

Panic in a Suitcase Study Guide

Panic in a Suitcase by Yelena Akhtiorskaya

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Plot Summary

“Panic in a Suitcase” is a contemporary novel of family and literature by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. The novel follows the lives of the members of the Nasmertov family, natives of Odessa, Ukraine, as they live in, or visit, New York’s Brighton Beach – and as, 15 years later, young Frida travels to her family’s homeland to write a biography of her poet uncle.

When the novel begins, it is 1993, and family matriarch Esther is suffering from cancer, prompting a visit from her son, Pasha, the only family member not yet removed from Odessa to Brighton. The fall of Communism in Russia has made traveling much easier. The family implores Pasha to move to New York, but he never fully commits. He worries about leaving his home life behind, rocky as it may be. He and his wife do not get along, but he worries about his son growing up in Ukraine without him. Pasha also worries about what his new life might be like in New York.

While he is in New York, Pasha is able to enjoy American culture, the ease of American shopping, and the Russian literary scene in the city. Pasha has just published his first book, a collection of poetry which is being well-received in New York and abroad. It is the beginning of a real writing career for him.

The rest of the family, including his sister, Marina, end up wondering if they do truly want Pasha to move to New York, for that will sever all ties with the motherland forever. With Pasha remaining in Ukraine, the family knows that they have a reason to return to their homeland to visit, and knows that they still have a footing in the old world. Their assimilation in America has been made easier to a large extent by the knowledge that they do have part of the old world to hold onto. Ultimately, Esther dies of her cancer.

Fifteen years later, after Esther’s death, Frida, about 30 years of age and in medical school, decides to return to Odessa for her cousin, Sanya’s, wedding. She has long been interested in her family’s roots – both its history, and its homeland. Frida attempts to convince her family to visit Ukraine with her, but they refuse to do so for a variety of reasons, including that they simply cannot afford to go. Nevertheless, Frida decides to go alone.

Frida stays with Sanya’s father, her uncle Pasha. In the past fifteen years, Pasha has become an immensely important literary figure in the Russian cultural scene, and he is well-admired and well-respected by many. Frida is also thrilled to begin learning about her family, its past, and its national roots, and how distinctly different life in Ukraine is from life in New York. Frida eventually comes to the decision that she is going to drop out of medical school and go into writing. Her first book will be a biography of her uncle, Pasha, playing up on the idea that he has become a literary giant.



Part 1, Chapter 1 – Part 1, Chapter 4

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 1 – It is 1993 in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York. Pasha (Pavel Robertovich Nasmertov), born in 1956 to an average family, wishes he had been born into a noble family. He has come to New York from Odessa for the entire month of July to visit his sister, Marina, her husband, Levik, and their family – including Pasha and Mairna's parents, Esther and Robert, at their expense. They do not have much money, but Pasha has even less. The family lives right on the beach, and they rally together to convince Pasha to go out to the beach with them.

Esther encourages her son to remove his crucifix, which is a symbol of his conversion to Christianity from Judaism when he was 20, for the sake of his niece, 9-year-old Frida. Pasha's decision to convert was a mixture of both belief and political convenience to be free of the ill-treatment Jews had long received in Russia. The family is frustrated with how slowly Pasha moves, as he has done all his life. Marina informs Pasha that Esther's cancer surgery is scheduled for the day after he leaves. Marina hopes that Pasha will move to America, or at the very least, arrange to stay long-term, to help with their mother. Pasha is noncommittal.

A storm comes on, becoming a tornado, and the beachgoers take refuge in the shops and hotels along the boardwalk. Marina and her family huddle in a nursing home lobby. Within half an hour, the storm is gone. As the people head back out, they see Pasha heading in from the water, having not realized he has lost his swimming trunks.

Part 1, Chapter 2 – Pasha's family has been living in America for just shy of two years, following the fall of the Soviet Union and Esther's cancer diagnosis. Pasha, suffering from sunburn, decides to get out of his sister's place, travel around a bit, and to see places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He also makes calls to people he knew back in Russia, now living in America. Among them is Renata Ostraya, who is actively involved in the émigré literary scene in New York. She tells Pasha about numerous literary events coming up. Among those actively involved as well is Pasha's best friend from childhood, Misha Nasmarkin, whose own father became a wealthy businessman after moving to America. Misha himself not only hosts soirees and other events, but also writes as well. Misha wonders if Pasha is in New York.

Pasha, meanwhile, asks his sister why their mother has always disapproved of anything he ever did. Marina has no clue, but she recalls an incident where Pasha had to burn all of his literary magazines when Pasha believed the KGB was going to search their house – with Pasha forgetting that his mother's jewelry was hidden in the fireplace grate as well. Pasha is stunned by this, genuinely not knowing what he had done.

Esther then lectures her son on not calling his own family – his wife, Nadia, and their son, 16-year-old Sanya. Not many people can understand why Pasha had chosen



Nadia, cold and unattractive, when he could have had Dora, warm and beautiful instead. Pasha speaks with Nadia on the phone, and she tells him she misses him and wants him back. After he gets off the phone, he asks his mother about the fireplace incident, and she confirms that he burned everything precious to her in a “fit of hysterical paranoia.”

Part 1, Chapter 3 – Pasha goes to visit Misha, full name Mikhail Davidovich Nasmarkin. He points out a rooftop swimming pool nearby to Pasha, where models often sunbathe topless. Misha is the epitome of wealth. Misha explains his own mother is relentless in her quest for him to marry and give her a grandchild, but Misha has tough luck trying to find the right woman. He decides to bring Pasha to a flea market, remembering that Pasha loved to collect old things.

Misha reveals, over lunch, his work in the literary field, including his own writing. Having had a crush on Marina when he was younger, Misha asks about how Marina is doing now. Pasha says she is doing well, and relates his conversation with Ostraya. Misha knows Ostraya, and believes that Ostraya doesn't like him, but does like Pasha. Pasha, himself responsible for a book of poetry, “Ancestral Belt”, decides to attend a posh literary reception that Friday at Misha's insistence, with Misha saying that Ostraya's invitation is worth following up on, for the event is invite-only. At home, however, Marina announces the family will be leaving for the weekend for Lake George on Friday at five for Esther's 65th birthday on Sunday. Esther tells Pasha to hang out with Misha; Marina tells Pasha the trip is not optional.

Part 1, Chapter 4 – The Nasmertov family arrives at Lake George. On Saturday morning, they head to the lake itself, their first ever encounter with freshwater. Esther confesses she was hoping to see Obraztsov perform in Millennium at the Russian Marionette Theater. Marina wonders why Esther didn't say anything, and Esther explains that she didn't want to ruin the plans for the entire family.

Pasha and his father take a boat out onto the lake to look at some of the mansions that dot the shoreline. They lose one of their oars in the water, and have a difficult time rowing. Pasha reflects on how Robert was Odessa's leading specialist in clinical neurology, and how Robert used to bring Pasha along on many of the trips he took to give consultations and seminars. Pasha and his father speak of how Pasha is not homesick, and what the literary circles in Odessa are up to. Pasha explains he'll be getting an assistant where he works, at the Filatov Institute of Eye Diseases – the same place Robert once worked. Marina and Levik come along in a boat, and Pasha and Robert explain that they have lost their oar. Robert and Pasha then climb in with Marina and Levik, and head back.

Out to eat, Esther tells Pasha that if he wanted to give her a real birthday gift, he'd relocate to Brooklyn, or even Queens, by the time she turns 66.



Analysis

“Panic in a Suitcase” is a contemporary novel of family and literature by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. The novel follows the lives of the members of the Nasmertov family, natives of Odessa, Ukraine, and begins with Pasha – the only member of the Nasmertov family not to have immigrated to the United States – coming to visit the rest of the family in New York. Immediately, the reader can identify the theme of family as being incredibly important to the story, for the family wants Pasha to remain in the United States long-term at the very least. This is due in large part not only to their desire to see their family completed in America, but also because the family is rallying around Esther while she has cancer. Pasha’s presence in the United States, long-term, would be a boon not only to Esther, but to the family as well, for it would allow Pasha to help out with Esther as she undergoes chemotherapy and other treatments.

The immigrant circles in New York – including, specifically, the literary circles of New York (and here, the theme of literature comes to the fore as central to the plot) – consist not only of Pasha’s family, but his friends as well. Friendship, like literature, comes to be an important theme in the novel, as Pasha’s reconnecting with childhood friend Misha proves to be of tremendous importance to his work as a writer. Misha, long established in New York, helps to orient Pasha to New York by showing him around and encouraging Pasha to accept Ostraya’s even invitation. Misha himself is also a member of the Russian-speaking literary circle in New York, as are most of his friends in the city. Indeed, the literary community – especially Misha – is excited about Pasha’s first book, a collection of poetry called “Ancestral Belt”.

The theme of family remains constant through the novel, but also becomes important through two symbolic scenes in the first four chapters of Part 1. The first is the sudden storm – the tornado – that comes on the first day Pasha is in New York. This is no coincidental occurrence. The storm proves to be an omen for a bad event, and an unexpected event, that are to come - events which will only be revealed at the end of Part 1 and part 2 of the novel. At the same time, the second symbolic scene in Chapter 4 has to do with Pasha and Robert – the patriarchs of the family – falling adrift on the lake as they lose one of their oars. This, likewise, proves to be symbolic of two important things: the loss of a sense of direction for some of the characters, and the loss of a sense of optimism for one in particular – all based on what will be coming in the second half of the first part of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Pasha come to visit his family in New York? How does he feel about the entire experience so far? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Pasha's family want him to move to New York, or at least to stay on long-term? How does Pasha feel about this? Why?

Discussion Question 3

For what reasons is Pasha so quickly invited into the social-literati world in New York? Does he originally intend to become involved with them? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

immobility, metabolic, presumptuous, correlated, dilapidation, arduous, globular, venomously, inveterate, existential, ubiquitous, aberrant, trajectory, erratic, elusive, garrulous



Part 1, Chapter 5 – Part 1, Chapter 7

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 5 – Marina heads to work on a Saturday, upset she is working on a Saturday, and annoyed she has to pick up Pasha from a party on the way home. Marina works as a housecleaner, and goes to clean the house of Shmulka and her husband, Charna, who have six kids and pay by the hour.

Meanwhile, Pasha meets Renata Ostraya at the party. Pasha is to be the guest of honor, and is asked to recite a few poems. He notices Misha talking to a group of writers and poets, one of them being a young, attractive woman. Misha later explains the woman is Lilya, who translates ancient Bulgarian philosophers, and her father is an experimental filmmaker, her mother a puppeteer, and Lilya's younger sister, Elza, is even more beautiful than Lilya. After Pasha's recitation, he is disappointed to see that Lilya has left. When Marina arrives to pick Pasha up, she ends up drinking and spending the night at Ostraya's, along with Pasha. Marina later learns that she has been fired by Shmulka.

Part 1, Chapter 6 – Robert speaks on the phone to a professor emeritus from Cambridge University in Massachusetts, who wants Pasha to translate a book for him. The professor says he'll make sure Pasha is given a position as a guest lecturer, and that Massachusetts is geographically closer to Brighton Beach than Odessa.

Robert dreams of being in a canoe with no paddles and, seeking to use something for an oar, finds a suitcase under his seat, which turns to dust the instant he touches it. Pasha is due to leave the following evening. Robert goes to look over Pasha's suitcase, which used to belong to Robert. Robert notes that Pasha's writings are with him – stacks of paper with notes, stanzas, and other writings. Among the papers, Robert finds a letter from John Lamborg, chair of Slavic languages and literatures department at Harvard, and copies down the address.

Pasha, meanwhile, has gone for a walk. He goes into a bookstore on Ocean Parkway, to get out of the heat. There, he runs into a pretty woman in her late twenties, Sveta, whom he met briefly at a party hosted by Ostraya. They begin to talk, only for Esther to arrive to remind her son he has a flight to catch. At the apartment, Pasha tells his family that he has considered moving to America, and wants to begin the process. Despite the family's insistence Pasha move to New York, Marina finds herself wondering if they even want him there.

Part 1, Chapter 7 – Pasha returns a year later for a visit while the immigrant process is still underway. Esther and Robert, making decorative lamps for a living now, worry that Pasha's visit will delay the process of immigration. Esther's cancer has returned. Marina is enrolled in nursing school. Each of the family members begins to wonder if they truly



want Pasha to come to the United States, not because they don't love him, but because it will mean severing ties with the motherland for good.

Esther's chemotherapy, meanwhile, has caused much of her hair to fall out, and she now wears a wig. She is banned from doing more physical chores around the house, and is pepped up by Pasha's visit. The chemotherapy appears to be working, however, and Esther is in good spirits because of that as well as Pasha's visit.

While shopping with Marina at Macy's, Pasha buys an expensive Rolex watch. At home, Frida finds Pasha's crucifix necklace, and wears it while examining her developing breasts in the bathroom mirror. The necklace accentuates them, and she decides she needs a training bra. She goes out to demonstrate her breasts to her mother and grandmother, who tell her to take the necklace off. Frida returns to the bathroom, angry they have missed what she was trying to show them.

Analysis

As Part 1 of the novel continues, the reader gains glimpses into the lives of each of the family members apart from Pasha – and included are Marina and Robert, the respective sister and father of Pasha. Their loyalty to their family is unquestionable, and the theme of family can clearly be seen at work through them in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, the reader learns that Marina is doing incredibly humble but important work as a housecleaner, all in order to be able to help support her family. She, like everyone else, wants Pasha to move to the United States so that the family will again all be in one place. Robert, too, wants Pasha to come to the United States so the family will be whole again – and goes through extraordinary lengths in order to do this, by pretending to be Pasha and forging letters to a professor at Harvard.

Indeed, the reader should note the presence of the suitcase in Robert's dream sequence, where he is adrift and the suitcase in the boat with him turns to dust upon being touched. The suitcase here becomes symbolic of two things in the novel: the first arises in an omen that Pasha will not be moving to New York after all, despite giving appearances that he intends to do so – the disintegration of the dream that the entire family will have immigrated to the United States. Secondly, the suitcase becomes symbolic of human existence itself – of aspirations and dreams in general, as well as the fears, humiliations, losses, and panic (emotional luggage) that people carry with them through their lives no matter where they are. Here, Robert's suitcase panic has to do with keeping his family together, and intact. Interestingly enough, members of the family –including Esther herself –contemplate whether they truly do want Pasha to move to the United States, for it would forever shut their homeland to them. Here, the experience of immigrants, and the theme of immigration can again be seen in the difficulties many of them face. Though the Nasmertovs are happy Americans, and are proud to be living in America, they still have a foot in the door in Ukraine by way of Pasha. It is as if because of this they are living in two worlds at once.



The reader should also pay attention to the theme of literature, which again returns in this section of the novel. Pasha at last attends one of Ostraya's party, where he truly becomes embedded in the New York-Russian literary scene. Indeed, Misha has been paving the way for Pasha in New York, by spreading word about the book and Pasha among the literati. Indeed, Pasha even gives a reading at one of Ostraya's parties – and all of this ends up leading to Pasha's meeting with Sveta, who will become instrumental in the future chapters of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolic importance of the suitcase in Robert's dream?

Discussion Question 2

While Pasha's family wants him to relocate to New York, they have hesitations about this. Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Pasha so keen to buy himself a Rolex watch? Why does the purchase of a Rolex watch seem so unimportant to Marina?

Vocabulary

concatenation, exquisite, ensconced, elucidated, equanimity, contortion



Part 1, Chapter 8 – Part 2, Chapter 10

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 8 – Robert has secretly been pretending to be his son, writing to John Lamborg at Harvard, seeking to have Pasha's book of poetry translated, and a position at the university obtained. Lamborg has insisted upon a meeting as well, so Robert must reveal to Pasha his scheming. Pasha takes the news lightly and calmly, and agrees to meet Lamborg in Brighton Beach. He comes to the house for lunch, and to learn about the family's immigrant experiences.

During the lunch, when word comes that Frida will be a pediatrician like her mother, Frida balls up her stockings and throws them at her mother's face. She is sent to her room, where her grandmother later comes to see her. Frida tells her grandmother that Lamborg is an idiot, and Esther calls him a drunk as well.

Ostraya and her literary circle later come to visit in Brighton Beach as well, considering it something like an adventure. As night comes on, they decide to go skinny-dipping. It reminds Pasha of the positive things in America he has found – good friends, and his good family. Pasha reflects on how Odessa is changing for the worse. For example, his favorite bookstore has turned into a casino. Esther ultimately dies.

Part 2, Chapter 9 – It is now 2008. Frida is returning home from medical school in Pennsylvania for summer break. Marina knows Frida is not too happy about the prospect of going into the medical field. Robert, having undergone lung surgery, is recovering well. Frida learns that Pasha's son, Sanya, is getting married. She insists they all go to Odessa for the wedding, but Marina says there is no time, no money, and too many other obligations for them to go. Frida contends that she herself, alone, will go. Marina interrupts her by saying she and Levik are late for a party – the Brukhmans' anniversary. Levik is not thrilled to be going to another party, and is angry because Frida learned about Sanya's wedding at all. Marina insists that Frida will have forgotten all about it by the next week. Instead of going to the party, they end up going to the beach, which is covered in fog. Frida, meanwhile, wonders about her uncle, Pasha, and what he has been up to. She looks through photos of the family's old life, back in Odessa.

Part 2, Chapter 10 – Frida works as a receptionist at Dr. Yuri Gamsky's run-down medical clinic over the summer, which she has done for years. At Gamsky's insistence, Frida decides to seek out her old friend and coworker, Diane. Diane has become jaded and is snobbish, so the reunion is not a happy one. Frida hopes that her reunion with Pasha, however, will be happy, for she has committed to going to Sanya's wedding. She and her mother go to a spa together. There, Marina runs into her friend, Milka, who invites her and Frida out into the smoking section where Irena and Riana are having cigarettes. The women lament that terrible things always happen to them that they have no control over, while Frida keeps to herself, pretending to nap in a chaise. As the conversation changes, she hears herself being discussed. Frida sits up and tells them



to stop discussing her. The entire smoking section stares. Friday apologizes to her mother and Milka on her way out.

As Frida's trip to Odessa draws near, she receives numerous instructions from her family – such as remembering to bring her own bags to markets or she'll be charged extra, and to never stay in the dacha alone overnight. She is also reminded to stay away from crazy Nadia.

Analysis

As the end of Part 1 arrives, the reader should reflect back to the bad and unexpected omens symbolized by the storm on Brighton Beach. While the unexpected has yet to occur (the reader will see what this is at the end of Part 2), the bad omen comes to pass through the character of Esther dying of cancer. Her death is heartbreaking for the entire family, but most notably for Robert. As in his dream, as the reader will recall, he now seems directionless and without real optimism for the future without his beloved wife. Indeed, the entire family itself appears to have become somewhat directionless without Esther in their life. With Esther in their life, their goals were clear: they needed to get Esther better, and they needed to get Pasha to move to New York. With Esther gone, the second goal – Pasha coming to New York – does not pan out at all. Indeed, 15 years pass between Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel, in which Pasha is found to still be living in Odessa.

At the same time, the theme of family reemerges as news that Sanya will be getting married reaches the ears of Frida, who, now a young woman, determines that the entire family should return to Odessa for the wedding. Faced with numerous constraints, including money and her parents' work schedules, Frida alone will be traveling to Odessa. Before she leaves, her family gives her advice on what not to do in Odessa – from staying alone in the dacha to how she should bring her own bags to markets. Here, the theme of immigration can also be seen, as Frida will essentially be an immigrant to her own homeland – a temporary guest immigrant – for she has no real memories of Odessa from her childhood.

The reader should also take note of the fog that covers Brighton Beach when visited by Levik and Marina. Their argument is reflective of their marriage seeming to have lost its way as they move into middle-age, and the fog becomes symbolic of that as well. Likewise, the fog comes to represent the confusion of their entire family with their current life circumstances. Apart from Marina and Levik attempting to settle themselves into the next stage of their life, it is very clear that Frida is not happy at all about her current place in life studying medicine – and so she herself seems to be lost in a fog, about what she will end up doing in the future with her life. Robert himself seems lost and without direction without his wife, and he becomes a mere background character as Part 2 begins – a character merely lost in the fog, the background.



Discussion Question 1

For what reasons does Frida insist her family go to Odessa for Sanya's wedding? What are her personal reasons? What reasons does Marina give her for not being able to attend? How does Frida react to this? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What is interesting about the idea that Frida will be visiting Odessa – her hometown – but as a virtual stranger?

Discussion Question 3

How does the death of Esther affect her family? Is there anyone her death seems to affect more than the others? If so, who and why? If not, why not?

Vocabulary

implementa, intrinsic, conducive, protracted, conjure, exuberant, desiccated, emanate, dearth



Part 2, Chapter 11 – Part 2, Chapter 13

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 11 – Summer in Odessa is dry and dusty. Pasha is now 52, and is unwell. He is now married to Sveta, who has moved to Odessa to be with Pasha. Pasha reveals to Sveta that he met his former wife, Nadia, at a party, and her deep voice and poetry attracted him to her, but the marriage turned bad, quickly, for Nadia had a superiority complex and dissuaded Pasha from attempting to publish any of his own writing for a long time. After the birth of their child, which took time away from Nadia's writing, and after the publishing of Pasha's book "Ancestral Belt", Nadia became more cruel toward him – and this was the summer of 1993 when he went to visit his family in New York. Marina calls Pasha to tell him that Frida will be arriving on Thursday.

Part 2, Chapter 12 – Pasha sends his new wife's half-brother, Volk, to pick Frida up at the airport. Pasha's apartment is half-run-down. Pasha and Sveta are very welcoming, though not overly affectionate, which makes Frida feel more at home because it makes her feel like a fixture in his life rather than a stranger. Pasha looks unwell, and appears as if he is half-asleep, but he notices everything. A man named Volodya –who looks just like Steve Martin –comes to the door. He offers Frida a cell phone and an envelope full of cash – 5,000 hryvnia – all things agreed upon by her father. Frida rejects the gifts. Pasha asks Frida if there is anything she'd like to see, and she explains she'd like to see the dacha.

The next morning, Frida meets Odessa's foremost artist, Tochka, dressed like a pirate, and having coffee with Pasha. Along with Sveta, they then show Frida around Odessa, which is described as a backwater, shell of a city by Pasha and Tochka. They then visit a café packed with Pasha's friends, some local, some from other countries ranging from America to Germany to Australia, all of whom have come for the Conference of Literature, a prelude for the Russian-Georgian Poetry Festival, Dreams of Georgia. Pasha speaks about his son's upcoming wedding. The other writers also speak to Frida about how much they admire Pasha and his work. Frida speaks to a woman named Renata, and tells Renata she won't be going back to medical school, though her parents do not yet know. Renata points out that Sveta is also a poet, but is eclipsed by Pasha. While Sveta worships Pasha and his writing, Pasha's claims to support Sveta's work are the claims of a condescending parent rather than a full-fledged supporter. Frida later asks about the dacha, and Sveta reveals it is gone in the divorce.

Part 2, Chapter 13 – Pasha is upset that he hasn't been invited to participate at the Odessa Conference of Literature in any way, shape, or form. Frida is also upset because Sanya has made no effort to visit her. Frida also asks Sveta why Pasha doesn't rail against the conference, for it is obvious the conference is composed largely of nobodies who enjoy shutting out someone of true esteem. Sveta explains that it is not her job as a wife to analyze, but to do three things for Pasha: feed him, believe in his genius unconditionally, and leave him alone. She says her former husband ended up



not being a genius, and so her faith in him gave out. She explains she met Pasha at a party hosted by Renata Ostraya, and that she knew her fate was Pasha. She explains she later convinced her first husband to take a teaching position at Odessa State University, and the rest with Pasha followed after.

A few days later, Frida remains behind while Pasha and Sveta travel to the Dreams of Georgia festival in Tbilisi for a week. Pasha doesn't like the idea of Frida being left alone. Before leaving, Pasha receives a call from Sanya that he and his bride-to-be have had an argument and are not getting married. It is too simple an end to things for Frida, and she wonders if Sanya even knows she is in Odessa. Pasha says that Sanya knows, and is going to take Frida out the next day for a night on the town in Arcadia. Pasha and Sveta then leave for Georgia, while Volk, his wife, and their kids come to stay in the apartment, their idea of a vacation.

Analysis

As Part 2 continues, the reader is given time to catch up with Pasha, who is now 52 years old, and not doing too well. He has remarried Sveta, and his reputation as a writer is firmly established – even though he seems to be suffering from a bit of starving artist syndrome. Here, the theme of literature can again be seen in the socials that Pasha and Sveta travel in. His exclusion from a local writer's conference is especially hurtful to Pasha, not merely because he is a kind person, but also because he identifies himself as a writer – and to be denied for something central to his being is a serious blow to him. Nevertheless, Pasha looks forward to being able to attend the literary festival, Dreams of Georgia, before his son's wedding. The reader should note how intrinsic and important literature truly is to Pasha's life – and how central it has been to the novel's plot.

Frida's time in Odessa so far has been relatively uneventful. She has come to Odessa to learn something about history and her family's past – and here, the theme of history emerges in its strongest form yet in the novel. Everywhere Frida goes in Odessa, she attempts to conjure up some form of memory from her childhood spent there, but she cannot remember anything. Indeed, Pasha and Tochka comment on the fact that the city is a hollow shell – and is nothing compared to what it was years before. (Here, the reader will recall Pasha's earlier disappointment that his favorite bookstore has been turned into a casino.) However, Frida's own time in Odessa also demonstrates the importance of family to Pasha. Pasha is happy to host Frida at his house, and delights in being able to show and share with Frida the few, better parts of the city. Frida feels immediately welcome with Pasha, even if she isn't thrilled with the time she has spent in Odessa, proper, yet.

Frida has also been given a strange opportunity to view Odessa through the eyes of an Americanized Ukrainian – and as someone who can't quite recall her own childhood in the place. As such, Frida approaches everything with the interest of a tourist or a recently-arrived permanent resident. She is very careful and very observant of everything she sees, in no small measure because she is attempting to recall the past.



Yet, she also discovers the run-down city and the seeming lack of opportunity that her own parents and family left behind when they moved to the United States. Frida is disheartened, but not discouraged from completing her visit. Unexpectedly, however, the reader also learns that Frida will not be going back to school in the fall – though the reason why is not discussed yet. Here, the reader is reminded of the storm's omen of an unexpected event, and that has now begun.

Discussion Question 1

What stunning revelation does Frida make about going back to school when the summer ends? Why is this so surprising to the reader?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Pasha so hurt by not being invited to participate in the Odessa Conference of Literature? How does he handle it? What does Frida make of it all?

Discussion Question 3

How does Frida approach her time so far in Odessa? What is unique about her experiences so far in Odessa? Why?

Vocabulary

psychoanalytic, hypochondria, idiosyncratically, inert, cadaverous, amalgamation, profoundly, fatidic, unctuous, rapacious, treacherous, adroitness, surreptitious, mortifying



Part 2, Chapter 14 – Part 2, Chapter 15

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 14 – Volk's wife believes Pasha's American niece has intentionally been left behind to keep an eye on things, though Frida doesn't look like a spy. She and Frida do their best to stay out of each other's way, with the wife seizing control of the TV. Frida goes out for a walk. She tries to recall places and events from her youth in Odessa, but little comes to mind. She runs into Nadia, who invites Frida into her dacha apartment. Nadia is brisk and impolite, but asks about Frida's family. Nadia complains that her own family is never around, and advises against Frida ever having a son, because sons do not come around to visit.

Frida then goes down to the shore to visit the Black Sea. It isn't Brighton Beach. Frida has her money stolen. Back at Pasha's, Frida learns she had missed a call from Sanya. Sanya leaves a message explaining he and his fiancée have reconciled and have gone to Malta for a few days. Frida knows, despite the tough time she has face so far, she does not want to leave Odessa. Instead, she has decided to write a biography about her uncle. She begins by acquainting herself with his poetry.

Part 2, Chapter 15 – The Georgia festival is twice as large as the previous year. Pasha and Sveta enjoy themselves immensely, and enjoy seeing old friends. Pasha hasn't come to the festival to take away from the experience, but for the experience itself. He converses on the phone with Frida, who says she will be staying a while, and that the wedding is back on. Pasha decides they will come back early to prepare for the wedding.

Analysis

Throughout the end of Part 2, Frida makes a concerted and renewed effort to attempt to connect to the past, to understand her family's history, and to secure her own memories of Odessa – but she is unable to do so. Here, the themes of family and history intertwine, with each being dependent upon the other. A family's roots, its past, are all a part of the present, and help to determine where the family is ultimately headed. The inability of Frida to remember things eventually brings Frida to the Black Sea, and to the conclusion that the Black Sea is not Brighton Beach. She realizes she is an American, but also realizes that her family's history is there in Odessa. While she is disheartened by the theft of her money and a strange experience with Nadia, Frida is undeterred as to her true purpose for having come to Odessa: to stay a while, to drop out of medical school, and to write a biography of her Uncle Pasha.

The novel closes on the theme of literature once more, between Frida's decision to commit to the literary world by writing a biography of her uncle, and her uncle deciding to return early from a literary festival. By the next generation assuming the mantle of the



former generation – the decision to write – the circle of family is completed and prepares for its next cycle.

Discussion Question 1

Explain Frida's observation that Odessa and the Black Sea are not Brighton Beach.

Discussion Question 2

What is the primary, and true reason that Frida has come to Odessa? Has she told her parents yet? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

For what reasons does Pasha decide to come home from the literary festival in Georgia, early?

Vocabulary

inarguable, floundering, platitudes, charlatan, somnambulating, proliferation, exponentially, villanelle



Characters

Pasha

Pasha Nasmertov is one of the two main characters of the novel "Panic in a Suitcase" by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. Pasha, born in 1956, is a native of Odessa, Ukraine, is immensely talented as a writer of published poetry, and is infamous among his family members for being slow at whatever he does. He is also held in contempt of the family for converting from Judaism to Orthodox Christianity, as a matter of belief and political convenience.

He is the uncle of Frida, brother of Marina, son of Robert and Esther, first husband of Nadia, second husband of Sveta, and father of Sanya. In 1993, Pasha visits New York's Brighton Beach in July, where most of his family has relocated, and where his mother is battling cancer. The family hopes that Pasha will immigrate to the United States for good, but Pasha is largely noncommittal. Eventually, he decides to begin the process of immigration but drops out after his mother dies. By 2008, Pasha has become a well-respected and well-known writer, and his son is getting married. Frida, now a young woman, visits Pasha in Odessa, and decides to write a biography about him.

Frida

Frida is one of the two main characters in the novel "Panic in a Suitcase" by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. Frida is nearing 10 years old when her uncle, Pasha, comes to visit the family in Brighton Beach, New York, in 1993. She finds him to be a virtual stranger, but warms up to him by the end of the first part to some degree. Frida is the daughter of Marina and Levik, the granddaughter of Esther and Robert, and the cousin of Sanya.

Years later, in 2008, Frida is attending medical school in Pennsylvania, and decides to go to Odessa for her cousin, Sanya's, wedding. She travels to Odessa to attempt to learn about her family history, as well as to see if she can remember much of the place from her childhood. She also travels to Odessa in order to change the trajectory of her life. She drops out of medical school, and decides to write a biography of her uncle.

Marina

Marina is the younger sister of Pasha, wife of Levik, daughter of Esther and Robert, and mother of Frida. Marina is very family oriented, and spares no expense to convince her brother to move to the United States, summoning up every conceivable reason from the health of their mother to the fact that everyone will be in the same place. Marina works as a housecleaner throughout the novel, and initially opposes Frida's decision to travel to Odessa, though she ultimately consents.



Esther

Esther is the mother of Pasha and Marina, the grandmother of Frida, the wife of Robert, and the mother-in-law of Levik. Esther is a kind woman used to hard work, and who maintains a positive attitude in battling her cancer, even though she ultimately dies of the disease.

Robert

Robert is the father of Pasha and Marina, the grandfather of Frida, the husband of Esther, and the father-in-law of Levik. Robert is kind and quiet, and schemes to get Pasha to move to the United States by impersonating his son in correspondence with a professor at Harvard.

Sveta

Sveta is the beautiful, younger, second wife of Pasha. Originally married to a musician-philosopher with whom she lost faith in, Sveta meets Pasha at a literary party in New York in 1993, which she describes as fate. Sveta and her first husband later move to Odessa, where their marriage disintegrates and Sveta begins seeing Pasha.

Nadia

Nadia is the first wife of Pasha. She is talented but cold and cruel, discouraging Pasha from publishing his own writing due to a superiority complex she has. When they have Sanya, Nadia becomes resentful of Pasha's rising stardom in the literary world, and her own motherhood. She makes life difficult for Pasha, and the two ultimately divorce.

Sanya

Sanya is the 30-something year-old son of Pasha and Nadia, and cousin to Frida. Sanya has two different children by two different women, and looks to marry a third. It is Sanya's pending wedding that encourages Frida to not only visit Odessa, but to change the trajectory of her life as well.

Misha

Misha is the childhood best friend of Pasha from Odessa, who now lives in New York. Extremely wealthy, Misha would rather continue to grow in the literary world and be with numerous girlfriends than settle down, marry, and have children – to the chagrin of his mother.

Renata Ostraya

Renata Ostraya is a Ukrainian émigré to the United States. Wealthy and well-connected, Ostraya is a member of the literary world in New York, and is a dominant force in the Russian literary world in New York, specifically. It is at one of her parties for literati that Pasha first meets Sveta.



Symbols and Symbolism

Suitcase

A suitcase is seen under Robert's seat in a dream he has about being adrift in a canoe. The suitcase turns to dust when he tries to touch it, causing him to panic. The suitcase is symbolic of two things in the novel. The first is an omen that Pasha will not be moving to New York after all – the disintegration of the dream that the entire family will have immigrated to the United States. Secondly, the suitcase is symbolic of human existence – of aspirations and dreams in general, as well as the fears, humiliations, losses, and panic (emotional luggage) that people carry with them through their lives no matter where they are.

Ancestral Belt

"Ancestral Belt" is a collection of poetry written and published by Pasha. It is his first book. It is an extraordinarily well-received work in Russian literary circles, and beyond, and cements the path of his career in writing. When Pasha comes to New York in the summer of 1993, the book has just been published and is already making waves.

Biography

A biography is planned to be written by Frida about her uncle, Pasha. She imagines the book will be more than 800 pages in length, and drops out of medical school to stay in Odessa in order to write it.

Photographs

Photographs are kept by the Nasmertov family in their home in Brighton Beach, New York. Frida goes through the older photographs they keep – from when she was a little girl in Odessa, and when her family was younger. She uses these photographs in an attempt to refresh her memory, but it does not work, for she was very young in the time they were taken.

Storm

A storm sets in on Brighton Beach in July when Pasha comes to visit, ruining a beautiful, sunny, and well-planned day. The storm develops into a full-fledged tornado, but only lasts half-an-hour. The storm is an omen for two important things to come in the novel. First, it serves as an omen for Esther's impending death from cancer. Second, more distantly, it serves as an omen for the fact that Frida will drop out of her parental-planned life in the medical field to write a biography of Pasha, instead.



Money

Money is carefully counted and cautiously spent by the Nasmertov family as they live in Brighton Beach, and have little money to begin with. While in Odessa, at the Black Sea, Frida's money is stolen. Though the situation saddens her, it leaves her undaunted, and determined to finish what she has begun by traveling to Odessa.

Crucifix necklace

A crucifix necklace is worn by Pasha as a sign of his conversion to Christianity from Judaism. It is a source of contention among his Jewish family members, who ask him not to wear the necklace so as not to confuse Frida. Frida, nevertheless, finds the necklace and tries it on, believing it accentuates her developing breasts. Her mother and grandmother order her to take it off at once.

Rollex watch

A Rollex watch is purchased by Pasha at Macy's in New York while out shopping with Marina. It is a demonstration of American wealth and affordability, as well as the variety of a free society – something rare and uncommon back in Odessa.

Medical textbooks

Medical textbooks are kept and studied by Frida as she moves through medical school. Ultimately, she decides she does not want to return to her medical textbooks, and instead wants to write her own book – a biography of Pasha.

Forged letters

Forged letters to John Lamborg, a Harvard professor, are written by Robert pretending to be Pasha. The letters entreat Lamborg to translate Pasha's poetry into English, and to obtain a position at Harvard for Pasha.



Settings

Brighton Beach

Brighton Beach is a beach and neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Brighton Beach is an area heavily saturated by Russian-speaking immigrants, and is home to the Nasmertov family – including Esther, Robert, Marina, Levik, and Frida. There, the family owns a home that is on the boardwalk, and is thus on the beach itself. It is to Brighton Beach that Pasha comes for a visit in 1993, and to Brighton Beach the rest of his family hopes Pasha will move.

New York

New York is a city in the State of New York, in the United States of America. Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs of New York, and is home to Brighton Beach. Brooklyn is home to tremendous culture, as is all of New York, including an active and prominent circle of Russian literati.

The Black Sea

The Black Sea is an expansive body of water which borders Odessa, Ukraine. The Black Sea is popular with Eastern European and Russian tourists in summer, and it is to the Black Sea that Frida goes to visit during her time in Odessa. On the beach by the Black Sea, Frida has her money stolen from her, and she becomes very aware of the fact that the Black Sea and its beach are not Brighton Beach, and are not home. Nevertheless, she is not deterred from her new mission in life – to write a biography of Pasha.

Odessa

Odessa is a city in Ukraine near the Black Sea. Odessa is largely run-down, impoverished, and is called a hollow shell by Pasha and his cultural friends. It is to Odessa that Frida travels for Sanya's wedding in 2008, and it is in Odessa that Pasha and Sveta live. Frida also hopes that being in the city will awaken some childhood memories in her, and give her a better sense of her family's history, but this does not turn out to be the case.

Dreams of Georgia Festival

Dreams of Georgia Festival is located in Tbilisi, Georgia, and is a prominent festival attended by thousands of writers, poets, and readers. It is also attended by Pasha and Sveta, and proves to be a wonderful time for them both. When the novel concludes,

Pasha decides to leave the festival early to return home for his son's wedding, back on again, and to see about Frida's new project.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Panic in a Suitcase” by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. In “Panic in a Suitcase”, the family dealt with is the Nasmertov family, and family, thematically, proves to be an important, positive, and determining factor in the plot.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the occurrence of cancer in Esther Nasmertov, the entire Nasmertov family, except Pasha, have relocated from Odessa, Ukraine, to Brighton Beach in the United States. There, Esther has access to wonderful healthcare, and the family, overall, has a better shot at a better future. The family – Esther, Robert, Levik, Marina, and Frida – all live together, and help one another in everything from simple chores to caring for Esther as she battles cancer. Like any family, they argue and have disagreements, but none of these issues overwhelms their sense of loyalty and closeness to one another. There is only one thing that is missing to make their family at Brighton Beach complete, and that is Pasha.

Pasha still lives in Odessa with his cold wife and distant son. For Pasha, his own family is not a very positive thing, but he finds the tremendous love and warmth lacking in his Odessa family in his family in Brighton Beach. His Americanized family worries about him constantly, and they take every opportunity and every chance they get –from reminding him of Esther’s condition to forging letters to Harvard professors –to get Pasha to relocate to the United States permanently. Pasha eventually decides to begin the process of immigration, but halts the process following the death of Esther.

As the novel progresses, the reader learns that Frida’s parents have planned a life for her in medicine. Frida is not thrilled about this, but goes along with it out of love and loyalty to her family. Eventually, studying medicine gets to be too much for Frida, and she turns to another part of her family for help. She drops out of medical school in order to write a biography about her uncle, Pasha. Though Frida’s parents have not yet been told about this – and will not likely be thrilled about it – the fact that Frida has turned to family – her uncle – for the next step in her life is demonstrative of the importance and loyalty of family to Frida. Her next stage in life – whether it had been medicine, or now, writing – is dependent upon her family.

Literature

Literature is an important theme in the novel “Panic in a Suitcase” by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. Literature, in all its forms – fiction and nonfiction, prose and poetry, novels and collections of shorter writings – all appear in the novel and form the core



component of the cultural aspects of the novel. Literature influences the events and lives of many of the characters in the novel, thus driving the plot of the novel itself.

The first encounter with literature the reader has in the novel is through the character of Pasha. Pasha is a poet, whose first collection of poetry, “Ancestral Belt”, has been published just prior to his visit to Brighton Beach in 1993. The collection is warmly and well-received, and Pasha is requested to recite some poems at one of Ostraya’s parties – themselves given for members of New York’s literati scene. Pasha’s best friend from childhood, Misha, also moves in the literary circles, himself a socialite and writer. Two more collections of poetry later follow, and Pasha’s fame and importance as a writer grow exponentially with them.

Pasha himself is married to a writer in his first marriage – Nadia – though Nadia detests the success he has had. She has long discouraged him from publishing his work, for she has a superiority complex and dreams of fame for herself. When motherhood comes instead, Nadia becomes cruel and callous toward Pasha, for her own dreams have fallen by the wayside. Dealing with his injurious marriage, it is at one of Ostraya’s parties that Pasha meets Sveta, who will become his second wife. Sveta is a writer and artist, and though others doubt it, Pasha says he supports and encourages Sveta’s own talents.

When the novel comes to a close, the reader learns that Frida is tired of reading nonfictional medical textbooks, and would prefer not to become involved in the medical field at all. Instead, her aspirations are cultural, and she decides to write nonfiction rather than merely read it. She will drop out of medical school in order to focus on writing, beginning with a biography about her uncle, Pasha.

History

History is an important theme in the novel “Panic in a Suitcase” by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. History – essentially, past events, and the study or reflection of past events – is central to much of the novel’s plot, especially when it comes to the Nasmertov family in general, and Frida in particular.

In the novel, it is family history, and the family’s roots in Ukraine, that comprise the kind of history dealt with, especially through the eyes of Frida. Frida consistently asks about the motherland, about Odessa and Ukraine, but the family continually brushes aside her questions about the past. Frida herself was too young to remember her very early life in Odessa, and she is very interested in being able to recall, learn about, and reflect on the past, though it is difficult to garner history from those who do not wish to talk about it.

Frida does not understand why her family refuses to talk about their history, but the reader learns that this is for two reasons. First, the family’s life in Odessa was paltry compared to what it is in Brighton Beach. True, they do not have much, but they have more than they ever had in Odessa – including the promise of a better tomorrow. They are happily Americanized. Secondly, the family does not feel as if Odessa is actually a



part of history, for they still have direct family in Ukraine – specifically, Pasha, and as such, still have one foot in the door. They do not talk about history as history, because they do not consider it to be history, yet.

As Frida grows into a beautiful young woman, her questions about the past increase. She decides to attend Sanya's wedding not just out of love for family, but out of curiosity about Odessa, and history. Prior to leaving for Ukraine, Frida goes through old photographs of the family from Odessa, and is dismayed to realize she cannot remember any of it. When she arrives in Odessa, she suffers the same frustration. Even being there in person does not bring up any memories of the past, and offers precious little about her family's history there. Ultimately, Frida decides to write a biography of her uncle, Pasha – with biographies being about the history of the life of a person – and realizes that she will have so much history to work with, she doesn't quite know where to begin.

Immigration

Immigration is an important theme in the novel "Panic in a Suitcase" by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. Immigration – the relocation of one or more people from one country, usually their country of origin, to another country –in the novel primarily deals with the relocation of Russians and Eastern Europeans, such as Ukrainians, to other places in the world (especially the United States) following the toppling of the Soviet Union, and the fall of Soviet Russia in the very early 1990s.

When the novel begins in 1993, the Nasmertov family has lived in Brighton Beach for less than two years. They have immigrated to the United States from their native Odessa, Ukraine, and have easily blended into American culture and society, and consider themselves pretty thoroughly Americanized, though they live in an area heavily populated by other Ukrainian and Russian-English-speaking immigrants. The United States offers the promise of a better tomorrow, and this includes access to better healthcare which is crucial considering Esther's battle with cancer. The differences between newly-liberated Eastern Europe and Russia and the United States are still striking 15 years later in 2008, when Frida's visit to Odessa reveals a hollowed-out shell of a city. Pasha's own apartment, for example, has few working lightbulbs, and much of the city itself is just as run down.

In America, though, the Russian and Eastern European immigrants are proud to call themselves Americans now, and to consider themselves Americanized, they keep circles of friends heavily inundated with people from the old country as a way of keeping the past fresh and alive, and as a way of continuing to acclimatize to the new country. This circle of immigrants is especially strong in the literary world, as Pasha learns that Misha, Ostraya, and others involved in writing either poetry or prose, have all come together to network and to support one another in America. A large part of their activities includes translating Russian-language literature into English for a broader audience. It is seen as something of an exchange: America has given them hope and opportunity, and so they will seek to add to American culture with their own gifts in writing.



In the Nasmertov family, Frida is especially interested in her family's past and their story of immigration, even though the family dismisses such conversation. To them, though they are immigrants, and have had a successful immigrant experience to the United States, they don't truly feel as if their ties to the motherland have been severed. This is because Pasha – immediate family to them – still lives in Odessa. As such, the family still feels as if they have one foot in the door, and haven't completely sealed off the old world behind them as most others have. This becomes essential for Frida later in the novel, as she makes an extended visit to Odessa to compose a biography about Pasha – and to learn more about her family's roots.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel "Panic in a Suitcase" by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. Friendship in the novel proves to be essential to the plot, and to affect it in various ways – especially when it comes to Pasha.

When Pasha is a child in Odessa, he becomes fast friends, and then best friends with Misha. The two of them do everything together, including getting in trouble. They become such good friends that they are almost like brothers. Pasha and Misha's families essentially adopt each other as a result – and this friendship is so strong that it transcends time and distance. Indeed, when Pasha arrives in New York, both Pasha and Misha are anxious to see one another again for the first time in years.

Pasha and Misha resume their friendship in person as if it had never been anything but in person. Misha points out a rooftop pool where models sunbathe topless, and then brings Pasha around the city for food and to see different sights. Indeed, Misha is very instrumental in getting Pasha to attend Ostraya's literati parties, and in helping to build up Pasha's reputation among literary circles in the United States. As a result, Pasha strikes up friendships with numerous other writers and socialites, including Ostraya, all of whom help to cement Pasha's literary reputation, and who serve as a good social outlet for Pasha.

Pasha's friendship with Misha and Ostraya also affects him in another way. At one of Ostraya's parties, he meets Sveta – the polar opposite of his wife, Nadia. The meeting, for Sveta, is not accidental, but fate. The two quickly strike up a friendship, and Sveta later remarries Pasha. She becomes an integral part of his world, and becomes essential to Pasha's circle of friends later on – both in Odessa, and throughout the global literary scene. Indeed, Pasha and Sveta love to attend various writing festivals and events, not merely for the recognition they are afforded, but because they are surrounded by friends.



Styles

Point of View

Yelena Akhtiorskaya tells her novel “Panic in a Suitcase” from the third-person omniscient point of view. This is done for several reasons. First, though Frida and Pasha prove to be the main characters in the novel, the novel also touches on the lives of various other members of the family at one time or another, including Marina, Esther, Robert, and Levik. As such, the third-person narrative mode provides a unifying voice tying together distinct lives and circumstances. The third-person point of view also allows the author to include important information to the reader about the characters, easily and readily supplied to the plot as it evolves. This also coincides with the omniscient aspect of the third-person point of view, in that it allows the writer to add essential information to the plot as the plot unfolds – information which the characters themselves might not stop to talk about or explain otherwise.

Language and Meaning

Yelena Akhtiorskaya tells her novel “Panic in a Suitcase” in language that is educated and well-written. This reflects not only the author’s craft in writing, but is also reflective of the strong element and theme of literature in the novel’s plot, and how central literature itself is to the story. In terms of educated language, words like adroitly, idiosyncratically, inveterate, and ubiquitously are used in a casual, natural way, reflecting the literary mind and education of the characters. In terms of the use of well-written language, the author phrases, consider the quote “Because Pasha didn’t hold grudges, the wounds inflicted on him were always unforeseen. Scar tissue never formed” (Narrator, Part 2, Chapter 13, paragraph 2). Here, the writer speaks to Pasha’s emotional, trusting, forgiving, and gentle nature, but uses descriptive analogies to demonstrate it, rather than merely coming out and saying that Pasha was too forgiving. This, too, adds to the nature of the novel’s literature-infused plot.

Structure

Yelena Akhtiorskaya divides her novel “Panic in a Suitcase” into two distinct parts, with each part being further subdivided into chapters dealing with the overall situation in each of those parts. Part 1 occurs in 1993 in Brighton Beach, New York, and focuses around Pasha’s visit to his family there. Part 2 occurs 15 years later, in 2008, when Frida travels to visit Pasha in Odessa, Ukraine. Each half of the book in part demonstrates the effect of immigration given time and the place. In Part 1, the Nasmertovs are happy to be Americans and wish that Pasha would also become one. In Part 2, now-thoroughly-American Frida travels to Odessa not just for a wedding, but to learn about her family’s roots in Ukraine, and to write a biography of her uncle, Pasha.

Quotes

Pasha was in Brooklyn, where both the buildings and the people were in need of fortifying, and he'd be honoring the borough with his presence for all of July – the entire month!

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

Importance: The narrator reveals here that Pasha has gone to visit his family in Brooklyn in July, 1993, for an entire month. The entire area seems to be wilting in the July humidity, and Pasha's presence will instill a breath of fresh air, both for his family and his friends in the city.

That was 715 days ago – they were still counting, though it was getting less clear to what end. At first it made the change manageable, marked progress.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Here, the narrator relates the amount of time that Pasha's family has been in the United States, and demonstrates that their emigration from the Soviet Union occurred just after the fall of the Communist order. The family keeps track of the days they have been living in the United States – but to what end they ultimately do this beyond marking the passing of time, they do not know. Their purpose – their goal – needs redefining, and temporarily, it will be the attempt to get Pasha to remain in the United States.

He may have been obstinate, but he was also a Nasmertov, which meant that he came equipped with a reserve of relentless, pestering doubt. If he didn't leave a bit of space for a change of opinion, he'd get claustrophobic.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 6 paragraph 6)

Importance: Here, the narrator describes common family traits between Pasha and the others. They tend to be worriers and second-guessers, despite their rather positive outlook on life. For Pasha, this sense of second-guessing is actually a positive thing, allowing him to think and change his mind about his life. For example, he has been committed to remaining in Odessa, but by the end of Part 1, he has second-guessed himself and changed his mind: he would rather move to the United States.

You all expect me to die,' said Esther when she heard that he was coming. 'If you think you're visiting a woman on her deathbed, you're quite mistaken.

-- Esther (Part 1, Chapter 7 paragraph 6)

Importance: Esther, though she is growing more ill each week from cancer, resolves to fight it, and resolves to explain to Pasha that she is not on her deathbed – and far from it. Nevertheless, Esther's cancer remains a chief concern for Pasha and her family, and Esther herself serves as an important role model for how to handle challenging and difficult times.



Even Esther found the idea of Pasha's permanent arrival a source of ambivalence. As long as he remained in Odessa, finality was evaded. They'd studied the cases around them – when an entire family was uprooted and replanted in another country – America, Germany, Israel – and all ties to the motherland severed, the psychological burden was often managed to the detriment of mental integrity.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 7 paragraph 7)

Importance: Here, the narrator reveals Esther's – and the rest of the family's – consideration of Pasha's moving to the United States. Though they want him to move over, they also know that his moving will mean the end of their connection to the old world. They have long had a foot in America, and a foot in the back door in Ukraine. If Pasha leaves Ukraine, they will no longer have this – and their emotional and mental states will suffer without having a homeland to return to or reflect upon directly.

A poet, of course, noticed everything.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 12 paragraph 16)

Importance: Here, the narrator explains that Pasha, who is growing unwell as he ages, doesn't appear to be altogether there, according to Frida's first impressions. However, despite his physical state, Pasha is a poet, and does indeed notice everything – far more than he lets on.

Because Pasha didn't hold grudges, the wounds inflicted on him were always unforeseen. Scar tissue never formed.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 13 paragraph 2)

Importance: Here, the narrator speaks to Pasha's kind, gentle, and forgiving nature. He is almost naïve to the point of being detrimental to himself, for he never toughens or hardens to the bad parts of life. This is true of the case when he is snubbed by aspiring writers who do not invite him to a local writing conference. It makes Frida feel bad for him, but also steels her positive opinion of her uncle.

The wife of a poet, she explained, has three responsibilities: to feed him, to believe unconditionally in his genius, and to leave him alone.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 13 paragraph 7)

Importance: Here, Sveta explains the purpose and functions of a poet's wife. They are simple, but they are utterly crucial to the husband-poet. They make sure he is well-cared for, believed in, and set free enough to be able to do his work.

She already knew what had to be done. She had to miss that flight.

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 13 paragraph 104-105)

Importance: The narrator explains that a plan of some kind is forming in the mind of Frida, though just what that plan is, is not yet revealed. In order to execute this plan, Frida must necessarily miss her flight home. Whatever she is planning on doing requires that she remain, for the time being, in Odessa.



But she didn't know the first thing about biographies. Where did one begin, especially with a story so tangled from the very start?

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 13 paragraph 107)

Importance: Here, the true nature of Frida's having missed her flight home is revealed. She is going to write a biography about her uncle, Pasha. What she doesn't know, however, is where to begin. She knows her family's history, and her uncle's own life, are complicated matters, and will require a lot of understanding. In the end, she decides to begin with his poetry as a good starting point.