



Book Review: A Year Without Mom

Written and illustrated by Dasha Tolstikova

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Twelve-year-old Dasha lives in Moscow and discovers that she is on the precipice of a year of many changes. Dasha's father is already in the U.S., and now her mother wants to go there to study advertising at an American university. Dasha is told she will spend a year with her grandmother and grandfather. She loves her grandparents, but it is difficult to stay the whole year without her mother.

Her grandmother is a writer, and Dasha goes with her to the summer writers' retreat outside of the city. They are there in August 1991 when the coup d'état attempted to dismiss Gorbachev occurred. After the Christmas holiday in Germany with her grandmother, Dasha's regular routine resumes. But life is terrible as only a young adolescent's life can be – her school is boring, the love of her life is in love with another girl, and it is a dark and cold time of the year. There is an answer to all these troubles—she wants to go to a different school, the one Petya, the love of her life, attends. But it does not work out; Dasha does not pass the exam. With the first spring rays of sun, Dasha's life changes for the better when her mother returns, but now there is a new plan—they both will go to America. Dasha is sad to leave all her friends behind and says she will not go, but it is the adults who decide and so her new life in Urbana, Illinois is about to begin.

The book is accurate historically, and gives a true portrait of Russia and the turmoil of that time. The Russian political events of the early 1990s are the perfect background for Dasha's story. Everything in the country changed with enormous speed: politics, economics, cultural opportunities, and possibilities for travel beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. A lot of these changes are seen in the book through the Dasha's eyes. At the same time, it is a girl's story, and Dasha's life is not that different from the lives of many other girls in the world. Dasha goes to school and to evening art classes, meets with her girlfriends, and falls in love with a boy whom she meets during the summer vacation. She also reads about America and watches American movies—she loves watching *Gone with the Wind*—because she wants to imagine the place where her mother lives. For Christmas, her mother sends her a wonderful present—a huge book with all the Beatles songs!

To gain insight into other ways of life told graphically, this book may be paired with *The Other Side of the Wall* (Simon Schwartz, 2015) or *Chinese-Born American* (Gene Luen Yang, 2013) even though this book addresses a younger reader. While Dasha loses her mother for only one year, additional pairings that would address loss of one's parents could include *Under the Mesquite* (Guadalupe Garcia McCall, 2011) or *Moon over Manifest* (Clare Vanderpool, 2010).

Dasha Tolstikova is both the author and illustrator of this book. This is her first book as a writer. Her black, white, and red illustrations are simple, but compelling, and they work effectively

with the text. She adds just enough Russian letters and words into her pictures that a reader can get some taste of the Russian language. She also skillfully uses some elements of a graphic novel. More of her art may be found at her website.

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