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**Mom at Last: How I Never Gave Up On Becoming a Mother**  
**Written by Sharon Simons, The Founder of Mom at Last**

The baby house hasn't seen new paint in decades. That's what they call it, the baby house. Where they keep all the abandoned Russian babies. More precisely, it's where the state agency keeps all the unwanted Siberian babies, or maybe just the Novokuznetsk babies, the small town we have driven hours to reach. The baby house is concrete block covered in dirty stucco and the facade has a slightly depressing rhythm to it: stucco and window and patches of exposed concrete repeated in long horizontal bands across the front of the building. It doesn't look anything like a house for babies, wanted or otherwise.

The air inside our car is heavy and smells of cigarettes, sausage, and mayonnaise. We sit there at the edge of a dirt parking lot for a long moment and stare out the window. By "we" I mean my husband, Rick, and me in the back seat, and in the front, our interpreter in her punkish ball cap and a bulky Russian driver. Outside, the sky is not entirely grayblue, but strangely the same gray-blue of the baby house. As I sit here staring out the window, what strikes me, other than the bleakness of the place, is that there isn't a baby, a child, or a wayward teen in sight.

What little I know of orphanages I learned from my father. My recollection of my father's childhood runs through my mind as we approach the baby house for the first time.

My father didn't tell me his life story all at once. So I had to get it piecemeal over many years and some of the pieces remain missing. All I have are his cobwebby tales, snippets, sometimes just a sentence I can cut and paste into another story he told me years earlier.

My father's father was in the merchant marines and thus rarely home. At age five my father's mother died and a neighbor took him and his sisters in while his father was out at sea. His father soon remarried.

The new wife, my father's stepmother, was an evil witch, to hear Dad tell it when he's in the mood to say anything at all about his upbringing. When I dig deeper, he usually shuts up. But when he does let fly with some unexpected chunk of memory, I hold my tongue and listen. I am always amazed how he fills the dead air with more of his story, even when he really doesn't want to. My father was dumped in an orphanage at nine and was let loose at sixteen. These are my words not his.

I remember a night many years ago when my father and I were sitting in his living room, he in his recliner, me sinking into a comfortable sofa. He spoke slowly in a low voice, possibly to keep my mother from overhearing. He said that as a kid he used to wet the bed and each time it happened, his new mother had taken to tying him to the old red maple in the backyard. After he told me, he turned to face me, paused for a long moment as if thinking how and what to say next, and said, "All I remember is hand-sized orange and yellow leaves. I'd look up into the tree and see all those leaves just days from falling down on me."

I told him there are now rules about tying children to trees.

"That woman wouldn't have followed no rules," my father said.

My father put up with this grouchy stepmother and absent father for four years. That was when his father died of a “terrible” accident, meaning no one would tell him exactly what happened. The stepmom promptly hauled the three kids over to St. Mary’s Orphanage in Newark, New Jersey, and left them inside the redbrick building. Saint Mary’s Orphanage anchored the corner of South Orange and Sanford Avenues and looked to a frightened nine-year-old more like a prison than a devoted home for orphans. The orphanage was run by fifteen or so Catholic nuns, each seemed meaner than jailhouse guards and as uncompromising as cold steel.

Orphans like my father and his sisters ate week-old stale food and were glad to have it. For all his years at Saint Mary’s, what my father remembers the most is being hungry. And fearful. This took place in the 1950s where discipline was revered, especially in orphanages, and included smacking the children with wooden paddles to enforce obedience.

Most years, during the holidays, people bearing gifts for the children visited the orphanage. On each such delivery event, the nuns would smile and pat the backs of well-meaning businessmen, lawyers, and church leaders doing their good deed for the year. The nuns would mumble as if praying, say thank you, wave, and shut the doors. They then would have several of the stronger boys stack all the gifts in a large room, used mostly when the nuns wanted to hide things from the children, and that would be the last anyone would see of the presents.

While my father was in his early teens, he would hustle up odd jobs in town delivering newspapers and fixing broken fences and anything he could do to earn a few dollars. He would hide the money in his room where often a greedy nun would snatch up the cash and disappear. Regardless, during his time there my father always endeavored to act correctly, study hard, and better himself.

Future moms and dads would occasionally arrive at St. Mary’s ready to adopt a child and my father would dress, slick back his hair and stand in line with all the others awaiting inspection. For seven years, he endured these examinations. But despite his efforts to look good, model behavior, and burning desire to leave Saint Mary’s, he was never chosen.

The happy ending to this story is that his older sister, also a St. Mary’s orphan alum, escaped, married at seventeen, and marched right back to Stanford Avenue and pounded on the big front doors until someone handed over her little brother. Which they did.

But it’s time to enter the baby house and see our real flesh and blood boys for the first time.

“This is it,” Rick says. “Here we go.”

I look at him and smile because that’s what I do, a woman who hankers for the bright side of things, the good and the positive. If I have to, I’m perfectly willing to put on blinders and blot out all the ugliness in the world, if it helps me get what I want. And right now I want inside the baby house.

I reach for the door handle and this little gesture sets everyone in motion. We crawl out of the minivan and I take a deep breath and grip the two little brown teddy bears we brought with us. Rick holds a bag of baby clothing and a few other items and hustles us inside. The lobby of the baby house is a spiritless dump, describing it as “cozy” or even “welcoming,” would be a blatant lie. Again, no babies. I learn later that we are not allowed to see any of the other orphans and thus they are hidden conveniently out of sight. I want nothing so much as to hold my baby boys, precious little Siberian tikes I have only glimpsed in photos thirty-five days ago. In one photo Dmitry is dressed in a pink jumpsuit and he stares up at the camera, frowning, his mouth slightly open, ready to say something quirky or maybe angry. Sergey is dressed in a black and yellow bumblebee outfit, arms in the air, and he has this loving, needy look in his eye.

My husband, Rick, is a cardiologist and cardiologists are compulsively alert to looming problems. He spent I don’t know how many years at Penn State and then medical school and then in his practice looking inside the body’s dark corridors for impending problems. Before we agreed to make the trip, he reminded me what we might be in for. “A lot of fathers and mothers of Russian orphans are alcoholics,” he told me. “Vodka,” he said using his doctor’s voice, in a way that was both stern and caring. “They can’t keep a job and they can’t raise a baby, so they drop the child off at the baby house. Only the child has fetal alcohol syndrome and nobody knows it.” This was a month ago, and I can still see him making a little check mark in the air with his finger listing off troubles to come. Extreme difficulty forming social

connections. Check. Trouble with emotional ties. Check. Zero impulse control. Check. Learning disabilities. Check. Check. Check.

“You’re signing us up for a lot,” he said, “if we take in a fetal alcohol child.”

Nothing in any the documents we’ve received says anything about fetal alcohol syndrome or any other disease. Far from it. Every bit of information has given off a calibrated, but incomplete report of the boys, which probably explains Rick’s skepticism.

“The boy’s aren’t sick,” I said.

“I’m just saying.”

“Do you want to reconsider?”

Here my husband softened, as he always did when we talked about the boys. “No.”

“I’ll love them no matter what,” he said.

“Me too.”

The director of the baby house spies us standing sheepishly in the lobby, trying not to touch anything. She marches out of her office and half-shouts something in Russian at us. Our interpreter, a skinny girl with glasses and her cap now tucked away, mumbles something to me I don’t catch. I want to see the boys and I’m tired of being in the car, of meeting strangers without understanding the language, and tired of the way the Russian adoption process doles out cryptic, often conflicting, bits of information in small doses. The director is blonde, round-faced and babbles on relentlessly. She has graying teeth and heavy makeup and a body several sizes too big for her clothes. Finally, she stops talking and stares at me, then at my husband, smiles and lets loose a little gruff noise. The interpreter says there is a small problem. They only have us down for one baby. She says it as if we’d stopped at a McDonald’s and the bored sixteen-year-old at the window had forgotten to include one of our milkshakes.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“The paperwork. It says just one,” she says.

“Two,” I say. “We’ve been over all this. The paperwork, the money, it’s all correct.”

The way it works here, way out in the boonies of Siberia, is if you want a baby, or two, you follow the rules. And here are the rules. You pay thousands up front to people in America, some whom you’ve never met, don’t know, and don’t fully trust. Then, once you arrive in Moscow, you take 10,000 dollars in cash and you put 5,000 in one envelope and seal the envelope. You take 4,000 and put it in another envelope. Seal it. You take the remaining thousand and slip it into a third envelope. At some point on your trek from Moscow to the baby house, a man will ask for one of the envelopes. You give him the envelope. No talking. No questions. Later, at another time and another location, another man will ask for another envelope. You give him the envelope. Same with the last envelope. For two babies, you double the money and the envelopes. No discounts.

What’s the money for, you ask?

No questions. We already told you.

To what degree that money filters down to care for the babies isn’t clear, but it’s not much, judging by the dilapidated condition of the baby house.

The director and our interpreter whisper in Russian. Occasionally, our interpreter turns to me and says, “Is much better, I think.” Or, she says, “Okay, the paperwork, it must not be correct.” Or she says other things equally unlikely to get us anywhere. By now, I’m gyrating with unhappiness, straining to smile at the director, moving my hands and shaking my head, and beginning to feel what mothers must feel who have inexplicably lost a child. I haven’t been a mother for even one second, and I have lost my child. This is a child I’ve never seen in the flesh, never held, never comforted, but the feeling of loss is no less real.

The director shouts and the interpreter says, “You get Sergey,” and pauses and says, “now.”

“Yes, of course I want Sergey, but I also want Dmitry.” Here I pull out a photo, the one of Dmitry in pink, as if proving he is mine. I have his picture, don’t I?

“Is not a problem,” the interpreter says.

“Can I help?” I say knowing full well that I am ill-equipped to track down the whereabouts of a twenty-one-month-old in a far off Siberian baby house, especially if he is not so much lost as hidden.

“Is not necessary,” she says. “The director, she is looking,” which isn’t true because the director is flashing her graying teeth at me, shaking her head as if to say, “Only one baby today.”

Rick quietly intones something to me and the interpreter and the director whisper, but no one is looking for Dmitry.

Our interpreter nudges Rick and me down the hall into another room, this one radiant in its cleanliness and color and aura of hope, all elements conspicuously missing from the rest of the baby house. Without warning a thick-bodied woman appears with Sergey and carries him to the center of a little play area filled with toys and places him on the floor, the floor itself a flimsy ancient carpet that looks much like a giant board game, one that involves trains, train tracks, train stations and the like. Sergey is sitting squarely in the middle of the tracks but doesn’t notice, or if he does, he appears happy to find himself at the center of things. The director casts a frown at us. We have an hour with him and we’d better get to it while she tracks down Dmitry, or at least that’s what she means if not exactly what she says. I sit on the carpet next to Sergey, a fourteen-month-old cutie in his red-and-white striped outfit, and I brush his blond hair with my hand and glance from Rick to the interpreter to the backside of the director marching away, hopefully toward my other boy.

Sergey sits next to me, inhaling giant breaths through his nose as if breathing me in. I speak to him and make soft little cooing noises. Rick kneels beside us and takes Sergey’s arm and strokes it. I show him the teddy bear, wriggle it to get his attention, and then I place it in his lap and let go. Sergey watches me, ignoring the bear at first, then leans his little head forward and smells it and wraps a skinny arm around its body and squeezes and squeezes.

There is more whispering off in the hallway and Dmitry finally appears, a tiny body cradled in a woman’s hefty arms. Compared to Sergey, Dmitry is a mess. Our order for two babies has apparently gotten waylaid, and as a rush job Dmitry hasn’t been properly prepared. He looks as if he’s been plucked from a box of mischievous babies, shaken and lightly dusted like you might a blouse you hadn’t worn in a while, and handed over. He isn’t dirty exactly, but he isn’t as spruced up and prepped as Sergey, as if the kids are only buffed, polished, and put on display when the adoptive parents show up for a test drive. He has red bumps all over his face from what I hope is only spiteful mosquitoes and nothing more serious. The bites, if that’s what they are, have been treated with something blue and pasty dabbed over the red. My little Dmitry is polka-dotted in baby blue and rose-red and, given his sallow skin, the combination isn’t at all pretty.

That, and he is wailing in one long, noisy, burst of anger, pain, or I don’t know what. Everyone vanishes. It’s just Sergey and Dmitry and Rick and me off in one corner of the play area, our little family parked on the floor of a baby house in Novokuznetsk staring at each other.

## About the Author



Sharon Simons, simply put is a tenacious woman who never allowed herself to be discouraged in her determination to be a mother. Sharon works part time as a Director of Marketing in the insurance industry and used her marketing skills to create and promote her website Mom At Last, ([www.momatlast.com](http://www.momatlast.com)) and has recently launched The Adoption App on iTunes, ([www.theadoptionapp.com](http://www.theadoptionapp.com)). She hosts a weekly internet show on Mom TV and has appeared on Dr. Oz sharing her story. She has also written many published articles about her journey becoming a mom. Sharon, like many women, struggled to find love and family; she wants to share her journey to inspire others that it is possible. Purchase a Signed Copy of Mom at Last: How I Never Gave Up On Becoming a Mom by visiting

<http://www.MomatLast.com/Memoir/>