and hurled it to the floor. Jeff, stunned that his family was falling apart, remembers searching for help online and coming across the term *adoption disruption*. "I couldn't believe people were suggesting rehoming her. We believed this is our forever child," he says.

After scores of calls to adoption agencies and lawyers, he stumbled across Lucy Armistead and Mending Hearts. Almost immediately, Armistead referred Jeff to an out-of-state couple with two other children from dissolved adoptions. The families connected, and Katya happily consented to being adopted into a new family.

"I just believe there are reasons for things," says Rebecca. "We were there to get her out of her environment and situation and get her into [her new family's] hands, where she's thriving."

At 13, Katya is doing well in her homeschool classes and recently signed a contract with a modeling agency. Katya "is our success story. She's an absolute joy to me," says her new mother, whom Jeff and Rebecca asked that we not name to protect Katya's privacy. "Maybe I'm just reaping the benefits of all their hard work."

She may be right. "Disruption or dissolution can be a great option for some kids," says Armistead. "They can scapegoat their first family, and they can move on. Until they have a place to put the blame, they can't seem to move past it."

### **The Struggle to Adapt**

There are no reliable statistics on how many Americans adopting from abroad later decide to relinquish their parental rights, but researchers know that disruptions and dissolutions are more common with children adopted at older ages. Ronald Federici, a developmental neuropsychologist in Virginia who specializes in international adoptions, has, in 24 years of practice, witnessed 357 disruptions out of the approximately 11,000 children he's seen. A leader in the field of orphan trauma and rehabilitation and an adoptive father of seven children from Eastern Europe and Russia Federici estimates there have been about 4,000 disruptions or dissolutions since 1990. (He bases his tally on consultations with parent support groups, adoption agencies and social services.)

[See "Adapting to Adoption."](#)

[See pictures of President Obama in Russia.](#)

Nina Ostanina, a member of the Russian parliament who sits on the committee for family, women and children, concedes that even within her country, thousands of adopted children have been returned to state care by parents unable to cope with them. "On the whole, only 10% of the children are able to normally adapt to society after they [age out of orphanages]," she says. The rest die young, turn to crime or drugs or alcohol, or end up in prisons or on the streets, says Ostanina — a sign that Russian orphanages may cultivate destructive behavioral patterns and mental illness no matter where the children end up.

"The longer the period of time in institutional care, the more brain damage and emotional and social damage occurs," says Federici. "It's inevitable." Orphanages are often unregulated, chaotic environments with one caretaker overseeing 30 or more children. Children can emerge, says Federici, "feral, undersocialized, sexualized, aggressive and inappropriate." When these children arrive home with their new American families, they are "square pegs," he says. "You can take the kid out of the orphanage, but taking the orphanage out of the kid takes a systematic process."

This is where adoptive parents falter, and they don't have a safety net. Uninformed about their children's needs, these moms and dads frequently land in the offices of therapists with no experience treating postinstitutionalized children. Some therapists prescribe drugs to control kids' behavior; others steer parents toward "attachment therapy," a mishmash of techniques designed to prompt adopted children to bond with their new parents, including holding or touching them for hours on end. Many of these children suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder and need specialized therapies, which don't come cheap.

"Slow and steady wins the race," says Federici. Long-term therapy with professionals experienced in the field of international adoption and a stay-at-home parent are often crucial. A calm, routine home life is also far more effective than trying to treat adopted children to the wonders of life in America, a common mistake parents make. Federici recalls one set of parents arriving in his office fresh from a trip to Disney World, distraught that their newly adopted Russian children had ransacked a hotel room and urinated on Main Street U.S.A. The trip "blew [the kids'] hard drives," Federici says. It was too much, too soon.

### **Not a Fairy Tale Yet**

Ray and Marianne Massi hope they are on the other side of their most difficult challenges. All three of their boys are in therapy, and the family is buoyed by their strong Christian faith and a network of extended family, including Marianne's six sisters and Ray's three adult daughters from his first marriage.

"We had it in our minds that we would end up with who we were supposed to have. That's what we believe," says Ray. "It's a tremendous sacrifice, but you can't say it was a sacrifice that wasn't worth it. Would I give this up and not know these three young men? It's part of God's will, and it's been absolutely wonderful."

The sacrifice for Marianne included giving up a successful career as a marketing executive. (She works part time at her church but is now on an extended leave of absence.) "I had a dream job, but I knew I was going to have to walk away from it," she says. Ray and Marianne also borrowed from Ray's pension and sold a camper to help pay the adoption costs for their boys.

Despite the relative calm that has finally settled over their family, Ray and Marianne worry about the future. Will their eldest son keep stealing and one day wind up in jail for it? Will their youngest forever be haunted by the death of his biological mother? Will their son from a disrupted adoption ever trust anyone enough to form an intimate relationship?


But they are combat veterans. Survivors.

"I love my children with all my heart and am committed to doing all that I can to help them, but it is overwhelming at times," says Marianne. "If you're looking for a fairy-tale story, I'm not it. Not yet, anyway. But the story isn't over."

*With reporting by Simon Shuster / Moscow*

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