Wesleyan University The Honors College

Solidarność
And Other Stories

by

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Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in English

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2008

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Wesleyan University for providing me with many buildings in which to write. Even more thanks to Wesleyan's English Department for giving me the opportunity to write a thesis in those buildings. And a special thanks to Middletown's Russell Library for being an extra building I could turn to.

Thanks to Paula Sharp, a woman whose dedication drove her to commute through a snowstorm in order to get to a meeting with me once. She has been the most wonderful and thorough advisor. Without her talent for time management I would still be writing the stories instead of these acknowledgements.

Thanks to my family: Lucja Andruczyk, the first person I met and one of the women to whom this work is dedicated. Jan Andruczyk, the second person I met and a good man. Daniel Andruczyk, my first best friend.

Thanks to my friends: Carrie Frances Battle, the first woman who shared her cigarettes with me. Casey Long, a best friend for six years and a cooking partner. Oliver Weisz, a friend from the old country. Emily Rabkin, a good friend to work with and a good neighbor. Andrew Carr, a friend who makes coffee well. Jimmy Maniscalco, a friend with an incredible brain. Alan Yaspan, a faithful reader.

Other things worthy of acknowledgement: Poland, for the first seven years of my life. The Unites States of America, for the rest.

Sincerely dedicated to my mother
and Amelia Earhart.

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The Joke

"Oh Jesus." She looked at him with her mouth hanging open. Her "Jesus" sounded more like a "jesah". Her hair was jet black; she was incredibly short and her mouth, every time Jan had seen her, seemed to be permanently set in a disgusted sneer. His intention had been to change her expression. However, what he had hoped to achieve was a smile not a mouth that hung open in disbelief.

"What? That's not funny?" Jan blinked several times. He was much older, old enough to be the girl's father. His hair was white, and his belly was big and fleshy.

"No! Why would you think that's funny? What's wrong with you?" Her mouth still hung open a little.

"Well, nothing. It's just a joke," he shot back, hurt. "Maybe there's something wrong with you. You can't even take a joke."

"But who would tell a joke like that in this day and age? It's so archaic."

"Archaic?" he said.

She wondered if he was repeating the word to show his disbelief, or because he didn't know what it meant.

"Archaic," Jan said again.

She decided he didn't know what it meant. "It means like old-fashioned in a bad way, like outdated."

"I know what it means. I'm not an idiot." Jan was lying.

"Well, fine then. Then don't be archaic," she said. She seemed to really enjoy the word, almost as if she were eating it while she said it. Jan's vocabulary was lacking in many ways because he had found it so hard to learn English. On this night he and his family, along with his son's Indian girlfriend, whom his son maintained was just a friend, were playing the board game version of Wheel of Fortune mostly in order to help him practice his English. He had thought carefully about the right word to use for this occasion and for this kind of girl.

"You are a cunt!" He had finally said. Curses were the first American words Jan had learned. He had learned to say *fuck*, *dick*, *bitch*, *shit*, *cunt*, and *asshole*. Unfortunately, he had only a vague sense of what the words meant.

The Indian girl said, "Are you kidding me?" and walked out.

"I was trying to!" He said behind her.

She had started out nice enough, had just come in to talk to him. Oddly enough, she had been more patient with him during the game than either his wife or his son had. She had told him she was sorry that he had not guessed any of the correct letters. She had advised him, for next time, that the most common letters on the board were *R*, *S*, *T*, *L*, *N*,

and *E*. Guessing *X*, *Q*, *F*, *J*, and *U* would not really get him anywhere, she had informed him.

Forcing a smile, he had said, "Thank you, I know that now." But he had had his reasons for having chosen the same five letters over and over again. And for doing so almost every single time he and his family played Wheel of Fortune.

He had chosen *X* and *Q* because they were both letters that existed in the American alphabet but nowhere in the Polish alphabet. These strange letters had always fascinated him.

Then he had chosen the *F* because it began his favorite word. He had really hoped to see this word on the board, but he never did. The word was *fuck*.

Then he had chosen *J* because that was the letter his name started with. His name was one that had turned out to be a curse in America. Everyone who met him for the first time always expected a woman. All his mail was addressed to Mrs. Jan Swiatski. He and his wife were constantly receiving letters from gay rights organizations. And when looking at those letters he got to use his other favorite *F* word. *Fucking faggots*, he'd say under his breath and then carry the letters up the stairs for his wife to sift through so that she could find the bills.

The final letter he had chosen was a *U*. The *U* had been for the *Q*, as he was well aware that no words with *Q* existed without a *U* right behind them. He was sympathetic towards letters that were dependent on one another to make a sound. In Poland, the following letter combinations made one sound: *cz*, *sz*, and *rz*. Unfortunately, he never had found out if any of those *U*s were on the board because a *U* is a vowel and "on The

Wheel of Fortune you have to buy a vowel, which means you have to have guessed some other letter correctly earlier in the game," as his son always reminded him.

…

As a child, Little Jan had known the way from home to the store by heart. His mother had taken him by the hand, and they had walked. Little Jan's mother had been the kind of mother a son wants to marry, maybe for a little longer than was healthy. She had clean white skin, chestnut-colored hair, and a tiny charming gap between her two front teeth. The gap was barely noticeable, but Little Jan was aware of it, and he adored it. He thought it looked smart. She always wore dresses when it was warm enough. In the winter, she wore a red coat with white trimming. Because of the red coat, it was always easy for Jan to find her, whether she was in a crowd of people or in a snowstorm. The fact that he could always find her made Little Jan love her even more.

They walked on a dirt road that wound around their town and then connected to the paved roads that led to cities. Few cars ever cared to travel on this road. The only cars that did belonged to the people who lived in the town.

The first house Little Jan and his mother passed on their walk belonged to the mailman and his wife and their three children. The frame of their front door was decorated with pieces of broken bottles. Jan wondered how many bottles of beer someone had had to drink to make that frame.

The second house they passed belonged to a quiet family with a loud but small dog. The dog would bark, without fail, at the moment when you thought the dog had noticed you but decided not to bark. And so, even though you always tried to keep

yourself from jumping, you ended up jumping anyway. The dog barked. Jan jumped. His mother squeezed his hand. They walked on.

The third house was the last house before the school. An old lady lived there and hardly ever left. When Jan thought of her, he could not picture her face or her hair. He could just picture a small, hunched figure in a summer dress that hung off it and looked like a nightgown. Then the road turned right.

The school was the next thing they passed. There, children played all day. Or so Jan thought. He was still too young to attend school himself. But he knew, the same way that everyone knew, that the old lady always just sat by her window whenever the kids played and watched them. But none of them could say they knew her face. And they could not say that they knew if that face was smiling or crying.

Finally, Little Jan and his mother made a second right turn and ended up in front of the store. The store was exactly in the middle of town.

…

Some people move to this country and meet lots of different people; some people move to this country and only stick with the same: they go to the old country's church, and the old country's stores, and read the old country's funny papers. Jan Swiatski was in the latter group. And unfortunately, his wife and son were in the former.

Jan's fingers moved slowly and thickly through the Polish newspaper, scanning for this week's joke. His hair was white and thin; it was gently parted in the middle every morning to reveal the red skin of his scalp. The red skin also covered his forehead, nose, cheeks, and chins. He had two chins and no neck. His eyes were so blue and clear that they looked like glass when he peered out at you. His nose was bulbous and slightly

redder than the rest of his face. A white moustache hid his upper lip. His lower lip, though, was usually full and waiting to smile. However, when he was mad, his lower lip was a straight white line that blended in with the moustache. Then he seemed to have no mouth at all.

His lovely eyes found the joke and he read it carefully, savoring each letter. He let out a hoot, and another, and another until he was out of breath. His teeth were showing now: they were perfectly straight, handsome even, except that he was missing two molars on both sides. And the size of his smile let that gap show.

He remembered the joke of last week and the small Indian girl who had ended up slapping him. He hadn't understood. He had said to her, "But you're not even black." She had been a college student. He was sure of it because she had said, "Yeah, but that's not the point." Then they had sat quietly in the living room until his son, Jacob, had returned and left with her.

"Your Indian girlfriend did not like my joke," Jan had said after them.

"Her name is Priya," Jacob had said without turning around.

Jan's wife had come out of the kitchen after the front door closed. She had stood in the hallway between the two rooms, drying a cup with a hand towel. She had stood there until they made eye contact. Then she had returned abruptly to the kitchen and left him to wonder what she had meant until she made an appearance again.

Jan's wife had come to America three months after him. When she arrived, Jan still hadn't found the job he had planned to secure by then. However, she had found a job as a medical assistant within a week and had kept it ever since. Jan's jobs came sporadically and were mostly with construction companies that laid him off for being

lazy on the job, or mouthing off when told he was lazy. He disliked the work and considered himself a person who was better suited to sitting and reading. However, at all these jobs, he had the freedom to write his favorite joke on the inside of his hard hat:

> *What do you call a nigger on the moon? A problem.*
> *What do you call five niggers on the moon? A problem.*
> *What do you call all the niggers on the moon? Problem solved.*

This was one of the periods when Jan was without a job. Because he had nowhere he needed to be, he mostly sat around the house. He only left briefly in the evenings to walk down to the deli that sold Polish newspapers. But it was only the afternoon and so Jan was sitting snugly on the couch.

He looked around the room. The small Indian girl wasn't there today. There was no one in the room to tell the joke to. He went to the kitchen to look for his wife.

…

The store in Poland had been a small thing; it sold only meat, bread, and milk. People had raised their own chickens and grown their own vegetables. In Little Jan's backyard small tomatoes had turned from green to yellow and then to red. But the store had been full of commotion; Little Jan had always felt lost in there. People had been calling out orders, bumping into one another in line, swearing, gossiping, and paying no attention whatsoever to a little boy.

Once, Little Jan had become separated from his mother and had been pushed against the ledge where the meat was cut and weighed. The scale was made up of two hanging plates; on one went the meat and on the other went the stones of various weights.

Little Jan was fascinated by this and put his little hand up on the second plate. This made the stones go down and the meat rise. The attendant put more meat on the

scale, until it was even. Little Jan pulled down on the stone plate again. Again, the attendant added more meat.

This went on for a while, but finally the attendant noticed the five small fingers and leaned over the ledge where he saw a small, stocky boy, red in the face and grinning up at him.

The attendant picked the boy's hand off of the scale and said to him, "Get the fuck out."

Little Jan did as he was told, not totally understanding why. He sat on the stairs outside and waited for his mother to come out so that they could go home. He started to cry. And that was when it happened.

At first Little Jan thought it had just gotten cloudy, but when he looked at the ground around him, he could see that it was all still very bright. It was just that there was a man's shadow looming over him.

Little Jan looked up at the man, and his first thought was that this man had the whitest teeth ever. His second thought was that this man had the blackest skin ever.

"Why are you crying, little boy?"

Little Jan didn't answer. His eyes only widened. The only other black people that Little Jan had ever seen were devils in the paintings at his church.

This man though, did not look exactly like the devils from those paintings. He had on a nice suit and hat, and he carried a suitcase. He looked just like a white man—a white man who was well off even. But to Little Jan he looked enough like the devils.

"Where's your mommy?"

He reached out toward the boy, but Little Jan pulled away from him and got up. In twisting away from the man's reach, he tripped and fell down the stairs. His heart pounded like a machine gun the whole way down, but once he was at the bottom he lay completely still because he had fainted.

…

Jan found his wife in the kitchen. She was standing over the stove and looking into a large pot. The walls around her were decorated with wallpaper that had small chickens and roosters on it. This was the only thing for their home that Jan and Lucja had ever chosen together. They had bought it right after Lucja arrived in America. The wallpaper had reminded them both of Poland.

"Okay, here it is."

She didn't look up from her cooking. Her hair was cut short and styled; no strand looked out of place. She was wearing a narrow skirt and a white button-up shirt. These were her work clothes; she always wore some version of this outfit to the hospital and once there she simply put a white coat on over the shirt. She came home for her lunch hour every day in order to start dinner. She wanted her son to have something to eat when he got home from school, even if she was not back yet.

"It's a really good one this week, honey."

She stirred the chicken broth to indicate that she was ready to listen to the joke.

"Okay so, a little nigger was helping its grandma in the kitchen…"

"Its?"

"What do you mean? Anyway, it spills some flour on its face…"

"Its."

“Okay, okay and *he* looked up and said, ‘Look grandma! I'm a white boy now!’”

Lucja stirred on. She was getting impatient. So he sped through the rest: “His grandma whooped his ass and told him to go tell his mom what he'd said. He goes into the living room and says, ‘Look momma! I'm a white boy now!’ His mom whoops his ass and tells him to go tell his father what he'd told her. He walks outside and says, "Look pappy! I'm a white boy now!" His father whoops his ass and then asks him what he learned. He says, "I've only been white for five minutes and I already hate you fucking niggers!"

“Oh, that’s terrible.” Jan’s wife said. “That’s even worse than last week’s.”

“No, it’s even funnier.”

She stirred.

“Because even a nigger hates niggers. Come on, honey. I admit, the last one was a little dirty, but this one is *smart*.”

“Is it smart? I really don’t think it is at all. You know, I hear some pretty nasty jokes at work. Some of the men there, they say very ugly things. But this is even worse than that.”

Jan felt disappointed. All he wanted was to see her laugh; she had a gorgeous gap between her two front teeth. He felt like it had been so long since he’d seen it.

…

Jacob was Jan and Lucja’s only child. He had been three when they had all moved to America from Poland, so he remembered nothing of Poland. Only certain smells and sounds triggered a feeling of familiarity that he could not trace back to anything. His name was originally spelled Jakub; this was the Polish spelling, and it was

also the spelling on his birth certificate. However, to everyone but his father, he was Jacob now.

At seventeen, he was very mature. He wore his dirty blonde hair a bit too long, but not long enough to make him look shaggy. He often had to push it out of his face, however. He liked to wear short-sleeved t-shirts over long-sleeved t-shirts. And although all the girls in high school loved him, he went after college girls and frequently could be spotted at nearby college campuses entertaining a crowd with his acoustic guitar. This is where he had met the small Indian girl. This is also where he had met his black friend David.

"He's coming today," Jacob explained to his mother, "and he has nowhere else to sleep. The dorms are going to be closed for all of winter break, and he can't go home." Jacob meant David.

"All right."

"I mean, can he sleep here?"

"Yes, of course."

"Okay, but don't tell Dad, because he's crazy."

Lucja just nodded understandingly. Jan turned and leaned against the wall so that he was not peeking in anymore. He thought about his wife's understanding nod. He hadn't seen her nod that way in his direction in years, though she had done it so often when they had been younger. Back then, they would talk for hours, telling each other secrets, and the line of communication had been so direct. It was almost as if a line had run from Jan's head to Lucja's heart. Now he wondered if she understood anything he said enough to nod at it anymore. *Black David* he thought to himself.

…

Jan and David had met once before: Jan had been driving home from work, as it was one of those weeks where he had a job. He had been passing a grassy campus field. He had stopped at a red light and had heard someone playing a guitar. He had looked over to where the sound was coming from and had been surprised to see his son.

"Jakub! Jaaaaaaaakub!" Jan had hollered out the open window of the pick-up truck.

The boy had looked up and frozen as if in fear. The music stopped. The crowd around Jacob looked over at the pick-up truck and then back at the boy. Jacob looked down; even from the road his father could see that his confident Indian-style seating had changed into a slouch. The boy hugged the guitar that he had, moments before, played so proudly. Jan wondered for a minute if Jacob was ashamed, pushed the thought from his head, and hollered his son's name again.

Finally, Jacob got up, leaving the guitar on the ground. Someone else sat down and picked up where Jacob had left off. As he walked over, Jacob did not look at the car or at his father. He just stared at the ground. Then Jan noticed a gangly black boy walking right behind Jacob.

When Jacob arrived at the car, Jan smiled at his son. The black boy was still right beside Jacob.

"Well, so, who is your nigger?" Jan had asked warmly. He had paused before saying "nigger" as if trying to think of the right word. The boys' mouths had fallen open, but before anyone could say anything else the red light had changed to green. Jan had

looked at the light and then the boys and shrugged apologetically as if to say, “Well, light’s changed, nothing I can do!” and driven off.

…

Jan’s family ate dinner together in their kitchen. Their home was too small for a dining room. Dinner was served on their rectangular table. Jan sat on one side; his wife and son sat across from him. Food was passed around silently. Silence was normal after a long day. Lucja had worked eight hours and Jacob had had a full day of school and then had sat around with the college kids. But Jan could tell there was something more electric in this silence than plain tiredness.

“Mom, he called David a nigger,” Jacob explained to Lucja.

“But that’s what he is!” Jan interjected.

They both looked at him with disdain.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“You just don’t say things like that.” His wife said.

“His name is David.” His son said.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t know his name. I know it now, so I’ll call him Black David. Can we all be happy with that?”

“Black David?” His son said.

“Well, I already know a White David from work. But I can’t start calling him White David because I’ve always known him as David.”

“Dad, do you mean you don’t have the capacity to know two people named David? You don’t even work there anymore. You got fired.”

This hurt Jan's feelings, and he looked to Lucja for support, but she only met his gaze with an icy one of her own.

"I guess I do have the capacity, son…" Jan was uncomfortable using the word *capacity* since he was not certain what it meant.

"I mean, you could call him Dave…"

"But it's just easier this way," Jan finished.

"This is not easier," Jacob said. He didn't speak for the rest of the meal.

White David had been Jan's only friend at work. They were both immigrants, and they both enjoyed racist jokes. When Jan told them, White David was the only one who smiled politely at him. However, White David was too shy to tell his own jokes. He worked hard because he was scared of losing his job. Jan did not work as hard since he didn't care much for the work, but because of the language barrier, physical labor was the only kind Jan was able to perform. Additionally, unlike White David, Jan was not the sole supporter of the family. This also allowed him to feel like he did not need to work too hard. In Jan's home, most of the money came from his wife. Jan only contributed to paying the bills when he could.

…

David arrived after Jan already had gone to sleep. However, this was not because Jacob and Lucja had tried to sneak the boy in.

Jan's routine had always been to go to sleep at 9 p.m. and wake up at 5 a.m. every day, whether he was out of work or not. He liked to catch the sunrise. He liked to sit and read the newspaper when no one else was around. Early in the morning was when he read the news from Poland. He read about the weather, crime, and politics, and he did

the crossword puzzle. When he read the jokes, however, he liked for people to be around so that he could share the jokes immediately. Jan felt good when he shared the jokes. He always felt the possibility that he would connect with someone right before he told each joke. He would read it and then smile at someone, and that person would laugh. Jan loved to make people laugh, because it made him feel special and adored, the way it would make anyone feel special and adored.

David had been given the couch to sleep on. He also had two pillows and two blankets to sleep under. The two blankets were plenty and David ended up kicking one of them off in his sleep, but otherwise he slept very peacefully.

Jan was surprised to see the boy there when he got up. But all he did was pick up the blanket that was on the floor and put it back on top of David.

Outside, the night was still in the sky, but the morning was creeping in. Everything was turning a light gray and some birds were up and calling out to their friends to wake them up too. The birds that were woken up called back, but softly.

David did not hear any of it. He dreamt about watching his little sister fly a kite at a park. The park was a composite park made up of all the parks he'd ever been to in his life: it had the swimming pool from one park that he loved, the carousel from another park that he loved, the big green tree with amorous initials on it from another park he loved, and so on. His sister was occupied mostly with the kite and took no notice of him at all, but when the kite was steady in the air she looked over at him and waved. He could feel himself smile and saw his hand out in front of him waving back.

Just then Jan was standing over David and waving his hand in front of the boy to see if he could wake him up. Lucja and Jacob had overlooked the fact that Jan got up at

five and liked to read the paper in the living room on that very couch. Maybe this was forgetfulness, or maybe they were never up early enough to see him reading, or maybe it was just meanness.

David didn't stir but kept on sleeping. Jan took his newspaper into the kitchen and read there but was only half focused on what he read; the rest of him was listening carefully in hopes of hearing the boy move. Whenever the boy did move, Jan tiptoed into the hall in order to look into the living room. He was disappointed each time to find that the boy was still sleeping, just moving and dreaming.

…

The day he had fainted after seeing the black man, Little Jan had come to gazing up at his mother's face. He did not see the black man, but the black man was standing a few feet behind her, and a few feet behind the black man, a small crowd had gathered.

"Mommy, I saw the devil."

"No, you didn't honey, you just saw Stanisław. He's an insurance salesman from Warsaw. He comes here every year."

Little Jan sat up slowly, but once he saw the black man standing behind his mother and smiling at him, Little Jan immediately fell back down. No one was certain this time whether he had really fainted or was just faking it. Whatever the truth, his mother carried him all the way home, even though many people in the crowd offered to carry him for her, since her pregnancy with another child was beginning to show. Once at home, Little Jan didn't stir until dinnertime from the bed where she laid him down.

…

David woke up around ten in the morning. The house was quiet. Jacob was still asleep. David shuffled to the bathroom. He had to pass by the kitchen, and when he did, he saw Jacob's father reading a newspaper. Jan had been sitting there for five hours, reading and rereading all the Polish newspapers, and now he was rereading old jokes. He had not been happy about this and had hoped that someone would wake up and sit with him.

What David saw when he passed by was a red face that looked up angrily, but that then made itself smile. What Jan saw when David passed by was two stick-thin legs, gray around the knees but brown elsewhere, a pair of boxers, and a t-shirt that hung off the boy as if off a clothes hanger. His face was thin and brown with big round glasses on it. But what Jan really saw was someone to tell the joke to.

As David left the bathroom and shuffled by again, Jan motioned for him to come and sit down at the table. Jan appeared very comfortable there. He was eating a doughnut and drinking coffee. He looked very sweet and welcoming, but Jan could see that the boy was still a bit hesitant.

"Please, come sit down." Jan made a grand gesture with his arm, indicating both that the boy should come into the room and which chair he ought to sit in.

David walked in and sat rigidly in the chair.

"You and I," Jan began. He paused, looking for the right phrase, "We get off on wrong foot, yes?"

"I guess so, yes," David responded.

"Well, I am sorry. I am a nice man."

"Oh."

“Yes, I am very nice and I am very funny. I love jokes, did you know that?”

“Jacob told me you like jokes.”

“Ah yes, Jakub.”

David didn’t say anything. He looked at the table and at Jan’s newspapers. He could not make out any of the words, and the pictures were all of men in suits and women with pearly teeth.

“Well, how would you like to hear one?”

“One what?”

“A joke!” Jan said this as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, as if there were nothing else to hear.

“Okay.” David’s answers were still curt, but he was beginning to feel more at ease. He saw that Jan drank his coffee with milk and ate a chocolate-frosted doughnut; David felt that a man with a sweet tooth couldn’t be too horrible.

“Okay, it’s a really good one.”

David nodded silently and gave a shy smile to show Jan he could begin the joke.

“So, a little nigger was helping his grandma in the kitchen. Spilling some flour on his face, he looked up and said, ‘Look grandma! I'm a white boy now!’ His grandma whooped his ass and told him to go tell his mom what he'd said.” Jan stopped there and looked at David to make sure he was following. David looked very alert, and so Jan continued.

“He goes into the living room and says, ‘Look momma! I'm a white boy now!’ His mom whoops his ass and tells him to go tell his father what he'd told her. He walks outside and says, ‘Look pappy! I'm a white boy now!’ His father whoops his ass and

then asks him what he learned." Jan stopped again, hoping that Black David was ready for the punch line.

"And he says, 'I've only been white for five minutes and I already hate you fucking niggers!'" Jan smiled and then laughed. David did nothing. Jan could tell that the boy was shy and tried to egg him on in order to get a little chuckle out of him.

"Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever hate other black people?"

"No."

"Oh, come on. Sometimes I hate other Polish people; it's normal."

David shook his head and then got up, tucked the chair in, walked through the living room, and into the next hall and knocked on Jacob's door.

…

Little Jan's father had read the newspaper every day. Little Jan loved to watch his father do this because it was the only time Jan's father laughed or smiled. When Jan's father laughed or smiled, Jan got to see his father's teeth. Unlike his mother's teeth, which she showed him often by laughing and smiling, his father's teeth had absolutely no gap. They were straight and handsome—bigger versions of Little Jan's baby teeth. Little Jan's father had dark thick hair that girls had swooned over when Little Jan's father had been a boy. However, now that he was a husband and a father, his hairline had receded so much that it did not make anyone swoon. Little Jan's father regarded his family with a serious expression either because family was serious business or because he saw nothing in them to smile or laugh at.

“Daddy, I saw the devil today,” Little Jan said while climbing up on a chair to sit next to his father. His father had just returned home from work, and dinner would be served any second.

“No, he didn’t—he saw a black man,” his mother corrected while putting potatoes on their plates.

Little Jan’s father looked at his wife and then at Little Jan.

“You saw the devil, son,” he said and smiled into his newspaper.

…

David was in Jacob’s room with him after having woken him up. Jacob’s room was very small and every inch of wall was covered with a Jimi Hendrix poster or a pin-up. Jacob’s eyes were still tired and squinty, but he listened intently to what David said.

“Are you sure?” Jacob asked and thoughtfully touched his chin in the place where he wanted a soul patch to grow.

“Yes.” David timidly put away his belongings. “I really think I should go.”

“What did he say exactly?”

“I’d rather not repeat it.”

“He probably didn’t mean anything by it though, David. You know how he is.”

“I don’t know how he is. I don’t think he really wants me to stay here, so I don’t want to stay here.”

“But David…”

That was the end of the discussion. Jacob knew there was nothing he could say to make his friend stay. Jacob had said that his father didn’t mean anything by it only as an act of hope; Jacob actually had no idea what his father ever meant by anything he said.

David folded up the things he had slept in. He folded up the things he had worn the day before. He stopped and took off his glasses to clean them on his shirt. Jacob could see that the bridge of David's nose was shiny, and Jacob knew that this was because David's glasses rubbed that spot on his nose. However, Jacob's first thought was that David looked as if he had been crying, and Jacob couldn't help but wonder if David wanted to.

David really had no other place to stay. His best shot was to get a room at the YMCA or at a hostel.

After he packed all his things, Jacob's mother gave David a bag full of sandwiches and fruit and before saying good-bye she told him, "I'm so very sorry."

He smiled politely and walked down the stairs, out the front door, in no direction, just away from Jacob's house. Jan watched this out the window of the bathroom.

…

Little Jan had owned a black baby doll. It wasn't uncommon for boys to have dolls in those days. And since it was a doll, the blackness of her had never seemed important to Little Jan until the night after he had seen the black man. The doll's spot was on a shelf right above Little Jan's bed. And that night Little Jan dreamt about being in hell and black devils rising out of the fire. He was crying and they kept asking, "Why are you crying, Little Jan?"

He was crying because he was in hell, and he missed his mother. He knew she was in heaven and that she would never see him again. But the devils couldn't understand.

Little Jan awoke to see the black baby doll looking steadily at him. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he thought he saw the doll's eyes move. He could not sleep for the rest of the night, but kept his eyes tightly shut.

…

"But this time you've gone too far." Jacob had been saying things like this to his father for close to half an hour. Jan was seated in the living room on his couch, and his son sat across from him on the smaller couch. The smaller couch was next to the doorway that led into the hall. Lucja was leaning against that doorway.

"I didn't want him to leave, son."

"But you made *him* want to."

"What should I do? Go out and look for him? It's not my fault he left." Jan looked at Lucja. However, her eyes were on Jacob and her head was nodding slowly at him as if to give him courage.

"You're so clueless! Do you have any idea what's going on around you?" Jacob got very worked up. "What kind of world do you think you're living in? This is real life! It's not a joke!"

"Not that his jokes are very funny," Lucja added, almost to herself.

"Dad, it's your fault that he left!" Jacob finally said. He rushed out of the room and went to his own, where loud music began to play almost immediately.

Lucja watched him go. She turned and walked into the kitchen.

Jan sat for a while longer but eventually moseyed out into the street and tried to go in the direction in which he had seen David leave.

…

After his sleepless night, Little Jan took the black baby doll, covered its head with a sheet and twisted the head off. He did the same with the arms and legs. He carried the bundle into the back yard and buried her. He buried her torso by the tomatoes, her arms by the strawberries, her legs by the potatoes, and her head by the flowers.

His mother watched from the kitchen window. She let him finish every step of the procedure before going out there herself.

"What are you doing, honey?"

"Nothing." He was crouching on the ground with a small shovel and the sheet in his lap.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Where's your doll?"

Little Jan began to cry. He knew that he was in trouble. He did not stop crying for a long time. He cried while digging up the head, the legs, the arms, and the torso and kept right on crying until, under his mother's watchful eye, he had put the doll back together and dusted her off using the sheet.

"Don't do that ever again with something I bought you. You know mommy spent money on that."

"I know mommy, I'm sorry. But the doll scares me because it's the devil."

"It's not the devil," she said. She took him into her arms and his head found its familiar place on her breast. He lay a hand on her belly, a recent development but it was beginning to feel familiar. He wept into her dress while she looked over the yard and counted how many holes Little Jan had dug.

…

Jan wandered over to the campus where he had seen David the first time they had met. However, it was getting dark and the campus was closed for break. The only place open was a bar. Jan decided to go in. Bars were where he went when things were going wrong, and he felt that things were going wrong for both him and David. And so, Jan thought that they might find each other there. David had no place to stay, but Jan had a place to stay with people who didn't understand him and who didn't try to understand him.

In the bar, happy hour had just ended and so everyone was happy. Jan tried to order his favorite beer. The beer was Polish; it was called Żywiec. Upon being informed that they did not have Żywiec, Jan told the bartender, "It means 'lifer', it's Polish, it means you're a drinker for life." Jan had himself a laugh at this, but the bartender had already given him a Bud Light instead and walked over to serve a pretty blonde girl and her tall friend.

Jan's attention was grabbed by a sudden burst of laughter from the corner of the bar. This was unlike the scattered, shy laughs heard around the room. This laughter was hearty; the laughter was responding to a joke.

He approached the corner and caught the end of a joke.

"And that's when I said, that's not my father, that's an umbrella." A young man in a sweater, no older than twenty-five, told this joke, and as soon as he finished several girls laughed and leaned in closer to him. He took this all in as a king would.

"Ha ha ha, that's a good one." Jan heard himself saying, "How would you like to hear one that's even better?"

“Sure pops, let’s hear it,” the young man in the sweater replied. One girl giggled and grabbed his elbow.

“Okay, I hope you are ready for this one. So a little nigger was helping his grandma in the kitchen. Spilling some flour on his face, he looked up and said, ‘Look grandma! I'm a white boy now!’ His grandma whooped his ass and told him to go tell his mom what he'd said. He goes into the living room and says, ‘Look momma! I'm a white boy now!’ His mom whoops his ass and tells him to go tell his father what he'd told her. He walks outside and says, ‘Look pappy! I'm a white boy now!’ His father whoops his ass and then asks him what he learned. He says, ‘I've only been white for five minutes and I already hate you fucking niggers!’” Jan told this joke with his eyes closed because he was nervous. This was the biggest crowd he had ever entertained.

Jan opened his eyes. The corner was silent. Someone coughed. Suddenly, he noticed how many of the faces in the crowd were not white. Just as suddenly, someone punched him in the nose. Jan stumbled back, his hand instinctively flying up to cover his face from more blows and to check for blood.

There was blood but there were no more blows. Everyone turned away after that. The young man in the sweater had just remembered something else funny that had happened to him. Jan was left to stumble off by himself.

He sat down at an empty table. He looked at his hands, which were shaking. He was starting to feel very bad. He didn’t know what to do and so went to the bar to get another beer. The bartender smirked at him and gave him extra napkins with his Bud Light. Jan used the extra napkins to wipe the blood off his moustache, but it was no use

because it had already started drying. Instead, he just sipped his beer, and from time to time, gingerly touched his nose with a napkin-covered hand.

He tried to remember the last time he and his wife had had a nice conversation. When they had met they had both been so nice to one another. They had loved to plan their life together; they had loved to talk about the future. They had planned to have a nice house, a nice dog, and lots of sons and daughters. But now he couldn't help but doubt even the nice memories. Lucja had become pregnant before their wedding, and now he wondered if that was the only reason she had married him. It was a thought he had often pushed away.

They hadn't planned on moving to America, but he had felt he had to do something drastic because Lucja seemed as if she were changing after their son's birth. Jan had hoped that moving to America would make her dependent on him. He would work and learn the language and she would admire his ability. Instead she ended up being the one who did that. America made Lucja hide her smile from him and cover her face in make-up; she used to never wear make-up.

So the future hadn't turned out exactly as they had planned. And now that they weren't young anymore, he didn't want to talk about the future with Lucja anymore. He knew that they would only get older and lonelier, and then die.

Their son was their future, but the boy didn't want anything to do with Jan anymore. Jacob never had watched Jan read the newspaper, even as a little boy. And Jan suspected that Jacob didn't read newspapers at all. Jan only saw Jacob read things off of his computer monitor. And although Jan had asked Jacob several times to teach him to use the machine, the boy never did. His response had always been something to the

effect of, “What’s the use?” However, he knew that Jacob would often tutor Lucja on how to use the computer when she needed to know something for work. Jan had always admired their closeness, but now it only made him feel depressed.

The man sitting next to Jan at the bar glanced over at him. The man looked much older than Jan, but probably wasn’t. He was probably only much drunker.

“Hey look, it’s The Lifer, The Drinker for Life!” the man said. Jan remembered seeing a figure hunched over at the bar next to him the first time he had ordered a beer. The man repeated “lifer” over and over and shoved Jan.

Jan was disgusted not only with the man, but with the entire bar. He suddenly felt that everyone who went to a bar regularly had no ambition, was not willing to change, and was content to live a life of routine.

He had no home to go to, but he also couldn’t stand to be in the bar any longer. He was about to get up and leave, when he heard snippets of something very familiar.

The first bit of joke Jan heard was: “A little honkey was helping his grandpa in the garage. He spilled some coal dust on his face, and he looked up and said, ‘Look grandpa! I'm a black boy now!’”

Jan’s ears perked up and the next snippet he heard was, “‘Look momma! I'm a black boy now!’”

Jan decided to get up and see who was talking. He poked his head through a small crowd and spied a middle-aged, porky black man in a plaid shirt and suspenders, out in the middle of a crowd, telling the joke.

“He walks outside and says, ‘Look poppa! I'm a black boy now!’ His father whups his ass and then asks him what he learned. He says, ‘I've only been black for five minutes and I already hate you fucking honkeys!’”

Just like after Jan’s joke, there was silence. The colorful faces around all wore different expressions. Some mouths were hanging open, while others were tightly shut. Some eyes widened, while other eyes narrowed. Some hands made fists, while other hands hung limply. The only common factor was the silence. However that silence was broken when a small white woman sharply inhaled and then threw her drink at the black man.

She had meant maybe to just wet him a bit, but her glass flew out of her hand and hit him above the right eye. It shattered there and the man’s eyebrow was soon covered in thick, sweet blood.

And then, everything that was still, sped up. Someone screamed gleefully across the bar. A woman danced with a man. A man shyly slipped the bartender his number. And the black man put his hand up against his eye and rushed out of the bar.

…

The night after the doll incident, Little Jan had heard his parents argue. Little Jan’s mother told his father about what Little Jan had done with the doll, and his father’s response was, “So what?”

After that they had gone back and forth. Little Jan’s mother argued that it had been wasteful to just throw out a doll like that, especially since they didn’t have much money. Little Jan’s father argued that if the boy hated the doll for being black, there was nothing he could do about it, and it had been a good lesson for him to learn.

“What’s the lesson?” Little Jan’s mother asked.

“That he can’t trust anyone black.”

“But this is just a doll.”

Little Jan did not listen anymore after that. He lay down in bed and tried to sleep. However, he dreamed about black dolls melting in a fire and awoke from those dreams to hear his parents arguing on into the night.

Things were never the same after that incident. His parents argued more and more often. It could not have been because of the doll, although Jan had thought the doll was the cause, for a long time, long into his adult life. Jan had realized only a few years ago that his parents had argued because they had come to value different things and couldn’t understand each other any longer. They stayed together long enough to give Jan two younger sisters, but soon after that Little Jan’s father abandoned them. His second sister had not even been born yet. His mother and sisters moved to the city, and he stopped being Little Jan.

…

“I thought your joke was very funny.” Jan had followed the black man outside and had begun by asking him if he was okay, to which the black man had responded with a hesitant yes.

“Really?”

“Yes, I did.”

“But you’re white.”

“Yes, but that’s not the point. I can still appreciate a good joke. Actually, I know one a lot like it, would you like to hear it?”

“I’d love to.”

And they walked off together into the night. Their heads bowed close together so that each could hear the other’s every word. They walked past the drunken women and their drunken boyfriends. They walked past another fight starting up. They walked past the rows of men self-consciously peeing on the side of a building. And somewhere deep in the night sweet, slow, and understanding laughter rang out.

In A Suitcase

There was a humble bustle in the back of a car, and I was quickly conceived, though I was the only one who knew it. Grass rose high on either side of the road, and the wild flowers rose even higher. A few weeks later I made my presence known. I made her throw up while she was working in the fields, I made her throw up while she was washing the dishes, I even made her throw up first thing in the morning after she sat up in bed. She hoped that it was food making her sick and not another person. But I knew better than to take this personally; she hadn't even met me yet.

She was sad for a while, and sometimes she would not talk at all, and other times she would talk much louder than usual or to herself. I would catch her pretending to read while really just turning pages absentmindedly. She would boil a pot of water until it all evaporated and then have to start over again.

The conceiver was named Jan or Janek depending on Lucja's mood. When spirits were high he was Janek, when things were somber he was Jan. But I knew him as Janek. When he was around, Lucja's heart beat very fast and made me nervous. It made him nervous in that way that makes a person tell jokes without being sure if they're funny or not. But those jokes usually made them both smile. It also seemed like I had a mother besides Lucja, and her name was Malgosia. She smelled like soap and cigarettes. We felt good when she was around, and we always wished she was with us. Sometimes we even smelled soap and cigarettes when she was not there; if we heard her name, or saw a bird swoop through the sky, or just picked up a bottle of milk. It made our hearts beat faster but in a way I usually enjoyed.

…

Six weeks before her wedding, Lucja cut her finger while hulling strawberries to make jam for the winter. She flinched. I flinched; this was the first time had she bled around me. She watched one drop fall to the floor before going over to the sink. She held the finger under the faucet, squeezing it at the base to cut off the blood flow, while cold water poured over it. Then she wrapped the poor finger in her apron. Suddenly we remembered meeting Malgosia; it was a memory we had often because so many things could trigger it. My mothers had become friends when, on the first day of their nursing class, the teacher cut open the thigh of a corpse to demonstrate that it did not bleed because the heart had stopped pumping. He then cut open one of the fingertips that was hanging off the examining table, which did bleed. Five drops fell from the finger to the floor while he explained that gravity had drawn the blood there. As the sixth drop fell, Malgosia fainted onto Lucja, who caught her and held her arm for the rest of the

presentation to keep her from falling again and in order to remind her that they were still alive. It didn't seem strange to do that—around the room, many women who had been strangers before moved closer together or held hands.

And then in the car Malgosia had opened up so easily: "My mother had so many miscarriages when I was growing up. It seemed like I was always about to have a little brother or sister until my mother would suddenly grab her stomach and look down at her skirt, which would be soaked in blood. One time it even happened at the dinner table."

I remembered how that story had made me shudder. And I decided then that it would not be long before I would start to hint to Lucja about my existence.

"I think I would be a good nurse; I always helped my brothers when they got hurt as kids," Lucja said.

"Just brothers?"

"Mhmm."

"I always wanted a sister," Malgosia said.

"Me too," Lucja said and Malgosia smiled at the road but in a way that was for Lucja.

I had tried to mimic their expressions, but my face was still too tense. All it did was squint; my lips were always pursed then. My senses, however, were all getting stronger. Eventually I could even hear better than my mother. At least, I always seemed to hear Janek walking into the room before she did.

Lucja still stood at the sink with cold water running over her hand when Janek let himself in quietly, "What smells so good?" he asked. The question broke Lucja and I out of the memory. Only the smell memory of soap and cigarettes lingered.

“I’m making jam for the winter,” she answered.

Janek looked into the pots filled with strawberries boiling on the stove. Now I smelled what Janek did in addition to what Lucja had already been smelling: soap, cigarettes, and strawberries. It was overwhelming. He came over to where she sat at the table and kissed the top of her head. I was learning that electricity could be conducted by almost anything on earth: metals and water, of course, but also by my mother and me, and maybe every human being. A current traveled through Lucja, starting precisely where Janek had planted his lips, and circulating down to her toes. She felt as if it were time to wake up, but she didn’t want to wake up at all. Her brown hair was parted in the middle, the same as it had been every day since I had come to know her. It smelled vaguely of cigarettes.

“Were you smoking?” Janek said.

“No.”

“Malgosia?”

“Yes.”

She was not telling the truth. Lucja had smoked the cigarette between Malgosia’s departure and Janek’s arrival; I was the only witness. I wasn’t sure why we were keeping this a secret; I also couldn’t tell what cigarettes were medicine for. Whenever Lucja smoked, it was because her heart was beating extraordinarily fast; however, it didn’t slow down even when she had two cigarettes in a row.

Janek thought about Malgosia, and this made his heart rush for some reason. All he really knew about her was that she smoked and that she had replaced him as the

person who drove Lucja back from class. He had finally met Malgosia, quite a while after learning of her existence, on a day when Lucja had arrived home late.

Malgosia had descended from the car first. She had had wavy blonde hair so short that it could not be tied up, and a very pale face, but her cheeks were rosy. Her jaw was angular and made her appear to be masculine although she had soft, pink lips. She had bright blue eyes that seemed to shine because of her dark eyebrows. She had looked thin and worn slacks, a collared shirt and a vest. Janek had thought that as a child she must have been mistaken for a boy often.

Finally, Lucja had seen him and waved to him. The two women had come up the stairs towards him. Malgosia had been a little bit taller than Lucja, but still shorter than Janek.

"What?" Lucja said.

Janek remembered where he was. He was at Lucja's kitchen table; Lucja was sitting across from him with her hands hidden under the table. She was waiting for him to say something because he was just staring at her. It was so strange to me. I knew that they were both thinking about Malgosia but also both trying to think of something to say that was not about her.

"I ran over a bird on my way over here," Janek said.

"How did that happen?" she asked.

"I don't know. I think maybe it was sick; it was flying so low to the ground. Almost gliding alongside the car, and then it just swooped under the car. I ran over it with my back tire before I could fully stop the car."

"My god," Lucja said. She looked at Janek. She could see him clearly. He was a man who hated the thought of hurting anything. He was wearing a sweater with a collared shirt underneath. The collar was crooked—one half poked out of the sweater while one half stayed in, as if he had thrown his clothes on in a hurry. He had started to wear collared shirts under his sweaters only after he had learned that she was pregnant. He was new to the practice and so it never turned out quite right.

For a moment Lucja and Janek felt the way they had felt when they had first met. Lucja had loved the way he spoke quietly and slowly and thoughtfully. She had loved the way he'd let his glasses slide down the bridge of his nose before pushing them back up. Janek had loved the way she looked beautiful when she did anything, the gapped teeth she had inherited from her parents but was ashamed of, the way her hands were rough from work, the way she never needed to wear make-up. Lucja was the first girl he had met who did not wear too much make-up. She did not wear any at all. His only other memory of a woman wearing no make-up and looking beautiful came from the early, vague years of his life when he lived in the country with his mother and father. Janek did not like how women looked when they wore too much make-up. After Janek's mother had moved from the country to the city, she had begun to wear make-up. His mother and sisters all spent a lot of time putting on make-up together before they stepped out of the apartment, even if it was just to buy some milk and eggs.

With Lucja, Janek felt more at ease than he had around any woman he had ever met. He attributed this to the fact that she was from a small town and lived on a farm. Her face was plain, simple, and inviting. She was smart without being pretentious. She was always reading something.

"How do you feel today?" he asked while putting a hand on her stomach. I could feel warmth on the top of my head and I swam towards it. But Lucja seemed bothered by the question and suddenly the carelessness with which he had dressed irritated her. He asked her how she felt every day as though she were sick. "Still pregnant," part of her wanted to answer, while part of her felt guilty, while yet another part of her felt confused and that part was me.

"I feel all right," she said, taking her hands out from beneath the table and resting them on her belly.

"What happened to your hand?"

"I cut it earlier," she replied, dismissively. "It's nothing."

"Let me finish this for you," he said. He picked up one of the empty jars on the table and started to spoon boiled strawberries into it.

It was dusk, and the kitchen windows were open. From the fields, Lucja and Janek could hear members of her family whistling as they finished up work for the evening. Soon, they would come in to eat a plain dinner of bread and meat.

And three hearts in this town beat very energetically; two in Lucja's kitchen and one in a car on its way home that passed a dead bird, embedded in the ground.

…

Five weeks before the wedding, Lucja waited, in her kitchen, for Malgosia. Lucja cut onions and read *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein, which made Lucja look at all the tables and chairs differently. Occasionally, a tear trailed down her face.

It was Malgosia's habit to drive over every morning and give Lucja and her family two bottles of milk. She could bake well too and promised to make Lucja a

wedding cake. Lucja made sure to be around early in the morning when she knew Malgosia would be coming by, and then again in the afternoon when Malgosia picked up the empty bottles. Malgosia was an only child, and thus, even though she was a girl, she accompanied her father into the fields and knew how to drive well.

Before meeting Malgosia, Lucja had had to depend on Janek or one of her four brothers to give her a ride, although her youngest brother would sometimes give her secret lessons. She could not drive very well, but she could do it if she needed to. No one knew this but the two of them and now me.

These days, Malgosia drove with Lucja two or three times a week after she had stopped by to drop off the milk. They often would invent an errand one of them needed to run and then take detours to explore a deserted part of town. Once they found a twice-abandoned house. The first residents had lived in it and decided to leave, taking all the furniture and wallpaper with them, leaving only their initials carved into the doorframe. Then someone else had found it and decided to fix it up but then gave up and left nothing but tools behind in the bare house. And that is the way the girls had found it. The walls had large planks of wood missing from them and wind hissed through the house, rattling it. Lucja and Malgosia had both imagined fixing it up and living there together.

The girls acted as though the two of them going off together in the middle of the day were a spontaneous thing, even after they had both come to expect it and look forward to it.

That day, just as Lucja read: "Why is there no adjustment between place and the separate attention," in *Tender Buttons*, Malgosia arrived and knocked on the back door.

Lucja looked up from her book and rose too quickly. Her head spun, and as she walked over to the door she thought she could see fireflies out of the corners of her eyes.

She opened the door, light came in, and the imagined smell of cigarettes and soap we had anticipated became realized. We both felt a rush of warm satisfaction. Lucja closed the door behind Malgosia and watched her slender shoulders shift as she walked.

At the table, Malgosia handed Lucja the bottles of milk. Without light spilling in through the door, the kitchen was a dark place. The windows were small and covered by white lace curtains that let in very little light. The table and chairs were made of heavy, thick, dark slabs of wood and bore the imperfections of homemade furniture. On the wall by the sink hung a small wooden cross. On the wall over the table was a painting of the Last Supper.

The milk was so fresh that it was still warm. Malgosia's knuckles grazed Lucja's wrist, and she almost dropped the bottles. She put them down on the table with a little bang. Malgosia opened one bottle and poured Lucja a small glass. The milk felt comforting in Lucja's throat, as she realized how dry her mouth had become. Already, I associated milk with a full and happy feeling. I wished I could taste it.

"What's this for?" Malgosia asked, pointing at the onions.

"I am making jam."

"Onion jam?" Malgosia asked and laughed, "You need to get out of the house."

Malgosia grabbed Lucja by the hand and led her out. They walked out past the barn, and past the fields—where they waved at Lucja's parents and brother—and into the woods. Woods were never far from home here. And then once they were in the woods

they found a clearing and sat. Malgosia wore pants. She also wore a brown vest with a black t-shirt underneath it. She had an affinity for vests.

Lucja had to tuck her legs underneath her because she wore a dress. Lucja liked to wear dresses, but only ones that had pockets. She had sewn pockets onto almost all of her dresses. She had even sewn a small lace pocket onto her wedding dress, only big enough to hold a wedding ring. She did this because there were often things she needed or wanted to carry with her.

"I'd like to move to Africa," Lucja said.

"What's in Africa?" Malgosia asked.

Lucja laughed and said, "I used to talk about it so much when I was young and my mother would always say, 'What's in Africa? Monkeys. And the soil isn't even good for farming.'" I wondered what Africa was.

"Did you want to farm there?"

"No. I just wanted to go somewhere where the weather was different. I used to draw maps of the world in the back of every book I had and then stars over every place I wanted to live in."

She had her copy of *Tender Buttons* in her dress pocket and took it out to show Malgosia the map of the world she had drawn in there while she had waited for Malgosia to come with the milk.

"At one point my parents got me a little suitcase because the pockets of my dressed were overflowing with The Collection, and it only made me want to travel more."

"What was in The Collection?"

“Oh, little things, like a photograph from my parents’ wedding, and a pin my father got from serving in the war, or old toys my brothers didn’t want anymore. But it really piled up and they decided I needed something better to carry them around in, but the suitcase just made me want to travel more. People from town would see me walking around with it and they’d always say, ‘Where are you going Little Lucja?’ and I would say, ‘Africa!’ or ‘Peru!’ or ‘China!’ It seemed like the rest of my family was happy here. They would farm, and fight, and focus on the small things, but I was always imagining being some place else.”

“When I was young I read Amelia Earhart’s biography and I wanted to go everywhere just like she did. It didn’t matter where,” Malgosia said.

“I read it too! It was my favorite book; I think it still is. It was the first book I drew a map of the world in.”

I thought I understood. We were in one place; Africa was another place. But still, I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else the way that Lucja and Malgosia could.

Lucja carefully ran her hand over the leaves, rocks and dirt. She found a soggy old pack of cigarettes. She opened it up to find two spoiled cigarettes inside.

“Probably one of my brothers’. I think they used to sneak out here to smoke; it must be very old,” she said twirling a damp cigarette in her fingers. “Do you think I could have a dry one?”

“No,” Malgosia said.

However, before Lucja had become pregnant, Malgosia had been more than happy to give Lucja a cigarette whenever she wanted one. I was learning that there were many kinds of people in the world, and Malgosia was one of the generous ones. In

addition to promising Lucja that she'd bake her wedding cake, Malgosia brought the milk to Lucja's family for free. She was the kind of person who would take along an empty spare bag on a trip and then return home with it full of gifts for everyone.

Malgosia was shy about accepting gifts herself, and if it had to happen she always preferred the gift to be handmade.

"In my room," she said, "I have a horse carved out of wood from my father, a rag doll made by my mother, and your human anatomy drawings from class. I think these are my favorite things."

"Oh, wow," Lucja said, flattered, "you tricked me. I traded you those drawings for milk—I didn't know they'd be your favorite things. If I had known, I would have asked for something better."

"Just ask; you can have anything." Malgosia looked down shyly.

"I would like an airplane ticket to Brazil, or my spot back in the nursing class," Lucja said, becoming braver at the end.

"I wish you had it back too. It's such a silly rule that you can't be pregnant and in the class."

"It's like they think once I have a baby I won't need a job anymore."

Malgosia frowned and took out a cigarette for herself. The clearing let in a few thick sunbeams. It was big enough to fit exactly two bodies, but not much more. The bodies that had been there before them had already pressed the leaves and twigs down for the girls.

"You shouldn't smoke either, you know," Lucja said.

"Mm," Malgosia said and lit the cigarette with a match. She breathed in deeply, and when she exhaled she covered Lucja's nose with her hand so that she would not breathe in the smoke. Malgosia's hand lingered there and felt a bump she had never noticed before.

"What's this bump?"

Lucja ran her fingers over her nose self-consciously.

"It got broken when I was a kid. And then it never healed right," Lucja explained.

"How did it break?"

"My brothers had built this shaky swing and hung it on the tree outside my house. We were all excited to use it. Zbigniew got to go first while Tomek pushed him, and then Tomek got to go while Zbigniew pushed him. I was getting tired of waiting for my turn so I asked what I could do and Zbigniew said that I could push Tomek from the front, but as I walked up to push him one of the ropes broke and Tomek fell, and the swing hit me in the face. I didn't even know where I'd been hit; my whole face went numb. Blood was everywhere; I remember I was wearing a yellow dress and there was such a stark contrast between the colors. Zbigniew laughed, but Tomek jumped off the swing and came over to me because he thought it was his fault. He held his shirtsleeve to my nose, even after we got into the house. I remember," Lucja said, sounding almost out of breath, "we waited so long for my mother to come, and he sat there the whole time with his shirtsleeve up to my nose."

Tomek was kind and had been the one who taught Lucja how to drive. Meanwhile, Zbigniew seemed like a harsh person. Since it was a small town, however,

everyone knew why he was the way he was. The story told to any newcomers, like Malgosia who lived one town over, usually went like this:

Zbigniew was the eldest of three siblings and his parents did not know exactly what they were doing with him. They beat him when he misbehaved, but by the time they had the rest of their children they had decided that it was morally wrong for parents to hit their children. Consequently, Zbigniew had become an alcoholic at the age of sixteen. After finishing high school he had joined his parents on the farm full time. As a young man at school he had been handsome and popular. He had been one of the few kids who got to spend a lot of time with kids older than himself. By the time he was fourteen he already had a favorite beer. In his late teens and early twenties he had dated many girls and had even gone as far as getting engaged to a few, but he always seemed to scare them off before there could be a wedding. At twenty-nine, Zbigniew had a hard time finding a date and was viewed by almost everyone as someone who had already had his best years.

All I knew about Zbigniew aside from that was that he had a low speaking voice, usually a grumble. It unnerved me. I much preferred softer sounding voices because they traveled in through Lucja's ears and down to the belly almost like the warm rain that fell during summer. Zbigniew's voice reminded me of a car driving down a gravel road.

Malgosia looked at Lucja's nose a bit longer and said, "I like this bump."

Lucja turned her head, and the sun coming in through the trees shone on her profile. Her hair was parted in the middle, and the bangs she usually wore pushed back were falling into her eyes. She had a broad face with high cheekbones and a cleft chin. Her eyes were such a light green that when the sun hit them, it almost looked as if she

had no irises at all. To Malgosia, with that dark hair falling into her clear eyes, Lucja looked heavenly.

…

If I concentrated hard enough I knew what Malgosia and Janek were doing even when they were not with Lucja. I knew that while Lucja and Malgosia sat in the woods Janek came to Lucja's house in order to help her with the jam she was working on that day. He had found abandoned onions and assumed that Lucja had run out to the fields for a minute to tell her family something. So he had just picked up where she left off. When she wasn't back by the time he had almost finished he began to worry and feel the way he had felt when he was growing up with his mother and sisters.

Janek had lived in the country with his parents until he was five years old. Before he turned six, he would have two sisters added to the family unit and a father subtracted. As his mother explained, their father had left on a business trip and died in an automobile accident. But now that Janek was grown, he questioned this explanation: his father's work did not require business trips—he was a plumber, and he was probably very much alive but a plumber elsewhere. Janek's mother, not knowing what else to do, had moved them to the city where it was easier for a woman to get a job. There, they had shared a small apartment. Though nothing horrible had happened there, Janek could not help but remember that apartment and that time without a feeling of discomfort. There were many times when Janek simply had felt left out. When the girls had been four, Janek had been eight, but they were all about the same size because Janek had been something of a late bloomer. It was then that he first had noticed that he was treated differently than the girls. In order to feel included, he would try to wear their dresses. This was met with

amusement from his mother at first, but with time that was replaced with scolding. She would come home from work to find her three children jumping rope in the building's tiny front yard, all of them wearing identical dresses. She would hush them inside so that no more neighbors saw Janek. Unfortunately, at his young age, Janek had had no way to explain that the goal he was scolded for was not the same goal he was aiming for. And then when the two sisters got their first periods—only one month apart!—his mother had seemed to spend a lot of time whispering with them. Meanwhile, new things had been going on in Janek's body as well, but he never had anyone to talk with about it. His only information had come secondhand from his friends at school. It felt strange to him now to think about that time. He hadn't thought about it since he'd told Lucja about it.

Lucja differed so greatly from his mother and sisters—she was a listener, while his mother and sisters seemed to talk to each other without any of them really listening. Janek trusted Lucja enough to tell her about wearing girls' clothes as a little boy. She had told him that she understood feeling left out; after all, she had four brothers and was the only girl. She even told him that she was sure he looked nice in a dress. And yet, now as Janek sat at Lucja's kitchen table, he didn't feel as if they had shared all their secrets. He felt as if he had told her everything about him, and that for some time she had remembered, but now she'd forgotten.

Janek heard the back door opening and looked up from the onions expecting to see Lucja. His eyes stung and watered, but even so, he could see that it was Zbigniew and not Lucja who entered the kitchen.

Zbigniew wore tattered clothes that allowed him to do farm work, and while most of his family had nice clothes that they wore when they weren't working, Zbigniew's

closet consisted of all tattered clothes and one suit reserved for holidays, weddings, and funerals, and even that was beginning to get a little tattered. He was very tall, almost two meters, and had chestnut-colored hair like Lucja. He sometimes went for days without shaving or bathing, and so while his hair color was the same as Lucja's, it usually looked darker. His face had high cheekbones, also like Lucja's, but his face was much more angular than hers and the stubble that usually grew there just enhanced that angularity. Atop his head he wore an old beaten-down hat so that all you could see of his hair were a few wavy strands that poked out onto the forehead and by the ears. As he got older he looked more and more like a scarecrow.

"I didn't think anyone was in here," Zbigniew said, instead of 'hello'.

"I let myself in through the back door. I thought Lucja would be here," Janek answered instead of 'hello' and then took his glasses off to rub his eyes.

"We saw her go off somewhere with Malgosia. They walked past the fields."

When Janek asked why Zbigniew had come into the house now even though everyone else was still working, Zbigniew explained that this break was part of his daily ritual; he'd slip away, and drive over to the bar and back. I knew about this break—I had heard Lucja talk about it. He thought no one knew where he was going, but everyone did.

It was decided that since Lucja was gone, and had been gone for a while, it would be best for Janek to accompany Zbigniew to the bar, since a bar could often prove to be a good distraction.

At the bar, the men's eyes adjusted to the moldy darkness—a sharp contrast to the crisp daylight outside. The weather in the bar was humid even though outdoors the day

was dry. There was only one fan for the entire space. It was easy for Janek and Zbigniew to find two empty seats together.

The only other patrons were two old men who were usually there; one was a widower and one had never married. Whenever the two old men were both there, they sat together. They had been best friends since they were young, and now they dressed in almost identical brown suits. They had spent their lives working and were old enough to live off the government now. They lived together in a small apartment, and the one who saved more of his government check that month would pay the rent. Two men living together, people would whisper. And so they whispered back.

"…walks around looking like a man," Zbigniew and Janek heard from across the room. They looked at one another but said nothing and went back to nursing their vodka and their beer, respectively.

"…even though she's about to get married," Janek heard and put his beer down with a bump on the table.

"What are you talking about?" Zbigniew asked as he and Janek walked over to them. And since they had been drinking even longer than Zbigniew and Janek the old men's tongues were loose and eager to talk. They claimed to have seen Lucja and Malgosia late one evening walking to Malgosia's car and holding hands. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. In actuality, the two men had been the ones caught holding hands. They had made eye contact with the girls, and though the girls had only smiled and waved before getting in the car, the two men had dropped each other's hands and waved back nervously. They couldn't help but wonder if Lucja and Malgosia would tell anyone.

“Her parents made a mistake with her. They raised her as though she were a son instead of a daughter,” the widower chimed in.

“She’s only manly because her parents didn’t have any boys to help in the fields. That doesn’t mean she’s gay,” was Zbigniew’s retort.

He raised his voice when he said this. And so naturally, all voices rose to meet his. Zbigniew was embarrassed that he was nearing thirty and had not yet been able to settle down with any girl. Since Malgosia was an unusual girl who would have difficulties finding a husband, she seemed like a natural choice. His parents had hinted at it since Lucja and Malgosia had begun spending so much time together.

“Times are so bad now that you’re going after a woman who is almost a man?” said the one who never married.

Zbigniew lunged forward but Janek held him back. He held himself back as well.

“Malgosia and Lucja are both gay!” The widower began this exclamation, but the pair of men cried “both gay” in unison, and doing so caused them to make eye contact and begin to laugh and cough.

“How could she be gay? She’s pregnant!” Janek yelled and then shuddered because this was the very first time he had said that she was pregnant to anyone. In fact, Lucja and Janek had never talked about it openly either. There had been a simple declaration: “My period has stopped,” and then a few days later a ring slipped on a finger, followed by a quiet car ride home during which their hands had felt numb. I was realizing that maybe there was something wrong with all this. Pregnancy and marriage did not always occur in this order, and you were only supposed to have two parents, not three.

This confrontation was not out of character for Zbigniew, and he continued to yell at the two old men while Janek was lost in his thoughts. And the old men laughed so hard that they had to rest on one another.

…

By the time Lucja, Malgosia, Janek, and Zbigniew got home, it was beginning to get dark. Zbigniew's absence had been noticed by the rest of his family but would go unmentioned, as always. Lucja and Malgosia came in through the back door laughing. Lucja did not even cover her mouth to hide her teeth like she usually did. Janek and Zbigniew entered through the front door scowling, but all four reached the kitchen at the same time.

"Where have you been?" Janek asked. He looked only at Lucja.

"Malgosia and I went for a walk in the woods." Lucja said. "Who cut my onions?"

"I did." Janek said.

Malgosia and Zbigniew stood behind their respective persons, she behind Lucja and he behind Janek. Malgosia gave a slight wave, which was met with a slight nod from Zbigniew. Lucja moved toward Janek and expressed her gratitude with a gentle squeeze to Janek's arm between the elbow and shoulder. They rarely kissed in front of people but since Janek was a bit drunk, he leaned in and gave her a kiss on the mouth. Lucja returned it softly and pulled away. She kept her eyes open and could see Zbigniew across the room with his arms folded, glaring at her.

Shortly afterwards, Malgosia drove home trying not cry and trying not to think about seeing Lucja and Janek kiss. Zbigniew drank more in his room—the dehydrating

effects of alcohol keeping the possibility of tears at bay. Lucja spent the rest of the evening with Janek as he drank instant coffee and told her about what had happened at the bar. Lucja acted surprised, although she wasn't.

"Those men are crazy," she simply said, keeping their secret.

…

One day four weeks before her wedding, Malgosia again came by and beckoned Lucja to go for a walk in the woods. Lucja was making cauliflower jam. She felt reluctant to agree at first. She felt they were being watched, but then drove that feeling away by telling herself that she wasn't doing anything wrong and that it was all perfectly innocent. After all, she was getting married in four weeks, and then everything might change. The free and easy days would be gone. But even these last days of freedom felt heavy. Lucja was barely sleeping as of late.

The two girls walked through the woods for a long time, going much farther than they had before. The woods became so dense that once Lucja and Malgosia were deep inside of them, it looked like neither day nor night. The two of them heard wild animals in the distance and felt something scurry near their feet, but the girls walked on because they knew that not every forest had a wolf in it. They both had faith that this one didn't. Once they felt that they had walked long enough, they turned back and sat in the clearing again. They didn't talk at first; they just listened to what the birds and squirrels were saying.

Much to my surprise, I could understand the birds and squirrels. They argued over who owned the forest. The birds said it was theirs because they built beautiful nests there and even people (who did not own the forest) built them homes there to live in. The

squirrels retorted that they stayed in the forest all winter, unlike the birds who flew to Italy. "Also," one squirrel mumbled, "if your nests are so beautiful, then why do you need people to build you homes?"

I barely heard Malgosia say, "I have to tell you something."

"Yes?" Lucja asked.

"Do you remember when we saw those two old men holding hands?"

"The ones who called us gay? I feel sorry for them. I guess they were just doing it to defend themselves."

"Maybe," Malgosia answered. "But I have to tell you: they were right about me at least."

Lucja looked at Malgosia's nervous but open face. Malgosia's skin and hair were so light against the dark woods surrounding them that she almost seemed to glow. A warmth filled Lucja's body, but the feeling was quickly followed by a panic that seemed to crawl up out of the earth, into the soles of her feet and up through her torso. The panic mixed with the warmth and created a frenzy. Lucja laughed and laughed. Malgosia looked at her, confused, her eyebrows knit together. My eyebrows knit together too. After spending some time with the birds I briefly mistook the girls' fast hearts for wing beats. I didn't understand what there was to beat about so fast. We already knew that Lucja loved her. Why was Malgosia so nervous?

"Why are you laughing?" Malgosia asked.

"Don't worry—I already knew that," Lucja said. I checked to see what the birds and squirrels were up to, but I kept an eye on the girls.

“I don’t want to get you into any trouble. Maybe it looks bad that we spend so much time together. I mean, you’re about to get married,” Malgosia said in a whisper.

Lucja’s eyes grew dark, “That’s not your fault,” she said. “I like spending time with you.”

“I raised my children here!” One old bird said.

“And where are they now?” A young squirrel mother asked, her babes tucked underneath her tail.

“I fly over this forest every day!” The old bird shot back, hurt. “How can you own something you haven’t seen all of?”

I noticed how close together Lucja’s and Malgosia’s hands were in the grass. Lucja reached over and clasped Malgosia’s hand. “I hope those old men don’t see us now,” she said.

Malgosia looked up at Lucja’s face—her eyes seemed to be ablaze. Malgosia’s heart picked up speed like a bird suddenly taking off into the air. Or was it one of the birds storming off in the heat of the argument up in the trees?

Malgosia looked away, and Lucja released her hand. Malgosia picked at the ground and saw that her hands were shaking.

The girls went back to listening to the conversations of birds and squirrels, which soon ended though the animals had resolved nothing. For the remainder of the day squirrels angrily picked nuts and stored them in spots on the ground they would not remember about in the coming winter, while the birds went home to their nests and picked fights with their families. A few families even decided to try and stay for the winter. The sun started to set, but the air stayed warm and Lucja started to drift off to

sleep; she leaned against Malgosia's shoulder. Malgosia silently allowed the union of head and shoulder. For a long time Malgosia's hands trembled, but after she kept them clasped together for a while she was able to drift off too. I punched Lucja's gut feebly, but I felt myself grow drowsy. I had to sleep whenever she did, and that was beginning to feel unfair.

…

Janek had come by once again, this time to find mostly uncut cauliflower. He sat down and chopped a few pieces in the fashion that Lucja seemed to prefer. He noticed the Virginia Woolf book Lucja had left by the cutting board. He leafed through it and stopped at page thirty-five where Lucja had underlined the following line:

> *Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.*

After that Janek found cutting the cauliflower to be tiresome. He couldn't understand why she'd underlined that. He decided instead to just sit, to wait to see if Lucja or Zbigniew came into the house first.

It turned out to be Zbigniew, but when Janek suggested going back to the bar Zbigniew said perhaps it would be better to avoid the place for a while, because "everyone there is crazy."

Then he walked past Janek to the cabinet. Zbigniew, with his back turned, continued, "but I do have this." He turned to face Janek again with a large bottle of vodka in his right hand.

They sat there for a long time in silence drinking big gulps out of big cups, worrying about almost the same thing. The afternoon heat built up in the room, and it

became stuffy. Janek put his head in his hands for a while and when he looked back up, his eyes and face were wet, maybe with sweat, maybe with tears, and he knocked over all the cauliflower that lay on the table before him. Zbigniew looked slightly bewildered, but quickly caught on to what was going on and knocked over all the cauliflower in front of him as well. After they had cleared off the table, they smashed the cauliflower around on the floor until it was all a thin mush beneath their feet. "Cauliflower jam!" they shouted. Hollow laughs filled the room.

…

I saw a light, but my eyes were shut. I could only feel the direction this light was coming from. The girls woke up, and it was dark. All they could see was a bright light that would travel from left to right and then back, hitting them somewhere towards the left end of the arc like a lighthouse beam searching for a ship. In their sleep they had positioned their bodies so that Lucja's nose was nestled in Malgosia's hair and Malgosia's lips were against Lucja's collarbone in what appeared to be the end of a kiss started long ago.

They sat up just as Zbigniew and Janek came towards them with the flashlight, but had no time to straighten their clothes or hair.

"What are you doing? You've been missing all day," Zbigniew said.

"We were talking, and we fell asleep," Lucja said.

Zbigniew looked at the body prints in the ground, how close they were. He stepped forward and slapped Lucja across the face.

"I know what I came out here to do," Zbigniew said with disdain. Both Janek and Malgosia pulled him back.

Up until that point everyone had more or less accepted Zbigniew's drinking, because he hadn't harmed anyone but himself. He may have started fights, but he was typically too drunk to fight or win them. His family was not frightened of him when he drank—rather, they saw him as being more innocent during those times. He'd never hit Lucja intentionally until this night.

"Are you okay?" Janek asked.

"Yes." Lucja said as she held her face and fought back tears.

They walked back in pairs: Malgosia with Zbigniew, glaring at one another and leading the way with the flashlight. And behind them: Lucja with Janek. Janek held her hand. It was far past the time Malgosia would have come back around to pick up the empty milk bottles.

…

With three weeks left before the wedding, my eyes opened up. I looked around to see where I was. For some time I had been trying to imagine what things looked like. I had been trying to imagine what seeing was like. I looked at my hands, and I saw my fingernails for the first time. I wondered what fingernails were for.

Lucja was cutting turnips. She sat stiffly. We had not heard Malgosia's voice in a while, and Lucja was frowning.

And now I was frowning too because Lucja wanted a cigarette. I had learned that cigarettes were not medicine, but the opposite. I could feel her physical needs so strongly now. She was not thinking about me. She had smoked for a while even after she knew about me; I had heard Malgosia tell her to stop. But Lucja hadn't. She went to her room where a cigarette pack was hidden in the base of her globe. Lucja thought about the

women who simply found ways to stop being pregnant. She wondered if she could be a woman like that. It felt like such a big choice that she didn't want to make it on her own—she did not want to make it at all, in fact, and so she waited for a sign. Waiting for a sign is something that people do when they know there will be something to regret regardless of what they decide.

She took a cigarette out of the pack and walked out of the house. She sat in a spot where she was sure no one could see her. The day was cloudy and as she blew out a puff of smoke a cold wind caught her shoulders and back. She shivered, and couldn't stop shaking even after the air was warm again. Her shoulder blades shook in unison, and she imagined that if she had wings this is what flying would feel like. I shook inside her too, but I knew that I couldn't fly either; I was trapped. No one came to visit her that day. Not Malgosia. Not Janek.

…

Two weeks before her wedding, Lucja stole the family car and headed towards Malgosia's house.

Lucja drove barefoot because that was how her brother, Tomek, had taught her to do it. That way, he had said, she'd be more sensitive to the pedals.

Malgosia hadn't come with the milk since that day in the woods. No one had noticed because of the bustle. They drank water instead. Lucja kissed her little suitcase and put it in the backseat of the car.

Lucja drove slowly, with the windows down. Wild grass grew high on either side of her and at times threatened to poke into the car. As she neared a dirt intersection she watched two birds fly in circles around each another, near the electrical wires that gave

light to all the homes scattered in the town. Her body tingled; she could barely feel her hands. She was thinking back to the woods, back to leaning against Malgosia's side, to brushes of the arm that had once seemed accidental, to the feeling of Malgosia's index finger knuckle along the knuckle that had formed on Lucja's nose.

She didn't notice a girl riding her bike out from behind the grass. Everything froze after a muffled crashing sound. Even the two birds had reached a stalemate and sat on the electric wires to watch. They saw the wild grass and the two dirt roads that crossed to make an "X", in the center of which lay a bicycle with bent wheels. A short distance away there was a girl facedown in the dirt. On the other side of the bicycle stood an old dark red car, and behind the car were the futile tracks made when Lucja hit the brake too late.

She got out of the car to see if the girl was all right but her legs were rubber. Lucja collapsed. And all the while, all I could think was just: I hope she doesn't fall on her stomach. Luckily, Lucja fell backwards, looking like she was just lying down to go to sleep, but very quickly. The birds continued to watch and saw the bicycle girl get up slowly and rub her head until she noticed Lucja lying on the ground. She went over to her and gently touched the belly that protruded slightly; she touched her face, and then looked back down the length of Lucja's body and saw the blood between Lucja's legs. The girl left her bicycle and ran back in the direction that she had come from.

Lucja awoke in the university hospital where she had taken her nursing classes during the school year. The room was painted pale green. She and the bed and were dressed in white.

"What about the girl?" she asked before even opening her eyes.

“She’s okay. She’s just got a bump on the head and a chipped tooth. She’s actually the one who went to get help,” Janek answered while gently touching her hair. He couldn’t help but fear that Lucja was asking about Malgosia.

“What happened to me? The baby?”

“The baby is okay, but you have to be careful now.”

Lucja started crying, and Janek wiped her eyes for her and kissed her face. She fell asleep. I, however, couldn’t sleep. Janek paced outside of the hospital room before returning to sit with Lucja’s family while I paced inside her.

When Lucja awoke again Janek was gone and Malgosia was sitting in his place. She had been watching Lucja intently and rose from the chair as soon as Lucja’s eyes opened.

“You stopped bringing milk,” Lucja said.

“I’m sorry. I was sick.” Malgosia put her hand on top of Lucja’s.

“Please don’t lie,” Lucja asked of her.

“What do you want me to say?” Malgosia asked. She appeared to be on the brink of saying something but then only shrugged.

“Why did you have a suitcase?” Malgosia asked after some quiet time passed.

“I don’t have to have this baby,” Lucja answered. My heart stopped for a moment when I heard her say that, and I finally understood wanting to be someplace else.

“What are you talking about?” Malgosia said and tightened her grip on Lucja’s hand, which now squeezed back. Lucja sat up suddenly and kissed Malgosia’s lips quickly.

“We could be together, like those old men.” Lucja said.

Malgosia's face had already been streaked with tears, and now fresh ones rose to the surface.

"But look at them," Malgosia said. "They're miserable old men."

"We could go away somewhere."

"We can't do that. You can't not have this baby. Do you really think we'd be happy if you did that?"

Lucja said nothing.

"I was with a girl once. Her name was Elżbieta. It was so hard to find any place to be alone. Once we took a chance and stayed at her house. Her father walked in on us and started hitting us both."

Lucja looked ashen.

Malgosia continued, "Neither of us was badly hurt, but after I left I knew it was the last time I'd see her. She sent me a postcard a few weeks later saying that she had to go live with her aunt and that there'd be little point in keeping in touch. That's what would happen to us, only worse. In the end you wouldn't have the baby and you wouldn't have me."

Fresh tears came from both sets of eyes, and I cried too.

"I told myself over and over that this was innocent," Malgosia continued. "You're pregnant; you're about to get married. I tried to convince myself that all I felt for you was friendship, but that's not true."

Malgosia got up and bent over Lucja's body. Her face hovered over Lucja's for a while before settling for a kiss on the hand that she still held. Lucja rose up in the bed and planted her lips on Malgosia's again, this time longer. Their mouths were warm.

Their bodies were warm too, and their pale cheeks filled with color. Lucja lifted a hand and tucked Malgosia's hair behind her ear and then dropped the hand to rest at the nape of Malgosia's neck. Malgosia's hands hung limply, and she moved her head to the side roughly. Lucja paused, but then kissed cheeks once lips were no longer within reach.

"Don't," Malgosia said, "it's too late. It was always too late."

She walked out of the room with a wet face and hands that shook like mad at her sides. Before Malgosia could leave the hospital, she had to walk past Janek and the rest of Lucja's family, who sat in the waiting area. Meanwhile, Lucja fell back onto the bed. She wept until she fell asleep. She dreamed about baby birds flying out of milk bottles to electrical wires, which electrocuted them and tossed them down to the ground, dead.

…

A week before her wedding, Lucja slept most of the day while Janek and Zbigniew packed all of her possessions into two cars.

A few neighbors came to help, and watch, and gossip. Janek and Zbigniew drank shamelessly, passing a bottle of vodka back and forth. They dropped things and laughed. They didn't bother putting anything in any sort of container. The only thing Lucja had packed beforehand was the suitcase she had kissed and put into the car. And, of course, this got dropped too. Everything got quiet after that suitcase fell.

For the last few weeks Lucja had been packing her little suitcase full of things that reminded her of Malgosia: an empty milk bottle, dried flowers, Malgosia's shaky anatomy drawings as well as her school identification card, and finally, a big map of the world, folded up.

"What is this stuff?" Zbigniew said as he and Janek stood over the contents.

Janek didn't say anything and slowly stumbled into the house, into the room where Lucja was sleeping. I heard the sloppy footsteps. For the second time in my life I wished that I could just be somewhere else. Lucja looked up at him in a daze. He stripped her naked. He saw that there was a bruise on her collarbone from the crash. Goosebumps formed on her skin; mine too. And she instinctively put her arms around her stomach, which rose up shyly.

"What's going on?" Lucja asked.

Janek's will dissolved as he looked at her stomach and her sad collarbone.

"I'm sorry," he said as he slowly dressed her.

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes."

"Why?" she asked.

"Why do you think?" was the answer. But it was met with silence. So he asked again, but differently: "Do you still want to marry me?"

"Yes, I do," she said sadly.

"That's good," Janek replied as he pulled up the covers. He looked at Lucja for a moment and then kicked his shoes off and climbed under the covers too. The couple lay belly to belly and I kicked them both.

Once everything was packed up the neighbors stood around talking.

Janek joined Zbigniew in the car.

As they pulled out of the driveway they both heard someone ask: "Shouldn't they move in together after the wedding?"

And the answer: "It doesn't matter."

Janek's face got a little red. Zbigniew saw this and leaned out of his car window to yell, "Don't listen to those old hens," loud enough for everyone to hear, including the hens.

…

For the wedding everyone met in a small wooden church. It was a town small enough that no one had to be formally invited to the weddings; they all just showed up. Old ladies had been praying for hours for the couple's happiness. And the two old drunk men, naturally, were drunk. They sat in the back together, holding hands. I finally understood that one had waited most of his life for the other, but now neither of them knew if it had been worth it.

The ceremony was simple. Two of Lucja's nieces walked at the head of the procession tossing flower petals out of a basket. They giggled as they did this and hurled some of the petals so hard that they fell on the people sitting in pews, but no one minded. The witnesses to the marriage simply brushed the petals off their shoulders.

Behind the little girls, Zbigniew and Malgosia walked tensely together, he in his only suit and she in her only dress; it was brown and ill fitting. They were an odd pair.

And finally, Lucja walked down the aisle. The wedding march was played on the old organ. Lucja's eyes darted from the left to the right side of the altar. She had already decided, yet her eyes still hadn't. No decision can be made wholeheartedly. There is the moment you decide, but then there are thousands of moments afterward when your eyes still dart back and forth between two things. It takes a while to grow into your decision. To Lucja's left, Malgosia drew her breath in sharply, and to Lucja's right Janek drew his breath in sharply.

The room was divided between those who knew and those who didn't know. But then there were still those who really knew. And those who really knew didn't eat the cake.

Solidarność

Piotr Lutynski hung from a coat rack by his school's library door in Sejny, Poland**.** The hood of his jacket was turned inside out and stuck on one of the coat rack's hooks. The jacket dug into his armpits and his arms were starting to tingle; they would fall asleep soon. He was twelve years old. He had blonde hair that would get darker as he got older, but for the time being it shone in the sun like straw. Everyone in the library went about his or her normal business. Kids read their books; one boy even took his coat off the rack. Piotr's face burned with shame, and he fought back tears. He started to swing his body to the right and left. The coat rack, as he intended, moved with him. In a few swings he built up enough speed and strength to knock over the coat rack with a loud crash. It was muffled only a little by the coats. Finally, everyone did look. His face was red, the part in his hair was red, he was panting, his mouth was open and you could clearly see the gap in his teeth. Piotr ran from the room, down the light-green hallway, out the double doors of the school entrance, and down the road, toward home. There was not a day that he did not dread school.

…

Piotr's seven-year old sister Wanda was already at home when he arrived. She was drawing at the kitchen table. They didn't have many colored pencils, and so she was making do with green, purple, and yellow ones. Wanda always arrived at home before Piotr did because she was not required to stay after school in the library like the kids who had trouble doing their homework.

"Piotr! I drew this for you," she said. The picture was of a yellow dog and a brown dog playing together. Piotr could tell that the brown color was made by mixing the green, purple, and yellow together. In the background Wanda had drawn their small house, and the woods behind it.

"It's us playing in front of the house if we were dogs," she explained.

"But we're people."

"I know, but I like drawing dogs better."

"Okay, thank you," Piotr said. "I have something for you too."

He took his math workbook out of his knapsack and opened it up to the page he'd been struggling with at school. All the answers were filled in and many eraser marks were apparent. Wanda did not look closely at the writing though because there, in the middle of the page, lay a dead monarch butterfly. Some of its guts could also be seen on the opposite page.

"It was already dead when I found it," Piotr said when he looked up from the math book and saw Wanda's eyebrows knitting together. He waited for her face to relax and then continued, "I thought you might want to preserve it and study it." Her face brightened with a smile.

“Thank you, Piotr. It’s wonderful!” Wanda gave Piotr a quick, warm hug. He smiled into her shoulder and his fingers brushed against her hair.

Their mother, Eda, walked into the kitchen to find her children at the table smiling at each other. She touched each of them on the shoulder. Wanda had long brown hair that Eda braided for her daily. Eda loved to do this because Wanda’s hair was so thick and strong, just like her father’s. Eda’s own hair was blonde and thin. Eda’s skin was pale and almost translucent in some places, so that you could see the blue veins that ran underneath it—those places were on her right temple, the backside of each arm, across her left armpit, and across her left breast. The visible veins made her look weaker and sicker than she was; people were often scared to touch her. Her husband, Zbigniew, was the first man she’d met who didn’t shy away from her. He said he loved the big, blue vein across her breast because he could see the blood that ran right into her heart.

Behind Eda, in the living room, Zbigniew taped up a brown cardboard box and stacked it on top of another. Their return address was written in black marker. However, no sending address had been added. The sending address would be that of the family’s new home in America. Zbigniew was leaving on a plane for New York the next day. His sister, her husband, and their son were living in a place called Brooklyn. Zbigniew could only bring one suitcase onto the plane, and so the rest of his things had to be mailed.

Zbigniew came into the kitchen as well. Piotr showed him Wanda’s drawing and explained that it was of him and Wanda in front of the house.

“But these are dogs,” Zbigniew said.

“Yeah, but that’s what she likes to draw,” Piotr defended her.

“You should learn to draw people,” Zbigniew concluded.

“I know how to draw people…” Wanda stopped when she saw that her father was no longer paying attention to her.

He was talking to Eda: “I have a final Solidarność meeting I have to attend before I leave.”

“I don’t know why you still need to go. You’re moving out of the country.” Eda said.

“Just because I’m moving doesn’t mean that I don’t care about the movement anymore. No matter where I am, I will always care about how Solidarność brings people together.”

Eda and the kids watched him put on his jacket. He gave them one last wave from the hallway. Then, he was walking out the front door of the house. He was turning on the car; the headlights were shining into the darkening day. He was driving away.

Eda started to prepare dinner while Wanda and Piotr picked up their things and went to the room they shared. One half of the room belonged to Piotr. Over his bed, he tacked up Wanda’s drawing beside other drawings Wanda had given him. Wanda called him over to her side of the room. She took down her new microscope from its spot on her bookshelf; it had been a birthday gift.

She and Piotr placed the dead butterfly between two small pieces of glass and examined it for a long time. When they were done looking at all of complexities that went into a butterfly wing, it was time for dinner. Wanda put her microscope back up on the bookshelf. She kept the butterfly between the two pieces of glass and put that on the shelf too, beside the other gifts Piotr had given her. Most of these gifts were things that Piotr had found along the road on his way home from school. There was the rock that

they both agreed looked like a silhouette of their mother, a beautiful leaf from a tree that they could not find, a broken golden bracelet, and some wire Piotr had bent into the shape of a flower. She treasured them all.

The children were accustomed to giving one another gifts because this was something their mother had always done for them whenever their father employed his discipline methods. He often yelled at them, called them names, and kicked things at them. Once, he had even chipped Piotr's tooth. The tooth had been fixed but with a material slightly whiter than Piotr's own teeth.

After Zbigniew had called Piotr a "retard," Eda had knit Piotr a lovely pair of mittens. When Zbigniew threw Wanda's books at her (she had left them on the dinner table after coming home from school and forgotten to remove them before dinner was ready), Eda had made Wanda a special after-dinner desert. She had delivered it to Wanda's room after Zbigniew had gone out for the evening. Eda had found Piotr and Wanda sitting on Wanda's bed. Piotr was wiping tears off of Wanda's face. The three of them ended up sitting on the bedroom floor and sharing the desert. If Zbigniew had been there he would have said they were eating like pigs. Although Eda tried to intervene in her husband's disciplining of the children, she usually found herself disciplined then as well.

…

The morning after Piotr and Wanda had examined their butterfly, they stood on the front step of their house. They were shoulder to shoulder, because Piotr was small for his age and Wanda was tall for her age.

It was so early that the air was foggy and cold, even though this was just the beginning of fall and the day was going to be warm.

Piotr and Wanda's parents were getting into their small red car. Their father's suitcase was in the backseat. He was in the passenger's seat with a hangover, and their mother was in the driver's seat. Before pulling away, she stuck her head out the window, smiled and waved to the children. She hadn't washed her hair, and it looked especially flat. Her smile looked forced. Beneath her shirt, the vein to her heart was so full of blood it felt like it might burst.

She had decided that since Piotr was twelve and Wanda was very mature for her age, it would be okay to leave them alone until the next day. Their father did not turn in his seat to wave. He felt too sick, and he already had given the children a limp good-bye hug. His hair was uncombed and he was due for a haircut, which he had refused to get in Poland, saying that he'd prefer an American haircut. As Piotr and Wanda watched the car pull away, their father's unkempt hair got smaller and smaller. Eventually they had to squint to see it at all. Then they had to squint to see the back of their parents' seats, and then they had to squint to see the back of the car. Once there was nothing left to squint at, Piotr and Wanda went back inside.

…

A few weeks before that the Lutynskis had been a complete nuclear family unit. And like any family unit, they had their routines.

Zbigniew and Eda's routine solidified the distance growing between them. In the past, they had had long, wonderful conversations before falling asleep, even when Zbigniew had come to bed tipsy. Sometimes this had even made him more animated.

However, over the last few years, Zbigniew had become very caught up in the Independent and Self-governing Trade Union, known also as Solidarność, and had needed to stay out later and later. If he made it home before daybreak at all, Eda was already asleep. They saw each other briefly, in the mornings, when Eda would be paying more attention to getting her kids ready for school.

Wanda and Piotr were best friends everywhere but at school, where their grades kept them apart. But at home and everywhere else, they treated each other like intellectual peers. Wanda could read better than Piotr. For Piotr, words tangled together on the page. He had been ridiculed for quite a while in the third grade after he was asked to read aloud but said he couldn't because "the words were hugging". He was called many names after that, but the one that seemed to stick the longest was "fag". This was not helped by the fact that Piotr's best friend at school happened to be an effeminate boy named Michalek.

Wanda and Piotr walked to school together. Once at school, Wanda replaced her brother's friendship with the friendship of most of her second grade class. At seven years old she had already learned that doing little things for people could mean a lot to them. Since she was among the top students in her class, she was always happy to stop what she was doing and help her classmates who were having trouble. The class would not move on until everyone had demonstrated that he or she had learned the lesson. Whenever there was class work in which partners or groups were assigned, everyone wanted to be with Wanda. The other top students would not help their classmates and instead preferred one another's company; they finished their projects early and spent the rest of the time looking down upon their classmates. However, Wanda would work with her

group until everyone understood what was going on, and if there was time left over she would help other groups too. Her nickname was “little teacher” and both the students and her teacher, Ms. Malinowska, used it. It was complimentary when coming from everyone but the other top students.

…

Before her father left for America, Wanda would usually spend her Saturdays with Piotr. However, after her father’s departure, Wanda changed: she could be found with anyone but her brother. One particular Saturday, a month after Zbigniew had left, she was at the school playground with her friend, Angelika. Angelika had had thick, curly, brown hair until one of her brothers chopped it off. Angelika had been wrongly accused of having broken the television remote, and in defending herself had ended up pointing the finger at her brother. Now she had a sloppy bowl cut that she tried to wear with pride.

The girls jumped rope with Angelika’s rope and played hula-hoop with Wanda’s hula-hoop. Two older boys approached, walking their bikes. Wanda recognized them as boys who had bullied her brother. They were both named Tomek, and they looked almost identical although they weren’t related at all. They were both tall, redheaded, and freckled to the point of being brown. The only difference was that one had a slightly bigger gut, a sign that he was wealthier.

It was an incredibly still Saturday afternoon. Clouds had hovered over the town all day and had refused to leave or to rain. The boys walked over toward the girls. The boys left their bikes at the curb and, as they reached the girls, the thinner Tomek snatched Wanda’s hula-hoop away from her. He had caught it in mid-air and tugged Wanda, who

was in mid-hula, toward himself. She had staggered forward and watched with wide eyes as the thinner Tomek had lifted her hula-hoop off above her head. She had witnessed moments like this before, but had never really experienced them firsthand. Things like this had happened to her friends. They happened almost every day to her brother.

The Tomek who had taken the hoop swung it on his arm, making big circles in the air. "Is this yours?" he casually asked Wanda.

If this had happened a few weeks before her father had left, she would have known how to handle the situation. She would have laughed it off. But these days she was walking around looking like a shadow. It was an invitation to be bullied; she'd made herself an easy target.

"Yes," she answered. If only she had answered, "yes" with a laugh in her throat.

"Oh no, it's not."

Angelika said, "Oh yes, it is. Wanda, don't let them do this to you."

"You're Piotr's little sister, aren't you?"

Wanda nodded.

"Where is that fag?"

"I don't know."

"He's probably sucking his friend's dick," one Tomek said to the other.

"I don't think he is," Wanda said sheepishly, but the boys ignored her. The thinner Tomek tossed the hula-hoop to the fatter Tomek in the air. It whizzed right by Wanda's nose. She took a step back, and her eyes began to water.

"Give it back."

"Was that a question?"

"Give it back, please."

Angelika was surprised by the way this bullying was unfolding. She had always looked up to Wanda. Wanda seemed to be an especially unafraid person. In the classroom Wanda dared to raise her hand even when the question seemed very hard. When they played, Wanda was not scared to climb tall trees and then jump off them. Angelika stood behind and to the side of Wanda; she took her shoulder and whispered into Wanda's left ear, "Don't ask them; tell them."

The boys overheard.

"Yeah, don't ask us; tell us," they said mockingly.

"What are you guys going to do with a hula-hoop anyway?" Angelika asked. "You don't even have little sisters. Are you two gonna play with it?"

"No, but I'm sure we could find something to do with it," the fatter Tomek said as he held the hula-hoop thoughtfully. He offered the other end to his thinner friend, and together they stretched the circle into an oval shape. Knowing that it could only go so far before it was permanently bent out of shape, Wanda finally stepped up to face them.

"Give it back now! What do you gain by breaking it? You're just bored!" Her voice still quavered, and tears ran down her cheeks to the corners of her mouth, but the boys had heard and understood.

The thinner Tomek released his end of the hula-hoop, and the fatter one rolled it back to Wanda, and she stopped it at her side.

"Okay, we're only giving it back because you started crying. Stop acting like a baby. You're seven." The boys must have felt a little ashamed, because they walked away.

"You can't let them push you around like that, Wanda. They only do it because they feel like they can." Angelika squeezed her shoulder. This was a shoulder that was now shrinking considerably, on a girl that herself was shrinking considerably. This was a shoulder that now shook easily with every sob that Wanda let out. Angelika hugged her.

"You okay?" Angelika asked uncertainly. The way Wanda cried reminded Angelika more of the way that her own mother cried, not the way another kid cried.

Soon after that Saturday, Wanda came home with a note from school saying that she had started to get to school late every day, that she sat in the back of the classroom instead of the front, that she would cry for no reason a few times each day, and that she took too long in the bathroom.

…

As Wanda walked home from school by herself two weeks later, the season's first snow fell. The snow was damp and melted quickly as it hit her. Before long, her shoes and jacket were wet. It was early November. Her father had been gone for almost two months. In a month the rest of them were supposed to move to America as well, but no plans had been made yet.

Wanda walked towards her front door but hesitated in the yard because there was an unfamiliar man at the front door talking to her mother. Wanda could see only the back of the man's head. However, she could make out her mother's mouth drawn into a thin, stern line and occasionally moving in the shape of the word "no." Her mother was wearing an apron over a pair of pants and wool sweater; her arms were crossed. Finally, her mother uncrossed her arms and reached into the purse she had hanging by the door

and handed the man some money. Wanda couldn't help but move closer now. She was shivering, and her mother noticed her and waved for her to come inside.

"This is all I have," her mother said as she released the money. The man turned to walk away. He and Wanda passed each other on the steps up to the house. The man wore a winter hat and a jacket. Some hair poked out from underneath the hat, looking unkempt. It reminded her of her father's hair, only this man's hair was lighter. The man had an especially red nose and red cheeks, also like her father.

As Wanda climbed the last stair up to the house she could distinctly see the vein on her mother's right temple as it throbbed. She also saw her mother's shirt move once or twice, right over the heart.

"Do you have something to say?" Eda asked her daughter.

"Who was that?"

"One of your father's Solidarność associates—apparently your father owed him some money."

"Why did he owe him money?" Wanda said.

"Never mind, let's go inside. It's cold out here."

Eda put her arm around Wanda as they walked into the small house together. Wanda thought that she could distinctly feel the blood pumping through her mother's arm despite all the layers of Eda's clothing.

…

Wanda arrived to school late every day because she no longer walked there with Piotr. She waited until he had left already, which often meant pretending to be asleep longer or acting like she'd forgotten something at the last minute.

One day as she walked to school she caught sight of Piotr not too far ahead of her. He leaned against a tree with his head tilted up. At first Wanda thought that maybe Piotr was watching a bird build a nest up there, but as she got closer she saw that he'd tilted his head in order to try and control the blood dripping from his nose. Piotr swiped the back of his hand across his face and wiped it on his shirt. He slid down the length of the tree until he was sitting on the ground.

Wanda thought to herself that maybe if she had been walking with Piotr, he wouldn't have been beat up on the way to school. She had no way of knowing; she was still too scared to walk with him. Still, she couldn't help but imagine the Tomeks seeing Piotr on their way to school. Perhaps Piotr had already stopped by the tree and really had been watching a nest being built, and then one Tomek had nudged the other with his elbow and pointed at Piotr with his chin. The other Tomek had nodded and grinned as they walked over with clenched fists.

She stopped where she was and watched Piotr from behind a tree until he picked up his book bag, slung it over one shoulder, and continued cautiously to school. Wanda waited a while and then continued on herself.

…

That Saturday Eda met with Wanda's second grade teacher, who could have been visiting her boyfriend in Suwalki that day, but had stayed in Sejny for the meeting, and made a point of saying so. The classroom was decorated with children's drawings. Most recently the class had made snowflakes by folding pieces of paper and cutting them. These hung from the ceiling.

Basia Malinowska was not an incredible teacher. She had noticed that Wanda was not herself only after Basia's own job started becoming more difficult. She had to spend longer on lessons and give more examples. She was the kind of teacher who treated her best students with care and attention and wished that the other students weren't there.

"Eda, what do you think is making your daughter so upset?"

"I don't know. I suppose it could be many things. Maybe she misses her father. Maybe she is scared to move. Maybe this, maybe that…" Eda trailed off. She was tired. You could see it in the way her sweaters had started to drape off her. You could see it in her eyes; she had circles under them so dark that they seemed blue.

"When are you moving?" the teacher asked.

"Probably right before Christmas, so we can all be together for the holidays. And if not, then during the summer, after the kids finish school."

"That's nice." The teacher was very composed. She wore a turtleneck sweater with a knee-length skirt and thick stockings. Like everyone else in town, she could not be sure if this family was truly moving to America as they said, or if Eda and her children had finally been abandoned by Zbigniew and were simply going to move back to Eda's mother's town to live there. And lately, Eda wasn't sure herself.

"It's probably the move. I mean, all her friends are here. She will have to learn English. We've been listening to some tapes that are supposed to help you learn," Eda said. "But you know what they say—you learn best by being there and speaking the language," she added with forced cheerfulness.

This meeting's only success was to make Eda worry more about her life. Zbigniew had yet to contact her with their new address in New York. She had men coming to the door claiming that Zbigniew owed them money; it had not taken her long to realize that these were Zbigniew's old drinking buddies, who were used to coming to him for money and receiving it. Wanda cried often and almost never spoke above a whisper. She had started to carry a rosary and if she wasn't speaking in a whisper she was silently moving her lips and squeezing the beads between her fingers. Piotr was still having trouble at school, and the bullying seemed to be getting more severe, but he just made up excuses for how he got his bruises.

…

"Mom, will you take me to confession?" Wanda asked the next Saturday. Christmas was not far off. It was customary for people to go to confession on Wednesday, Friday, or Saturday so that by Sunday morning their consciences were clear and they were ready to receive the communion, especially around Christmas. However, Wanda was only seven. She had not received her First Communion yet.

"Why do you want to go to confession?"

"I need to confess."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I can't." Wanda shook her head and hugged herself with her arms.

"Okay, we can go," Eda said. She handed Wanda's coat to her and then put on her own. She took Wanda's hand as they stepped out the door.

It had become much colder since the first snow and had snowed every day since. Near Eda's home was a lake and across the lake was the church they attended. Usually,

they would take the car there and drive around the lake, but Eda suggested they try the lake out to see if it had frozen over.

They ice skated on their shoes. Eda walked a bit ahead and held her daughter's hand tightly; the sun was bright. Briefly, they both felt good. But when Eda turned back to smile at Wanda, she saw that Wanda's eyes had become fixated on the crucifix at the top of the church steeple. Birds were flying around the cross, but Wanda's eyes did not move to follow them.

Wanda finally locked eyes with her mother once the girl felt the blood pumping through her mother's hand, through her mother's glove, through her own glove and into her own hand.

The inside of the church was dark and moody. Most of the people there were very old women, lighting candles, fingering their rosary beads, and waiting in line for confession. Wanda waited with them.

When she finally got into the booth she said, "Father, I would like to confess."

"How old are you?" Was the reply.

"I'm seven."

"Who is this?"f

"I'm not supposed to say, right?"

She heard some banging and the priest walked out of his half of the confession booth and opened the door to her half. The booth was a simple wooden box. The priest emerging from his side had caught everyone's attention. Old, short women peeked over the heads of old, taller women in order to see.

"Little Wanda Lutynski, what are you doing here?"

Wanda looked up at him from where she was kneeling on the velvet step. Her hands were pressed together in front of her face and she slowly lowered them before saying, “I want to confess.”

“But you’re too young.”

“But I want to.”

“Okay, how about you go and kneel in a pew with your mother and confess there, in your head. It will go directly to God.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then why doesn’t everyone else do that too?”

“It’s because they’re older than you, and they have a harder time getting in touch with God.”

“What about my penance?”

“God will let you know.”

Wanda nodded sternly and walked back over to the pew where her mother was sitting. Wanda kneeled and looked up into the large picture of the Virgin Mary behind the altar. She looked so serene and angels were holding up parts of the bed sheets she was wearing. Wanda noticed that the Virgin Mary was barefoot and was standing on the devil.

Wanda pressed her palms and fingertips together and concentrated very hard. After a while her face lost some of its tenseness and she leaned forward wide-eyed. She stayed that way for a long time. She stared intently at the candle flickering on the altar; perhaps it was supposed to provide her with her penance.

Eda's blood clumsily and nervously made its way around her body. She remembered a girl from her childhood who, like Wanda, had become deeply religious and who, like Wanda, had stopped speaking above a whisper. When the girl was seventeen she had thrown herself off the town bridge in the middle of the night. No one knew why for certain. Her father who lived alone with her moved away soon after and was said to have drunk himself to death. Most people suspected that she had killed herself because she was pregnant with her father's child.

…

The boys had been relentless with Piotr. They were twelve and would tease each other mercilessly over any unexpected stiffness. Every boy got his turn; the only difference was that some could take it better than others. A beloved line of defense was to say that it was big, and you had used it, preferably with a girl. The stories could be as imaginative as dreams. Most of the boys would not know that they had been lied to until much later in their lives. The tales they heard would often be physical impossibilities.

Although it was easy to pick on Piotr about many things—his height, his puny shoulders, his gapped teeth, his freckled face, and his trouble with learning—it was especially rewarding to pick on him about his awkwardness with girls. The only females Piotr spoke to comfortably were his teacher, his mother, and his sister.

When Piotr saw a girl he thought was pretty he did not know what to say; he was overwhelmed by a feeling that he described as "almost being able to fly". He would smile at the girl and follow her around as if pulled by an invisible string. Anywhere she was, he would be nearby. The girl would whisper to her friends, they would giggle, and they would look over to where Piotr was standing. He would usually be only one or two

meters away. He would smile at them, and look as if he were about to say something. His mouth would go from a smile to just hanging open. This always made his gapped teeth and his one chipped tooth even more prominent. They looked as though there was not enough room for them in his mouth, as if they wanted to jump out. Whenever his mother found him open-mouthed, she would silently correct him by gently pushing his lower jaw up to meet the rest of his head. Wanda had adopted this habit as well.

The only other way Piotr knew to show affection was to give gifts to the girls he thought were pretty. The lake near their house was often filled with frogs and tadpoles. When it rained, small puddles formed everywhere along the dirt roads, and you could find small frogs and tadpoles in it. Once when Piotr was walking home with Eda she had pointed them out. He found them to be so beautiful that later, Eda ran outside with an empty jar and came home with some tadpoles for Piotr so that he could watch them grow. Piotr loved this gift a lot and the next day took one of the tadpoles with him to school in his pocket. He tried to decide who the prettiest and nicest girl in his class was. Once he found her he walked up to her desk, removed the tadpole from his pocket, and put it on her notebook. The girl slammed the notebook shut and spent a half hour screaming. Piotr cried, saying she had killed it, although it had died in his pocket on the way to school.

The only true story about sex Piotr ever heard came from his best friend Michalek. Michalek had recently gone to visit his aunt, uncle, and cousins who lived a few towns over. His parents said that way they could get the visit out of the way before the holidays. Otherwise, they would have to bring presents. Michalek's family stayed with his aunt and uncle for a weekend, arriving on Friday night and leaving on Sunday

morning. All the proper beds in the house were taken up by adults and so all the children slept in the living room on couches and beds made by pushing two chairs together. Michalek had the good luck to sleep next to one of his cousins who was about the same age. During the night each boy discovered he was stiff. And because of a slight misunderstanding, that being that each boy thought he was touching himself at first, they each had their first successful sexual experience with another person. Piotr looked at his friend once the story was over; he saw that Michalek's lips were trembling. He was squeezing his hands together. He was looking down and his eyelashes made little moon crescents on his cheeks.

"Didn't it just feel like doing it to yourself?" asked Piotr.

"Not really," Michalek said quietly. "It was nicer."

...

The day their mother had driven their father to the airport, Piotr and Wanda had stomped around the house, throwing a roll of coarse brown toilet paper back and forth until it came undone. They rolled it up and repeated the procedure. They sang loudly the dirty songs that they had heard sung in the playground. They stuck their heads out the window and yelled at drivers who passed by. Soon they were drunk with power, they wore their parents' clothes, they found the chocolate, and they kept the TV set on all day.

After playing house for a long time, Wanda said, "Can we play astronauts now? Look, the moon is out!"

This was one of the rare days when you could see the moon in daylight. It looked eerie and unreal. Wanda sat on one windowsill facing out, and Piotr sat on another. "Are you ready, captain?" Wanda asked.

"Yes, captain," Piotr answered. They were co-captains.

“Our mission today is to fly to the moon, collect moon rocks, fight the aliens and get back in one piece.”

Then they were off. They flew past clusters of stars. They passed other space ships, manned also by kids around their age. Some wore helmets. Others had fashioned capes out of bed sheets, but Wanda and Piotr went as they were. Their mission was a success, and on the way home Piotr wanted to sit next to Wanda and let her fly the ship herself because he’d become so exhausted fighting the aliens. She complied and was proud to be the solo pilot. However, they encountered a lot of turbulence on the way home. The spaceship shook so much that Piotr often had to put his arms around her in order to help her remain steady. That was the only way she could fly the aircraft without crashing into a nearby planet.

Once they were safely back on earth, they decided to go for a walk, as it was not dark yet, and they had grown tired of being in the house all day.

They wanted to walk over to the big open fields where cows usually roamed until sunset. By the time Wanda and Piotr got there, they could have the fields all to themselves. The quickest way was to walk into the woods behind their house, follow the path they had made themselves and marked with sticks. As they went along their path, the sky slowly darkened through the tree branches. The moon was high up now, and Piotr told Wanda a story about how the moon was really a man who was always watching the people on earth.

Wanda asked, “Why does he watch us? To protect us?”

Piotr said, “I don’t know.”

Wanda had more questions, but they all left her mind when with her next step she kicked a paw. She grabbed Piotr's arm and they stopped to look. What they saw was two wolves. Each wolf was biting the other's neck and appeared to have died doing that. They appeared to have been there for quite some time. Other living things had started to eat them, and both of their bellies had trails of innards coming out of them. The wolves' teeth were still bared. Their heads flopped to the side unnaturally.

"Are you sure they're not dogs?" Wanda said.

"I think they're too big to be dogs," Piotr said.

"Why do you think they did that?" Wanda said.

"I don't know. Maybe they were fighting over a girl." He bent closer and was about to touch one of the open throats but Wanda pulled him back saying, "Piotr, don't!"

He felt that the hands that grabbed him and pulled him back were shaking. He understood that she must be scared and so he said, "Okay, let's go home."

As they turned back and followed their path home the sun set completely and the only light came from the moon. Wanda had decided that the moon was watching them only to watch them. He would not save or protect them from anything, but he would know everything.

At home they ate and watched television until it was time for bed. When that time came Piotr said, "Let's be Mom and Dad."

Wanda laughed and said, "Okay, I'll be Dad." She ran over to the cabinet where they both knew their father hid his alcohol. The bottle she found was half full and held a brown liquid.

Piotr laughed at her and said, "No, I get to be Dad."

He took the bottle out of her hands, opened it, and took a swig. He made a face and said, “This tastes awful! How can he drink this?”

Wanda pouted because Piotr had taken the bottle from her and said, “Let me try.”

Piotr handed it to her and she took a swig as well.

“It’s not so bad,” she concluded, though it took a lot of effort for her to keep from twisting her face up the way he did.

He took it back from her and this time took two swigs. They continued on this way, and soon they were falling over each other laughing. Wanda no longer worried about the wolves or the moon.

Since they were still playing house and they were Dad and Mom—though it was not clear which of them ended up being Dad and which ended up being Mom—they slept in their parents’ bed.

They initially fell asleep very easily but Piotr awoke in the middle of the night with a stiffness on Wanda’s leg. She did not seem to notice, or maybe she did not mind. Piotr touched the leg against which he lay and Wanda didn’t say anything, only sighed. He thought that meant something and soon was curious enough to climb on top of her. Wanda opened her eyes. She felt unsteady even though she was lying down. She couldn’t even speak. Wanda just stared at the moon, and it stared at her. The next morning Wanda awoke knowing she and Piotr were both doomed.

Meat Store

On a muggy day in August of 1993, a man drove a borrowed car to La Guardia International airport. He had a difficult time finding a parking spot. The people he had come to pick up were international travelers who were wandering around their terminal and had began to feel stranded and panicked.

When he finally found them, he hugged the woman first and then the two children at once. The little girl was holding a pink stuffed animal meant to resemble a rabbit wearing a tie. The boy was clutching the straps of his book bag. When the man put his arms around them, the children did not reciprocate. None of them had said a word yet and after he'd hugged all of them, they all took a step back to consider one another. The woman and her children stood in a row, and he looked at them in turn. The woman was thinner, the boy was slightly taller, and the girl seemed to have developed a nervous tic that made her play with her rabbit's tie. To them, the man himself appeared younger. His face was plumper. He was wearing a Hawaiian print shirt, which none of them had ever seen before. A pair of sunglasses dangled from a string around his neck. Neither the mother, nor her children had never seen him wear a color before that wasn't black, brown, or gray.

"You're all grown up," he said to the children.

“What are you wearing?” asked the woman.

He assured them that this was what everyone wore here, yet the woman and her children did not see anyone in the busy terminal wearing anything that resembled the man’s outfit.

As they got into the car the man said, “Let me take you home.”

The woman gave a slight chortle. As he drove, she imagined that this man, her husband, was going to drive the car through Queens, into Long Island, then onto the beach at the very tip of the island and into the Atlantic ocean. She imagined the children looking with wonder at all the sea creatures they saw as they drove over the ocean floor. Water leaked into the car, but only slightly, wetting only their feet. The water was warm so they didn’t mind. Once they drove out of the water they were in France, where the kids swore they saw Jacques Cousteau waving at them. Then they went through Germany where the children tried to keep count of all the dogs they saw. (In the end they agreed that collectively they saw between 67 and 72 dogs). Next came Poland, and this was where the children’s faces got expectant as they looked out the windows for things they might recognize. They drove past the house of their grandparents, who were outside by the front door waving, past the children’s school where the principal, his wife, and their daughter waved too. Finally, the car pulled into a driveway, which was made up of tiny rocks that caused the car shake a little until it stopped and the children threw their respective doors open, ran up to the front door of a small white house, left their things there and ran behind the house to play in the woods.

But her husband took a turn towards Brooklyn instead. The woman glanced at her kids in the back seat every so often. They were both looking out their windows and

contemplating a city where the heat was so strong that it seeped into the car and made the sky look like it was wavering. She had been hoping to see a smile or a look of awe on her children's faces. The boy's mouth hung open, but she knew that it hung that way out of habit and did not necessarily indicate any feeling. She reached back and gently pushed his chin up so that his teeth met, then she moved her arm across to the other side of the backseat where she touched her daughter's cheek. Her daughter, in response, took a break from looking pensive and gave her mother a slight smile. The woman's arm moved back towards her own body in the front seat, but not before softly running her hand down her daughter's thick braid, which after a long plane ride was a bit tussled and should have been re-braided.

The man drove with his window open. His elbow peeked out of the car at other elbows peeking out of their windows. He liked to honk the horn and lean his whole head out the window sometimes and yell at those other elbows.

"What are you saying?" his son asked.

In response, the man repeated the words he'd just said, but more quietly. The boy repeated after him, and the man laughed, but still didn't explain what he'd said.

By the time the family arrived at their home in Brooklyn, the sun was low in the sky. It hid behind most of the buildings that they passed and then popped up again at intersections, hitting the right side of everyone's head, and so every now and again each right eye in the car squinted.

The man parked the car in front of a fire hydrant. For a moment the Lutynski family stood together like a set of statues, their luggage looking like the base of the rock they were carved from.

Tags on the suitcases read Eda Lutynski for the woman, Piotr Lutynski for her son, and Wanda Lutynski for her daughter.

"What floor do we live on?" Wanda asked as she looked up at the four-story brownstone.

Her father replied, "Zero," and led his family down to the basement. There the label by the buzzer read "Zbigniew Lutynski".

Once inside he said: "This half is for us," and vaguely indicated one half of the room they were standing in. One half of the room had a bed, a couch, a kitchen table, a sink, and a refrigerator. "The rest is used for storage by the couple that lives upstairs and owns the building."

Eda and her children looked up at the ceiling as though they'd be able to look through it. If they could, they'd have seen a dumpy, middle-aged Jewish couple with no children: a woman who always wore a dress with an apron over it when she was home and a man who wore slacks and a collared shirt—all of the shirts with identical sweat marks under the arms. The couple would walk around the apartment together, one usually following the other, sometimes yelling, other times just complaining. Eda and her children would see the couple cooking and cleaning, and a few times they'd catch the man and woman smiling despite themselves.

Clearing his throat, Zbigniew got his family's attention back and showed them where the refrigerator was; a Polish grocery store's business card was stuck onto the refrigerator with a strawberry magnet. He'd stocked the refrigerator with food from the store. He said that it was all authentic Polish food though the woman and her children had never heard of the companies that made it. This was food that Eda usually prepared

from scratch back home, like pierogis, kielbasa, and even cheese—which she had made from milk that she hung by the sink in cheesecloth. Zbigniew turned the stove on and off. He showed them the bathroom—which had a toilet, sink, and shower—but no bathtub; it was the only room besides the main room in the apartment. There he turned the water on and off in the sink and in the shower. There were lazy cockroaches in the shower that only scattered when threatened with water; they didn't run when the light was turned on. He also flushed the toilet, as if Eda and her children didn't already know how to do that.

Then Zbigniew said he had to go return the car and that he'd be back soon. Eda made dinner for herself and the children by heating up some pierogis, which was not a favorite food for the children, nor for Eda.

After dinner they unpacked the few things they'd brought with them. Wanda made a small pile of books and put her microscope on top of them. Piotr taped up drawings Wanda had made for him in Poland, one of them made as recently as the previous day. Eda took out a tape player and put it on the small table by the bed; she then took out the English tapes they had started listening to in Sejny, Poland and turned one on. She made tea for herself and Wanda, and they sat on the floor sorting through photographs taken recently of themselves and their old house in Poland. Piotr was in the bathroom scaring the cockroaches, which for generations had not been threatened by a young, curious boy. The cockroaches did not know to run when he stomped his feet, and at least eleven of them died the first time his foot met the ground. All the while the tape played; it said, "Czesc, jak sie masz?" and then "Hi, how are you?"

Eda and Wanda said, "Hi, how are you!" Piotr echoed them from the bathroom.

“What’s your name?” They all answered with their names.

“Where are you going?” Piotr asked the cockroaches, and crushed six more with his feet.

“How long have you lived here?”

“One day!” they all answered their English question in Polish.

“Where is the bathroom?”

“Here!” Piotr declared, with his arms raised over his head—having killed every cockroach in sight. (The rest of them had found hiding places, which to their horror, were where they had to live from then on).

“What would you like for dinner?”

“We already had dinner,” Wanda told the tape.

Eventually they went to bed. They all fit on the bed, though it was small. Piotr asked if he could sleep in the middle but Eda said no. They left the sofa empty for Zbigniew to sleep on because they expected him to come back that night, but he did not return.

In the morning, Eda was awakened by the phone ringing. Her arms were around her children. Piotr was on her right side and Wanda was on her left side, with her ear to her mother’s heart. The ringing of the phone was startling to them because the room was so bare and there was hardly anything to muffle the sound. Eda’s blood, which had been swimming quietly through her, now pounded through veins and arteries like a runner, and Wanda’s head rose and fell with each beat. Eda got up carefully, and Wanda turned to face the other direction and tried to sleep again, while Piotr lay on his back with his eyes open, his arms under his head. He listened to his mother’s side of the conversation.

“Hallo?” she said instead of the English “hello.”

Then, she continued speaking in Polish, “Oh, hi,” instead of “where are you?” which indicated that it was not Zbigniew who was calling.

Eda shuffled over to a drawer in the kitchen area, opened the drawer and looked in.

“Yes,” she said.

This was followed by more silence on Eda’s part.

Then, “Okay” and “Thank you” and “Bye.”

Eda hung up the phone and said, “That was your aunt, Lucja.”

Both of her children appeared to be asleep, and so Eda dressed quietly. She took some money out of the drawer. She took the business card off the refrigerator and softly closed the front door behind her.

Outside people wore sweaters because they felt the chill of the coming autumn, but to Eda it still felt hot in comparison to the weather in Sejny, where autumn started in July. Eda couldn’t help but stare at the people she passed. There was a deli on the corner of her street, where teenage boys stood in ripped jeans chewing gum and smoking cigarettes. When they saw her staring, one of them winked. Eda looked at the ground. She walked farther and passed by an orthodox Jewish man holding his daughter’s hand. His daughter was tiny, even for her age, which appeared to be four or five, and when the father noticed Eda looking he tugged the girl closer to himself. Then she passed a couple who was arguing, both looking as though they hadn’t changed their clothes in days. She wondered how long they had been standing in the street arguing, perhaps all morning, perhaps since the night before, perhaps for weeks—since before Eda and her children

even arrived in the United States. When the couple saw her looking, the woman barked, "What the fuck are you looking at?" which Eda did not understand, though the tone was perfectly clear. She looked at ground again and did not notice the red light as she was about to cross the street. A white jeep whizzed right past her and someone screamed, "Hey!" from inside, to which she instinctively called back, "Czesc!" and then felt stupid, for one because she had used the wrong language, and also because she realized that the voice wasn't saying hello at all.

She stepped backwards until she was on the sidewalk again, and then she looked up across the street. On the corner was a lively and bustling store with people coming and going; it had a large red awning with the silhouette of an eagle in red on it. Eda recognized it not only from the Polish flag, but also as the image on the small business card in her breast pocket. The store was proudly called "THE POLISH EAGLE!"

When she walked in she was greeted by a tall boy who said, "Czesc!" enthusiastically.

She replied—in Polish, "Hi, I'm looking for a job—can you help me?"

"I don't understand what you're saying. 'Czesc' is the only Polish word I know."

"Hi…job…help?" she said, trying out her English for the first time.

The tall boy still looked a little confused but he said, "Here, come with me."

Eda looked at him until he explained through gestures what he wanted her to do. She followed him through the store past the dried goods, the teas, the sweets, and into the back where the deli was, then past the deli into the back of the store where large hunks of meat hung from hooks and a few people in bloody aprons glanced up from their work to see who was there but glanced back down just as quickly, as if seeing a lost-looking

stranger pass through was something they were used to. The tall boy pointed at a wooden door, which led to a small office. It also had two little windows that looked out into the meat room. Eda saw a fat man sitting at a large desk inside; behind him a Polish flag was pinned to the wall.

The tall boy knocked on the door; he poked his head in and said a few words before turning back to Eda and gesturing with his head that she ought to go in.

"Tank you," she said, trying out a bit more of her English. She walked past him into the office.

"Hello, miss," said the fat man in Polish. He had a round face with prominent cheeks that made him look like a hamster, and gray hair creeping up his head, starting above the ears. He was the man that all men dreamed of being when they left Poland. He had come to America and succeeded. He owned something. He was a leader. He had stayed true to his heritage. This was what he told her and then asked, "When did you get to the United States?"

"Yesterday."

"And you're looking for a job already? What about your husband?"

"I think we should each have our own job."

"What about your kids? Don't you have any?"

"Yes, but they are old enough to go to school."

"How old are they?"

"Eight and thirteen."

"Okay. The little one needs to go to something called 'Elementary School,' and the bigger one needs to go to something called 'Middle School'." He said both school

names in English and wrote them down on a piece of paper for Eda along with the addresses. "I know this," he explained, "because I have kids around their ages too and this is where they go to school. They're both very smart."

"How long have you lived here?" Eda asked.

"Fifteen years—both of my kids were born here. Here is a picture of them." He turned a picture frame on his desk towards her. In the picture a tall, blonde girl in a pink t-shirt had her arm around a young brown-haired boy wearing an Aerosmith t-shirt.

"They're lovely," Eda said wondering what "aerosmith" meant.

"So listen, I can give you a job. It's not going to be the best job. I can't put you in the front because you don't speak any English yet. I'll start you out back here, and as your English improves, we can move you towards the front."

"Tank you," she said.

"No, it's pronounced 'thank you' with a 'thhhhh' sound," he said. He showed her how to make the "th" sound by putting his tongue up to his teeth.

"Thhhhh," she said.

"Good. You start tomorrow at six a.m. Wear something that can get dirty."

He got up and led her to the door. He shook her hand. She noticed that she was taller than him and that his suit pants bunched up at the bottom. She wondered why he didn't have his wife hem the pants, but she did not ask.

He closed his door and Eda looked at the other people working in the meat room. They had glanced up at her again. She smiled and nodded. They nodded back. She walked to the front of the store where the tall boy was standing again. He held the door open for her. She said, "Thank you." He said, "Czesc!"

...

Three weeks passed during which Eda learned from her boss, Artur Lewski, that their neighborhood had a vibrant Polish community—the epicenter of which was his store THE POLISH EAGLE!—but that there were also quite a few Jews and Puerto Ricans to look out for. She walked to work while the sun rose and donned a white hat and apron to work in the meat room. She taught the tall boy in the front a new Polish word each day, and he taught her an English one. In the meat room, she worked alongside two men and two women, all of whom had also arrived recently from Poland. With their help, Eda realized that Artur Lewski considered THE POLISH EAGLE! to be an Ellis Island of sorts. His store was inevitably where every new Polish person in the neighborhood ended up, often by getting a job there. He considered himself to be doing a great service to his community. When the neighborhood had its annual culture parade, Artur Lewski was at the head of the Polish section. Even so, the workers of the meat room called him "The Statue of Liberty" behind his back and laughed.

As time passed, Eda got to know her four co-workers better: There was Maciek, who was twenty-two and had finished college in Poland. Each week, he sent half of his paycheck home to his mother in Poland and then spent the other half on books. The first book he bought was a Polish-English dictionary, the second was on American History. Now he was buying the classics, Dickens and Chekov and trying to read in English what he'd already read in Polish.

Then there were Andrzei and Dorota, who were a married couple. They had been in the United States for five months and now their main objective was to learn how to argue in English. They were starting out slow, with just the swears. Dorota would yell a

sentence in Polish and finish it with “prick!” Andrzei would yell back and finish it with “asshole!” Mr. Lewski would stick his head out of his office door and roar, “shut up!”

Finally there was Adel, who never smiled. She had lived in America for two years and knew English fairly well but was never moved up to the front of the store because she looked too “uninviting” according to Mr. Lewski. The only time she was at the front of the store was when she took one of her eight smoking breaks during the day. She was Eda’s best friend in the meat room and Eda often accompanied her on breaks.

“I had a husband,” Adel once told Eda, “but when I wanted to move here he didn’t, so I just came without him.”

“Are you still married?”

“I guess so.”

Every week of work in the meat room had a similar rhythm. On Monday morning a butcher would deliver a truckload of carcasses, which he sold to Artur Lewski for a discount because they were uncut, and because they were typically of a quality the butcher did not want to use himself.

There was the Monday ceremony of hanging up dead pigs and cows, for which Artur Lewski himself would don a white hat and apron in order to help. Just a glimpse at him would reveal that he was glowing with pride because he was able to do even the most common work; wealth hadn’t changed him at all. “It’s amazing that he can pat himself on the back with both hands without even dropping that pig,” Adel whispered to Eda once as they struggled with their own carcass. Eda shook so hard with laughter that Maciek had to run over and help them keep their pig from falling to the ground—in which instance the meat would be ruined.

As the week wore on, the hanging carcasses would get thinner and thinner. At the end of each day they were rubbed down with salt and the temperature was turned down ten degrees to help the meat keep longer. By the end of the week, Maciek, Dorota, Andrzei, Adel, and Eda could see their breaths while they worked. They wore two or even three sweaters under their aprons. Once all the meat had been stripped from the bones, the skeletons were taken down. This was always Andrzei's favorite part of the week because he would taunt Dorota with the skeletons he took down, often to the point that she would be running around the room, screaming but with a hint of laughter hidden in her throat. He chased her with a skeleton that he used as a puppet to ask for a kiss. The rest of them would look on, Adel often saying, "I can't believe she lets him." Eda wondered for the first few weeks if anyone should step in to help Dorota—before realizing eventually that Dorota looked forward to this part of the week as much as Andrzei did. And Maciek would shake his head and look ashamed to be there. Finally, Artur Lewski would walk up to the small office window overlooking the meat room, knock to get Andrzei and Dorota's attention, and call, "You two!" and to everyone else, "Get back to work."

…

Soon after they met, Eda invited Adel over to dinner, since Adel lived alone and often dined alone. This happened to be one of the dinners when Zbigniew came by unexpectedly. Eda, Adel, and the kids were sitting down at the dinner table, when they heard a knock at the window. They all looked up to see Zbigniew bent in half and peering down at them.

Eda got up to open the door. Zbigniew came in holding up a plastic bag as if to contribute to dinner. The plastic bag contained a six-pack of beer, which no one but Zbigniew was interested in drinking. He sat at the head of the table where Eda had been sitting. She pulled up an extra chair next to Adel.

Wanda told everyone at dinner that her new favorite book was one that her aunt Lucja had loaned her: a biography of Amelia Earhart. Then Wanda related a dream in which she was Amelia Earhart, flying across the Atlantic Ocean with Eda and Piotr.

"What about me?" Zbigniew asked.

Wanda shrugged and looked down at her plate.

Adel leaned over to her and said, "That's a lovely dream."

"Thank you." Wanda whispered.

"Who is she again?" Zbigniew asked Eda as he took a swig of his third beer. He did not try to make his voice inaudible to Adel. Adel lifted her chin at him.

After dinner, Zbigniew put a twenty in the drawer and took out a ten. However, Adel only saw the last action.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he asked.

"It looks like you're taking Eda's money," Adel answered.

He just shook his head. He took his remaining beers, said good-bye to Eda and the children and left.

"He's worse than Lewski," Adel told Eda after they had done the dishes. The two women sat at the table sharing a cigarette. "Who does he think he is?"

"I don't know," Eda answered.

…

School started for both of Eda's children. Although in Poland, Eda had worried her children were avoiding each other, once school began for them in America they resumed the routine of walking together. They did this even though they had to split off eventually to go to different schools—it was as if they had been made close again by a shared nervousness.

By the beginning of the school year, Wanda was almost done reading her aunt Lucja's biography of Amelia Earhart. Wanda spent two hours each day in an English as a Second Language class where her teacher was a young widow who often looked like she'd just been crying, but who always smiled at the children in the classroom. She smelled like coffee. She often wore turtlenecks. Piotr was in an ESL class as well, but his lasted only an hour. He had made friends with a big Puerto Rican boy named Julian. Eda worried that because Piotr was so small he'd get picked on a lot here as he had in Sejny. However, this big boy seemed to be a buffer.

Piotr told Eda about how he and Julian had met. Piotr had accidentally bumped into Julian while he was on his way to a class and while Julian was idling around in the hallways, deciding between whether to be late to class or not go at all. Piotr had been looking at his shoes, which were untied. He had been afraid to bend over to tie them because of some cryptic advice he'd gotten his father, which was: "Whatever you do—don't bend over in this country; they'll eat you alive." Piotr was waiting until he got to class to tie his shoes from a sitting position, but he had to watch his feet carefully so that he did not get twisted up and fall. That's how he had walked into Julian. Julian had turned around with a snarl on his face. He had said a few things, which Piotr hadn't

understood at the time. Now he knew that at first Julian had wanted to fight, then Julian had wanted to know why Piotr's mouth was hanging open like that, and then Julian had wanted to know why Piotr was smiling a goofy smile and shrugging at him like that. Finally Julian had laughed, deciding Piotr and his gapped smile were funny, and then he had helped Piotr find his ESL class. Now Julian and Piotr exchanged whole sentences in broken English.

After Piotr related this story, Eda's only question was: when had Piotr's father given him the advice? Piotr's response was a half-truth. He said Zbigniew had picked him up from school once and taken him to get something called "a pizza". The full truth was that Zbigniew did not actually know exactly where Piotr's school was; Piotr had run into his father accidentally on his way home. At first Piotr had spotted the Hawaiian shirt his father liked to sport, then angry arms flailing in an argument, and then the person the arms were flailing at. This person was a young woman with a plain face and a big stomach; she was clearly pregnant, but even if she hadn't been, her stomach still would have been big. When Piotr had walked up to them with his mouth hanging open, the argument had dissolved. The woman had said, "See?" and then walked off.

When Piotr and Zbigniew sat down afterwards in front of their "a pizza," Piotr asked his father why he flailed his arms like that. Zbigniew explained that it was customary to move your arms when saying something important. Then he gave Piotr the advice about bending down.

At home, there were few problems: Eda and her kids quickly learned that Zbigniew would not be around much. After disappearing to return the borrowed car on the day of his family's arrival in America, he appeared again after three days and

informed Eda that maybe he ought to stay at his sister's apartment so that Eda and the children had more room. Then once they could pool enough money from their jobs they'd get a bigger place. Eda had agreed to this. Now, Zbigniew stopped by once or twice during the week, had dinner with the family, put some money in the drawer and then left.

The bed, which had been two mattresses stacked on top of one another, had been divided. Wanda slept on one mattress and Piotr slept on the other. Eda slept on the sofa. Each sleeping area had a tube of anti-itch cream by the pillow because as Eda and the kids had discovered that in addition to the cockroaches, they also shared the one-room apartment with things called "bed bugs," a name that they all found funny. The bites were not too bad if you put cream on them right away. Part of the Lutynskis' morning routine was to sit up in bed, say "good morning" in English, and then cover their itchy arms and legs in the cream. Other than that and a small incident in which they had bought conditioner instead of shampoo and walked around with hair stuck to their scalps for a day, the three of them were adjusting well.

Eda, inspired by the strawberry magnet on the refrigerator, decorated that part of the house with strawberries: strawberry place mats, a strawberry teakettle, strawberry kitchen towels, and drawings of strawberries made by her children. Sometimes Adel stopped by with something for the house. One time she brought strawberry salt and pepper shakers, and another time she brought a strawberry ashtray. Adel became a regular fixture in the household. She'd come home with Eda after work, and the two women would prepare dinner from scratch while they recounted some pompous thing Artur Lewski had said, or some trick Andrzei had played on his wife Dorota. The only

uncriticized member of their work force was Maciek, whom they both thought of as a younger brother. As time passed, Eda was got to see Adel's rare smiles more often. They were smiles that reached all the way up to her sarcastic eyes, giving them some light. And now it wasn't unusual for a passerby peering through the brownstone's basement windows to catch sight of two women sharing a cigarette at the kitchen table, while two kids on the other side of the room read or drew in their beds.

…

After two months in school, Wanda and Piotr were being introduced to the concept of Halloween. In Wanda's ESL class, the young widow read them a story about a dead wife haunting her husband. When a tear streamed down the teacher's face, Wanda was the only one who understood English well enough to know why the teacher was crying. Wanda got the teacher a tissue from atop the bookcase. In the spirit of Halloween, the tissue was orange.

After class the teacher thanked Wanda for the tissue and asked what she'd be for Halloween. Wanda said, "Amelia Earhart."

Meanwhile, Julian was telling Piotr about the tradition of egg-throwing on Halloween. Because of the language barrier, it took at least a week for Piotr to understand this concept and why it was fun. He initially just saw it as a waste of food, but once he caught on he couldn't wait.

Around this time, Zbigniew began taking money out of the drawer rather than putting any in. The Saturday right before Halloween, Zbigniew appeared for dinner and spent the night on the couch, waking up on Sunday with his family. Eda shared Wanda's bed with her. In the morning, while Eda made breakfast for all of them, Zbigniew

smoked a cigarette at the kitchen table. His hand played with the strawberry ashtray as he laughed sadly to himself.

"Let's go to church today!" he announced, waking the children.

The family had never been particularly unreligious, but during the three months they had lived in America, they had not gone to church at all. A cross hung over the front door and a picture of the Virgin Mary hung alongside a picture of Jesus Christ over the sofa.

"Where is there a church?" Eda asked.

"There's one a few blocks away that has Polish services," Zbigniew said.

"Okay, we'll eat and then go."

"We need to leave now. It starts in ten minutes."

He hurried the children out of bed and within a few minutes they were all dressed and ready at the door. Zbigniew pulled on the doorknob, and it broke off in his hand.

"Oh fuck," he said in English. He tugged at the door and pried at every corner, but it was no use.

"Can we eat breakfast?" Piotr asked Eda.

"Yes."

Eda and her children sat at the table, and ate the eggs and bacon Eda had scrambled for them. Zbigniew was still occupied with the door. He tinkered for a while, said, "shit," and then continued tinkering.

"Piotr, come help your father," he said after breakfast was eaten. Eda washed the dishes. Wanda sat on the sofa and read.

"What do you want me to do?" Piotr asked.

“Just come here.”

Piotr approached the door, and Zbigniew pointed up at the tiny windows that led out onto the street.

“Do you think you could fit through one of those?”

“Not really. What about Wanda?” Piotr asked.

Wanda looked up, startled from her book.

“Are you still reading your aunt’s book?”

“No, I’m reading it in English now.”

“Why would you read the same book twice?” Zbigniew asked, but he didn’t wait for an answer. “She’s too short,” he decided.

Zbigniew bent his knees and made a nest out of his hands for Piotr to put his foot on. Piotr complied and reached up to the window. He opened it and stuck his arms and head out while his father pushed his feet. It looked as though it might work. Eda turned around as water poured straight from the faucet and down the drain.

“Ow,” Piotr finally said.

Zbigniew pushed more.

“Ow!”

“Stop it!” Wanda said from the sofa.

Zbigniew tried to pull the boy back in, but he was stuck. Piotr punctuated this realization for Zbigniew with more “Ows”.

“Come and help me,” he told Eda and Wanda. The three of them pulled the boy’s legs, and he cried and screamed and eventually fell back into the room. His face was covered in tears. Eda gently took his t-shirt off. His underarms and the ribs directly

beneath looked red and raw and they would certainly bruise. Eda gazed at Zbigniew like a lioness.

"Wanda, take your brother to the bathroom and help him wash his arms," Eda said.

Wanda put her book down and left the room with Piotr.

"Why are you here? Did your girlfriend break up with you?" Eda whispered violently.

"What are you talking about?" Zbigniew whispered back.

"It was the first thing your sister told me. I know you haven't been staying with her. We've been to her place, and there's no trace of your things there."

"This is crazy."

"I don't want you to come here anymore. I'm calling Adel so that she can open the door from the outside for us, and then I'm changing the locks."

After Piotr washed up, he and Wanda stayed in the half of the room where the couple from upstairs stored their extra things. The kids pretended to look through them while exchanging secret smiles: they had heard what their mother had said.

Eda was on the phone with Adel for a while, and then Adel was there. Zbigniew continued to fiddle half-heartedly with the door until Eda slipped the key underneath the doorframe and Adel opened up the apartment. Air burst in. Zbigniew grabbed his bag, throwing in his toothbrush and spare shirt.

Eda, Adel, and the kids stood in the doorway and watched as Zbigniew climbed the four steps to the street level. Once at the top he stopped and turned to look back at them. Eda and Adel left the doorway. Zbigniew walked down the street as Wanda and

Piotr watched: at the end of the block he lit a cigarette, his face twisting up as if he were tasting something bad.

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