

A GOOD BOY/Cynthia Morrison Phoel

FOR HOURS NOW Dobrin has been begging Stassi to stop it, shut up, are you *trying* to make her mad? "Put those down," he hisses, whispering, though his mother lags too far behind to hear.

Stassi has plucked two tomatoes from his bag and is holding them to his chest, the stems pointing out. "Dobrine," he says, cupping the undersides of the tomatoes with mock tenderness. "You want a squeeze?"

"*Molya ti si,*" Dobrin pleads. He has had enough of his friend. They have spent the entire afternoon together, helping his mother in the garden she keeps a half-hour's walk up the mountain. Until today Dobrin had almost liked the garden, mostly for the gratification it brought his mother, who hardly had time for it. Now Stassi has tainted the place, not to mention the tomatoes, which no amount of washing will ever make clean. "Your mother's tomatoes are so *firm,*" Stassi said the first time she turned her back. "So deliciously *ripe.*" By the time they were finished in the garden, Stassi was saying things right in front of her, as if his comments were so clever she would never catch on.

He finally shut up when they began the walk home, but at the crest of the hill overlooking their town, Dobrin's mother stopped to talk to an old woman. It irritated Dobrin that there could be so many old women and that his mother could not pass a single one of them without stopping to say hello. He continued down the road with Stassi, which turned out to be a mistake. Away from Dobrin's mother, Stassi started up again.

"Some nipples really are green, you know," he says now, admiring his handheld protrusions.

Dobrin can see his mother inching away from the woman, trying to extricate herself from the conversation she started. It is still early, and already they are on the brink of evening, the sun low over the mountain.

Dobrin is ready for the summer to be over. Stassi will be in his class again, but there will be others there to dilute his energy and Mrs. Kuneva there to squelch it. Many of his classmates think it unfair that they should be stuck with crabby old Kuneva for a second year in a row, but Dobrin doesn't mind so much—certainly not so much as he minds Stassi fondling the tomatoes.

"If you don't stop it—" he begins but is distracted by a tomato bouncing down the mountain. He squats to trap it, and another hurtles

by, another and another. A throng of tomatoes has escaped from one of the bags. Above him, his mother stands in the middle of the street, shading her eyes. Her bag of tomatoes, what's left of it, is tipped at her feet.

A quickening in Dobrin's stomach and he follows her gaze, panning church steeple and bakery stack, flagpole displaying limp Bulgarian flag, rusted metallic beams of the new post office, started but never finished, the skyline of flat asphalt roofs. Finally, with Stassi beside him pointing, Dobrin sees it. In the hours they have been at the garden, the large white moon of a satellite dish has appeared on top of an apartment building. Theirs.

"Bozhe," Stassi says, "Do you think your father—"

"I think you should go home," Maika says. She is walking fast now, about to overtake them.

Stassi nods politely to Dobrin's mother, and then, looking at Dobrin, his face splits with a grin too wide to be merely a smile. He makes a great show of running down the mountain unencumbered, flailing his arms out from his sides, going out of his way to stomp on tomatoes lolling in the road.

Dobrin's mother continues down the road, neither waiting for Dobrin to retrieve Stassi's bag nor slowing for him to catch up. By the time he is balanced with a bag in each hand, his mother is several paces ahead. Something advises him to keep his distance.

After a block or so of trailing Maika, of silence and double-the-bags bumping, leaking smeary tomato juice down his legs, the satellite dish disappearing from his vision but growing larger in his mind, he wishes Stassi were still there.

Dobrin's father greets them at the apartment door with jumpy hellos. In the next room a cheery, televised voice offers a more articulate welcome. "Your ticket to the best in sports," it promises. "World Cup soccer. Watch it here."

"You," Maika says and rushes past him.

Dobrin's father flinches, though only for a moment. He has been expecting this. This is not the first time he's accepted *electronica* instead of wags, though this piece, this infraction, is the biggest by far.

In the days that follow, Dobrin can hardly last an hour without going outside to admire the dish. Up close it's dizzyingly large, and Dobrin is at once thrilled and sickened by how big it is. Even from a distance it is otherworldly and menacing.

Stassi says that with a dish like this Dobrin can have any girl he wants. He says girls can't resist a really big dish. This dish is going to change Dobrin's life. Dobrin wonders if it already has, though not in the way

Stassi thinks. Of course there have been fights before, too often having to do with the cost of Dobrin's notebooks or the condition of his shoes or the new jeans, too tight too soon. Though small for his age, Dobrin would be willing to stop growing if it would make things between Maika and Tatko a little easier.

But Dobrin cannot think of one fight where the crime was committed with intent. He does not like trouble, least of all with his mother, who has skinny shoulders and is not at all pretty when she's angry. Tatko, on the other hand, does not seem to mind trouble—a thing Dobrin can't quite grasp. Sometimes he wishes his father would be nicer to Maika or at least not make her so mad. Other times, he thinks it takes a lot of guts. It takes a lot of guts to own a dish this big. He wonders if guts grow along with belly, muscle and bone.

Sitting on his mountain perch, Dobrin stares absently at the dish, which looms over their home like a big white cloud. Beneath its shiny orb the rest of the building looks shabby and old. Better when he makes his eyes into slits and looks only at the dish. Then, what he sees is glory.

How long can Dobrin's parents go without speaking to each other? A week has passed, and so far nothing more than the occasional spray of words spat out like watermelon seeds—necessary, unwanted. Dobrin is on the lookout for a sign—a *Bless you* or *Excuse me*, a stifled giggle—any indication that they will be okay.

Stassi assures him the silence is normal. Parents can go for long periods of time without talking. He asks if Dobrin can hear sex noises coming from their bedroom because if they're having sex, then they're going to be okay. "Sex can cure anything," Stassi says. "Even cancer."

What does Stassi know? His parents have been divorced since he was four. He has never known anyone with cancer or a satellite TV.

Dobrin thinks that if Maika would just sit down and watch one of the TV's programs, she might learn to appreciate it. But she refuses to enjoy it. It's foolish to own a satellite TV, she says, when you can barely afford heat. This year she is teaching Bulgarian literature at both high schools in town. At night and on weekends she tutors private students at the dining room table. During these hours the TV should not be on, though there have been more than a few crucial matches—Barcelona, mostly, and sometimes Munich—that Tatko has watched with the volume muted.

Dobrin has to agree with Tatko that the satellite TV is a blessed thing. Even with his parents not talking he loves it. After years of watching the same three stations through a thick haze of electric fuzz,

it seems like a miracle that there can be so many programs playing at once and no matter where the program is coming from, the picture is clear—clearer than the hand in front of your face. Clearer even than the mural pasted to their living room wall of a sun setting on a crystal-line lake, an image that always looked remarkably sharp until now. Soccer and basketball all day long, and if there isn't a new game on, they replay an old one. At night, after Maika goes to bed, girls appear on the screen—girls like Dobrin has never imagined, like the center-folds on the front of the bus only better, touching themselves, undulating with passion. It is better than his cousin's Madonna video, better than anything he has ever seen.

During the matches Dobrin cheers and Tatko jumps up and down, calling fouls and assigning penalty shots like a true referee. But the girls they watch in silence. Tatko—and Stassi, when he's there—on the sofa, Dobrin in an overstuffed chair. Dobrin's favorite is a girl called Lana, schoolteacher by day, hooker by night. At school Lana wears heavy glasses, long skirts and blouses buttoned up to the neck. Dobrin thinks that if he were her student, he would only consider her a little bit beautiful. Then, the camera does this great thing where it peers between the buttons of her blouse and transports you to the other Lana, the unconscionably gorgeous Lana with parts Dobrin can hardly believe are real.

They watch the girls with the volume turned low because Maika is sleeping in the other room. Tatko insists there are parts of a man's education a mother shouldn't know about, and for the wondrous hours with Lana and others, Dobrin is willing to agree. Besides, he suspects the girls might make Maika's migraines worse than they already are. As it is, on most nights she goes to bed without even having dinner. Sometimes, through the closed door, Dobrin can hear his mother's gasps as the pain grips and squeezes her brain. If he goes in to check on her, he finds tears soaking her pillow. Tatko says the headaches are an act to make him feel bad. Dobrin is not so sure; nevertheless, he can feel his father's sadness, the way he slumps over the arm of the couch and peers at the TV from beneath the low visor of his hand. Even when they are watching girls, he can feel it.

It's almost impossible to believe that the girls on TV and Mrs. Kuneva are of the same species. Stassi says people shrivel up if they don't have sex. Dobrin points out that neither he nor Stassi is having sex, and neither is as withered and sorry as Kuneva.

"Who says I'm not having sex?"

"*Stiga be*. Who would have sex with you?"

"Your mother," Stassi screams and slaps his leg. "You thought you had her all to yourself, didn't you?"

Dobrin punches Stassi in the arm, says, "Stop with my mother!" and Stassi laughs harder. This is the Stassi Dobrin hates. In seventh grade he was responsible for the extra homework their class got almost every night, homework that Stassi himself never did. He was always rocking his chair, tipping his desk, dropping bits of chalk into Mrs. Kuneva's cups of espresso, spoiling what little stamina she had to get through class. As they embark on eighth grade, Dobrin expects more of the same. To Dobrin, sameness is more ominous than change.

On the first day of school, Mrs. Kuneva addresses them as *ladies and gentlemen*. "Ladies and gentlemen, take out your English workbooks," she says with such propriety that for a moment Dobrin thinks she may have forgotten where she is. He looks at his classmates—Stassi with his head bent over the desk, using a protractor to engrave his name in the already mutilated surface—and wonders if it's possible that they have become *ladies and gentlemen*. Indeed, they have grown. Taller, wider, moister. They have more hair. But *ladies and gentlemen*? From Stassi's corner of the classroom comes a fit of coughing and inaudible words.

In their second year with Kuneva, Dobrin's classmates know to be skeptical of their teacher's broad optimism. Last year she was always making them out to be more than what they were. "You are very well prepared for this exam," she would say as they embarked on a test that half of them would fail. "You know all the words in this dictation," she'd promise before she read an impossible passage. "You are the most considerate group of students I have ever had," she told them a week before Women's Day, and still they gave her only a paltry bouquet, picked from a garden near the school and wrapped in paper towels. Time and again they witnessed the rise and fall of her hopes. And still, Dobrin believed that maybe he would do well on this exam, this dictation.

That first day of school, Mrs. Kuneva seems to be hoping for an awful lot. She is all dressed up like a lady out of one of those films from the British Council that she is always making them watch. She wears a pink dress, cinched at the waist. It might look nice if her breasts weren't so saggy and thin. Her hair is curled, pinned just above the ears. She looks like an antique—girlish and nicotine yellow—and you can tell she fancies herself a beauty, the way she walks around kicking her pink shoes out in front of her. Dobrin wishes she looked prettier than she does. It's a shame because he can tell how hard she's tried.

Later Dobrin catches Kuneva grimacing at her saggy self in the smudged classroom window. Already she has confiscated the protractor

and a soccer ball from Stassi and worked herself into a healthy rage over their poor memories. She has dictated a passage that she pledged would be "so simple they would enjoy it." Sharpening his pencil, Dobrin momentarily believed in his proficiency in the English language—he would start this school year off with a high mark!—only to stumble first on *Somerset*, then on *Maugham*. By the second sentence, he knew he would be lucky to get a passing mark.

Ladies and gentlemen, Kuneva says as she bids them good-bye. When he tells his mother about this, she catches her breath—*Gospodin? Kak mozhe?*—then starts to cry. She says she is not ready for him to be a man just yet.

After school, Stassi invites himself over to watch the satellite TV. Soon this becomes a habit. "Only if you leave before my mom gets home," Dobrin says, feigning irritation. The truth is, he is glad for an ally when he returns to the apartment at the end of the day.

In just a few weeks the TV has attracted a number of Tatko's friends, four or five of them, who come in the morning and stay all day. By the time Dobrin gets home from school, they have nothing left to say to each other. They just sit there, flaking peanut skins into their chest hair and watching. Distracted by the scratching and belching and crunching on nuts, Dobrin can hardly follow the program on the screen. At least Stassi talks, he finds himself thinking. At least he can count on Stassi to break a silence.

Today Stassi leans over and whispers, "Your dad's got boobs," eyeing Tatko, shirtless.

Dobrin tweaks Stassi's forearm until he says *ow*, but Stassi's right; Tatko does have boobs. Dobrin worries that he will grow boobs too. He hopes that this won't happen until he's married, or at least until he's twenty or eighteen.

In the meantime, he wishes his dad would stop walking around bare-chested all the time. At the pool, Tatko's boss makes him wear a shirt, though he doesn't mind if Tatko rolls up the sleeves to get an even tan across his biceps. Dobrin thinks he looks impressively strong when he does this. Tatko's arms are broad and flat and three times the circumference of Dobrin's.

Some of the other men are wearing shirts, but not all. Nudging Stassi, Dobrin nods at one of the men with boobs as big as Tatko's. Immediately he is sorry to have drawn this comparison. They are not the same, his father and these men. *His father has a job. His father has a satellite TV.*

A barman at the pool café, Tatko works from May until September. Only from September to May does he sit on the couch, and even then,

not all the time. Once or twice a year he manages to pick up a week here or there, waiting tables at a conference or tending to a private party. When that happens, there's a feast at home, with meat and yellow cheese and a bottle of perfume for Maika, presented with great flourish in front of friends, the price tag still on.

Back when they were talking, Maika used to plead with Tatko to find another job. She would come home with ideas for him. "Marietta says Nikolai has more work than he can handle." Or, "Stefan says they're looking for a repairman at the motel." But Tatko would get angry and say he made parties, not repairs. He was waiting on the couch for something good to come his way.

These days Dobrin would relish such an argument. He suspects it is not Tatko's joblessness that perpetuates Maika's anger so much as it is the couch sitting and the satellite TV. Even Maika knows there are not enough jobs to go around this town. It's likely Tatko couldn't get another one even if he tried.

To make up for the rest of the year, when summer comes around, Tatko works long hours. From dawn until dusk he serves *kebabche* and beer and keeps the shrill *chalga* music turned up high. He stands behind the grill and calls to his cluster of tables—a slab of cheese? some bread? a little Ruska salad?—spreading around a spirit of plenty. His customers buy it, ordering food and drink as they rarely do at restaurants, as though this is some great celebration. Every few minutes, Tatko raises his hands and snaps his fingers and rotates his hips. "Oh, ho," he calls, caught up in the swirl of his own good humor. Chef, waiter, bartender, no one takes better care of customers than he.

Tatko's bar is the only profitable part of a business that should do better than it does. The next pool being three villages away, there is little competition. This pool is clean and well kept and chlorinated enough to kill all the germs. What's more, nestled at the foot of the mountain, it gives the effect of swimming in a big green cavern. But Vulkov, Tatko's boss, keeps the prices high. People have to ration their trips to the pool, saving their *leva* for the most beautiful days. They come more frequently at the end of the summer, once they have given up hope of affording a trip to the Black Sea. But it is not enough to make up for the earlier months. When Vulkov pays Tatko at the end of the summer, his fifteen-hour days, his boundless energy, they do not matter. Vulkov says he can offer more if Tatko will accept electronics—TV, stereo, VCR, *you pick*—in lieu of cash. Tatko is pleased to make the deal.

Hearing Maika's key in the door, Dobrin wonders if Tatko is still pleased with the deal he made. A week ago he told the couch-sitters,

"Next year, CD player," but he hasn't mentioned it again. As Maika passes through the room she deliberately steps in front of the TV. "Extravagances," she hisses, grabbing glasses and bowls off the table and out of hands. "Look at this mess." Dobrin wishes she wouldn't do this—it embarrasses everybody—but this, he suspects, is her aim.

The men leave, but not before Tatko retorts, "You have your extravagances, I have mine." He is talking partly about the Cadbury eggs that Maika buys for Dobrin and the food she puts out on their first-floor balcony for stray dogs and cats. But mostly he is talking about the money Maika spends on migraine remedies. Once a month she goes to see a woman for treatments. Vilichka claims to have extra-sensory powers, which she uses to put spells on water and herbs and animal fats that people buy to cure migraines and burns and other afflictions. She claims she can cure anything, and she has a great many followers who believe in her. Maika pays ten *leva* for the bus ride, thirty *leva* for the visit, and one hundred *leva* for ten gallons of water, which Dobrin has to help her carry back on the bus.

"If you're going to spend that kind of money, at least go to a doctor," Tatko says. It's not so much money, really, but it's been a long time since there's been store-bought wine on the table or a stick of dried meat to eat. Dobrin knows that if Tatko ever saw Vilichka, there would be no end to his fury. For as much as Dobrin wants to believe that Vilichka can help his mother, instinct tells him that she's a fake. It's not that Vilichka doesn't look the part; it's that she looks *too* much like the earthy, spiritual vessel of energy she claims to be. She wears long skirts and grows her hair down to her bottom. She doesn't even wear a bra, which Dobrin finds terribly distracting when she's bending over the spigot in her yard, helping them fill the jugs. Her breasts are the largest he's ever seen, too big, if that's possible. He thinks if she were really serious about her work, she would at least wear a bra and roll her hair into a bun.

Once Tatko claimed he had poured Vilichka's water out of the jug and replaced it with regular water and Maika didn't even notice. Maika cried when he said this.

Tonight, Maika endures her headache long enough to eat dinner. Afterward, she cooks rice in the fat leftover from their meal, and Dobrin helps her carry it out to the balcony. Hearing the scrape of the metal bowls on the cement floor, the dogs and cats come running from all around, rib cages heaving, whimpering happiness. They lick Maika's hands, they are so grateful. When a dappled bitch with a freshly torn ear nuzzles its nose between Dobrin's legs, an embarrass-

ing knot rises in his throat. He wonders about the difference, if one exists, between extravagance and need. Vilichka's remedies, the way Maika suffers, isn't the cost trifling for the possibility of relieving her pain? Even the satellite TV doesn't seem like much of an extravagance when you consider how much use it gets. "Business," Tatko's friends call it, because this is what they have to do all day, and the fact of the big white satellite dish atop the building—doesn't that count for something?

Later on, Dobrin asks Tatko why the men never leave until it's too late. Apparently this is funny. "You think it's better at their homes than at ours?"

A month of warp and confusion, a kaleidoscope of worries shifting in a round. At night Dobrin lies in bed and listens for sex noises, laughter, the opening and closing of the bathroom door. Granted these sounds have been missing before and they always, eventually, came back. Nevertheless he has noticed that the spaces between them have grown longer and quieter, and he wonders about the time when they stop connecting altogether and all they have left is the consoling chatter of the satellite TV.

Dobrin thinks that if Tatko would apologize, Maika might accept what has already been done. It would make a difference if she knew that he was sorry. But Tatko's jaw is set; his arms are crossed; his eyes are fixed on the TV. Who is he to apologize when he is not even sorry? How can he be sorry for this glorious TV?

Barking erupts outside Dobrin's window. The belated heat makes the dogs surly and tired. Mrs. Kuneva says Americans call this Indian summer, this last burst of warm weather before it turns cold. To Dobrin it feels like a taunt—an aftertaste of the summer just past and a reminder that the next summer is a long way off.

By his measure, it had been a good summer, perhaps even a great one. As in summers past, he spent most of his days at the pool, where Vulkov let him swim and eat for free. Staying home was not a good idea. When he stayed home, Maika got cross. She said she wanted to get *something* out of this arrangement. They couldn't eat a stereo, she would start in. Dobrin couldn't wear a VCR to school.

At the pool, Vulkov had Dobrin fill in when the lifeguard didn't show up. This made Dobrin nervous—he had not been trained to rescue people—but Vulkov said it didn't matter. People would feel safer and behave better with someone in the chair. Once his initial unease passed, Dobrin looked forward to the times Vulkov pushed his fat finger into Dobrin's bicep and pointed toward the seat. He was some-

thing of a celebrity on these days. Everyone wanted to talk to him and hang out by his chair. He suspected that they were mainly interested in talking to a lifeguard and not so much to him. Nevertheless, he could not help but be enamored with how brown his feet looked against the light blue platform of the chair and with the girls' decorated toenails and pastel-colored bikinis that turned almost see-through when they got wet.

On top of the sheets, wearing only his underwear, Dobrin can almost believe that summer is still here. That just hours ago he was sitting in the lifeguard chair, staring down at the girls from his class, pondering the twin miracles of their breasts. Just as Dobrin slips his hand beneath the elastic band of his underpants, a man starts yelling at the dogs to shut up. A woman screams at the man. A chorus erupts on the street outside. Dobrin wants to yell too—aren't they supposed to be smarter than dogs?—but instead of adding to the noise, he gets up, leans out the window, and spits out the big glob of phlegm that has gathered in his throat.

"Dobrin? Dobrin Kirilov, was that you?" an angry voice yells from below.

A month ago, Dobrin would have apologized for spitting on his downstairs neighbor. Now, he lies back down and wraps a pillow around his ears.

"Ladies and gentlemen, take out your English workbooks." By the end of October, Dobrin's class has proven that they are nothing of the sort. Still, Kuneva starts out every morning the same way, with hope and expectation that they will have done their homework and come prepared to participate in class.

Likewise, Dobrin, at the end of October, still starts out eager to please, though lately he's been mesmerized by the satisfying symmetry of the elastic straps that cut across the back of Tanya, who sits in front of him. He has noticed that Tanya rotates among three different bras, and that on one of these bras, the lower hook is broken. Dobrin thinks that Lana from TV would never wear a bra with a broken hook, and yet he's realistic that his possibilities for any type of contact are much greater with Tanya than they are with Lana. And in this bra Tanya is one step closer to being unclothed. Lately he's been devising strategies to increase their contact, the key strategy being to stand as close to Tanya's desk as possible while he stacks his books or puts on his coat. As of yet, she's only hit him with her elbow.

"Dobrin!" Kuneva is standing over his desk, looking at his half-finished homework.

Dobrin looks at it too, with more disappointment than guilt: he wishes it were done. The night before, he had sat down with his workbook in front of the TV. His goal was to have the homework finished by halftime. But the game wasn't so interesting because it was a replay of a game they'd seen before, and Dobrin got to thinking about other things, namely his father and the fact that he had not spoken to Dobrin in an awfully long time. He started to wonder if maybe Tatko was angry at him, too, and once that thought got stuck in his mind, it became very important to say something, though he didn't know what. The goal became finding something to say by halftime, and this was all Dobrin could think about until moments before the buzzer, when he finally blurted out, "Who do you want to win?" Which was a stupid question of course because they had seen the game, and they knew who would win.

After all that, Dobrin was relieved when Tatko ignored him.

In the corner of his mind, Dobrin registers Stassi talking, something about a date with Lana. On the homework sheet lying on his desk, he sees that he quit writing in the middle of a word.

"Dobrine," Kuneva exhales in her weary way, "You have so much potential." For once, Dobrin is not fooled.

Maika wants to make one more trip to the garden to gather vegetables for the winter, and would anyone like to come. The way she says it, it's clear Dobrin is supposed to join her.

Every spring, Maika plants *tomati*, peppers, onions, garlic, potatoes, pumpkins and zucchini—twice as much as she needs because half will fail from slugs or neglect. Maika doesn't have time to care for the garden. The untended fruit rots on the ground. As it is, they have not been to the garden in more than a month, not since the day of the satellite TV. Dobrin is not eager to go. The slugs will be all over everything, and he will spend the entire time collecting them in a jar. This late in the season, they will be the size of chili peppers.

But what Dobrin wants is irrelevant. His mother's migraine has subsided for the first time in a long while, reason enough for him to go. And there's the incident that happened last night.

Maika had gone to bed. Stassi had stayed late watching TV and comparing every girl to his father's girlfriend. "You think *she's* got hooters!" he said, using a word he'd learned from an American film. Stassi could pick things up just like that. "You haven't *seen* hooters until you've seen my father's girlfriend."

"*Kakvo e dumata?*" Tatko said. "Hoo-ters?" Stassi sniggered at his strained pronunciation of the word. "Hoo-ters," Tatko said again, and Stassi clapped his hands.

They'd barely heard Maika's shuffling outside the door, barely turned the channel in time, and when they did, they flipped to a news program that Maika surely knew they had not been watching.

"What's so funny?" Maika said to Dobrin. Stassi was bent in half, shaking with laughter, and Tatko was smirking.

"*Nishto*," Dobrin scowled. Indeed, there was nothing funny about it: his father grinning like a schoolboy, his mother standing there in a nightgown too worn for company to see. Dobrin wished he could buy her a new robe and maybe a new haircut. He wondered if a new tube of lipstick could turn her lips into a smile.

The road to the garden is lined with houses; usually it takes a long time to get there because Maika has to talk to everyone. But this day they walk straight up the mountain. The first half of the walk is a paved road, which they manage easily. But when the road turns to dirt, Maika's shoes slip on the wet ground and gather a thick rim of mud around the edges. Dobrin keeps his hand on her back to steady her.

When they reach the garden, Dobrin takes the jar Maika hands him and starts collecting the slugs. It is cool enough that the flies are gone, and the air is sweet with the rich ferment of composting fruit. Dobrin finds a sturdy twig about a foot long and starts picking the slugs off the pumpkins and zucchini that are still good. While Dobrin collects slugs, Maika rakes fiercely at the rotting tomatoes and cucumbers, combing them into a heap in a corner of the plot. Even though they are at opposite ends of the garden, he can feel the soft thud of her rake hitting the soil.

Dobrin tries to imagine Tanya working in the garden. Wondering what she'd wear, he keeps coming back to her snug green turtleneck, not only because it looks very nice on her, but also because of the green vegetation, and he thinks it would be a good match. He imagines her picking strawberries and tomatoes and cucumbers in peak condition. He doubts very much that Tanya has ever seen a slug.

Maika has finished raking and is coming up behind him, choosing the squashes to take home and wiping them with a dirty towel. "Dobrine," she says. "I want you to be a good boy, you hear?"

It has been a long time since Dobrin's mother reminded him to be a good boy. She used to tell him this all the time. "Be a good boy at school today," she'd say. "Be a good boy and clear off the table." If Tatko heard her say this, he would mock her. "That's right, Dobrine. You be a good boy," he would say, and Dobrin could tell he did not really mean it. Dobrin would not know what to do, who to please—usually his mother because he wanted to make her happy.

There in the garden, the words *Be a good boy* sound hollow as a rotted-out squash. Dobrin does not know what a good boy is, let alone how to be one.

At two months, Stassi says there's still a chance. He says even if you don't like a person, if you share the same bed with them night after night, eventually you will have sex.

It's just a matter of time. Only yesterday Dobrin had thought his parents were on the verge of a breakthrough. The prices for central heat had finally been taped to the post office windows. They were impossibly high, higher than they had ever been. Maika figured they could afford to heat only two rooms, the living room and one other. She said it should be Dobrin's room; he was not the one who got them into this situation.

"*Gluposti*," Tatko said, staring hard at the TV. "Dobrin's room is the smallest."

In the seconds that Maika took to formulate her response, Dobrin had felt them on the edge of a conversation. Oh, this would be good! A fight, even one that all the neighbors could hear, would be better than so much quiet.

But Maika had turned things in another direction. "Fine then," she said. To Dobrin she added, "You sleep with me, and your father will sleep on the couch."

Tatko snorted. He has been on the couch ever since the satellite TV was installed.

"I like the cold," Dobrin said. He did not want to sleep with his mother. But Maika was clattering dishes in the cabinet; Tatko was turning up the volume on the TV. "I like the cold," he said again, louder and more insistent, but no one seemed to notice.

When the border is approached, eyed, retreated from, this is when Dobrin feels most discouraged. "There's still hope, bro," Stassi says. Dobrin hates it when Stassi calls him *bro*.

Cold is cumulative, Dobrin decides as he lies awake in bed. Two weeks of trying to beat the cold and he is losing the battle. It is only the end of November; he has at least four months of cold, freezing cold, ahead of him. He has taken to showering before he sleeps, starting the night out with groundless optimism: tonight he will be warm! But by two, three o'clock, any heat he started out with has escaped through the weave of the layered Rhodope blankets and dissolved into the air. Moment to moment, he tracks the steady creep of the chill as it penetrates his toes, feet, and ankles, loitering in his bones. He pulls the

covers over his head to capture the warmth of his breath. It is a marvel to him that such warm air can come from such a cold body.

Even with his head beneath the blankets, he can hear the satellite TV. Listening to Tatko flip from the girls to a basketball match, he is tempted to go watch a quarter and warm up, but he doesn't particularly feel like being with his father right now.

Earlier that evening, Maika had sent Tatko out on what should have been a quick errand. "Dobrine, tell your father to go buy bread," she'd said. Tatko had not returned until long after dinner was finished. Dobrin and Maika had eaten alone, *gyuveche* with no bread, no satellite TV. Amidst so much stillness, Dobrin felt small pinches of anger at the cat, who did none of his usual mewing for food from the table but curled up in a ball in the dent Tatko left on the couch; at the radiator, which did not hiss and pop as it so often did, but purred quietly without any punctuation whatsoever; and at his mother, whose bites slowed to a stop with half her dinner uneaten. That was one thing about the satellite TV. Rarely did it pause between commercials and programs, and never, *never* did it stop.

Lately, Dobrin has started to wonder if they will go on forever like this, the quiet getting quieter, togetherness growing strained and unyielding, until things are impossibly hard, a fossilized existence. Beneath the layers of blankets, cold, anger, he lies still, like a body entombed. After a while, he bends a leg beneath the covers to make sure he can.

When Dobrin finally climbs into bed with his mother, he does it in the middle of the night, when his father is dozing in front of the TV, his face awash with electronic color. Dobrin's skin is chapped from the moisture of his breath beneath the covers. His nose is running. He opens and closes doors quietly. Once he has closed his mother's door behind him, he stands still, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

The room smells of Vilichka's herbs, and the radiator crackles. Even though his mother is all the way over to one side of the bed—it's clear she's been expecting him—her heat is everywhere under the covers. Cold though he is, Dobrin finds this disgusting. He wonders how he was ever able to sleep with his mother when he was a child. He can hardly bring himself to get in the bed, and once he does, he lies stiffly on the edge. He is awake and acutely aware of the thawing in his fingers and toes.

Stassi crosses a line when he claims his dad's girlfriend is even hotter than Lana. "She's from Germany," he says to Dobrin on a break between classes. Neither of them has pocket money to spend in the

café, so they stay in the classroom, which stinks of damp chalk and body odor.

Dobrin leans against the radiator, pressing his fingers into its grooves. "So what?" He is tired of hearing about Stassi's father. Stassi's father lives in a huge apartment in Sofia. Stassi's father takes him to soccer matches. Stassi's father eats dinner at McDonald's almost every night. Dobrin thinks that if Stassi's father was so great, he might visit every once in a while.

"So she's pretty."

"Being German doesn't necessarily make you pretty," Dobrin says. There is a German teacher at school who isn't pretty at all.

"This one is. And she has real blonde hair. My dad says she's blonde *everywhere*."

Dobrin tries to imagine how this might come up in conversation between Stassi and his father. He doesn't think his own father would share such a detail. Besides, what about armpits? So many summers at the pool, and Dobrin has yet to see a pit that is blonde. "You lie," he says, though he is not sure about this. He is not sure of anything Stassi says anymore.

He feels his mood deteriorating. The day started out well. He had done his homework and received a good mark. He asked Tanya for a pencil, and she turned around and offered him a choice of implements. Dobrin took his time deliberating and had gotten a good look at the rounded silhouette of her breast. For a small girl, she has big hooters.

The class is starting to file back in. Dobrin is glad that the break is almost over and Stassi will have to return to his seat.

"Anyhow, tell your dad the answer is yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes on the German girlfriend. My dad can hook him up."

Stassi waits for Dobrin's face to turn hot before he breaks into one of his cackles. "I got you, bro," he screams, stomping his feet on the ground.

Dobrin has wanted to punch Stassi for a long time. Mrs. Kuneva gets there just in time to see his fist land squarely in Stassi's eye.

A week of sleeping in Maika's bed and Dobrin has learned that if he can distract himself from the intense heat under the covers and the smell of Vilichka's herbs, he eventually will fall asleep. He strains to hear the score of the game, but all he can make out is the rush of the crowd, which, when filtered through the bedroom wall, sounds like running water.

In less than a month they will be into the new year and on the downhill slope toward summer. Dobrin has been thinking that next summer he wants to be a real lifeguard, which means he will need training and a new bathing suit. When the winter is over and Maika is no longer paying for heat, he will ask her if she can afford these things. If everything works out, when Vulkov pays him at the end of the summer, Dobrin will be able to pay her back.

Payback. They are just now studying compound words. Cutthroat. Diehard. Kuneva makes the mistake of defining payback as *tit for tat*. Stassi has never heard anything so wonderful.

Tit for tat, he says about the punch. "Don't worry about it, bro," which makes Dobrin want to punch him again, if Stassi wouldn't like it so much. Stassi is infatuated with the ring of purple that encircles his eye. He spends the whole class touching it. On breaks, he goes to the bathroom to see if it has changed. Kuneva has decided that for as long as the bruise lasts, Dobrin must stay after school each day and write a one-page essay. The first day she made him write on the meaning of friendship. The second day he had to come up with different ways of working things out.

In bed next to him, Maika rolls from her back onto her side. When his mother lies this way, Dobrin thinks her torso looks like an angry violin. He can remember a time when things didn't always end in anger, when near arguments—those crackling moments when there's still a choice about which way things can go—ended with Tatko pulling Maika onto his lap and wrapping his arms around her waist, nuzzling her with his big, oily nose. Maika would laugh—*stiga be! that tickles!*—and Dobrin would laugh too. Tatko might find her breast with his hand and hold it for a moment before she pulled away. That was years ago, and still Dobrin can remember how he felt, at once joyous and bashful. Maika would extract herself from Tatko's grasp, and Tatko would stare after her—her chest or her retreating behind—the way he now stares at the girls on the satellite TV.

Love? Lust? Only now is Dobrin starting to suspect there is a difference. When he is watching the satellite TV, it is easy to believe he loves Lana and all her sprawling beauty. He loves the way she makes him feel. But during the daytime, he thinks that what he feels for Lana is something less than love. He is not sure why he thinks this, only that there must be something more to it than the sensations she ignites in his groin. He thinks of all the silly hearts he used to draw for Maika. *C lubov, Dobrin*. From Dobrin with love.

Earlier that day, Tanya paid him a compliment.

"I like your sweater," she said, not looking at him but playing with the zipper on her rucksack.

"You do?" Dobrin had only two sweaters, a blue one and a brown one, both knit by his *baba* and inherited from his father, both ugly and old and smelling of cedar. What was there to like about such sweaters? Dobrin was wearing the brown one. He could see the ends of the yarn poking through the weave at the places where his grandma had finished one ball and started the next. He hated this sweater. Nevertheless, he wore it because the chill was still there—he could not get past it. This sweater was the warmest piece of clothing he had.

Tanya turned in her chair, and he could see he had embarrassed her. He scrambled for something to say to fix things. "Thank you." Or "It's old." Or "I like your sweater, too," which he actually did. Oh, God, he did. It was pink, starting to gray with age, and a little too small. Depending on the way she sat, the sweater rode up in the back, showing off an oval of bright white skin. It seemed terribly intimate to Dobrin that he should see this skin so low on her back, perfectly creased by the faint ridge of her spine. He wondered if she knew about this skin, if maybe she wanted him to see it.

Dobrin can hear the match on the satellite TV. That afternoon Stassi had asked to come over to watch it, but Dobrin had told him no.

That exchange had taken place after school, after Dobrin's detention, during which Kuneva had made him write an essay on ways to keep warm during the winter months. Of his own volition, Stassi had waited for Dobrin out in the hall, periodically kicking his soccer ball at the door to remind Dobrin he was still there. Dobrin had taken his time, hoping that Kuneva would yell at Stassi and make him go home, but she just sat there, writing marks in the *Dnevnik*. More than once Dobrin saw her pen skip when the ball slammed against the door, but surprisingly she held her temper.

"What do you mean, *no*?" Stassi said. "Barcelona, bro! Aren't you going to watch?"

Dobrin had planned on watching the match, but then he changed his mind. "My parents said they want a night with just our family."

"What do you mean?" Stassi said, fingering the mottled ring around his eye. "They're talking again?"

"A little." Dobrin had not intended to tell this lie, but he was happy with how it sounded. He wondered if it even was a lie, or if it could be true. Maybe things *were* getting better, and he was just not seeing it.

"Didn't I tell you?" Stassi said, trying to maintain his cheer—but Dobrin could tell he was mad. "*Ami*, fine," he said, kicking the ball down the stairs and running after it. Dobrin followed at a slower pace. When he got outside, Stassi was nowhere in sight.

Now Dobrin can hear the satellite TV switch from the game back to the girls, the familiar music, always the same music, filtering through the wall. He slips his hand inside his underwear and inhales softly.

He had not said anything to Tanya after the sweater incident. She had not given him the chance. After class she had practically run from the room, leaving Dobrin to wonder if she was embarrassed or hurt or just in a hurry. Several times he's questioned if the moment really happened, if she said anything to him at all. Tomorrow he will redeem himself. He will say something to her whether or not he has a reason. He will find something. He will tell her he likes her rucksack or her nibbled pencils or the slope of her back when she leans forward over her desk. He will tell her that over the summer he had noticed her tan lines and the way her bathing suit rode up over her hips. He will wear his brown sweater, and Tanya—oh, Tanya. He will ask her if she wants to come over and watch a show on the satellite TV. She can choose the program. She can. Oh. There in the darkness, it seems so easy. The million things he would like to tell her. Yes.

With one swift movement, Maika throws back her covers and rises from the bed. Dobrin uses his clean hand to cover his face and waits the humiliating stretch of time as she fumbles for her slippers, her sweater, the doorknob. He hears the kitchen door open and close, listens to the tick of the gas turning on, the oven door opening, the chair pulled up close.

This is how they will spend the night. Maika in front of the oven, Tatko in front of the satellite TV and Dobrin in a puddle of his own misery, wondering if this is how it feels to be a man.



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