

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: LITTLE POMERANIA AND OTHER STORIES

Thomas Earles, Master of Fine Arts, 2011

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The stories in this thesis represent a portion of the work I have done during my time as a student in the creative writing program at the University of Maryland. They were ultimately chosen for their thematic links and because they—I feel—best represent the writer I have become over the last three years. Collectively, the stories deal with class, communication, culture, disappointment, displacement, marriage, and maturity, sometimes all in the same story. While each story is meant to stand alone, it is arranged here in a deliberate order, relative to the others, as there is a discernible arc.

LITTLE POMERANIA AND OTHER STORIES

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Street Legal.....	1
Little Pomerania.....	29
Dee Dee Says.....	64
Milena.....	88
Birds.....	113

Street Legal

The next day, after I broke up with Nicole, I was back at work, and poor Tuat had to listen to it all from me, all of my usual pissing and moaning about everything, plus what had happened with Nicole the day before. It was late August, early evening, late afternoon. It was hot out, but a breeze blew off the ocean a block away and whipped through the Hilton's driveway.

Tuat was this Vietnamese guy in his forties, one of the only guys I talked to at work. Most of my friends were away at college, and the other guys who worked the driveway were a bunch of dickheads. Tuat had a bunch of kids away at college too, more than I could keep track of, all with strange sounding names like mythical birds. He was working three jobs to try and pay all of their tuition. I was just working the one, to help my mother pay her mortgage after my father died, and not for much else. Nicole would be heading back up to Smith in a few weeks too. I wasn't going anywhere. I didn't have any plans.

I'd been working forty hours a week for the last three years, doing just enough to keep from getting fired, being just careful enough to not crack up the cars, and taking just enough shit from the guests so they wouldn't have a reason to complain about me. I guess I was lucky to have the job, since I couldn't even drive a stick shift, but I didn't see it that way.

Standing around at the beginning of our shift, waiting for guests to arrive or check out, I started to tell Tuat about me and Nicole spending the entire day together.

“When that happen?” he said.

“What?”

“She your girl or something?”

So I told him that me and Nicole had been dating a few months, but had been keeping things quiet at work and with our families. We’d become friends over the last few years, and each summer she came back to Jersey from Northampton to work the front desk, but things had started for us that June when we went out one night after work.

“Good for you,” Tuat said. He liked Nicole too, and always referred to her as being “pleasant.”

I told him he was missing the point of the story.

Guests had started pulling in to the driveway. The doormen greeted them, gave them tickets, took their tip, called a bellman for their bags, and then called out to a driver.

“Hey, Twat.”

Everyone else that worked in the driveway or the garage mispronounced Tuat’s name on purpose. It was supposed to be pronounced “Too-ott.” After a few guests complained that the drivers were running around calling each other a “Twat,” hotel operations asked Tuat to go by a different name. They suggested “Todd,” or his last name, Vuong, or something else, his choice. For some reason, he chose Jeff, and that’s what his new nametag said. I still called him Tuat, and everyone else still called him “Twat,” and the guests kept complaining about it.

Guests started complaining as soon as they pulled in, before they'd even gotten out of their cars: Why was it so crowded? How come the driveway was so backed up? Why didn't the police do something about the traffic on Atlantic Avenue? Then there were the problems that had absolutely nothing to do with us: I didn't win at the craps table. Somebody was on my machine all night. How come I'm not getting comped like I used to? The hotel's booked, how can they not have a room for me? Why does the steakhouse close at ten?

A few of us went over to take the cars. These guests had tipped the doormen on the way in, but not us. I never understood that. Didn't they know we were the ones who would actually be driving their cars? What did the doormen do? Jack-shit, that's what they did. My guy got out of his car in a dark blue blazer like he was going to a yacht club or something. He probably settled at a high-bet table so he didn't have to rub elbows with the tourists from Scranton lined up for a turn at the nickel slots. Immediately this guy started telling me not to move the seats or the mirrors, and then asked me to park his car on a lower floor so he could get it faster when he checked out. He complained that we always took too long when we brought his car back. Did he tip me? No he didn't. So on the short drive over to the garage I moved his seats, moved the mirrors, and parked it all the way on the top floor of the garage. Then I waited for Tuat. On the ride down the man-lift I started to tell him the rest of what happened with Nicole the day before.

“We spent the whole day together,” I said. “It was awesome.”

“I stay home. I sleep. I'm too tired on day off,” Tuat said.

“Well, we went out. Like I said, we spent the whole day together, and it was really nice. Then she decides she wants to take me over to her parents' house.”

Back down at ground level we jogged over to the driveway.

“So what happen,” Tuat said.

I didn’t have time to finish. More guests were checking in and it was getting busy. I took a Mercedes up and brought a LeBaron back down. I always tried to time it so I could drive a car up and bring one back down in the same trip. Running on the blacktop was murder on my shins.

The guy in the LeBaron eyed me up and down and held a folded dollar bill between two fingers. He didn’t say thank you, good bye, kiss my ass or anything. A dollar. It was busy for a while after that and on my next front I had to run over to the garage. There weren’t any cars to take up. I didn’t run the whole way, just until I rounded the corner and was out of sight. I remembered the guest who was waiting for his car, a real miserable old bastard. Never tipped more than a dollar, if that. Definitely not worth running for.

I waited for Tuat at the man-lift, and on the ride up I started to tell him the rest of the story.

We got off at the fourth floor and stopped for a minute. I was in no hurry. “We pulled up in front of her house and I never even made it out of the car. Her father was out front doing something in the yard. Nicole went over to talk to him, and he took one look at me and said, “Get rid of him.” That was it. She drove me home. I got out of the car without a word and haven’t called her since.”

“What she say?” Tuat asked.

“She didn’t say anything. Neither one of us did. I just got out of the car and went home.”

“What she say after what father say?”

I shook my head. “She just got rid of me.”

“Maybe you talk later. She here?”

“Who cares.”

“Maybe you call her later.”

“Later,” I said. “I’m going out and getting drunk.” And I did. When my shift ended I walked to the Chelsea Pub. I usually sat at the bar with Nicole whenever we went, but some of the waitresses were kind of cute, and they only worked the tables, so I sat at a table. There was a skinny redhead that worked there. I remembered seeing her before. I did remember that one time I’d been in the Chelsea Pub with Nicole, she’d said something about one of the waitresses staring at me. She came up to the table with her pad and said, “Is it just you tonight?”

I don’t usually drink a lot, and I’d really been taking it easy since I’d been with Nicole, but that night, I didn’t care. The redhead’s name was Stacy and by the time she got off, I was already drunk. I don’t remember too much after that, but some friends of hers were having a party. I only remember a handful of people being there, sitting in a circle smoking pot. Stacy and I ended up sleeping together in a bedroom there.

When we pulled up in front of her house the next morning, I was really hoping Stacy would just put the car in park, tell me she’d be right back, and run inside with the engine still idling. Instead, once the car came to a stop, she turned the engine off and said, “Why don’t you come in for a minute?”

I looked up at the house, a one-story white rectangle with a pitched roof, running lengthwise back to a tiny yard and an unattached garage. In the long driveway alongside the house a car sat under a blue tarp, the back end up on cinderblocks. The paneling of the house had almost faded to gray and the grass needed to be cut. What a shit-hole, I thought. To tell the truth though, it wasn't much worse than our house, where me and my mom lived. It was roughly the same size and looked about the same age. It wasn't nearly as nice as Nicole's house. But I didn't want to go in. "I don't know," I said to Stacy. "Is anybody home?"

"Probably," she said. "My dad's usually home."

It was noon on a weekday. Most of the other houses on this street were one-stories, and all in need of a paint job. The street itself looked like it hadn't been paved in over a decade. This was a working-class neighborhood, like mine, and most everyone else besides Stacy's father was likely at work.

"I guess I'll just wait for you."

"Come on," she said. "What are you, shy?"

"I just don't really want to meet your dad." That was the truth. I'd decided I was going to tell Stacy the truth, no matter how brutally honest it was. I don't know if it was because at that point I just didn't care how things ended up with us, or if I was just still too raw over what happened with Nicole, if I just wasn't capable of trying hard enough to lie anymore. And of course, I'd kind of had it with fathers.

"Don't be a dick," she said, getting out of the car and pulling her shorts up so the top of her thong didn't show.

So I got out and walked up the cracked sidewalk to the rail-less concrete stoop at the front door and followed Stacy into the house.

There was Stacy's father on the sofa watching TV, nearly 300 pounds of him squeezed into a t-shirt and shorts, a beer between his legs, the condensation from the can leaving a faint wet spot on his crotch. I thought I saw one of his balls poking out the bottom of his shorts, sitting on his thigh like a hairy tumor.

"Where have you been?" he said to Stacy without looking away from the TV.

Then the wooden screen door slammed shut behind me and Stacy's father looked over at me. "What do you want?" he said.

"This is Mark," Stacy said, and began to walk away. "We're going to my room."

I didn't follow her. Instead I stood next to the sofa, and waited for her father to tell me to get lost, or to yell for Stacy to tell me to get lost. When he didn't, I reached out my hand and said "Mark." It was hot in the house, and it smelled kind of funny, like fresh paint and stale eggs. It made me nauseous.

"How do you know her?" Stacy's father said.

"Work," I said and let out my breath. A second later I put my hand down. "Her work. I stop in there sometimes."

"I thought you were going to say school." He started to lift his beer. "You get served in that place?"

"I'm twenty-one."

"Oh. I stay out of bars myself," her father said and lifted the beer can to his lips, took a long drink and burped. "I hope nobody's bothering her in there though. You know she won't be eighteen until November."

I hadn't even bothered to ask Stacy how old she was. I guess I must have figured if she was old enough to work as a waitress in a bar, then she must be at least eighteen. When we'd started talking last night it never entered my mind that she was still underage, or had it? I felt a few beads of sweat break out on my forehead. What the hell had I gotten myself into, bringing an underage girl home to her father after being out all night? For some reason I wondered what my own father would have thought. Would he be ashamed of me? He always forgave mistakes, but was that what I had made here?

Stacy's father leaned back into the sofa. "Sit down."

I didn't want to sit, didn't want to be in the house. I almost walked right back out the front door. Looking down at Stacy's father's pale, fat legs, blue veins bulging beneath the skin, tube socks pulled halfway up his calves, I was pretty sure I could outrun him if I needed to. I couldn't remember if I'd told Stacy my last name, in case she decided to tell her father, but she knew where I worked. The Hilton was right up the street from the bar, and she knew I'd left my car there last night. How would I get to work later today without my car? So I just sat down.

Stacy's father lifted the remote from his lap and changed the channel and I noticed the tattoo on his arm of a skull and a bottle, both on fire, with the words "Born to Raise Hell and Drink Wine" underneath. I almost laughed, but stopped myself. What a stupid tattoo, but at least I didn't have to worry about him seeing my tattoos now. When my mother had found out about them she said, "Your father would be disappointed. He knew the things people hold against you when you're trying to get a job. Why make it harder on yourself?"

Stacy's father changed the channel again and I paid a little more attention to the TV. It was old. Encased in a large wooden cabinet, it sat on the floor, a piece of furniture in its own right, framed photos of Stacy and her father, together and separately, lined about the top. In the corner, a dying ficus tree sat in a black plastic potter, dirt scattered on the scuffed hardwood floor around it. At least we had a nicer TV than that. I'd never gotten a chance to see the TV in Nicole's house but I imagined giant flat screens built into the walls or hidden behind expensive paintings that could be moved out of sight by remote. Fucking aristocrats.

"So where'd you keep her last night?" Stacy's father said, still looking at the TV.

"We got to talking, talked for a while."

"Right," her father said.

I didn't want to be caught in a lie and I wondered if Stacy had bothered to call last night to say she wouldn't be home, to lie about staying over at a friend's. I wondered if she ever bothered to call, or even cared if her father knew where she was. "I'd had a few drinks at the bar. She wanted to make sure I didn't drive. It was late and we went to a mutual friend's house." I was willing to put the blame on me, but not out of any sense of chivalry. If I could somehow make Stacy sound like she'd behaved responsibly, I could make it sound like nothing happened the night before. I wanted to avoid a scene, sure, but I wasn't expecting to be back anyway. What did I care? "I'll be honest, I didn't get much sleep at all last night." What the hell did I say that for?

Stacy's father took another long drink from the can of beer. He put the can back between his legs and said "Listen, that girl is hell on wheels, you know. Takes after her

mother. Never could control her either.” He took another sip, shook the empty can and crushed it in his fist. “Stacy’s all I got left, I love her, but you just watch yourself.”

I sat there wondering what I was supposed to do with that when Stacy’s father suddenly lifted his leg and farted. He put his leg back down and acted like nothing happened.

We let it hang there between us for a few seconds. Finally, I looked over at him and said, “Excuse me.”

He laughed.

“Mark,” Stacy called from down the hall. “Come in here.”

I still expected her father to say something, something like “Stay right where you are boy,” or “Stacy, get your ass out here if you want to spend time with him in the house,” but he didn’t say anything, just kept laughing.

So I waited another second and said “Well, it was nice—“

“Yeah, nice meeting you,” Stacy’s father said, still laughing a little, and went back to watching TV.

I stepped down the hall to Stacy’s room, wondering if that man was her real father. I was a little indifferent to her looks. She was a little too skinny for me and I didn’t like her reddish hair, the faint freckles on her face and her slightly upturned nose. It’s not that I found her *unattractive*—she was sexy in her way—but she just looked like one of those girls you saw—everywhere. But how did she get to be cute with a father who looks like that?

I stepped into Stacy’s room.

“Close the door,” she said, and lit a candle.

I glanced back out into the hall at then back at her.

She placed a cigarette in her mouth. “Close it.” She reached for the candle to light the cigarette.

I closed the door and asked her, “That’s your dad?”

“That’s my dad.” She wasn’t looking at me and exhaled a long trail of smoke that looked blue in the sunlight from the window. She held out the open pack.

“Is it all right?” I said.

“What, are you worried about the smoke alarm? He took out the battery to put in his hand-held Solitaire game.”

I hadn’t noticed if her father smoked. I didn’t see any ashtrays anywhere and didn’t think it was all right to smoke in the house, but I took a cigarette. “So what happened to your mom?”

“She’s in Florida with her new husband,” she said.

Stacy’s room did smell like cigarettes, mixed with chocolate, and was warmer than the front room had been. The furniture looked newer than anything else in the house, with fresher paint on the walls, but clothes all over the floor, and a few cigarette holes. I saw a teddy bear on her dresser, next to a picture of her with two other girls in oversized-sunglasses, smiling in front of an arcade. I lit the cigarette and stood while Stacy sat on the bed watching me. I put my hands in my pockets, and pulled them back out again.

“So are you going to see her again?” she asked.

“Who?”

“That ex-girlfriend of yours.”

“I don’t remember mentioning her to you,” I said.

“You didn’t talk about much else last night, but I’d seen you together before anyway.” She flicked her ashes on the floor. “I guess you don’t remember but that’s how we started talking. I asked you where she was.”

I knew it would hurt Nicole if she knew what I’d done with Stacy. I hoped it would hurt her. “No. I think we’re done.” As soon as I said it I hoped Nicole never did find out.

Stacy put her cigarette out, stood and put her arms around my neck. She kissed with her whole mouth, gulping at my lips and probing my mouth with her tongue, bitter with the taste of the menthol cigarette on her breath. I was still cotton-mouthed from the night before and realized Nicole had been right about kissing me after I smoked. It was kind of gross. Stacy undid my jeans and started working on me with her hand, slowly. It was painful the way she twisted it once it was hard. I noticed her high school graduation picture on the nightstand. That had only been two months ago.

“Wait, wait,” I said, worried that her father would come in, and suddenly very aware that I could be charged with statutory rape. It wasn’t worth it. This girl, this house, her fat father rotting on the sofa out in the living room, none of this was what I’d wanted. I knew what I was doing last night, knew how I was trying to get the heartache out of me, where I was trying to leave it. I was a step over the line already, one more step away from something that might change everything.

“It’s okay.” She took off her own shorts and underwear in one motion, stepping out of them once they were down on the floor. They had been very short on her, with the bottoms of her cheeks just visible below the seam, but looked even smaller on the

ground. She hopped up and wrapped her legs around my waist. Still kissing me she nearly pulled me down onto the bed.

“Wait,” I tried to say through her lips, scared that her father would come to the room, but I worried more that the noise we would make if she fell over would give Stacy’s father a reason to get up off the couch and come in. I put one hand under her ass and held her to me as she carefully guided me inside her. She never took her mouth off mine and had one arm around my neck and one hand behind my head. She began bouncing on me and tried to remove her shirt, getting it stuck around her head. I moved one hand up to cup her tiny breast, feeling along the edge of her pink-brown nipple, and looked down to see the triangular tan lines on her chest. Her breasts were much smaller than Nicole’s.

I kept worrying about her father coming in. I guess I could imagine how any father would feel about any guy coming into his house and fucking his teenage daughter in her bedroom in broad daylight while he was in the house. There was something even dirtier about it because her father was there and it was daytime.

Stacy continued to pump up and down on me and she moaned softly. I put a hand over her mouth to quiet her and watched the door. I couldn’t help but think of the last time me and Nicole had been in the backseat of her car one late night after work, and I imagined the look on Nicole’s father’s face if he’d ever caught us.

Suddenly I felt myself about to finish. “Wait. Wait,” I said, gasping. I lifted her off me and pulled out of her just in time.

She let herself down and picked her panties up off the floor to wipe herself off.

I stood in the middle of the floor breathing heavily, sweat dripping from my head and in patches on my t-shirt.

There was a knock at the door, and from the other side, “Stacy?”

She stepped into her shorts and pulled them up without putting any panties on.

I rushed to zip up my jeans and pulled the bottom of my t-shirt down to cover my groin, still noticeably aroused, my heart racing.

“What?” Stacy said to the door, pulling her top back down, her nipples pointing through the front.

I thought I saw the door open just a crack but I couldn’t be sure.

“Thought I’d offer Mark a beer,” her father said.

“He’ll be right out,” she said and I thought she sounded frustrated. I wondered if it was because I’d finished so quickly, or because we were already finished by the time her father knocked. Maybe she was frustrated her father hadn’t caught us in the act. I wanted to think she just like me, but I remember wondering if there was someone she wanted to hurt too.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my hands.

Stacy said, “Here,” and handed me a t-shirt from the floor. “You better get out there.”

“What about you?”

“He isn’t waiting for me.”

I saw my reflection in the mirror on the closet door. I was a sweaty mess. I looked back at Stacy and saw her fiddling with a pack of candy on her dresser before I walked out.

Back in the living room her father was back on the sofa, another can of beer between his thick thighs, laughing at something on the TV.

When he saw me, he leaned over and reached down to the side of the sofa. I noticed a tiny red cooler there on the floor. “Here you go, Sport,” he said, handing me a beer. “Guess I don’t have to ask you for ID, do I?”

“No, no.” I tried to laugh along with him, but I really didn’t want to show him any ID. I thought a beer was probably just the thing to kill my nerves and the last of my hangover. When I took the can I noticed it was warm.

“I just brought those out,” he said.

Brought them out from where? I thought. That must have been why he got up from the sofa and knocked on Stacy’s door. Did the refrigerator in this house even work? When I sat down I noticed a line of empty cans along the bottom of the sofa, and condensation rings faded into the hardwood floor.

“So you going to school?” he asked.

“No, I’m just working,” I said. “I help my mom out with the mortgage, and I’m trying to save a little money. I might go someday though.”

“That’s real good of you helping out your mom. Kids should make a little effort to help out their parents, after everything their parents did for them, raising them and everything, giving them a place to live.”

“Thanks,” I said. Not too many people ever took the time to notice and tell me I was doing a good thing, and hell, I thought more people should.

“And education isn’t for everybody. Believe me, I know it isn’t for everybody, but still, it is important. I told Stacy maybe next year she could pick one of the

community colleges and I'd help her out with tuition. Education's important. I'm even thinking about going back for my GED." He finished his beer and opened another.

"My father never finished high school either," I said.

"What's he do?"

"He died two years ago, but he did a lot of things. Plumbing, construction, hot dog vendor. He always had a job." That wasn't true. He'd spent a lot of his last few years out of work. I was already lying.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Where are you working now?"

"At the Hilton," I said. "I'm a valet."

"They need any help over there?" he asked. "You guys must make a ton of money."

"I don't think they're hiring right now," I said. I didn't want Stacy's father to get too close. I thought about him or possibly Stacy crossing paths with Nicole. "Business is down, and the money isn't as good as everybody thinks it is."

"No?" he sounded surprised, and a little disappointed.

I didn't want him to think I wasn't making any money. "I mean, we do fine, it is good money, but we don't make as much as some people think. It's weird there. For one thing they have doormen handing out the tickets, and they get most of the tips when the guests come in. People don't tip like they used to anyway. Not in this recession." Most of my money was going to my mother, but I thought about what I'd been pissing away on Nicole the last few months. I never wanted her to think my family was that bad off, that my father had basically left us with nothing, but who was I trying to protect, me or my father?

“I know all about this recession,” Stacy’s father said, took another sip of his beer and burped. “All about it. It’s hit hard. Hitting everybody hard.”

I wondered how many of this guy’s days weren’t spent on the sofa in front of the TV.

Stacy’s father turned toward me, facing me now. “What do you usually get? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“A dollar, two. Sometimes more, usually not.” I took a long gulp of the warm beer and had to stop myself from wincing.

“What do the doormen get?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “Ten. I don’t know.”

“They don’t share with you guys?”

“No.”

“It ain’t right.”

I sat up. “Sometimes guests tip the doormen and don’t give us anything. I guess they don’t realize we’re the ones who get in their cars and drive them. We’re the ones who have to be careful with their cars. All’s the doorman does is ask them if they’re staying overnight and hands them a ticket. When the guest leaves they give us jack-shit. Then they come back next week and don’t think we’ll remember them.”

“What do you do then?”

“You don’t want to know.”

He laughed, red rising in his cheeks.

I laughed a little with him and worked on finishing the beer. I still felt a little nauseous and shook what was left of the beer in the bottom of the can, mostly foam I

guessed. Where was Stacy? Is this what she'd wanted? I was getting a little lightheaded and really hoped that I'd pulled out in time.

"Done?" her father asked, reaching to take the can from my hand. He shook the can, closed one eye and looked in the opening, then drank the foam from the bottom.

I felt a warm bubbling in the bottom of my stomach.

"You must drive a lot of nice cars over there though," he said. "All them big-wigs coming to the casino."

"Lot of Mercedes."

"Eh, German," he said, waving his hand. "So what do you drive?"

I would have lied, but I didn't know what to say. I don't know much about cars, so I told the truth. "88 Mercury Cougar."

"American made," Stacy's father said. "Hell yeah."

I shrugged. Was Mercury still made in the US? What the hell did I know.

He put his hand on my knee then and said "Come on outside. I'll show you the 'Cuda."

It had cooled down. There was a breeze in the street as we stepped outside and the neighborhood was quiet. He brought the little red cooler, put it down next to the car in the driveway and pulled the blue tarp off. There was his 1971 Barracuda, all faded paint and primer. "She'll be street legal once I get the back wheels on and the parking brake fixed," he said. "Replace a couple of gaskets. I'm almost ready to take her out."

My first thought? This thing isn't going anywhere. "She's a beauty," I said. I was just happy to be outside. The fresh air calmed my stomach.

He put his hand on my shoulder and led me over to the front end, pointing. “Four headlights, and check out those fender gills. The only year they made it with those.”

I nodded, but didn’t say anything. None of this stuff mattered to me.

“You want another beer?”

I decided to have another beer. Fuck it. I felt better now that I was outside. I guessed I could relax now that Stacy’s father liked me.

So we just stood, beer in hand, looking at the car, Stacy’s father smiling with a faraway look in his eye. “Been a long project,” he said. “Restoring her for a few years. Hit some rough times lately.”

I nodded and drank my beer. I hate it when people get in these moods. I waited for him to continue.

“She’s got a 338 V8.” He held his hands out to show the size of the engine, the can of beer held in the half-circle of his thumb and index finger. “Man.” He shook his head, smiling again. “Can you imagine cutting loose with that out on the road.”

“I can definitely imagine it,” I said. That was about all I could do, imagine it. I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about.

Stacy’s father downed the rest of his beer. “Tell me honest, sometimes you guys take a car out and tool around in it, right? I mean, just take it out somewhere where you can really punch it?”

I drank the beer a little faster now, swallowed and said “Sure. Sometimes.” Once time I’d let Tuat talk me into going for a joy ride in a Ferrari. I’d been nervous the whole time. I thought of telling Stacy’s father a version of it where it had been my idea, that I’d

sped the car down Ventura Boulevard to Chelsea Heights and back to the Hilton garage, with Tuat tensed up in the passenger seat.

“Mark,” Stacy yelled from the door. “Are you ready?” She’d changed her clothes, but was barefoot, holding the screen door open.

“Whenever you are,” I said.

Her father took my hand in his fat fist. “Stop by another time” he said. “I’ll be here.

When Stacy dropped me off at my car I waited a minute before I got out. “Your dad’s an okay guy,” I said.

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. “I guess.”

I kissed her a bit more tenderly than I had earlier and noticed the slightly confused look on her face. “Why don’t you give me your number and I’ll call you later, okay.”

By the time I pulled into the driveway at home my mother was already leaving for work.

“Back out,” she said. “I’m leaving, and you’re going to be late.”

So I pulled back out and parked at the curb. I finished my cigarette and stamped it out in the street.

My mother shook her head. “I thought you were going to quit, but I see you’ve picked up some more bad habits.”

“It’s not like I stay out all night that often,” I said. Looking up at the house I saw it really wasn’t all that different from Stacy’s. Just the siding was newer, and I’d mowed

the lawn a few days ago. But I guess I didn't have hours to spend on the lawn like Nicole's dad. I had to work for what we had. I also realized it wouldn't take much for Stacy's house to look a little nicer. I reached to give my mother a hug.

"I don't know what's going on with you but you better not be late for work," she said. "And take a shower. You stink like beer."

At work that night, I parked cars like usual. I took incoming guests' cars from the U-shaped driveway up to the garage. Trucks, SUVs, and the occasional camper were moved to a ground lot two blocks away. I parked and ran, parked and ran, pain shooting up through my shins from impact on the concrete, from four until seven. Whenever I got into a car that had a manual transmission I just got right back out of it and took a different car. When one of the doormen asked me to park a VIP on a low floor so the guest could get their car faster when they left, I took it all the way to the top of the garage, then took the man-lift down.

I never got around to taking a shower before I left for work that afternoon, and I still felt hung-over until I managed to get some food in my stomach. Nicole had the day off, but I thought about giving her a call at the end of my break. I wanted to hear who would answer. I wanted to tell her, or her father, that I was fine, that I was over her. No, that wasn't true. I wanted to hear her voice.

I went back over to Stacy's house that night. I noticed the tarp was never put back over the Barracuda. After Stacy was asleep, I sat up with her father drinking beer and nodding as he talked about the Eagles, but I didn't say much. I knew less about football

than I knew about cars. After a little while I let him think he'd talked me into joining his chapter of the Moose Lodge.

The next night at work I took a ticket to bring down a guest's car, the same miserable old bastard from the other day, the one who rarely tipped. On the drive down from the garage I threw his insurance card and what I thought was his house key out the window onto Pacific Avenue.

Back down in the driveway, as the guest drove his Chrysler off and I put the dollar tip in his pocket, I saw Tuat get out of a white Jetta like Nicole's and Nicole's father get in.

"Is that your girl car?" Tuat said a minute later, folding a five into the rest of his bills. "The one who work at front desk?"

"She's not my girl anymore. I told you all about that."

"That her daddy?"

"That's him," I said. "The Prick. I told you what he did to me, didn't I?"

"Maybe he no want her let you drive car, cause you still can't drive stick?" Tuat said, and laughed.

I looked away. "He didn't even want me in the car. Fucking guy never met me."

"What she say now?"

"I haven't talked to her," I said. "Fuck her. We're done."

"Because father?" Tuat said. "So you break up with her, but her fault?"

"What?" I said.

"You let people get to you too easy." Tuat pointed out at the driveway, the cars coming in and leaving. "All of these people, everybody. What you want? Respect? Fuck

respect, fuck everybody. Look at me, you think I care.” Tuat was close to fifty years old, had four children, two of them grown. “I come, I make my money, I go home.”

“Easy for you to say, you’ve got a wife waiting for you at home.”

“My wife waiting for me, waiting for me to come home with money. That’s respect, respect of family, my family. What else I need? You think people here respect me?”

I didn’t say anything.

He waved his hands at me and started to walk off. “You learn.”

I was back at Stacy’s house that night, drinking again with her father. When we ran out of beer he got up and came back into the living room with the cooler filled again.

“When’d you stop drinking wine?” I asked, nodding at his arm.

Stacy’s father cocked his arm up and looked at the tattoo. He smiled faintly for a second and said, “I used to drink wine with Stacy’s mom all the time. Now I don’t drink wine no more.”

“My mom quit smoking after my dad died,” I said. “She wants me to quit too.”

“You miss him?” he asked.

“Sure. I wonder what he’d think of me now, what he’d want me to do. I feel a little trapped sometimes.” I was feeling a little drunk now and closed my eyes.

“I hear you.” He finished his beer and opened another one. “Sounds like you don’t have it easy.”

I opened my eyes and sat up on my elbows. “Listen, are you all right for money? I’ve been sleeping over here, drinking your beer. Could you use a little?”

Stacy's father looked a little uncomfortable, and started to say no, but I looked down at my pockets, took my money out, counted out a hundred dollars and gave it to him.

He took it, and I must have fallen asleep a minute later.

The next morning I woke up on the sofa. I decided to go out and cut the grass. No one asked me to do it. I just felt like it. When I finished, and was putting the lawnmower back in the garage, I heard Stacy's father beneath the Barracuda, banging away at something and cursing. I hurried back into the house. I wished I knew more about cars, so I could help him—I didn't really think Stacy's father knew what he was doing either—but I didn't want him to ask me to help, and find out how little I really knew. Inside, I took a quick shower and went into Stacy's room to wake her up.

She was surprised. "What," she said, opening her eyes and sitting up.

I'd taken the sheet off her and was pulling her panties down. "I missed you."

"I thought you were starting to like my dad more than me," she said, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

I tried to laugh, but it ended up sounding a little awkward, even to me, as I thought about what she said.

That weekend the hotel was busier than usual. People trying to get one more trip in before the end of the summer. I was so tired on Friday that I'd gone straight home after work without stopping at Stacy's. It had been nothing but check-ins all night. Then on Saturday we parked cars until nine and then stood around waiting for guests to start leaving. The locals didn't usually stay late on Saturdays. The garage was nearly full so

they'd begun leaving VIPs in the driveway. I stood with my hands in his pockets next to a black Mercedes parked at the curb. I was waiting for a chance to sneak off and smoke.

Just then Stacy's father pulled into the driveway behind the Mercedes in his 1971 Barracuda. I took my hands out of my pockets and walked over to the car. It didn't make sense to me, seeing it out of the house's driveway and on four wheels, like someone driving a boat on land. It was still all faded paint and primer, standing out like a hairless dog next to the brand new Mercedes. I worried that anything I touched on it would fall off.

He turned the engine off and stepped out smiling. "Thought it was a nice night to take her out, maybe go up to the nickel slots and play a little." He had a pair of stiff new jeans on, a belt cinched tightly up over his belly, nearly up to his chest and a black Who Let the Dawgs Out t-shirt. The jeans looked like they'd been pressed. "I got my new Wranglers on," he said.

"What are you doing driving this thing on the street?" I said.

Stacy's father almost looked hurt but kept smiling. "I told you I didn't have that much left to do on her. Putting the wheels back on didn't take any time."

A doorman came walking over. "Staying overnight, sir?"

"No, I ain't," Stacy's father said, and took the ticket without giving the doorman a tip. He gave me a knowing look and grinned. "Now look," he said to me, putting his hand around my arm and lowering his voice. "She ain't exactly street legal. I didn't get the parking brake fixed. That's a tough part to find and besides I don't have the money. But I got a guy. He gave me a good inspection sticker. That's what I spent the hundred you gave me on."

Guests had started coming out of the hotel. The other drivers had already begun running up to the garage.

“I want you to park her,” Stacy’s father said. He handed me a wrinkled five. “It’ll give you a chance to see how she handles.”

I looked into the car and sure enough, it was a stick shift. “Yeah thanks, but I don’t know if I can. I should wait here for another driver before I take it up.”

A few drivers were already returning. “We gotta move those cars,” one of the doormen yelled. The curb had to be cleared so guests’ cars could be pulled right up to them.

Jesus Christ, where the hell is Tuat, I thought, looking around the driveway.

“I don’t want anybody else touching it. I know you. I trust you,” Stacy’s father said.

From the revolving door to my right, Nicole stepped out into the driveway in her black skirt and matching jacket, her high heels clicking on the concrete. She looked at me, then at Stacy’s father, then back at me and looked away.

I forgot about the fiasco on four wheels for a second and watched her, eyed the cleavage through her white blouse, down to her legs. Almost a woman, I thought. I missed her body for a second. I resented her body.

“By the way,” Stacy’s father said. “Stacy wants you to meet her at work when you finish.”

On the other side of the U, at the entrance to the driveway, Nicole’s father waited in her black Jetta. He’d come to take her home.

Other valets were pulling in behind me. Guests were waiting at the curb for their cars. A few car horns sounded.

I waited for Nicole to cross the driveway and reach her car. I got in the Barracuda and gently closed the door. Someone beeped behind me again. More drivers were pulling into the driveway on their way back from the garage. Okay, I thought. Clutch in, brake out. How hard could it be? I just had to move it from the driveway and out of sight until I could get Tuat or another driver to take it up to the garage. I'd just take it slow. Clutch in, brake out. I put both feet on the floor and took a deep breath. When I turned the key in the ignition the Barracuda lurched forward a few feet, smashing into the back-end of the Mercedes in front of it before stalling out. I was shocked by the impact, but heard the tinkle of broken glass hitting the ground before the Mercedes' car alarm started up.

Outside the passenger side window Stacy's father was yelling. "What did you do? I told you the parking brake wasn't fixed. I left it in first gear."

People looked in my direction but no one stopped what they were doing. Drivers brought the guests' cars as close to them as they could. Guests tipped, got in and left.

I didn't move to get out of the car. I sat with my hands in my lap, watching the guests' faces as they drove by, some with their mouths slightly open, some smirking, a few frowning in sympathy. Old men and their miserable wives coming back from dinner or a show, an hour at the craps table.

Nicole's father had driven around the U to come out of the driveway. As they passed, he and Nicole looked at me. Nicole hunched down in her seat and covered her eyes with her hand. Her father turned his head to keep looking as they passed. The car's

window was open, but I couldn't hear him over the Mercedes' car alarm still blaring. I watched his lips say to Nicole, "Do you know him?"

Little Pomerania

There are no books in English here, not that I've found yet anyway.

The first floor is like any small town library, shelves of old hardcover volumes and a few spinning, wireframe racks of paperbacks, all in the rolling Latinized Slavic script, accented vowels and consonant clusters. I usually end up rereading a collection of Adam Zagajewski's poems whenever I'm down here. "Otworzy się pamięć, jak spadochron, w nagłym syku powietrza. Otworzy się pamięć i nie zaśniesz wcale"
Memory will open, like a parachute, in a sudden hiss of air. Memory will open and you will not sleep at all.

I haven't been sleeping well. I stayed up most of the night and woke up today at 11:30. On days when Natalia works and I don't I usually sleep in, but even if I do wake early I usually just lay around for hours. There isn't much else to do. After a cup of coffee I got dressed and walked here to the library.

The librarian eyes me each time I come in and offers a weak, obligatory smile. She looks like any librarian anywhere in the world might. In her glasses, turtle neck sweater, and skirt she wouldn't seem out of place in Anytown, USA. Actually, I've never seen the skirt, never seen her come out from behind the counter, but she must be wearing a skirt. She's always doing something at her desk that I can't see and we never speak, not since the first time I came in by myself and asked her "Czy można uzyc komputer?"

"Proszę poczekaj," she'd whispered without looking at me, and slid an old notebook over for me to sign-in, ignoring my accent, an accent indeterminate to me, and

ignoring any interest she could have possibly had in my foreignness, the novelty of someone like me coming in to use the computer in this library, in this small town in Poland.

She must be ten years older than me, in her forties, and each time I see her I wonder about her life, the secret life of the librarian, who and what she goes home to, whether she lives in a house or a flat in one of the apartment blocks, if she ever married and had children or if she lives with her parents, if she always dreamed of being the librarian here, if she's happy with how her life turned out. I suppose people's expectations here are a little lower, and many of them are just happy to have a job and a roof over their heads. Maybe it isn't fair to assume that. "People are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." I wonder who said that. I should look it up while I'm here.

Up the spiral staircase the second floor is always cold, colder than the rest of the library. I come here to pass time and to use the computers, which take up half of the second floor, the gallery level, or is it a mezzanine? There's rarely anyone else here. I used to use the computers at Kultury Dom, the Culture House, but there the librarian's kids are usually playing games on them and she has to ask one of them to get off when I come in. Then I feel like an intruder. Then it comes home to me that I don't belong here. It's an insular community and I already stand out as it is. Few people ever move here and settle, at least they haven't in the last sixty years or so, not since the Germans were forced out.

This library is a converted twelfth century chapel, one of the few buildings that survived Soviet bombardment of the town in the spring of 1945. That's something I've

learned from the few English-language sources I can find about the area, websites mostly, and a few books and pamphlets I've managed to hunt down here in town and in Szczecin. I haven't quite mastered the language enough to read about the town's history in books in Polish. I can walk around and observe, but to learn the particulars, what things really mean, I probably have to look elsewhere. I ask as many people as many questions as I can, but most of them just don't know, and don't care.

The other half of the second floor is mostly glass cases filled with artifacts found in and around town from throughout history, some from the Stone Age. Spear heads and pottery, some dating back three thousand years. Most people here probably don't have any idea of what's up here. But how many of us appreciate the place we're in, once we've started taking it for granted, until we leave it?

I mill around for a while, looking through the shelves, looking over the displays. At the computer I check my email—nothing much, some pictures from a friend, his daughter's baptism. I read some news. There's an upcoming election back in the United States, "Change you can believe in," or something. I've always believed that, one way or another, change would always come, until it wouldn't anymore. I remember to look up that quote, "People are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." Abraham Lincoln. I don't think it's as simple as that.

On my way out I don't bother saying anything to the librarian, no "do widzenia" or anything. She knows I'll be back tomorrow or the next day. She and I have settled into this routine and don't need to speak. It's a relationship that works just fine for us.

Outside, it's nearly freezing but the town is going about its usual business. I have an hour before dinner. Sometimes I take a walk along the concourse that runs along the

old medieval wall circling the older center of town, but Natalia will be finished work soon and I have to meet her at her parent's house. I decide to skip the wall today, but I take my time getting to my in-laws.

I get there early, while Natalia and her mother are still getting dinner ready in the kitchen. I always knock when I arrive, and wait, giving someone the chance to open the door for me and invite me in, but I always end up opening it myself. Natalia is quiet when I come in. That quiet is nothing new. I thought she might have been talking about me right before I came in, and I guess I should be glad if she was. At least I was on her mind. She gives me a look, almost to say I should have been there earlier to help, but no one would have let me help anyway.

We eat in the living room, where the coffee table has a crank underneath to raise it and two drop leafs turning it into a dining room table. On the table are sliced bread, pickled zucchini, mashed yellow potatoes, already cold and sprinkled with dill, boneless pork chops, rolled up and filled with cheese and peppers then breaded and fried, cherry compote, bottles of mineral water, Beidronka-brand lemon-lime soda, and a liter of Coke, for me, but the Coke, like everything else, tastes different here.

Natalia's grandmother, Babcia, sits with me at the far end of the table. My father-in-law picks her up from the village sometimes to stay with them for a few days. I like to talk to her, especially now that my Polish is improving somewhat and I can say more to her than "*Do you have a cigarette lighter?*" and "*Is this your newspaper or mine?*" I've been trying to find out as much as I can about the people who live here, especially Natalia's family, but I don't get a chance to ask anyone anything now. They're all too

busy eating. No one asks me about my day. Natalia sits at the other end of the table from me, close to her father.

My mother-in-law rarely sits down to eat with us and it makes me uncomfortable. She's constantly bringing more food from the kitchen, refilling bowls before they go empty. Dishes and plates clink on the table as she makes more room. I take a little bit more of everything on the table, just enough so she won't think her efforts are wasted, but not enough that she'll worry about bringing more.

Halfway through dinner my father-in-law says he thinks it's time to get one of those big-screen plasma TVs. He changes the channel after his Tom and Jerry cartoons end.

Across the table from me, Bojenna, Natalia's spoiled fifteen year old sister, claps her hands. "Plasma, plasma, plasma," she says. Before we left the States and came to live here Natalia used to send boxes of new clothes three times a year, usually just a pair of shoes or an outfit for her parents, but the rest for her little sister. "*Jacek and Bogdan have Plasmas,*" she says in Polish. "*Jacek has two, and three laptops and a new camera.*"

"*I bought you a laptop,*" Natalia says to her. "*Isn't one enough?*"

I turn to look at the 27 inch RCA against the window, now showing a BBC cooking show. They have a satellite. The TV is a few years old, but the picture is fine, and it's bigger than any of the TVs Natalia and I had back in the States, but I don't say any of this now.

"*For Bojenna,*" my father-in-law says about the TV. "*Teenagers, you know.*" He's looking at me, and he keeps his words simple whenever he's saying anything to me, knowing my Polish is still limited. "*They must have everything new. Better.*" I know he

wants the TV for himself as much as anybody. He spends as much time in front of the TV as anyone, watching cartoons or old westerns, and he's had to start wearing glasses the last few years.

“*Was Natalia the same?*” I say, and smile, trying to make a joke.

Her father shrugs and says “*Girls.*”

Natalia looks down at her plate and says “*I always had everything I wanted when I was a girl,*” in Polish, so everyone at the table understands her, but I wonder who she's really saying it to.

A few minutes later I help my mother-in-law clear the table, then she comes back into the living room with two more sliced loaves of bread and two plates with sliced meats, cheeses, and tomatoes. I make myself a small sandwich and take my time eating it. Once, during our first trip here after Natalia got her green card, I made the mistake of taking the last slice of bread and the last slice of ham after they'd sat on the plate for an hour or so, long after everyone else stopped eating. I was already full; I was just trying to be nice. When my mother-in-law saw me take them she took the plates into the kitchen and brought back another sliced loaf of bread and another small ham.

After dinner we sit for a few hours and my father-in-law turns on Sami Swoi, the first film in a popular series of Polish comedies from the late 1960s. Seeing them on TV is something like seeing *The Wizard of Oz* or *It's a Wonderful Life* would be back home, generally reserved for holidays or near holidays, but special occasions in their own right. Sami Swoi is variously translated as “Our Folks,” “Just Folks,” “All Folks here,” or “All Friends Here.” It's a line from the movie, and taken in context, I'd say it's closer to “Our Kind of People.”

The film takes place at the end of the Second World War. Poles from the eastern part of the country, areas that are now part of Russia and Ukraine, are moving into the western part, areas recently recovered from Germany when the allies moved the border. It's kind of *The Beverly Hillbillies* meets *Wagon Train*. One family, all of their belongings loaded up onto an old flatbed truck, comes into a small town in the Recovered Territories. They spot a cow standing in front of a house. The cow looks like it must come from the other side of the river Bug—because of its spots or something—where the family is originally from, so their “folks” must live in the house. They claim the abandoned house directly across the road. It turns out, the cow and the folks do come from the other side of the river Bug, but unfortunately, it's a family the first family has been feuding with for generations. Now the families are neighbors again. Madcap hilarity ensues. They argue over land, over a stray kitten. The fathers nearly get into several knife fights with each other. The teenage son of one family falls in love with the teenage daughter of the other family. Vice versa. Neither family can accept this. There's also a bit of the wild west to it, since it mostly takes place on farmland, there's a general sense of lawlessness in this reoccupied town, and there's danger from roving bands of German malcontents and unexploded ordinance. One particular gag involves the spotted cow getting blown up when someone from the rival family chases it into a minefield. The films make fun of Poles, Germans, even Americans, but they're very careful not to portray the Russian army in a negative light, even calling them at one point, I think, “Very skilled.”

Everyone in Natalia's family laughs at the same parts. It is a pretty funny movie, but a lot of the humor is lost on me, between the language and the culture. Despite that,

and all the silliness, the story mirrors that of a lot of families in the region. The entire North/Northwest of Poland was German, by proxy if not fact, for centuries before the end of the Second World War, so was the Silesian region in the south. The Recovered Territories they call it. But it depends on which version of revisionist history you want to believe, and it's all so hard to keep track of, even from the English language sources I have been able to find. The general consensus seems to be that by the seventh century the area was Slavic, by the tenth officially Polish, by the thirteenth German, in fact if not in name, and then finally, shortly after the war, Polish again. The German population was expelled and the Polish and smaller Ukrainian ones from the eastern areas of Poland were compelled, if not forced by the liberating Soviets, to move in. People packed up what they could carry in cars, on the small spaces afforded them on cross-country trains, or whatever they could just carry on their backs, and made their way west. Once they were allowed to stop they'd just settle in whichever empty house they got to first. That's what Natalia's father's family did. A four flat house on Szcepanskiiego, with 1907 above the front door, a hundred years old by the time I first set foot in it, and already occupied by three generations of Natalia's family.

I sit and nurse a few warm Tyskie beers my father-in-law keeps in a cabinet at the bottom of the hutch. For a while after the movie, I try to include myself in the conversation, laughing when everyone else does, asking my father-in-law a few details of his life. After a while I lose my way and stop trying to listen. It probably doesn't concern me. I look at Natalia, who smiles and laughs a few times but doesn't look back at me. I realize she's barely said anything to me all night.

I notice no one has been saying much to Babcia either and she's almost nodding off to sleep, so I try to get her talking about what town used to be like right after the war. Her family was from Warsaw, which she pronounces *Var-sha-va*, slowly, almost singing each syllable, but she went to Munich before the war to work in a garment factory. After the war she ended up here and, except for one brother, never saw anyone in her family again. "*When I was nineteen years old I went to Germany. I worked in the factory,*" she says to me tonight. "*The German men liked to hear me sing. I used to sing a song when I worked.*" She tries to remember the song, her hands trembling as she hums to herself.

I've heard the story before, and she can never remember the song.

She begins again. "*When I was nineteen years old I went to Germany...*"

Later, walking with Natalia through the center of town, I'm bundled up against the cold again—shirt, sweater, long underwear, corduroys, wool jacket, hat, scarf and gloves. My feet are especially cold. After only a few short months in Poland the cobblestone streets have already worn holes in the bottoms of my shoes. We walk everywhere. The car we didn't sell is in storage back in the States like almost everything else we own, waiting.

Natalia, with her coat buttoned up, holds her collar closed against her neck, but otherwise doesn't seem to mind the drop in temperature since the sun went down. Maybe it's because she grew up here. She's in a skirt and stockings and the knee-high leather boots she's taken to wearing now. Every woman between the ages of twelve and fifty seems to wear those boots in this part of the world. Her heels make a hard, steady click

on the sidewalk. I hate the sound they make, like she's too determined to get somewhere, and although I'm keeping up, if I slow down she'll just keep going and leave me behind.

We're on our way home. Her home, I still think of it. It is—the apartment her father bought her before she came to the States, before she met me. Halfway there I'm running out of breath. I don't like the cold, not like this. I ate too much and I'm still burping up the warm beers her father gave me at dinner. I don't imagine I'll ever get used to drinking warm beer.

I stop for a moment and take a few deep breaths. At night the air here usually smells like wood burning. That I do like. It's the kind of rustic, European detail I always expected about winter in Poland. Much better than the smell of burning plastic that sometimes fills the air. Despite the developing economy and EU membership, some people here are still so poor they'll burn anything to keep their houses warm, especially in the villages, but even in the smaller cities like this. It's that kind of poverty that brought so many young Polish people like Natalia to the United States every year on student visas, although, relatively speaking, her family had money.

"I told you not to drink so much," Natalia says, after stopping a few feet in front of me with her arms folded, watching me.

I don't remember her saying anything to me tonight about how much I drank. "I had three beers," I say. "You saw." I bend over a little, put my hands on my knees, and inhale through my nose. "I think I ate too much. Do we always have to have sandwiches after dinner?"

"Don't eat what you don't want," she says.

“I didn’t want to be rude. I feel bad if your mother goes to all that trouble and I barely touch any of it.”

Back when we were living in the States Natalia was constantly on me about how much I ate and cut out most of the fat and junk food from our diet. She was concerned about my growing middle and the heart disease that killed my father. Now she never really says anything about how much I eat. I guess it’s because we have so many of our meals at her relatives’. She probably doesn’t want to seem rude either.

“Are you going to be sick?” She’s looking back in the direction we were walking. We’re not far from the church now. Once we get there we only need to cut across the courtyard and cross the street and we’re home.

I start to answer her, “No, I’ll be fine,” but before I’m finished she’s already started walking again. Click click click.

I jog a few steps after her to catch up. A minute later we’re reaching the church. The sidewalk is broken by a bare patch of dirt and I try to step around it. We haven’t had snow in a week but the ground is always muddy here. It’s muddy everywhere in Poland. Even in the bigger cities, with seemingly no dirt in sight, it’s impossible not to track mud everywhere you walk. I stopped wearing khaki-colored pants because of the black splotches that always appeared around the cuffs and up the backs of my pant legs.

Natalia’s over the dirt patch in two quick steps and I follow. We turn right and walk through the church courtyard. Christmas is still a month away but there’s already a manger scene set up outside. We used to make fun of anyone in America who had their Christmas decorations up before Thanksgiving, Natalia too, but now she won’t admit that in some ways Poles are worse. I remember my parents talking about giving up meat on

Fridays during Lent when they were growing up, but it wasn't something they continued when they raised my brother and me. But here, in this overwhelmingly Catholic country, people give up meat on Fridays during Lent and Advent. We won't be eating any meat tomorrow.

I feel a tinge of guilt every time we walk past the church and each time we go to mass. Before we left the States we were still waiting on an annulment for my first marriage. I thought it would happen faster, but Natalia hasn't taken communion in four years, since our civil marriage isn't recognized by the church. It seems we were always waiting for something—a green card for her, me finishing school, a baby. Natalia's father is still waiting for us to have a church wedding so he can throw us a party, but Natalia stopped mentioning it months ago, before we got here.

I look up at the clock tower of the church. Seven-thirty. That makes it one-thirty in the afternoon back in America. I loop my arm through Natalia's and pull her a little closer to me. "Maybe there's a movie on," I say.

"I have had a long day. I'm tired." She opens her mouth wide in a silent yawn and pulls her arm free to cover it with her hand.

I wonder if it's a real yawn. "It's not even eight o'clock," I say.

"I'm taking a shower and going to bed." She's always gone to bed early, by eleven most nights, but here she's always asleep before ten and up by six each morning.

We cross the street to the rows of rectangular, communist-era apartment buildings where we live. They're all nearly identical. Some are painted a dull yellow with brown stripes down the center; others have been left the plain color of concrete, with black cracks in the walls and mossy green stains spreading out beneath the windows. Natalia

showed me pictures of the buildings before we got married. Afterward, while we were waiting to see if she'd get her green card, I used to imagine what it would be like if we had to live here, how I would make my way as an American living in Poland just to be with my wife. There was reason to worry. Our lawyer warned us about a flub Natalia had made on a visa extension application, a lie technically, about working after her employment authorization had expired. It was enough for them to possibly deny her application for permanent residency. I remember thinking back then that whatever happened, things wouldn't be so bad. At least she owned her apartment and I had a marketable skill: English. A native speaker, with a degree in just about anything, can usually find a job teaching English in Eastern Europe. But back then this was just a possibility, a worst case scenario.

Here at the apartment the cobblestones give way to concrete slabs. We walk to our entrance at 7/B. Natalia tries the door and it easily swings open. Sometimes it's locked, and I still don't have a key. Natalia has one and her father keeps the spare. Inside the building the stairwell smells like dirt, like the freshly turned dirt of a garden. It doesn't smell as bad as the farm Natalia's grandmother lives on in the village twenty kilometers up the road, but it still turns my stomach sometimes. I can already see the fresh mud we're leaving on the concrete steps, swishing around with the dried mud that other people left earlier. We live on the fifth of six floors and there's no elevator. Halfway up my legs hurt and I'm holding on to the wall, recently painted bright green. I'm still not used to all the walking. The stairwell is cold, and coupled with the smell and the dying plants that nobody waters on the cracked concrete windowsills, there's the

feeling of still being outside. I wonder why they went with the green paint for the walls. Was it cheaper or does anyone here really think it's a nice color?

We reach our door and I wait below the landing while Natalia clicks the key clockwise several times in both locks. She hasn't said anything since we walked by the church. I look at the door of the only neighbor we share this landing with. His door is older, more worn and faded than ours. I can't remember ever seeing him but I'm pretty sure he has a dog. How many times have I passed him on the stairs without knowing who he was? We don't really know any of the neighbors. Natalia was gone for six years, and I can't really say much to any of them anyway. Few people speak English in this little city, and my Polish isn't strong enough to carry on a conversation. This may be home for now, but most of Natalia's friends left around the same time she did, and few ever came back here. Instead they stayed in the United States, many of them illegally, or moved on to find jobs in other EU countries like England, Ireland, and Norway. It feels like we're cut off from other people here, except her family.

Natalia gets the door opened and I follow her inside. I stop to pull my shoes off and put on my slippers as soon as I'm through the door, but she flips the light on in the foyer and walks straight to our bedroom without taking off her boots. She'll expect me to vacuum this weekend, and when I don't she'll do it early Monday morning while I'm still sleeping, making more noise than she has to. I won't bother trying to tell her that I don't vacuum as often because I'm more careful about making a mess. That's never been an argument I can win.

I hang up my coat, my hat, my scarf and follow her. I'm starting to get my wind back. She's already standing in her stockings, folding up her skirt to put it away.

I lean against the doorjamb, hoping to get her attention, but she keeps moving and turns her back to me.

“You were quiet at dinner tonight,” I say. “Was work okay?”

“Work is work.” She got her old job back, at the cosmetics store right in the center of town, where she worked before she left for America. She looks at me now, while she rolls off her stockings.

I’d like her to leave them on, to sit down on the bed and look at me, to smile and not seem like there’s always something else she needs to be doing.

“Listen, are you sure you don’t want to check if there’s a movie on TV, open a bottle of wine? Feels like a while since we just sat, just the two of us.” I realize it’s been since before we left the States.

She takes her pajamas from a drawer and walks past me. “Shower,” she says. “I have to work tomorrow.” On her way to the bathroom she adds, “And so do you.”

Her father will be here at six to drive me the twenty-six kilometers to Stargard to catch the train to Szczecin and the language school I’ve been teaching at. Natalia and her family tell me there hasn’t been train service here in town for decades, but there is a bus to Stargard. Sometimes I’d like to take the bus, to just fend for myself for a change, but her father would rather drive me.

I’m still standing in the doorway of the bedroom when I hear the water running and realize I have to pee. Thank God for separate wash and toilet rooms, probably Poland’s greatest invention, if I can give them credit for it. Why shouldn’t there be a separate little room, like a closet, for the toilet? If they weren’t separate I wouldn’t be able to get in the bathroom anyway. Natalia locks the door when she showers now. She

didn't always. I turn around and stand at the door of the washroom for a minute, listening to the spurt of the shower head. I almost knock. I don't know why. Then I step into the toilet closet.

I flush the toilet and hear the water pressure change in the next room. "Sorry," I yell, but she probably doesn't hear me.

I go into the living room and sit on the sofa. This apartment is bigger, and probably nicer, than our last two apartments in the United States. Her father didn't spare any expense—hardwood floors, new cabinets, new doors, retiled bathroom—except on the furniture. All the furniture is old. There's another, smaller bedroom next to ours. I guess when he bought this place Natalia's father thought it would make a good room for a baby, if Natalia ever had one. It's painted pink with butterfly curtains on the window, and it's too small to get a bed in there to make it a guest room. I'd like to turn that room into an office, but Natalia doesn't want to do anything with it, so it stays empty.

Our old Russian-made black and white TV takes a minute to warm up and I scan the four channels we get. Lots of other people in this housing project have satellite dishes attached to their balconies. We don't, so I don't watch too much TV. Natalia always liked American TV shows, I thought, but now she doesn't really seem interested, even though we could watch them if we had a satellite dish. "I can watch at my parents' house if it's something interesting" she says.

Scanning the channels now I notice there's a talk show on TVPL1, regional news on TVPL2, a commercial on TVPL3, and a dubbed documentary about the Hungarian Revolution on the fourth channel, whatever that is. Sometimes they show American movies on TVPL3, with one guy dubbing all the dialogue and key plot points in Polish.

With the volume up, I can usually make out the English track while the guy doing the dubbing isn't speaking, so I stop at TVPL3 and put the remote down.

The water stops and I wait a few minutes for Natalia to come out of the bathroom. I'm getting a little antsy by the time she does, not even paying attention to the TV. When the door opens she's already wearing her pajamas and her towel is hanging from a hook on the door. She used to come out of the bathroom naked after a shower. I'm watching her from the sofa. She smiles, weakly, a quick upturn of the corners of her mouth, and goes right into our bedroom. I give her a few minutes of privacy to pray. On the TV a commercial for Knorr instant soup ends and TVPL3 returns to an American made-for-TV movie. They show a lot of these things here. The Polish channels must get them cheap. I don't think anyone here gets the distinction between made-for-TV and the big-budget movies that are released to cinemas. Natalia never did. "A movie is a movie," she'd say.

Natalia comes into the room a few minutes later and stands at my side, looking at the TV. "Something interesting?"

"Not really," I say, and turn to look at her. I smile, trying to make her understand that she has my attention.

"I'm going to buy the TV for my parents," she says. "There is a Panasonic at Mediaexpert for seventeen hundred zloty. What do you think?"

I had a feeling this was going to come up, and I know why her father mentioned it in front of us at dinner. Everyone here thinks we're rich Americans. Even Natalia, who lived here until she was twenty-five, now she is a rich American. They don't know we have less than seven thousand dollars in the bank and don't even own a home back in the States. The thirty six hundred zloty I make every month teaching at the language school

means we're pretty well-off, by Polish standards. Coupled with the five hundred zloty Natalia makes and the fact that we don't pay rent, everyone thinks we're very well-off. But we don't save much. Depending on the exchange rate I only make about twelve hundred dollars US every month. I understand she wants to help her family, but it's a lot of money, and I've been thinking we'll need it for when we move back to the States.

"We don't have a plasma TV," I say. We just have an old Sanyo in the bedroom and the Russian-made black and white here in the living room. Our TV wasn't much better when we lived in the States.

"We don't need one."

I wonder if her parents do. "That's almost half a month's salary," I remind her.

"I can buy it with my own money," she says. "I just asked you what you thought. I didn't say you had to buy it."

"You asked me what I thought and I said it's a lot of money." I already know this is an argument I'll lose. "And I didn't say we shouldn't buy it. I just think we should talk about it, think about it for a while. There's no rush, but besides, shouldn't we be saving our money for when we go home?"

She doesn't say anything for a moment, just folds her arms and looks in the direction of the TV. "Then we'll think about it," she says finally. "Goodnight." She bends down and kisses me on the corner of my mouth, warmly enough, but doesn't linger.

I reach to give her a hug but she's already turning to leave the room. When she closes the bedroom door I wait to hear the mattress squeak before I get up. It's too early for me to go to bed and I'm bored. I used to lay down with her whenever she went to bed, whether I was tired or not, wait for her to fall asleep and then go read or finish watching a

movie, but I've stopped doing that. She said she was tired anyway so she'll probably fall right off to sleep. She doesn't need me for that. We both have to be up for work early in the morning.

I walk into the hall and stand in the doorway of that empty little bedroom. There's just enough light from a streetlamp coming through the window that I can make out the faint butterfly pattern on the curtains.

I think about having a cigarette on the balcony and then going in to see if she's asleep yet, to try and get her to talk, but I don't feel like washing my hands and face and brushing my teeth if this isn't the last cigarette I'm going to have tonight. She hates it when I come to bed smelling like cigarettes, although she hasn't said anything to me about quitting in a long time. I know she's going to buy that TV, and I wonder why I even bothered to say anything about it to her.

After a few minutes I move down to our bedroom and open the door, trying to hear Natalia breath. It's quiet, so I go in, get in the bed and whisper her name.

She's lying on her side with her back to me.

I reach my hand under the covers. Starting at her hip I run my hand down her thigh then around to her front. Her skin is smooth and tight on her legs. There are dimples around the three tiny scars along her bikini line, from the botched operation to remove the growing fibroid that was keeping her from getting pregnant. They've faded to a pale white, but the doctors accidentally cut into the wall of her uterus and had to perform an emergency hysterectomy to stop the bleeding, leaving a longer scar on her abdomen, brown and jagged, with smaller dots left from the staples used to close it. I'm careful not

to touch any of the scars. I know how sensitive she is to them. Once I tried to kiss them but she turned over and started to cry. I move my hand down between her legs.

“No,” she says, but doesn’t move. She still has her back to me.

I take my hand away but don’t get right out of bed. I’m waiting for her to say something else. I try to remember what I came in to say.

After a minute I get up, quietly, and go back out into the hall. I make my way out onto the balcony through the kitchen. It already feels colder outside than it did a little while ago. I should go back in for my jacket but I don’t. I’m shivering and several matches burn out before I can get a cigarette lit. I remember the nights I stayed up worrying about that green card, wondering if she’d get it, and after she did, thinking, what are we going to find to worry about now? In those years right before and after we’d gotten married I’d cleaned up my act, went back to school and started teaching. I looked forward to the future in a way I hadn’t most of my life. It seemed that exciting things were on the horizon.

A dog is barking somewhere but otherwise the town is quiet. I look out from the balcony and see a single truck drive past the church on its way to Szczecin or beyond, over the border into Germany. West.

Natalia wakes me at five thirty for work. She shakes my arm and I take out my earplugs, which I’ve started wearing here to block out the noise of the upstairs neighbors. They wake up even earlier than we do. Natalia and I both start at eight but I need to take the train to Szczecin.

Natalia rolls out of bed from her side and goes into the kitchen.

I go about my routine of getting dressed for the cold again. The sun is coming out but it won't warm up until after I'm already at work, and I may have to wait a few minutes on the platform at the train station.

In the kitchen Natalia busies herself making breakfast. We don't talk about last night. She still looks tired, despite nearly eight hours of sleep. When I tell her I'm not hungry, she'll act surprised, like I'm only saying I'm not hungry to spite her, to undermine her efforts, but I'm waiting for her to stop acting surprised. Each morning, for weeks, I've told her I'm not hungry first thing in the morning, that I'll take something to eat on the train.

From the hall, once I have my things together, with my bag slung over my shoulder, and my hat and gloves already on, I tell her I'm leaving.

She comes to the kitchen doorway and says "Tell my father don't forget to pick up bread on his way home."

Natalia's father picks me up at six to drive me to Stargard to catch the six thirty train. Down on the street, I can see his frame nearly fills the entire front of his Nissan, while he waits for me with the engine idling.

I put my bag in the back seat and sit beside him with my coffee in a travel mug between my legs. We rub elbows as he puts the car in gear. "Dzien dobre," I say.

"Dobre, dobre," he says, as the car lurches away from the curb and he speeds down the narrow streets, taking turns too quickly, so that we lean into each other around every corner, our thick winter coats rubbing together.

Today at one point he decides to ask me, "*You like it now in Poland?*"

For a minute I try to think of something to say, think how I can explain it to him in my broken Polish, then I realize I'm not even sure what I'd say if we were fluent in the same language.

"Yes and no. A little," I say.

He watches me from the corner of his eye and says something about my mother. I think he says *"Do you miss your mother?"*

I repeat what I just said. *"Yes and no. A little."* And he turns his head to me now, but says nothing.

Sometimes I wonder if he knows how little of what he's saying I understand. If he does, it doesn't stop him from talking the entire ride. Occasionally, when I get lost in what he's saying, I'll speak to him in English, just to break things up.

I think about the things I know about him. He went to work when he was fifteen. So did I. He knows that much about me. Natalia told him on our second visit here. But my father had lived several more years, so I didn't have to work to support my whole family. No one was depending on me.

A few years later he'd been conscripted into the army. To this day, two years of military service are mandatory for all able bodied young men. Before he'd left, he had to talk a few of his friends, teenagers not much younger than himself, to move in with his mother. If the state got word that a single woman was living in a four room flat alone, they likely would have confiscated it and relocated her. When he'd returned, two years later, he had some trouble getting rid of the friends. Then he married Natalia's mother, a girl from a farm in a village a few kilometers away. His family origins are shady, to him, other than that they came from the general vicinity of Warsaw, but he's lived in the same

house all of his life. He knows that much. I learned all this back when we were still having three-way conversations, Natalia translating between the two of us.

Sitting in the car with him now, it occurs to me that no matter how long I stay here, it's unlikely he or anyone else in Natalia's family will ever truly know me, not in our lifetimes. That must be why they feel like someone has to do nearly everything for me. I must seem like a baby to them. It's hard to gauge someone's intelligence or self-reliance when they can barely use the language.

Her father drops me off at the train station, a pre-World War II building, serving trains left over from the 1950s.

Stargard was an important city in the eastern half of Germany before and during the war. Only a few miles from where I'm standing now was Stalag 11-D, where allied prisoners of war, mostly Canadian, were interred for years following the disastrous Dieppe raid. A famous Broadway actor was shot and killed while trying to escape. Here he was, an English speaker, marooned across the ocean, for what ended up being a lost cause, taking his last breath of air, here in Pomerania. Did he sense the finality of it all, and how bad must things have gotten before he decided to make a break for it, all or nothing, and where did he think he would go once he had gotten away?

I get out and take my bag from the back seat. As I'm about to close the door I lean down again. "*Don't forget bread.*"

"*1600 hours,*" he says back and drives off. He'll be back here waiting for me at 4 o'clock.

I wait at the platform, shivering, wondering if I have time to step back out in front of the station and have a cigarette.

The train arrives a few minutes later and I choose a seat facing the opposite direction the train is traveling, so that I'm facing east as the train travels west. I don't look out of the windows anyway. Instead I read a book and eat the fruit I brought from home.

In Szczecin I take a tram to the language school where I teach. I meet two classes in the morning for two hours each, and then meet each again for an hour in the afternoon.

For the lunch hour I usually go to one of the spaghetti bars in the center of old town. We're close to two universities and these places are popular among students. They're a lot like American fast food restaurants, with workers in matching polo shirts and visors, and combo meals with a side and a drink. But they stick to the combo menu rigidly. I once asked for water instead of a Coke.

"The menu says Coke. I must give you Coke," the girl at the register said, pointing at the menu and not looking at me.

I'd try to say it's a vestige of communist bureaucracy, but I don't know enough about that to make the comparison.

I usually don't eat the side dish. I can't quite get used to eating French fries with spaghetti, or worse, a hardboiled egg in a cup of cold tomato sauce. That's just weird. But again, they'll never substitute one for another, even if you ask them. If you want meat sauce you get the egg, if you want the fries your pasta comes with peas in it. The spaghetti is very good though. I usually finish it, but I always feel bad about throwing away the egg or the fries, especially with hungry university students watching me. I don't want to reinforce what any of them think about spoiled Americans and waste. Sometimes I bury it in a napkin or slip it into my empty soda cup before I dump my tray in the bin.

Today I don't even have a choice. It's Advent. Meat sauce is off the menu, but I might have ordered it anyway if I could have.

Back at the language school I spend the afternoon on demonstrative pronouns.

"This is my pencil," I say, holding it up in front of my face.

The students repeat it.

"That is your pencil," I say, pointing out to the room.

They repeat a little louder this time.

I base most of my lessons around things that were in the Polish language books I learned from: *To jest moja matka. To jest moj ojciec. To sa moi rodzice.* "This is my mother. This is my father. These are my parents." I've noticed some of the students getting frustrated because we're stuck in the present tense.

At the end of the day I take the tram back to the train. I like the tram. It takes me on a kind of lazy, round-about tour of the center of the city. Sixty percent of this city was destroyed by allied bombing during the war, back when it was still a part of Germany, back when it was called Stettin. There's a rounded corner where the tram line cuts across a busy intersection. Some of the buildings there are pretty old, pre-war probably. At least they look like it. I imagine people sitting on a tram, much like this one, wondering if their children are home from school yet, and looking up when they hear the planes overhead. Before I start to feel too badly for them I remind myself what had probably already happened to the city's Jews by then. Besides, nobody who lived here then is still here now.

Sometimes I'd like to walk around Szczecin for a while, or even Stargard after I get off the train, and not hurry home, but catch a later bus back to town. But I've never had a chance. Natalia's father is always there to pick me up at four.

On the PKP express train from Szczecin to Stargard I keep to myself. Most people do, but I used to think it was easier for me because I stand out as a foreigner. Despite it being Poland's seventh largest city, on the banks of the River Oder just across from the German border, and having a lot of signs in English, I've yet to meet anyone here who speaks English, outside of the language school. I'm still too shy to even try to speak Polish to anyone outside of the family unless I have to. Sometimes I wonder if I'm too self-consciously American, but lately I think it's likely no one here knows or really gives a fuck what I am.

I sit facing the direction the train is moving, east for now, with my bag on the seat next to me, looking over a day-old copy of *Gazeta*.

We've been going to the cemetery about every other Saturday since we've been here. Natalia has a lot of relatives buried here, quite a few who died while she was gone. It's like she's trying to catch up on time she missed with them while they were still alive. I try to understand, but there are other things I'd rather do on a Saturday afternoon, and I'm waiting for her to feel that way too. At the gate there's a small kiosk where we buy a half dozen jarred candles and a book of wooden matches from an old man in a faded parka and a folded hunting hat. He charges me two zloty for the matches.

"Does he always charge for the matches?" I ask Natalia as we enter through the gate.

“Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn’t. It isn’t important,” she says as she reaches into the paper bag for one of the candles.

I can’t remember either. I usually have my own matches but they ran out last night on the balcony.

At the entrance, on either side of the walkway are several tiled mausoleums. “Gypsies,” Natalia told me the first time we came here. “Nobody else here has graves like that.”

They don’t, but the other graves are more ornate than they usually are in the States, huge headstones with matching stone slabs above the ground running the length of the grave. Most of the headstones carry a picture of the deceased or of each family member in the same plot in some cases. All of the photos look the same, black and white, or in dull color on a white background with everyone’s portrait in the same profile, the same stoic expression on their faces, as if they went out one day to have their grave picture taken. You’d have to admire the foresight of it. None of the graves I’ve seen are older than 1946, the year the border was changed and Poles began to repopulate this area under the gentle prodding of the liberating Red Army. Before then this whole region was part of Germany. One small corner is dedicated to German headstones from before the war, but they’re packed so tightly together they must have been dug up and moved, or reset and arranged after they were knocked down by something.

Before Natalia left for America the old part of the cemetery was nearly full and a second plot of land right next to it was gated off. There were a few graves there then, she told me, but now that part is nearly full too. I walk with her to each of her family’s graves, saying a prayer with her at all of them and lighting a candle at some. Then I leave

her so she can pay her respects to some friends, particularly a boy who choked himself on a toothbrush while serving his two years of compulsory military service, but there are others (ex-boyfriends?) and I know she'd like the privacy.

There's a small park outside of the cemetery. An old tank and two field howitzers sit on raised concrete pedestals, pointing west. It took me a while to get a straight answer out of anybody about which army the tank and cannons belonged to. Everybody who lives here came after the war. But I've read up on it and I'm pretty sure they're Russian. I stand by the tank and light a cigarette while I wait for Natalia. Across the street, beyond the cemetery, is a range of wide green hills covered in leafy, root vegetable uniformity. I imagine myself running up one of those hills and staring down at some roadside village with its own church and its own small shop on the other side, as out of touch with this city over the hill as it is with the rest of the world.

While I'm waiting for Natalia by the tank I think about those German headstones. I wonder if any of them are from Jewish graves or if there was a separate Jewish cemetery. Where was it? Were there any Jews in this city while it was part of Germany? There must have been but, Germany or Poland, it's not hard to imagine what would have happened to them. Just hard to imagine how, and there isn't anyone around to ask. There is an area behind the second plot of cemetery land, overgrown and fenced off, that they say is where the main part of the German cemetery was. I'd like to have a look, to hop the fence, and walk around, see if anything else is still there, discernible beneath the vines and weeds, but Natalia and her family never want to walk over with me and always talk me out of getting too close. "You will get in trouble," they say.

Staring back at the tank and the cannons I think about the holes blasted in the wall surrounding the center of town. The “medieval wall” some of the guidebooks and postcards call it. Over six meters high in some places, it isn’t really medieval, not much of it anyway, maybe just the foundation or the first few feet constructed out of old round stones probably brought from the river bed. It runs in a circle surrounding what used to be the whole city, from the tenth century, when the first Slavs in the region were Christianized right here, or so they say, up until after the Second World War. It’s only broken by two gates with towers at either end of the main road that runs through town. The wall had been continuously built up and knocked down over the centuries, through the invasions of the Teutonic Knights, Sweden and so on, while this chunk of land kept changing hands between Slavic and Germanic people. Toward the end of the war the Germans built the wall as high as it stands now, in red brick, fortifying this city against the Russians on their way to Szczecin, and then on their way to Berlin. By the time the Red Army got here the German garrison and nearly the entire town’s population had already fled. I wonder if this tank and these cannons were used to blow any of the holes in the wall before the Russians just stopped and moved on. The people who have lived here since never bothered to repair the wall or knock it down. This is all stuff I’ve read in what little English language history on the region I can find. I guess I always wonder what kind of roots people have to this place, on whichever side of the border, wherever in the world they live. For probably the first time I think about myself as a resident too, the things that are keeping us here.

Natalia’s still not back and I light another cigarette. I smoke a lot when she’s not around, sometimes even if I don’t want one, just to get one in while she’s not watching.

Prosze o papierosy was one of the first things I learned to say in Polish, so I could ask for cigarettes at the kiosks. I started smoking Marlboros here too, the only American cigarettes I can find, and I swear they're stronger here than they are back home. It's no wonder I was so out of breath last night when we walked home. I always promised Natalia I'd quit once we had a baby. Was that her idea or mine?

When she comes back she sees me smoking, and I'm sure she knows it isn't my first one, but she doesn't say anything. Actually, she hasn't said anything about me smoking in a while.

"Ready?" she says, unsmiling and standing a few feet away from me.

I stamp out the cigarette and kick the butt under the tank.

The next morning Natalia wakes me up by shaking my feet. I've started wearing earplugs while I sleep and can't hear a word she's saying, but she's standing at the foot of the bed, waving her arms and yelling about something, her eyes wild and her lips moving quickly. The sun isn't up. It can't be time to go to church yet. I pull out an ear plug and hear her screaming that the apartment is filling with water. Barely awake I have a vision of water rising up to the fifth floor of the building, like we're on a punctured ocean liner about to sink. She runs out of the room and as I jump out of bed I realize there's a leak in the toilet room.

She's throwing towels on the floor and crying "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I step past her and pull the loose tile from the wall behind the toilet. It's just attached with a magnet to give access to the pipes behind it. Natalia's brother Jacek showed it to me the first time I ever came to this apartment. He was running his hands

along the wall, trying to tell me that he'd done all the tile work in here. He has a habit of speaking to me in German because someone told him it was close to English: "Mein, um, mein kleigen." Which I think means "my house." I guess he hasn't picked up that much German in the Frankfurt slaughterhouse where he works.

Water is spraying from the pipes, but I can't tell if it's from our toilet or from one of the other apartments. There's a valve and I turn it, but the water doesn't stop. "I can't tell if this is from us," I say.

"Yeah, the fucking neighbor he came and woke me from downstairs." She's laid out all of the towels and now starts throwing clothes from the hamper on the floor. The hallway is almost completely covered in water. "I know he is going to sue me now."

"Don't worry," I say. I'm standing in the hallway now. "You have insurance, don't you?" I don't know what to do.

She doesn't answer me, but the doorbell rings

"Open it. It's my father," she says.

"How do you know?" I'm walking to the door, my socks already wet.

"I called him."

"When?"

"Before I woke you."

When I open the door her father rushes in. He's breathing heavy, from running up the steps, I guess. Natalia is crying, almost whining to him and I don't catch what he says to her, but he's talking loud and fast. He tries to check the pipes and says, "Czy masz pudelko zapalek?"

It takes me a second to realize he's talking to me. What the fuck is a zapalek?

“Czy masz pudełko zapalek?”

Matches. Matches. He’s asking me if I have a box of matches. He can’t see the pipes behind the wall. I run to the coat rack and check my coat pockets.

I don’t have any matches. “Nie mam,” I say.

“Korwa,” he yells. That’s a bad word, but I’m pretty sure he isn’t saying it about me.

I try to bring him a candle I’ve lit on the stove but by the time I get there he doesn’t want it. He runs back down the stairs.

Natalia shakes the water from her hands and pouts a little.

A few minutes later the water stops. I can hear it hiss-whine and then settle into a slow drip.

Her father comes back, still huffing, with the building superintendent. “*He turned the water off. I’ve called a plumber,*” he says.

I’m standing by the wall, trying to stay out of the way.

“*It’s fine. It’s fine,*” he says, and lightly slaps me on the cheek.

When the plumber comes it takes him about an hour to replace the valve. I sit on the balcony smoking while Natalia and her father have coffee with him.

I decide to take a walk today, along the concourse that runs along the perimeter of the old medieval wall. Natalia and I used to walk it together, and she used to smile at my giddy fascination with it. We don’t have anything like this, anything as old, in the United States. Main streets run through what used to be the main gates at four points. And there are towers: the powder tower, the grain tower, and my favorite—the drunken tower. Town drunks used to be imprisoned here until they sobered up.

I notice a man, maybe a little younger than me, alone, walking along the concourse a hundred yards or so ahead of me, stopping at points of interest and taking pictures.

There are plaques at several spots, probably nineteen in all, telling the history of the town or the wall or a certain tower or other. When we first began coming here, sometimes Natalia and I would take walks here in the afternoon and I'd ask her to translate what the plaques said. Sometimes I'd get frustrated because she never seemed to understand the concept of literal translation. Instead of telling me exactly what each one said she would try and summarize it, dumb it down for me, which actually ended up taking her longer than it would have to just translate word for word. Say it as it is and I'll figure out what it means. Interpretation wasn't anything I ever needed her for.

I notice the man taking pictures of each plaque, carefully, stepping right up over it and adjusting his zoom lens. Who is he and what's so interesting? I haven't bothered to look at any of them in a while, in years really. The wall still fascinates me but nothing in those Polish descriptions does. When I reach the plaque the man has just taken a picture of I notice, for the first time that it's in three languages. At each one is a Polish, British, and German flag. The English is broken, barely intelligible, but it's there, a description of this section of the wall and its significance.

The next morning I tell my father-in-law that I'd prefer to get home on my own after work. He tries to talk me out of it but I insist.

That afternoon, after the train I stand in the cold waiting for the bus and begin to regret it a little, but once I'm on the bus I change my mind again. I'd really rather not be

around any of them more than I have to today. What's the point of me rushing home anyway? There's a few hours until dinner, nothing to do and no one waiting for me. Any waiting will just be to see that I've gotten home, and then what?

Off the bus I smoke two cigarettes on the walk. Sometimes after work I stop by the store to see Natalia on my way home but she took the day off today. Her parent's house and the cemetery are each the same distance from the bus stop, in different directions. If I make my way to the concourse and cross the meadow I can be at the cemetery in ten minutes, so I decide to go. I'm going to get a look at the old German section, to see if anything is there.

Beyond the new plot of the cemetery, I make my way over to the fence, stepping over a few felled trees and twice hopping over puddles nearly a meter wide. The fence must be at least two meters high and there's no easy foothold far enough from the ground for me to start my climb. I need to pull myself up and shimmy my entire body up and over. I come down hard the entire way and land up to my ankles in mud. I can feel water seeping into my shoes immediately and when I pull my feet out there's a squishing noise. Both of my shoes are entirely covered in mud and I try to step away quickly, but my feet are already getting cold. I'm already over so I still want to get a look around but there's nothing, just trees and weeds and shrubs but no sign that this was ever a cemetery, that it was anything special at all.

I make my way right to Natalia's parents' house. Getting back over the fence was harder the second time. I didn't want to step in mud again but I don't know why it even mattered. I managed to scrape and kick most of the mud off once I made it closer to the

street but my shoes are already ruined and the bottoms of my pant legs are coated in dry, flaking mud.

Before I even get to the door I can smell the boiling cabbage for the golobki my mother-in-law is making. I wipe my feet on the mat three times and knock but nobody answers. I try the door and it's open. I pull off my shoes and roll the cuffs of my pants up. When I step inside and I can hear everyone in the living room, moving around and talking.

My father-in-law shocks his hand on some split wires that he'd jury-rigged to connect the satellite box to the old TV. "Korwa," he yells. I'll never get used to the foul language he uses in the house around his wife and two daughters.

I stand at the front of the room, still in my hat and jacket but with my shoes off and my pants rolled up. Everyone stops what they're doing and looks at me.

Natalia looks at my feet and then up to my face. "I thought about it," she says after a moment, in English.

"Who carried it?"

"Me and my father."

"I wish you'd waited for me," I say. "I could have helped."

"You don't have to help with everything and I didn't want to wait."

The Panasonic is already out of the box and set up by the window.

Dee Dee Says

Getting started. It may sound obvious, but one of the most important first steps to successful parenting is reaching the decision that you are ready to be a parent, ready to give 100% of yourself to the welfare of another. Financial stability, of course, is key, but even more important, you need to be content with your life choices. The joys of parenting are innumerable, but they can also conflict with your ambitions, which can lead to resentment in the long run. Have you already done everything you planned to do, everything that having children might keep you from ever doing?

--from, "It Isn't Just About You Anymore," A Guide to Planned Parenthood

Published by the State Division of Youth and Family Services

"I just wanna have something to do," Dee Dee says sometimes. Here I go, already making excuses for him, but I guess adjusting to life in the suburbs has been kind of hard. Today he's just been sitting out on the lawn all morning.

Vera and I never got around to having children of our own. We never decided not to, it's just that there was always something more important to get to first. If it was meant to happen, it would happen. Vera used to say she wanted kids—one, maybe—but we just kept putting everything else in our lives first, careers, house, and then one day we realized time and biology had passed us by. A few years ago, after we were already in our forties, she would talk about adoption, but she brought it up the same way she would sometimes suggest we go out dancing. I don't dance. It was just a whim of hers. We decided we just didn't have the energy anymore and we were comfortable. We had everything we needed.

Dee Dee is a Ramone. He used to be anyway. He played bass, but left the band years ago. “Now I wanna be a good boy,” Dee Dee says.

Now he’s ours. That’s what Vera calls him.

In ideal situations, you will not be in this alone. Talk things over with your partner and make sure this is what you both want. You are in this together, and for the next several years will be sharing the responsibilities and decision-making when it comes to your child. Before jumping in to parenthood, assess your relationship and make sure this is the right person to begin this journey with. Make sure you respect your partner and his or her wishes. Keep conflicts to a minimum...

It all started several weeks ago. One of Vera’s kids at school—she’s a high school guidance counselor—lost both of his parents in a car crash. Very tragic. We were at the funeral. I liked the kid; he shook my hand, called me sir, thanked me for coming. The kid—David is his name—was fifteen, an only child, excellent student, superb athlete, and from a good family. Division of Youth and Family Services couldn’t track down a living relative, so Vera wanted him to stay with us. She’d grown close to him over the two years she’d been his advisor. I guess it was some sort of mothering instinct, something neither one of us really knew she had. I wasn’t crazy about the idea of taking him in at first, but I did like the kid, and he was practically grown, already formed. Most of the work was done. I didn’t imagine David ever coming home drunk in the middle of the night or getting a girl pregnant, and Vera just wouldn’t let it go. It was all she talked about for a week, so I finally said okay, we’d give it a try.

A few days later, David's case worker Mr. Bitburg told us, "We've found an aunt of David's, alive and well, and living upstate."

"How horrible," Vera cried out and covered her face with her hands.

We were sitting in Bitburg's office at D-Y-F-S. I still wasn't used to hearing the word said out loud—"Die-fuss." It was just something you saw in the paper all the time, connected to something horrible someone did to their kids. I put my arm around Vera and rubbed her shoulder. She can be very emotional sometimes. "So that's that," I said. "David will be staying with her."

"Not exactly." Bitburg cleared his throat and shuffled some files around on his desk. "We can't hand him over to her. It seems she made an error on her taxes three years ago."

Vera was quiet next to me, and I saw her peek through her fingers.

"But she's his nearest relative," I said.

Bitburg dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "This tax issue, it raises questions about her character and credibility. Nowadays you can never be too careful."

"Then he will live with us?" I asked.

"No." Bitburg shook his head ruefully. "I'm sorry, but after we found the aunt your names were removed from the case as potential foster parents, the logic being there was no longer any need for foster parents. Once we found the discrepancy in her financial records, however, David was immediately assigned to a different family up in Binghamton. I am sorry," he said again, "but these things happen and my hands are tied."

Vera let loose then, crying uncontrollably.

For my part, I have to admit I was a little relieved. I guess I didn't really want the kid, but I had to give Vera something. I always try to show her that I support her and the things she wants. A little effort at expressing my indignation should have been enough. "This is outrageous," I said. "We wanted him first. Just reassign him to us."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," Bitburg said. He sighed and leaned in toward us. "Vera, Doug, I have to tell you. You'll find that with the Division of Youth and Family Services, as with most state agencies, there is an obscene amount of bureaucratic red-tape surrounding everything we do, and the decisions we make seldom make any sense to anyone, including us. It's a hold-over from our old way of doing things."

"And the new way?" I asked.

"In other areas we're trying to improve. We have to," he said. "For instance, did you hear about that family with the six children who'd been forced to survive on animal waste from their pets because the parents weren't feeding them? DYFS had visited that home twelve times in thirteen months, yet those kids were still living like dogs in the cellar."

I had read about that, and told him so.

"That was us. That was my department," he said.

"What's your point?" I asked.

"The point is we've got someone else for you."

Parenting, unquestionably, comes with sacrifices. Just as there will undoubtedly be things you and your partner used to like to do that you will no longer be able to do, you may even notice other changes in your personality and interests. Does this mean you have to stop being you? No, not exactly. You will still be you, but you will be a new, different you. At times, you may not like the

new you. By the same token, there may be times when you don't like your child. You may not like the funny faces and fart noises they make or the songs they make up and sing to themselves, loud enough for everyone to hear. You may find your child annoying and at times even be embarrassed to be seen with him or her in public. Don't worry; this is completely natural. The important thing to remember is that they are young and impressionable, and are really just being themselves, but how you handle the situation, and the things you say, can have a profound effect on them. This is especially true in the cases of foster children, who may already be feeling vulnerable and unwanted. Be sure to avoid saying things like, "You can tell you're not my kid, because I never did anything like that when I was your age...."

The first time we saw Dee Dee, standing in Bitburg's office the next day, he was wearing jeans, a leather jacket, and dark sunglasses. The leather jacket was too small for him and it looked like he hadn't changed the jeans or sneakers in years. He looked impatient and out of place, like he was waiting to be dismissed. At first I thought he might have been the janitor, or some dead-beat father who had finally been tracked down and brought in. Then he started to shimmer in and out of sight. I half expected him to float off the floor and I actually rubbed my eyes.

"Well, here he is," Bitburg said.

"Is this a joke?" I said.

"No, this is Dee Dee."

"But he must be as old as me. He isn't even a child."

"He reads at a third-grade level. He's *child-like*," Bitburg said. "And he won't be getting any older."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Let's just forget I said it."

Vera approached Dee Dee, lifted one of his hands and let it drop. “Is he retarded?” she said.

“He’s a Ramone,” Bitburg said.

“This is Dee Dee Ramone, and you want us to be his foster parents,” I said. “This is ridiculous.”

“I have to agree with you there, but he is a ward of the state and he’s been assigned to you.”

Despite everything—and I’ve never admitted this to Vera—a part of me thought it was kind of cool. I’m sort of in the music business myself. I used to write jingles for the ad agency. Did you ever hear the commercial for Pep-o-Dent toothpaste? *Brush! ...and keep on brushing.* That was me. Me and my team. I knew who the Ramones were. Then I remembered. “Isn’t Dee Dee dead?”

Bitburg said, “New laws have created a few loopholes. Call it overzealousness if you want, but there are worse things we could be accused of than trying too hard. We have been accused of worse.”

Bitburg laughed. Dee Dee laughed, tentatively. I didn’t. They stopped.

Vera took a brush out of her purse and began running it through Dee Dee’s hair. She brushed it one way, then the other, then another, before flattening it back down over his forehead with her palm the way he seemed to like it. Then she adjusted his sunglasses. “There,” she said.

“Huh, nice lady,” Dee Dee said and wrapped her in a light hug.

“Okay,” she said, patting his back. “Okay.”

I watched the two of them standing there, Dee Dee unsteady on his feet and nearly six inches shorter than her. Vera pulled away from Dee Dee and they both smiled, keeping one arm around each other. I saw fresh tears glistening at the bottoms of Vera's eyelids. "We'll take him," she said.

It's unlike Vera to make snap decisions like that. Early in our marriage, when she'd had her eye on a bigger house closer to the city, we'd decided to wait on something more affordable but with a longer commute. She understood my point, so we waited to buy the house we live in now. We ended up with less living space but with a double garage where I could work on my hobbies. It was the same when we bought a new car last year. She didn't jump to buy the dependable, economical Japanese model she originally picked out. We waited and got the BMW we both wanted. The one I drive now. I was surprised, to say the least, that she was so willing to take Dee Dee in without even talking it over with me. Watching the two of them together, I could tell I wouldn't be able to talk her out of it, not yet anyway, and Bitburg had already begun getting the paperwork ready. Besides, I thought, it might be kind of nice to have someone else to talk to, show my work-station to and fool around on the Casio with. And I really didn't think this would go on for long anyway. "I guess that means we'll take him," I said to Bitburg.

Sure, they're cute when they're young, but you need to be in this for the long haul. As children mature, you may find it increasingly difficult to relate ...

On the ride home, I already started to have some second thoughts. I guess nothing quite prepares you for parenthood. That's what I've heard, but really, nothing ever prepares you for having a dead Ramone in the backseat of your car. With my hands too

tight around the steering wheel, I stared ahead at the road, occasionally looking back at him in the rearview mirror, unsure if he was awake or asleep or what, and wondering what we would do with him. What if he died for real before we got home? I wondered what DYFS would try to do to me if I just left him at a bus stop somewhere. It's not like we'd grown attached to him at that point. I fully expected him to smell bad, but he didn't and a few times I thought I saw him shimmer in and out of sight again. It was all very weird.

Next to me in the passenger seat, Vera asked Dee Dee to tell us about his days with the band.

"I was making a hundred and twenty-five dollars a week and I had a hundred-dollar-a-day dope habit," Dee Dee said.

"Well, boys will be boys, I guess," Vera said.

"I wanna be well," Dee Dee said.

"How about some ice cream?" Vera asked.

"Yay!" Dee Dee said.

Back at home, Vera rushed Dee Dee into the house, laughing and pulling him by the hand, him stumbling after her. I hung back, waiting by the car and watching them. I realized he hadn't even brought any bags with him. Or had we forgotten them? Then again, I thought, what could he really need? He probably didn't have a wardrobe of spare leather jackets and jeans. By the time I got inside Vera was already putting Dee Dee down for a nap on the couch and had him swaddled in an afghan her grandmother knitted.

He was giggling and mumbling to himself. She hadn't made him take off his jacket or sneakers.

A few minutes later, in the kitchen, I said to Vera, "Don't you think you were a bit hasty back there?"

She was getting something ready for dinner. "He's a good boy," she said. "He just needs a little love, and some direction. You'll see."

"But don't you think we should have talked about this first?"

"We did talk about it."

"When?"

"We already agreed to take David in."

"Yes, David," I said.

"And we got Dee Dee."

"That's my whole argument."

"Argument about what? We agree," she said. "And I hope you're going to stick to your end. You said you'd make a real effort with this."

I suddenly had a headache so I went up to bed. I don't know if she woke Dee Dee later or not, but I didn't get to spend any time with him that evening.

Over the next few days, I felt Vera got a little too close to Dee Dee. It would have been fine if she treated him something like a nephew she'd been extremely close to but hadn't seen for years, or the grown son of a family friend, visiting the old neighborhood and staying with us for a while, or maybe even a soldier she'd been pen pals with and had sent care packages to for the last two years, home on leave from the Middle East—

slightly shell-shocked— and now meeting for the first time. I'd have even been okay with something like a local homeless man she'd made a habit of baking weekly casseroles for, someone who'd merely fallen on hard times through no fault of his own, some senseless tragedy that cost him his family or his station in life, completely bat-shit probably, but dignified somehow, a hot meal the extent of the charity he was willing to accept from us. After finishing he'd pat his stomach contentedly, stand up from the table, accept the leftovers in an old Tupperware container from Vera, wrap himself back up in his rags and tatters, and just leave. That would have been great.

No. Instead, what she treated Dee Dee like, from the moment we first arrived at home, was a son, like her very own. That's the only way to say it. Me, I kept him a bit at arm's length at first. I mean, we didn't even know the guy.

Vera acted like every day was his birthday. For instance, almost every night, Vera ordered pizza from Chef Gino's because that's what Dee Dee liked. We haven't ordered pizza from there in years, because I've always thought their pizza was kind of shitty.

"Hey. Pizza. It's great. Let's dig in," Dee Dee said each time it arrived.

When he wasn't asleep on the couch or eating pizza he was watching cartoons, laughing at gags an eight year old boy would no longer find funny, waving his arms around in strange motions and rolling his head around on his neck.

Each night, shortly after dinner, when Vera gave Dee Dee his bath, I could hear water splashing around and the two of them laughing in there. Just once I accidentally walked in on them. Dee Dee sat naked in the tub staring up at Vera like a baby who didn't understand but was highly amused anyway, as she used shampoo to lather his hair

up into a fake Mohawk. That kind of bothered me, so I walked right back out and closed the door behind me.

After a few days she began to ask how far he'd gotten in school—not far—and how many high school credits he'd completed—not many. So she wondered if she'd be able to get him transferred into her school. The principal owed her a favor. I told her I didn't think that made any sense.

“The only thing it makes is sense,” she said, then offered Dee Dee another slice of pizza.

“Don't want to be taught to be no fool,” Dee Dee said, a string of melted cheese dangling from his chin.

I didn't know what to say so I suggested we try to get him a job, but neither one of us could figure out anything he could do.

“I believe in miracles,” Dee Dee said.

Despite my reservations, she managed to get him enrolled in school. I was busy with work by then, and didn't really get a sense of how it was going, but after a few days when I came home one night I sat down across from Dee Dee in the living room. He was here. That much was settled, but I hadn't gotten to do any of the things I wanted to do with him. He must have been getting bored by then, and I worried that he'd begun to see me as a stranger. I thought maybe he'd want to watch music videos or horror movies with me, but he just didn't take to them. I couldn't bring myself to ask him how school was going. That would just be silly. How old was he supposed to be anyway, nearing fifty? Did it matter?

So I asked him if he was upset at all about how his life had turned out.

“I don’t care about history,” he said, and floated up off the couch, sitting cross legged in midair, but then something in one of the cartoons caught his attention and he plopped back down. A minute later he said, “Guess what?”

I said what.

“What’d you do today, Doug?”

There wasn’t much to say so I just told him about my job at the ad agency and that I had once composed jingles.

“And they make you wear a tie?”

“It’s expected, yeah.” I looked down and held the tip of my tie in my hand. I’d always thought of myself as a success. Look at everything we had. But when I was younger I’d never really thought of myself as the type of guy who would go to work in an office all day long, wearing a suit and tie. “I guess it’s just one of those things that creeps up and just happens to you,” I said aloud, mostly to myself.

He thought about that for a minute and said “You know I used to write songs too.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard.”

“Did I ever hear any of the stuff you wrote?” he asked.

“Did you ever hear the commercial for Pep-o-Dent toothpaste? *Brush! ...and keep on brushing.*”

Dee Dee looked confused—he always looked confused—and said, “No... no. But you know one time in Barcelona we were playing “Pinhead” and this guy that we used to have come running out on stage dressed up like a circus freak knocked my

microphone stand over and it chipped two of my teeth. So I always hated playing that fucking song after that.”

“I don’t know if I ever heard that one.” I tried to remember any songs I knew by the Ramones. I’m sure I’d recognize one if I heard it, but could I name any? Were they ever on the radio?

“Oh, you know ‘Gabba Gabba Hey! Gabba Gabba Hey!’”

“No, doesn’t ring any bells.” I really wished I could remember it.

“Oh, give me a break already. Hey, check this out.”

I didn’t say anything.

“It might have been Munich. I think the night I chipped my teeth was in Munich.”

“Well, thanks for sharing,” I said. This, at least, was something we could bond over.

Dee Dee laughed and pulled a cigarette out of his jacket pocket. “I like you, man, you’re alright,” he said. “But, the fucking ties…” He put the cigarette in his mouth.

“Dee Dee, we don’t smoke in the house here,” I said. “And, um, I don’t really think you should be smoking at all. You know it’s terrible for your health, right?” I was embarrassed saying this. What kind of a square did he think I was, and what right did I have to tell him anyway? Did his health even matter? I couldn’t understand how any of that worked.

Dee Dee threw his head back and closed his eyes. “Man. The fuck,” he said, and stood up to walk out of the house.

Before he'd made it outside the timer on the oven dinged and Vera called, "Dee Dee, it's ready." She'd baked him a cake and he huffed past me into the kitchen. It was clear to me then which one of us he favored.

So the next day I offered to leave work early and pick Dee Dee up from school. Vera was only too happy to see me doing my fair share of the parenting, as she called it, and she had some conferences to attend to in the afternoon anyway. I guess I just assumed Dee Dee had been taking the bus home all week. Vera's day rarely ended when the students' did, but it turns out she'd been driving him home herself. I knew I'd fall behind at work if I did this, but I could catch up later in the week or over the weekend. There was, of course, family leave time that I should have had coming, but there was no way I was asking for it. Where would I begin to explain?

When I arrived at the high school Dee Dee stood on the sidewalk under a tree, picking his nose. I pulled up as close as I could get and beeped the horn three times. Each time he waved to me but it took a fourth beep for him to realize I was there to pick him up, or to realize who I was.

"Thought we could hang out a little today," I said as he got in.

"I was just standing over there," he said, pointing.

"I saw you," I said, and helped him figure out how to fasten the seat belt.

We spent a little time in the city and then went home. Vera didn't look happy when she came home later and found us out in the garage, music blasting and beer cans lining the floor. "It stinks in here," she said. "What is this?"

“Dee Dee and I went over to the record swap and bought some of his old albums,” I said.

“Are you sure it was a good idea to give him beer?”

“Let’s face it, Honey. He’s over twenty-one, and then some.” I really didn’t see the harm.

Dee Dee handed Vera a beer and said “I want to live.”

It was a blast. I hadn’t done anything like this since college. We played some of the albums all the way through, which didn’t take long because they usually clocked in at just over twenty minutes, each song a mere minute and a half long before Dee Dee’s recorded voice could be heard counting off into the next one. Some of them Dee Dee couldn’t remember recording or ever playing, but just by listening to them a change seemed to be coming over him. He stood up straighter, his face filled out, and he seemed more alert. A lot of the songs sounded the same to me, with titles like “I Don’t Care,” “I Don’t Want You,” “I Don’t Want To Walk Around With You,” and “I Don’t Want To Go Down To The Basement,” but it was still fun.

Vera complained that they were too negative. “You must want to do something, Dee Dee. You should really set some goals and put some of your positive energy to work,” she said.

“You know these are old songs, right?” I said, tapping my foot and opening another beer. “This is who this guy was,” I yelled over the music, pointing at the stereo.

Dee Dee seemed to want to please Vera. “Watch this,” he said, and played “Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue,” “I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend,” “I Wanted Everything,” and “I Wanna Be Sedated.”

“Should have been a hit,” I said.

Vera had taken a seat and gave me a look.

Then Dee Dee played “I Want You Around,” a slower number, about as close to a love song as the Ramones could probably get.

Vera smiled, first at Dee Dee and then at me. She stood and held her hand out to me.

“No,” I said at first, shaking my head. “No.” But I took it. We danced.

Dee Dee watched us, laughing softly to himself, then he took off his jacket and shirt and went and peed in the corner.

Try a Little Tenderness. With both of you giving all of your attention to your child, it’s easy to neglect your relationship with each other. You and your partner may notice a marked decrease in intimacy. When this happens, make some effort to rekindle the romance in your life. Remember why you are together and why you decided to have children in the first place...

As Vera and I lay in bed that night I felt a small sense of pride in Dee Dee’s musical accomplishments. I never realized he’d been so prolific. He would have gotten that from my side of the family if we’d actually been related. In my head I imagined Dee Dee and the other Ramones growling *Brush! ...and keep on brushing* over buzz saw guitars and pounding drums.

Just then Dee Dee stomped into the room and fell into bed between us, nuzzling up to Vera’s neck and mumbling incoherently. I later found that he’d finished off the rest of the beers by himself.

Vera giggled, and patting Dee Dee's shoulder with one hand she gently tried to push him away with the other.

I sat up in bed and said, "Dee Dee, come on. Go to your room."

Dee Dee mumbled again.

Vera laughed again. "Did you brush your teeth, Dee Dee?"

Brush!

Dee Dee mumbled something else and snuggled up closer.

"Dee Dee, go to your room right now," I yelled, but he'd passed out in the bed, already snoring, still wearing his jeans and leather jacket.

I ended up sleeping on the sofa.

Allow your child to pursue his or her own interests, within reason of course. Remember, the point of being a parent is not to relive your life through your child, but to help your child live his or her own life safely, as a productive member of society.

I had to stay late at work the next night and when I came home I found Dee Dee lying on the kitchen floor with the cord of the toaster tied around his arm. He'd taken his leather jacket off and for the first time I noticed the track marks running up and down his arms. His eyes fluttered open and he said "I'm living on Chinese rock."

I laid his head in my lap and shouted, "Vera. Vera, we need help." I tried to stand and lift Dee Dee but he was limp in my arms. After pulling him through the kitchen I managed to get him to the foot of the stairs. One time in a movie I saw a girl put her boyfriend who'd overdosed in a cold bath with ice.

Vera was at the top of the landing tying the sash of her robe. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I shouted. “Where were you?”

“Taking a nap,” she said. “We went into the city. Dee Dee said he wanted to buy a Rolex.”

“A Rolex?” I didn’t think she knew what she was talking about. “Help me get him upstairs.”

“That’s what he said. So I drove him around until he spotted someone he thought he knew.” She came down and tried to help me lift Dee Dee. “He got out of the car for a while and when he came back he said he couldn’t find a Rolex. You took him into the city yesterday. What did he do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I think he may have overdosed.”

“On what? Maybe he’s just tired,” she said.

Trying to shift Dee Dee’s weight onto my shoulder, I told Vera to go back up the stairs and together we would try to get him into the bathroom. Halfway up the stairs his weight shifted again and twisted me around so that I fell on my back with Dee Dee on top of me. Vera grabbed one of his hands and pulled from the top. I managed to shimmy up with my back and then push with my feet to get us up a few more stairs, but the strain was too much for both of us.

We were nearly to the top but Vera couldn’t pull anymore. “You’re going to have to push, Doug. Can you push for me?”

I tried to catch my breath and get my bearings. Dee Dee was dead weight on top of me.

“Push,” Vera said again.

I tried to push again, holding my breath and clenching what felt like every muscle in my body.

“Push,” Vera said again.

“I am pushing,” I snapped back. “This is all your fault. You did this and I wish you could feel what it’s like.”

“You’re doing great,” she said.

We finally got Dee Dee up the stairs and into the bathroom. I was walking backwards, holding him underneath his arms, and fell into the tub with Dee Dee on top of me. We were both face up and I cradled him between my arms and legs.

Vera came in right behind us and turned the faucet on. The water was scalding.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Don’t we need hot water? A lot of hot water?” She was scared and she flusters easily when she’s scared.

“I think you’re thinking of something else. We need cold water.”

“Are you sure?”

“No,” I said.

“How about clean sheets? Should I get some clean sheets?”

“Turn the fucking cold water on,” I yelled.

She turned the water on cold and let it run.

“And get some ice.”

After Vera went to get the ice Dee Dee whispered “Doug, I wanted to get a Rolex.”

“I know Dee Dee.”

“One time when we were in Valencia I wanted to get a Rolex but Joey wouldn’t go with me so I had to go by myself,” he said.

I stroked his hair back off of his forehead with one hand. “Did you ever get the Rolex, Dee Dee? In Valencia I mean?”

“I can’t remember. Doug? Are they nice?” he asked.

“Are what nice?”

“Rolexes. Are they nice watches?”

“Yes, Dee Dee. I’ve heard they’re very nice.”

Dee Dee seemed fine after a while and we didn’t want to get him in any trouble so we just put him to bed. I wasn’t even really sure if he’d taken anything. After Vera went to sleep I stood in the doorway to Dee Dee’s room listening to him snore.

The next afternoon Vera called me at work and asked me to come home right away. Dee Dee had left school early and she’d found him wandering around the neighborhood disoriented. When she tried to get him into the house he’d collapsed on the lawn and wouldn’t get up. By the time I got home some of the neighbors were watching from the sidewalk. I helped Vera lift Dee Dee and walk him inside and then waved the neighbors off. Inside, we sat Dee Dee down on the couch. Vera took Dee Dee’s jacket and sneakers off. He was shaking and sweating but she wrapped him in a sheet and a quilt and helped him lay down.

I stayed in the room as she walked away, hating the feeling that this was all somehow my fault.

Dee Dee's behavior was becoming alarming, unacceptable really, and he'd stopped floating and shimmering in and out of sight altogether.

The next day he was expelled from school for trying to stab one of his classmates in the lunch line. Vera pleaded with the administration but they questioned what Dee Dee had been doing at the school in the first place. The school board considered disciplinary action against the principal for allowing him to enroll at all. Vera wrote a letter to the town newspaper lashing them for turning their backs on her boy. We were scared of what Dee Dee might do if he was alone for long periods of time, but neither one of us could stay home with. I started hiding valuables and locking our bedroom door before we went to work in the morning until Vera caught me and told me I should be ashamed of myself.

Sure enough, the other night we awoke to crashing sounds out in the garage. When we went out there we saw Dee Dee passed out on the floor. The stereo, the CDs Dee Dee and I had bought the other day, my Casio, my drafting board, everything smashed in pieces on the ground, gashes in the drywall where he'd thrown something up against it. He'd keyed the driver's side door of the BMW. I stood dumbfounded, surveying the damage. Vera went to Dee Dee, cradling him in her lap, and asking him why he'd felt the need to do that, what was this an expression of?

I left the two of them out there and went back to bed without saying a word. About an hour later Vera came back and I pretended I was asleep, but I never fell back to sleep that night. I lay awake and didn't move, sick to my stomach that I'd failed at

something important, that there was some step I could have taken to do things right, for everything to have turned out normal.

Remember that we are here to help. The Division of Youth and Family Services employs trained professionals dedicated to the welfare of your child, and to helping you be the best parent you can be. But keep in mind, whether you seek our help or not, we will be watching...

Yesterday, after lunch, I reached Bitburg on the phone. "It's about Dee Dee," I said.

"Who?"

"My ward," I said. "There's some problems."

"Is he a picky eater?"

"What? No... I don't know. It's just not really working out. I was thinking I could maybe give him back now."

"Doug, listen to me, this is a common problem among new foster parents, but you've just got to stick it out," he said. "Rome wasn't built in a day, you know."

"This is a very horrible, horrible thing you've tricked us into, and I wasn't ready for any of this. I want to return him."

"Well, you can't," Bitburg said. "The laws have changed again."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," he said. "Remember those loopholes we discussed? Those are now closed. Dee Dee Ramone is no longer a concern of the state Division of Youth and Family Services."

"So what does that mean?"

“It means you’re on your own.” He hung up.

Tough Love. Your job is to be a parent, not a friend. Remember to set boundaries. Yes, you should always be on your child’s side, but that doesn’t mean your child is always right. Don’t forget who the grown up is...

This morning I told Dee Dee I wanted him out of the house.

“We’re a happy family,” Dee Dee said, and vomited on the floor.

We were in the living room. Vera stood behind Dee Dee. I’d told her earlier that he had to go.

“I’m not mad at you, but I am disappointed,” I said, “and I can’t just sit here and watch you...do this to yourself anymore.”

“Doug...,” Dee Dee started to say and turned to look at Vera.

“Don’t look at her. Look at me when I’m talking to you.” I walked to the front door and opened it.

He stood there staring at me, without moving.

I looked down at the floor and said “Just leave.”

Dee Dee walked out, and from the window I saw him put his sunglasses on and sit down on the lawn.

Vera moved to the window but I closed the blinds. “Don’t even look at him,” I said. “You’ll only encourage him.”

“Who are you trying to punish?” she said. “Me or him?”

I knew then that there was something lost between us, something that we’d each had in our own way but would never share again. There’s a point, I guess, after so many

years, where your life interests diverge. I wondered when that had happened, and when we'd both just given up. When had we both known exactly what we wanted and realized that it wasn't going to happen?

I reached my hand out to put it on her shoulder. "He isn't real," I said. "He's a cliché."

She didn't let me touch her. "Hasn't it all been?" she said, and left the room.

It was the first time she'd ever talked to me like that, with that razor sarcasm in her voice.

A few minutes later I sat down and tried to read a magazine but I couldn't concentrate. I didn't want to look, but after a while I peeked through the blinds. Dee Dee was still on the lawn, staring right into the window.

He's still sitting there.

Milena

We'd already been living in town a few months the first time we saw Milena. It was about two weeks before Christmas and she was in Biedronka, standing at the row of vegetables with a head of cabbage in her hands.

Natalia and I had been in the middle of an argument about how often we went to the grocery store, three times that week already. It was a habit I'd tried hard to break in her after we'd been married back in the United States. Now I was realizing that it was just something people did here in this small town in Poland, partly because the stores were so much smaller, because nearly everyone walked everywhere and didn't carry too much home, and partly, I guess, because there just wasn't anything else to do. As much as I enjoyed getting out of the apartment—when it didn't involve going to work or going to her parents'—I didn't see the point in so many trips to Biedronka, not when we ate most of our meals at her parents' anyway, breakfast being one of the only times we shared alone together, sitting across from each other at a table for two in her tiny kitchen, in silence.

I had no idea who she was when Natalia pointed her out to me, motioning with her head and whispering "Milena."

The name didn't mean anything to me, but I couldn't help staring for a moment. Milena stood out, young and pretty, standing still among the old ladies who pushed and shoved their way through the narrow aisles of the tiny supermarket. I followed the long, slender lines of her gloved fingers up to the furry cuff of her jacket, the long brown hair draped over her collar, then to the profile of her face as she considered the cabbage, the

bright blue eyes, the angle of her cheekbones, a faint constellation of freckles around her nose, the pout of her lips. There was a softness in her expression that was missing from so many of the other faces I encountered here, something that hadn't been defeated in her yet.

She was with a small boy, two or three years old. That caught my attention too. There weren't that many children in town anyway, but nobody brought them to the supermarket at this time of night. I saw Milena say something to him and laugh as she pretended to bounce the cabbage off the top of his hooded head. He tried to lift his little arms in his heavy parka, reaching for the cabbage, and Milena laughed again.

Natalia had looked something like that when we met, with that same playful spirit when she'd come to the United States as a student six years before, but it had been a while since I'd seen her laugh like that. She was already beginning to blend in with the other women back here in her hometown. Paler, less light in her eyes, resigned. She'd gained back a little more weight than she'd lost following the surgery, a surgery that had left us in a New Jersey ICU for weeks, and then sent us scrambling back here to be with her family. Natalia had a hint of her mother's stout figure in her hips and thighs these days.

"Who is she?" I asked Natalia, but she turned her head, waved the question away for later and approached Milena to say "Czesc," an informal hello and goodbye.

Milena's face lit up with a polite smile when she saw Natalia and I couldn't tell if they were friends or just acquaintances. They settled into a quick, subdued catch-up in Polish. I didn't bother trying to listen, but Milena didn't seem to want to talk long, like she suddenly realized there was somewhere else she needed to be.

Natalia didn't bother to introduce me, not that I cared at the time. I just wanted to get out of the store. I'd been standing behind our tiny shopping cart, trying to stay out of the way, both hands ready to push as soon as someone moved, gave me an opening through the crowded aisle.

Just someone she knew, I thought, home for the holidays. Soon the town's emigrants would start arriving in droves, almost an entire generation, and among them nearly all of Natalia's friends her own age, coming from overseas or the larger Polish cities, hours away. I already knew to expect them, from when we used to just visit twice a year, once in summer and once at Christmas, while we were still living in the United States. Around the twenty-third of December suddenly there would be hundreds, if not thousands of people in their twenties and thirties in their new, name-brand clothes, walking the streets, filling the straight-backed wooden pews of the church, lining up at the town's kantors, exchanging American dollars, English pounds and Norwegian kroner for Polish zloty, crowding the grocery stores and small shops, buying last minute gifts, throwing around the money they'd earned all year, trying to impress their families and the few people their age who'd stayed in town to raise children and work. Among them would be pretty, young girls, and my eye would wander ceaselessly until they left again after the New Year. That's all I thought Milena was; she was just a little early.

I noticed a few short, scowling women in fake fur coats pass by and slow down to eye my wife and Milena standing there talking. I almost said something when they stared too long, but stopped myself, realizing I wasn't sure why it bothered me. I wasn't confident enough in Polish to offer up anything suitable to say anyway. The subtleties were lost to me. Whatever I came up with would be entirely too meek or wildly insulting.

It was the same when talking with Natalia now, so we just didn't talk much. Even our arguments were quiet affairs by then. Point, counterpoint, surrender and resentment. By then we'd already realized our problems had followed us across the ocean, settling in the corners of her apartment like dust. I probably wouldn't ever think of it as *our* apartment. We'd left all that behind in America, along with my job, friends, and anything else I could claim. Still, I was trying to be patient.

While she spoke with Milena, Natalia looked down at the boy a few times, but didn't smile or try to talk to him. She just wasn't interested in children anymore, now that she could never have any of her own.

The boy was playing with a shopping basket at Milena's feet. I noticed two cans of tomato paste in the basket, with the ubiquitous *Ladybug* logo of the supermarket chain. When I first started coming here I didn't put the words Biedronka and "Ladybug" together, even though there was a huge picture of one on the sign. Natalia gave me a look when I finally asked what Biedronka means and told me it literally means "Ladybug." I guess I just didn't live in a world where things were that obvious. Natalia did. Maybe that was part of the problem between us. Looking down at Milena's basket, I thought she was probably making Golobki—*little pigeons*—rice and ground meat wrapped in cabbage leaves and served in sauce. I was hungry. Natalia's mother served dinner promptly at five every night, and now it was already nine pm. We wouldn't be eating again tonight. Natalia was convinced that eating late was what made Americans so fat. I would have asked her to take a look at some of the people around here, but there was no point in asking for trouble.

When the boy finally turned to me and I saw his face I noticed that he was black, or at least his complexion was a lot darker than anyone else's in this part of the world. I think I noticed, but I didn't really think anything of it at the time. Back home he wouldn't have stood out at all, and I had my mind on other things.

Later, on the walk home, my arm weighed down by the plastic bag filled with heavy jars of shredded, pickled red beets that I didn't eat, I waited for Natalia to tell me about Milena. I thought if she'd bothered to point her out to me in the store then her appearance must have been something she'd be interested in talking about. But for several blocks the only thing that escaped our mouths was the white puff of our breath.

Once in sight of the block of Communist-era apartment buildings where we lived, I finally asked again, "Who was she?"

"Milena," she said. It was the second time I'd asked, and the second time she'd answered as if the name alone should have meant something to me.

"I don't know who that is," I said.

She told me I'd never met her, but Milena had come to the United States a year after her. Natalia, and most of the people who followed, came in one of the last great waves of Polish students before the economy picked up enough that most of them didn't bother leaving Europe anymore. Natalia seemed to want to leave it at that, and didn't offer any more.

But I kept trying. "Did she come to New Jersey?" I asked. Many of those students came to the shore towns for summer jobs, a few, like Natalia, staying longer than they'd planned to.

“No,” Natalia said, and thought for a moment, “She went to Hilton something, in South Dakota?”

“Hilton Head Island, South Carolina?” I said. Natalia had always had an interesting relationship to geography. I tried to get her to laugh with me, and lifted her hand, guiding it into the crook of my elbow, but after a few seconds she let it drop to her side again.

“Probably,” she said. “I emailed her, talked on Skype a few times, even sent her a Christmas card.”

I remembered that at the time Natalia was keeping in touch with a number of people she knew from back home.

“I don’t know how long she stayed there, but she went somewhere else, Chicago maybe. I know she stayed a few years, but I didn’t talk to her again.”

I guessed they weren’t that good of friends.

It was one of the longest conversations we’d had in a while, although I didn’t do much talking really, just nodding and grunting that I understood during a few of her pauses. As she kept talking it occurred to me she was only wondering out loud what had happened to Milena. I might have not even been walking alongside her. She wasn’t really speaking to me.

“Now she is back with her son,” Natalia said and was quiet after that, maybe waiting to hear what I’d say. Children, the mere concept of them, had become an awkward topic for us, for her.

When I didn’t say anything Natalia said “That was her son. She had him in the United States, but they came back without the boy’s father.”

I heard the packed snow covering the cobblestone sidewalk crunch beneath our feet. Milena had come back with a child but no husband. Natalia had come back with me, but no child. She must have been thinking that. That was obvious enough to me. “Did she tell you all that?” I asked. “Didn’t seem like you spoke to her very long.”

Natalia looked away and we kept walking. “People have already been talking about her, and I knew she was back. I heard it at work.”

Neither of us mentioned that night that the father must have been black, or what that might mean in this Polish town, where the only black people anyone ever saw were on TV—in Eddie Murphy movies, the imported Brazilian soap operas, and the West African kids playing for the national team and the football clubs of the larger cities like Szczecin and Poznan. One thing I did realize then and there: suddenly I wasn’t the only American in town anymore, and it didn’t take long to find out what people had already been saying about Milena and her son.

The next night at dinner, seated around the table with her parents and sister, Natalia said “*Guess who we saw?*” and told them about Milena at the store. Natalia’s mother put down the pot of boiled chicken she’d been serving Natalia’s father from and said, “*No one knows what that girl was doing over there for five years.*”

My father-in-law, already sucking the meat from a chicken leg, the skin flapping loosely from the bone, said, “*We know one thing she was doing.*”

I passed the bowl of pickled zucchini to Natalia and tried to listen. I overheard a word I didn’t recognize, “Murzyna,” and then lost my way in the conversation. “What does it mean, murzyna?” I said to Natalia.

She glanced over at me, nodded, and looked back to her father. Natalia understood my limits with the language, but I noticed that since we arrived here this time, she'd been translating less and less for me.

My father-in-law was saying, "*She couldn't even come back for her mother's funeral last year, but now she just shows up with a black baby.*"

That's what he called him. Djecko czarny. A black baby. A few months ago, at the mention of the child I would have put my hand on Natalia's knee to give it a reassuring rub, but now I didn't. We were past offering comfort to each other.

"That's what it means, "murzyna," Natalia finally said to me. "It means a black person." And then to her parents she said, "Mowimie African-American. Afrikanin i Amerikanin."

Across from me Bojenna, my teenaged sister-in-law, listened quietly with her head propped up on one elbow, watching her parents argue, slowly forking food in her mouth without looking at her plate, like usual.

I managed to make out some of the different versions of the story going around town, but a lot of it got past me. I was foiled by the intricacies of this lisping language of palatial syllables and hard consonant clusters that I'd never master. There were conflicting stories of drugs, money, questionable professions. Differing accounts made Milena out to be equal parts victim and whore, with some of the usual stereotypical motivations of underprivileged girls, whether abroad or not. "*They say she married some guy for a green card,*" my father-in-law said and winked at me. To some, that was the only reason anyone married any of us.

Natalia's mother said, "*She couldn't find a European over there?*" and swept her arm out, not necessarily including me and my Scots-Irish roots in Rust Belt America.

"Chicago has almost as many Poles as Warsaw."

I still wasn't used to the Polish pronunciation—*Var-sha-va*—and I noticed at that, everyone stopped talking. Natalia's parents and sister looked to me, a rare instance when I was indulged and given any authority, whenever the topic of America came up.

Before I could say anything Natalia shook her head and said "*This is very normal in the United States. Many different people are together,*" and I was proud of her in that moment. I considered that she herself had never met anyone who wasn't a white, Catholic heterosexual before she'd arrived in the United States at the age of twenty-five. Her perceptions had changed quite a bit in six years. I almost did rub her knee then.

Everyone looked to me again, giving me a chance to weigh in. Natalia only glanced in my direction. I said, "*We are, how you say, a thing for cooking, where everything is turned, mixed and cooked together, becomes the same?*" I tried gesturing, a stirring motion with my finger.

Natalia's parents and sister continued to look at me, waiting for me to finish, to make some sort of sense of what I'd just said.

Natalia turned and gave me a look like I'd just burped at the table.

"A melting pot," I said in English under my breath, looking down at my plate.

The rest of the conversation continued in Polish and I went on eating without listening. After a little while, Bojenna and I, both finished with dinner, sat on the floor playing Euro-Monopol while Natalia kept talking with her parents. I rolled and landed on "Urlop" at the corner of the board.

“Holiday,” Bojenna almost shouted, trying out the English she’d been learning in high school.

“We say ‘vacation’ in America,” I told her.

“Would you like to go on vacation?” she said very slowly, enunciating every word.

I just smiled weakly and nodded for her turn to roll. Outside the window, the sky had long-since turned black, and it had started to snow again.

In the days that followed, all the usual places around town suddenly came alive with ideas of Milena. In shops, at the library, waiting to buy cigarettes at a kiosk by the apartment, I thought I heard her name whispered behind the counter. Old women in line to buy bread said that’s why they had never let their daughters go to the United States. Teenage boys grouped on the corner said it was proof that she’d do it with anybody.

We’d been going to the cemetery every Saturday since we’d started living here, leaving candles on the headstones of Natalia’s grandparents, aunts and uncles, and even some of her friends: an alarmingly high number of them, it seemed, dead from suicides. One twenty year old boy choked himself with his toothbrush rather than serve his compulsory two years of military service, another jumped from the eighth floor balcony of his university dormitory over a breakup with his girl, two days before graduation. Sometimes I wondered if it was because of the weather. The fresh inch of snow from the night before made the mud of the cemetery sloppier than usual.

Nearly all of the headstones had a portrait of the deceased framed beside the name, the same stoic expression in all of them, in profile, on a plain white background. It

was as if everyone went out one day specifically to have their cemetery portrait taken. You'd have to admire the foresight of it. As Natalia, her mother, and I made our way through the packed rows of graves, trying not to slip in the mud, I noticed a few fresh mounds adorned with a simple wooden cross. It was customary to wait a year before putting up the headstone, I'd learned. I wondered if one of those fresh graves belonged to Milena's mother.

We'd buried my mother nearly a year before we left America. My father's ashes had been scattered over the Atlantic off a pier in Point Pleasant, New Jersey a decade earlier. Heart disease killed them both, my father, oddly, only a few short months after my mother had gone through the same kind of operation that would later result in Natalia's hysterectomy, although my mother had been fifty at the time. At my mother's funeral I promised to take Natalia home to be buried, if I outlived her. At the time I assumed it would involve taking her casket on a plane. I wasn't so sure anymore, and I wondered if there would be a place for me beside her.

A few of the more depressing portraits were of young children, in much shorter plots: a five year old, pneumonia; a seven year old, leukemia. The smallest graves had a smaller stone in the ground, with no portrait at all, infants, their life spans measured out in the space of a few months, weeks or days. Would that have been easier for us in any way? I left Natalia and her mother to walk up the path and smoke a cigarette. I ended up smoking two, the cheap Polish cigarettes burned up so fast.

Each Sunday morning we went to mass with Natalia's parents and Bojenna. I hadn't tried to get out of going to church yet. There were still a lot of compromises I was willing to make and I knew this one was important to her. She was always the more

religious one. We were in the back of the church and I stood one step behind Natalia and her mother, spending most of the mass searching the rows and rows of people for Milena, wondering if she'd come. Now I wanted to get a better look at her son too. A young girl giving the reading before the homily whistled through her S's, C's, and Z's like a boiling teakettle. I envied Natalia's father, who usually snuck off to walk outside, complaining about his legs or the air in the church, I hadn't yet worked up the nerve to join him.

I didn't see Milena anywhere. Maybe she went to an earlier mass. Maybe she didn't go at all.

After mass ended we waited for most of the crowd to leave before we made our way to the door. Even here in church they pushed and shoved each other, rushing en masse to receive communion, and then rushing to all leave at once. Women pushing carriages had to wait for everyone else to squeeze through the doorways before they could leave. I sat down in a now-empty pew next to Bojenna.

"You are sleeping good?" she said to me. She only meant the night before, to make polite conversation.

I just nodded. "I am sleeping good," I said, but it was a lie.

As we waited, it seemed a line was forming back to the priest's office and I remembered that on a glass-enclosed bulletin board outside the corridor on a piece of paper yellowed with age, was typed "*Please come forward with any information regarding anything that should keep anyone from receiving the holy sacraments.*" Natalia had read it to me a while back. Although the priests had probably already heard all of the rumors, I couldn't help thinking some of those people were lining up to tell what they'd heard about Milena.

The next day I was back at work. I'd managed to get a job teaching English at a language school in Szczecin, the closest city to town, but still an hour away by car. I spent that afternoon on demonstrative pronouns. "This is my pencil," I said, holding it up in front of my face.

The students repeated it.

"That is your pencil," I said, pointing out to the room.

Some of them repeated a little louder.

I based most of my lessons around things that were in the Polish language books I learned from: *To jest moja matka. To jest moj ojciec. To sa moi rodzice.* "This is my mother. This is my father. These are my parents."

In recent weeks I'd noticed some of the students getting frustrated because we were stuck in the present tense. I could relate.

Even with the death of my parents, in those first few years with Natalia, everything had seemed spread out before me. For the first time in my life I looked forward to the unknown. There were good things on the horizon. What would it be now?

There was a young girl who sat in the front of my class and rarely participated, twenty years old, maybe. I didn't know if I'd ever heard her voice. She was on a dual program with a vocational school downtown, across from the river, as most of the students were. That day she wore a too-short skirt and white stockings. I watched her chewing the end of her pen, her full, Slavic lips moist around it. I imagined she was looking right through me to the wall, with the words coming from my mouth sounding like a series of clicks and beeps.

After class I wanted to take a walk through the city, to spend some time on my own where nobody knew me, but if I was late for the train I'd be stranded with no way home.

On the PKP express train from Szczecin to Stargard I kept to myself. Most people do, but I used to think it was easier for me because I stood out as a foreigner. Despite it being Poland's seventh largest city, on the banks of the River Oder just across from the German border, and having a lot of signs in English, I hadn't met anyone who spoke English, outside of the language school, or at least anyone who was willing to speak it openly. Sometimes I wondered if I was too self-consciously American, but it's more likely no one knew or cared what I was.

I sat facing the direction the train moved, east, with my bag on the seat next to me, looking over a day-old copy of *Gazeta* someone had left on the seat.

Natalia's father usually dropped me off and picked me up at the station in Stargard. No one in the family really trusted me to get around on my own. I appreciated the ride, but I'd been pushing for more independence lately. I'd only recently demanded, and received, my own key to Natalia's apartment. Before then I'd been locked in, going out on the balcony to smoke, waiting for Natalia to come home, or waiting at her parents' for her to finish work and come get me.

Her father couldn't pick me up that day because of a part-time job he'd taken at the butcher's, a return to his old career following a brief retirement, once we'd arrived and were no longer making enough money to send them, to help provide for Bojenna. When he'd had his own shop he'd made good money, by Polish standards, enough to later buy apartments for each of his grown children, Natalia and her two brothers. For

him, he says, living under communism was easier, “*if you were a little smart and knew who to bribe.*”

From Stargard I caught the bus to take me back into town, and there in an aisle seat, Milena sat with her son, a heavy bundle of bright winter clothes and pudgy limbs in her lap. I imagined she’d been shopping or visiting relatives in Stargard who she hadn’t seen since before she left— a kind uncle or godfather—with presents for her nieces, brought over on the flight, wrapped up in clothes and stowed in her suitcase to avoid paying taxes on them, a brief playtime for her son, with other children, under kinder eyes. As I walked toward her, bumping knees with people in the forward seats, for some reason I wondered if she’d seen me the other night and remembered me, if she’d heard about me, the American teacher living in town, the same way I’d heard about her.

She looked at me as I walked down the aisle, maybe because she noticed me looking at her. She’d probably already learned to expect people to stare. I tried to smile but she looked away, bobbing her son on her knees. She had that same look on her face that she’d had the other night, not defiant, resilient. Even her hair had a life to it that no one else’s here did, falling in waves over her shoulders instead of lying flat over her head and neck.

I took a seat in an empty row ahead of hers on the other side of the aisle and opened the newspaper, which I still carried from the train. After a few minutes, as the bus got moving, the silence was bothering me. What the hell, I thought. I turned around to her, twisted at the waist and bent halfway over into the aisle. “Dzien dobre,” I said. “Jibba tak moja zona.” *Good afternoon. I guess you know my wife?* Who the hell starts a conversation like that? I felt blood rushing to my face, embarrassed and quickly added,

“Moja zona jest Natalia Zalewska,” suddenly confused about what the subject of the sentence was, and whether I should have put “My wife” or her name first.

“*Tell her I said ‘Hi,’*” she said to me, smiled briefly, and looked out the window at the long-abandoned pastures and empty fields passing outside the window. This land had been tilled for centuries and there were no trees in sight.

I decided to switch to English, saying, “You’ve spent some time in the United States?”

“Several years,” she said, in a soft, rolling accent. “You are an American?”

“I am.”

“Natalka didn’t tell me.”

That didn’t surprise me.

“I liked America very much,” she said. After a moment she kissed her son on the cheek. “But now I am back.”

As we spoke, the people around us began to turn and look, suddenly more interested in the sound of spoken English than in their newspapers and the passing landscape.

“I saw her the other night,” Milena said. “Natalka.”

“I know. I was there. I saw you too.”

I noticed the old woman next to Milena eyeing her son, catching a hint of his complexion beneath his scarf and the high collar of his parka. I stared at the old woman’s face, trying to get her attention but she didn’t look at me. She just alternated from Milena’s face to the son’s, and then to the passing scene in the window.

I smiled again. “What is your son’s name?”

“Zbigniew,” she said. “Zbigniew Roger. After my father and his father’s father.”

No wonder they came back, I thought for a second, and the smile must have left my face. Does she want this kid tortured wherever he goes? “There is an empty seat here,” I said to Milena, looking back at the old woman, who saw me now and kept her gaze at the window. “Would you and your son like to sit with me?” I didn’t know why I said it.

She paused. “Thank you but we are nearly there, and I don’t want to get up with him while the bus is moving.”

“Sure,” I said. “Nice talking to you.”

“Thank you,” she said again. She seemed surprised at the offer.

I turned back around and opened my newspaper, passing the rest of the ride in silence, wondering if Milena would be walking the same direction as me.

Back in town the bus pulled into the stop at the old railway station across from Bojenna’s high school. I stood, but stayed at my seat while others got off. As Milena passed me, carrying her son off the bus I said “Czesc” to her.

“Czesc,” she said, laughing, at my pronunciation I guess. “Talk to you later, buddy.”

I stepped off the bus and watched her walk in the opposite direction until she turned a corner and was gone.

On the walk to Natalia’s parents’ house I stopped at the butcher’s to see her father. I missed our conversation that afternoon, a little.

He was in the slaughterhouse in the back, hosing down the floor and feeding scraps from a tin plate to a dog that guarded the place at night. “*Sometimes they pay me*

just to come feed the dog,” he once told me. I guess the free-market had made great inroads in the last two decades. All the carcasses were already removed from the hooks, the meat already processed. It was a family vocation. Both of Natalia’s brothers had gone into butchering as well.

He said something to me, which I understood as *“You are in the city okay?”*

“Tak, naprawde,” I said. “Wysystko jedno.” Yes, really. Everything is fine.

He stopped hosing long enough to look at me. Everything was not fine, and he knew it. I’d long felt the quiet sympathy that had grown in him for me, felt it even the night I’d cried, months back, drunk on Tyskie beer and vodka, appealing to him, to anyone, all I’d done for Natalia, even as he replied, *“What? What did you and your fucking American doctors do for my little girl,”* and then placed his hand on the back of my neck, as I sobbed into the tabletop.

“I saw the girl on the bus,” I told him, watching him spray the hose at a few pools of blood and bits of gristle. *“The one from America.”*

He gave me a blank look, and I assumed he either didn’t know who I was talking about or wanted me to say it, wanted me to say her name.

For some reason I didn’t want to. *“The girl who came back with the baby,”* I said.

“And now you are thinking about America?” He’d begun hosing again, and threw the dog a scrap of meat. The dog snatched it up out of the air.

I waved the idea away. *“Natalka will never go back.”*

“Will you ever go back?”

“I have nothing there without her.”

He didn’t say anything.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said. "No, I am thinking about what the people say about that girl. How can you think any of it is true?"

"I don't," he said. "Because I know what they say about you, and I know it isn't true."

"What are they saying?" I guess I should have known I wasn't immune to the gossip either.

"It is better if you don't know."

"I want to. What do they say, that she married me for a green card?"

He shrugged. I knew he didn't want to tell me. Finally he said, *"That you gave her a sex disease. That's why she can't have a baby. That you gave her AIDS or something."*

I didn't say anything for a minute. *"How does anyone know about our problems?"*

"Those aunts," he said. "My wife's sisters." Then he said something comparing them to clucking chickens, that I didn't quite catch. Sometimes I think he forgot that I didn't always get his analogies. "They started talking about her problems, and people started saying things."

Not knowing what else to say, I offered, *"AIDS doesn't work like that."*

"You understand," he said. "People here are jealous. Once the talk starts, they are glad, glad something horrible happened to her." He'd started to cry. "Because she almost had a good life in the United States, a life they could never have."

It snowed for a little while that Saturday, just a few flurries, and Natalia decided to go to the cemetery anyway. I stayed in bed with a book. I'd spent most of the night on the sofa, unable to sleep, periodically getting up to look out on the town from our sixth-floor balcony. We rarely spent a whole night in bed together anymore. I'd decided to stop going to the cemetery with Natalia, explaining that it was just too sad for me. I wasn't sure if that was true, but she said she understood. I don't know if she really did though.

For once, that Saturday, I wanted the privacy, and wouldn't have minded being locked up in the apartment alone.

February. The last time we had sex had been February.

First it was Lent, and we'd given that up along with wine, and meat on Fridays. Then it was the operation to remove the fibroid that was keeping her from getting pregnant to begin with. God she wanted a baby. "The good news is she's going to be okay," the doctor had said. I wanted to go back now and ask him exactly what his fucking definition of okay was. "If we hadn't been able to remove the uterus in time she would have bled to death." After that we were all done. She hadn't let me touch her since, and I still wanted her. Since February it had been pleasure myself or no pleasure at all.

At first I tried to focus on the book. A man-in-extremis. That's all I can remember of it. I found myself hugging a pillow to my chest and actually groaning. I had to. I began to picture that girl in the front of my class, the white stockings going up under her skirt, her bleached blond hair up in a pony-tail at the top of her head, those pouty lips. It didn't quite do it. The problem was, picturing her beneath me, she had that same vacant look, staring right through me up at the ceiling, chewing on the pen or snapping gum. I tried to conjure up an image of someone else. It's a shame to say it, but as much as I still loved

her, the idea of Natalia was too depressing. I put her out of my mind. And there she was. Milena.

A few days later we saw her again. Natalia had the day off at the cosmetics store and I was home because the language school, like the universities, had already let out for the semester. I'd talked Natalia into going for a walk just before noon because the silence in the apartment was maddening. The slate gray sky was overcast, with a promise of fresh snow in the cold air. There had already been snow on the ground for weeks, but the ground, for once, had hardened, giving us a break from the mud that was nearly always present, all year. There weren't a lot of people around that day. Almost everyone was at work, and the public schools in town were still in session. That must have been why she'd been out, safe to walk around without the prying eyes of town on her. Along the concourse that ran along the outside of the old medieval wall, circling the center of town, Natalia and I saw Milena and her son walking toward us.

She smiled at us both and spoke in Polish to Natalia.

Natalia said "Czesc" to her son, Zbigniew, who just looked up at her from beneath his hood and scarf. He didn't seem to know what to make of her.

"Czesc, Zbicek," I said to him, and asked Milena if I could pick him up.

She smiled. "You know how to say his familiar name?"

"We are friends," I said, lifting him up in my arms. "Jestesmie Amerikaninem," I said, trying to shake his hand. *We are Americans.*

I lifted him up and held him to me, just his eyes and nose visible beneath his hood and scarf, his arms hanging limp at his sides but away from his body in the thick parka.

Milena pulled his hood away. "Say 'hi,' Zbicek," she said. "Mowie 'czesc.'"

"Have you been teaching him English?" I said. "I could help you if you want." I turned to Natalia, smiling, and when I saw the look on her face she made me suddenly aware what I was doing to her.

"You didn't tell me you met him already," Natalia said.

"*We met on the bus from Stargard,*" Milena said, and then in English, looking at me, "He is a very kind man, your husband."

"You didn't tell me about that," Natalia said, forcing a smile, and staring right into me. I knew that smile. She hadn't bothered using it in a while, but I'd seen it several times since before we left the U.S.

We tried staring each other down for a moment. I didn't feel bad anymore, and I didn't say anything at first, but I got angry for the first time in a long time, thinking, none of this is my fault.

The snow started to fall, landing in big flakes on the boy's hair and resting there. I handed him over to Milena, and as she cooed to him I said quietly to Natalia, "We don't talk about much at all these days, do we?" I didn't know whether Milena heard me or not.

"Well, I should go home," Milena said. "Looks like we can't take our walk today, Zbicek."

We said goodbye and I watched the direction she walked away in. They must not have come far. I had some idea where she lived now.

Natalia worked the next day. I got out of bed as soon as she left, showered, milled around the bookstore by the church for a little while, bought an expensive pack of

American cigarettes for a change at a kiosk across from the bicycle shop then took a slow walk around the concourse. At the kiosk I'd thought about buying Zbigniew a small truck, cheap plastic, imported from China, twenty four zloty, nearly eight American dollars, but I didn't know if I'd see her and didn't want to be caught carrying it around. I made my way around the concourse three times, stopping to smoke for a while each time I passed the spot where we'd seen her the day before, sometimes leaving the path to walk up the streets, slowly walking past each house, trying not to get noticed peering in the windows. Then I went home for lunch, sat up in bed for a while and went for another walk, this time all around town, but careful to avoid the cosmetics store, the butcher and the church. That took me two hours and then I made my way to the concourse again. It was nearly dark by the time I saw her, making a snowman with Zbigniew not far from where we'd seen her the day before.

“Dobra notz,” I said.

She laughed. “We don't say it like that. It isn't a greeting, like ‘good evening.’”

“I know.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“Because I like hearing you laugh at me,” I said.

Her nose was red from the cold and she sniffled. “You are alone?”

“I am,” I said.

She invited me in for coffee. It was only a short walk to her house, an old one-story that looked like it was sinking into the ground. Inside, the living room was dark, and her father sat up in a chair, staring at the TV. Milena introduced me to him but he barely glanced over. I noticed milky cataracts in his eyes.

She put Zbigniew in a playpen across from her father and changed the channel to a children's show, something with a priest and people in animal costumes. We took the coffee into another room with a futon, which I imagined she folded down when she and her son slept. She put the tray of coffee down on a small table and turned around to face me.

I'd love to be able to say that I couldn't do it and left, that in that moment, the best parts of myself, still buried away somewhere in there kept me from going any further, that I decided I was still a good guy, that I still saw my most important function on this Earth to be a good, faithful husband, that I took Milena by her arms, lowered my head in some kind of sad dignity, turned away from her, and walked out, zipping up my coat against the cold and leaving tracks away from her house in the snow. I'd love to be able to say all of that.

As soon as she turned around we went to each other, falling into the wall, a struggle of touching and violent kisses, pulling at each other's clothes, gasping, throwing our bodies against each other.

"Mamo," we heard Zbigniew calling from the other room. "Mamo."

Milena stopped to listen.

"No, he'll be alright," I said, pushing up against her, the hot blood throbbing through my body, her skin warm against mine. I'd already come this far.

She pulled her lips away from mine, looked away and said, "I think you should probably go home now."

I stood there, turning it over and over in my head. *You should go home now.* Although she'd said it in perfect English, I didn't understand what it meant.

It was after five, and I'd missed dinner. Outside, the lights were coming on in all of the other houses up and down the block and across town.

Birds

Next morning them goddamn finches is at it again--tootling and tweetling and whistling.

Like usual they start around 4:30 and I don't get up before six most days but today's my day off and it's my birthday and I don't care none about my birthday but today like most days before six I want to kill them little motherfuckers and I would sometimes if I had a gun.

But Belle won't let me keep one in the house cause she says I'd end up shooting my foot off or worse yet shooting her and I don't think that's worse yet cause sometimes that woman don't listen but I ain't laid a hand on her in forty years and I ain't ever hurt nobody but sometimes that woman is a goddamn pain right in my ass but not like them birds, them finches.

I'd like to catch them and tear off their beaks and then take the tape and wrap them in the goddamn tape and throw them back out the window and there you go now FLY you goddamn sons-a-bitches.

This one time I threw a pot of boiling water out the window on that old elm outside our window but I missed and just scalded the Thompsons' cat and that cat don't like them birds neither but I don't want it up in that tree cause that's my tree goddamn it and I don't like that cat none and that was the end of that cause that cat never did like me and I don't think the Thompsons ever did much neither and I know they don't now but I don't care and that cat with half the hair burned off its ass hisses at me and the

Thompsons don't talk no more and Belle says be nice and I say I'm always nice goddamn it, but ain't neighbors just neighbors?

But it's my day off now and I'm up.

So I'm closing the window after yelling at them finches to shut the fuck up when Belle yells up for me to come down cause breakfast is ready and it's my birthday and all and all I can think is goddamn birds and thank God I'm sixty and she can't think of nothing rhyming to put in the paper like she did when I was forty and she put in the paper "Lordy, lordy look who's forty" with a picture of me smiling and pulling a fish off a line at the lake two years earlier and I told her no more goddamn it, but then again when I turned fifty she put a new picture of me pulling a fish off my line at the lake and she had printed under it "Nifty, nifty look who's fifty" and both times she cut out that picture and pasted it on the fridge and I tried to pull it off but the paste stayed on and I had to scrub with a sponge and scrape with a razor to get that paste off.

And didn't that woman raise such a stink when I did?

So I said, no more goddamn It, I told you but you don't listen cause she don't never listen.

And she didn't listen then she just pasted up a new one the next day because she'd taken all the free copies of that newspaper she could carry on the day that goddamn paper was printed and she did the same thing both times when I turned forty and when I turned fifty and I'm thinking thank God I'm sixty cause sixty don't rhyme with nothing and there ain't nothing cute you can say about sixty except boy I'm getting old and so are you so just let's save all the horseshit and have our cake and eat it too and go about our day and watch TV cause today is just a day like any other day and then go to sleep and

just sleep and not talk about how all the years gone by and the kids is grown and boy don't time fly and didn't the kids sure grow up fast and ain't they gone and though we didn't have a perfect life and do everything right ain't we had a nice life and ain't we had a nice time and ain't we still got time and ain't there a few years ahead for us to still have a nice time so shouldn't we try and all?

And I say no let's just go to sleep cause tomorrow is another goddamn day and you gotta wake up and go to work and start everything all over again and life is still moving too fast and don't give nobody a break so you ain't got time to stop and think about what a nice life you had if you ain't had such a nice life you just had a life and you got to keep running and nobody gonna let you stop or slow down even so just go to goddamn sleep already.

But now it's morning and Belle is banging on the ceiling with a broom cause breakfast is getting cold and I ain't come down and it's my birthday and all and didn't she go to all this trouble for me on my birthday?

And alls I'm thinking is thank God I ain't forty or fifty again and ain't nobody gonna put my picture in the paper with any cute fancy shit written under it but then I get downstairs and there's just pancakes.

Well don't we have pancakes all the time? That ain't nothing special and what's all the trouble about that? And I ain't saying I don't like it and I don't appreciate everything you do for me and everything you done I'm just saying pancakes is pancakes and goddamn it woman can't we just eat without it having to be something special and I know it's my birthday but ain't pancakes just pancakes?

And then Belle she standing there and she start crying and says what did I go to all this trouble for and ain't I gone to all this trouble? And she's got that old house dress on and she's all leaning to one side on account a her hip.

And I just say, forget it all right, goddamn it.

So I just go in the living room cause pancakes is pancakes and I turn on the TV and them Porter Rican women with the big asses is jiggling it all on the TV and I'm thinking about Belle's ass and how she used to have an ass and how I ain't been with but one woman in forty years and I only been with two other women in my whole life and one of them was before I went in the army and she's dead cause she died having a baby she had with the fella she married and the other one was a whore after I came home from the army and she was skinny but on the TV is another Porter Rican woman with a big ass and I'm thinking goddamn it pancakes is just pancakes and thank God there ain't nothing cute you can say about sixty but then

ZAP!

And the picture change and there's a man talking in Spanish and I think he's saying emergency and I got the re-motor control so I change the station and there's a man on that station talking in English and he's saying it's an emergency but then the power cut off and the picture on the TV is gone and there ain't no more asses and there ain't no emergency so I try using the re-motor control but ain't nothing happenin cause the goddamn Ko-reans can't make nothing right no more and everything run on computers so I just sit and I'm waiting.

Then Belle come in from the kitchen and say she heard something on the radio which run on batteries and it didn't go off when the power gone off and the lights is off

and the clock and she don't know exactly what's going on but there was a man saying emergency, now this is a real emergency, and then static and the man again and don't panic but this is a real emergency and there ain't no power and then the radio went dead.

And she knows them batteries is good cause she replaced them the other day when she was cooking and the radio died cause the batteries was dead and she didn't have nothing to listen to and she's sure them batteries is good and don't I think something happened and ain't I scared?

And I say no it's just a fuse, goddamn it, cause the fuse got blown is all.

And she says that radio don't run on no fuse and she knows them batteries is good and them batteries don't run on no fuse.

And I say, I know goddamn it.

But she say don't I think we should call the kids to see if they're all right?

I say how we gonna call the kids when the powers down? Ain't the phone run on electric like everything electric and what can I do for the kids and anyway what do we know now it's only been five minutes and maybe the power's gonna come back on and how we even know the kids is home when they got jobs?

But she always goin on about the kids like they ain't long gone and you got to do everything for em when they already grown and how long you got to wait before kids can do something for themselves and when's the last time they was here anyway? You do everything for the goddamn kids till they don't want nothing from you no more and that's exactly what you get in return for the trouble.

But she always gotta go on about the kids and the phone and shit and she says don't you think it's weird and ain't you scared?

And I say, no goddamn it. Now that's it, alright?

So we wait, but there ain't no power so I just sit there and there ain't no TV and it's all quiet but after a while Belle come back all leaning on one hip goin on about the phone and I try not to say nothing cause I don't like yelling and I just want to be quiet but she keep goin on.

So I say, I told you woman be quiet but you don't listen cause that woman she don't ever listen sometimes and after forty years I'm tired and it's enough already and finally there ain't nothing cute you can say about sixty and it's my day off but goddamn it pancakes is pancakes and them goddamn birds but there ain't no power and ain't nothing on the TV and I ain't touched nobody in forty years but ain't my kids grown and the Porter Rican women got the big asses but I ain't touched nobody and I ain't ever hurt nobody but the goddamn neighbors and their cat can't just leave nobody alone and I just want to be quiet and sit and it's enough already but ain't nobody gonna let you stop or slow down even and can't the kids pick up the goddamn phone and call their mother already cause ain't we done everything for the kids and wasn't Belle something back then but what we got to show for it cept the house and no power and the goddamn neighbors and HHHNNNNNNN.

It's a sound like that, all HHHNNNNNNN.

It's like a machine all HHHNNNNNNN, like a ringing in my ear but not exactly cause I hear it coming from outside.

So I say to Belle, you hear that?

And she says, what?

And I say that sound, all HHHNNNNNNN, and I do it like that, all
HHHNNNNNNN.

And she say, I don't hear nothing.

So I say, just listen goddamn it. Just listen, all right.

And we wait and it's still going all quiet like but it's there, like HHHNNNNNNN.

But she say, I still don't hear nothing. It ain't there, must be a ringing in your ear
or in your head.

And I say, I know. Don't you think I thought a that? But it ain't in my ear. It's
outside. I know. There it is, all HHHNNNNNNN. I hear it right now.

But she say, well I still don't hear nothing. And she walk out.

So I get up and I look outside and then I go to the other side of the house and look
outside and Thompson and some other neighbors is outside and the humming is still
going but there's nothing going on and there ain't no TV and there ain't even no radio or
nothing and we just sit cause we can't do nothing and we wait.

But Belle keeps moving around saying don't you think something's happened and
ain't you scared?

And I say, no, sit down goddamn it cause we can't do nothing just wait that's it
goddamn it, all right.

But she don't listen and she says I want to call the kids to see if they're all right
and I say we can't and she says I want to see the kids and I say we can't goddamn it just
sit and be quiet but I don't like yelling and I'm just trying to be patient and just wait and I
start thinking about them birds and I'm mad but then I'm thinking about them asses and
the Porter Rican women on the TV and some of them got the big asses and some of them

don't but just got regular asses and then I think of something and I almost tell Belle but then I don't cause it's about them asses and she don't need to hear it cause she don't understand but the humming still going and I'm thinking and there ain't no power and we can't do nothing and I ain't been with but one woman in forty goddamn years.

Then Belle says why don't you eat and ain't I gone to all this trouble?

And I say pancakes is pancakes and that ain't trouble all right but they're on the table and I almost eat but they're cold and I say they're cold.

And Belle says didn't I tell you to come down and didn't I go to all this trouble?

And I say you didn't tell me the trouble was pancakes cause we have pancakes all the time. Then I check my watch but my watch stopped too.

Then Belle takes the pancakes off the table and I say I told you pancakes is pancakes.

And Belle takes the Monopoly from the shelf in the pantry and sits down and says let's play and I say no not now but she says it's your birthday and all and I thought we'd have a nice time so let's play cause we can't do nothing else and there ain't no power.

And I say no cause I don't want to play and there ain't no power and my birthday don't matter now.

But she says let's play cause she don't listen and she's scared.

And I say all right goddamn it and I want to be the thimble and she open up the box and she give me the thimble and she's the hat and she lay out the board and she's counting out the money then she roll and she waits and says, you want to go?

I say, just go goddamn it and the humming outside and I can't play like this cause it ain't no fun and she rolls again and she goes and we play but the table starts wobbling and the humming outside all HHHNNNNNNN and now it's loud.

Belle say, what's wrong.

And I say, what do mean what's wrong? Can't you see the table all wobbling and shaking? And the humming got loud now, all HHHNNNNNNN, so up I go cause I know that hummings outside.

Thompson and the other neighbors is outside looking around cause there ain't no power and Thompson's got that old Ford but the Ford ain't running and I say to Thompson what's he think and he just shrugs and goes inside but his cat hisses and Belle says be nice and I say I'm always nice goddamn it and we go back inside.

But the humming still going and the house start shaking and Belle standing there all leaning to one side and I reach over cause I know she gonna fall right over.

She say, what's wrong with you, what's goin on?

And I say, don't you feel it, don't you hear nothing? The humming real loud.

But she just standing there and she say, you making me scared.

So we go back outside and the rest of the neighbors is outside and some of them is milling around lookin up and the Thompsons is leaving but the Ford don't run and they got the luggage and they're walking cause something's wrong and I say to Thompson what's wrong I say hey what's wrong goddamn it and Belle don't say nothing like be nice or nothing cause the humming is loud and everybody stop and then somebody said they said it was an emergency and there ain't no power and the cars is all stopped in the street and somebody says maybe somebody done something I'm thinking maybe it's Ko-rea

cause everything's done on computers these days but I don't want to jump to the wrong impression cause it could be anything but there ain't no power and the humming don't stop and now it's loud but I just want to watch the TV but there ain't no power and I'm maybe a little nervous cause I don't know and I feel it in my stomach and in my chest and everything wobbling and I say maybe we got to go.

And Belle says, go, go where, where we gonna go? What's wrong with you? And she just standing there.

But I got to keep moving and it's still humming outside and the walls start shaking and now that's it and I say that's it that's it we got to go go go and I say we just better haul ass.

And she say, I don't what's gotten into you or what's wrong and you scaring me but if you say we got to go then we got to go and let's go to the kids.

And I say, how we gonna get there and how we even know the kids is home cause ain't they got jobs?

And she say, where else we gonna go, and if we going we going to the kids.

I say, fine let's just go, goddamn it, go.

And she's in the fridge and she says, I ain't leaving it.

And I say what?

And she's got the cake and it's a big cake and she says, after I gone to all this trouble on your birthday, I ain't gone to all this trouble for nothing and I ain't leaving it.

But I say, goddamn it it's just a cake and my birthday don't matter none now just haul ass Belle and that woman don't listen and she won't leave it and she puts it in a big

plastic bag and she's got it and says ok let's go and I say damn it woman you better haul ass and she says I'm hauling.

Outside and we ain't changed our clothes or took nothing but Belle's got that cake and she wants to get in the car but all the cars in the street is stopped and I say don't you know nothing cause isn't that the first thing they take out and ain't you watched movies when the aliens ZAP and they take out the catalytic converters and solenoids and shit and ain't that always the first thing they take out in the movies?

And she say, what are you talking about?

And I say, well there ain't no power and Thompson's Ford ain't running and the cars all stopped in the street.

And she say, how you know, maybe it's the battery.

And I say, woman you just better haul ass.

So we start goin but she can't carry that cake so she starts dragging it by the bag and it's a big cake and I say goddamn it woman just leave that cake we don't need cake now and she says ain't I gone to all this trouble and she don't listen but she's dragging that cake and she say when we get to the kids we're gonna have this cake and we're gonna have this day cause this is your birthday and I didn't go to all this trouble for nothing.

And we almost to the end of the walk at the street and the humming still loud but I stop and I say, goddamn it woman, I told you we don't need no cake cause the humming all loud and there ain't no power and we got to haul ass but you don't listen you don't never listen.

And she say, be nice. It's your birthday and all.

And I say I'm always nice and I know it's my birthday but cake is just cake and it don't matter none now and I'm sixty and finally there ain't nothing cute you can say about sixty but maybe it's the end of the world and all and we ain't got no time and didn't I give you the best years of my life and there ain't been nobody in forty years.

And she say I know but didn't I too and don't you wanna see the kids and maybe we got a little time and alls I ever wanted was to make you happy on your birthday and ain't I gone to all this trouble?

But I say leave that cake goddamn it and ain't I done right by you but it's been forty years goddamn it and I ain't touched nobody but you and I told you we don't need no cake but you still dragging that cake but it almost don't look like a cake no more just a squash of cream in a bag and I ain't been with but one woman in forty years and I aint been with but three women in all my life and one of them was a whore after my discharge and the other one's dead and I can't even look her up for old time's sake and I ain't been with a woman one time outside of this state. And I start thinking about all the women I ain't been with and all the kinds of women in this world and I'm thinking I ain't never been with no kind of Chinese lady or none of them Porter Rican women with the big asses and what am I missing and you only get one chance in this world and that chance is coming to a close and I ain't never done so many things and I'm looking at Belle dragging that birthday cake and I'm thinking I ain't wanted her like I use to want her in twenty five years and I'm thinking I gave her the best years of my life and she did too but ain't I done right by her and ain't my kids grown and don't time fly but ain't they gone and what's the point and I'm always nice but neighbors is neighbors and them goddamn birds but there's so much I ain't but don't nobody ever want to let you slow down or give

you a break and the humming real loud now so I turn around and it's slow like and I come back around and Belle, saying what's wrong, she say what's happening to you and down I go on the walk and it hurts and it's ringing and it's in my chest and down my arm and there ain't noting cute you can say about sixty but it's my birthday and why don't the kids call they mother sometime cause she worried and she always goin on about the phone and I look up at Belle didn't she used to be something and she's got the cake and it's a big cake and ain't we gonna have that cake and didn't she go to all that trouble and ain't we had a nice time and ain't today a day just like any other day and then something just

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And that's all right and it's hot and can't we go to sleep now all right cause the kids is grown and the kids is all right and ain't we had a nice time but just then the humming just stops and everything stops and everything quiet and I'm down and I don't see Belle and I'm thinking all right that's all right cause next morning them birds is gonna be at it again.