

The first suitcase, though small, was filled with those bare necessities that I knew would be scarce: toilet paper and peanut butter. The larger suitcase held gifts for people I did not yet know: nylon pantyhose, Marlboro cigarettes, and six solar calculators the size of credit cards. The backpack — also a present from Aunt Helen — was empty and therefore did not contain lubricated condoms.

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I had not been surprised when my mother did not see me off at the airport. It's strange, said Aunt Helen as we waited for the boarding call, She said she'd be here...

Yeah well she says a lot of things, I said.

It's probably the traffic...

I rolled my eyes but Aunt Helen continued:

...Or maybe something with the car.

You don't have to defend her, you know.

Nobody's defending anybody.

Yes you are. You're always trying to justify things for her. You're just as bad as she is.

Aunt Helen threw my name at me in shocked reproach. And as always I retreated:

Look I'm sorry — I didn't mean it. But can we please stop talking about her for once. For now can we just change the subject?

Aunt Helen became quiet, conciliatory. From her purse she pulled out a small wrapped present:

This is for you, she said.

The present was thick but hard, approximately the size of a Russian dictionary. I began to unwrap it.

In front of us a man had stopped suddenly and was worriedly patting the pockets of his coat one by one.

Thanks, I said and looked at the unwrapped present, But it isn't...

It has an inscription..., Aunt Helen added and pointed at the inside cover.

I read aloud: "Use this dictionary in good health. May you have the patience to find meaning in every word."

But it's not...!

Take it, she said, After all: words are the key to any language — you can't speak without them.

I know that... but the dictionary — it's not... I mean I can't...