

Rusalka
and Other Stories

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ABSTRACT

Rusalka and Other Stories is a creative thesis composed of short fiction and the first section of a novel. The two stories - entitled "In Deep" and "The Rain" - are concerned with the troubled relationship between childhood and adulthood, and the complicated network of influences that construct us as human beings. Combining the tools of psychological realism, philosophy, and fabulism, these stories explore the boundary between objective reality and the imagination. The novel, entitled *Rusalka*, traces four generations of women from pre-World War II Poland to contemporary Chicago. The story begins in 1921 with a powerful Polish woman outside Warsaw making a devil's bargain: she must sacrifice her honor to give birth to a daughter, who will be beautiful and musically gifted. Each subsequent daughter born into the family is a refinement of the woman who came before, including the novel's narrator Luscía - an operatic soprano and new mother, raised in Chicago to see herself as the zenith of her family's strange legacy. In this novel Luscía shares the stories - both historical and fantastical - that shaped her childhood as she struggles with the decision of whether to allow her daughter to be tied to the same birthright.

Dedicated to my sisters and my brother

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IN DEEP

Freya runs down to the water at top speed each day, screeching to a halt at its edge and spilling up a scrim of sand with the force of her braking. She wraps her long arms around herself against the wind and nudges one toe forwards, hitting the water with a delicate splash. She's allowed to swim out to the edge of the pier, and most of the time the tide holds the ocean so low that this trip barely constitutes swimming at all – just a slow effort of dragging oneself through the water, spacey and graceless, a jointless hopping on a low-gravity moon.

Even as she dabbles around in the shallows, Freya's skin looks stretched, her movements yearning. A water baby, a sea sign. I told her that we can't get everything we want. Some urges are better left submerged.

What did Cece always say about Freya? That she was a boring bump, didn't know her head from her hand. Of course they secretly loved each other, but I wasn't supposed to know. I'd walk into their bedroom to turn the lights off around midnight and sometimes they'd be curled up around one another stomach to spine.

We came to the seaside against my better judgment; what can you do about free timeshare space from your mother, when you're on the kind of budget that involves learning how to cook actual dried beans? When the beach house is offered in front of your quiet daughter, who has had a difficult time in school all year and could really do with a break? Freya would never push me, would never

ask, but when her nanna slid the timeshare brochure across the kitchen table her eyes grew at least a size and a half and she stuck her nose on the photos to get a little closer.

“That would be like real summer vacation,” she said. “Mom.”

It was late June and so far she’d spent two weeks shuffling around the house with a popsicle in her mouth, devouring the piles of books we picked up on bi-weekly excursions to the library. Jacques Cousteau, Robinson Crusoe, the Scarlet Pimpernel and his lonesome cliffbound prison. “Her head’s always in the clouds,” her teacher told me in Freya’s year-end report. “In the ocean,” I corrected him. “Her head’s always in the ocean.”

“Well,” I said to Freya, my eyes across the table on my mother, “I’ll think about it.” Freya jumped up from the table with a copy of the brochure in her hands and ran-hopped into the living room.

“She didn’t say no! She didn’t say no!” my daughter sang.

“I didn’t say yes either!” I reminded her. But she was right. I’ve always preferred to be a firm mother. If I mean no, then I will say it.

Freya doesn’t mean to be a naughty child, but here in the beach house she can’t seem to help it. While I’m trying to read a book or put together something for dinner she crawls up the walls. It’s a small house, more of an apartment in size, and somehow they must have been working against the laws of physics when putting it together. The corners crush in at what seem to be angles much more

acute than 90 degrees, and the whole place leans inward and makes me think of something unsteady and made out of gingerbread.

The corners possess some magnetic appeal. At home Freya reads, or learns and abandons basic macramé projects, or makes daisy chains. It isn't that she's idle, she's just quiet. By disposition. Here, she's always sitting with her spine inserted into one of those corners, and no matter what she starts out by doing, soon enough she jams her sneaker soles against the walls, pushes her shoulder against whatever surface is handy and achieves a minor lift off the floor. Of course she can't get very high, the walls have no traction, and soon enough she'll turn around and start jumping, scrabbling for unseen handholds, really working at it.

I don't know what she'd do if she somehow got up there. It's a frightening image; one's own daughter clinging to the ceiling like a spider. But I've been watching her, and I don't think that reaching the ceiling is really her aim. All those reaching, straining, spine scratching stretches – it reminds me of deer rubbing the velvet off their antlers against trees and pythons snaking away from their dry outer layers. And it doesn't look to me like Freya's trying to get *up to* something, so much as *out of something*. Like she's trying to crawl out of her own skin.

When you swim out in the ocean past the sight of shore, you are playing with forces. Tidal. Elemental. Beams from the moon. On this trip I am trying to

explain to Freya that there are things in the sea that surpass ordinary understanding. But not in the way that she supposes.

What else can I say to her? She needs to know. When she steps into the water and goes out of her depth, she will not snatch up the pelt of a seal and dive to the fathomless bottom to play with her sister. There are no selkies in North Carolina, and her sister Cecilia is drowned. Dead.

Freya is only ten years old, but precocious for her age. She reads more than I do. And so I'm sure she got this idea from some book, but I can't figure it out. There are no Irish myths in her volume of *Monsters and Mysteries*, and we've never watched *The Secret of Roan Inish* together, even though that was one of my favorite movies when I was a child. Somewhere in the process of growing up it slipped out of my head, and I didn't remember it existed until recently.

"Mom? Momma?" Freya climbed into my lap like a cat. It was a few months ago, and she still had the hollow look in both her cheeks like she was sucking them in with every breath. I tried feeding her up, bringing home donuts and embarking on baking projects together, but it didn't help. When she lay against my chest it was like holding a pile of warm laundry, something malleable and messy and waiting to be folded up. "If I stole back Ce's water skin, would she have to come live with us again?"

"What?" I asked. The concept itself was opaque enough, and I still wasn't used to getting questions about Cecelia. Not even from Freya, who legitimately has a lot of them. At that point talking about Cece lit a little fire inside my throat,

so all I could do was cough and sputter in reply, trying not to get too badly burned.

“You know,” said Freya. She had her thumb hovering around her mouth, trying not to stick it in. When I catch her in this state she often starts tracing the line of her lips, or biting her nails. I’m not sure it’s an improvement, but I don’t know what else to tell her to try. I’ve heard smoking is a good way to keep your hands and mouth active, but that’s about it. “She found her seal skin, for the water, and that’s why she doesn’t come back home. Because it’s like a game.” The tip of her thumb crossed the threshold of her mouth, but it stuck there.

You aren’t supposed to indulge your children’s fantasies past a certain point: that’s what all the parenting books say. They tell you things you thought that you knew, about reading to develop a child’s imagination and routines being a comfort. And as you read them, you start formulating desperate plans: tomorrow we’ll have fruit salad. Tomorrow I’ll be able to help you.

Of course Freya didn’t really want to bring Cecilia back to the shore: she never was one to stop her sister in an adventure. But after a year of waiting she was through sitting on her hands – if her sister could escape into the ocean, so could she.

“Frey baby, don’t you know I’d miss you if went away into the ocean? Do you want me to be sad, and to miss you all the time?”

“Well,” she said, “maybe if I can find my skin I can help you find yours too.”

“But what about my job?” I asked. “I can’t do my job in the ocean.”

Freya gave me a look of deepest pity.

“Duh, you wouldn’t. You would just swim around and we would eat clams and sit in the sun and play all day with Cecilia. You don’t need money if you’re a *seal*.”

“Babylove,” I said, reaching out an arm to put around her. “Come here, let’s talk about this, ok?” But Freya leapt backwards as if singed and backed towards the kitchen.

“Momma, when you’re stuck out of the ocean you always have a *true love* who’s trying to make you stay there, and the test is you have to escape them even though you love them, because they’re hiding your seal skin and can’t let you go be happy.”

“Freya,” I said. “You stop this right now.”

But she had already disappeared around the corner. I heard her filling up a glass of water at the sink, the soft gulps she made drinking it down. I could barely stand it, listening to the water fill her throat up again and again and again.

The most difficult thing is telling Freya so frequently that she is wrong. Even though it is a matter of her life, even though I can tell she doesn’t believe me. She’s had this kind of idea before – it used to be one of my favorite parts of her, that she was my little fairy girl. In every neighborhood we’ve lived in she makes friends with the dogs and holds private meetings with them that she will

not discuss. She likes to leave a little plate of food out, for the leprechauns she says, though as far as I can tell she's not interested in leprechaun gold.

Cecelia was a much more practical child – everything was an opportunity to get rich or famous, whether it involved digging supposedly precious gems up from the dirt in our backyard or putting on a neighborhood play and charging admission. She would sweep a blanket over her shoulder and tell the boys from the block that she was playing the king, and then happily let them draw a full beard onto her face with markers while Freya just watched. Freya was the audience.

In the mornings I stand her up at attention in her swimming suit and rub suntan lotion onto every exposed part, even making her move the straps so lotion can go under and she'll have fewer defined lines of salt and tan. I never use enough, somehow, but it's a start.

“What are the rules?” I ask.

“More suntan lotion after swimming,” she says.

“And?”

“No swimming past the dock.” She makes a face.

“And?”

“My head always has to be where you can see it.”

“Right you are,” I say. I tuck a magazine into my bag and take a few moments to rearrange all our beach possessions. My heart beats a mile a minute as we walk through the door, every time, every day.

My mother didn't mean anything by offering her timeshare to us, except in the nicest way. I haven't told her about Freya's idea, because I'm ashamed that I can't control it. Just when I think I've gained a firm grip it slips out of my hands and back into her head, through the ears, through the eyes. I see it leaking out from between her lips like black brackish water and dripping down her chest. It evaporates and she breathes it in again. It's part of her ecosystem.

Freya didn't tell her either. I wonder about that, as we pad down to the beachside and her ponytail swings against the sunburn on her neck.

In high school I woke up at six in the morning every day. When the alarm went off I did not press snooze. In the breaking light of day – or, depending on the season, the full dark of night – I eased into sweat pants and a loose t-shirt, and with my book bag slung over my shoulder biked to the YMCA pool to swim laps. From six-thirty, when the facility opened, until eight-thirty, when mothers became available to drive children to lessons, an adult open swim was scheduled, with space for senior water aerobics and three lanes cordoned off for lap swimmers like me. Usually I was the only one there, face easing under over, under over the water line while adult contemporary music played on a boombox a little too far away for me to hear clearly.

Every so often though, the lanes would be full when I arrived, and no telling when someone would finish their workout. A doctor in town prescribed swimming for muscle injuries, joint pain, smoothing out spinal abnormalities – I know because after a week of swimming next to a woman of about sixty-five, I

asked her and she mentioned the S curve of her scoliosis. Most people grew casual about their healing after several sessions and stopped coming, but for a little while there would be constant danger of not getting a lane until too close to school starting. Then my whole day might be ruined: other open swims were choked with playgroups or athletic businessmen, and I couldn't afford a pass to any of the more private local swim clubs. The mornings were my time, my only time, and my chest would clench with fear from the moment I woke up until the second I slipped into the water, unimpeded.

A lake or an ocean would have been better, I see that now. But I grew up in small town near Greensboro; I didn't have options, and the water was the important thing. It soothed me. After swimming for an hour I could sit through dull classes, manage a checkout girl job at the local grocery store, help clean the house and do my homework. It didn't matter that my nose got clogged with dust or that organic chemistry fell outside the realm of things I could care about. My mind followed the smooth movements of my arms through the water: my legs scissoring through blue expanse, the feel of it running in submerged rivulets along my stomach. I lived for the moment when I'd reach the pool wall and have to dunk down, a rotating sphere, and then jet back off the edge in the other direction.

I raised my girls to love water that way, something equally as inevitable as movie theatres or grass fields or linoleum kitchen floors. We moved to a town a couple of hours away, with a small lake and a river within driving distance. Freya preferred the shallows when she was younger, the place she played while her father stood next to her up to his ankles, until even that became too much and he

took off, gone one day to some other one-lake town I guess. But Cecelia was always fearless. She threw herself off docks and dove under the ropes designating the monitored swimming area; she and I would play games, pacing each other out to this rock or that sand bar, and she wouldn't come out of the water until she was pruned passed all recognition, like a wet little mole burrowing into her towel.

Every year we saved up for a trip to the coast. Nothing fancy, just an opportunity to smell the real ocean and feast our eyes on the farthest horizon. Then one year we came back without Cecilia, our skin white as though Freya and I had been the ones held under the surface by a rip tide, our blood cooled by the water that stayed too deep for the sun.

After that I took pleasure in boiling water, as if to cleanse it of itself. I didn't like to step into the shower, and I moved Freya back to my mother's town where the only places to swim were chlorinated and cost-prohibitive. My mom thought Freya would develop a phobia if we didn't go back and face the thing that swallowed Cecilia up like an aspirin and coughed her back like a chicken bone, a bad bite, a mouthful of soapy something.

I didn't tell her that her only remaining granddaughter had already developed a terrible delusion, and that bringing her to the ocean would be like bringing Don Quixote to the windmills. I told myself that this was from shame, not wanting to break her heart with more strange news. But I should be honest and say that there's also a part of me that doesn't want Freya to be wrong. A part of me that hopes Freya knows something that I don't know.

At night my daughter seems satisfied. Once she's dried off from her swim and her bath, once I've tucked her away from the house's sharp edges in her own little bed she hunkers down into the covers so they ripple around her. It's hot, and she doesn't really need a blanket – every morning I come in to see her ankles covered in sheets, the rest tossed onto the floor. But she demands the full turndown service. It must be like being a swaddled baby: all her limbs are constricted and exhausted from exercise and the burned skin radiates on her nose and all she can do is lie there and sink farther in.

“Freya.” I tuck the cool corner of the top sheet under her chin. “You had a lot of fun swimming today, hm?”

Her eyes are closed, but I can tell she's still awake.

“Yeah, momma. It was good.”

“And you feel good now, in your bed, hmm?”

She pops one eye open, just marginally.

“Sure.” She doesn't seem certain what I'm wanting to hear.

“So tomorrow is our last day. You want to go swimming again? Or maybe walk into town and see a movie? Get an ice cream? We haven't even checked out the little library, and it's pretty cool looking. Your cup of tea.”

“No,” she says. “Swimming. Good night.” There is a finality about Freya these days that goes into my bones.

I dream about Cecilia stuck in an attic. She bumbles around spires of cardboard boxes, their corners punched in and dank with cobweb. The attic has one little window, looking out over a dry lawn with a rusty sprinkler. But Cecilia doesn't pay any attention to the window with its cast iron framing and antique glass. She opens squeaking boxes and thrusts her nose into an old trunk. Out of everything she pulls clothing, sheaves of pictures, half-empty shampoo bottles – the ephemera of existence. I can't believe she's gotten herself caught up in this packratty crawlspace, smudging her delicate fingers with junk.

In the dream she tears through boxes for hours, until the piles of things she's pawed through come to look larger than their hollowed out containers. Finally, she pries up a floorboard in the corner. It's hard to do, and a splinter slides under her fingernail. But she doesn't yelp, she just keeps tugging until a chunk comes off that leaves a space just a little bigger than her hand. She always had a fascinating way of crushing her hands down into little balls so they looked so much less substantial than they were unfurled. Often enough she'd stuff a fist into her mouth and lord it in front of Freya, who ran away gagging and begging her to stop it.

When she reaches into the crevasse she's made I wince, even through the dream. I shrug my shoulders in bed. But her expression is perfectly neutral as she roots around, so blank that it could be the blurring of every face she's every made, all of them added up and then divided by their total number to achieve something placid and in-between.

Then it breaks open into a smile. And she pulls out her hand, and slipping behind it is a dirty fur, which she lovingly strokes and drapes with a flourish over her shoulders.

Freya is buzzing with energy as we troop down the waterfront, her towel looped around her neck like a cape. She runs ahead of me and back as though she's afraid I'll go missing, or take a sudden turn in some unacceptable direction.

I can see her heart beating almost out of her chest, the polar way it's pulled towards the water. I want to stop and cup my hand over it, press down firmly, so that she stays in this one precious piece. But I'm a good mom. I shoulder the bag with our snacks and bite back my hysteria as our thong sandals flap along the pavement.

The ocean on a hot day smells like forward motion. I can catch distinct whiffs of train rail tar and iron pinions and grinding shells and decaying kelp. The waves push all the secrets up to the forefront and then drag them back down again, but not permanently. They're always leaving accidental things behind.

We spread out our towels, and after dipping my toes into the moist rim of sand around the sea, I sit. The ground is uneven beneath me – incredible how hard it is to ever get your towel down flat. And this gives me an excuse to muck around for a few minutes, grinding my tailbone into the small dune formations beneath me and throwing rocks away from our perimeter. Then I pull out my magazine and lie down on my stomach, watching the reverent way Freya takes herself into the ocean.

She's slowed down now. Every grain of sand under her callused feet deserves attention, and the first shock of cold in the water is something she must consider, even if it doesn't bother her now. Her ankles disappear into the first ring of tide, and then her calves are half gone, then her stomach, her elbows. I have to admire the way she plows through all the problem spots – a wave on the back of the knee, the first kiss of water on the lower regions of her bathing suit. She always used to *squeal* at every stage of getting wet, to the point where I worried she didn't really like to go swimming at all and our beach trips were some minor torture. But when she finally ducked her head in, the water became her home. She would float on her back all day, looking at the sun.

Now the ocean is home even when she is not touching it. Her progress into the water has shed all its reluctance and become a shivering pleasure, a greeting ritual. She picks one dripping hand out of the surf and shades her eyes with it, looking at something in the distance that I can't quite make out. Then she dives.

I recognize the tuck as she turns under water. It isn't directional, it's a contact high, and soon enough she spins back up to the surface and begins to stroke out to the end of the pier. Her toes could still touch there, but walking is awkward and to swim is to fly. When she gets to the last piling she hesitates, bobbing, one hand embracing the sodden log. And then she turns to me, and her smile is a brilliant filament in the sun on the water.

Just as I stand up, she disappears.

“Shit,” I say to no one, and tear off the shorts I am still wearing, toss down my sunglasses. When Ce swam out too far I wasn’t watching, and now I’m watching always, ready to spring or feel the blood drain out of my face.

I barely feel the sand burning my feet, throw up two enormous fins of wake as I run into the shallows and throw myself into the waves. Freya has popped up in the far distance, and I don’t understand how she shot off so quickly, why the space between us doesn’t seem to diminish as I push myself, muscles snapping forward and back, salt water pouring into my mouth as I try to breathe. When I look up to orient myself I think I can see a dark form and Freya’s hand reaching out towards it and I scream without thinking: “Leave her alone!”

On the beachfront now, a crowd is surely gathering. Kids with juice boxes and shovels in their hands, parents clutching warped and sandy paperback novels. Should they come in? They wonder. Do I need their help?

But I’m far beyond them, out here in the water. It extends black below me, the sky infinite above. And just out of my reach Freya continues to move deeper, no longer looking back at me, no longer wondering what lies beyond.

RUSALKA

PRELUDE

This is the most important thing my grandmother told me of the Polish countryside:

A woman sits nude on the branch of a tree and lets her brown legs dangle into the open air. The bark ridges cut pleasantly into her thighs, and she presses her palms down, curls her fingers around the bough.

A man walks towards her through the woods, pushing aside whip-thin limbs of birch and beech; sidestepping shrubs as he searches for his lost path. The woman hums a song, and the man's feet begin to fall in time with the music. He does not realize that this is happening, does not yet feel his body in thrall to her.

It is a surprise then, when he catches sight of her legs. He's far from his village, tired and thirsty; the last thing he expected to find here was another person, particularly a woman who is naked and glorious and alone. Her feet are callused, the soles covered in dirt, and they hang before him like clothes left to dry in the wind. He follows the smooth blue ridges of her veins up to her calves, her fingers, her neck, her breasts. To the soft and downy lobes of her ears. When he looks into her face she smiles, and his surprise becomes recognition. His thirst disappears as the scent of a nearby river fills his nose and mouth, wets his tongue. The man knows that he's met the love of his life, and she is going to devour him.

This is an old story. While the aroma of clean water lingers in the air, the woman will ask the man for a gift of bread and salt, which he will feed to her with

his own fingers. He's already trembling, imagining it. His body is vibrating with desire.

The man shimmies up the trunk of the tree and swings onto the branch beside his beloved. The closer he gets the more she smells of river currents, the rush of waves over mossy rocks releasing the green musk of water plants. Tilting her head to the side, the woman beckons him with her fingers. He leans in to kiss her: closer, closer. He bobs his head in time with her song, and as they embrace her humming rumbles through him. He has never felt so entwined with someone, so protected. After a moment, his body drops to the forest floor with a muffled thud.

What happened next? I asked my grandmother, my *baba*.

That, she said, depends on who is telling you the story. Most people don't understand the *rusalka*, and so they wouldn't tell you that she has tears in her eyes as she jumps down from the tree and lands softly in the leaves. They wouldn't tell you of her heaving sobs of regret as she walks back to the river, her body light as air.

But then again, my *baba* said, what most people *would* tell you is also true. That she will find another man; that she will do it again. She will sit in the trees and sing her song as often as she needs to, take as much strength as she requires to survive.

ONE

I used to wonder why it is that children need bedtime stories, and after much consideration I've decided that it teaches their little brains to dream. Could you fall asleep into the noise of complete darkness, infinite possibility? Without the guide of a little narrative, a little magic, how would we know where to go when we closed our eyes?

There is a baby at my breast, which was once a flat landscape, so I know that a good story can transport you. Start out as a young girl, fidgeting while your mother slices strawberries into a bowl in late summer, and end up as a woman staring at the Chicago winter outside while an infant – strange, but familiar – looks up at you with curious, dubious eyes. Across the room is a stereo shelf scattered with recordings, sheet music. A thin smattering of selections on vinyl, which is John's pretension, not my own – I've never understood his fascination with how music is preserved. I'm interested in how it's made. Living inside music that lives in me, so that we, the song and I, are a continual unfolding out of one another, a growing vastness, an emerging pattern. Perpetual rebirth.

It seems odd to me to think of my voice scratched into a wax cylinder, trapped like a spirit caught in a jar. Worse still a computer chip: the tip of my tongue striking my teeth, the glottal contractions in my throat, even the air that circulates through my lungs and my blood, all somehow frozen onto a thumb drive that I can toss into my purse. From across the room I scan the operatic scores I've lined up to read as I nurse, each with a variety of recordings tucked

beside it. I like to read the score first, and sing it through, to let my body interpret the notes on the page. Then I listen to any recording I might have heard before and make sure I'm not imitating someone else's voice.

The baby, my baby, barely makes a sound. Sometimes soft snufflings, yawns that expand her entire body so she seems to be unkinking at the joints. Little Karina, who I've already slipped into calling plain Kara. She doesn't mind that it's snowing outside, that a slick mix of sleet and ice and rain is tapping on the tall windows of the living room. To her, the entire world is the chair I sit in, or perhaps just the length of my arm where she lays. To her, the sun is a bent lamp at my elbow, and the whole of existence is quiet – tappings, stockinged footsteps, hush the baby is sleeping.

Since Kara was born I haven't sung a note. I've lain in bed with her soft weight splayed across my chest, and I've inhaled the milkfat scent of her hair. I've passed her to my husband and watched him press his nose against hers, stare cross-eyed into her pupils, smile his smallest, truest smile. I wrap silence around myself like a blanket, like I'm always cold. Looking at my scores makes me shiver. Waking up with *Tosca* in my head fills my lungs with ice. Kara is so small: just a creature of cheeks and eyes, folds and rumples. I wrap the silence around her too, to keep her core temperature high. So the breath she sighs out at me will heat my neck in tiny bursts.

My grandmother Ada, *babenka Adelajda*, tells me that when I was first born I blinked my eyes with the regularity of a metronome. As a child I ran down the tiled aisles of the grocery store leaping in time with crescendos in the piped-in

music. If the song was up-tempo I got mischievous, pinching all the grapes in a bunch to find the crisp ones and popping them in my mouth when no one was looking. Sometimes I tried to sneak one bite of every fruit and vegetable in the store: a bean sprout, the torn green taste of a lettuce leaf, an apple bitten down to the white on one side and then placed back on the pile with its shiny unadulterated face forward.

If the music was slow I lost the will to walk. My baba Ada held my hand and asked: “Is that the weight of the world I see on your shoulders?” as I leaned into her, burying my face in her side and letting my knees buckle ever so slightly. But it wasn’t sadness, exactly, that stilled me: I wanted to lay on the floor and progress at the same pace as the chords. Toss an arm out, then rest. Roll onto my stomach, then rest. My body was starting to ascertain that the quiet moments between notes, between sounds, were as important as the sounds themselves.

The wind blows water against the window in waves, as if it were a body heaving backwards and thrusting itself into the glass, demanding entrance. The pounding is so regular it’s almost soothing, at least with a radiator near my knees, hissing steam in concert. My spine cracks as I stretch in my chair, and the child stretches her fingers, which look boneless.

John asked me yesterday if he ought to be worried that I’m not rehearsing. In general he allows me my privacies; if I wear green every day for a month, or develop a sudden aversion to dairy, he isn’t one to make a fuss about it. But my insistence on keeping the apartment in a state of hospital silence was giving him pause: it was, he said, unsettling. Kara had been crying on and off for two hours,

and both of us were fraying at the edges. John suggested that I try putting her down with a lullaby, and instead of nodding as I normally would have at anyone's invitation to sing, my hands went instinctively over her ears and I pinched my mouth shut like a stubborn child.

"As long as I've known you," he said, leaning across the bed where we all three lay, "you've never gone a whole week without singing, let alone two. Actually." He paused, stroking my tense jaw. "I don't know if you've ever gone a single day."

"Well I've never gone a whole week without sleeping either." I twisted my neck and nipped his fingers on each knuckle, skipping the thumb. One, two, three, four. Kara watched, quieting into hiccups, following the movements of my mouth with her eyes.

"You know what I mean, Lu." He gently pulled his hand away. I closed my eyes and rearranged my head on the pillow, unsure whether I was collecting my thoughts or feigning sleep.

"Yes," I said. "I know what you mean."

After a few minutes I peeked out at him from between my eyelashes, and found him running the back of his fingers over Kara's belly. His love for her is so strong that if I squint I can see it ushering off him in ultraviolet rays, a beatific suffusion of light. It terrifies me. He's ready to give her everything. And that leaves me wondering: am I?

My baba Ada was the one who steered me to sleep, past fear of oblivion, around monsters in the dark. Every night while my mother Sara robed herself in silk and went out to sing and sip whiskey in the bars, or practiced jazz standards with a crackling record player in her bedroom, Ada would tuck me soundly into bed and tell me stories of her own *matka*, Greta, the fierce Polish mother of us all.

The Greta I heard about then was a young woman, ferociously proud of the fact that she never shrank from work. With her brown arms she rolled bread loaves, hauled lumber, spanked naughty children. She was equal to the challenge, so common in her time, of a woman's double burden: family and field. She was formidable, tobacco-spitting, knuckle-handed, and when she kneaded bread in her kitchen she hummed. With a baby dandling, she hummed. And when called upon she could sling a calf wholesale over her shoulder and bring it, puling, to the slaughterhouse with a song so low in her throat she might be mistaken for a growling bear, dragging her prey to its bloody end.

But there was also something uneasy about the Greta of my childhood, a hint of tragedy and lack. That was what made her so compelling: she had true love, she had power, and she traded it all for the prize of a daughter. Like the *rusalka*, poor wraith in the trees, Greta drained the life force from all that she loved in order to fill a yawning, indefinable need. According to my baba Ada, she made a deal with the devil. According to my mother, Greta's crime was betrayal.

The three of us – Ada, my mother, and I, shared an apartment in Ukrainian Village, a neighborhood of Chicago that has since been overtaken by the young

and the suave, walking their dogs. Then as now there was a Polish grocery that Ada visited to pick up items she found essential: a spiced sausage, pickled herring, water carbonated by a spring near her hometown in Poznań. But in my memory the differences between past and present are stronger than the similarities. Instead of twenty-three year olds with razor-cut hair, I remember the neighborhood porches populated by old men with piercing eyes, smoking cigarettes that they pinched between thumb and forefinger. The scraps of conversation that whipped by in the breeze were as likely to be Polish or Russian as English, and the air smelled like wood varnish, and pickles, and wool.

My bedroom in that apartment was small, but I liked it because it faced the yard. We didn't have a remarkable garden, since it takes a special sort of madness to do much planting in Chicago, where the winter cold is obliterating, and the ground can be covered in snow through April. But on summer nights I could look out my window and see lightning bugs skimming over the lawn. If I sat still I could hear the murmur of neighborhood cats as they stalked through the bushes, calling out to prey.

That window was also instrumental in one of my first conscious realizations about sound – that it changes depending on its environment. I must have been very young, maybe four years old, not yet in any formal training for my voice. But I was big enough to reach the window latch and raise the sash, and proud enough of my independence that I didn't mind struggling a little to do so. I was singing something silly – a little do-re-me, a trill, a scale. I had to shove the weight of my shoulder underneath the sash to get the right height, and when I did

I was thrilled with myself: I stuck my head outside and bellowed my little song into the open air.

Immediately I knew: something was different. I was so surprised that I hit my head as I pulled it back in and felt my tongue gulp up against the roof of my mouth. In the safety of my room's four walls, I turned and sang the same few notes, feeling the air rush up through my lungs and strum against my throat. My eyes widened as I listened: inside, the notes ricocheted like pinballs, without any room to open up and spread out. But outside, the sound had space to flex. A C might waver and become a D as it hit a patch of wind and lifted into the sky. A high note, instead of sounding slightly bossy, was clear: it cut like a knife through the traffic and barking dogs.

In a different sort of home I might have been encouraged to take on a broad range of activities. Maybe, seeing my interest in the urban wildlife in our yard, the kind caretaker in my alternative world would have bought me books on anatomy and helped me articulate the skeleton of a vole from an owl pellet cleaned in ammonia. I could have been sent to ballet lessons and enrolled in the Girls Scouts, curling my toes into a perfect pointe and earning merit badges for insect identification and a facility with starting fires.

But it would have been the wrong approach, with me. I'm not the sort of person who benefits from having her excess energy drained, and I was never the sort of child who got bored easily, needing to move on to something shiny and new each time I set down a toy. It's true that I had a lot of energy. But it wanted

focus, not dispersion. If I'd been taught wilderness survival skills I might be a feral arsonist by now.

Ada knew just what to do with me because she anticipated my love of music before I was ever born. When my mother Sara was pregnant and woozy with size, Ada sat her down next to a record player and let Chopin's *Nocturnes* rumble through her. She played Polish composers first – Paderewski minuets, Lutosławski concertos – but soon realized that I moved around more when the music featured singing.

“It gives me heartburn,” Sara complained. Apparently I had a special fondness for Mozart and Dvořák, and expressed this affinity through acrobatics. I know now what it feels like to be stretched to capacity – a drum skin, a bulging bag – and have your passenger decide to start kicking, so I can imagine my mother's troubled expression as she readjusted to move her ribs out of the line of fire. At some point, when Ada wasn't looking, I'm sure she leaned down and gave me a few sharp flicks.

With or without my mother's explicit approval, however, my cells were coaxed together to in arpeggios and crescendos. I was born, much to Sara's dismay, with a large head and a strong jaw, giving my very first scream a breadth and tonality that stopped my doctor in his tracks. So I'm told.

So I'm told. My baba Ada has always been big on stories. And if she says my singing is not just a gift, but a birthright earned by Greta's sacrifices, who am I to doubt her? If she tells me too that my daughter will surpass me, as I surpassed

my mother before, aren't I right to exhibit a hint of hesitation in teaching the girl to sing?

TWO

People tell stories in order to remember: who they were, where they came from, what they did. But these stories are passed from hand to hand and over time they can be turned into softer versions of themselves, like a craggy stone worried smooth.

Stories also reveal their teller. Hidden inside the tale of the *rusalka* is a fear of getting lost alone in the woods and being attacked by an animal – fear of one’s own impotence in the face of nature. It’s a story terrified of river water for what it runs over, trees for what their branches can hide, and women for the love they feel that neuters as often as it nurtures. And in my grandmother’s hands, it’s a story that reveals a teller who’s afraid of what she herself may be willing to devour.

Baba Ada rarely told me a story the same way twice. As a child I didn’t question this, nor ever ask her how she came to know so much about what her mother thought and said and did in her absence. The stories about Greta and Ada just existed, they just *were*, like Baba Yaga and the Dragon of Krakow and Peter Rabbit. I cried at night for *more Greta, just one more Greta*, in the small purple bedroom in which I discovered my voice, where posters of Lucia Popp smiled her pristine soprano smile down at me under a bouffant hairdo.

“There was a party,” she told me one night. I settled beneath the weight of my covers, and could see the threads of the story occurring to her. It often happened like this: inspiration weaving together with myth, the certainty of the

tale mingling with surprise. “The piano factory invited all the young people by to hear the magnificent voice of their instruments, and to dance.”

I was thirsty, but I didn’t want to ask for water. If Ada got up she’d fuss around about something: find that all the glasses in the kitchen were dirty and tie an apron on with a sigh. Or she’d come back with the water, but lose the thread of the story, and maddeningly embark on something different. The spit in my mouth was heavy and thick, and every time I swallowed I felt my throat getting drier. But I wrapped myself around Ada’s arm and leaned my weight into her. Quiet. Listening.

She stroked my hair, and then she truly began.

“Picture this,” she said. “A large wooden room, a fresh-swept floor, with tufts of sawdust still stuck in the corners. Outside a tall window the harvest moon is visible, in a sea of black that extends infinitely in all directions. The door opens, and a crowd of young people burst inside and stamp their heels on the hollow-sounding floor. They rush from place to place picking up misplaced factory trinkets like chisels and wire, and whisper in front of the bandstand that elevates a piano, a fiddle, and a breathy clarinet.

“Pushed up against one wall is a table laid with apples, bread, and punch. The boys huddle around it readjusting their ties while the girls swarm and disperse with logic of birds. By coincidence the girls are all wearing blue dresses, all of them new. They pull at one another’s hems and judge the geometry of waistlines, the pristine nature of pressed fabric. Any imperfection is carefully

picked away with fingernails, which have themselves been buffed and polished to a diamond gleam.

“Everyone is jittery, antsy. A girl and boy crack their heads together reaching for the same slice of apple, and the room erupts in hysterical laughter. The band walks onto the stage and strikes up into jazz, looking into each other’s eyes to ensure they all start in the space of a heartbeat.

“Why is the room so agitated? Why does it feel like a crowd of starlings is sweeping around the ceiling, the simultaneity of wings causing *shooshes* and *booms*? The young people bow and curtsy to dance partners, still giggling between their fingers. They flood the floor like flower petals in a rainstorm.

“As they dance the room fills up with hot breath. Curls of steam rise off of the girls’ exposed shoulders and from under the collars of young boys’ shirts. Sweat beads up on the dancers’ faces, but instead of irritating them it just makes them more eager, shaking their hair to rid themselves of the moisture itching along their scalps and throwing themselves into frenzied two-steps and foxtrots until the very boards under their feet begin to glow hot.

“The room is hazardously close to its flash point. In another minute flames will erupt up the walls with a *woof* and peel back the wood to reach the oxygen outside. The fiddle will fill up like a bowl of fire, and the clarinet will spit hot tongues with each squeak. The piano will be perilous. The piano will be a burning beast.

“The dancers don’t notice. They’re spinning in circles, gripping each other by the hand. They will spin and hop and clutch to their doom. Or so they would if it was their choice to make.

“However, most people have less control than they think. Even their hubris can’t hold sway over the will of a god.

“A gust of wind blows the door open once more with a bang, and a figure stands illuminate in the entryway. Her skin is golden and her hair lays arrayed like the horns of a ram. It falls over her shoulders in curls and coils, brushing against the bright red fabric of her dress.”

I squeezed Ada’s arm. “Is it Greta?” She gently loosened my grip and laid me against the pillow.

“Of course,” she said. “Of course it is Greta. Where she walks the earth freezes and burns; in this room the heat is snuffed like a candle between licked fingers. One instant the dancers are flushed with the glory of movement. In the next, they’re frozen into sculptures of ice.”

I smiled with pleasure.

“But why?” Ada continued, as much to herself as to me. “Why does she choose to freeze them? They are her townspeople – familiar with her dirty childhood feet and uncombed hair, the wildness of her limbs. They know that Greta is a strange girl, who prickles with lightning when she’s angry and hums in time with the bees in the field. They do not know her like she is though, wrapped in linen and tapping her clean fresh shoes on the floor. She is driven by desire, and won’t let their movements hinder her.

“Greta stalks through the crowd, careful not to disturb the statues, not to knock against their precarious balance and send a young girl or boy crashing to the ground. Murder among changelings is still murder. She peers into their faces – ohs of surprise and plum smiles of pleasure – and gazes through the prisms of their hair. She is looking for something, but cannot find it. She assesses the shape of a foot’s arch rising out of a shoe, the symmetry between the fingers of two twin hands.

“Then something catches Greta’s eye, and she inhales the sharp splintering cold of the crowd. Across the room is the figure of a man, slightly taller than the other dancers, slightly stooped. His hair falls shaggy against the nape of his neck, and even through their icy cage his eyes gleam warm. She approaches him, circles him, considers the wisdom of his untucked shirt. The toes of one foot are raised up off the ground, ready to tap in time with the band, anticipating the arrested measure. Unlike his companions this man is alone. He gives the impression of someone waiting.

“Greta nods to herself. She stands close to the man, and presses her thumb to the fat of his bottom lip. Her thumb is warm and leaves a print, the skin sticking slightly as she pulls it away. As she steps back, the room erupts once more into noise. The man’s toes fall into tapping, and he holds a hand up to his mouth. The lip Greta touched is bruised, as it will be for the rest of his life. Saul, the man who will be her husband, holds out his same hand in invitation.”

I pulled the sheet taut over my hand and sucked on the knuckle of my thumb through the fabric, imagining my fingers clasped in the hand of someone I

loved. In my head Greta appeared, standing steady in front of Saul while the rest of the girls in the room shook their heads like colts to clear them. Her red dress was a blot of blood against the inky blue silk and tulle around her. As the music picked back up and Saul took her in his arms, the skirts would twist and sway together, their colors melding, so that from above you might track Greta's movement by the purple streak tailing behind her through the crowd.

"What are you thinking of?" Ada asked me. I sunk my teeth into the sheet, to slice through it like scissors, but my incisors just rubbed blunt and dry against the threads.

"Did they live happily ever after?"

"Darling." Ada frowned and tucked the covers around me until I was as immobile as a mummy. "We aren't at the end of the story. I'm asking what do you think? What do you feel?"

"Hot?" I guessed. "Or cold?"

"Ah, maybe so," said Ada. It was sometimes a surprise, the answer that satisfied her. "But you must know that they aren't such different feelings. At certain levels, fire and ice are the same. You can have an oven, say, and that's not the same as an ice cube. But a man who douses himself with gasoline and burns up to prove something he believes in is true? He is the twin of the man who is trapped without clothes in the snow, the man drifting out to sea on an iceberg to relive a dream told to him by his dead wife.

“The important thing is: even with the dancers melted and dried, even with the flame of their dancing banked, there is still a sizzle in the piano factory.

Something hot blue, ice sheer, that Greta feels as surely as her own heartbeat.

“Naturally, her pulse is already strong, beating in reply to Saul’s palm on her spine. She knows she should be satisfied with her marked man: the huntsman, the woodcutter, who no other girl would dare approach. He spins her around the floor and their shoes make light scuffs, which are erased by the roving crowd. She leaps into the turns, letting him lift her into the air.

“Still, Greta’s heart pounds at her. It is hard and steady like a knock at a wooden door, fast and nimble like someone running across a room on their toes. Saul spins her and spins her but she knows that on the other side of this dizziness there will not be rest. There will be keys clicking into the wrong locks, and pencils tapping unthinkingly against desks. There will be this sound throwing itself against her head, this feeling tossing itself into her ribcage, ticking, spitting, clacking, crackling, until she finds whatever it is that her body so badly wants and takes it in her hands, quieting it against her cheek.”

Ada ran her fingernails up and down my arm. I shivered.

“From across the room Greta hears the call. A boy who has been joking with two blue-bosomed girls misjudges his step and falls backwards with a crash. His full weight slams against an instrument of polished mahogany, a half-built piano full of wires and pins that was too large and unwieldy to wheel out for the dance.

“As the boy jumps up and brushes himself off the whine of the piano bends through the crowd. Greta stops moving, her eyes catching the gleam on the instrument’s lid, and allows Saul to lift her once more by the waist to use up his momentum. When her feet hit the ground again, she points. The piano’s whine turns into a wail, turns into a sob, a soft sniffing, a whisper. A path in the crowd opens up, and Greta walks through. Saul trails behind her, watching her move.

“The moment Greta’s fingers touch the piano, she knows: this is something special. This is meant for me. She runs her fingers over the keys – one is missing, like a tooth shed in an apple. Beneath the varnish Greta can still smell the green wood, the pliable branches that were snapped off to shape the trees into useful planks. A vibration runs from her hand through the instrument, and she wants to take its entire bulk into her arms. To fall asleep inside its belly and wake up with it inside her own. So she looks at Saul, who is bewildered, and then hitches her skirt thigh high, leaving just enough length for mobility and a hint of decorum.

“Crouching then, Greta explores the instrument’s underbelly, and, finding purchase, she heaves it above her head. It sits on her palms like a medallion. The room is hushed and immobile, this time from shock.

“But Greta pays the crowd no attention – even Saul is beyond her thoughts. Turning, she hefts the piano to the quietest corner of the factory floor as the metalworks inside scratch and grate. There is a momentary cacophony, a casual grunt from Greta as she sets the thing back down. When she does, she sighs: the impossible pounding in her heart has lifted and vaulted her lips into a

smile. Standing in the piano's place is a little girl, almost too small to be believed, shivering and mussed in a party dress and tights. The girl is whimpering, as if only just clamping down on her tears, and she leans into Greta's arms like a tree into the sun.

"Run along and play, Greta tells her, straightening her hair ribbon. *You're safe now.* And the little girl takes off into the night, leaving on Greta's cheek the small shock of a kiss."

Ada paused, and looked at me. "How do you feel now?"

"Who was the girl?" I asked.

"Well," Ada brushed a lock of hair away from my eyes. "I used to think that she was me, coming to say hello a little early. But now I know: she was you."

"Me?"

"The idea of you, which was already in the world's mind. Now," she pressed her hands into my shoulders. "How do you feel?"

I thought about it. "Strong."

"Good. Then you won't mind if I turn out the lights and let you get to sleep."

As she flicked off the switch by the door and stepped one foot outside, I called to my *baba*.

"Ada?"

"Yes darling?"

"So *did* Greta and Saul live happily ever after?"

“Oh.” Ada frowned, leaving me with a feeling I couldn’t place. “In a way,” she said finally. “You could say they were happy. But every so often Greta turned Saul once again into ice.”

“Why?”

Ada slid out the door, so only her head was still visible to me. “To try and see in him what she saw the first time. To make sure that he was always there.”

When I was six Ada signed me up for a children’s choir in a church in Pulaski Park. Our own church, St. Mary of the Angels, was where Ada sang, but they didn’t offer junior chorus or voice lessons: their mission was to send music directly to God, readymade and ideal.

We talked about the choir for weeks before the first meeting. In the kitchen, on the train, walking briskly to the grocery store: it was all that either of us wished to discuss.

“What songs will we learn?” I asked. We were out to pick up eggs and milk so that Ada could make paczki. They were my favorite Polish food, essentially donuts. Paczki looked to me like sugarplums: plump and sparkling. I liked the way they collapsed under my teeth, and the fact that I had to lick my fingers after eating one.

My feet smacked against the pavement in polished Mary Janes. It was March, and grey snow still gathered in the corner of the streets where it had been thrown by snow blowers over the course of the winter. The sidewalk was perpetually wet and salted, and my shoes would be near ruin by the end of our

walk: white-streaked and saturated. But I was going to be a singer, and I had decided that morning that singers don't wear boots.

Ada was neatly appointed, as always. I never woke up so early that I saw her without makeup on, with her hair uncombed and loose around her shoulders. On this day, her wool skirt was smartly pressed, her sweater free of pills and tucked safely beneath a jacket that tied around her waist. There was perhaps more powder on her face than absolutely necessary for a trip to the store, but she was still more sensibly dressed than me. Though her boots had fashionable low heels, they were waterproof.

She held my hand, my cotton gloves sticking against the mended suede of her own.

"They'll probably want to start slowly. Perhaps begin with scales. Then a few simple songs. Maybe 'Children Blessed of the Lord?'"

I made a face.

"I can do that one."

"Well, not that song exactly, but something like it. They'll want to do easy songs to tell who is the best and who needs more help."

"Well." I kicked a stone ahead of me as straight as I could, following it with my eyes. "Then later can I sing better songs?" When we reached the stone, I kicked it again.

"Of course darling." Ada didn't even look down at me. Her stride was full of purpose. "Who do you think they will realize is the best?"

This was Ada's perpetual attitude about my voice. She assumed it was a precision instrument from the moment of my birth – perhaps before – and never expected that anyone else would think differently. Including me. Very likely she lay her head against my mother's stomach and listened for phantom reactions, as if her very hope was sonar. If we were sitting in a restaurant and someone accidentally struck their knife against a glass, my baba Ada would turn to me with an expectant gaze until I said: "B minor?" Or whatever the note might have been.

Perfect pitch, to Ada, was part of my birthright, written in my blood. She was furious if I hummed a song just a shade flat in her presence, even if I was mimicking something I'd heard on the radio. And since she was proud, she liked to show me off. In church I named the organist's key changes; walking down the street with Ada and one of her friends I called out the different pitches of car horns. People laughed and admired me and handed me candy. Once, when I was ten, a waiter in a café dropped an entire tray of glasses near our table, and when the shock in the room wore off I said to Ada: "Shostakovich?" She laughed and laughed and together we hummed through Katerina Izmailova's aria from *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk*, the one where she insists on her bravery and power.

"Will we sing Mozart? Handel? Vivaldi?" I breathlessly tossed out all the names that I loved.

"In time."

"Schubert? Beethoven? Wagner?"

Ada looked at me with stern appreciation. “It is a church choir, child. Not an opera hall.” But then: “Perhaps. In time. Once you’ve shown what you can do.”

My fingers were cold as we stood in the narthex of the church. I leaned on the wall next to a frosted glass door – tight shut – that led into the sanctuary, and imagined that the designs had been frozen into it with my breath. There was a great deal of Latin lettering, and the image of a man with a bald pate and pious hands, clasped together in worship. I placed my palm against the window, but instead of melting a print into the pane the chill of the glass seeped into my skin. A vent near the ceiling was sputtering heat, but mothers and children kept opening the front door and letting in the wind, so the furnace’s effect was negligible.

“How much longer?” I asked Ada. She looked at the small gold watch she always wore, the one we used to count beats when she led me through her own choir’s sheet music and taught me time signatures.

“Very soon.” She straightened her skirt and smoothed her hair, as she did whenever I had annoyed her by asking more than once for something she didn’t want to buy. “They said it would start at six o’clock, and it’s only six-fifteen. I’m sure the director just wanted to wait for everyone to get here.”

There was in fact a round-cheeked woman standing near the door and taking names as each participant arrived. The woman didn’t seem to be in any hurry though. She leaned down and talked to the children, threw her head back and laughed with the adults who were milling around nearby her. There was a

small crowd with us now, breathing out warm pockets of air with their conversation. I eyed them warily. The children looked disinterested: one girl was zipping and unzipping her jacket, while another slowly unraveled her glove. The boys had already formed into a pack, so only their backs were visible. Most of the other children were slightly older than me, but somehow seemed younger. If I looked one in the eyes they appeared startled, and lacking.

Nothing was quite how I had pictured it. When Ada sang on Sundays she stood on a balcony high above the crowd, with a stained glass window shining behind her with images of the saints. The whole choir was perfectly coordinated in smooth black robes, their chins tilted always towards the conductor, who had a thick grey beard and stern eyeglasses. Ada's choir moved together like a flock of birds, their faces rising and falling in tandem, their eyes fixed on a single point and purpose. When a soloist did step out of the group everyone else turned to look at her or him, as if relinquishing their collective power, feeding the singer with their attention.

As Ada dressed me for the evening I imagined a similar flurry of movement all across Chicago: children just like me being tucked into sweaters and skirts, zipped into slacks and tied into shoes. Our hearts would all be beating harder than usual, up in our ears. We would step into cars, onto the El, out onto the street in a synchronized pace, the syncopation of our heels clicking out evenly behind us. When I walked through the door of the church there would be a rush of balmy air. We would breathe out our relief in unison. We would see ourselves in one another: something we had been missing, suddenly found. That's what I'd

imagined. But so far the only thing even close to my expectations was the icy glass and its frozen monk.

I pressed my hands together like the monk on the sanctuary door was doing. Perhaps this was how God kept people warm: they placed their fingertips and palms together, then rubbed them up and down. I liked the sound my skin made, scuffing against skin, and it did heat me up just slightly.

“Put your gloves back on if you’re cold,” said Ada, frowning. “Don’t be so silly.”

Before I could respond, the woman who seemed to be in charge clapped her hands and invited us all to join her in the rehearsal space. I stuck my hands into my jacket pockets, and followed the other children, counting my steps. *One*, two three, *one*, two three. I hopped slightly, back and forth, walking myself mentally through the steps of a waltz. A couple of kids looked at me as if I was trying to bash into them, scooting a pace or two away. I didn’t care. I kept playing the waltz in my head and sat down carefully on a stool in the small rehearsal room, crossing my ankles so the shiny toes of my shoes pointed up at me.

“Alright!” The woman from the front of the church smiled broadly, standing on a small wooden box in the front of the room. “I’m Mrs. Baker. You can call me Noreen, or Noree.” She beamed at us again. “I’m *so* happy to see you all here tonight, ready to use your little voices in the service of the Lord. That’s just lovely.”

“*Hi Noree.*” The children around me all spoke in unison, as if they’d been prepared for this exact interaction, this bubbly woman standing before us. I

looked around the room and caught Ada's eye. My hands were clasped tightly in my lap. Ada nodded to me almost imperceptibly and I turned with some hesitation back to Noreen.

"Now tonight we're not going to start with anything too tricky. Remember: we're here to have fun." I shifted in my seat. There was nothing exactly wrong with what Noreen was saying, but it gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, rising to my chest. "I know it's almost springtime," Noreen continued, "so first I thought we'd do one of my favorites. You might know it. It's called 'I'll Be A Sunbeam.'"

As she spoke, Noreen hopped off her box and walked around the room with a stack of pink and yellow mimeographed papers. She handed one to each child and gave a few to the adults who were shifting from foot to foot in the back of the room. My paper was yellow and slightly smudged. It smelled like old silverware. In the top right corner was a picture of a smiling sun, and below that was a list of verses intercut with the chorus. Ada was only beginning to teach me to read, but I didn't need to read to see that something was wrong. I raised my hand.

"Yes sweetheart?" Noreen smiled at me and bent down, putting her hands on her knees.

"Where's the music?" I asked.

"Honey, it's right there in your hand."

"No, it's not."

“Yes honey, it is.” Noreen reached out and took the page from my fingers, wagging it in front of me. “See?” I pinched my lips together and nibbled on them slightly. Ada was always telling me to be polite, but she never let me talk nonsense to her either. And this woman was talking nonsense.

“That’s just words.”

Noreen stood straight and looked at me.

“What’s your name, honey?”

“Luscia.”

“Well, Luscia, what a pretty name. You see, these are the words that go with the music. So I’m going to play the piano, and we’ll all sing these words along and make the song. Ok?”

She smiled at me, and I could tell she thought that I didn’t understand. Maybe that I’d never heard music before. Maybe that I was simple. She turned towards the group and opened her mouth to give further directions. My hand shot back into the air.

“Luscia honey,” Noreen said. “We’re going to get started and then you’ll see what we’re doing.”

“How do you know what parts to give us?”

“Excuse me?”

“Who’s a soprano? Who’s an alto? What key is this song is? Who composed it? And who did the arrangement? Are there any solos available?” I threaded my fingers back together in my lap. “Please.”

The room seemed to hum with the afterglow of my words. Thirty heads tilted and pivoted towards me. I shivered. Not out of fear, but recognition. This was what I had believed music to be. The precise concurrence of emotion and movement, like the bow-strokes of thirty violinists. But instead of embracing me, this sweep of harmony shoved past me without pause. I may as well have been sitting in the middle of crowd of dogs, agitated by a note too high for me to hear.

“That’s not what we do here.” This was Noreen. She curled a sheet of mimeographed paper around one finger, twisting it tight. I stood up.

“Ok,” I said. “Then I should leave.”

Ada met me by the front door, where I was slowly buttoning up my coat. I was afraid she would be angry with me: we’d spent so long waiting for this day to come, talking about it, planning. And I’d let her down.

Baba Ada knelt down in front of me and quickly fixed the last couple of buttons, so my coat pushed my scarf up, warm around my neck. She put one hand against my cheek and she smiled.

“What a terrible waste of our time, darling,” she said. “Let’s go home.”

THREE

I dress Kara carefully before venturing outside. In fact I'd still rather not, but I'm in need of tea and the phone is ringing incessantly. If I step out and happen to forget my phone on the table no one can blame me. I've got other things on my mind.

After we came home from the hospital I was sure I'd lost the thing. How many years has it been since I was allowed to ignore its ringing? Sleep through it? Leave the receiver off the hook? But John solved the mystery by telling me he'd turned my phone off, since going straight to voicemail is our best modern equivalent of the monotone busy signal. He made me turn it back on when he returned to work this morning.

"In case you need me." He brushed the hair off my forehead and kissed me as I sat nursing. So many mouths occupied with my body. "Just for emergencies."

A list of people who might now be calling me: John, who is the most likely, since he is a great manufacturer of his own sense of urgency. But he will be in rehearsal and meetings, so possibly not. It could be my agent Michelle, but she called yesterday to John's mobile to wish me her most heartfelt congratulations, and anyway we made a deal about these first few weeks.

"Normal people get maternity leave," she said. "Be normal."

"Normal people are extremely boring," I told her, "and you'd never associate with any of them."

Back then I thought I'd feel seclusion as an unbearable weight. And instead here I am wishing I could compound it, brick myself in to a room full of blankets and pillows and other insulation, take my meals by dumbwaiter. I tuck Kara's soft hair into a knit cap that fits snugly down over her ears. Infant caps are always this way, I find, so tight that they seem to be promising a little bit of extra skull for these early days of life, as well as a barrier against cold air. The baby sleeps poorly enough already that I've disallowed myself coffee during my breastfeeding, but having grown up with Ada tea runs in my blood. This morning I used the last of the loose leaf, and the satchels disappeared a few days ago.

Supposedly infants can't see well at all: the world to them is made up of dim shapes and vague shadings of light. Not unlike a surgery patient wrapped up in gauze. What can this mean then, for Kara's perceptions? She seems to be watching me closely enough, more so as she unwrinkles from her time in the womb and her eyes lose their perpetual sleepy squint. I touch her cheek and she immediately snuffles and turns toward my finger. I snap on the other side of her head and she wobbles around trying to get a look. A creature, then, of sound and scent. I tuck the cap more carefully around her ears and wrap her in a downy blanket all the way up to the back of her head.

The phone picks up again with its beeping ring. Normally I choose something a bit more interesting: Rachmaninoff's Prelude, opus 23, number five. Or something by Bartók, if I'm in the mood – maybe part two of the Cantata Profana. That gives people a good scare.

But I set it plain in anticipation of Kara. Ada believes music is transmittable, like an airborne disease. Or rather, triggerable: Kara caught the bug through her blood, but it has to be switched on to work. I was supposed to sing to her as soon as she was born and watch her transform in front of me into a little wind-up jewelry box, something that plays Swan Lake when you open it. Instead I cried and fell asleep, and here I am with an irritating telephone and a child who screeches and burbles in no appreciable rhythm.

It could be a friend calling. I do have friends. Could be a local admirer who somehow got my number, though now of course I'm reaching. Could be the Lyric, but John is there and if they have questions they can send them home with him or route them through Michelle. It could be a new booking, could be a wrong number, it could be my phone company trying to sell me some new and more extensive mobile network, or it could be some poor schmuck Julliard student calling to extol the current academic programming and ask me for an alumni donation. It could be a contact I met once at a cocktail party who's in town for one night only and was hoping to grab a drink. We could meet at Japonais. No, they'd apologize and congratulate me, begging off.

I don't check. Instead I tighten my coat around me and strap on the baby carrier that came to us in one of the innumerable well-wishing bundles which arrived on our door in the days preceding the baby's due date. I lost track early on of what we bought ourselves and what was sent as a gift: that will make thank-you notes an irritating exercise. Perhaps I'll just forget. Leave my phone yipping

and vibrating beside a stack of scores, walk out the door and ignore my polite obligations. Head out into the world and leave no trace behind me.

Greta and Saul married in late fall, in the middle of a rainstorm. Ada still tells me about it every year on the anniversary of their wedding. It is important, she says, to understand that Greta and Saul were in love in light of everything that came after.

The strange thing about the rain that day, according to Ada, was that it obscured the entire sky, including the clouds. Raindrops fell like sheets of needles, shivering, silver, and sharp. All that anyone could see outside were undulating waves that seemed to come directly from heaven. Until they saw Greta.

Although the guests – which is to say, most of the town, though no one could quite recall being invited – were nervous about going outdoors, the bride was elated. She greeted the water like a friend and raised her nose to the mineral smell, the clean air each peal of rain left behind. Her white dress hugging her close, she walked into the road and made no attempt to cover herself up in the face of the storm.

The pounding of the water on the dirt was a drum, and Greta walked apace its rhythm towards the forest. She didn't seem to mind that she was alone: the cottage Saul had built for them was at the edge of town, and that was where she knew she'd find him. People peered out their windows and watched her go by: a

speck of light, a candle flicker in the gloom. The vision of her drew them like the scent of fresh fruit. They followed her hungrily from pane to pane.

For despite its effect on everything else, the rain revealed Greta: the cotton of her gown became translucent and sticky, luminous against her flesh. The townspeople could see the curve of her shoulder blades, feel their fingers aching to run keystrokes down her spine. They wanted to pinch her thighs, bite her thumbs, suck the water off her hair. They wanted to blow warm air against her belly, and unbutton her clothes feeling the *pop* of each release. Greta shook her head and shot silver spray in all directions, a halo of movement and mercury. People everywhere opened their doors and walked into the storm, carrying flowers.

On the border of the woods and the road Greta paused, halting the crowd that had formed behind her. Everyone was soaked, and solemn. Surrounding Greta was nothing but the same grey water, hanging like a curtain that roared and reared. But then there came a light.

It seemed to those looking as if Saul had opened a door in the very rain. Behind him was the warmth of golden wood, the scent of a cook stove. He stood, perfectly dry, in the doorway and looked at his bride: goddess of the river, living wave. She bade him come forward and he did, the rain plastering his hair against his head and turning his clothes as dark as pitch. Standing in the space where civilization melted into trees he wrapped his arms around Greta and kissed her until she almost wasn't there. The crowd's ears were full of the howl of the storm,

their stomachs gnawing with joy and envy. Greta pulled away and placed her thumb on the bruise of Saul's bottom lip. *I choose you*, her eyes said. *You only*.

Saul picked Greta up in the driving rain and ascended the unseen steps to their home: just a rectangle of warmth in the storm, an outpost on the edge of the forest. When he closed the door, no one could see where the couple had gone, and they could only throw their flowers to the ground in the hope they'd be found when the sun re-emerged.

The couple was early with their sons. They came fast, and were various as a bevy of princes, made to protect a kingdom with their unique gifts. First was Andrzej, towheaded at birth but later dark as dirt. Then Fil, who tagged after his brother and begged to play; Fil who was smattered with freckles and stomping with mischief. Finally came Konrad, blond as a bell ringing.

"My brothers," Ada said, "were a tribe. Always together. They moved like a herd of deer, each one of them alert to the movements of the others. The boys sniffed in the grass. They locked their heads together like antlers and pushed one another to and fro in the yard. They nibbled food from the vegetable patch and left their bite marks there to be found by later harvesters. In fact you," she nudged me with her elbow, "take after them in that way."

We were walking along Lake Michigan, the summer wilting the grateful city around us. I wore a pink dress, my favorite color in my eighth year, and sandals that left white lines on my feet as if I'd been born Palomino. At the end of the school year a girl I despised had announced that her favorite color was pink as

well. I took her aside at recess and talked to her using my sweetest tones. She leaned closer to me with every word, and by the time the bell rang her favorite color was grey.

In Edgewater, a few blocks from the lakeshore, there stands a large slice of cake masquerading as a hotel. Dolled up in pink, it's a grand vision. A girl's playdream. We never went inside, but that summer I insisted on taking our walks up north so I could watch the water glint off the windows. I was waiting for an opportunity to get closer to the ground floor doors; I imagined finding one mysteriously open and slipping through without anyone noticing. Inside would be a society of magicians who would recognize me as one of their own by my voice. I'd run through empty hallways being waited on by eager and animate pushcarts, brooms, and pieces of cutlery.

But most days baba Ada and I crossed Sheridan and maneuvered the multi-directional freeway exit that complicates pedestrian life outside the Edgewater Hotel, and then strolled along the large cracked concrete stairs that border the lake.

"They were good boys." Ada held my hand and stared out into the waves, which smelled like bathwater and diesel. Farther down the shoreline was a beach dotted with towels and studded with white lifeguard chairs. "Did mostly as their mother said, and loved her deeply. They were her champions."

"What were their special gifts?" I hopped carefully over the seams in the concrete. "You said they had gifts."

“Well.” She didn’t shift her gaze. “They were forest spirits. Disappeared into the trees, camouflaged themselves in the leaves. That kind of thing. Just for starters. Andrzej could hear footsteps from twenty miles away. Sometimes we would be sitting on the porch talking and he would cock his head to the side as though someone had begun whispering in his ear. He could tell the direction a person was walking, the weight of their body, even their temperament by the sound their feet made against the earth. If anyone else tried to hear what he heard they’d have made themselves crazy. But Andrzej didn’t even have to try. Listening came to him as naturally as a heartbeat.

“Fil,” she smiled, “was shiftier. He could smell anything, taste anything. He’d have made a wonderful knight to a king, because he could have detected poisoned food without having to take a bite. It made him fussy with his eating. But it was useful.”

“How?”

“Well, planting for one thing. He could always smell water in the ground. And his father Saul was a woodsman – made his living cutting lumber. Saul was already plenty clever at picking the right trees to harvest, but Fil could smell an infestation of ants. He could smell a bird’s nest in the top branches of an oak and would climb up to pick it out before the tree was felled. The thing about Fil was, though, he was always ready to play a trick. If you saw him wrinkle his nose and asked him what he smelled, you had to be ready for him to say it was you.”

We walked along the steps for a ways, coming close enough to the beach that I could hear the jingle bells of an ice cream cart. “C major,” I said, not to anyone in particular. “What about Konrad?”

Ada stopped at the edge of the concrete stairs, where a series of smaller steps led down into the sand. At the lake’s edge was a group of children throwing buckets of water at one another, and shrieking laughter. For a moment I felt a tug behind my navel. I wanted to run down the steps and onto the beach, letting the dirty sand get into my shoes. I would head straight for the water and dive in, soak my dress, float on my back and look at the sky. But Ada was still holding my hand.

“Konrad was a beacon,” she said finally. “He called things to himself.”

I was still staring at the gang of children. “What kind of things?”

Ada peered up at the sun.

“Light. Animals. If Konrad sat still he would be surrounded by birds. They fluttered out of the trees and landed all over him: on his shoulders, in his hair, on top of his feet. And he called rabbits. Not,” she looked pointedly at me, “by shouting or whistling or anything like that. I mean that they came to him. First the smallest creatures, but then larger ones too. Once, Greta walked out into the woods at the edge of our cottage, looking for Konrad. She wanted to bring him in to dinner. She didn’t see him in the first clearing so she went a little farther, and then ahead of her she heard a sound. A rumble. A growl. On the path was a bear the size of a house and right next to it was Konrad. His fingers were entwined in the bear’s fur, and the bear’s eyes were closed. It was purring.

“Greta started to run towards her son, and the bear’s eyes snapped open. The two of them stared at each other for a long moment. Then Konrad whispered something to the bear and scampered into his mother’s arms. Greta stared after the lumbering beast as it departed, but it never once turned around.”

We ourselves turned to walk back the way we’d come. I wanted a last look at the children playing on the beach, the sunburn across their noses.

The one thing Greta didn’t have in her family of strong sons was a creature of songs. That is to say: a creature like herself. She never minded living apart in her small town, hearing the whispers of those who said she was a witch, she was a water spirit, that the songs she hummed everywhere she went would draw men to her so she could drain them of life.

But she minded being alone in her own home. Saul was a gently giant man, hunched over at the table as he ate his soup, back bent in the woods to avoid hitting his forehead against low-hanging branches. But with his softness came his silence. He regarded his wife with quiet admiration and was never drawn up in the humming she did. In fact he seemed to not hear it at all: the rhythms, the buzzing, the vibrations in her throat were as nothing to him. They were too insubstantial. He loved her for her weight and heft and hands.

The boys ran relays around their home. They pitched war games and threw mud balls and called up storm clouds and held congress with the foxes and elk. Saul dragged trees down and planed off their rigid bark and the boys queried wood larks, teased the nanny goats in the yard. Inside Greta baked bread, and to

herself she hummed. She took pride in her household and family but she knew deep down that it was not enough to satisfy her. Behind the cottage was a small plot of land fenced off near the trees to protect it from wildlife. The grass there was so green it was practically purple, and dabbed here and there were smears of white, which, from a distance, could easily have been flower bushes. Saul carved each slim cross himself, after the wood was consecrated by the church.

Greta vibrated with noise, so much so that it was hard for her to believe that neither her husband nor her sons noticed it. Sometimes Konrad paused in his games when she walked by as though he had been struck by an idea. But he never sang a note, never hummed along with her – for all his affinity with animals he never caught a small bird and brought it to his mother wrapped up in his hands. To even want this, Greta knew, was selfish. He was his own child. He had his own path to follow.

The cottage the family shared was built of redolent pine, the walls always dripping slowly with sap. It seemed to be a sturdy and impenetrable structure, but when Greta was alone and looked around herself she always felt the forest encroaching, the trees returning to reclaim their material selves. Greenling stalks coiled around into the backs of chairs, and trunks like spines erupted from the floorboards: a thicket of men turning their attention to the distance. From the ceiling sagged branches so robust that Greta knew they came from trees almost too large to fathom, and despite the careful chinking Saul had done, wind seemed to slither through the timber limbs.

Saul took each boy into the woods on what he called a hunting expedition, the purpose of which was to find their bed. They would spend a full day, sometimes two, searching through the gnarled branches, assessing the benefits of each possible contender. Andrzej chose a mighty pine because the tree had impressed him in the backbone of his house, and because upon leaning his ear to its trunk he heard something inside that he chose not to describe. Fil settled on ash after telling his father to close his eyes, and then sneaking up and taking a taste on the tip of his tongue. And Konrad, who was often inscrutable, spent two days of fruitless hunting. When his father was nearing exhaustion and despair a sudden wind picked up and began blowing leaves around the forest floor. Konrad held out his hand and snatched something off the breeze. By the river's edge, he and Saul found the willow the leaf belonged to, and Konrad hid his eyes behind the roughing knuckle of one hand until the tree had been felled.

During these expeditions Greta would stay near the house or the barn, usually wrestling with a new presence in her belly. What tree will you choose? She hummed and asked the air. When Andrzej was on his quest it was a cheerful question, with Fil uncertain. And by the time Konrad stepped into the woods Greta's mind sat balanced on a careful scale of fear and joy as she contemplated the red mess of a child coagulating within her. For between each boy there had come a girl, at least one, for whom there had also been a careful selection of wood grain. But instead of a bed, Saul cut the somber boards of a box, inside which the girl would nestle like a jewel while she rested silent beneath the trees.

It wasn't until I was eleven that I realized what these sleeping girls meant. They had shown up in various Greta tales over the course of my life as anything from talismans to window dressing, their grave markers landmarks on the grassy ground my great-grandmother walked. But it hadn't occurred to me that they were my flesh and blood – Ada's sisters, cut off at the knees.

Once the thought came to me though, it took up residence. For weeks the dead girls hovered around my head like summer flies; I had to blink them out of my eyes and bat them away from my hair. At a moment when I'd finally distracted myself – slipping bread into the toaster for a sandwich or leafing through the libretto Ada had given to me for my birthday – one would pluck at my sleeve until a thread came loose. And as soon as I acknowledged one the lot would be upon me, whispering their insubstantial opinions in my ear.

The haunting took its toll. I began to toss and turn in my sleep, and the food on my plate lost its savor. Whatever the meal was – pierogi, pizza – it looked sallow to me, like it was lacking essential nutrients. Though I didn't notice it, my cheeks grew slightly hollower. I looked like a ghost myself.

One day Ada was sitting across from me in the living room of our apartment correcting my posture as I warmed up with a series of minor scales. She held a yardstick like a conductor's baton, waving back and forth to keep time. Occasionally she would press it to my shoulders or stomach to make sure I held an erect carriage.

This was a common enough exercise for us: Ada's posture has always been impeccable and it's to this that she attributes all her choral achievements,

however slight. At an age when most girls were still inventing games with plastic horses and sneaking makeup from their mothers' purses, I was singing Puccini. Ada would never sing Puccini. But the maturity of my voice outstripped my emotions by several years. Inside I was still young enough to want to believe Ada always knew best.

Today though, the short wooden flicks began to irritate me. It was already taking all my attention to focus on the transition from an ascending melodic minor to descending when my mind kept drifting towards the graveyard behind Greta's house. Each tap of the ruler against my abdomen felt like a gentle reminder: *you're breathing*, it said. *That must be nice*. We started every rehearsal session with at least fifteen minutes of scales to ensure that I didn't blow out my vocal cords or develop a nodule. *Greta destroyed everything to save you*, said the voice of the dead daughters. *Not us. And you won't even risk a sore throat?*

Ada switched the ruler to her other hand, and in so doing cracked a nail.

"Oh damn," she said. And she set the yardstick on the sofa while she went to find clippers and a file. In the meantime I was meant to take a brief rest – this was the agreement made through countless sessions of voice lessons: while the cat's away, the mouse must save her breath. I walked over to the couch and picked up Ada's ruler, flexing it between my hands. Not very strong. With one swift bend I snapped it.

Baba Ada rushed back into the room and put her hands on her hips.

"What do you think you're doing, *lalka*? Do you think that rulers grow on trees?"

I wanted to hold up my chin and yell at her. To tell her that her rules were crazy and that my posture was excellent and she was pushing me too hard. But instead my lower lip began to quiver.

“What happened to Greta’s daughters?” I asked. “The ones who came before you?”

“Oh.” She looked surprised, turning the nail clipper over and over in her hand like there was some important part of it she kept missing. “Is that what’s worrying you?”

I nodded.

Ada led me over to the couch, kicking aside the two halves of the yardstick which I’d tossed unceremoniously on the ground. She put her around my shoulders and sat me down, then leaned over and kissed my head, took a deep breath through my hair. With Kara in my arms, now I have some idea of what that moment might have been to her: realizing that your beloved child has discovered death. And now I understand why she told me what she did.

“Before Greta had me she lost five girls.” Ada looked at me. “You know this.”

I nodded again.

“But what you might not know is that, with the exception of one, she lay them all to rest beneath her house with the hope that someday she might see them again. Greta,” Ada sighed. “My mother had to fight to survive the war. Poland had to fight to survive too. And for a time she died. Germany took her. Russia

took her. It's happened many times in the course of history. But soon enough she rose again to embrace her people and see that they lived happy lives."

"Greta?"

"No darling, *Polska*. But Greta was a princess of Poland who did battle for the nation's honor. And of course she was different than the other fighters – she was connected directly to the earth and the water and the trees. So when she died, she never really died."

I looked up at Ada with shining eyes.

"She went underneath her house and slept. She's still there, still sleeping, with the princesses who went down to sleep before her. And when the time is right – a time of need – they'll all come forth again into the world and ensure the safety of all that they love. So you see, they're safe. The girls. Because they're with her."

She tugged my ear. Gently.

"Just like you're safe here with me."

Kara's infant form switches around inside these stories; she is bundled up in them like a tiny egg. In Greta, you could see us all, descending from her like wooden nesting dolls. But when I was a girl I thought the view stopped with me. That when my baba Ada braided my hair or led me through scales, I was the last note in the song, the last line in the tale. The little queen our family machine was built to make.

In her time, my mother Sara thought so too. I couldn't know, as a child, what a surprise I'd been to her. All I saw was that she was suspicious of me.

If she was bored she picked up my hand, so much smaller than hers that even I could see it was delicate, and clipped off the raw smiling ends of my nails. If she was in a good mood she'd file them down with her many emery boards, each possessing of its own subtle use. And she'd pick a candy color she felt suited me and paint my small rounds until they resembled jelly beans.

"Ok," she'd say. "Now blow on them. And don't move. You can't move until they're dry because you'll muck around with something and mess them up." Then she'd frown. "I'm not doing this again. So you'd better keep them neat."

So I would sit. Sara disappeared into her room or out into the day, but I remained perfectly still, to show her I could. When she happened by – ten minutes later, sometimes an hour – Ada would find me in my small wooden kitchen chair, practicing my mother's frown. My hands would be laid out on the table in front of me, itching on the palms and starting to twitch impossibly, with my fingers each separated by the width of a cotton ball.

The first time she discovered me this way Ada sat across from me and smiled as if we were playing a game.

"What are you doing?"

I didn't look up. It seemed important to maintain focus on my nails.

"I have to wait for them to dry. Otherwise I'm going to mess them up."

Ada made a small *ahh* and came over to me, picking up one of my hands in her own. "So when will they be dry?" she asked me. "They look dry to me."

I scowled. “You can’t tell by looking.”

“So touch one.”

“I’m not allowed.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well. “

We sat quietly together for some time. The beams of sun coming through the window traveled across the waxcloth on the table and crept up my wrists. At last baba Ada stood up and stretched her arms, balling her hands up and then wiggling her fingers, pressing her nails into her palms and then extending them so her arms looked like wings.

“Sitting here is making me stiff, *lalka*. I’m going to go get hot chocolate at Kopi,” she said. “I was going to invite you, but I can see that you’re busy. So I suppose I’ll just have to go alone.” She walked out into the hall, still talking back at me as she put on her coat. “It’s too bad. A long way to go by myself, since I don’t have a book to read on the train ride. And I’ll be awfully lonely if I have to wait for a table. But there’s nothing to be done. You clearly have to wait here.”

Before she had fitted her key to the lock I sprang from my seat and threw myself against the door. Ada came back in and wrapped me up against the wind outside, making sure that my scarf and hat matched the new grown-up color of my nails. Sitting pressed together on the train, rocking back and forth as we traveled towards a bus exchange, Ada told me about Greta’s home in Poland: about what had been and what was to come. I leaned into her on the turns and let the words seep beneath my skin, as the light had in our small kitchen.

I knew that Ada was trying to make me feel better about the fact that my mother had left me sitting all alone. What I didn't understand was that once upon a time, my mother had heard these stories too. That she'd been petted and painted and made to believe she was whole, until one day she cracked open and out I came: a smaller doll with a sleeker voice.

Ada taught us both that Greta's magic set our family line in motion: women who came from women, women who came with music. Each woman a better singer, a more perfect form. When I was a girl I couldn't see that in these stories, Kara was implied by my very existence. That I was required to improve on my mother, and that the day would come to improve on me.

FOUR

Ada earned our keep doing alterations at the Marshall Fields annex store on East Washington. When she arrived in Chicago it was a good job, better than doing tit and tat as a home seamstress, and certainly a vast improvement over anything connected to the city's infamous slaughterhouses, where her cousin Freddie worked until they closed down or until he died – I've never been sure which.

To me though the work at Marshall Fields always seemed beneath my *babenska*, who herself wore clothes tailored to make her look like a lady, with precision pleats and hidden darts. I didn't understand that these two qualities – her dignified sense of style and her position as a day laborer – were quite inextricably linked. She was able to take home clothes deemed beyond repair and work them over into sleek statement pieces for herself, or else cut them down for my mother or me. And the women at Marshall Fields provided a community that neither family nor church – for reasons I didn't understand for some time – could provide to Ada when she first left Poznań.

Despite my belief that my baba deserved better, the store still drew me with the childish appeal of a factory floor. I marveled at the fact that a bolt of cloth could become a pair of pressed slacks; that a large tear could be mended into invisibility. And the seamstresses Ada counted as her peers, many of whom spoke Polish with the same homesickness that she did, represented to me the height of good fortune: a captive audience.

I was not generally allowed in the big back room where women sat with lamps bent towards their handiwork, fingers running nimbly over bobbins, belts, and treadles. The thought was that I would be in the way, and the thought was right: on the few occasions Ada capitulated to my whining and snuck me along with her I raced up and down the aisles between sewing machines and stood in the window singing “Amarilli, Mia Bella” until all foot pedals stopped and all hands applauded. Probably Ada prepared them for me, those women with their hair tied back, with their sensible dark eyes and occasional arthritic protrusions in the fingers. But as far as I knew they lived their lives there, bent over careful hemming and hypnotized by the constant grinding mumble of the machines. When I ran through the door – shoes making their *slap slap slap* against the floor – I pictured myself as a refreshing, avenging wind blowing misery and monotony out the window with my laughter.

After a song or two Ada would give me a handful of Frango mints and tell me to go play quietly by myself. This was the hard part. I was not naturally still. But Ada told me that it would be good practice for being a singer when I grew up: sometimes I would have a single aria nestled amidst an two full acts of opera. I would need to be able to wait in the wings for my moment of glory.

The alteration room was on a floor that wasn’t open to the public. So when my fists were full of chocolates and I’d been dismissed from the sewing floor I was generally able to wander around the hall and find a place to sit all by myself. Any clothing waiting for the clever attention of Ada’s ladies was piled in a mountain of fabric in one room – women would come by as they completed their

projects and peel a new one from the stack, with instructions for hemming, mending, or taking in pinned to the front.

The finished clothing was treated with more reverence. Several of the rooms on the alteration floor were no more than giant walk-in closets with low lighting as though they housed art being preserved against the elements. Racks of suit jackets hung beside rows of starched blouses; wool skirts organized by length were suspended beside coats, which were rimmed with mink or rabbit depending on the price. One room was always reserved for wedding dresses sheathed in thin plastic sheeting – the plastic muted the dresses’ blinding whiteness and made them glow as they may have in the light of the moon. Often the dresses swayed when I entered their lair; they looked very much like a cadre of sleeping ghosts all hung by the shoulders, effluvial tails dragging gently on the ground.

I dared myself to stay among them. It was a challenge: eat a pile of chocolates in a room of white clothing without leaving any fingerprints. Sit in a quivering pool of spirits without awakening one and raising its ire. I chose a point in the middle of the room and shuffled a few hangers aside to duck between so the plastic closed back around me when I leaned against the wall. I was afraid of the ghosts but if I closed my eyes I could convince myself that the *shushing* sounds of the swaying dresses were really coming from leaves rustling together in the wind.

The only risk to this tactic was that sometimes I would fall asleep, and then my dreams might take me anywhere.

I remember the last time I ever visited the ghost room, how I pinched my eyes shut and concentrated on the sound of my breathing because it blocked out

all other distractions – a creak in the corner or a suspicious lowing of conversation from the floor below. As with any dream I can't recall the moment that it began, just that there was a woman roaming in a forest with her skirt brushing against her knees. Daylight leaked through the nearly bare tree limbs but it was a bleached light, more imposing than relieving. When the woman – for I was the woman, though then again I wasn't – looked up at the sky she could see a cold bulb dangling there as if from a wire.

Slowly she became aware that something was following her. Maybe more than one something. The woman picked up her pace but her path was obscured; thorns pricked at her shins and left thin scratches on her arms. Lying on the floor of the room full of wedding dresses the rough carpet rubbed against my cheek and I tossed in my sleep. The woman felt a tug on the hem of her skirt but when she turned around there was no one behind her, not even a small set of hands disappearing behind a tree trunk or under a shrub.

Our consciousnesses – hers and mine – moved together and apart as though they were dancing, a new step pressing them into an embrace and volition tugging them asunder. She paused to peer around herself and I thought *no*. Go faster. My heart broke into a run, but it was stuck inside the woman's body and she was curious.

"Greta-ah-ah-ah."

We heard the voice and her blood froze for the both of us. Another sharp tug was felt on her skirt; a sudden wind scattered a pile of leaves and the woman jumped. Somewhere far away my body was tossing and turning, itching to wake

up. But around us issued the soft crunch of footsteps; out of the corner of my eye – or was it hers? – I saw shadows ducking in and out of view.

“Greta-ah-ah-ah.”

Closer – for it was closer now – the voice splintered into many voices, a hollow harmony that encroached from all sides. Tears welled up into the woman’s eyes but they caught there. There was nowhere for them to go. A third tug came, the waist of her skirt pulling away slightly from the skin and then snapping back into place. This time when the woman looked down she saw a beautiful little girl with thick dark hair who took a step backwards when she realized that she’d been spotted. Her hands were folded demurely behind her back.

A circle of little girls surrounded the dream woman, and all of them resembled both her and each other. Though some were smaller and some were larger they were clearly identical in design: they would grow into the same woman. If they were given the chance to grow.

“We’re here so you can eat us.”

“Eat us.”

“Eat our hearts.”

The dream woman spun around and I spun somehow in the other direction so we saw them in stereo, their mouths moving in tandem. Each set of small brown eyes was serene. They looked like glossy nuts or beads. The voice of the dream woman trembled.

“I don’t understand. I don’t want to eat you. I was just out for a walk...”

She trailed off as she realized that she didn’t remember how she got there or why

she began strolling through the woods in the first place. I shifted uncomfortably on the floor of the Marshall Fields dress room, feeling like the driver of a runaway car.

“Oh,” said the little girls. “*Oh*. Oh. Oh.” They stepped forward, their knees knocking together. “Well then.” The sound echoed: *well, well, well*. “We will have to eat your heart instead.” They stepped forward again and grabbed the hem of the woman’s skirt as though they were her children trying to keep from getting lost.

The first girl, the tallest girl, reached up and put a hand on the woman’s arm.

“It will only take a second.” She tightened her fingers. “It will be over before you know it.”

I awoke screaming beneath a row of white dresses with my baba Ada shaking my elbow. Her skin was pale paper, crumpled slightly and pulled back tight by the set of her mouth. For a moment I couldn’t stop my screams – the dresses brushed back and forth around me like branches and the plastic wrappings clung to my skin. Then Ada grabbed my shoulders and pulled me out into the center of the room, dragging a couple of wedding gowns off their hangers behind me. Standing on my own two feet I was able to bring the room into focus. I took a few gulping breaths, feeling the hash marks in my throat that I’d rubbed raw by shrieking.

“What is it?” Ada kept hold of my shoulders and searched my face as if she would be able to see through it. On the word *it* she gave me the tiniest shake – so slight I’m not sure she was aware of doing so. “What’s the matter?”

A whispering drew my attention to the doorway and I saw several seamstresses leaning their heads together and sneaking peeks in my direction. It seemed like months ago that I’d stood in front of them all, framed by a window, and showed off how I could wrap my mouth around Italian phrasing. This was an embarrassment to my *babenka*. She’d trusted me to sit quietly and wait for her to finish her work, and instead I’d roused the entire staff by acting like a baby. Thinking about the smallest girls in my dream – babies themselves – sent a shiver through me, but I took a few steadying breaths.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m ok. I fell asleep.”

Ada looked at me with a terrible little wrinkle in her forehead. But then she straightened up and turned towards the doorway with a shrug that scattered the women who’d gathered there. When they’d gone, Ada picked up one of the wedding dresses that had fallen to the floor in the confusion – it draped heavily over her elbow like a lady in a pose of supplication, arms wafting hopelessly down.

“I’m going to have to press this again.” She spoke quietly, inspecting the few almost imperceptible new lines in the fabric. “Lucky that the girls in the main room were all asking to hear you sing another song. Maybe you could choose something special for them?”

By silent agreement Ada never asked me about my dream, and I never asked again to come to Marshall Fields when she was working. I felt guilty – not so much about the disruption as the fact that my dream made Greta somehow sinister; it populated her landscape with threats. I'd bitten my tongue thrashing around inside the nightmare and for several days afterwards my mouth tasted like blood. I found it sitting on my teeth at the gum line and felt myself swallowing it, my stomach filling up with iron.

Sometimes you can walk across a boundary without sensing even slightly that the boundary is there. Stumble over a line in the sand; brush the fingertips of a stranger on the train; plant a tree in earth too shallow for it to put down the roots it needs to grow. Any small choice can alter the course of your history.

Kara and I walk through the streets of North Chicago and I point things out to her that she probably cannot see. She's almost completely invisible inside her winter clothes – out of reach of wind and dirt and water and snow – and yet everything touches her. As she turns toward a bird in the air above her, suddenly flight is possible. When she smells bus exhaust the world loses its semblance of perfect cleanliness. Each time I stroke her cheek she remembers tenderness.

I'm annoyed at myself because I know that it was probably my baba Ada calling me, back home. Until two weeks ago I'd never have refused her call without reason – good reason too, like being on a plane or in the middle of a private performance. I've answered calls from my *babenska* in the middle of lunch meetings, holding up a finger and putting on a face of serious business before

stepping away from the table just to chat. She calls me from shopping malls if she finds a dress she thinks might suit me, and I'm happy to discuss the particulars of cut and fabric. She calls me in the early hours of the morning with insight into my programming, and I usually have to get out of bed so as not to disturb John as we sing snippets of arias back and forth to one another. Here a high note, here a low.

And now here I am, ducking her calls like a teenager sneaking out for a date. Kara murmels against my chest, sucking intermittently on the strap of her carrier. I press her gently into me and fight the urge to sing her a tune and consume her attention, distract her from the rest of the world by becoming the center of it. After all, what kind of mother is afraid to sing her child to sleep? *Perhaps*, a voice whispers within me, *one who's afraid the girl will absorb any music she hears, draw it out of the world like milk through a straw*. One who's not yet certain if that's a gift she's willing to give her child, or if those notes and tones are hooked in her so deep that sharing them would be gruesome, like splitting a spleen.

Here's a confession: I'm afraid to talk to Ada. She is the one who taught me that a girl child is a creature to be treasured, the exception to the rule that I am a *rusalka*, built to take and take and never give. If I handed Kara to her surely the river of her love would be diverted to the soft bones and powder skin of my baby. And then what love would be left for me? I would be a water spirit stripped of my estuary, flayed and left to dry out on a tree branch. I would no longer be the focus of three generations of expectation, but just a person in the world whose story is written into the history of a new golden link in the chain.

I didn't tell Ada about my pregnancy for two weeks after I found out. In fact I didn't tell anyone, not even John. We hadn't been trying. I'd just become lax about birth control. I told myself the symptoms were just caused by the stress of touring, or the giddiness at the end of a show's run, or my own gentle stupidity. A pill missed, more or less: how could it have made a difference? But my body, which has always been a precision instrument, made the adjustments it needed to without my say-so. Unexpected notes would pop out of my mouth while I was warming up – inhale Handel, exhale Liszt. My neck was stiff, my stomach uneasy, and my hands grew numb in the late afternoon as if a smaller set of fingers were rooting around in them, looking for a way out.

And so I told her, just before she knew unbidden. My baba Ada, who had brought me here to Chicago as less than even an idea, across dangerous waters and through dark times.

We met up at a café I like on Southport, sipping tea and tasting the Bavarian cakes. Ada isn't a fan of Julius Meinl, but I tell her she's just being prejudiced. Not every Bohemian can be Hitler.

"See this?" I asked, spooning chocolate into my mouth. "This is Mozart tarte. Even you can't find anything nasty to say about Mozart."

"Please, child," said Ada. "Don't be irritating. I'm here." She looked at me from under her eyebrows as she held a teacup to her lips, and for a moment I thought everything would surely be alright. This was my Baba after all, the

woman I look to for lessons in grace and comfort. My Baba, too, who was the wheels of my career, always moving me forward. I could trust her. Couldn't I?

"Baba, John and I have news."

I tried for casual, but things were never phrased this way between us. John, as far as Ada is concerned, is just another part of me. His news is my news, and never the other way around. Ada leaned forward, setting her tea down and taking up a napkin in one neat motion, and I knew there was nothing more that I needed to say out loud. Around us people leaned over the pastry glass, making selections. A pair of girls in the corner rustled through their boutique purchases and chatted about Foucault. There is danger in every action, they were saying. You can never guess the outcome of your choices.

Ada is always graceful, but the way a lioness is. Her beauty comes from the way she controls her power

"*Ślodki*. Are you joking?" She took my hand. "You're shaking, dear one. You foolish little baby bird. Did you really think I would be angry?"

I faltered.

"No, baba, I just didn't..." I took my other hand and pressed it on top of hers. She uses endless pots of creams, wears gloves in the winter and oftentimes fall to protect her skin from the harsh light of the sun gleaming off of the snow. Nonetheless her hands are creased, like paper crumpled and left in a pocket, made into soft fiber through pressure and wear. "I didn't want it to change anything."

She looked at me pityingly.

“It’s a baby, child. It will of course change everything. But it’s not like we didn’t expect this day to come, is it?” She stroked my palm and started to laugh. “Just look at the state of you. Bolting your cake and trembling like a leaf. You’re at the top of your career! There’s no shame in having a child. What utter nonsense. We should celebrate!”

It seemed like such a sensible thing to say. I was about to wash down my relief with some tea when I noticed the shine in Ada’s eyes. It was her storytelling glimmer, the light within her than connected all the way back to Greta’s knobby childhood knees. Greta’s lungs, Greta’s hair, the soft down of her upper lip and the powerful clench of her infant hand. A hand that held all of us clutched within it.

“Baba?” I asked.

“You know what this means, of course,” she said. “We should begin planning for her right away.”

“Baba, she’s barely the size of a walnut right now.”

Ada pressed on, pressed my fingers.

“We should start planning early, because she’s going be the most magnificent of us all. When Sara was born, I thought there couldn’t be anyone more beautiful. But then,” she paused, and raised a finger to my cheekbone. “She will stun us,” Ada whispered.

Inside me Kara sighed. I felt the silken bustle of her, settling fabric, a butterfly’s wing. I thought about the way my mother had looked at me as a child,

when she thought I wasn't paying attention. Her eyes slits, teeth lightly brushing the outside of her lip. Would I look at my own child that way? As a morsel?

FIVE

If the woods tried to encroach on Greta's home, she equally attempted to inhabit them. Greta's people were always killed in the manner of forest creatures – they died as they lived – struck by lightning, threatened by a corrupted stream, lost in a field of identical birches that confounded a wanderer's sense of direction. People in town said Greta came from nowhere, that she'd been found by a hunter bundled up on the ground and had for the most part raised herself. And for that reason or for some other she continually wandered back into the woods on rambling walks that led her nowhere.

People also said she pulled trouble behind her wherever she went, but for a long while that was just talk – it wasn't true. Not until she was a grown woman making choices for herself and asking for the things she wanted. Wishes are dangerous things, you see. Start asking the sky to grant you requests and you better prepare for some fallout, red rain.

It was after Konrad was born that she made the deal, after a fifth daughter had already bloomed and faded. This time Greta insisted on digging the grave herself. She was insensible to protests, deaf to Saul's urging to remain in bed, to the midwife's scientific explication of the volume of blood she'd lost in labor. Greta took the small raisin of a body and wrapped it in clean blankets with the face left bare. Even close up it was difficult to tell the child wasn't just sleeping.

This parcel Greta strapped to her back with a long length of cloth, leaving her hands free to carry a shovel. She allowed Saul to put an apple into her pocket,

a crust of bread, and then she kissed the boys on the tops of their heads and walked into the forest snapping small twigs beneath her feet.

She walked all day. In truth she had no notion of where she was going, what she was looking for. But occasionally she caught the hint of a song on the wind – naturally, she thought that she was imagining it. But with no other guiding light to follow, she turned her ear to the sound and walked towards it. By noon she'd consumed the apple and tossed the skinny remains of its core beneath a bush. By nightfall she was curled up beneath a tree guarding the waxen infant with the curve of her body.

When the sun came up Greta found herself in a small clearing full of light blue flowers. She was covered in dew, her clothing wet and her hair hanging in damp strings. She blinked in the light and spent a moment trying to remember why she was there, rubbing her eyes and cricking her back. There was a baby asleep beside her.

“No, sadly not.”

Greta jumped. “Who are you?”

There was a man some ten feet away leaning against a tree. He was dressed in a three-piece suit and a hat, with one hand shading his eyes from the sun. When he saw that Greta was up and alert he took his hand down from his forehead and clapped as if calling a meeting to session. And he smiled.

“*Witam Pani.*” The man rocked back and forth on his heels and then started to stride around the clearing. His shoes, like Greta's, were shining with dew. “Good morning my dear. No, I'm not here to do you any harm. I happened

to see you walking in the woods last night, and I noticed what you were carrying and it really got my attention. What a sad story. A lady, a beautiful lady such as yourself, with no little daughters. I mean yes, sons.” He looked apologetically at Greta from under his hat. “But a son isn’t really the same, is it? They’re all such *naughty* little things, no matter how loveable. No, a daughter is really just the ticket.”

The man strode over to where Greta was sitting and turned his gaze to the bundle of blankets on the ground beside her. His eyes glistened and Greta found herself wondering: does this man understand? Is he actually mourning for me?

“Yes, sadly so. Sadly and avoidably.” The man fixed Greta with a stare so frank and direct that she turned away and looked into the trees, which looked spindlier and more identical as they receded. “But at any rate, it seemed to me a shame for a woman to bury her child alone. There are such actions as need witness to be remembered. So here I am.” He rocked again on his heels. “And here you are. Don’t let me stop you.”

What else could she do? Accepting the hand the man held out for her – a clean hand, with trimmed nails and pink skin – Greta hauled herself to her feet and picked up her shovel.

“Oh,” said the man. “I think anywhere around here will do.”

Greta’s shoulders heaved each time the shovel sliced the ground, calling forth a cold *chink* from the soil. She wanted a deep hole to muffle her own grief. Soon she was standing in a pit up to her ankles, then her knees. The dirt grew

cooler the deeper she went, a chill seeping out from the earth and into Greta's skin.

As she worked she began to hum, and was so wrapped up in the jostle of her digging and the rhythm of her music that she didn't notice for some time that the man was whistling along with her. The high notes wove seamlessly into the rumbling from Greta's throat, the soft exhalations from between her pinched lips and the punctuating grunts of her labor. It wasn't until she took a deep breath between notes that she realized the music continued without her. She looked up and the man arrested his whistling with a guilty wheeze.

"Please." Greta leaned on her shovel and struggled for breath. "Don't stop. I like," she waved a hand in the air for emphasis, "to listen. To someone else for once."

"Well, isn't that just the point?" The man's eyes gleamed. "You need a little music in your life."

He walked over to the exhausted form of the baby, lying in the bed of grass where Greta had left it. The blanket was wrapped tight around the child, folds tucked cleverly under folds so that the whole package was smooth as a pillowcase. Crouching on his heels, the stranger picked the baby up and cradled it in his arms. Greta sucked in a breath and held it, suddenly afraid of what this man might do. But then again, what could he do? The child was already dead.

"I already told you." The stranger's voice was smooth and warm. "I'm not a threat to you. I'm just a sympathetic party passing through." He rocked the baby back and forth and the down on its head rose and fell with the motion. "Still." His

gaze didn't leave the infant's face. "Still. It does seem to me that we have something to offer one another. You have a life full of men, and I can offer you a life full of music. It would be," he sighed happily at the child, "a fair trade."

In her half-dug grave Greta's ankles grew cold. She tried to call up an image of Andrzej's face, then Fil's, then Konrad's. But she couldn't.

"What do you mean, a trade?"

The man looked up into the distance as if calculating a large number.

"Nothing you'd notice at first, of course. You want a daughter. And so you should have one. And you know," he looked now into Greta's eyes with that same candid stare that seemed to lock her in her place. "She should really have a daughter too. And her. And her."

He lay the baby back down in the grass where she was perfectly still.

"A line of beautiful, musical ladies. In fact – and why not – more and more musical each one. Yes." He was talking mostly to himself now. "There's a precision in that. A science that I like."

"I'm not sure that I understand you," said Greta. But the man was barely paying attention to her, caught up as he was in the details of his idea.

"And the beauty of it is, you don't even have to say yes. All you have to do is not tell me no. For a long time you'll think you dreamed this. Or that I was some madman you happened upon in the woods. From time to time you'll catch a glimpse of my face on the street or my reflection in a window but there's no need to worry. I won't be checking up on you." He beamed at Greta. "No need."

Greta's fingers tightened around the shovel.

“What are you going to do?”

“Oh, well if I had something in mind that would take all the fun out?

Don’t you think? I prefer to let intuition be my guide. Like right now, I’m thinking about you holding your baby girl in your arms, her legs kicking. The little bird learning to whistle and chirp and sing. And it fills me with joy. Don’t you agree?” he asked. “Don’t you feel it?”

A small weight alighted on Greta’s heart. It fluttered its wings.

“I do.”

The stranger rubbed his hands together with relish.

“Then it’s settled! You’ll have a daughter all your own, probably spoil her rotten, and naturally love her. And someday I’ll find myself wanting something and I’ll remember your fine boys and I’ll have what I need at my fingertips.” He snapped, and Greta could have sworn she saw a blue spark flicker up into the sky, but the man just folded his hands behind his back and walked away, whistling as he wove between the trees.

With nothing left to do Greta finished digging the hole she’d begun and tucked her stillborn child into the cradle of it. She marked the place by laying a cross of stones, though later when she tried to find the clearing again she could never be sure of it, the stones having been kicked and plucked and moved by countless sets of unseen hands and feet.

Everything about me depends on Greta. That is what Ada told me about herself, that is what Ada told me about me.

“You are the finest creature yet born,” she said to me each morning. We had a ritual: baba Ada woke me up at seven, and the first thing she did was brush my hair. Light spilling through the curtains in the summer, a soft lamp turned on to help us see in the winter, when the sun was barely up when she cracked open the door. My baba Ada sat on the edge of my bed and wrapped the comforter around me, drawing me towards her and kissing the top of my head.

“You are my golden girl, *złoty mój, lalka*.”

The brush was brown wood, with many hard bristles, like a horse brush. It brought me into my body. My first sensation on any given day was the sudden sharp pressure of those bristles on my scalp, and the slow tugging that followed them. I let my head fall to the side Ada was brushing and she tilted me straight with two fingers on my chin.

“You’re growing so beautiful. Every day.”

She said this to me when I was three, four, five; she said it on my eighteenth birthday when I lay in my bed with colt legs tucked under me. At fifteen I decided the routine left no room for my personal expression, and began sleeping naked. It made no difference. In fact, my baba never even mentioned it: she came into my room and brushed my hair a hundred strokes, then stood me up on bare and wobbling knees and led me to the closet to choose between my dresses.

“Before me,” Ada told me, “Greta was lonesome for a daughter. And when I was born she wept for ten days. As I grew up she brushed my hair every morning to spin it into silk, and to teach me how to someday brush your hair for

you. She understood what a treasure you would be. She dreamed of you even though she had to wake up every morning into a world without you.”

SIX

We're almost home when a neighborhood sandwich shop catches my eye – one of those establishments that prides itself on ostentatious faux-Old-World Charm, all dark wood panels and expensive cheeses. Their food is overpriced and their wines get by mostly on the aesthetic appeal of the labels, but I stop in from time to time for lunch. Because the menu is pleasantly snobby, and duck confit is duck confit.

I hesitate by the door. My breath is visible, and the sun is going down: I could pop inside and pick up a few things for dinner, since John will be home and hungry soon and god knows I'm constitutionally opposed to cooking. I weigh my options: I already have a bag of tea and some interesting-looking Turkish Delight on my arm from the import store we stopped in earlier in the day. And despite looking like a toy Kara's actually heavy, or at least she comes to feel that way after an hour or two of toting her around. But still. If I really want sandwiches nothing else is going to satisfy me, and I'll end up bothering my poor husband until he comes down here and picks some up after all.

As I speculate the door swings open to the accompanying jingle of a bell.

"Oops, excuse me." A bearded man carrying a case of wine lumbers past me and I step to the side. Oh, what the hell. I catch the door and go in.

Kara and I are met by the humble buzz of conversation – twenty-year-old counter clerks laughing about something and menacing each other with plastic bags; middle-aged customers discussing the relative value of wines by *terroir*. Familiar, obnoxious, comforting. It all feels so delightfully ordinary that I wonder

for a moment if I've been wrong about motherhood: entirely wrong. Maybe I can slip into it like a skin and wear it easily. People will admire Kara on the street and whisper about me when I tour: *she's so multi-faceted. I don't know how she does it.* As Kara grows up I'll feed her popsicles and kiss her cold stained mouth.

I look down at my baby and nuzzle her nose with my own. She sucks on it thoughtfully and then spits it back out.

As I dawdle over the cheese counter looking for Époisses, a particularly smelly piece of succulence, I'm startled by a sound. Not that I *should* be surprised: what *fromagerie* would be complete without fluffy chamber music? But I can't help it. I pull Kara's hat down more firmly over her ears and realize that I've actually begun to breathe in rasping gulps. My god, am I going to hyperventilate in the sandwich shop? I'd never hear the end of it, and yet I can't stand the idea that Kara's first exposure to proper music might be a Salieri string quartet. *Salieri* for heaven's sake. Why must retail sound tracks always be so anemic?

Trying to look casual – *Oh well, nothing appealing today* I hope my face expresses – I hurry out of the store. From the sidewalk I feel like I can still hear the stereo. But that's not possible, is it? I couldn't hear it before. Kara starts to cry in that nasal way that infants do when something ineffable is wrong that they wouldn't explain to you even if they could. I dig around in my purse, letting the plastic shopping bag of tea and candy slide down onto my elbow, its weight cutting through my coat. I pull out a pacifier and stick it into her mouth. Her head plunks immediately against my chest.

“Oh, what a sweetheart.” A passerby coos at us. “Such a little angel, just sleeping there. Aren’t you, punkin?”

I actually want to hit this woman. Instead I shoot her a tight-lipped smile and begin walking towards my apartment a few blocks away. My heart is a fist squeezing and unsqueezing in my chest. A pulsating bruise. Part of me is still back in the sandwich shop waving a few fingers idly in time with the music. That part of me is seduced by the charm of faux-Mozart: it’s selecting Prosecco instead of Champagne and planning to announce to John that tonight shall be a night of substitutes. I’ll wear a velvet gown to the dinner table and then make him take me someplace nice, where I’ll change into blue jeans. And I’ll sing “Contro un’alma sventurata” from Salieri’s *Palmira, Queen of Persia*.

I’ll sing. I’ll *sing*. We’ll be sitting in a cocktail bar and I’ll stand up with no warning at all and blast the radio into stunned silence. I’ll feel something welling up in my stomach: a wave rushing through my lungs and up my throat and into the atmosphere. No one will be able to stop it, least of all me, this mounting, rolling, roaring thing that lives inside me all the time and demands to be let out for air. It will spill out of my mouth and wrap around me gratefully. We’ll embrace. We’ll welcome one another home.

But my evening of substitutes is already upon me. The baby is sleeping and it’s barely five o’clock. If I get home and remove her gently from the carrier she might stay down for hours yet, and I’ll be able to put on my headphones while I eat Thai food I’ve ordered in. Instead of preparing a day of meetings and rehearsals for tomorrow I’ll stay up late, because I have no control anyway over

when I'll need to rise. Instead of picking up a conductor's score and annotating it with colored pencils while the opera throbs through our apartment I'll flip through a few pages before feeling how dry the paper is in my fingers compared to the wet notes on my tongue.

Instead of doing exactly what I want to, as I've done for my entire life, I'll ask myself: how long can you go on like this? Why are you doing this to yourself?

Looking back, I'm not always sure which of my stories about Greta come from Ada, and which ones I dreamed. Was it my imagination that sparrows flew out of the forest to tell Greta secrets, or is that a memory from my grandmother's childhood? Did she wake up one day to see her mother standing on the porch, humming along with the song of a bird? Or did I feverishly toss and turn my way into a world where the cries of larks opened windows in the sky that only my great-grandmother could see through?

The two options feel, to me, equally possible. I knew even as a child that part of what made Greta real was me. Not in the way of storybook characters brought to life by having their voices read out loud – not emotionally. I was Greta's living heartbeat.

I can track some ideas back to Ada through Poland – that is to say, sometimes I'll catch wind of a tale that's strikingly familiar, coming from a total stranger. One night at a dinner to benefit the Chicago Lyric Opera I was seated beside a professor of Central European history from Northwestern. He was unschooled in music, just an admirer, and we chatted mostly about local politics

through the soup course: which alderman was still idealistic, and which had clearly begun to take bribes. I lost track of what he was saying when the main course arrived; my steak was slightly overdone and I was picking at it with my knife, trying to decide whether to send it back or simply trade with someone else. As I doubtfully examined the un-pink meat, the professor began a conversation across the table.

“...and then some people say, even now, that he’s just asleep under Wawel and will ride again.”

My ears pricked. I set down my steak knife and asked him to repeat himself. “It’s just that I believe I’ve heard that story before, but I’m not sure quite where.”

“Well, yes.” He took a sip from his water glass and crunched thoughtfully on a thin piece of ice. “Your heritage is Polish, isn’t it? So it’s not at all unlikely you’d know the story of King Bolesław, in some form or other. I actually have a picture book that tells the story, for my son.”

I squinted at him. “Well I’ve never heard it by that name. I’m sorry to make you repeat yourself, but could you just give me the highlights? To see if anything jogs my memory?”

“Why not?” He looked pleased. “It’s a very operatic little myth actually, in tone. It might be right up your alley.” By now several people at the table had turned in interest, and I leaned onto my elbows, nodding at the professor to continue.

“The hero of the tale was known as King Bolesław the Great. He was one of those extraordinarily benevolent rulers, and beloved for it: an Arthurian figure, really. All the images of him show him looking rather muscular in chain mail, with flags wafting around behind him.

“So he turns Poland into a great nation of Europe, building bridges and churches and of course winning wars. He even had a renowned sword, just like Excalibur. The ‘notched sword,’ they called it.”

“Szczerbiec?” I interrupted. “I think I’ve seen pictures of that. It’s real.”

“Oh yes,” said the professor. “The whole thing is real. Well, up to a point. Bolesław’s life is really a matter of history. You know: as certain as anything else recorded for posterity primarily by the winners. He’s the one who turned Poland into a proper kingdom, and it made people a little, maybe one could say, ecstatic about him?”

“What do you mean?” I sipped my wine. It tasted like blood.

“Oh, just the usual hero worship I guess. For one thing, his sword was used for the coronation of all the future kings for quite some time. But mainly it’s the myths around his death that are interesting. You see,” the professor leaned over to me and spoke conspiratorially, though he kept his voice quite loud enough for everyone at the table to hear. “No one knows where he’s buried. It’s a complete mystery. His knights too: they all just disappeared, which of course lends itself to tales of immortality. Some people say they’re sleeping under Wawel Castle in Krakow; or under a mountain that’s shaped like the head of a warrior.

“But the key thing isn’t where they are buried. The story also says that Bolesław, wherever he is, is still waiting for Poland’s truly dark hour of need. And when it arrives he’ll ride forth from his tomb and reclaim the notched sword to smite his kingdom’s enemies to dust.”

The professor looked satisfied with himself. I sat back in my chair, somewhat stunned. Something nagged at me.

“Is that the end of the story, then?” I asked. “He just rides out all Christ-like and saves the day? That seems awfully neat.”

He laughed. “Well, it is a heroic legend of course, it’s got to be a little tidy. But you’re right.” He looked thoughtful, pushing his fork around on his plate so it screeched. “Now that you mention it, there is something else. Bolesław and his knights ride again out of their mountainside and restore Poland to her greatest glory. But after that they’re good and truly dead. Until they save her, they’re still alive. But once the deed is done, they’re gone forever.”

The night before Kara was born – not that I knew; she was a week early – I lay in bed with the covers pulled up to my knees and chatted with her through my skin. I wanted to prepare her for coming into the world, explain that I would be gone sometimes for tours but that someone would always be at home to take care of her. I told her that she would resent the way adults treasured her childhood, would always be indignantly trying to explain that her life was difficult too, and could we please just acknowledge that?

“But we’ll have our reasons,” I told her. “You’ll have something we all want and can’t have and we’ll be so jealous of you that sometimes we’ll feel like blowing up.”

In my dreams, until I was six or seven years old I lived with Greta in her small cottage at the edge of the woods. When I wanted to be alone I sat on a footstool in the corner of the kitchen so that I could be near the fire but also smell the sharp resin of the wooden walls. The footstool was covered in scratchy brown wool. Greta reached into the stove and took out fistfuls of flame out with her bare hands.

She and I stared at these balls of fire, asked them questions as if they were tiny stars come down to visit. *You must have seen so much*, we said.

Each time I learned a new song I rushed to Greta and sang it for her. Each time I coaxed my voice towards a new high note I saw her eyes shining with pride. We walked through her Poznań township hand in hand and the people on the street parted ways for us – they shifted the sea of their movements to let us through and we walked as though on the sandy floor of the ocean marveling at all that was around us. Sometimes Greta pointed up to the sky and said, look! And a bird flew past the sun so fast that no one but us noticed it obscure the sun. Just for a moment. The bird’s wings a black cape across the clouds.

“We’ll want to see what you see,” I told Kara. At that moment her eyes were shut against their gentle bath, the warm water I stored for her within me. She saw geometric combinations, Escher portraits of the sounds on the other side of her swaddling wall. Or maybe she saw nothing, since she hadn’t yet the

experience to know that there are shapes to name and colors to fill the shapes in and make them shine.

By Greta's side I knew myself to be a chosen girl: unlike other people I'd been made for a purpose. For me, Greta had given her sons to the devil. So I could sing the sun and moon into the sky, so I could talk to the spirits in the forest and they would let me have safe passage. When I lived with Greta all I knew was magic, and it didn't occur to me that it might be a thing to be wary of – that if I touched something magical it might reach out and touch me back.

La rossignol, Stravinsky's nightingale, can call kings back from death with her music. I sing opera. If my voice can cheat annihilation, what else might it be volatile enough to do?

As I grew older Greta's cottage receded from me; the weight of her hand on my own diminished. When Ada told me the stories of her mother's life all I saw was that they explained who I was supposed to be. I didn't see the knots in the floorboards anymore or the mammoth iron mouth that was Greta's cookstove. And I only had a faint, haunting memory of the last trip Greta and I took out to the forest, when she helped me climb up into a tree and together we hummed the river's song. I had some notion of the person who happened towards us and hypnotized, scrambled up the tree to sit beside us.

The person was, I thought, my mother Sara with her dark hair and her almond eyes. She took our hands in her own and lifted to each of our lips a crust of bread fresh from the oven, watched me chew and swallow and open my mouth for another. And she looked at me, looked so reproachfully, when from either side

Greta and I leaned in to kiss her cheeks. I remembered faintly – remembered as a dream – the way the color drained from my mother’s face and how her body fell like a rag to the forest floor. She got up and brushed herself off, walked away, but I could see that something was missing from her from that moment, and that I had taken it for myself.

“Now you’ll be strong,” Greta told me. “Like I was.”

I put my hand on my belly and could feel through the taut skin the basic outline of a foot. I inspected it for toes and knees but it was still too indistinct, too much a part of me. Kara was sleeping and still, soothed by who knows what. The sound of my heart? The thrum of my blood?

Do you hear me, little girl? I asked her in my mind. You might have things that other people want, and that’s a dangerous business. You’ll remember things I wish I knew. You’ll go places I want to see. And you’ll be able to talk to Greta, whereas if any of the rest of us call her forth we’ll kill her, or she’ll kill us.

THE RAIN

The first incident did not alarm us. We saw it as a sign of spring's approach – the days when rain would fall over us like a sigh. True, it disturbed some people – worms crawling over one another on the pavement, dripping in and out of puddles, quietly expiring in cracks on the sidewalk. But we assumed they had seeped out of the ground like always, that these worms were simply nightcrawlers that got confused and stayed out too late.

Fishermen picked them up by the handful and placed them in dirt-filled plastic containers, to be refrigerated until they got the chance to go out on the river. One man chatted happily with his neighbor while raking the long, fat bodies up for relocation to his compost patch.

Most of us reacted to the appearance of the worms the way we would a midnight snowfall: mild surprise that we hadn't heard it while we slept, then amusement as we convinced ourselves there wasn't anything to hear. A farmer, having risen early to complete his morning chores, witnessed the whole thing and was struck dumb as the worms fell out of the sky and hit the dark wet grass. He stood in the doorway of his barn and watched the torrent of bodies, still purple in the predawn, cascade across his crop fields in thick waves. Afterwards he didn't tell anyone, figuring they'd assume he'd fallen asleep. And anyway, it didn't seem like the kind of thing he had words for. It was private, like a dream. Secret, like that dream's meaning.

We certainly would have forgotten about it if it hadn't been for the birds.

When I was a child my grandmother told me that swallowing an apple seed would cause an apple tree to grow in my body – roots in the belly and branches stretching through my arms and out my mouth and eyes and nose. She said this to scare me, because I was a voracious eater, and she thought that being a little suspicious of the bites I took would make me appear more refined.

Her story didn't have the desired effect. Instead of slowing down and nibbling delicately at the food I was offered, I started speculating on what else I might eat in order to grow something better than a tree. One day a classmate of mine returned to school after a trip to a tropical island, and I saw my opportunity.

The girl's parents had allowed her to collect a shoeboxful of souvenirs to bring home from the beach, and she carried it into the classroom to deliver a show-and-tell. We passed the box around as she spoke, running our fingers over smooth stones, shaking the small glass bottle of sand, marveling at the colorful whorls on the sea shells. By far the best thing, to my mind, was a tiny dried seahorse – no bigger than a thumbnail – that had become lodged in one of the folds of the box so that it was partially obscured from view. No one else, from what I could tell, had noticed it – possibly even the girl who owned the souvenirs had forgotten it was there.

I carefully dislodged the seahorse, which was delicate and brittle, and held it close to my eyes. It weighed nothing at all. No one was paying attention to me – the girl was talking through a series of photographs on the projector – so I closed my fingers lightly around the seahorse and passed the box to the desk on my left.

Some people took the falling birds to indicate an attack: they were coming from the skies to strike us down. But if that had been the case they'd have whistled by our ears, swung past us in swallow loops, and raced back into the air to gain the tactical advantage of altitude.

It's true that the sounds they made on impact were more disquieting than the last shower of bodies – unlike the worms, they fell by day, and made sickly wet thumps against dirt, patio furniture, and the windows of cars. Occasionally the larger birds knocked over a garbage can that had been set out by the street for pickup, or cracked a pane of glass. And since it was daytime we were all out and about, and some of the birds did actually pelt people on their heads and shoulders; a few small starlings got their feet stuck in women's hair, and hung there like grotesque decorations as the women screamed.

But once fallen, they didn't get back up. The birds lay still where they'd landed, with closed eyes like soft, sleeping puppets. Their feathers were smooth and their bodies streamlined, so that when one of us summoned enough courage to look closer – emerging from under awnings and suspiciously unlatching the doors of our cars – we had the urge to pick them up and cradle them in the palms of our hands.

For almost a full day the neighborhood cats avoided them, streaking across backyards to hide in trees and stalking with their hair raised up, static and alert. But soon enough nature took its hungry course, and we had to start shoveling them up into plastic garbage bags to keep the feral animals away.

I kept the seahorse hidden in the front pocket of my shirt until recess; the cotton was thin and soft, so I could feel the outline of the tail against my chest, its prick and curl. When my classmates ran outside at the bell I walked slowly behind them so as not to attract attention, and went to lean against the trunk of a tall tree in the corner of the schoolyard. There I unbuttoned my pocket and took out the seahorse, which was just as dry and light as before. It reminded me of the herbs my grandmother grew in her garden and then harvested, hanging them upside down with brown string until they turned grey and crackled in the wind.

As the bark of the pine tree bit into my spine, I popped the seahorse into my mouth and let it sit for a moment on my tongue. It was salty, but beneath that was a wet green taste I couldn't place.

My teacher walked up across the lawn and asked me what I was doing all alone. Normally I tore around in a group of wild girls at recess, throwing woodchips and hanging by our knees from the steel bars on the playground. The last time I'd sequestered myself at school had been months ago, so I could vomit privately into a rhododendron bush. The teacher put a concerned hand on my shoulder and I swallowed.

"What's in your mouth?" she asked. Her lips pulled downward in a frown.

"Nothing," I said. She frowned more deeply.

"You haven't eaten something from the ground, have you?"

I shook my head, but I must have been harboring a guilty look, because she bent down and put her hand around my jaw to pop it open.

“Spit,” she said. “Spit.”

But there was nothing there. The teacher put one finger in my mouth and probed it around, under my tongue and behind my teeth, as I squirmed and protested. After a moment she stopped. With a sigh, she straightened up and wiped the spittle from her hands onto her skirt, and sent me off to jump rope on the blacktop. I felt the seahorse darting about in my belly as I sprinted away with my heart pounding in my chest.

After the birds we had a respite of some days, which, looking back, only made everyone more fidgety and nervous. Scientifically, two events did not suggest a pattern. But our hearts were not scientific. They quailed and rebelled.

It was almost a relief, then, when one day a bus, pulling up to a precarious stop on a steep hill, was punched backwards some two feet by the impact of a hound. The first reaction of those on board was fury at the bus driver. One man, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the rim of his briefcase, said indignantly: “Thing was coming right at us – *anyone* could’ve seen that.” A little girl began to cry, and her mother shooshed her, while some of the passengers speculated that the dog – which hit the middle of the windshield, not the tires or grill – had been tossed by the wheels of a passing car.

But the street was empty. A piece of trash blew in the breeze; the sun shimmered. A bicyclist *whinged* by downhill and every head turned to watch it pass, genderless beneath a sheet of bright Lycra and a newsboy cap.

“Well,” said the driver. He scratched his cheek with all four fingers on his

left hand. “I guess we should check on it. See if there’s a license.” He paused as the doors opened with a mechanical whisper, and stepped down, crouching to look at the fallen form.

Then the screaming started, somewhere not too far away. It took the passengers a moment to recognize what they were hearing, but when they did the hair stood up on the backs of their necks. Everyone held their breath as the shrill notes echoed, as if offering their own air to the sound’s terrible power. They couldn’t see where the scream might be coming from; the hillside still appeared deserted.

“What do you...” began the mother, tightening her arm around her daughter’s shoulders. But then there was thunder and everyone was speaking at once.

It was different than the birds. A collie’s head cracked against the concrete, and a series of majestic pointers fell side by side on the crab grass in a vacant lot. Their limbs splayed out in attitudes of knowingness, as if pointing to something which was coming from all directions. A pug knocked the helmet off a parked motorcycle, and when both clattered to the sidewalk it was impossible not to compare them in size.

There was significant hysteria. People screamed to be let off the bus, but no one wanted to go outside. Mostly they sat with their heads between their knees and their hands over their ears, trying not to feel the occasional weight slamming against the sides of the vehicle.

The problem was that people couldn't stop looking. They wanted to know if their own dogs were among the fallen; they wanted to know if there was a hierarchy. Each body was hefted and moved to a line-up, where all the pathetic forms were laid neatly, side by side, on blue tarps. Most people shuffled by and looked for familiar collars, telltale signs. Others walked through and stopped at only the finely muscled dogs, curling up the lips to examine the teeth, inspecting between the toes for indications of damage to the claws. Of this second group, some were scientists or journalists, but some were merely unsettling and quiet.

A few of the observers seemed to find what they were looking for. A kid in basketball shorts and a grey t-shirt scooped up a chocolate brown Labrador, tarp and all, tossing it over his shoulder and gripping tight around the middle. One woman stood and sobbed for half a day to anyone who would listen, about the time she'd spent teaching her pinscher to go up and down stairs, since living in a puppy mill he'd never learned how.

But most people agreed that their lost dogs weren't there. These dogs were strangers – maybe they came from a few towns over, where some other group of confused citizens was living through the same buzz of conundrum. Maybe they came from across the ocean.

Over the next few weeks I thought about the seahorse every time my body moved of its own accord – gurgles in the belly, sudden leg cramps. I didn't know what a seahorse was likely to eat, so I snuck an assortment of snacks from the pantry, mixing the aquatic with the equestrian. On Monday I nibbled dried apple

slices, on Friday seaweed sesame crackers. I begged my mother for oatmeal, carrot sticks, grilled sardines on buttered toast.

I pictured the creature gaining strength inside me, shifting and flitting through a dark and sinewy world of tides. If I hiccupped, it was brushing against the algae draped off the alveoli in my lungs; when my stomach growled it was rooting through the kelp and coral in my intestinal wall.

My mother came into my bedroom at night and sang me a song to put me to sleep. She touched my forehead and said a blessing for a peaceful mind, brushed her fingertips up and down my arms to wish me sleep without restlessness. Then she always laid her palm on my middle, as together we said a prayer and murmured our goodnights.

One evening, as she was rubbing my belly – gently, mindlessly – a burp rose out of my throat.

“Oh,” I said. “Excuse me.”

My mother looked at me queerly.

“Have you been eating smoked oysters again?” she asked, leaning down to catch a whiff of my breath.

I shrugged, and made to answer *no*, but my body gave a little lurch, and instead of talking I began to cough. I wrapped my arms around my middle, and pitched forward so that my nose brushed against my knees. My mother swooped me up against her shoulder and began to pat my back like a baby’s after nursing, cooing to me that I should *hush, hush* – I’d been a croupy baby, so this was nothing she wasn’t used to. I coughed and gasped for air; she patted rhythmically

on either side of my spine. At last something wet dislodged itself from my throat, and I spat it out into my hand.

It was a small, rumped octopus, purple in hue. Without a word, my mother and I looked at it, until she gently plucked it from my palm and left the room, turning off the lights behind her.

After the dogs came the jellyfish, which left a slick sheen over the sidewalk and clung to tree branches, shimmering like ice. There were also salmon, which made the same flat sound on the ground they made when hitting newspaper at the market, and occasionally split open down the middle to reveal grapefruit-pink flesh beneath their silver scales.

For the most part, though, the animals just got larger, and we still did not know where they were coming from. Nothing seemed to be missing from any of our houses or farms; no breeders of pets reported losses, except from damage.

“You know what’s coming next,” some people said. They looked one another up and down, like sides of meat.

“It’s a judgment on us,” others decided. Meaning: on you. Not me. Not that.

My mother kept me home from school. She told them I had the flu, and indeed I was nauseous, unable to find my sea legs. I knelt in the bathroom on the cool white tiles, and vomited brackish water into the toilet.

Sometimes clumps of seaweed came up with the water, mellowing until I

gathered myself to break them into flushable pieces. Once a school of small silver fish shot out of my throat, and swam around the toilet bowl together as though they shared one mind, as though they were a single animal. I watched them dash from side to side, swelling and contracting as they explored the boundaries of their new environment. And I started to cry, clutching at my ribs with shaking fingers, trying to feel out what else might be happening behind my skin.

Knocking gently, my mother came in. She felt my forehead with the back of her hand, and told me: “No fever.” But then she placed a cool washcloth across my brow anyway. My stomach rolled over, and I spat out a mouthful of ocean. “I called your grandmother,” my mother said.

She knelt down and pulled me onto her lap. “She had a suggestion,” she told me, rocking gently back and forth. I nuzzled my face into the space between my mother’s arm and stomach. “I want you to give it a try.”

Taking my chin gently between her forefinger and thumb, she raised my head up and looked me in the eyes. When I saw that she was holding an apple seed in her hand, I started to cry harder and furiously shook my head. She held me until I settled down.

“I know you don’t want to, but it’ll do the trick.”

We all ran from shelter to shelter holding our hands over our heads. As though, in the event of being caught out in a shower, our hands would do anything at all. The truth was, we were less afraid of what was coming out of the sky, now, than we were of being sucked up.

“But what if it isn’t people from town?” The old men in the stone pub were the boldest postulators; the pub had no windows, and they were there from noon til dark, and beyond. “What if it comes to that, and the people aren’t anyone we know at all?”

“Like the dogs,” one man grunted.

“Right, like the dogs? Will we just bury them and that’ll be the end of it?”

“Church bury them?”

“Is there enough church ground?”

“Depends.”

They were quiet, thinking of all the things such a question might depend on.

“Where would they come from, then?” one man asked, scratching his grey beard and tugging on the bristle hairs. “Who would they be?”

This was what we all wanted to know: who would they be? If, one day, we walked outside and saw men and women falling from the sky, what faces would they wear? Would they be naked before God, or dressed in nondescript clothing like our own: thermal shirts, blue jeans, button-downs? Some of us wondered quietly, to ourselves, if there would be children among the fallen. Perhaps the children would come first, in keeping with the tentative order we’d deduced of ascending size.

Maybe the bodies would be doubles of our own, and written on their hides would be all our secrets and our sins. They would tumble onto our lawns and we would truly be unclothed, rushing out to cover ourselves with blankets.

Maybe after the people, there would be a rain of angels, then of gods, and then of titans. Maybe there was an intelligence so immense that we couldn't know to fear its coming, and it would wrap around us soft as silk, so we didn't even suspect it had fallen until we were buried alive.

Still we ran, with our fingers knitted above our scalps, hoping the speed of our legs would carry us home.

I held the apple seed on my tongue, and felt its smooth contours. With my eyes locked on my mother I whimpered, but she just nodded her encouragement. I worked up a mouthful of spit, as if preparing myself to swallow a particularly large vitamin. The seed swam, and then went down.

How can I explain what happened next? It relies on you believing. What had been a roiling sea within me stilled as the seed found purchase. I can only tell you what I felt; my eyes couldn't travel inside and see the roots crackle out, couldn't see the shoots of plant life scratch against my stomach wall, or the tendrils unfurl.

If you asked my mother she might say that it was just a placebo effect: my mind adjusting to a new and more helpful delusion. The corners of her mouth would twitch up when she said it though; a different truth buried under her tongue.

The roots shot down into me and drank and drank, swallowing all the seawater and cleaning it like kidneys. And as I felt the change, spring came into my eyes. Inside me, flowers bloomed, shaking their petals down onto everything,

so the white velvet of them tickled the back of my throat and I felt them shuffling up and down as I breathed. I coughed again, and the seahorse fell onto the bathroom tiles. It shattered into pieces, which we came to regard as dirt or sand as we crushed them beneath our heels in the ensuing days, forgetting where they came from, forgetting what they meant.

