

## NATALIYA NEDZHVETSKAYA – “MY LIFE”

I was born on the outskirts of Moscow, Russia, on July 11, 1991, while it was still the Soviet Union. At times my childhood memories seem more like vague dreams than concrete occurrences. In one of my earliest memories, I’m eating raspberries from our neighbor’s bushes while my mother digs for potatoes. It’s a warm, sunny day and the raspberries feel tart and sweet on my tongue. I am at the communal gardens about a mile from where we used to live. People have continued visiting the gardens even after it’s become politically incorrect. Apparently, cucumbers and potatoes taste the same whether grown under communism or capitalism. I am four at the time.

Sometime after my fifth birthday, my father, my mother, my brother, and I left Moscow and moved to New York City. Despite both my parents having been college-educated engineers, we had a very difficult time during our first few years in the United States. Having virtually no savings and no English-speaking skills, my parents had to accept whatever jobs they could find. My father handed out flyers on the street and my mother cleaned houses. We lived on West 190th Street, deep in Washington Heights. My childhood years were a strange mixture of Russian, Hispanic, and American influences. I loved growing up in the city – the immeasurable chaos, the minute overlapping details of people’s lives, the constant motion were all instrumental in shaping the person I’ve become. To this day, I find some sort of somber beauty in *National Geographic* editorials on inner-city environments and war-torn villages.

Living in several different places in that same neighborhood of Washington Heights, my brother and I changed schools three times in four years. My family’s dynamic changed as well. I don’t know if I’ve ever been part of a truly happy family, but I’ve certainly been part of an unhappy one. My parents’ marriage began falling apart almost as soon as we moved to America, if not before. For the last two years of their marriage, civil conversation ceased completely. I was nine when my parents were divorced. Most children have a dif-

difficult time with divorce, dreading the very mention of the word. I was actually happier after my parents went their separate ways. It meant I could finally come into my own, rather than constantly having to worry about the problems of others. Ironically, coming into my own would take a much longer time than I had anticipated.

A few months after the divorce, my mother found an ad for an engineering job in suburban New Jersey. I had been excited for the move, relishing the idea of seeing a new place, but soon discovered the devastation of homesickness. My first year in New Jersey was one of the most miserable in my life. Though my mother came home much earlier, I was alone a greater portion of the time. In those lonely hours, I found the quiet comfort of books – truly one of the most valuable discoveries a person can make. While living in the fictional worlds of Lewis Carroll, Jules Verne, and Charlotte Bronte, I gradually adjusted to the brave, new world around me.

Problems have a tendency of staying around, changing their shape but retaining their complexity. There were still periods of difficulty in my life, such as my mother's unemployment and lack of health insurance, but I found myself ignoring these problems as best I could. Ignorance wasn't a solution but it was the best I could manage. During this time, I entered high school, attending the Academy of Allied Health and Science in Neptune, New Jersey. It was the fresh start I desperately needed. For the first time in my life, I felt I was being honest with the people around me. As a result, I started being honest with myself.

When I was a child I would stare at the sun, despite the blinding pain, just to make sure it was really there. It wasn't enough just seeing the light around me or feeling the sunshine on my skin – I needed to see it with my own eyes. In this same way, I felt I had to accept my past because I needed to know I was more than the present. Though it was painful at first, I realized that I still felt guilty for the difficulties I had encountered, as if those obstacles had somehow made me a worse person. I finally came to understand the lie I was living. If anything, overcoming those obstacles had given me resolve and empathy that made me unique. At the end of my delusion, I

stared at the sun and rather than being blinded by what I saw, the past and present became strangely illuminated.

## COMMENTARY

In this essay, the author undertakes the difficult task of relating the story of her entire life instead of focusing on a singular event or experience. This essay is effective, but perhaps it could have been stronger had the writer chosen to concentrate on a less expansive topic.

Students are often instructed to avoid writing about the notorious four D's – death, depression, drugs, and divorce. While this advice holds some merit, it should not deter students from addressing these issues if they truly contributed to life-altering experiences. This writer does just that by tackling an ambitious topic: the consequences of her parents' divorce.

While doing so, the author delivers her words with ease. Her style is lyrical and effortless. She addresses the joys and difficulties in her life with the same weight, neither demanding praise nor pity from the reader. She writes with an admirable straightforwardness and honesty – traits that make her both likeable and believable.

Given that the topic she chose was so expansive, the writer does not directly take a long enough look at some of the turning points in her life, a key goal when writing application essays. As successful as the essay is, this is a pitfall to consider when dealing with such ambitious topics.

—Wendy Chang