

**THE
INCREDIBLE
EVENTS
IN
WOMEN'S CELL
NUMBER 3**

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**KIRA
YARMYSH**



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DAY ONE

If you asked Anya which day in prison had been the most trying, she would say the first. It had seemed both insane and endless. Prison time was elastic: it stretched out interminably, only to then fly like an arrow.

It started with her waking up on a clammy, impermeable mattress in a detention cell in a Moscow police department. She had been arrested the day before, but her efforts to outrun the riot police, her journey in the police bus, and her registration at the police department had kept her busy enough to all but overlook how it had ended. The reality of being in police custody struck her only once she was locked in that cell.

She had spent the night tossing and turning on the mattress, trying to pull her top down to avoid her body coming into contact with the oilcloth. The mattress was on the floor, there were no pillows, no blankets, and it was impossible to get comfortable. Either the arm under her head went numb or she got pins and needles in her side. She could only tell that she had managed to get some fitful sleep when she jerked awake, which happened many times.

What the time was, she had no idea. The cell was windowless, with only a dim light bulb above the door, which stayed on night

and day. Her phone had been taken from her. Each time she woke, for want of anything else to do, she entertained herself by inspecting the wall in front of her: the peeling paint that looked like crushed eggshells; the suspicious streaks whose origins she preferred not to think about; the graffiti: LEX, UP BIRYULYOVO!, ALLAHU AKBAR. Waking up one last time with a jolt, Anya realized she was not imagining it: she could feel a tremor under the floor, the metro must be open, morning had arrived.

The police department began coming to life, as Anya could hear through her cell door, which had been left ajar overnight. A kindly, older cop had not locked it but left it open a handbreadth. (A chain on the outside ensured she opened it no farther.) She lay, listening to the police arguing among themselves in the reception area, the telephone ringing off the hook, the rasping of a door lock, water flushing in a toilet she was eventually taken to visit. A policeman let her in and stayed outside to keep the door shut.

Anya dithered and looked around her. A scene from *Trainspotting* came to mind, where the main character goes to “the worst toilet in Scotland.” He had clearly seen nothing like the one in the Tverskaya police department, with its chipped tile floor awash with murky fluid. A rusty chain hung from the water tank, and as for the toilet itself, it was a hole in the ground. Anya decided against going anywhere near it. Running the faucet for appearances’ sake, while avoiding all contact with the squishy remnant of soap on the filthy edge of the washbasin, she emerged, and the policeman took her back to the cell.

Time passed with demoralizing slowness. Her cell door was now shut tight and did not allow in any outside sounds. She ran her eyes over the walls, which were barely visible in the dim light, but it was an unrewarding pastime. She felt heavy and clumsy from lack of sleep, and thoughts stirred sluggishly in her head. Anya could not tell how long she sat like that. Her heart seemed to begin beating more slowly

and she felt she was sinking into a trancelike state; perhaps, indeed, suspended animation. When the door opened and a policeman came into the cell, Anya was startled, not sure what was happening.

She was taken through to the reception desk and told to sit on a bench next to a sad-eyed woman who looked Roma, a young guy who was drunk, and a man with a large black eye. The fatherly cop who had left her door partly open took the box of her belongings out of a closet. "Get yourself together," he said. "You have to go to the court hearing." Anya turned on her phone, quickly checked her messages, put her belt back on and laced up her sneakers. (The laces had been taken from her before she had spent the night in the cell.)

"Don't make too much effort," the cop advised. "You're going to court."

"Why, aren't laces allowed in court?" Anya asked in surprise.

"They are, but you'll have to take them back off at the special detention center," he explained considerately. Anya was touched.

Her appearance in court took less time than she expected, contrary to what she'd hoped, because it was at least light and airy there. Her friends had brought coffee and a Caesar salad for her, and she was allowed to keep her phone.

The judge, whose punctuality Anya was regretting, was a severe-looking, gray-haired man. The hearing began on time, the breaks lasted precisely as long as he said they should. This might be a good sign, she thought. If someone looked as stern and unassailable as a rock face, she was sure the decisions they made would be just and fair.

Anya's crime was to have been within reach of a riot policeman at a protest rally. She had been randomly plucked from the crowd and shoved into a police bus, where it was hot but rather lively. Lots of people besides Anya were being arrested, and they were all talking, joking, and laughing together. There was a party atmosphere. This was the first time she had been in a police bus, so it was an adventure. She

had no doubt that when they got to the police station they would all soon be released.

She and the others were taken to a conference room. It was a large space with rows of chairs, a bit like a schoolroom. By one wall was what looked like a desk for the teacher, only it had a portrait of Putin to the right of it, one of Medvedev to the left, and the flag of the Russian Federation in the middle. Anya's fellow detainees were called up to the desk one by one. They each signed some papers and were then released. It was getting dark outside, but still Anya was being kept waiting, until finally she was the only person left and the darkness had become impenetrable. An electric light up by the ceiling was making an irritating buzz. A policeman came in and told her she would have to spend the night in an "ADC," which was decoded for her as an administrative detention cell. She could not see why she was the only one being treated like this, and began arguing. The policeman said she was facing a more serious charge than the others and would have to stay in the ADC to await trial.

Lying on the floor in her cell she had found it less easy to suppose everything was going to end well, or soon. The court today was at least clean and orderly, and there was even a bolt on the toilet door. Anya's hopes of a happy ending revived slightly. When the judge invited her to address the court, she was reluctant to stigmatize him in case he was about to release her and she would find she had been unjustly rude to a good-hearted person. The judge heard her out, retired to deliberate for half an hour, emerged exactly on time and, with a wholly just and absolutely unassailable expression on his face, ruled that she should continue to be held in custody.

Anya was duly transferred to a special detention center. The two cops transporting her were in a hurry to get home, so they put a flashing light on the roof of their car and sailed past the Moscow traffic jams. Racing through the streets with the siren wailing, Anya felt like

a big cheese in the criminal underworld, but this part of the day was also disappointingly brief. She looked out of the car window as apartment buildings flashed by, and reflected that even the most uninspired five-story blocks appear unbelievably appealing to someone on whom a sentence has just been pronounced.

Arriving at the special detention center, Anya's guards found that their speeding had been to no avail, because a whole line of police cars with detainees was held up in front of the gate.

Another long wait followed. The cops at first took turns getting out of the car to smoke, then they both got out at the same time, then they let Anya out to join them. Inevitably, the discussion turned to politics. The senior cop sententiously pointed out what a lot of trouble Anya and her comrades were causing the police by organizing unsanctioned rallies. After delivering this reprimand, he moved on to complain about a judicial system that was putting Anya in prison for nothing more serious than her idiotic rallies, and thereby obliging him to drive her all over Moscow. Next he excoriated the government for its thieving: police salaries were dwindling, but the number of rallies they were called on to disrupt was not. Anya tried to point out tactfully the possibility of a connection between government thieving and protest rallies, but her guard was not looking for a debate partner. After deploring the chaos around him, the policeman started on the director of the special detention center, who was keeping them in line in this heat and thereby proving himself to be his most powerful and perfidious foe. The cop ranted and railed, his buddy tacitly concurring, until finally the three of them were allowed inside.

Anya was so worn out by the day's waiting, she was almost looking forward to quickly getting into her cell, but this was not to be. Her guards handed her over to the police at the center and made themselves scarce. Anya embarked on the process of being booked.

The registration procedure consisted of several stages and was thoroughly ridiculous. First, the police gutted the bag of goodies that Anya's friends had brought to the court. She had no idea what was in it herself, so she studied the contents with no less interest than the officers did. It was even rather fun, like picking presents out of Santa's sack. The rubber flip-flops and sliced sausage might not be particularly wonderful, but after the ordeals of the day she was not going to be picky with gifts.

Everything was opened, sliced, or shaken out. About a third of her items were confiscated, and some she was advised to leave for now in the storage room rather than taking everything with her into the cell. The bag itself had to be left in storage because its shoulder strap "represented a risk." Anya could not see how it could, so she naively asked the question. A pompous cop with fat cheeks, who she decided must be in charge, gave her a chilling look and said, "You might hang yourself." Anya shuddered and asked no more questions.

In addition to the shoulder bag, other items deemed impermissible were: a pencil sharpener (a blade!), a packet of sunflower seeds (husks!), hair conditioner (due to its nontransparent packaging), a pillow and blanket (also nontransparent). And much else besides, for reasons at which she could only guess.

When she was instructed to discard several oranges, she broke her resolution and tentatively asked, "What's the problem with oranges?"

"Might contain alcohol."

"Really?" Anya asked in bafflement.

"People inject alcohol into them with a syringe," the fat-cheeked cop explained wearily. "Soft fruit and vegetables: impermissible. Only apples, carrots, and onions are allowed. And radishes."

After Anya had put the plundered remains of her belongings into a plastic bag, she was taken for a medical examination. This was

performed in a small closet adjacent to the reception area. There were no onlookers, but the fish-eye of a camera in the corner of the ceiling hinted at less than complete privacy.

The doctor was a chubby, bespectacled, fairly young woman, who might have seemed likable but for the expression of withering contempt on her face. She eyed Anya disparagingly, as if unerringly able to recognize an incorrigible case when she saw one. She ordered Anya to take her clothes off.

"What, everything?" Anya asked, with a sideways glance at the camera.

"Just your shirt and jeans. Now show me your back. Were you beaten at the police station?"

"What?!"

"I'll take that as a no. So why is there bruising down your spine?"

Anya tried twisting around to look but, needless to say, could see nothing. "What bruising?" she asked anxiously. "Perhaps it's from lying on the mattress there . . ."

"Some mattress! Right, and what's this bruise on your leg?"

"That's definitely from when I fell off my bike the other day."

"She fell off her bike! Any complaints?"

"No!" Anya said quickly, and the doctor instantly snapped shut her book and made for the door, managing to convey disdain even with her back turned.

It was time to have her fingerprints taken, which was called "finger rolling." A sheet of A4 paper with squares was placed in front of Anya, in which she was to leave prints of the pads of her fingers and, in two larger squares, prints of the whole of her hands. A blonde policewoman of middling years started running a roller with glossy black dye over Anya's hands. "It's really very good, washes off easily," she told Anya, noticing her look of concern. It was unclear whether she was bragging or offering reassurance.

When it was all done, Anya assumed she would at last be taken to her cell. However, the pompous cop brought another tome out of the side room. Anya groaned inwardly. Sitting down heavily, he put the book in front of him and opened it. He looked intently at Anya and said, "We need to list your valuables." "Fine," Anya agreed. "What valuables?"

"That's for you to tell me. There's usually a phone. Do you have one?" Anya nodded. "Put it here. And where's your ID? Yep, there it is. Your national insurance card? That's another valuable for the list."

"Should I get witnesses?" the blonde cop asked. The pompous cop nodded and started writing in his book in ornate, painstaking handwriting. The blonde left the reception area, clanging her way through a succession of doors. Anya counted three before she heard her say, "Okay, girls, this way. You're needed as witnesses. We've got a new cellmate for you." Anya did not hear the reply, but shortly afterwards heard flip-flops slapping along the corridor as someone approached reception. She readied herself.

How did Anya picture her future cellmate? The images in her mind drew on American TV series and Russian news items, so she was expecting a hybrid of a pretty, athletic blonde in an orange jumpsuit and an abject, ground-down woman in a headscarf. She felt the tension building as the flip-flops approached, and when the first figure came around the corner, she almost fainted.

Two women came into reception immediately behind the police-woman. Anya stared at them in disbelief and felt her heart sink, leaving behind a gaping, shuddering void. Athletic blondes clearly end up behind bars only in America.

The first prisoner looked as if she had just been brought up out of a dank dungeon. Anya was struck by how pitifully thin she was, her bony shoulders sprinkled with purple pimples, her rib cage skeletal. She was wearing a tank top with spaghetti-like shoulder straps and, in

the presence of cops uniformed up to the ears, seemed almost naked, which made her appearance even more dreadful. She looked like a skeleton in a biology class rather than a live human being. The woman's gaunt face was yellowed. Thin curls straggled over her forehead and through them she glared out at the cops and at Anya with fiendish hostility.

The prisoner following her looked better, but only because of the very low baseline. Anya found her troubling too. The oddest thing was her dull, disoriented expression, as if she were not all there. A further peculiarity was what she was wearing because, in contrast to her half-naked companion, she seemed to be wearing too much. All of it was denim, from her pants to her shirt buttoned up to the throat, to her jacket.

"What is it n-now?" the first one demanded, looking venomously at the police. Anya thought the stutter made her even more sinister.

"We need witnesses," the pompous cop replied without looking up from what he was writing. "Cell phone, black, Apple. Model?"

"It's an iPhone 7," Anya said, continuing to peer surreptitiously at the women.

"Seventh series, case with Apple logo, charger for it . . . for it? . . . white, damaged at . . . what's that called? . . . well, let's say, the base. National insurance document, 133-8096156 . . ."

The cop wrote down the final digit and pushed the log across to the half-naked woman. "Check it," he grunted.

The woman reluctantly bent over the table and ran her eyes down the page. Anya shuddered at the sight of her shoulder blades, which seemed about to tear through her skin. Denim woman stood meanwhile staring blankly at the wall and paying no attention to the proceedings at all.

"S-seems all right."

"Sign it. First name, surname, signature."

The half-naked woman signed. Denim woman did not move, as if she had not heard, but after a poke in the ribs from her cellmate, stirred herself and also scribbled her name in the book.

The first prisoner suddenly turned to glare at Anya, who was so taken aback she stopped breathing. For a while the woman stared at her, completely unembarrassed, before breaking into a smile and saying, “D-don’t be scared. All the girls are fine. Nobody’s going to hurt you.”

Anya stared back at her. She wasn’t sure what surprised her more—this sudden flood of goodwill or the fact that one of the woman’s front teeth was missing.

“Thank you very much, but I’m not scared,” she murmured.

“Don’t be scared!” denim woman suddenly repeated very loudly and, looking somehow past Anya, also gave her a happy, childish smile. Anya counted three missing teeth.

“All right, let’s go to the cell, girls,” said the policewoman. Hearing this, the half-naked woman adopted an expression of deep displeasure, but turned on her heel and walked to the door without another word. Denim woman made no move and carried on smiling blissfully.

“Move, moron,” her friend hissed, tugging her sleeve. She swayed, almost losing her balance, but then obediently flip-flopped in her wake, the smile never leaving her face.

“So, how many people are there in the women’s cell?” Anya asked after a moment of silence, glancing at the door through which the women had just disappeared.

“Five, plus you,” the pompous cop replied, placing Anya’s valuables in a striped bag with the number 37 printed on it. Only then did he look up, and something in Anya’s expression made him take pity, because he added, “They’re all perfectly normal. No drug addicts, no hardened criminals.”

Having encountered two of her future cellmates, Anya’s impatience to get to her cell had dissolved but, for better or worse, her

registration was now complete. Clutching a plastic bag containing what was permissible for her to take inside the cell, she left the reception area, guided by a boy of a policeman with a solemn and serious expression.

Beyond the door leading into the depths of the detention center was a second, and beyond that was a green-painted corridor with no windows and only searingly white fluorescent light bulbs that ran the length of the ceiling. Anya felt she was walking through a sunken wreck on the seabed. On both sides of the corridor were metal doors festooned with bolts and locks. Strange, identical, meter-high pipes with yawning mouths were fixed to the wall by the doors. Anya glanced into one as she walked by but saw only darkness inside.

"What are those for?" she asked the boy.

"That's not for you to know," he replied severely.

There appeared to be only one women's cell, which was exactly in the middle of a row and numbered 3.

"Stand there," the boy said, and started sorting through his bunch of keys. They were so enormous they looked like stage props. It seemed incredible that they could be used to open actual locks rather than serving a purpose only in school plays. Selecting the requisite key, the boy first looked through the peephole into the cell, then looked sternly at Anya, and finally, with a rasping sound, unlocked the door in front of her.

Anya assumed her most independent air, drew herself to full height, took a deep breath, and . . . immediately succumbed to a coughing fit. Clouds of cigarette smoke billowed out of the cell and her eyes were instantly stinging. Her spectacular entry had been ruined, but there could be no turning back. Blinking, spluttering, and firmly clutching her bag of possessions, Anya stepped unseeing into the semidarkness. The door was immediately slammed shut behind her. A silence ensued.

It took her a few moments to get used to the smoke, but when she finally managed to open her eyes and looked quickly around, she saw . . . them.

Several women were sitting far inside the room, looking at Anya. Light from a small window fell in broad swathes on their shoulders and brows, which made them look not like living people but statues hewn from stone. They were silent and motionless, and seemed suddenly like idols arranged on the bunks. A dense fog of cigarette smoke in the cell blurred their features, as if she were looking at them through glass covered in condensation. Seconds ticked by but still the stone idols remained immobile, and Anya felt everything go cold inside her.

"Well, tell us your name, then, and how long you're in for," said the nearest.

The spell was broken and the women seemed to come to life. The one asking the question took a long drag on a cigarette, which, Anya now noticed, she was holding. A ribbon of smoke rose towards the ceiling. All her fellow detainees started moving at the same time, one coughing, another changing position. They were all perfectly normal, and Anya felt a prickle of embarrassment at having almost panicked seeing them all. The women inspected her quite openly, and under their lively, curious gaze she felt herself thawing out.

"I'm Anya. I'm in for ten days," she said.

"Much like the rest of us," said the woman smoking the cigarette. "Driving without a license too, were you?"

"No, actually I was at a protest rally."

"A friend of mine went to a rally once!" another girl chimed in. When Anya turned to look at her she was taken aback for a moment, because the girl was dark-skinned. That was completely unexpected, as if part of Anya's daydream about American prisons had suddenly come true.

"Er . . . may I sit here?" Anya asked, recovering her poise and pointing to a vacant bunk.

"Sit where you like," grunted the smoker.

The cell was spacious, and much less gloomy than Anya had thought in that first moment. The walls were painted a delicate peach color, nothing like how she had pictured such places. There was music coming from a radio somewhere. Looking around, she spotted a mesh-covered recess above the door. The floor was wooden, and the furniture consisted of a lopsided locker in the corner piled high with packets of tea and biscuits, and four narrow bunks. One corner of the room, where the walls were tiled, comprised the "bathroom," with a washbasin and a small cubicle that obviously served as a toilet. Its walls extended to shoulder height on Anya, and on its diminutive door a sheet of paper torn from an exercise book urged, "Run the faucet when using!"

"W-want some tea?" her half-naked former witness asked hospitably.

"If I may." The woman stood up and started rummaging in a pile of blankets on the top bunk. Anya looked for any sign of a kettle, although she would have been surprised to find one, given that she had not been allowed to bring even a pencil sharpener into the cell. In the meantime, the woman extracted a misted plastic bottle from under the blankets, poured hot water from it into a plastic cup, and dropped in a tea bag.

"I'm N-natasha," she said, handing Anya the tea with an encouraging smile. The tea was just short of lukewarm. Anya mumbled something suitably appreciative and took a hasty sip, feeling it important to show enthusiasm and not give offense. She had no way of knowing how she was expected to behave here.

The other women said nothing and carried on looking at her.

Anya hesitantly inquired, "What's your name?"

"Katya," responded the girl with the cigarette, exhaling. She said it in an offhand manner, almost grudgingly, as if to make it clear the question was of no interest and she was replying only out of politeness. At the same time, her gaze was so intrusive and watchful that every time she looked at Anya it made her feel uneasy. Katya's eyes were a striking feature, light blue, almost transparent, and Anya was perturbed by the disconnect between the way she spoke and the way she stared. She was not repellent, but Anya had a sense it might be wise to keep her at a distance.

"My name is Diana," the black girl said. She was tall and monumental, wore a flared black dress, and had a springy bun on top of her head. Taking the cigarette from Katya, she inhaled elegantly and returned it.

"How did you all come to be here?" Anya asked tentatively.

"The two of us," Diana said with a nod towards Katya, "are in for driving without a license. A ten-day stretch. Separately, but on the same day."

"And I s-swore at a cop," Natasha said, pouring tea for herself and settling on her bunk.

"Can you get sent to a detention center for that?" Anya asked, surprised.

"Of course you can. I was standing with my husband outside a store. He was holding a c-can of beer. Unopened, mind you! Up come the filth. You're drunk, they say, come with us. I know all about them. I've been through it all before. I said, we're going nowhere with you . . . and a couple of other things. So, like, they arrest me for obstructing the police in the performance of their duties."

"Have you done time in a detention center before?" Anya asked.

Natasha smiled indulgently: "Yeah, I've done time—but not in a detention center."

Anya nodded quickly, trying to look blasé, even though a siren was wailing in her head. She was curious to know why Natasha had been in prison, but not sure she wanted to hear the answer.

"Natasha's our old hand. She can tell you tons of stuff it's good to know," Katya said sardonically, stubbing out her cigarette. Looking around at her fellow inmates with those cold blue eyes, she paused at denim woman, Anya's other witness. "Ira here is our exotic case. Isn't that right, Ira? She's in for not paying child support."

They turned as one to look at denim woman. Until now she had been sitting, silently huddled in the corner of her bunk, but their attention revived her instantly. She smiled and started nodding. Anya was fairly certain she had not heard the question. Ira's strange condition made Anya no less apprehensive than Natasha's criminal record, but again she did not want to inquire further.

"I'm here for driving without a license too," said the fifth girl, who was sitting on the bunk next to Anya's. When she was sure she had everyone's attention, she added, "Only I had a license." Anya looked at her and could not believe that there was a fashion model in the cell with her. To be truthful, Anya was uncertain what exactly her profession might be, but only because she had never seen such women up close, having previously encountered them only in photos on Instagram. The girl had that photoshopped look even now, sitting a meter away from Anya on a crumpled prison bed. Her eyes were blue, her hair purest silk, her bust an F-cup. She batted her extraordinarily long eyelashes and pouted her lips flirtatiously.

"You mean you actually had a license?" Anya asked, continuing to look her over almost impolitely.

Diana, who had obviously already heard the story, snorted and then responded for her: "It was out of date, for Chrissakes."

"Well, yes, but I never had any trouble until then!" the fashion plate said, immediately explaining to Anya with a friendly smile, "My

license was revoked eight months ago but I didn't hand it in! Why would I want to do that? Oh, and my name is Maya, by the way."

"Delighted to meet you."

"For this I was sentenced to five days, and before that I was held overnight in a police station. Can you imagine it?"

"I absolutely can."

"I tried to commit suicide there. They didn't take my bag from me and it had a chain on it. I wound it around my neck and tried to strangle myself."

Anya's eyes widened. "Oh my god!"

"I even lost consciousness for several seconds," Maya boasted, clearly satisfied with the effect she had achieved. "Then I started scratching my veins open. I was just so completely stressed out!"

"Goodness me . . ."

"Look!" Maya thrust her arm under Anya's nose. There was indeed a thin, dotted line of dried blood on her wrist. "But never mind, the cops got what they deserved! When they tried to arrest me, I bit one of them! And then at the trial they started hinting that if I gave them a bribe I could be let off, would you believe such a thing?"

Anya nodded just in case the question hadn't been rhetorical. She was startled not so much by what Maya was saying as by how she was saying it, so full of herself.

"Well, I said, no way. I make it a rule never to give a kopeck to these twats!" Maya concluded with unexpected vehemence, only for her face to light up again the next second in a smile.

"You should be thankful you only got f-five days," Natasha said, sipping her tea. "You're lucky they didn't send you to the funny farm as a suicide risk."

"Could they really do that?" Maya said, sounding appalled. Her expression and tone of voice changed with the swiftness of a cartoon

character. In the course of a minute she could appear hurt, scared, flirtatious, complicit, sweet, and incensed.

"You b-bet they could, and you'd have liked it a whole lot less there," Natasha assured her.

Maya became subdued, clearly reflecting on that scenario. They were all silent for a time, the only sound coming from Natasha slurping her tea.

Katya eventually set aside the plastic cup she had been using as an ashtray, slapped her thighs and said, "Right, we were just playing Crocodile. Are you in?"

"I think I'd rather just watch to begin with," Anya responded swiftly. It was not a game she liked, and she had no wish to make a fool of herself in front of five strangers.

"Suit yourself. By the way, do you smoke? Got any cigarettes?"

"No."

"Shit, we've only got three left," said Diana, lighting up all the same.

"It's okay, we'll bum some from cell 5," Katya promised. "And if one of you makes me act out the word 'investment' again, I'll kill you."

They both laughed. Katya started looking for the bag they were using for the game, which they eventually discovered Ira was sitting on. She continued to radiate pure bliss, even when the others began holding their noses and shouting, "Yoicks, Ira, you've farted in it!" As the game organizer, Katya shuffled the pieces of paper in the bag and held it out. The others each helped themselves to a word.

Natasha went first. Standing in the middle of the cell, she raised her arms, clasped her hands above her head, and gazed expectantly at her cellmates. Nobody had the least idea of the answer. She looked at them severely, raised her arms again, and then imitated splashing something around. Her expression was so grim that everybody

started giggling, and the longer nobody guessed, the more furious Natasha became. She stared daggers at the others, as if knowing for a fact they had long ago worked out the answer and now were only pretending not to know, out of spite. Finally she gave up and just pointed up at the ceiling, even though pointing at things was against the rules.

Maya shouted, "A light bulb!" which, to Anya's surprise, turned out to be right. She got off her bunk.

Standing with upright posture, she again surprised Anya by having such a diminutive body that her huge breasts looked downright intimidating. Maya was wearing platform sneakers, and stepped forward a little unsteadily, like a newborn fawn. Taking center stage, she squatted gracefully, stuck out her butt and put her fingers to her head, as if they were horns.

"A bunny rabbit!" Katya yelled, jabbing a finger at her. Maya looked pleased with herself, got up and sashayed back to her bunk.

It soon became obvious that Crocodile was not Katya's game. She waved her arms about pointlessly, cursing under her breath at first, then very loudly. The others were in fits of laughter. Katya shouted, bellowed with laughter, swore, and called them a bunch of idiots. She bounced up and down but failed to bring the others any closer to the answer. Finally, when she was in a really foul mood, Diana took pity on her and announced that the word was "Big Ben" and that she had been the one to put it into the bag.

"How can you do a charade for 'Big Ben'?" Katya demanded furiously. "That's even worse than 'investment'! Ooh, I could kill you!"

Clearly undaunted by the threat, Diana shrugged and said, "You only needed to point to your T-shirt."

Everyone looked at Katya's T-shirt. She pulled it forward to take a better look at it herself. There, taking up the entire front, was a picture

of Big Ben. Katya yelled angrily and plumped herself down on the bed, crossing her arms and legs.

After Diana and Ira took their turns, the game concluded, and it was at this moment that Anya realized how hungry she was. The Caesar salad her friends had brought to the court had been the only food she had eaten all day.

"Do we get an evening meal here?" she asked hopefully, to nobody in particular.

"We've already had dinner," Katya responded.

"And what about taking a shower?"

"Water's off." Anya gave a deep sigh, and felt it was odd she could have imagined this long, tiring day ending any better than this.

"Is it completely turned off?" she persisted, just in case. "When is it likely to come on again?"

"Only the hot water is off," Katya explained patiently. "For maintenance. You can ask to be taken to the shower. They usually do take newcomers there—but with the cold water it's really freezing. Thursday is the official day for showers."

Anya did not immediately take in what she meant. "What, only once a week?"

"D-did you think you'd come to a holiday resort?" Natasha growled, scowling. "Get used to it. Prison is like this too, you know."

Anya was about to quip that getting used to being in prison was not part of any future she envisaged for herself but, wary of Natasha, asked instead, "So what's the daily routine?"

Natasha, clearly the cell's specialist on prison life, took on the explanation. "First there's breakfast, but g-girls don't usually go. Want us to w-wake you up?"

"You can try," Anya said uncertainly. Hungry as she was, the thought of breakfast in a communal cafeteria was a horror. Ever since

nursery school Anya had been firmly convinced such places were best avoided if at all possible.

"Then there's the m-morning inspection," Natasha continued. "After that they take you for phone calls in the afternoon. That's f-fifteen minutes. Then there's exercise. That's an hour. There's also l-lunch and dinner. After that there's the evening r-rounds and lights-out."

"And what about the rest of the time?"

"The r-rest of the time you sit here."

"I thought we'd be made to work . . ."

"Come on!" Natasha said with a laugh. "This isn't a labor camp."

That statement, coming so close on the heels of the other, that everything here was "like prison," struck Anya as inconsistent, but she decided against trying to be too clever.

"Katty!"

A muffled exclamation came unexpectedly through the window over to one side. Katya, who was smoking again, quickly passed the cigarette to Diana and in two bounds was up on the windowsill. The windows were close to the ceiling, so the sills were a meter and a half from the floor. Katya had been nimble and moved like lightning. While lounging on the bed she had given no sense of her strength, but as soon as she leaped up there Anya felt the power in her.

"What?" Katya asked in a loud whisper.

"How you getting on?" the voice outside asked, accompanied by chuckling.

"It's D-dimka from number 5," Natasha said excitedly, half getting up off her own bed.

"Ask him for smokes," the ever-practical Diana prompted. She got up too, more reluctantly, straightened her dress and rather grandly took herself across to the window.

"Got any smokes?" Katya asked in a businesslike whisper. There was a brief pause.

"Yep," the unseen Dimka from cell number 5 confirmed.

Everyone, apart from Maya and Anya, jumped up from their beds and joined the conversation.

"Then give us some!" Katya said, shushing her cellmates with an imperious gesture. Ira and Natasha obediently fell silent and even sat back down. Diana, in a display of independence, stayed where she was.

"What ya got to swap?" Dimka asked after a further pause.

"We can give them the apples!" Natasha whispered, in the excitement losing her stutter.

"We can swap you apples," Katya communicated out loud.

"Okay, done. You send us apples and we'll send you cigs."

The girls immediately rushed away from the window and got busy, Natasha rummaging through plastic bags, Diana collecting the apples. Next Katya went over and hammered her fist on the cell door. The peephole opened almost immediately and Anya glimpsed someone on the other side.

"Can you take some apples for us to number 5?" Katya asked brusquely. Anya couldn't make out the answer.

"Oh, ple-ease," Katya whined, trying to ingratiate herself.

A small hatch in the door opened with a clatter and the blonde policewoman who had fingerprinted Anya peered into the cell.

"What's that, apples?" she asked, sounding bored. Katya ceremoniously passed the bag of apples through the hatch. The policewoman looked in it suspiciously and said, "No notes, I hope."

"Oh yes, we're really going to be writing them letters!" Katya replied tartly. The policewoman sighed and closed the window.

Several minutes elapsed. "Perhaps the bastards have cheated us," Ira speculated, looking, for the first time so far, not just vacantly happy but actually interested in something.

"Oh, get lost!" Natasha exclaimed.

After a moment, the hatch clattered open again and the police-woman's face reappeared.

"Number 5 said to give you these cigarettes. But just so you know, girls, this is the first and last time you use me as a postwoman."

"Yes, yes. Thank you!" Katya exclaimed, rushing to the door. When the hatch slammed shut again, she added, "It's a joke, the way she says that every time."

It struck Anya that the detention center was a bit like a summer camp for dysfunctional adults. When she was little she used to go to children's camps every year and loved them, because they were like a simulator of independence, a model of the adult world she wanted to move into. She had even then been full of contempt for children who were sobbing for their mommies on the first night. Anya herself had been entranced by the prospect of being away from her parents for a whole month. She had liked everything about the camps: singing songs while someone played a guitar, late-night ghost stories, the farewell campfire, all the entertainments and competitions. Even the two-tier bunks, an invariable attribute of the dormitories, had struck her as yet another novelty. To her they seemed all part of a great adventure.

The student dormitory where Anya had lived for five years after moving to study in Moscow had been the next step on her path to adulthood. Although it was a step closer to the real world, everything about it was still redolent of summer camps—the sense of togetherness, the illusion of grown-upness, even the iconic two-tier bunks. It did not yet feel like real life, only a demo version of it where, in a safe environment, you could learn skills you would be needing later.

Anya believed that her long-awaited adulthood had begun when she graduated from university and moved into an apartment of her own. That was the moment when she had finally grown up, and she never imagined anyone could regress from that state. Now, however, in this special detention center, she felt exactly this, that she had

regressed, as she sat once again on a two-tier bunk surrounded by roommates. It was as if she were being drawn back into the time in her life when she was only playing at reality. If the summer camps and student dorms had brought young Anya closer to the world of adults, this detention center was demoting her back to the status of a child, where freedom was curtailed by instructors, romantic relationships conducted by exchanging notes, and the main currency not rubles but apples.

A key again rattled in the lock—the doors seemed to make an extraordinary amount of noise—and the pompous cop came into their cell.

“Are you going for a shower?” he asked Anya sternly.

“Is there only cold water? If so, no thanks.”

“Up to you. Here’s your bedding.” With that he handed Anya what looked like a table napkin that had been folded over many times.

“Is that the bed linen?” Anya asked in bewilderment. The cop became even more stern.

“It’s single-use. You’ll be brought the standard-grade bed linens tomorrow.” Anya turned the table napkin over in her hands.

“They won’t,” Maya told her as soon as the cop had left.

“What do you mean?”

“They only say that. They haven’t yet brought anything different to any of us.” Only now did Anya notice that all her cellmates had the same strange table napkins on their mattresses. She unfolded hers. Her “bedding” consisted of two pieces of material: one long and narrow, which must be the sheet; and a second, like a square envelope, the pillowcase. Both were made of a material Anya had only previously seen in hospitals, where it was used for shoe coverings. With a sigh, she made the bed. More precisely, she laid the “sheet” over the mattress and reached for a blanket in the heap at the foot of her bunk.

“I wouldn’t use that one,” Katya said emphatically.

Anya stopped short and looked at the blanket apprehensively: “What’s wrong with it?”

“It stinks!” Ira exclaimed joyfully, continuing to radiate blissful happiness but appearing now to be reacting a little more specifically to her environment. Anya decided to sleep fully dressed.

Her cellmates also got ready for bed. Maya popped under her blanket without a moment’s hesitation, and Anya reflected enviously that she had clearly managed to dial down her expectations in the past couple of days.

“Oh, girls, I would so love to go somewhere warm, somewhere in Dominica maybe . . .” Maya murmured dreamily.

No-nonsense Natasha, ensconced on the top bunk, warned Ira, who was on the lower one, “I’ll k-kill you if you keep tossing and turning. I wake up in the middle of the night because the b-bunk is shaking and every time it’s you t-turning from one side to the other!” Ira continued beaming as if all was well with the world.

“What do you keep poking me with?” Katya asked Diana. They occupied the bunk farthest from Anya and against a wall, with Katya on top and Diana below. Diana was currently lying with her legs raised and purposefully trampling the underside of Katya’s mattress.

“My feet. Want me to stop?”

“Well—no. Carry on, I like the massage.”

“Do they ever turn the radio off?” Anya asked. She became aware that all this time extraneous voices had been tangling with the thoughts in her head, and only now realized that the radio was never silent.

“They turn it off after the evening rounds,” Katya told her. “Although they’ve forgotten a couple of times and we’ve had to bang on the door.”

“When do they turn it back on?”

“After the morning inspection.”

Anya had no recollection of the evening rounds, because she fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. At some point, somewhere in the distance, she heard the clanging of a door and voices, then it suddenly became darker as the main light was switched off. Sometime after that, the radio was finally turned off and there was dead silence so suddenly it almost woke her up fully again. She could hear Maya wheezing in the next bunk. Anya suddenly had such a sense of peace; it was as if she were sleeping not in a detention center cell but in the softest bed in the safest of sanctuaries. This endless day was finally at an end and all her fears were left behind. However odd Anya's cell-mates might be, they posed no clear threat, so at last she could relax. With that thought, she opened her eyes to look one last time around the cell, and froze.

Ira was not asleep. In the pink light of the only light bulb, Anya could see her, but she seemed unnaturally tall. Anya remembered for a fact that Ira was short, but now, sitting up in the bunk, the top of her head was almost touching the upper tier. If she had looked like a giant-ess Anya would have been less unnerved than she was by this barely perceptible, but wholly inexplicable, impossible differentness. Ira was muttering something. Anya could see her lips moving feverishly but no sound came from them. It was as if she were reciting a prayer or an incantation, and Anya felt a panic surge through her. What she was seeing seemed totally, quintessentially insane. At that moment Ira moved her hands and something glinted. Anya was paralyzed in her bunk. Scissors. Abnormally, phantasmagorically large scissors. They could not possibly have found their way into a detention center cell, yet here they were, gleaming in Ira's hands. Horror engulfed her like wildfire and she could not breathe. Ira turned slowly towards her.

Only this was not Ira. It was a woman who resembled her but was a thousand times more terrifying, so old that a patina of wrinkles

made her face almost indiscernible. Like in an icon, it had worn away to a dull, dark stain. At first Anya thought in horror that the woman had no eyes, but then saw they were closed. Anya stared at her, rooted to the spot by absolute terror. She wanted desperately to screw up her eyes and stop seeing that face, but she could not. There was an impenetrable silence. The monstrous face with its closed eyes was still turned to Anya and its lips were moving impossibly fast. She suddenly understood that all this time the woman had been looking at her, somehow seeing her despite the tightly closed eyelids. The realization was blinding, as if she had suddenly been dragged out from behind a curtain onto a dazzlingly lit stage. Emitting a terrified, bloodcurdling scream, she woke.

DAY TWO

The next morning, Anya was shaken out of sleep by the clanging of a door. She found herself staring at a low, patterned ceiling and was not immediately sure where she was.

“Breakfast!” said a woman’s voice.

The drowsy haze in her head was dispelled in an instant. She was in a cell, in a detention center in Moscow, and looking at the floral pattern of a mattress on the top tier of a bunk.

She sighed, closed her eyes again, and felt a strong urge not to get out of bed. Somebody—Anya guessed it must be Natasha—jumped down from a nearby bunk, grumbling to herself. Only Natasha could already be so grumpy first thing in the morning.

Water flushed, the toilet door creaked, then somebody blew their nose and hissed, “Ira, you i-idiot, you kept me awake all night again!”

Anya smiled to herself, but just for a moment. The moment she heard Ira’s apologetic murmuring, memories of the past night flooded back.

She shivered, and everything went cold inside her. Through half-closed eyes she looked around the room. Natasha was in the middle, tying her hair up in a ponytail. Dopey Ira was sitting in her bunk trying inexpertly to button her denim shirt, looking so completely ordinary