**The Girl Who Became 41**

**A Short Story**

**By Galina**

Once upon a time there lived a girl called Sasha. Sasha wore glasses and loved mathematics. Sometimes it seemed like she loved mathematics more than her own home. She even went to school on snow days, when she didn’t have to – that’s how much she loved mathematics!

She also played with trucks, licked icicles, stomped in puddles, and sneaked into construction sites. It was lucky that Sasha’s city had all of that. When someone got murdered in her building, she stared at the blood stain on the wall and poked it with a stick, because it seemed like the thing to do.

Then, as Sasha was growing up, she began to suspect that there was more to life than stomping in puddles and poking at blood stains on the wall. She wanted to see what else was out there. The only problem was that the city where Sasha lived didn’t let anyone out. It was one of those very caring cities: it loved its boys and girls so much that it couldn’t let a single one go.

It was then that Sasha thought of becoming a number. After all, numbers could go anywhere.

And, maybe, as a number, she could get bigger, stronger, more powerful, and then come out into the human world when she was ready.

Sasha closed her eyes, took a deep breath and thought of a number. And then, just like that, the world around her changed.

“Hey there,” she heard a voice behind her back. She turned around and saw… somebody!

“What are you?” Sasha asked.

“I am Fourteen!” the somebody said to her.

“I am Sasha!”

“I don’t think so. You are **1**!”

 “Really?” Sasha looked herself over critically. She really was **1**, with the sharp edges and a poky point on top. “But I wanted to be **77**!”

 “Everyone starts as **1**,” Fourteen replied. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“No,” Sasha said. In fact, nobody told her anything.

“You should have learned the rules before deciding to play the Numbers game,” Fourteen disapproved. But Fourteen’s disapproval faded quickly, replaced by optimism. “Well, at least we don’t start out as Zero! Or in the Negative!”

“True,” agreed Sasha, although she felt a little disturbed.

“I’ll show you around!” Fourteen offered.

“Thanks,” Sasha agreed.

Fourteen thought it best to explain to Sasha the basic rules of the Number World and the laws of the Number Line that lets everyone know where their place is. Overall, it was desirable to be Big, Positive, and Whole. (Whether it was better to be Odd or Even was still debated).

Sasha began to feel like she was getting the hang of it, but then she heard a terrible noise, as if a helicopter was approaching. “Run!” voices shouted. “Run for your lives!”

Everyone ran; Fourteen, too, abandoned Sasha and disappeared from view. Sasha looked up and saw a great black shape, sharp angles and poky points, hovering over her. A moment later, the black thing took a hold of Sasha and Sasha experienced a terrible sensation of being turned inside out! And yet, another moment later, it was as if nothing had happened. The black shape was gone. Sasha felt fine again. The numbers began to emerge from their hiding places. Fourteen emerged too, and tried to look nonchalant about the whole thing.

“You abandoned me!” Sasha accused her companion. “I could have died!”

“No,” Fourteen explained, “Some things just can’t hurt you when you are **1**! Like the Square Roots for example. If one of them gets a hold of you, nothing will happen to you. But if one grabs *me*! Why, I’d be worse than dead!”

“Why?” asked Sasha.

“I’ll become smaller. And I’ll become Irrational!”

“Is it bad to be Irrational?”

“It’s awful! Nobody really knows you completely, not even you! And the more you look at yourself, the more you have to readjust your position on the Number Line. You never have a moment of peace!”

“That does sound pretty bad,” Sasha agreed. “So it’s good to be **1** then, right?”

“Well, it depends. The Roots can’t hurt you, if you’re **1**, that’s true. But on the other hand, power doesn’t do much for you, either. **1** to the power of two is still one. **1** to the power of million is…”

“Still **1**!” Sasha said, irritated. “That doesn’t sound fair!”

“Whining won’t get you anywhere,” Fourteen admonished. “You should just try to grow as a Number!”

The next day Fourteen taught Sasha about the Signs.

“Pay attention to the Signs!” Fourteen said. “The Minus Sign, followed by Big Positive Numbers, is a terrible danger. It can make you Very Negative!”

“Oh,” said Sasha. “A Plus Sign is a good thing then?”

“Not if it’s followed by Big Negative Numbers! That can make you Very Negative, too!”

“Well, then a Minus Sign and Big Negative Numbers combined must be truly awful!”

“No, no, that’s a good thing. You can really come out on top if that happens,” Fourteen reassured her.

Sasha found it to be very confusing. She later learned that, while it was really desirable to be Big, Positive, and Whole, it was also very desirable to be Prime.

“That’s just very special,” Fourteen said dreamily. “See, when you start getting bigger, they want to take you apart. Break you down into your factors. But if you are Prime, then you only have two factors! One – and yourself. Nobody can take you apart.”

“I am like that now,” Sasha said with pride.

Fourteen shrugged. “Honey, you are **1**. Who cares!”

“Oh,” Sasha said. Her spirits were dampened a bit, but she really was trying to understand the rules! It sounded like being Prime made you invincible!

They walked and walked together. Sasha stepped into a puddle without looking, stumbled over a Minus Sign and became a -**1**. Fourteen told her to be more careful. Sasha really tried, but five minutes later she walked into a swarm of Plus Signs and Minus Signs. Fourteen got nervous and tried to pull her out, but couldn’t and was pulled in. When the swarm dissipated, Sasha emerged as **41**, and her companion, as **6.**

“That’s your fault,” Six complained. “I worked very hard to become **14**. To become **6** again is an insult! And how did you get to become a Prime?!”

Sasha felt terrible and offered to go look for more Signs – she was willing to give a bit of herself to help her companion become bigger. For some reason, that made Six even more irritated.

Sasha apologized profusely. Six finally said it was fine, but Sasha couldn’t tell if Six meant it. As they continued to walk, Six saw a big sign in one of the store windows. “Seventh Degree Polynomial seeks a Leading Coefficient. Join our cohesive team in our search for THE SOLUTION. Even Numbers Only”.

“That’s it,” Six said. “That’s my chance! I will join!”

 “Oh,” Sasha said. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? You’ll always be glued to the Variable with the biggest Power!”

“You’re just jealous!” Six dismissed.

Sasha just stared.

Six sighed. “I’m sorry. But I’ve bounced between the Negative and Positive for too long, and had some really close calls, and almost became Imaginary. I’m very tired. This is what I want.”

“Okay”, Sasha said. She wanted to ask whether Six still had a real name or ever thought of getting out into the Other World. But Six didn’t seem in the mood for questions.

They hugged and parted ways. Sasha continued on her journey alone. She was sad, but also quite confident: after all, she was a Prime now. Nobody could take her apart into factors, because her only two factors were herself and **1**.

She was filled with so much confidence that she didn’t pay attention to the shadows hovering over her, or to the disturbing sound that went SQUEAK, SQUEEEEEAAAAK! After all, she was invincible!

And then, somebody grabbed her and dragged her off the street into a house.

When Sasha’s eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw the strangest being in front of her. Sasha remembered her companion’s stories and gasped, “You’re Irrational!” She felt scared and a bit disturbed.

“I am not just Irrational,” the being said with great pride and dignity. “I am Transcendental.”

Sasha kept silent.

“I am **π**!” the stranger said. **π** 's voice was warm and soft, and Sasha began to relax a bit. “And who are you?”

“I am **41**,” Sasha said.

“I can see that,” **π** agreed, “but that’s not what I asked. I asked *who* are you. What is your *name*?”

“You know *names*?!” Sasha gasped.

“Of course! I know about the other world, too. It really helps to be irrational!”

“My name is Sasha.”

“Nice to meet you. Now tell me, why are you gallivanting so merrily and not noticing the flocks of Square Roots above your head? Do you want to become one of us?”

“What do you mean?” Sasha protested. “I will never be like you, I am Prime!”

**π** laughed at that. “You silly, silly Primes! You think that because nobody can break you into factors, you’re invincible, and you forget how fragile you are! A **16**, or a **121** will only become smaller after a Square Root encounter, but when a Square Root comes for you, you will be made irrational!”

Sasha’s heart pounded.

“And!” **π** continued, becoming irritated, “didn’t you hear that nasty SQUEAKING sound?”

“I did,” Sasha admitted. “What was that?”

“That, my dear, was the sound of the Numbers being FUDGED. That’s when Numbers get contorted into painful shapes, so that an eight looks like a zero, and a twelve looks like a negative nineteen. A huge embarrassment to everyone, and it’s best to avoid it altogether!”

Sasha spent a few days with **π** and **π**’s friends, some of whom were also Transcendental, and some, just Irrational. She met ***e***, and **G**, and many others, who were all quite friendly. True, nobody could really get to know them fully, but to the twelfth decimal point was a pretty good approximation!

Then Sasha asked **π** how she could return to her world. **π** seemed like someone who would know everything.

So, **π** brought Sasha to another friend’s house. There, a Division Sign and a Zero chatted about something in quiet voices.

“I am NOT dividing her by Zero!” the Division Sign exclaimed, the moment **π** said hello. “Every time I do that, I’m in trouble and the paperwork kills me!”

“These are exceptional circumstances,” **π** said mildly.

“And it’s not good for the environment!” Zero added disapprovingly.

“Well, that’s why we do it sparingly,” **π** insisted. “But Sasha needs to get back to her world.”

“Are you sure that will get me back?” Sasha asked.

“Sure? No,” **π** admitted. “But it seems right. Divided by Zero, you become infinite. And if you’re infinite, you’re too big to be contained in this world, so you will return to your own.”

“Seems quite risky,” Sasha said. “And maybe I’m not ready to go back yet. Maybe I should try to become bigger … grow to Six Digits!”

**π** laughed at that.

“Sasha, that’s a clever idea. But in a different world, you always start as **1**. You know that, don’t you?”

Sasha sighed. She hugged **π** and told him to say goodbye to everyone else for her. And she promised to make sure that nobody ever FUDGES the Numbers again. And then, she took a deep breath and said very bravely to the Division Sign, “I am ready! Go on then! Divide me by Zero!”

Then, Sasha woke up in her own bed.

She was living on the seventeenth floor of a high rise, and it all seemed right and familiar, from the pair of glasses on the bedside table to the big warm blanket covering her. Sasha got out of bed and was shocked! The mattress and the blanket were shredded, with feathers and foam scattered all over!

“It’s all the sharp edges and pointy poky angles I still have,” Sasha thought to herself. “I thought I could just stop being a number, but I see that’s going to be difficult!”

And then she went out into the human world. She walked cautiously, as not to touch anyone. “After all,” Sasha reasoned, “If I am not careful, I could really do a Number on someone!”

And then she forgot about being careful and bumped into someone.

“I’m so sorry!” Sasha said.

“You didn’t hurt me,” the Other Woman said. Her voice seemed familiar to Sasha, and Sasha looked up and smiled.

“I’m glad! I feel like I’m all sharp edges and poky points,” Sasha said.

“I know!” the Other Woman said excitedly, “Me too! Isn’t that weird!”

“Well, I guess we just need to make sure we turn those sharp edges away from other people. And from ourselves,” Sasha said. “Then we’ll be okay.”

“That’s very clever,” the Other Woman approved. “What other clever things do you know?”

And so, they talked.

But that’s another story.