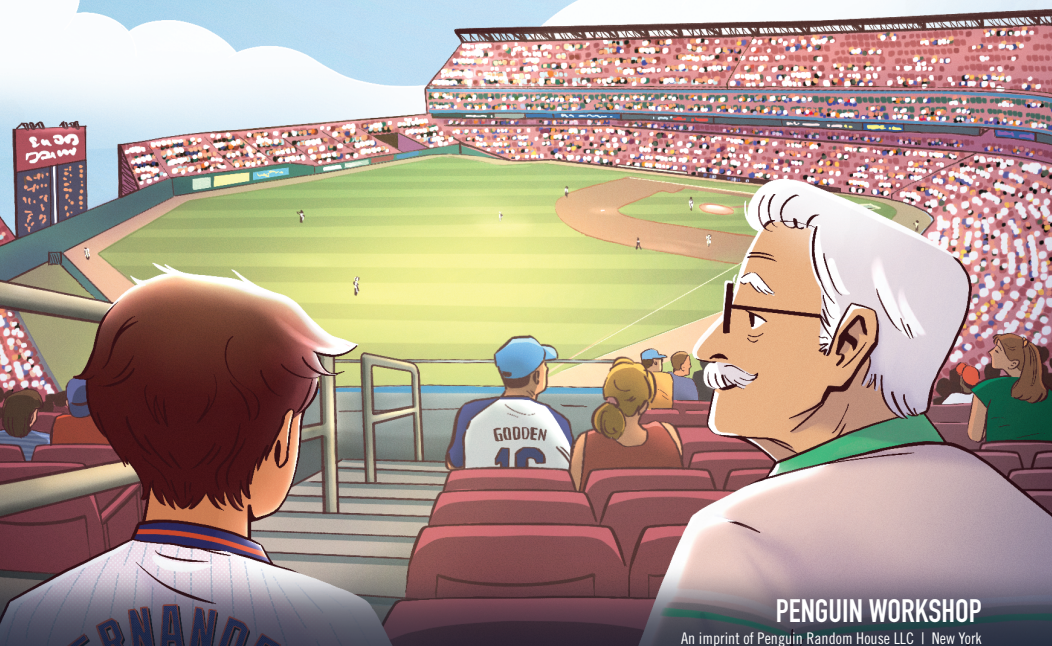


It's the summer of 1986, and Yasha Reznik doesn't care about his parents' "American Dream." Just because *they* wanted to move to the suburbs of New Jersey, doesn't mean that *he* wanted to. Yasha's dream is to make it through his bar mitzvah, watch the New York Mets go all the way this year, and fit in at his new school.

But fitting in when he's from one of only two Russian families in town may be harder than he thinks. Even ditching his Russian name, in favor of the more American *Jake*, doesn't seem to help. The only person who seems to really get him is Bernie, his elderly pal from the senior citizens home where Yasha is doing community service for his bar mitzvah project.

Then Bernie says his dream is also to see the Mets make it to the World Series. And Yasha may not know his Torah portion yet, or why he feels alone even with his new "friends," but he does know one thing: somehow, someway, he's going to get those tickets.



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YASHA'S
Amazin'
BAR MITZVAH

 *by Margaret Gurevich* 

Penguin Workshop



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AUGUST 20, 1986

The dopey smiles on my parents' faces make me want

to hurl. I sit quietly, refusing to acknowledge them. I've got nothing to say, not when they've turned my world upside down.

"Our own driveway," Mom says as Dad makes a left onto the gravelly path. "Can you believe it?"

I suck in air through my teeth and count to ten before responding. "Yeah, great stuff." The words fall like stones, heavy and emotionless. I won't give them anything.

Dad puts the car in park and the two of them just sit there. Mom puts her head on his shoulder, leaning into his hug, and I hold back an eye roll. *They're* happy about this move at least. Might as well let them bore each other with their joy while I unload the car. I grab four bags at once.

It's only when I'm standing at the front door that I realize my parents have the keys. They're probably still sitting there, talking about how they finally achieved THE AMERICAN DREAM.

Because I've heard them talk about this goal of theirs almost every day of my thirteen years, I do my best to push back the anger bubbling in my chest. It's not like they uprooted my

life or anything. Not like they dragged me away from my home mere weeks before my bar mitzvah, from the friends I would've celebrated with. I shuffle back to the car, paste a smile onto my face, and stretch out my hand. "Keys, please?"

Mom's head is still on Dad's shoulder. "You don't want to check out the backyard? Our own backyard! Can you believe it?"

I grit my teeth and wonder what else she'll be excited about. *Our own mailbox, right by the door! Can you believe it?* I slowly inhale, calming myself. "Later, for sure. But I have to use the bathroom."

She hands me the envelope with the keys, and as I leave, she and Dad start gushing about the tiled bathroom. The bathroom in our Brighton apartment had green seventies-style wallpaper. Apparently, tiles are a big step up.

I walk in the door, and as much as I hate to admit it, I'm impressed. While they've visited the house many times, this is my first time seeing the place. Four of our Brighton kitchens could fit into this one. Wooden cabinets, framed by sunny-yellow wallpaper, cover the wall. Note to self: Wallpaper is okay in kitchens. There is also a big window, right above the sink, overlooking the backyard.

"Now imagine," Dad says, coming up behind me, huge cardboard box labeled KITCHEN in his hands, "staring out that window while you're eating breakfast every morning. It's like being in the middle of nature."

I walk to the window and look outside. The yard is full of unruly green grass, and the old owners left a dirty table and

chairs on the patio. Brighton was in New York City. Patches of grass lined the curbs, and our kitchen window looked out onto the fire escape. Our other windows only had views of whatever was happening on the street below. Often, that meant people not curbing their dog's poop. I can't imagine stray poop lining the perfectly manicured lawns of this suburban New Jersey town.

"Wait until you see your room," Mom says. "Ignore the wallpaper. We're going to let you paint it whatever colors you like."

My room in Brighton was covered in Mets posters, and that was just fine with me. But I know this is another version of *Can you believe it?!* "Sounds good," I say, grabbing two boxes with my name on them and following her into the hallway.

"Ta-da!" she says, opening the door to a room the size of our old living room. There's a walk-in closet, and a window takes up a side of one wall.

"Wow." My anger fades for two seconds. They even got me a new bed. I had pretty much outgrown my single, and this one has built-in shelves at the head and bottom. "When did you get this?" I plop down on the firm mattress.

She beams, and a little warmth lights up my chest. Moving before my final year of junior high was the last thing I wanted to do, but it's nice to see her so happy. It's been a while.

"You know how Dad and I have been here every weekend for a month cleaning and setting up? We finally got the bed last week. I'm so glad you like it." She tears up and gives me a

hug. “Well,” she says, voice shaky, “I’m going to clean the table on the patio. We can try one of the local delis for lunch and have a picnic outside. Won’t that be wonderful?”

She doesn’t wait for my answer and hurries out to get things ready. I kick off my Converse and lie down on the bed.

My best friends, Slava and Zhenya, are probably still at the beach or maybe heading up to the boardwalk to grab our favorite lunch—spicy shashlik. There were a ton of delis, pizza joints, and diners on the drive here, but not one Russian store. A realization clutches at my stomach, which has nothing to do with hunger. Brighton had a lot of Russian stores because it had a lot of Russians. If there’s not even one Russian store here, does it mean we’re the only Russian family in this town? The lump in my gut grows bigger.

“Yasha!” Dad calls from the kitchen. “Come get the rest of your boxes.”

I sigh and push myself off the bed. I’ll unpack, but first I have to do one thing. I remove a Mets poster and tape from one of my boxes and hang my favorite player, Keith Hernandez, on the wall by the window. Keith seems to be looking around the room like he has no idea how he got here.

Same here, man.

“Yasha!” Dad calls again, now with an edge to his voice.

The lump has traveled to my throat. “Well, Keith,” I say, “welcome to your new home. You get a big wall all to yourself. Can you believe it?”



AUGUST 21, 1986

When I drag myself to the kitchen the next morning,

sunlight streams through the window, highlighting Mom and the newspaper spread out beside her.

“This is what it’s all about,” she says, waving at the window behind her. “You can even hear the birds!”

“You’d think we were in a Disney movie,” I gripe as I pour myself a bowl of cereal and milk. “So much nature . . . is unnatural.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Mom says, patting my hand. “Your dad and I started our day just sitting outside with a cup of coffee.” She closes her eyes. “It’s so peaceful.”

Peaceful is code for *boring*. In Brighton there was always something going on—honking taxis, screaming drivers, people shouting to one another over their fire escapes.

“Hmph,” I mumble, shoving the cereal into my mouth. I know it seems like I’m not giving this place a chance, but this was always *their* dream. Couldn’t it have happened later? Like after I graduated high school?

“I don’t want to rush you,” Mom says, “but you need to finish up and get dressed. Katya and her son are coming by in half an hour.”

I swirl the little mushy circles around in my bowl. “Katya the realtor?”

“Yep,” Mom says. “We really should get to know her family. She’s plugged in to all things Rockwood. And she’s Russian like us.”

Interesting. Maybe there are *two* Russian families in this town—including us. I so took blending in for granted in Brighton.

“I was going to call Slava.”

Mom cocks her head to the side. “You can call him anytime. You’ll be starting school in a couple of weeks. Don’t you think it’s a good idea to meet some of the Rockwood kids?”

Sure, it’s a good idea. Eventually. But I know that head tilt of hers—evidence that a question isn’t really a question. In this case, the only answer is yes.



At exactly 10:30, the doorbell rings. Mom flings open the door and hugs Katya immediately. A boy with blond spiky hair stands behind her, checking out his feet, which are decked out in white high-tops with black stripes on the sides—the fancy new Converse Weapon.

“Come in, come in!” Mom says, ushering them both inside. “Katya, this is Yasha.”

“I prefer Katie,” Katya says, extending her hand. “This,” she says, pushing the boy forward, “is my son, Alex.”

“Yo,” Alex says, stumbling toward me. He looks me over, and I can tell by the expression on his face—like he’s smelled a fart—that something feels off to him.

If I had to guess, it’s my sneakers—last year’s style purchased on sale last month—or my jorts and T-shirt, gold chain on display. My Brighton style clearly clashes with Alex’s Rockwood preppy: pink polo shirt, collar up, tucked into khaki shorts.

“Yo,” I say back, and stare at him until he looks away. I was worried about being the only Russian kid in town, but Alex doesn’t make me feel better. He may be Russian, but he’s not Brighton Russian.

“Why don’t the two of you get to know each other?” my mom says. Her voice sounds a little too high-pitched. “Is your soccer ball unpacked?”

“One sec,” I say.

As I walk to my room, I hear Katie tell my mom about “the best lawn guy,” even though we don’t need a guy. Dad was so excited to buy the Super Cutter 3000—“guaranteed to get any weed, no matter how deep,” according to the box. Sure enough, my mom answers, “Pyotr always dreamed of his own lawn. He can’t wait to dig in.”

I bring the ball into the kitchen and motion for Alex to go outside. As I close the door behind me, I hear Katie say, “Just in case Pete changes his mind, I’ll leave the landscaping card right here. Trust me. You’ll thank me.”



Alex follows me to our backyard, and I kick the ball to him. He puts his hands in his pockets and leans against a tree. “I don’t play.”

What skills do you need to kick a ball back? “Does anyone here play?” I ask. Our staring game can’t continue, so I use my nervous energy to dribble the ball back and forth myself.

“Not really,” Alex says. “Baseball is the thing to do here. It starts in the spring, but my friends and I play in the park down the street when the weather is decent.”

I kick the ball from one foot to the other. “My friends and I played too, but not like on a team or anything.”

“You don’t have to be good,” he says, finally making eye contact again. He seems to be offering me an invite.

“Cool.” Is he warming up to me? I kick the ball to him again, but he just lets it pass. My face burns, and I look away, feeling like an idiot. I leave the ball and walk over to one of the chairs on the patio.

Alex follows me and brushes the seat with his hand before sitting down. My mom scrubbed those chairs well; not a speck of dirt or pollen smears the seats. Are all kids here this obnoxious? I fidget with my gold chain and notice Alex watching.

“So, uh,” he says, “I’ll introduce you to my friends next week. We can all go to the pool or something.”

I stop fidgeting and look at him. He’s smiling but lacing his fingers together, like he’s nervous. Maybe he’s as weirded

out by this parent setup as I am. We're way past the age of playdates.

"Yeah, sure."

We hear our moms' laughter through the open window. Alex leans back in his seat and sighs. We're stuck with each other. May as well make the best of it. He turns in my direction, clearly realizing he has to make an effort too. "Sooo, what was Brighton like?"

I perk up. Whether he really wants to know or not, it's a topic I'm happy to talk about. "A lot less quiet."

Alex laughs. "You mean you're not loving being bored out of your mind? I bet New York had stuff to do too."

I nod. "We lived near Coney Island, so my friends and I went on the boardwalk and to the amusement park a lot."

"No kidding? There's nothing like that here."

"Wow, you're really selling this place."

He shakes his head. "Nah, that's my mom's job. I tell it like it is."

Alex seems like he may take a page out of my friend Slava's book—what you see is what you get. I like that. I motion for Alex to move closer, like I'm going to tell him a secret. "Serious question," I say, "lots riding on your answer."

Alex moves back a little, his smile wavering. "Yeah?"

"Mets or Yankees?"

"Is that even a real question?" Alex asks, eyes narrowing. "Mets all the way."

I raise my palm, and he slaps it and grins.

We hear the door slam, and Alex starts to get up. “So, I’ll see you next week?”

“For sure,” I say, actually getting excited to check out the summer scene here. Alex ended up being okay.

He passes the soccer ball on his way out of my backyard and pauses. “Hey,” he says, like the idea just occurred to him, “Yasha is short for Yakov, right?”

I nod. I was named after my grandpa Yakov. He was religious, but you didn’t want to advertise being Jewish in Russia, so my parents gave me the shortened Russian version of the name.

“How do you feel about Jake, short for Jacob?” Alex asks, his eyes not looking directly into mine, just like when we first met. “It’s the American version of Yakov,” he adds quickly so I won’t think he just pulled the name out of his butt.

I shrug. His mom’s words echo in my head: *I prefer Katie*. The quick way she changed my dad’s name from Pyotr to Pete. I swallow. “What’s wrong with Yasha?”

“As one Russian to another,” he says, biting the inside of his cheek and meeting my eyes again, “trust me. You’ll thank me.”