

THE SEASON OF POISONED FRUITS  
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Translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

From Part I, Chapter 1

2000  
July

Nobody in the Smirnov family could have dreamt of such misfortune. Then again, they'd always thought Zhenya was a little strange, exactly like her grandmother, though they'd always said that quietly about Gramma, on the sly. She, after all, had retired with a pension but kept working, too, and totally deranged people don't toil their days away in a bacteria lab and bring home a salary. When Zhenya slipped up, her mother'd feign melancholy pity and say, "Well, that's Zhenya." Then she'd add, "Our oddball." Or, "She has her quirks but that's not so bad, Zhenya, honey, don't think anything. On the bright side, you're smart." All the while, she'd be looking at Zhenya out of the corner of her eye and asking the others not to pay attention even though there was nothing to pay attention to: Zhenya was an ordinary child, completely average among unremarkable, quiet children. But the trouble Zhenya would cause later, bringing such shame, such disgrace, on the whole family, you couldn't look people in the eye.

Right now, though, Zhenya doesn't know what she'll cause. Right now, Zhenya's sixteen and she's on summer vacation at her grandmother's dacha, sitting in the oak tree by the gate, and biting an apple. The apple's unbearably sour, worse than a lemon: it's greenish, covered in

scabby warts, and the size of a baby's fist. No surprise there, though. Seven old apple trees grow on the dacha's swampy land and they all bear completely identical sour fruit.

Zhenya spits out the piece she'd bitten off, tosses the apple after it, empties the rest of the apples from her pockets – they fall into the grass like birdshot – and then settles into a fork in the tree that's all silky with moss. The oak's forked top embraces Zhenya and its bark warms her. The sun steals its way through the foliage like a dazzling midge, running along her nose, seeking her eye. Zhenya notices soundless motion and a supple gray back in the grass around the roots of the tree; the neighbor's cat is cutting through their yard. Now he slows his pace and pricks up his ears, ready to pounce. He stands a minute, bites off a blade of grass that was tickling him, and moves along. The scorching mid-day heat rustles, buzzes, and chirrs. A bumblebee hums in low tones, lingering by Zhenya's hand as if sniffing it, and she remembers catching one. She'd wanted to stroke its fuzzy, striped abdomen, which looked enchantingly soft, but the bumblebee stung her. Of course she was little then, but she learned her lesson. She's observed everything beautiful and desired from a distance ever since.

The bumblebee flies out of the yard, speeding off toward the bus stop and store, tracing an arc over the heads of pedestrians walking along the road.

And now they're finally here.

Aunt Mila doesn't seem to have changed a bit: she's a bit wider, of course, and she's gained some flesh, but she's still Claudia Schiffer walking off a billboard. Her bleached hair had been teased but its airy, almost see-through voluminousness has already collapsed. Her face is flushed from the heat and a little saggy: it's gathered into a flabby fold behind her chin and formed creases by her mouth but it's still beautiful. With a harsh, lifeless beauty.

Next to her is Dasha, a slim coiled spring of a girl who's three years younger than Zhenya, wearing a soft headband, and carrying a pink rucksack on her back. Dasha's shuffling along, which raises dust that sticks to her flipflops, slender feet, and red leggings. Ilya tells her to cut it out but Dasha keeps shuffling, watching underfoot.

Ilya's the only one who's unrecognizable: he's really grown up and now he's even taller than Aunt Mila. He's going into his last year of high school, that's what Mama said. Broad in the shoulders, a little angular, with his hair cut short, like an athlete's. It's as if a doll or a child's body has hatched another person, a grown-up.

For some reason Zhenya had been imagining the arrival of the children she remembered, the kids who'd been housed easily in the attic with Aunt Mila on two metal mesh beds, though of course she knows everybody's grown up, that children do, in theory, grow. But now she doesn't understand how they're all going to live in the same place for the coming weeks, for Aunt Mila's whole vacation. Now it seems like their grandmother's house will be too small for everybody, especially Ilya. It seems as if he'll knock his shoulders against the door jambs or the dark back of his head on the ceiling.

Ilya's carrying a plaid fabric bag in each hand and there's something boxy inside each one, stretching the fabric. He doesn't set them on the ground, though, he's waiting patiently for Zhenya to come down from the tree and open the gate.

"Hi," says Aunt Mila. Her mascara has melted in the sun, leaving black squiggles around her eyes. "That's your cousin Zhenya."

"Ma, we know each other," says Ilya.

His voice is as rough as oak bark – it, too, isn't at all what Zhenya remembers and she suddenly feels uncomfortable about her overalls that are dirt-stained on the knees and about her

top, which is faded and too tight, featuring Leo, Kate, and the bow of the sinking *Titanic*. And about her body, too, which is as dense as a stick of bologna. Her hair's pulled back in a ponytail, which she knows doesn't look good on her, because her "monkey ears," as her father says, are peering out. Zhenya reaches for her hair tie but then has second thoughts and lowers her hand.

"Yes," she says. "You've been here."

"Oh. My. Goodness. How old were the two of you that you can remember?"

Aunt Mila hands Zhenya a drawstring satchel made of cracked patent leather and a plastic bag with the black silhouette of a woman in a floppy hat who's labelled *Marianna*. Aunt Mila walks around Zhenya, with Ilya and Dasha following her, and she strides along the path toward the house, loudly describing what had been built where on the property. The garden beds with carrots were here and now, look, there's nettles, everything's overgrown, right here's where Sveta and I – she's your aunt, you'll meet her again soon – this is where we hung up a hammock, and the toilet's over there, you'll go outside to do all your business. I used to come here on vacation a lot at your age. The mosquitoes were terrible, there's always been so many mosquitoes here, I remember Sveta and I'd be lying there at night...

Zhenya peeks stealthily inside the bag with Marianna, maybe there's a cake to go with tea, or some candies or cookies? Her grandmother's friend Lailya Ilinichna always brings a marshmallowy cake. But the bag contains only flowered terrycloth clothes, a makeup bag, and something wrapped up in another plastic bag. Probably all the good food's in the bags Ilya's carrying.

And now Papa's greeting everybody on the veranda, asking how the ride was and are they tired, and Aunt Mila groans and complains about the stuffiness on the suburban train, which they almost missed, they sat on the sunny side because there was no choice since there were so

many people all packed in, all the granny carts and some drunk jerk sat next to them and slumped right on her shoulder...

Papa nods as he listens. When he sees Zhenya he waves at her to move it, not dawdle.

“Does this go inside?” Zhenya asks about the plastic bag and the patent leather satchel.

“Where else? Put them in your room,” says Papa, then he smiles at Mila and Dasha,

“Come on in, here, put your shoes right here, on the little shelf...”

“Sorry we’re empty-handed,” says Aunt Mila, obediently taking off her shoes. “We didn’t have time to go to the store, Dasha wanted to get to the bathroom fast, her timing’s always bad...”

“Ma-ma,” Dasha reproachfully says.

“No big deal, no big deal... Here’s the slippers, pick whatever ones you like, right here.”

“And it’s a good thing you didn’t stop at the store! We have plenty of everything.” Their grandmother’s voice carries from the house. “Are you hungry?”

“Of course they’re hungry, warm something up,” Papa says, answering for Aunt Mila as he leads her inside.

He’s not talking, he’s cooing. He’s in a good mood even though he’s been nervous since morning, like always before guests arrive. Mama and her grandmother mostly kept quiet, cooked, and tidied up, but Zhenya took her player and went out to the oak tree. “Papa’s just tired, you’ll need to be really quiet.” That’s what Mama usually says – used to say – but it got so there was no need for warnings. Zhenya had learned to hear annoyance, just like dogs hear ultrasonic frequencies. She could hear the mounting electrical proximity of a scene – will it blow up now or a little later?

But everything’s quiet and calm now. Safe.

Dasha kicks off her flipflops and goes inside, looking around as if she's in a dangerous jungle. Ilya lingers at the threshold, glances at the satchel and plastic bag, and holds out a hand:

“Here, I'll take them.”

Zhenya shakes her head and continues untying her shoelaces, catching her fingers in the loops. Ilya walks away, leaving behind only smells of the train, gasoline, deodorant, and laundry detergent. Zhenya sneaks a sniff of his forearm. It smells of scrapes, mud and tan, and tree bark, and it's strewn with mosquito bites.

She takes the plastic bag and the satchel, and goes inside.

From Part I, Chapter 16

2005

April

As she's approaching a subway station that looks like a white button to press, Zhenya scrutinizes sullen men who look like they're from the Caucasus region and women who seem too plump, who might be hiding hexogen under their jackets. Zhenya doesn't have the energy to walk the last steps to the revolving doors so she turns around and heads for Prospekt Mira instead, to flag down a car.

“How about two hundred to take me to Paveletskaya?”

The driver makes a face, as if Zhenya stinks. It's actually the inside of the car that stinks, though: there's tobacco smoke plus three pine tree air fresheners are hanging from the rearview mirror, a blend that makes Zhenya feel a little nauseous. There's a rug remnant instead of upholstery on the passenger seat. “Russian Radio” is playing.

“Three fifty,” says the driver.

There's no choice, Zhenya has to go or she'll be late. Management already has its eye on her and she was recently reprimanded. Zhenya busts her butt at work and sometimes skips classes at the institute so she can stay late to translate instructions and contracts even though she's not at all required to and doesn't get paid overtime. But Zhenya loses all her resolve every time she drops in on the director intending to ask for extra pay.

She sits on the piece of rug and closes the door, which bangs tinnily, trivially. She looks at her arm. The scar on her wrist peers out from under her sleeve. The scar is smooth and a little puckery, as if someone spilled wax on her skin and then threaded the edges and pulled, to make a gather.

The driver turns up the radio and Sviridova sings about love, nobody, and never.

2004  
August-September

On August 31, 2004, Zhenya was punished – shamed-and-disgraced – for the first time. She'd stopped by to see Alina, Diana's sister, to borrow a dress. Ilya had invited her to wander around downtown with him the next day and she wanted to wear the dress.

Diana's sister lived with her parents near Riga Station, in a meandering Stalin-era three-room apartment swathed in old wallpaper and book shelves. Alina lived in the room she used to share with Diana, her mother lived in another, and her father found shelter in the third. Only formally were they not divorced: they all gathered together only for cheerless evening tea. He recently brought home some biddy, Alina said, her sad eyes vacant while Zhenya tried on the dress. There was such a scene she had to get out of the house for the night.

Zhenya felt sorry for Alina but couldn't genuinely sympathize. Because the dress fit her beautifully and stretched nicely over her bottom. Because Ilya was supposed to pop by the next

day but had called to say, “Let’s walk around Moscow until we can’t walk anymore, then we’ll go to the first café we see.” And Zhenya’s already feeling his lips on hers, his warm elbow under her fingers, the glow of the streetlights, cigarette smoke in the wind on the embankment, and Moscow’s evening din in her face.

She had to stop in on her parents, too, her mother had asked.

Zhenya had so much energy that she decided to walk to her parents’: why spend the fare to ride just one stop? She came up out of an underground passage by the subway and walked past the patinaed monument honoring Sputnik’s creators. Then something banged, knocking Zhenya off her feet. And there she was on the asphalt, lying on debris by an overturned litter bin. Cars honked and alarms wailed incessantly, you couldn’t tell what was close or far away – the sounds barely made it through what felt like thick cotton in her ears. There was a smell of burning, people were running somewhere, away from the subway, away from Zhenya. She tried to stand up but her head was spinning. Someone lifted her by the elbow, led her a couple steps away, and sat her down on the grass by the Krestovsky shopping center. You need an ambulance, he said, but Zhenya waved him off.

Cars parked behind kiosks smoldered and smoke was coming out of the subway, too. A man lay right there on the asphalt; his legs were visible through the rips in his pants. Zhenya’s arm, scraped and bleeding, was burning hot. Sounds gradually came back to her and some sort of plaintive feline wail was worming its way into her head: it felt like a bit more would make her sick. Before long, Zhenya realized someone lying near her on the grass was moaning.

Ambulances, firemen, and cops came. Zhenya waited for someone to approach her but everyone ran past and she just left, forgetting the bag with Alina’s dress on the grass. Everything seemed foggy. Along the avenue, across Krestovsky Bridge, which stretched over the train



tracks, buildings had gone to bed without undressing. When Diana called on her mobile, Zhenya was dreaming of wailing cars and, for some reason, tanks. They were creeping toward her along the avenue and Ostankino Tower was behind them, burning like a giant match, and a dead man circled overhead as car alarms wailed, the subway entrance disgorged smoke, and an alert screamed that this was all because of our sins, our adultery, our destruction of the world's order.

Zhenya took some time off work and didn't go to the institute either; she wrote to Ilya saying she was sick. She vomited at six in the morning and her father wouldn't talk to her: he thought she'd come home drunk the night before. Zhenya told him the truth, to his mean back, and the news repeated that truth but her father had gone completely into his shell. He smoked and smoked on the balcony, talked about "the ones from the Caucasus" who ought to be kicked out, who the fuck needed them in Moscow, why the fuck had we all needed that Chechnya anyway.

Look what's happening, Zhenya heard her grandmother's voice, look, look what's happening. But Zhenya didn't have the strength to open her eyes, all she wanted was to stay in the dark. Her grandmother turned up the TV volume and an anxious voice inside it said: Hostages taken in the Northern Ossetian city of Beslan, a city thirty kilometers from Vladikavkaz. This morning an armed group forced their way onto the campus of School Number One. A ceremonial school assembly was just finishing at the time. Terrorists brandishing weapons herded the students, their parents, and teachers into the building...

Zhenya sensed smoke, the reek of burnt rubber, of burnt flesh – it all penetrated her nostrils. An unfamiliar wailing vibrated in her empty, weary stomach and rose in her throat. It gradually became clear that everything around her had coalesced into a strange and logical connection that only she understood, into a structure with her and Ilya at its center. The

explosion at Pushkin Square in 2000 suddenly surfaced out of the dark, cramped space of her recollections. She probably should have understood the warning back then, at the funeral of her first cousin once removed. But no.

2005

April

Rain streaks the windshield, washing off road dust. Zhenya wants to roll down the window, collect some rain in her palm and wipe her face. But that would look strange so she sits and endures.

She's thinking again about how she and Ilya are being punished for violating the order of things. Zhenya's being punished because Zhenya's not made for happiness and happiness isn't made for Zhenya, it's for nice sweet girls, for the ones who take daytime classes and study abroad in Paris. For ordinary girls who aren't at all strange, aren't oddballs. For the ones whose cousins don't arouse them.

The question is how to live that way. How can you live calmly, knowing that at any moment you could be poisoned and blown up, mauled and dismembered, burned in a subway car, suffocated with smoke, or spattered on the subway car walls during your ride to work? You can't be happy, especially now, when they can torture and kill children for three days in an ordinary school. You can't ride the subway since anybody with a backpack or suitcase could be a jihadist. You can't fly on planes – they don't always reach their destinations. Everything's mined, all around, and there's now more and more tripwires you can't touch – Zhenya will certainly graze one someday.

Zhenya shrinks at the sight of the police, tries to look as inoffensive as possible, and waits: now they'll come over to her, now they'll search her. Sometimes she unfastens her jacket:

here I am, there's nothing under the jacket, and my purse isn't big, you don't need to look at me like that. Irrational fear torments her: what if they suspect she's a jihadist, too? Even though she has a completely Slavic appearance.

She spends a lot of money on taxis now. Sometimes Ilya gives her a ride but he doesn't know what happened by the subway at Riga Station, that Zhenya was there. She hasn't said anything to him so far, she's afraid he'll understand the warning and leave her. And she doesn't want to break up yet. Zhenya knows it will end: the top of her skull feels the structure's contractions, the air's resonant crackling, and she prays, Please, just one more day or week, I know, I know everything, but things have never ever been so good.

In a month or two or three or ten, they'll need to break up anyway because nobody will approve of them. There's a faint rainbow-like fog between them, it's a mirage, a *trompe-l'œil*. Madness that disappears on its own. Zhenya promises she'll deal with it. Later.

But for now, let it stay.

From Part III, Chapter 3

2013

October

Dasha's first memory is this: a dusky winter afternoon, their old apartment in Lyubertsy. Ilya's sitting and scribbling something in a textbook with a pencil. Dasha says she's hungry but Ilya doesn't want to be distracted from his book: he's constantly in his books, he's studied like crazy, like his life depended on it, from an early age. He heats up hotdogs and potatoes in a frying pan,

puts that in front of Dasha, and returns to his textbook. Dasha takes the plate and goes back to the other room and asks something; she no longer remembers what, she just remembers feeling unbearably bored and very lonely. Maybe she'd asked him to read to her about Winnie the Pooh. But Ilya just gets mad, he doesn't feel like talking to her. Shut up, he says. You're bothering me.

He notices Dasha later, in the evening, after Papa and Mama come home. Papa yells at Mama, Mama yells at Papa, and something breaks in the big room, jangling as it shatters on the floor (it later turns out to be the dome of the ceiling lamp). Mama's suddenly wailing, sounding stifled, it's awful, and Ilya closes the door to the kids' room, quickly finds *Winnie the Pooh*, and reads to Dasha. She likes the story about the teddy bear and Christopher Robin, and the donkey Eeyore, and Tigger (Papa looks like Tigger), too, and she likes how Ilya's finger follows along the lines of text. Dasha follows that finger, mentally combining letters into syllables and syllables into words.

That's how Dasha learned to read before turning five.

All in all, she's more inclined to thinking she hates men.

Just take what happened this morning. She was walking Gleb to school – he'd been admitted to a Moscow grammar school for first grade after they'd commuted for two years to a Moscow kindergarten (which was exactly why Dasha'd spent so much time and energy on the kindergarten). Dasha bought two rolls and coffee in a paper cup outside the subway station. The cup was one of those thin ones and it burned her fingers, even through her gloves. Dasha and Gleb started eating their rolls right on the street because they were late, out of time, and really had to hurry. They were standing at a crosswalk, scattering crumbs on themselves. A man next to

them looked them over in disgust (though you'd think he wouldn't stand there if he was so displeased) and said:

“Pigs.”

Dasha knew immediately that was directed at her. The cup's burning her fingers, there's wind and fall drizzle in her face, the morning's gloomy and dreary, and Sanya hadn't come home last night.

She herself didn't really understand how it happened. It was just three motions: she tossed the roll, took the lid off the cup, and splashed coffee in the guy's face. He, of course, shouts from the pain and covers his face with his hands, and Dasha screams, “whatdidyousaywhatthefuckdidyousay,” and Gleb's pulling on her arm, screaming:

“Mama, don't, don't! Ma, let's go!”

“Stop screaming, the hell with this!” Dasha barked at him, too, but she left fast anyway because there was a green light for the crosswalk. And then somebody called the cops. Sanya would help her, of course, if something happened, but it was better not to drag him into this. She didn't even want to think about what he'd do later.

And Dasha had cheated on him a couple weeks ago. She'd met a guy in a bar. Well, not really a “guy,” since he wasn't young. Balding, married (you can't hide the ridge from a wedding ring) but okay overall, no potbelly or third chin. Carried himself with confidence, Dasha loves that, too. They talked about this and that – he's an engineer, works in Zhukovsky, loves motorcycles.

“So listen, you have a husband.” He points at her ring finger. “Why're you doing this?”

“Are you going to screw me or not?” says Dasha.

It wasn't exactly clear why she went with him. She was just bored and sad, Gleb was staying with her mother, Sanya was on duty somewhere. So they got a room, hard to say what kind since they didn't even put the light on. The engineer started asking questions during sex, "So does your husband do it like this? How about this? And this?"

Dasha got sick of his chattiness. She dismounted his dick, found her jeans on the floor, got dressed, and left.

Why doesn't anybody ask married men questions? Of course it's not good when a man's sleeping around on his wife but it never occurs to anybody to ask, So why're you doing this? Everybody understands a man's polygamous by nature, he needs variety, he can't eat the same thing every day. But it's as if nothing can bore a woman. It's as if, by default, she's not really aching for sex, that she shouldn't think much about it because sex is for pleasure, and wanting that pleasure is for men.

Why isn't a woman entitled to the same thing? Why can't she leave the child with her husband after a divorce and let him sit with the kid? Well, she can but the community would devour her because "she's the mother!" It's as if a woman's life is all planned out, lived in advance, and the only thing left is a piece after fifty, after the husband leaves or dies so she doesn't have to feed anybody or do their laundry, so she can live out her life, looking for what *she* wants. How should she spend her remaining years? And it's very strange when the point of it all is external. You're supposed to be for someone else all the time, instead of yourself. If you're truly good, you're supposed to dispense yourself to others, dissolve in them.

A woman's supposed to be kind. Understanding. Shaved in strategically important places, ready for sex and blowjobs. She's supposed to be friends with a man's mother and relatives, ask them for recipes and advice. If need be, she'll swallow offensive words, deeds, and sperm. She'll

ask her husband when to go on vacation instead of making the decision herself. She's a good cook. Earns money. Doesn't cheat. Doesn't drink. Doesn't swear.

They can all go fuck themselves with their "wants."

She doesn't feel like going home after work. She has to guess again what kind of mood Sanya will be in when he shows up, so the whole evening's tense. Life's livable if he's in a good mood but five times out of six it's shit because Sanya's work isn't so sweet. If he comes home sober, that's no big deal, he'll grumble a little, and roll into bed. The options vary if he's drunk.

Sanya comes home drunk that night at eleven thirty.

"On duty, huh?" Dasha asks, which gets her a palm to the top of the head, not hard but noticeable.

"Don't be stupid, hon, huh. Course I was at work."

Dasha rubs the hurt spot, looking dissatisfied, but Sanya doesn't react. He's clomping around in the kitchen, where he slams the refrigerator shut.

"Why the hell do I need your borsch again?" he yells.

The lid clanks, Sanya brings the whole pot to the bathroom, pours into the toilet, and flushes. The entire floor's covered in beet-colored splashes. Dasha and Gleb could have eaten borsch for another two days.

"Listen," Dasha's trying to speak calmly, "just tell me if you don't want soup and I'll fix something separate, whatever you need."

He silently puts on his coat.

"Where you going?"

"As if we fucking care..."

Well, yes we care. He deletes texts from his phone, he started doing that even before the wedding, Dasha's checked. There's been less sex, he's not trying at all. And Sanya doesn't drink with Dasha anymore but with someone else, somewhere else, somehow else, and the anger's simmering, rising into her throat, flowing out.

“Out with the ladies again?”

The last thing Dasha sees before he hits is Gleb. He's peering out of his room, shouting something and there's horror on his face but Dasha can't hear anything beyond the ringing in her ears. She's lying on the floor thinking, God forbid Gleb dashes out now, Sanya will definitely break something in him.

Her face hurts. Sanya's feet, wearing dark blue cotton socks, are headed for the kitchen. Something clanks and smashes. There's a smell of burning. Dasha has trouble getting up. She follows him – he could start a fire. But it's tarot cards burning in the sink, Sanya's lit them.

“What've you done here, Baba Vanga, shit... Next thing, bitch, you'll bring chickens to the kitchen table for sacrifice.”

Then he goes into the other room, opens the wardrobe and the window, too, wide open. Rain soaks the windowsill. Without looking, Sanya scoops up Dasha's things and tosses everything out into the darkness. T-shirts fall like shot white birds, coming down on powerlines.

“You're getting out of here now,” he says.

A winter boot from a box on the upper shelf flies into the darkness. A second boot follows. Dasha imagines someone walking under the windows when a woman's boot with a heel falls from the tenth floor. She'd have burst out laughing if her face hadn't ached.

“This is *my* apartment, *I* live here, you jackass,” she says but she steps back, ready to escape, when Sanya walks toward her.



But he doesn't hit her, no.

He takes an umbrella and the car key, and leaves.

Dasha locks the door and slides the latch fast so it can't be opened from outside. She goes to the kitchen and scrapes the charred tarot cards into the trash. They shower into the bin. The thirteenth Arcana is visible; Death winks.

Dasha pulls the card out and burns it completely. She gathers the shards of a plate off the floor. Then she opens the window to let out the smoke. She'll need to go down for her things and pick them up, but she can't: her legs are leaden, she herself is all leaden, her head's as heavy as cast iron, it's lowering. Dasha lowers it to the table, face-down. The tablecloth dampens and the ash on it dissolves into a gray blotch (how many times did I say not to smoke in the apartment).

She hears light footsteps. A child's warm little hand settles on her back and pats her between the shoulder blades.

"Ma, are you tired?" Gleb asks.

Dasha nods: Yes, I'm tired. Very.

First thing in the morning she goes to have her injuries documented. Then to the cops to write a complaint – she's definitely decided not to let Sanya wash his hands of this. The cops tell her: So he doesn't have a record? There'll be administrative punishment or you'll come in yourself later and retract it, like happened so many times before. But that wasn't me, says Dasha. They keep persuading her: Just don't let him in and that's that, you'll only make him mad with the admin punishment and everything. In the end, Dasha doesn't write anything.

A text comes in.

*sorry hon*

She deletes it. Changes the locks immediately. Packs Sanya's things in suitcases and plastic bags, and carries them out to the stairwell. Texts him: *pick them up before somebody else does*, then she and Gleb go to her friend's to live there for a couple days – no matter what, you can't go to work with a black eye like this. Of course her friend's horrified. She offers to let them stay longer but that would be awkward. And if Sanya suddenly found them, would he make trouble? Dasha can't put her friend at risk like that.

Gleb has to go to school, he's in first grade and his homeroom teacher's been calling. Dasha lies that everybody's sick. She's decided not to bring him to school for as long as possible: What if Sanya's watching for them by the school? Her palms go cold when she imagines them meeting.

After her friend's, they stay with her mother, who messes with her head. Sanya calls regularly, her mother holds out the phone – answer, she says – but Dasha won't take it. What can they talk about now?

Sanya obviously doesn't agree with her. A text comes from an unknown number.

*i'll find you bitch*

*i'll find you*