

Welcoming Jesse

He was a four-year-old in a Bulgarian orphanage, a place where just surviving left no time for play. Then he woke up with an American family that jumped on trampolines, threw water balloons—and loved him.

By Melissa Fay Greene

In March 1999 I took an orphanage child on an outing. The little boy came willingly, shyly, bravely, with a small swagger, into the director's office. A teacher rooted around in a deep plastic sack behind the desk and fished out a pair of black Velcro sneakers that were slightly too small. I zipped him into an American-made blue-jean jacket, and out we went. The front door of the old, pink two-story stucco building in rural Bulgaria opened onto an avenue of grass. Geese scuttled back and forth through the puddles.

The little boy had just turned four years old, a Romany child (a Gypsy), with dark brown mischievous eyes, black hair, brown skin, a smile of white baby teeth. He gave a high-pitched shriek of happiness when he stepped outdoors and saw the geese, and he pointed, but he didn't know the word for geese. He knew the word for dog—kooche!—and screamed it happily again and again because there were plenty of mongrels in the park to which I took him.

I showed him you could throw rocks into water, and we threw pebbles and handfuls of sand into a tired stream for an hour. He was dazzled by it all—wind, sky, clouds, and the clatter of rocks into the water. In his gaiety he leaned so far over the stream, into the wind, that I was hanging on to the back of his jacket for the last ten minutes as he dropped his pebbles from a nearly horizontal position.

The round-the-world trek in search of a child usually begins quite simply, with the thought How would a child go with this? Or, for parents with children, as in our case, How would another child go with this?—"this" being one's life; one's house or apartment; one's vehicle; one's stance, pro or con, on gerbils; whether one feels toothpaste should reside primarily inside the tube or should protrude gummily from under the cap, lacquering the exterior; and, finally, one's potential ease of access to large quantities of Barbie outfits and Lego blocks.

Later, if the anticipated child is to arrive through an international adoption agency, there will be time to master the vocabularies of immigration, of infectious diseases, of attachment disorders. But a prospective parent does not start down the road to adoption after contemplating the one-child-per-family policy of China or the demise of the Soviet Union, nor after thumbing through the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. In the beginning, a parent is musing about umbrella strollers and night-lights and Babar.

It takes a great leap of faith, everyone agrees, to adopt a child, and probably a greater leap to adopt a child from another country, a child of the Carpathian Mountains, of the Yangtze River, of the Bay of Bengal, of the Amazon. But the fortress of the family, of the bloodline, is willingly breached; the stranger is embraced. There is about it a thrilling step into the unknown and a willingness to move into the play of large human forces, of history and the displacement of communities and social upheaval and famine. And, on some level, the feeling I can't save all the children, but I can save this one.

Jesse and I left the orphanage and went with his teacher to her apartment in the nearby city. Although the little boy remained calm, his eyes were wide and his fingers were trembling with curiosity, so I gave him permission to explore my belongings. He unzipped and zipped, unzipped and zipped every compartment on the suitcase, backpack, and camera bag; he found snaps, too, and buttons and screw tops. He spent 15 minutes sorting through a velvet bag filled with my earrings, and he saw they came in pairs. The teacher had a shelf in her bedroom with cut-glass perfume bottles of tantalizing sizes and shapes; the little boy popped off the top of each and sniffed—his eyebrows raised—and carefully put each cap back on. But when I tried to hand him a stuffed teddy bear, a gift to him from my kids back home, he gave a small cry and huddled in fear.

returned with him to his orphanage's playground on a sunny morning. The Pope could not have had a finer reception at the Sea of Galilee than I had among those children, as the word Mama! flew from mouth to mouth. A plump, cropped-hair little girl ran over and attached herself to me. "Mama," she pleaded, with crinkled forehead, lifting her arms to be held. Suddenly I was in the center of ten, of 20 preschoolers—beautiful dark-eyed children!—and their little hands were petting me, stroking me, trying to hold my hands, slipping in and out of my pockets. One hand captured an empty plastic film canister from my coat pocket, and a rather lopsided-looking boy rapidly limped away with his treasure, then stopped nearby to examine it, his fingers also itching to play, to manipulate. The children's caregiver looked at me to see if the boy could have whatever it was he'd stolen, and I nodded vigorously up and down. But in Bulgaria a nod means no and a shake of the head means yes, so she ran after the boy in order not to offend the American visitor, the visiting Mama, and he fled with it.

Dozens of children had playground structures to climb on but nothing to play with. I saw one piece of a broken shovel, and I saw a few scraps of cellophane, perhaps from a package of cigarettes, and these items were passed hand to hand among the children. Children brought them to me, too, and I caught the rhythm: that I was to examine it, praise it to the skies—"This is a very fine piece of cellophane you have here"—and hand it back.

At lunchtime, they all marched inside and found their little chairs at the long tables. The lunchroom staff played a cassette tape of children's songs for them to listen to while they ate. At nap time they would all march to their beds. At potty time they would line up and sit down on a long row of potty-chairs. At shower time, they would undress, line up, and be soaped up and rinsed off in rapid order. It's like day care 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It's like a loving but poorly equipped preschool from which children never are picked up by parents or baby-sitters waiting in a long line of vans and sport utility vehicles, holding a car-pool number out their window.

The little boy and I were invited to spend the night at his teacher's apartment. I tried to bathe him, but he wouldn't sit down in the bathtub, had never heard of such a thing, though he was highly entertained by the white tub and all the smashing water. I shampooed his hair and dressed him in fuzzy, footed, orange pj's from an Atlanta department store, and when he burst back upon the dinner party in the kitchen, our Bulgarian hosts shouted, "Bravo!" and, on closer inspection, announced he now smelled like an American.

In the night, I saw him wake up scared in the strange bed and room, and my murmured foreign words were of no comfort; he rocked himself back and forth, sitting up in bed. I felt as if I were looking into his past, a long line of cribs in rooms to which caregivers didn't come when children cried in the night. He rocked faster and harder and then suddenly threw himself down and went back to sleep.

The next morning he was awake before me and greeted me with laughing eyes and a huge smile, a smile made bigger by the fact that he was wearing many circles of lipstick. He had unzipped my suitcase and purse and cosmetic bag—like a series of Russian wooden nesting dolls—and opened the lipstick and used it just right, put it back into its case, into the bag, into the purse, into the suitcase, zipping up everything, then sat on the foot of my bed and waited. What could I say?

"Bravo, little boy," I said and remembered to shake my head from side to side.

When I first brought him home, he was lost in bewilderment as the older children—four of them, ages seven to 18—and their friends romped around him. I realized immediately: He does not know how to play. The world of childhood fun and make-believe was foreign to him. Though he'd spent the last three years in the nonstop company of other children, day and night, bedtime and morning and mealtime and showers, it was not about play. They were not having fun. They were surviving together. And even among preschool-age orphanage children, there was a harsh social hierarchy: There were kids who hit, kids who stole food.

Before I traveled to Bulgaria, a developmental pediatrician here urged me to find out if the child was capable of imaginative play—it would reveal some important cognitive and emotional issues—so I took along some absurdly funny toys, including a tiny fuzzy weasel dressed in a frock and bonnet. When I produced it, the little boy gasped and fell backward in horror. I demonstrated it was just a toy, whereupon he tried to beat it to death with an umbrella. I came home uncertain of the result of my experiment.

In his new house in Atlanta, he sat and watched quietly as the light-hearted American children performed antics and shrieked with laughter. Coming from a utilitarian world, he could not make out the point as my seven-year-old daughter, Lily, and her friends wildly flung their hair and danced to radio music, or dug through a costume box to dress themselves outlandishly. The trampoline in the backyard produced no food, nor cleanliness, nor rest; why were children pitching themselves into the air only to come back down in the same place?

A few days after Jesse arrived, 15-year-old Seth handed him a deflated balloon. He was pleased. "Eema balloon! Eema balloon!" he said proudly—"I have a balloon!" Seth lured Jesse into the bathroom and filled up the balloon with water. The child's eyes widened as the balloon grew fat and jiggly. Then Seth enticed him out to the back porch, helped him onto a porch chair, and instructed him

to heave the beautiful green water balloon over the side. Jesse watched as the balloon fell and exploded onto the driveway. He hung a long time over the railing, looking down at the puddle and balloon fragments. When he finally drew back and turned around, he had a look on his face that said, "What a wonderful country." He insisted Seth spend the next four hours with him repeating the process.

On a Saturday night two weeks after Jesse's arrival, Lily and two girlfriends created a sparkling tent under the dining-room table: They taped strands of tiny orange Halloween lights underneath the table, threw blankets over the top of it and sleeping bags inside. They invited Jesse into the cave and then plugged in the lights. It took his breath away. In that instant, I thought, he got it. The magic of the place transmitted a message of childhood fun of such pure essence that even he couldn't miss it. He scooted out, ran upstairs for his pillow, returned, and made himself a little nest, calling, "Leka nosht!"—Good night!—to everyone as if he were in on an enormous joke. Several months ago, we showed him the Walt Disney video Hercules. It was a watershed event for Jesse. He evidently noticed many likenesses between himself and the hero in terms of divine origin, teen-idol good looks, and superhuman strength. (It's an adoption story, too, but he's not conscious of that aspect.) "Cha-chee not here," he said one night at the dinner table. He pointed to himself: "This Gerkules."

The next morning he ran into the kitchen after a sneeze and screamed, "Gerkules need Kleenex!" My husband observed that it was probably the first time the words Hercules and Kleenex had ever appeared in the same sentence. Lily suited him up in a purple cape, plastic knight helmet, belt, plastic knife from a toy kitchen set, and sandals. He has stuck with that outfit every day since, although some days he is Hercules and other days he is Hercules's best friend. He has placed himself in charge of keeping dragons at bay for our family.

"You scared of dragons, Mama," he reminded me one morning. "Cha-chee kill them. Cha-chee Gerkules's friend." One night at bedtime he had misplaced his plastic knife and was in true distress—what to do if dragons appeared out of the night? I went downstairs and returned with a fireplace poker, which he accepted as a powerful weapon, clearly a good choice for your basic young dragon-fighting Roma-Bulgarian.

He now sleeps with the fireplace poker under his bed. When he comes into my room in the middle of the night to snuggle with us, he carefully transfers the fireplace poker to underneath our bed. We humor him, yet underlying our amusement is our knowledge that this is one small boy who has known real-life evil and danger. He has survived abandonment, multiple orphanage placements, bullies, and the persecution and poverty of his people, the Roma. My older children have learned some dark lessons from Disney stories, but Jesse has had his own life lessons confirmed: In the life of a hero, there is always a dragon.

Yesterday morning he bounded into the kitchen all dressed and wearing two freshly unwrapped sanitary napkins, one taped to each wrist, "Like Gerkules," he proudly announced. His older brothers staggered out of the room laughing as if they were choking to death.

I said he really couldn't wear those to preschool.

"No?" he asked sadly. "Miss Pat saying no?"

"No, Mama saying no."

"Cha-chee too strong? Cha-chee scare other children?"

"Mmm, that's not really the problem."

"What?...What, Mama?"

"Because they're Mama's."

"Mama give ne Cha-chee?"

"No."

"Why?"

I took him out that very afternoon to the nearby sports store, and we bought two black Nike sweatbands for the wrist. "Strong," he said appreciatively, in a deep voice, admiring his own wrists.

"Strong like Gerkules." [H Biography](#) | [Author Profiles](#) | [Book Tour](#)

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