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**Excerpt from *A Good Boy***

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  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, ning 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 wages, though this piece, this infraction, is the biggest by far.

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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. His queasiness doesn't go away if he heads up the mountain and views the dish from eye level: 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 get 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.

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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 crystalline 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 centerfolds 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.