

DESIRE LINES
Excerpt from a Novel

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Fine Arts degree

MFA Program for Writers
Warren Wilson College

November 23, 2024

Director

Date

I.

NATALIA

Natalia flipped the light switch and nothing happened.

She rummaged around in the kitchen drawers for a flashlight, then clung to the railing as she made her way, slowly, down to the basement. There was the fuse box. How many times had she told Sofia to call an electrician and get her wiring updated? She switched out the fuse and heaved an empty sigh.

If Sofia were here, Natalia wouldn't have to deal with this damn fuse box (forgive me, Lord). If it weren't for that damn heart attack, Sofia would still be here (may she rest in peace). If Sofia had gone to the hospital, maybe she wouldn't have died. If Natalia had been here, she could have called an ambulance. If Sofia hadn't loved bacon so much, maybe her heart would have been healthier. If Sofia had eaten more Cheerios.

She could work herself into a tizzy thinking like this. Instead, she faced the stairs and set out to climb them one careful lift at a time. These days, if she let her guard down, her bones might stop complying with what she asked of them at any moment.

Back upstairs, she flipped the switch again—blessed light. She crossed herself quickly. Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

She confronted Sofia's house, no longer dim and shadowy from the overcast winter day. In the living room, a mahogany wall clock began striking the quarter-hour. Sofia's slippers, a nice, thick pair made of felted wool, perched on the shoe rack. Natalia tried them on. They fit her perfectly.

Sofia's possessions would all go in the estate sale that the realtor was arranging. Natalia's job was to clear anything personal, to survey for anything of her cousin's that she might decide to

keep. None of Natalia's three children wanted anything. They had been emphatic: no more family junk. Still, she felt she owed it to Sofia to sort carefully.

She opened the kitchen cabinets, full of cans and boxed pasta. Sofia favored Campbell's chicken noodle soup. She kept a month's supply on hand, just in case.

Natalia roamed through the house. She found objects in the most unexpected places. Sofia's toothbrush was by the kitchen sink. Next to the bathroom window, a jar full of quarters. Sofia's hairbrush was in her sock drawer. All these peculiarities of Sofia's domestic life that Natalia had never bothered to notice before.

Natalia was not exactly sure what she was looking for in the corners and closets of Sofia's life. Anything that might remind her of Sofia's loud laugh, of the way she always smelled of coconut oil, or the rough rub of her skin as she aged. In the dresser, Natalia found a small drawer stuffed with bras and bandanas. She lifted a red checked bandana to her nose and breathed in Sofia's scent, then slipped the bandana into her pocket.

On her bedroom wall, Sofia had framed three photographs. To the left hung a small photograph, its word edges visible against the black sheet of paper Sofia had used to fill the frame. The image was black and white, taken back in Poland, in a village whose name was lost to Natalia now, though she was sure her mother had told her. Sofia's mother and Natalia's mother stood shoulder to shoulder with their three brothers and their parents. They all had the same sharp nose. Color would have captured the small, bright blue eyes the family shared as well.

In the middle, Sofia had displayed one of the few photos that existed from their childhood. The two of them stood in front of the house in Windham where they had grown up, holding their bodies stiffly apart from each other, the startling flash of the camera stripping any

sign of their close bond. Natalia could make out her mother's handwriting at the bottom of the photograph: *Natalka i Zofia, 1943*. Sofia had been living with them for two years by then.

In the final frame on the right, a woman whom Natalia could almost recognize stared boldly out of a studio portrait, the muted monochrome kind that was just going out of fashion in the 1960s, when this portrait was taken, judging by the woman's hairstyle. Natalia pulled the first two frames off the wall and angled them into her purse. She left the third hanging, slightly crooked where she had knocked it.

Once, Natalia had thought she and Sofia would spend their whole lives together. This was how it seemed, at least, when they were girls. They were raised like sisters. Sofia's mother died when she was young, and everyone agreed that her father couldn't raise a girl, so Natalia's mother took her in. Natalia and Sofia shared all their secrets with each other. When Sofia started to menstruate, she came to Natalia first. When Natalia had her first crush on the boy down the street, Sofia knew before she even told her.

Natalia's parents could speak only a few words of English. They were of no help when the teacher sent home a notice, or when Natalia wanted to stay after school for piano lessons. So she turned to Sofia instead. Only a year older than her, but somehow always knowing what to do. Together, they figured out how to forge a parent's signature and how to charm the piano teacher into offering Natalia lessons even though she could not afford to pay. Natalia counted on Sofia, and Sofia proved herself worthy of the responsibility. She taught Natalia how to scoff at the other girls so that they could climb in social regard, despite their hand-me-downs. They held themselves apart, but they had each other.

Natalia had assumed that this would stay the case forever. That they would share the same fate, whether they ended up married with a gaggle of babies pulling at their limbs or

figured out a way to make something else of their lives, like the dreams Sofia sometimes whispered about. Whatever their path, Natalia thought they would choose it together. Then, when Sofia was twenty-one, she left, and sometimes Natalia felt like she had spent the rest of her life readjusting to this surprising world in which she could no longer count on Sofia to show her the way. By the time Sofia returned, almost forty years later, too much had changed.

Sofia's back room was full of junk. She seemed to have saved every bill or piece of mail she ever received. An ancient exercise bike was barely discernible under boxes labeled by year; likewise, a hefty wooden desk. You could have tossed this all a long time ago, Sof, and saved me the trouble, Natalia thought. She rested her eyes shut for a moment, her gripes landing nowhere. Files and books jutted out of every inch of a tall bookcase. Some titles Natalia recognized and plenty she did not. A full collection of Shakespeare's plays, yes. Mary Oliver, yes. *Carol in a Thousand Cities*, no. Natalia formulated a plan: donate the books to the library book sale, trash all the rest. Właśnie, właśnie. Yes, exactly. Natalia had enough stacks of paper in her own house. She didn't need Sofia's too.

She would poke around for just a moment. Not snooping—just checking to confirm her instinct that there was nothing important here. Just a quick survey, nothing more. Her husband Frank would be here soon to pick her up, and that would be the end of it.

Despite the clutter, Sofia appeared to have had a system for all these papers. She had labeled most of the file holders jammed in the bookshelf. Natalia ran her eyes over each one. *Bank Statements, 2001. Bank Statements, 2002. Bank Statements 2003.* Sofia had always been careful with her money. She never trusted the banks to keep it safe and checked every calculation of her funds by hand. Just a few weeks ago, she had called Natalia to gripe about the bank

pressuring her to switch to online statements. *House Files, Car Statements, Clippings*. Natalia paused to pull this last box off the shelf. Sofia had kept newspaper clippings that interested her, carefully snipped and taped to sheets of fresh white paper. Natalia pushed at the seat of the exercise bike to test its sturdiness, then leaned her bottom on it. A little rest. There was no sense that she could decipher to what Sofia had saved. Some of them were major events, cut out from the *New York Times* and *USA Today*: 9/11, Al Gore's loss, Bill Clinton's win. Others seemed more or less randomly selected from the local gazette: a photo of the Memorial Day parade from 2007, a feature on a new Chinese restaurant that opened in 2003. She shuffled the papers back together and returned the box to the shelf, scanning for anything else of interest. *Health Records*, several boxes. Then, on the very bottom shelf, *Letters*.

No. No. Absolutely not. She shouldn't pry. She should not read Sofia's letters. She should respect the privacy of the dead. She pulled the box off the shelf. This one was half-empty. She would just glance through. She would not read the full letters. Honestly. She pulled the papers out of the box, careful not to yank and rip something. (Lord, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.) The pages fluttered loosely apart, unencumbered by the shelf. *Dear Sofia*, she read at the top of the page, shocked to meet her own handwriting. And again on the next page, and again on the next. Every single letter in the box was from Natalia. Letters she had sent to Sofia during those years when Sofia lived too far away to justify anything more than the very occasional long-distance call. Letters she had sent in desperate yearning for Sofia to return, and then in resignation that she would not, and then, simply, out of habit.

Natalia put them back in the box without reading them and carried the box with her as she left the room, shutting the door firmly behind her. As she walked down the hall, she could

almost hear Sofia's voice calling her from the kitchen. *Is that you, Natchu?* Careful, now. Sofia was gone. Best to let her rest, nie?

The kitchen was empty, of course. She sat down at the table to wait for Frank. If Sofia had kept the letters all these years, Natalia would not throw them out either. In the driveway, Frank beeped his car horn.

Natalia was glad to return home, where all the light switches were perfectly reliable. She settled in with her latest find from the library's "new and notable" table, a book on global warming by a newspaper columnist at the *Boston Globe*. So far, she thought it very convincing, but tonight she was having a hard time concentrating. Her mind kept traveling back to Sofia's house, imagining each room full of Sofia's belongings, what it would take to properly sort everything. Days and days of work lay ahead of her.

When Frank asked what she thought about dinner, she suggested he heat up the mushroom casserole in the fridge. "We've eaten that casserole five nights in a row," he muttered.

She looked up at him and didn't say a word.

"I'll make something," he offered.

She nodded.

Just as the smell of baked pork chops started to waft out of the kitchen, a pair of headlights flashed into their driveway.

"Who's that?" Frank called. Natalia could see out the front window from her reading chair.

"Looks like Irena," Natalia shouted out. Sure enough, their daughter emerged from the driver's side of the car.

“Has she brought Wren with her?” Frank asked.

“Oh!” Natalia closed her book and stood up to look closer. In all the day’s commotion, she had forgotten that her granddaughter would arrive today for a weeklong visit.

Wren ran up to the door to greet Natalia with a kiss, then rushed over to Frank for a hug. Natalia ushered Irena in, then pushed the door shut against the cold.

“We came straight from the airport,” Irena said, giving Natalia a kiss of her own. “I figured you’d want to see her.”

Wren had been in Chicago for a few years now, and Natalia didn’t think she came home nearly enough. “Will you stay for dinner?” she asked Irena. “I’m sure your father made enough.”

Frank overheard her as she followed Irena into the kitchen. “There’s always the mushroom casserole,” he joked. Natalia spotted a full pot of mashed potatoes on the stove and shook her head.

“You two still cook like you have a full house,” Irena commented.

“It looks like tonight we do,” Frank said.

“The Lord provides,” Natalia added. She pulled Wren over for another hug. “How was your flight?”

“I napped,” Wren said. Natalia watched her eyes scan the room as though assessing whether everything was still in its place since she had last been there a few months ago. Wren paused at the fridge, where their calendar was a month behind, and got up to flip it to the right page.

Wren reminded Natalia of one of Rossetti’s lounging women. Her face had stayed rounded, a soft swell to her cheeks and forehead. In the winter, her complexion brightened to a smooth cream, the same color her perfect, round belly had been when she was a baby and Natalia

had spent hours simply staring at her in awe. Natalia was satisfied that her good looks had passed on to her children and grandchildren. This was not an insignificant legacy.

Irena, unfortunately, seemed determined to reject the gift of good genes. She had dyed her hair again, prompted perhaps by her recent divorce. Red. There had never been a red-headed gene in the family until Irena hit her teenage years, cycling through a new hair color every season. She hadn't done red in a while. Natalia held her commentary in, as Irena had asked her to the last time she wondered out loud whether green hair dye was appropriate for a woman in her forties.

Wren retrieved the silverware and began to set the table, just as Natalia had taught her. A good girl. Too many young people these days had no manners.

"How are we today?" Irena asked. "Dad, how's your back feeling?"

"Just fine, as you can see." Frank would have said that no matter how he was feeling. Natalia caught Irena's eyes rolling and they shook their heads at each other. There was no helping a man who refused help.

"In fact, I can't see. That's why I'm asking."

"Look at me," Frank said. "Do I look like a man in pain? I have my daughter, and my granddaughter, and dinner on the way. Natka, did we remember to get more ice cream?"

"You would do well to answer your daughter's question honestly," Natalia said. She turned to Irena. "He's been taking his pills at least. And yes, we have ice cream."

"Enough of me," Frank said. "Wren, tell us what's new in your world, and pass me the plates."

Natalia waited for everyone to sit down, plates piled with Frank's famous pork chops and mashed potatoes with a generous dollop of butter. The pork chops looked a bit dry to Natalia.

She would have preferred kielbasa. Natalia sat at the head of the table, with Frank to her left and Wren to her right. Irena took the seat at the opposite end.

“Grace?” Natalia said. Frank clasped his thick hands together and Irena and Wren followed suit.

“Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive. Thank you for bringing Wren home. You could do that more often, you know. Thank you for the food on our plates. Thank you for these potatoes and the soil they grew in and the farmer who planted them there. Thank you for Frank’s special pork chops. Thank you for our health, and please keep Frank taking his medication. Lord, please watch over Sofia in heaven. Amen.” (And may Frank remember to take the pork chops out of the oven a little sooner next time. Amen.)

“Amen,” the others echoed.

Natalia cut her pork into small bites and listened to the conversation drift back and forth in front of her. This was what Anna and Mila and Rina envied her for: that she still had a daughter nearby, that her grandchild actually deigned to visit. She was grateful. Right now, she was also tired. She chewed her meat slowly, so as not to choke. That would be the worst way to die.

Wren called her attention.

“I’m sorry, baby, what did you say?”

“Dziadziu said you were cleaning out Siostra Sofia’s house today. I asked how it went.”

“Oh, good. Just taking a look. I hope the estate sale will do most of the clearing for me.”

“I’m sorry I missed the funeral,” Wren said. Natalia flinched. She had hated hearing Father Mark, the young new priest, talk about Sofia. He hadn’t known her at all, and he got half the things Natalia told him wrong when he repeated them during the service. As an adventurous

young woman, Sofia had moved to San Francisco, then Montana, he said. How hard was it to remember Los Angeles and Minnesota?

Wren was still talking. “I wish I had known her better,” Wren said. She meant this earnestly, and that softened Natalia a little.

“She kept to herself,” Irena said.

Natalia nodded.

“I always thought it was strange how she never came to holidays,” Irena went on. “She’d come to anything else you invited her to and seem happy to be there, even if she didn’t talk much. But I can’t remember her ever coming to Easter or Thanksgiving. Not even Christmas.”

“Why was that?” Wren asked.

Enough, Natalia wanted to say. Enough questions about Sofia. She had left plenty behind for Natalia to take care of. Natalia didn’t want to have to provide explanations too.

“Your Uncle Daniel would skip holidays too if we let him,” Frank said. True enough: last Christmas, Daniel had flown in for just a day. His wife had a poker tournament that he needed to get back for.

Natalia saw an opportunity to redirect the conversation. “How’s David?” she asked Wren. Wren had been with David—her partner, as she called him, all this new lingo the young people had—for a few years now. He was the reason she moved to Chicago. Wren seemed not to hear her question, reaching instead for another roll. Natalia caught Irena shifting a worried gaze around the table.

“It’s good of you to take on the house, but I hope it’s not too much work,” Irena said.

“Did you find anything interesting?” Wren asked.

“Nothing much.”

“Sofia was a saver,” Frank said. “She might have some family records of interest to you, Wren.”

“I didn’t see anything,” Natalia said. (Lord, give me patience.)

“Maybe Wren should go look,” Irena suggested.

“I’m surprised,” Frank said. “I really would’ve thought she had some good stuff.”

“You didn’t find anything?” Wren asked.

This new turn in the conversation set off a quiet, insistent fear in Natalia. She wished Frank would shut up. Sofia had left her the house, she felt, not just because she was the only one to leave it to. It was a final act of trust, a gesture that Natalia would not take for granted. She didn’t want anyone else getting between her and what Sofia had left behind.

Maybe giving this lot a crumb of truth would put them off the idea. “I found some old letters I sent her many, many years ago. I saved them, don’t worry. That’s all there was.”

“See,” Frank declared. “I told you.”

“Are you certain there wasn’t anything else?” Wren asked.

“Couldn’t you use a hand with the house?” Irena phrased her words as a question, but her tone conveyed a command. Natalia closed her eyes. She could feel herself being overpowered by the second.

“I’m just fine,” Natalia said. “Thank you all for your interest. I will handle the house. Sofia kept things—sure. Reams and reams of receipts. There’s nothing about the family, Wren.”

That should’ve been the end of it. Frank was a nuisance, but he could read the edge in her voice when he overstepped. He wouldn’t push her on something that had just been an idle suggestion. And Wren was still her granddaughter, after all. Instructible. But Irena, always bossy, had come to think she had decision-making power over Frank and Natalia ever since Natalia had

refused to go to the doctor for a cough, and wound up in the emergency room two days later with a bad case of bronchitis. “I told you so,” Irena had said at the time, and now she seemed determined not just to tell them what was best for them, but to follow through on her will.

“I think it would be good, Mom, for Wren to be there with you. If you’re going to be lifting and moving and sorting things.”

Natalia opened her eyes. Wren saw her chance. “I don’t have any plans this week,” she said. “I can help, Babcie.”

Natalia sighed, sensing her case was lost. “Alright,” she said. “But I’m telling you, there’s nothing to be found. We’re just going to be sorting through some old glassware and clothes for Goodwill.”

Wren nodded. Irena looked pleased. Frank got up to fetch the ice cream.

The next morning, Natalia dressed in beige slacks and a red sweater, looking for something practical but with a little cheer, for Wren’s sake. She was just finishing curling her hair when Wren knocked twice on the back door and pulled it open. “Good morning!” Wren sang out.

Natalia pulled her in for a kiss hello. Frank gestured toward the warm cinnamon rolls sitting out on the counter.

“Dziadziu,” Wren said, her voice almost scolding. “You didn’t have to.”

Natalia caught the wink Frank gave Wren in reply. Wren dug her fingers in the pan to pull out a bun and ate it over the kitchen counter. “Mmmmm!” she called out.

Despite the cinnamon rolls, Wren was keeping her figure, with just the slightest hint of a curve to her belly. Very good. Although Natalia didn’t understand why Wren dressed in such shapeless slacks and bulky sweaters, which didn’t flatter her at all. She liked the most garish

colors, too. Today, she had somehow found both a sweater and a pair of pants in slightly mismatched shades of bright purple.

Frank packed two cinnamon rolls to send with them. "In case you get hungry," he said. Natalia gave him a peck on the cheek and asked him to come by with lunch at noon.

Sofia's house was only ten minutes down the road, but it sometimes felt to Natalia like a world away. When Natalia and Frank married, they chose a small, three-bedroom house in one of the new tract developments popping up in the same part of town where they had grown up. Slowly, the old rooming houses and shacks where all the new arrivals had lived were getting torn down and turned into neat rows of subdivisions. When Sofia moved back from California, she chose an ancient cottage on the other side of town, where farmland patched in among old mills. The houses were further apart and the land still felt a little wild.

As Wren pulled into Sofia's driveway, Natalia noticed Sofia's car. She had overlooked it yesterday. She sighed more loudly than she intended. "We'll have to sell that," she said.

Wren put her car in park and turned the key off, but left it in the ignition.

"Are you ready, Babcie?" she asked. "We can take a minute if you need."

Natalia turned her attention from Sofia's Honda to her granddaughter sitting next to her. Her eyes tightened with the worn practice of a woman, not a girl. Still, Natalia wasn't sure Wren should be trying to take care of her grandmother's emotions. It was her responsibility to care for Wren, not the other way around.

"Of course I'm ready," Natalia said.

At the front steps, Natalia rummaged in her pocketbook for Sofia's house key. "I'm sure I had it," she said. But the key wasn't in with her daybook and tissues, and it wasn't in any of the

side pockets either. She grumbled in frustration. Wren's calming murmurs only made her more irritated. "We could drive back to get it," Wren offered.

Natalia tried turning the handle of the front door. It didn't budge. She herself had locked it when she left yesterday. "Lift up the mat," she told Wren, but Sofia had left no key hidden there.

"Let's try the back," Wren said.

When Wren exclaimed at the sight of the pond, Natalia recalled that Wren had never been here before. Natalia had always wondered if Sofia held herself apart from the rest of the family on purpose, or if, when she moved back, already an old woman, Irena and her siblings, and later Wren and her cousins, had simply overlooked that Sofia might have anything more to offer than a kindly smile. Natalia had never asked, and she had never pushed Sofia about the holidays, either. I let you have your idiosyncrasies, and you let me have mine.

Wren skipped over the frozen ground to the edge of the water. "I can't believe this is hiding right here behind the houses. How beautiful," she exclaimed.

"It's not exactly pristine," Natalia said.

In the winter, though, the pond still froze over into a stunning expanse of ice. Natalia thought that if she were a painter, this was the kind of scene she might want to paint: a close-up of the ice's marking, varied in color where it might have unfrozen and frozen again, marked by the cut lines of someone's ice skates. People still ice skated; that was some consolation. So much else had changed. Last winter, Sofia had complained to Natalia that the pond wasn't freezing. The winter was too inconsistent for a solid layer of ice to form.

The ice looked frozen now, but Natalia didn't trust it. "You had better not," she said to Wren, who was toeing its edges. Wren took Natalia's hand to walk back toward the house

together. They approached the small brick patio that Sofia had built to sit outside all day and look out over the pond. But there was only a small clearing in the trees, so you could really only get a glimpse. Natalia had suggested several times that Sofia might take down a few trees to get a better view, but Sofia resisted. The trees were there first, she said.

Wren kicked at a loose brick at the edge of the patio and turned up a key.

“Here,” she said, triumphantly unlocking the back door.

Entering the house with Wren, Natalia felt it to be newly unfamiliar. She knew the layout of the home, its wide floorboards, the makeshift curtains that Sofia had never replaced. She could point out which of the furniture Sofia had prized most. But with Wren here, she felt everything needed explaining, in words she wasn’t sure she had.

They started in the kitchen. Neutral ground: glasses, jars, bowls. Natalia called out a list of estate sale items for Wren to write down. Eight water glasses; three cocktail glasses; complete set of four dishes and bowls; four miscellaneous mugs; numerous tchotchkes. When they finished in the cabinets, they moved on to the furniture. One dining table, solid dark wood, with four matching chairs; one stepstool; one sideboard with glass doors.

Wren had brought some heavy-duty black trash bags for anything that needed dumping. She cleared out the dried goods from the cupboards, setting aside anything sealed and unexpired for the food pantry. She swept everything out of the fridge.

Natalia assessed the tchotchkes that Sofia had collected along the kitchen windows. Wondering whether a buyer might be interested in a wooden horse or a nicked ceramic vase, Natalia glimpsed her own future. All of these objects that composed her life, too, would be dispersed, trashed, finished.

They listened to the radio as they worked. Sofia kept her dial tuned to NPR, just like Frank. Natalia didn't particularly care for the classical music that played on the local NPR station in the daytime, but she liked the idea of keeping the radio tuned as Sofia had left it.

Natalia had never pitied Sofia when she was alive. Now, the pity snuck up by surprise and she disliked it. Never marrying meant that Sofia got to live on her own terms. And these were her terms, *tak*. A comfortable house, a well-stocked kitchen, a few family photos. For Sofia, that must have been enough.

“What was Siostra Sofia like?” Wren asked over the sounds of a Bach concerto.

This question, a simple one, flummoxed Natalia. What account could she give? “We were raised together,” Natalia said. She rummaged in her mind for a story that would satisfy Wren, but she got lost worrying that she didn't know what version of herself Sofia would want Wren to know about. The memory that finally surfaced was not from their childhood, but much later: the first time Sofia and Natalia stepped foot in this house.

Fourteen years ago, Natalia had come here with Sofia when she was looking for a place to buy. The house was bare then, no kitchen table, no full cupboards, no chiming clock. It had been unoccupied for a few years. The realtor let slip that the dark lot made it a tough sell. It was winter, then, too. Sofia wore borrowed snow boots from one of Natalia's daughters and a jacket from Frank. She had arrived from California unprepared.

As the realtor walked them through the house, Natalia hung a half-step behind Sofia, watching her. She still didn't fully believe that Sofia would be moving back, after nearly forty years away. There had been Los Angeles, then Minnesota, with that woman—friend—however you call her, Wilma—then back to Los Angeles, again. Once before, many years earlier, Sofia had considered coming home. That time, Natalia had told her not to go through with it—not if

Wilma was coming with her. That had been foolish, maybe. Still, Natalia had been glad that this time, Sofia was looking alone. Now that the children were gone, Natalia was desperate for company. She searched Sofia's reactions as she assessed each room, waiting for her to show some sign of dissent. She braced herself for the inevitable rejection.

The realtor took Sofia all the way through the house, pointing out the modern appliances in the kitchen, the flooring in the living room. When they reached the backyard, Sofia's eyes lit up. Through the veil of pine branches, the pond glistened.

Sofia walked across the yard, a thin layer of hard snow crunching under her boots. The realtor stood in the doorway wearing heels. Natalia hesitated behind her, then made her way out to follow Sofia.

"Look at that, Natuchka." Sofia's eyes scanned the surface of the pond. From afar, it appeared to be one vast pool of gray, but up close, the ice's more subtle coloration and markings came into focus. A single ice fishing hole poked the east end of the pond. The western end was just out of sight.

"What a special place," Sofia said.

"It's no ocean," Natalia replied, over-eager to make sure Sofia was seeing, clearly, what she was signing up for. She knew, from the photos that Sofia sent with her short letters, that the balcony of her apartment in Los Angeles looked out over the vast Pacific, dark and dotted by the white caps of waves.

"No," Sofia said. "But it feels like home."

So somehow Sofia still felt this place could be home, despite all the time away, despite only coming to visit a handful of times in nearly four decades, despite showing up as someone so different that Natalia wasn't even sure she recognized her. Natalia was glad that Sofia was seeing

this pond in the winter, when at least it had the cover of the ice, rather than in the summer, when all the ponds across town got scummy with algae and the glossy sheen of god-knows-what the mills had dumped in them and never cleaned up.

“Can you hear that?” Sofia asked.

“It’s the ice cracking.” The day was a bit warmer, above freezing, so the ice was settling into new arrangements of particles.

“Natuchka, I think this is the one.”

Sofia made an offer that day, eager to square things away before her flight back to California. Natalia marveled that she had the money to buy a house, something she hadn’t known any other single woman to do. But Sofia had been working all her life, of course, and she had always been careful with her money. When Frank offered to help her with arranging the mortgage paperwork, she told him she had it in hand, and so she did.

Natalia tried to tell this story to Wren, but all she could seem to communicate were a few disparate images. The empty house. The realtor’s heels.

“Wait—” Wren said. “I should be recording this.” Just last year, she had tried to get Natalia and Frank to sit down for what she called oral histories. Natalia had told her she was not history yet, finding every way she could to drag her feet without having to say no, no, nie. Frank gladly sat with Wren for hours.

She got out her phone, and they sat at the kitchen table. Natalia tried to keep going. The pond, the ice cracking. She didn’t know how to talk about the miracle that Sofia’s return had felt like to her. And without it the story didn’t make much sense, she could tell by Wren’s blank-faced nodding. There was something essential about the events that she could not convey.

“That’s all,” she said, cutting herself off. “I’m not much of a storyteller, you can see.”

Wren let the recording run, as if waiting for Natalia to change her mind and pick the story back up. When she didn't, Wren asked, "What else do you remember about Siostra Sofia?"

"I think we ought to move on to the closets in the hall." Natalia shifted her weight as if to rise.

Wren turned off the recorder. "Were you and Siostra Sofia close?" she asked.

Natalia let her spine settle back into the chair. Her body gladly acquiesced to staying seated. "Like sisters."

"Like sisters?"

"Sofia and I were raised like sisters," Natalia repeated. This fact, which she had stated so many times over the years, to teachers, to friends, to doctors, struck her as newly terrible, now that Sofia was gone. And Natalia had never stopped describing Sofia as her sister, even in the years when there had been more silence between them than anything else. Natalia swallowed her dread and doubled down. "We slept in the same bed in my parents' little house for, oh, it must've been fifteen or twenty years of our lives."

"The same bed?"

Natalia caught the disbelief in her tone. "Be glad you're an only child," she teased. "Between Sofia and my brothers running around, the only thing that was ever really mine was my toothbrush." (Keep them all happy in heaven, Lord.)

Wren smiled.

"Maybe we should eat," Natalia said.

Wren brought sandwiches out of their lunch pack. The midday light showed through the blinds, patterning the kitchen table in stripes. They ate in silence for a few moments.

"What were you thinking about?" Wren asked.

“Oh nothing,” Natalia said. She smoothed the tin foil that she’d unwrapped from her sandwich.

“Why did Siostra Sofia move away?”

This is exactly what Natalia had wanted to avoid—having to explain. If Sofia wanted to give an account of her life, she could’ve done that while she was here. (And why didn’t you, Sof? At least to me?) Now that Sofia was gone, Natalia felt protective of her memories, as though telling them aloud might risk them shattering.

“That was so long ago,” Natalia said.

Wren took the last bite of her sandwich. “Why, though?”

Natalia could see the food in Wren’s mouth as she spoke. She wished she wouldn’t be so careless with her manners. “I’m not sure,” she said.

The foil was crinkled and creased where it had been folded, but it flattened readily, like polished silver, first under Natalia’s finger, then her nail.

“She left for a job in California. Maybe she had always wanted to try something new. Her father was working in Canada at the time. Maybe that inspired her. We never talked much about it.”

“Why not?” Wren asked.

Natalia folded the tin foil back around the remainder of her sandwich, undoing the flat silver pools she had created. “I’ll save this for later,” she said. She put her hand over Wren’s and squeezed. “Let’s get back to work.” She shook off Wren’s look of disappointment.

They made quick work of the house together, and Natalia found herself grateful for Wren’s help. Wren went through the boxes in the back room more carefully than Natalia would have liked, but

as Natalia had predicted, there was nothing more to find. By end of the third day, they were almost done.

The next morning, Natalia called Wren and told her not to come. She said she was feeling sick, maybe a cold, and so they'd have to finish up at Sofia's tomorrow. The truth was that Natalia felt perfectly healthy, she just wasn't ready to face the end of clearing out Sofia's house. All they had left was the bedroom and once that was finished, it was over. Sofia was really gone.

Natalia acted like she was sick, for Frank's sake. She stayed in her housedress and slippers all day. She heated up a can of chicken noodle soup for lunch. Frank stayed clear of her, not wanting to catch whatever she had.

Wren called in the evening to check in on her. Natalia was tempted to claim another sick day, but she held herself back. Wren would come by in the morning.

A For Sale sign greeted Natalia and Wren when they pulled up to Sofia's.

"I hadn't realized they'd put it up so soon," Natalia said.

Wren angled her body toward Natalia. "We can take it down, Babcie, if it's too much."

Under the shade of the pine trees, the snow lingered. Natalia shook her head sharply. The movement felt pleasingly crisp. "No, it's good. The sooner it sells, the better."

Natalia had been careful to bring the key this morning. The door opened with ease. The house's scent was becoming familiar again to Natalia, rid of the odor of neglect that had surfaced in the weeks after Sofia's death. Now, though Sofia was still gone, the space seemed to have more life to it.

"Wren, could you turn the heat on, baby?" she asked. Wren had already shed her coat and boots, while Natalia was still unbuttoning hers.

The life in the house, of course, was Wren, who bounded over to the round heater dial.

“Seventy-two?” Wren asked.

“Seventy-four, please.”

Wren returned to sit on the couch next to Natalia as she loosened her boots. She was eager to help—that was more than many of Natalia’s friends could say about their grandchildren. And she was smart. She had gotten a full ride at UMass and landed a job at a local library after graduation. Now she was on her way to a graduate degree in library studies. And surely whatever was happening with David was only a blip, the usual kind of trouble a couple must endure.

The previous day, when Irena called to inquire about Natalia’s supposed illness, she had mentioned that maybe things were not going well with Wren and David right now. “I don’t know what it is,” she said. “She won’t tell me.”

Natalia had met David a handful of times. When Wren first brought him home, Natalia was confused. Wren had told Natalia and Frank that she was—what was the world that she used—that she liked women, but also men? Natalia was relieved that she had apparently picked men. Her life would be easier this way.

Wren watched Natalia slowly unlace her boots. “How is David?” Natalia asked.

“Good!” said Wren.

Natalia knew from the exclamation in her voice that something was wrong.

Wren had never been a child of brightness. Kindness, yes, and quick to laugh. But her natural way of being was something brooding and restless, something Natalia recognized. This seriousness was a kind of inheritance among the women in the family, though it had skipped her daughters, so she thrilled to see it reappear in Wren. It wouldn’t make Wren’s life easier, but Natalia did think of it as something that made her own life more interesting—or could have.

When Natalia was sixteen, her mother had sat her down at the kitchen table one night after her father and brothers went to bed. “Your mind burrows,” her mother said. “You’ll have to unbury it. I did it, you can do it too.” Natalia was confused. Her mother had never corrected her in this way. Told her to put on a cleaner dress, yes, or pushed her knees together, yes. But her mother had never said anything about Natalia’s moody daydreams. “You need a husband,” her mother told her. “You cannot get so lost in yourself that you abandon your family.”

So Natalia did what her mother asked: she worked to put on a brighter mask. She didn’t resent her mother for the advice. She had been right. But Irena didn’t know that she needed to tell Wren the same, and Natalia couldn’t bring herself to either. Supposedly, men these days were different. Wren would be just fine.

“I hope David gets around to proposing soon.” Natalia had merely been following her train of thought, not realizing it surfaced in a rather abrupt way. This was not what she had planned to say. Wren pulled away from her on the couch.

“I know, Babcie.”

Natalia nodded. She sensed Wren didn’t want to continue the conversation, but she had one more thing to say. “Tell him I said he better do it while I’m still alive. I want to see you walk down the aisle.”

Wren stood up. “We’re working on the bedroom today, right?”

“Right,” Natalia said. She led Wren down the hallway.

They started with Sofia’s jewelry, of which she did not have much. Wren convinced Natalia they should take it all, get it appraised rather than leave it for the estate sale. Who knew, it might be worth something. Wren picked out a turquoise choker for herself, something Natalia

couldn't remember Sofia ever wearing. Natalia slipped one of Sofia's rings onto her own hand, a gold band Sofia had worn on her right ring finger that now fit Natalia's pinky.

While Wren combed through Sofia's clothes, Natalia let herself out onto the back porch. Wren could take anything she wanted, but the exercise of selection felt depressing to Natalia. This was all Sofia left behind: piles of objects that would soon lose their imprint of her, be assessed only on the value of their aesthetics and usefulness. Whether her sofa matched their wallpaper, whether her clothes were sufficiently old as to be stylish again, or merely dated. Oh, Sof. Where have you gone?

Sofia kept a bird feeder in her backyard, which no one had filled that year. Birds flushed the bare branches of nearby trees, but none alighted on the empty birdfeeder. Even the birds had already forgotten her faithful hand.

"Babcie!" Wren's voice called out from the doorway. "Come see this!"

Natalia wiped her boots off at the door, then took them off, along with her coat. She left the coat flung over a kitchen chair. Wren was impatient for her to come into the bedroom.

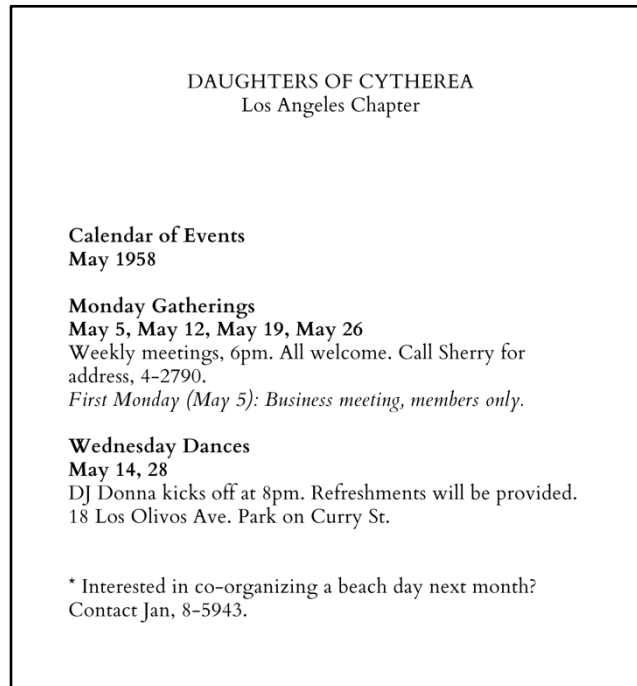
"What is it?" Natalia asked.

Wren pointed at a red patent leather suitcase. "Have you seen this before?"

Natalia shook her head. It didn't look like the kind of thing Sofia would own.

"I found it under the bed," Wren said. She opened it. It practically exploded with papers, just like every other box and bundle in this house. Natalia waited to be told why she'd been called in here.

Wren picked a folded pamphlet off the top and handed Natalia an old Xeroxed page, folded in thirds. "Look," she said. Natalia unfolded the paper.



Something from Sofia’s Los Angeles days, then. “Nice, honey.” She would rather Wren didn’t dig around in Sofia’s suitcases. Maybe she could dissuade her through disinterest.

“Do you know what Daughters of Cytherea is?” Wren asked.

She handed the pamphlet back to Wren. “No, I have no idea.”

Wren rifled through the suitcase with enthusiasm. “Babcie, you have to see this.” She handed Natalia a small stack of magazines, dry with age. On the top of the stack, Natalia noted the cover image first: an illustration of a woman seated on a wooden chair. Innocent enough. She took in the title of the magazine, *Bounce*. Then the subtitle, *A Lesbian Review*. Natalia gripped the stack but did not move to look any further. She regretted letting Wren poke around on her own.

“Where did you find this suitcase?”

“Under the bed,” Wren said.

Natalia considered her next move. “If Sofia was keeping something there, separate from her other papers, she might not have wanted it found. Or maybe it belonged to someone else. I think we shouldn’t pry any further.” She tried to sound resolved.

“Babcie, we can’t throw this away. This is a treasure trove. This is an archive.”

Natalia cast around for a way out as Wren began looking through the suitcase again. “Honey,” she pleaded. “I don’t think Sofia would have wanted this.”

“Do you think Sofia was a lesbian?” Wren asked. She didn’t look up from the papers. She did not even seem to think the question was out of line.

“I think it’s time to go home,” Natalia said.

Now Wren did stop her rifling. She looked up at Natalia with an expression that was—was that accusatory? “But what do you think?” she asked.

“There are parts of Sofia’s life that she kept to herself,” Natalia said. “She would not want us digging around and asking questions.”

Right, Sof? But no, that was not quite right. Natalia was the one who didn’t like questions. They probed. They pressed. They scared her. They demanded answers she did not have. Once, Sofia had been the one asking her questions. She was the only person whose questions Natalia had been willing to answer truly. But Natalia had long ago stopped asking Sofia questions that would only lead to trouble. If Sofia were here now, she would be nodding at Wren, urging her to keep asking.

Wren set the papers down. “What do you mean?” Her voice became quiet.

“You have to understand, honey, times were different.”

“So she was secretly a lesbian, you mean?”

“Secretly? I don’t know, honey. I think it’s best we leave these papers be. Can you put them in the toss pile?”

Wren gathered the stack of magazines and pamphlets and laid them gingerly in the suitcase. “Babcie, these are important. We have to keep them.”

Would you really want this, Natalia wondered. But Sofia couldn’t say anymore, and Natalia seemed to have less and less of a way out. Wren was strong-willed, just like Sofia. Natalia had always admired Sofia’s persistence, and taken pride in Wren’s, thinking maybe she had helped instill some drive in the girl. Now, Natalia felt up against them both for the first time, and she sensed her defeat. “Alright,” Natalia said gently. She would try one last plea. “Honey, it’s getting late. We better wrap up. Please, I’d really prefer to let those papers stay behind.”

“I’ll just take it home to have a closer look,” Wren said. “Then we can decide what to do with it.”

Natalia left to find her coat in the kitchen. She slipped it on, expecting Wren would appear soon. When she’d zipped her coat and put on her hat and gloves and still no Wren, she sat down at the table. Already the light was fading. So many afternoons, Sofia must have sat at this table. Which chair did she prefer when she was alone? Maybe she sat in this very one, with the view clear out the window. What did she think about as she sipped her afternoon coffee? Natalia could taste the coffee as Sofia had liked it—black and nearly bitter. A month ago, Natalia would have sworn that she knew Sofia nearly as well as she knew herself. But she had only wished that were the case, and thought saying it might make it true. Now, she was left with all the questions she hadn’t asked.

“Wren?” Natalia called out.

Finally, Wren appeared in the doorway. She had the red suitcase in one hand and a black trash bag with the items she'd selected from Sofia's closet in the other.

Natalia stood and checked the back door to make sure it was locked. She followed Wren out the front. After locking it from the outside, she laid her hand against the door, checking that it too was closed.

Natalia hadn't thought about the year Sofia left for a long time. 1955. Natalia had been younger than Wren was now. She had just turned twenty, and she felt certain that her life was primed for something wonderful to happen.

The year was barely a month old when her cycle failed to arrive. She waited for it for a whole week. Every morning and every afternoon, checking her underwear for the inevitable stain of rust red. That first month it didn't arrive, she didn't worry. Her cycle was irregular. When it happened for a second month, the waiting and watching with no reward, a seed of worry planted in her gut. It was a weedy seed, one that rooted and grew quickly, overtaking her thoughts in any quiet moment. She began avoiding Frank, instructing everyone in the house to tell Frank she wasn't home if he called. They had been dating for just six months.

One afternoon, her brother Alfred shouted for her to come to the phone. Frank's voice on the line sounded unfamiliar after just a week. "You've been busy," he remarked.

"Tak."

She could tell he was waiting for an explanation, but she wasn't going to offer one.

"There's a party at Dave's this weekend. Bonfire and all that. Do you—"

"I can't," she interrupted.

"Oh."

The silence expanded between them, until Natalia couldn't stand it. A pregnant pause, she thought to herself, and almost laughed. She tried to let the humor color her tone. "I'll call you," she said, as though she had no worries, and he needn't have any either.

She hung up the phone and chased Alfred down in the yard, screaming at him mostly because he was an easy target.

By the third month of waiting, watching, nothing, she knew. She had no idea, really, what to do, but the idea of addressing the bundle of cells growing inside her felt impossible. She tried, once, to say the word “baby” aloud. She watched her lips in the mirror form the shape of the word, and she heard the sound come out of her mouth. It repulsed her, so much so that she did something she hadn’t done in a long time, which was to stick her fingers down her throat and try to vomit out any traces of the word that might be lingering inside her. She was out of practice, and it didn’t work.

The only question was whether to tell Sofia, and for the first time in her life, she decided the answer was no. To tell Sofia would be to acknowledge the fact of the thing, which was exactly what she hoped to avoid as long as possible. She didn’t have a plan.

She didn’t have to tell Sofia, though, because before long, Sofia asked. They were lying in bed, snuggled close to each other for warmth. The curtains, pulled shut, shrouded the room in darkness as the moon rose outside.

“What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

Natalia rolled onto her back, away from Sofia.

“Something’s going on with you.”

“I’m tired,” Natalia said. “I want to sleep.” She had never tried to hide anything from Sofia and she could feel she was doing it wrong. She tried again. “Nothing is wrong. I’m just tired lately.”

“Why?” Sofia asked. She propped herself up on one elbow. Natalia glared at the outline of Sofia’s head, unable to make out her features.

“I don’t know.” Natalia tried to sound exasperated, instead of what she really felt, which was close to tears. She could no longer zip her skirts up all the way.

“Natchu,” Sofia said, and this endearment, a name only Sofia called her, uttered in a tone of such pleading, shattered Natalia’s bravery. Then came the tears.

“Tell me.”

“I’m pregnant.” The words floated out of Natalia’s mouth and into the air and they would have been absolutely unbearable, lingering there, if Sofia hadn’t smothered Natalia immediately in a hug, holding her so fiercely that she felt more anchored than she ever had before.

Sofia didn’t try to comfort her or ask questions. She let Natalia cry until she began to gag from the effort of weeping so violently and so silently, trying to make sure no one else in the house would hear. Then, finally, Sofia began to make small noises of comfort.

The gagging subsided. Natalia sighed.

“Natchu, it’s going to be okay.”

Natalia couldn’t quite believe this, but hearing Sofia say it aloud made her think perhaps it could be true. She fell asleep with Sofia rubbing circles in her back, and she slept soundly.

Natalia woke up the next morning with sore eyes, as though she’d bruised them from all her crying.

“You stay in bed today,” Sofia instructed. “I’ll tell Cioci Ann that you’re sick.”

Sofia swung in and out of the room quietly as she got ready for work at the jewelry store downtown owned by the Brozes, where she stood behind the counter all day helping young men pick out modest rings for their intended brides and chatting with old women who needed their watches fixed.

Normally, Natalia would have been bustling about at the same time as Sofia, getting ready for her job at the school library. Today, she lay in bed in her pajamas, watching as Sofia selected a white sweater that complemented her brown skirt, pulled her hair out of its rollers, and applied an easy touch of blush. Sofia seemed utterly in command of her appearance in a way Natalia felt she'd never had success with. Always a stray hair, too little or too much makeup. She slipped one hand under the covers and ran it over the slight roundness of her belly, then poked a finger into the firm skin as though it might deflate. She brought her other hand down to her privates, feeling first for the plunge between her legs, then pulling up her nightgown and slipping her hand under her underwear. Thick hair, foreign feeling. She knew making love before marriage was a sin. She shouldn't have done it. That much was very clear to her now, and she wished it had been clear to her earlier. Should not have done it. Should have said no. Strange, then, that it had felt so good.

She extracted her hands from under the covers when Sofia came over to say goodbye. Instead of the hug Natalia was expecting, Sofia motioned for her to move aside and sat back in bed next to her.

"You'll wrinkle your skirt," Natalia said.

Sofia pulled her in close, cradled Natalia's head on her bosom. "I don't mind."

Sofia smelled floral, light and unfamiliar, a perfume she'd started wearing lately. When Sofia wore it, Natalia missed the smell of her body that it masked. Sofia had said Natalia could use it too, but Natalia worried the other women at school might think she was putting on airs if she showed up wearing perfume.

"Maybe I should go into work," Natalia said. The day loomed before her, long and lonely.

"No," Sofia said.

“I could still make it in, just a little late.” She usually arrived at eight, but the library didn’t open to students until nine. She could plead with Mrs. Marklen not to dock her pay.

“You need rest. You just stay here, and I’ll be back tonight and we’ll talk then.”

The talking part did not appeal to Natalia, but she followed Sofia’s instructions.

Natalia’s mother came home first that afternoon, before Sofia. The shops stayed open after the factory closed so everyone could run their errands. Her mom knocked on the door and entered without waiting for permission. Natalia was reading a novel.

“Wszystko dobrze?” her mother asked. Everything fine?

Natalia coughed and put the back of her hand to her forehead as though testing for a fever. “Tak,” she said.

Her mother offered to bring her some soup. She shook her head. Her mother shut the door, gently turning the handle so that even the latch barely made a noise.

An hour later, Sofia burst in, in a hurry. “Oh Natchu, there you are,” she exclaimed. She kissed Natalia on the cheek, stripped off her nice skirt and sweater in favor of house clothes, and came to sit on the side of the bed.

“What do you think about a walk?”

A walk sounded divine to Natalia after having let her body sink into the mattress all day. Her flesh reconstituted itself upright, clinging to her stacked bones. The two of them bundled against the cold and walked out into the thin light of the early evening.

Natalia kicked at the frozen ground while Sofia bent over to fix her boot’s lace. Natalia pulled her woolen hat down further over her ears. The air felt bracingly hard in her lungs. The first snow would come any day now.

Sofia led Natalia to the sidewalk. They walked in what could've been any direction. Natalia's mind was elsewhere, everywhere, in her memories of Frank, in her worries, in the future with the—*think it*—baby, and in the future without it.

“What do you want to do?” Sofia asked. Natalia looked up, surprised to realize that they'd gotten as far as the Wuzniaks' horse pen. The pen was empty now, their horse in for the night. She had been thinking that babies were terrible little things, so needy, she knew from her brothers, and impossible to hide. Some women got placid babies, but all of her mother's had been screamers, and Natalia thought it likely she'd wind up with the same.

After a pause, Sofia asked the question a second time, even more gently. “What do you want to do, Natchu?”

“Babies are awful,” Natalia replied. She kept her voice low, though she didn't see anyone around. You never knew how words might reach unintended ears.

Sofia murmured her assent. She hooked her arm through Natalia's elbow and waited for more. When Natalia stayed silent, Sofia offered, “They certainly can be.”

Natalia knew what question Sofia was asking her and even knew her answer. It had come to her very clearly that day, as though the path forward had been inside her all along, she had just needed to get quiet enough to listen for it. Still, she wasn't sure she was ready to say it out loud. She slowed her steps, looking intently at the grooves of the sidewalk and feeling the heft of her body, blood for two pumping through her veins.

“Should we turn around now?” she asked.

Sofia planted her feet, pulling Natalia to a stop. She turned Natalia to face her and held Natalia's shoulders.

“You have to decide,” she said.

Faced with Sofia's stare, Natalia felt last night's sobs pushing to return. If she let herself dwell in the shame of Sofia knowing her failing, the silent shudders would return. She fought to return to the surety she'd come to earlier that day. She shook off Sofia's grip and looked to the sky, where the light was fading quickly. She was twenty years old. That was plenty old enough to get married. If they had the wedding soon, they could play off the timing without too much suspicion.

"I need to get rid of it," she said. She would not let herself feel anything, would not, would not. Would not.

"Okay," Sofia said. "We'll figure out how."

"How?" Natalia hadn't thought that far.

"I'll figure it out," Sofia said. She stepped back. For a moment Natalia feared she was angry, getting pulled into this mess that was not hers. But she was only trying to turn back home, and she shepherded Natalia along with her.

A few days later, Sofia instructed Natalia on the plan. They would call a doctor in Boston to make an appointment. They would use a pay phone to make the call, so Natalia's parents wouldn't see the charges on the phone bill. On the appointed day, they would both call in sick to work. They would catch a bus in Springfield. After the appointment, they would take the bus back that same day. They would tell Natalia's parents they had plans with friends after work, to explain their absence at dinner.

Sofia had thought of everything, except what the actual procedure would be like. About that, she said nothing.

"Will you make the call?" Natalia asked.

“Of course.” Sofia rubbed her back and Natalia let out a small sigh.

The bus was crowded and cold. Somehow all these bodies couldn't make up for the malfunctioning heater. Sofia had asked her, that morning, if she was sure. “We don't have to do it,” Sofia said. Natalia wouldn't let the question pierce her. She shook her head too quickly. She was not someone to go back on her decisions. Now she was stuck on this ice box bus for two hours.

“Do you think I'm doing the right thing?” Natalia whispered as quietly as she could.

Sofia squeezed her hand.

“How will I know this is the right thing to do?” she asked again.

“Does it feel like the right thing?”

“Mama would never forgive me if she knew. Tata, I don't even want to imagine what he'd say. This wasn't supposed to happen.”

“Natchu, I can't tell you what is right. You have to decide that for yourself. And you know I don't believe in God. But if I did, I would tell you that He forgives.”

Natalia wiped at her tears with her thick glove, which only made her cheeks itch.

“Did you talk to Frank?” Sofia asked. Of course Sofia had known it was Frank, without even having to ask.

“I've been ignoring him,” Natalia said. “He thinks I'm mad, but I just can't face him.” Natalia stared at the seatback in front of her. “If I tell him, he'll want to get married.” She didn't feel ready to marry, true, but there was another reason, one she didn't voice out loud: she didn't want Frank to see her any differently. Frank would marry her, yes, but he'd do it out of duty, because he was a good man, not out of love. And love was the thing Natalia had always dreamed

of for herself—if she must marry, if she must mother, let it be for love. She kept this to herself, though, thinking Sofia would find such sentimentality absurd. She kept staring ahead for a few moments without registering Sofia’s silence. When she did, she looked over. Sofia’s brow was furrowed, and her voice emerged tightly.

“Are you sure you don’t want to tell him?”

“I can’t,” Natalia said.

“Then I think this is right, Natuchka. You can’t raise a baby on your own.”

Natalia nodded. Sofia wasn’t wrong. But maybe, she thought, she could raise a baby with Sofia’s help. They could move, somewhere far away where no one knew them. They’d tell people Natalia was a widow, and find a little apartment, and raise the girl. It must be a girl.

This was a dream, though, and Natalia knew it. She could never leave her parents, her brothers. And she didn’t want to give up her life, really. She’d have to tell Frank, dear Frank, to move on. To find someone else. This was the real future.

Sofia laid her hand on Natalia’s knee, which had been jittering.

“You’ll feel better by tonight,” Sofia said.

Natalia couldn’t tell whether she meant it. Natalia certainly didn’t believe it.

Route 20 flew past, beyond her reach. She had let Sofia take the window seat, though she would have preferred to be tucked in from the strangers in the aisle. Sofia loved going places, and seldom got to.

What they saw out the window here wasn’t so different from home. Wooden frame houses with yards and a car, the occasional gas station or corner store. Plenty of woods, with trodden ground visible through the bare trees. Every so often, a marsh, frozen over and silent. As

they approached Boston, the houses came closer together. Natalia felt a slight unmooring, as though the bus had carried her out of known reality.

Once they disembarked, Sofia pulled out the slip of paper on which she had written the address and directions. They found the streetcar with the help of an older Irish woman laden with shopping bags. “Be careful,” she warned them. “Girls like you ought to hold your purses tight.”

“Don’t worry,” Sofia said once they’d found seats. “She was only trying to scare us.” Natalia cast her eyes about the train car, wondering which of these strangers might try to rob her. Sofia grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “We’re fine,” she said. Natalia didn’t know from where Sofia got this assurance. They had been in the city only once or twice, to greet new relatives arriving from Poland. Natalia peered out the window, considering what it would be like to live some place like this, where the houses crowded together and the air smelled unnatural. Not that she would want to live here. But there was something entrancing about it, the idea of an entirely foreign life.

A fellow passenger, someone who had overheard Sofia asking for help earlier, gestured to them that their stop was next. Sofia turned a grateful smile, and Natalia tried, but feared her face was set in more of a grimace. At every step in this journey, she flickered between dread and determination.

They descended in a residential area with a small row of shops. Sofia double-checked the address, then pointed at a door that led to the second floor above a fish shop. They rang the bell. As they waited, a customer entered the shop. Natalia considered whether the woman held suspicion in her eyes as she gave them a once-over. The air grew pungent with the smell of fish for a moment as she entered the shop, then it receded.

A small woman, grey hair, green smock, opened the door to the second floor. Here, Natalia's memory cut out. She didn't keep the details of what happened next, just the glint of metal, the falsely kind voice of the doctor, and excruciating pain. She retained no impression of what she might have said or done in the cold, bare room, or even of the bus ride home.

The next day she woke up to Sofia watching her closely, asking immediately how she felt. "Fine," Natalia said. On the third morning, when Natalia woke up feeling almost herself again, Sofia whispered, "I'm so glad you are okay." Only then did Natalia realize what a risk she had taken, how lucky she was that the blood flow eased just as it was supposed to.

A few weeks later, Sofia announced that she was leaving for California. They were lying in bed under a flannel sheet. Natalia sat straight up, to better look at Sofia. She was immediately furious.

"This must be a joke," Natalia said. The furthest away she could recall anyone she knew moving was Connecticut. How would Sofia get to California? And what would she do there?

"I already told Cioci Ann and Wujek Ben," Sofia said. "I asked them not to tell you, to let me tell you myself. I have to be responsible for myself, Natchu. I can't live here forever."

"But what about our plans for the apartment?" What she didn't say: what about me? She had felt like a cracked water pitcher these past few weeks, steadily leaking tears. She was still avoiding Frank. She needed Sofia right now.

Sofia didn't respond. Natalia thought she could make out tears glistening on her cheeks, which only made her angrier. What right did Sofia have to cry? She was the one choosing to abandon her. "Well?" Natalia asked.

When she didn't get an answer again, she threw her body back down on the bed and turned her back to Sofia. They didn't speak for four days, until Sofia approached Natalia one afternoon while she was in the kitchen, chopping potatoes. School had let out. Her mother was out doing the shopping, and her brothers and father were at work. Sofia was home unusually early.

Natalia glared at her, but didn't say a word.

"Today was my last day at the shop," Sofia practically whispered. Her eyes were puffy and red.

"Why are you crying?" Natalia asked.

"Mr. and Mrs. Broz have been so good to me," Sofia said. There wasn't a trace of anything less than earnest in her voice. "I'll miss them," she said,

"What about us?" Natalia asked. "Will you miss me? And the family?"

"Of course, Natuchka."

"Then why go?"

"I have to try it," Sofia said, her eyes never meeting Natalia's.

She had found a job working for some rich lady who used to live in Northampton and now lived on the ocean somewhere between Los Angeles and San Diego, but still solicited all her housekeepers through the local high school's gym teacher. The teacher had reached out to Sofia, and she had said yes. Natalia learned this all through her mother. She wouldn't stoop to asking Sofia herself, if Sofia hadn't told her in the first place.

Natalia simply did not understand. She thought she and Sofia had made a promise to each other—unspoken, yes, but only because it didn't need to be said aloud—to accompany each other. She felt a certain claim over Sofia's life, and the decisions she made about it. Now, of all

times, she thought Sofia would be here to lean on. Should be here, must be here. But Sofia had claimed her life back and decided something about her future that Natalia hadn't even known she wanted. This left Natalia feeling adrift.

A few weeks later, Natalia drove Sofia to the bus station in the car she'd bought with the money she had been saving up to rent an apartment. She pointed out the plush seats and radio dial to Sofia, expecting admiration, but Sofia only nodded.

"What's wrong?" Natalia asked.

"Nothing," Sofia replied.

Natalia turned on the radio, but Sofia asked her to turn it off. They drove in silence for a few minutes, until Sofia spoke.

"I'm scared, Natuchka."

"Scared of what?"

"What if this isn't the right thing to do? What if I hate it out there?"

A month ago, Natalia might have seized this opportunity to make her case for Sofia to stay. But until now, Sofia had made her preparations to leave so quickly, so resolutely, that Natalia had hardened against them. Sofia had acted callously toward her, not thinking at all about what Natalia would feel about this abandonment, so it was with callousness that she responded now.

"You've made up your mind. You have the bus ticket. You have to go."

Sofia nodded again, three times. She wiped at her eyes. She looked reassured, as though she had mistaken Natalia's words for encouragement.

"I'll miss you so much, Natchu."

Natalia muttered a noise somewhere between acknowledgement and dismissal. She didn't want Sofia to see her hurt, or glimpse her fear of what life would be like with Sofia far away. But when Sofia prompted her—"Natuchka?"—she sighed through her reluctance and replied, "I'll miss you too." She couldn't keep the crack out of her voice, and that set them both off crying, then laughing at themselves, then crying again, until they reached the station.

Natalia followed the signs to the parking lot. She found a spot easily. She turned off the car. She and Sofia looked uncertainly at each other. "I suppose we go in now," Sofia said.

Natalia lifted Sofia's suitcase from the trunk. The bus station was cold and busy. Natalia took Sofia's hand. All along, Natalia couldn't quite imagine that this was all real. It seemed too momentous, and too mundane, all at once. Her shoes pinched her heels as she walked. She'd worn her nice shoes, the ones reserved for Easter, christenings, graduation. Around them, strangers bustled through their own lives. Was this a regular day for them, or were they about to lose something too?

They sat in hard-backed seats inside the waiting room. When the bus was called, Sofia rose. Natalia stayed seated. Sofia reached her hands down and pulled Natalia up for a hug. "Kocham cię," Sofia whispered into Natalia's ear. "Love you too," Natalia whispered back. Natalia sat back down. A line of people passed down the corridor to the bus. She walked over to the window to watch where the buses pulled out of the depot. She could still see Sofia's bus, loading people and luggage in. It would be a long journey for Sofia, all across the country. Finally the bus driver pulled the doors to the luggage storage shut, and began backing the bus out. Natalia waved out the window until the bus pulled out of sight.

SOFIA

Natchu, I see why you were angry at me for leaving—I really do. But I couldn't have explained my decision to you then. Would it have been any better to let you realize I'd been fired from the jewelry store for what I'd done for you? I wanted to spare you the guilt.

I went to Mrs. Broz because she seemed like a woman who knew things. I thought I could trust her. Every day, she sat in the back office tallying accounts and paying out invoices, while her husband charmed customers out at the front counter with me. But she never seemed resentful of her backstage role. Instead, she seemed to think it more desirable. She wanted to teach me basic figures so that one day I might be able to help with the accounting, too.

I was right to go to her. Even after everything, I believe that. She knew what to do, who to call to get you taken care of. She gave me the number for the clinic—that's what she called it—in Boston.

I never thought to worry about Mr. Broz. I suppose Mrs. Broz must've let it slip. Careful woman, I always thought her, but maybe she'd had a drink too many, or maybe she thought her husband was a different kind of man. When he found out, he was sure I was the one who needed the abortion, even though I'd told Mrs. Broz it was for a friend. He couldn't stand that.

“A whore cannot work at my counter.”

His words.

Thank God for Mrs. Broz, who convinced him to let me stay on for a month while I searched for something new.

I looked in town, but you know how things worked. I felt the wariness of other shopkeepers when I made inquiries. Mr. Broz had always been a gossip. When the gym teacher

reached out about the woman in California looking for a housekeeper, I saw my way out, and I took it.

I realize that may sound selfish. Just leaving like that, leaving you, leaving Cioci Ann, leaving everyone. But at the time, I thought I was protecting you. I didn't think I had a choice. And I'll admit: I had always wondered, a little bit, what life might be like anywhere else.

In California, I found, the trees were scrubbier than in New England. The ocean was in the opposite direction of where I expected it to be, which was easy to remember when I saw how the streets ended in the rising horizon line, and harder to remember when I woke in the morning, imagining that the faint smell of salty air blew in from the east. Eventually, I grew accustomed to the geographical reversal, to the wild waves of the Pacific, to the small movements of the seasons, to the flowers that bloomed out of sync with any logic I could ever follow. But at first, it all struck me as stranger than I had expected. Not that I had really known what to expect, when I made the decision to leave.

Mrs. Margolis had explained in her letter that she was fed up with Californians, but stuck on the West Coast with a husband who wouldn't leave. So she hired girls from home to come and run her house, bringing a bit of Northeastern rigidity with them. She appreciated our formality and pressed clothes.

When I arrived at their house in Encinitas, Wilma, the new nanny from Minnesota, gave me the tour. How Wilma slipped in amongst all the New Englanders I was never quite sure. Mrs. Margolis had hired her just a few months before me, but already Wilma knew the ins and outs of the house, where one would chafe under the exacting eye of Mrs. Margolis, and where one could find freedom.

Wilma introduced me to the gardener George, a local man in his forties, who told me that the last housekeeper had brought with her a wool coat that she kept out all winter, hung on her bedroom door, waiting for a chance to use it. This last girl had finally given up on the California climate and moved back to Massachusetts.

“She only lasted a year,” George said.

I wasn't sure whether I wanted to leave immediately or stay forever. I wondered whether other things had drawn the last girl back to Massachusetts, besides the four seasons.

The house was smaller than I had expected. Its roofline clung low to the ground. Inside, however, the rooms felt spacious. Remember Cioci Ann's house, Natchu? How we kept piles everywhere? Newspaper for kindling, worn blankets that might someday be patched up, trinkets no one could recall where they came from. Mrs. Margolis preferred her rooms spare, the furniture strangely pristine, not a single object out of place. Sometimes it seemed to me more a museum than a house. Wilma stayed upstairs, next to the boy's room, so that she could hear if he cried out in the night. She showed me the small room built into the garden shed where I would stay. It had a bed, a dresser, a desk, and not so much sunlight. It looked out on a garden that was riotous with flowering plants I could not name.

I wanted to tell you about all this in my letters, but I didn't know where to start. It wasn't just the plants that I couldn't name. Nothing I saw or felt or said seemed to have any relation to our life back home. I don't know if you have ever experienced that sense of complete dislocation, Natchu. I could barely understand what was happening around me. That's why I kept my letters short. For that, I'm sorry.

Mrs. Margolis sat me and Wilma down and explained that the family kept one car for the nanny and housekeeper to share, so we would have to coordinate the boy's care with any errands I needed to run. We were welcome to use the car for our own purposes, as well, on days off, but expected to pay for our own gas in those instances.

I thought of my father and his stories of the lumber camps in British Columbia. Stuck for weeks on end, year after year, with no town in driving distance. Once, when I was young, I asked him if he got lonely out there. He spit out a bit of tobacco juice like he always did when he was thinking. No, he said. The other men were plenty company. Before I left home, I sent him a letter with my new address in Encinitas. As I'd expected, I didn't hear back.

"You do know how to drive, yes?" Mrs. Margolis asked.

I nodded.

"Good."

Wilma didn't say a word until Mrs. Margolis left us to go pick up groceries. "I take him to his doctor's appointments and to the park sometimes, but we don't need the car much," she said. "Just so you know."

"Alright," I said.

Wilma was a brown-haired girl with sparse eyebrows. She wore plain, smock-like dresses and walked around the house with an ease I could not imagine achieving.

"Do you need anything?" she asked.

In the few months she'd been here, she had taken comfortably to the boy, a blond five-year-old who seemed to me awfully underfed. Wilma had assured me that wasn't the case. I could see she already had an ally in the house, which made me less interested in becoming her friend.

“No,” I said. Better to keep to myself.

I had only been there for a week when I almost quit. I had taken this job to get out of town, not because I wanted to be a housekeeper. I figured I would be able to pick up the basics of housekeeping quickly enough. We had helped out around the house our whole lives.

I found that I didn't particularly like having to work to another woman's standards.

The first day, Mrs. Margolis showed me exactly how she liked everything done. The next day, she followed me around as I did my work. I didn't mind at first. I understood it to be part of my training when Mrs. Margolis reminded me to scrub vigorously to remove the soap ring off the porcelain bathroom sink. But Mrs. Margolis kept tailing me, long after I'd mastered the basics of the job. One day, I dusted all morning. Mrs. Margolis followed me from room to room. I might not have minded if she said something. A conversation would have helped take my mind off the monotony of the chore at hand. But she was silent, watching me move around the room, lifting object after object to dust every surface.

At first it was merely annoying.

“Did you get the legs of the piano?” Mrs. Margolis asked me in the front room, after having just watched me painstakingly dust every crevice of the upright.

“Yes, Mrs. Margolis.” I tried to muster deference in my tone.

But as the day went on, and Mrs. Margolis continued to monitor my every move, I could barely manage a civil reply.

At the end of the day, I picked up the phone and called you. Do you remember?

“What are you doing calling me collect?” you said when you answered. “Mama will kill me for these charges.”

“I’m coming back home,” I said. “I’m quitting.” I didn’t explain herself. I called you because I was sure that you would not ask questions. I thought you would welcome me back immediately.

You were silent. When you finally spoke, your voice was level and quiet. “You are not coming back. You stay there, and you make it work,” you said.

I almost dropped the receiver. I didn’t know what else to say, so I let you off the line so as not to keep accumulating charges.

I didn’t understand why you were so adamant with me. I stayed. But that didn’t make the job any easier. I nearly screamed a few weeks later when I realized that Mrs. Margolis was monitoring the cleaning supplies with marked lines she thought I wouldn’t notice, as though I had any reason to steal a cupful of bleach. The third time she critiqued me for not scrubbing the floors well enough, I spilled the sudsy mop water all over and pretended it was an accident. Even though I had to mop it up, it was worth it to see the terror on the woman’s face at the prospect of water stains on the legs of her wooden chairs.

Wilma caught me by the arm in the hallway the night of the mop spill. I usually came in to fix myself dinner late, after the family went to sleep. The one thing Mrs. Margolis didn’t hire out for was cooking, but neither would she deign to cook for me or Wilma. This left me scrounging up quick meals without intruding on Mrs. Margolis’s kitchen reign.

Wilma stopped me as I carried my sandwich toward the back door. She pulled me into the kitchen. Her grip was surprisingly firm. I hadn’t felt another person’s touch since I’d arrived in California.

Wilma spoke in a quiet voice. “You can’t win against her,” she said.

“You see that she’s intolerable, though, don’t you?” I asked. I wondered for a moment if Wilma might be an ally in this house after all.

“She’s just unhappy,” Wilma said.

True enough. Her husband, the supposed tyrant who kept her in California, was never home. His work, something to do with Hollywood, kept him traveling most of the time. I had yet to even meet him. She didn’t seem to have any friends, either. Nothing to get her out of the house, nothing to focus her ferocious energy on.

I shook my head and turned away. So I was surprised, the next day, when Wilma knocked on my bedroom door to ask if I was doing okay. I said yes, I was doing just fine. I thought this would reassure Wilma enough that she would leave. Instead, Wilma sat down on the edge of the bed, which creaked with the unexpected weight. Her feet dangled off the floor.

“Are you lonely?” she asked. Her eyes cast about the room as she asked the question, seeming to interrogate the few items I had laid out: a small statue of the Virgin Mary that Cioci Ann had insisted I bring, a photo of me and you as children, a small dish holding two bracelets.

The directness of Wilma’s question startled me into an honest answer.

“No lonelier than I’ve ever been,” I said. There were two kinds of truth in this answer. That I had always been a little bit lonely, and that I hadn’t felt that loneliness intensify here, even so far from everyone I knew. I hope you understand this, Natchu. I don’t mean that your love wasn’t enough. And I was so lucky your mother took me in. I know that. But you must have felt it too, that I could never quite find my place, no matter how much I tried.

“Do you miss home?” Wilma asked.

I thought of your letters, exuberant about your impending nuptials; of the one letter Cioci Ann sent, asking if I had arrived safely; of the handful of letters I’d received from friends eager

to know what California was like. Reading them, I hadn't felt the pangs of homesickness I expected to feel. I thought I would miss Windham more than I did. Despite how much I hated the job, your instruction to make it work was working.

"Not particularly," I said. "Do you?"

Wilma's eyes softened at the question. I wondered whether Wilma might be lonely, then felt badly that I had not made more of an effort to be friends.

"Sometimes I have whole conversations with my mom in my mind," Wilma said. "It helps."

The next night, Wilma came again. And the next. She sat with me on my bed and we recounted our days to each other. The image that comes to mind is her curved spine, slouched over at the end of a long day of running around after the boy. Wilma managed to help me cultivate a little more empathy toward Mrs. Margolis, and I convinced Wilma that it was okay to have a laugh at our employer's expense every so often, like when she bruised her knee tripping over the rug as she lingered around the house to spy on me. Knowing Wilma existed in the house with me, even if we went about our separate duties, helped me care less about the woman's paranoia. Every so often, when we ran into each other during the day, I'd try to pull a funny face without anyone else seeing, just to make her smile unfurl.

The months passed into a strange winter, in which spring felt ever present. I kept my coat packed away in my suitcase.

George warned me about the New Year's Day party when I first arrived. Every year, he told me, Mrs. Margolis threatened not to host it. And every year, just when everyone else had already placed their orders for pies and cakes at the bakery and reserved their cut of meat at the butcher,

so that all that could be done was to scramble to cook everything at home, she changed her mind. Best to plan for the party to happen, George told me. Start polishing the fine china early. He paid particular attention to the hedges throughout December, so that when Mrs. Margolis declared the green light, the garden would already be in tip-top shape.

I didn't heed his advice, though of course I should have. The day after Christmas, after her husband had been home for three full days in a row—more than I'd seen him ever—Mrs. Margolis made the announcement. The party was on.

We all got to work, and yes, it was a feverish sprint, just as George predicted. Every inch of wood had to be polished, every painting rehung, every cushion scoured for stains. But it was worth it, because Wilma, George, and I got to attend. We were working, technically, but Mrs. Margolis whirled about with such frenzy that there was not even a chance to for me intervene.

That party is one of my most vivid memories from the Margolis's house, Natchu. I must've mentioned it to you at the time, didn't I? It was a glimpse into a world I had never seen. Everyone there had on the finest suits and dresses, made of fabric we couldn't have even dreamed of getting at Newsome's in Windham. They all moved about the living room as though nothing in the world mattered. No shouting, no arguing, only polite chatter and respectful laughter. A few of the guests brought children. Wilma ushered them into the playroom, which had been outfitted with buckets of shiny objects just for them: streamers and noisemakers and crackers.

And there were so many different kinds of people, Natchu. One woman had her hair shorn in a pixie cut. Another, who looked younger than me, arrived on the arm of a man old enough to need a cane. One of the men wore an ornate costume of baggy, pleated pants and a

button-down shirt. George caught me staring. “Don’t be rude,” he said. “He’s theater royalty in Thailand.”

You remember what Windham was like when we were growing up. Everyone was just like us: speaking the wrong language, never enough money, and trying their best to look respectable despite all that. If you didn’t get it right—well, nobody would dare not to at least try. Cioci Ann drilled it into us. The goal was to fit in. But somebody had given these people permission to be all kinds of different.

“Who are they?” I whispered to George. We stood along the wall by the kitchen door, where Mrs. Margolis could ostensibly call us into action at any moment. “I didn’t think she had any friends.”

“He does,” George replied. I looked over the room again, seeing now how Mr. Margolis moved about the room, passing by each conversation just long enough to make the guests feel welcome. “They’re his business associates, really, so I guess they owe him money, or maybe he owes them. Or maybe they’re just here for the furniture,” he added with a laugh.

“The furniture?”

George explained patiently that the oddly stark, angled furniture that filled the house, which I had assumed was some kind of strange cost-cutting measure for the household budget, was in fact the height of fashionable design out here in California. I couldn’t imagine that people came to the party just to admire it.

“I think it’s ugly too,” George admitted.

The party went on late into the night. Once the children fell asleep in their piles of pillows and blankets in the playroom, Wilma came back out to join us.

“So, these are Californians?” Wilma commented.

“My people,” George said. He threw his arm out in mock sweep, ensuring we caught the joke. The men sitting here in their tailored wool suits smoking cigars couldn’t be more unlike George, who showed up to work most days with a worn jean jacket and a pack of Marlboros in his pocket.

But I knew what Wilma meant. I’d been here for months, and this felt like the first time I was glimpsing a world that extended beyond the Margolis’s lives, even though we were still sitting in their living room. It made me curious. What else were we missing?

After the party, after we’d all pitched in to put the house back in order, after Mrs. Margolis had sworn she certainly would not be repeating this again next year, winter lulled on. Out of boredom as much as anything else, I came up with the idea for the drives. “We could take the car, go anywhere,” I proposed to Wilma one night, as we sat at opposite ends of my bed. “See California.”

“Are we allowed to do that?” Wilma asked. The car was ours to use, sort of. Mrs. Margolis had told us we could use it for our own errands, but she hadn’t said anything about road trips.

“Screw her,” I said. I was feeling reckless enough to invite a little adventure into our days off. I couldn’t have foreseen how the drives would lead to other kinds of recklessness, turning down unfamiliar roads with abandon.

That week, we poured over the road map, an old edition that a former maid had left in the car. Wilma chose San Diego. On our next day off, we followed the coastline down to the naval base, where we watched sailors in white and blue mill about on unfathomably large ships.

Wilma proposed a game. “Pick one to marry and tell me why.”

I surveyed the masses of men and shook my head. "I can't pick," I said.

Wilma laughed. "All of them, you want?"

"None of them," I said. Their clean caps didn't appeal to me.

When it was my turn to select a destination, I preferred to go inland, seeking out desert and mountains. We eased the car up a steep road, hoping it wouldn't give out on us. On the long, careful ride, I learned about Wilma's life. Two brothers, younger. She had grown up on farmland with dairy cows and chickens, but after her father died, they had leased out the fields.

"Did you ever wonder what your life might have been like if he hadn't died?" I asked. It was a question I often asked myself about my mother's death. What I was really trying to find a way to ask was, who was Wilma under these facts of her life?

I knew by then that sometimes Wilma needed to think for a while about a question before she would answer, even questions that seemed simple to me, but I trusted that the answer would come. I waited.

"There was no time to wonder," Wilma said. "We had to keep the place running, and my mother needed me to set an example for my brothers. The example was that we would do what we needed to do and we would all be alright."

The winter sun warmed the car, and Wilma cracked the window open slightly.

"I think sending me here was my mother's attempt at atoning for those years," she carried on. "She never left the county, so I was surprised when she wanted me to apply for this job. I hadn't ever realized that for a woman who lived such an unremarkable life, my mother had big dreams. She can't live them, but maybe I can."

The road we were on climbed the edge of a shrubby mountain, bigger than anything I had ever seen. What we called a mountain back home would barely rate as a hill here. Though I

caught myself longing for the tall woods of New England sometimes, that day I saw something beautiful in the sparse, green-grey landforms around me. Further in the distance, patches of snow marked the higher peaks.

“Do you like it here?” I asked. I wondered why I had never asked Wilma this. It was a question I asked myself all the time.

Wilma toyed with the cigarette lighter. She asked me if I wanted a smoke, and I shrugged. “Sure.”

“I never thought this could be my life,” Wilma said. “But I like it here with you.”

With you, I repeated back to myself. What could those two words mean, with you? Besides you, Natchu, I hadn't yoked my life to anyone else's. I hadn't meant to tether myself to Wilma, either, but here we were, smoking cigarettes, headed toward the Santa Rosa Mountains, and when we pulled out at an overlook, I found my gaze wandering from the view I was supposed to be taking in, toward Wilma instead, the softly rounded profile of her face, the slight sheen of her sweaty neck, the movement of her arm as she lifted her hand to shade her eyes. Wilma caught me looking. My first instinct was to look away, acting as though I hadn't been watching Wilma, but that only lasted a moment. Then I looked back. It was an impulse I couldn't explain, certainly nothing rational, something I couldn't resist. Somehow Wilma made me amenable to this kind of connection. Somehow Wilma made me less lonely. I didn't know what was happening, Natchu. I had never experienced anything like this before. Wilma was still watching me when I lifted my gaze again, and something unpronounceable lit up in her eyes. I broke into a smile, which Wilma mirrored. I wanted this moment to last, but feared it, too. There was something here that might surface if we made space for it, something I didn't dare name. I wasn't sure yet if I wanted that surfacing.

“I’m thirsty,” I said, with careful effort to seem nonchalant.

I walked back to the car to retrieve my water and waited for Wilma to follow. We got in opposite doors, retreating to the solidity of the car and the necessary distraction of motion. When I drove, I kept my eyes ahead of me.

That night, Wilma told me she was tired and went straight to bed. Laying in my own room, alone, I reached to touch myself, seeking out a pleasure I didn’t think I deserved. I willed my body to feel. But when the pleasure came, I couldn’t bear it. I pulled my skirt down and wiped my fingers on the sheets, not minding the stain they’d leave. Shame welled in my eyes but I didn’t let the tears loose. I got up to wash my hands of my own smell. I vowed not to do that again.

George remarked that Wilma and I got along better than any help they’d had before. He hoped that meant we would stay.

In the spring, the hills bloomed. They had been brown and dry only weeks before. Now, purples, oranges and yellows touched each other gently as though saying a joyous hello. We’d gotten enough rain—this George explained to me—that even the desert was flowering.

By then, Wilma was spending more time in my room than in her own. We stayed up later and later, with each passing week, talking long into the night. The first time Wilma fell asleep there, I arranged my limbs carefully around hers, crowding the bed but careful not to touch. Her eyes opened just long enough to ask, “Can I stay here?” “Yes,” I said. I barely let myself breathe. I thought briefly of the boy, wondered if Wilma would get in trouble for being here instead of with him. But I didn’t want Wilma to leave, so I didn’t say anything.

I wasn't sure I could trust my own desires, and I worried about misreading Wilma's. No one ever taught us about desire, Natchu. Or if they did, I missed that day of twelfth grade. You used to tell me that with Frank, you had known right away. I thought that sounded terribly romantic, but I had no idea what that meant. In love, you were eons ahead of me. And you were far away, too far to consult.

The next night, Wilma laid on my pillow and I laid next to her, our eyes on each other. When it became impossible to find anything else to say, I felt in equal measure the urge to look away and the urge to touch Wilma's brow. I willed myself to keep looking. Wilma waited, and waited, until I reached out and stroked her temple. Wilma stayed frozen in place, as though petrified, and I worried that I had misread her gaze. I pulled my hand back. "No—" she said, and I interjected, "I'm sorry." "It's okay," she said. "I mean, yes. Yes." Her lips curved into a small smile and when I understood that she was urging me on, I grinned with a happiness I didn't know I could feel. "Yes?" I asked. "Yes," she said. Then she reached toward me, fingers on my ear, on my cheek, on my lips, in my mouth.

Natchu, that night changed everything.

We woke in the morning's first light, having hardly slept. Wilma pulled the covers, which had tangled in the night, up and over us both.

"I don't know where we're going with this," I said.

Wilma stroked my chin, lingering on the angle at the back of my jaw.

"I don't know how this works," I said. I wasn't sure what I meant by 'this,' and I didn't dare try to say anything more. My whole body tensed, and Wilma, as if she had noticed, ran her hand down my arm with a firm grip.

“It can work however we want,” Wilma said. Somehow, in the night, we had switched roles. Now Wilma seemed far more sure than I.

“Have you ever done this before?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“We’ll figure it out together,” she said.

“Have you?”

Wilma nodded. I couldn’t decide whether this was reassuring or worrying.

She nuzzled into my neck, then pulled me toward her.

“We’ll be late,” I said.

“Just one more minute,” Wilma pleaded. She was acting playful, trying to pull me out of my whirling mind. I let her.

Summer was bliss. I experienced an entirely different kind of season than I ever had at home. The heat blazed but the house, low and shaded, stayed cool. Wilma and I took to the beach, where we could walk along the tide line in the early morning or late at night. This became the focus of our days. I cleaned, it seemed to me, only to get to the hours we could spend together at the beach. At night, we left the house quietly, through a back gate, hoping no one would notice.

On a clear, moonless night, I lay next to Wilma in the sand. My eyes searched the sky, finding more stars than I knew possible. The life I was living these past few months was a thing of beauty that I would never have imagined. Perhaps because of that very beauty, it felt irreconcilable with anything from my previous life. I didn’t mention Wilma to you in any of my letters. Not because I wanted to hide her. I thought you would be happy for me. But I wasn’t

entirely sure yet what to make of Wilma, who she was and would be to me, and I didn't want to say anything until I was sure.

Just as summer began to fade, one of your letters arrived. Wilma brought it to my room, as she always did. Usually I waited to open letters until after Wilma left, but this time I was feeling lighthearted. Wilma had brought me a sprig of salvia to go in the nicked vase on my dresser, a vase we'd found together at a swap meet a few weeks ago. I was mid-sentence, telling Wilma about the scolding I had got that day from Mrs. Margolis, as I ripped open the letter. I could tell at a glance that it was different. Usually your letters were long—pages, even. This one barely held a few lines.

Sof,

Mama won't write to you so I will. You should know that she has been very ill for several months. She won't go to the doctor so she doesn't know what is wrong. But she seems weaker every time I see her. Bartek is trying to convince her to see the doctor. Everyone is worried about her. I'm not telling you to come home. I just thought you should know.

Love,

Natalia

"What is it?" Wilma asked. "Bad news?"

Very bad, I thought, but I didn't know where to start with explaining.

I folded the letter up and said, "No, nothing," realizing as I said it that this was the first lie I'd told Wilma.

It would have been easy enough to simply write back to thank you for letting me know and leave it at that, but something kept me from doing so. Cioci Ann was as close as I had to a mother. She had done more for me than anyone else in the world. And she had always been tough. I couldn't imagine her falling ill. The next day, I received a letter from your brother Bartek, telling me the same thing as you had. He didn't ask me to come home, either, but I couldn't help but read that expectation into both letters.

The next night, I told Wilma I wasn't feeling well. If I was going to have to leave, I might as well put a stop to this now. Alone, my twin bed felt newly spacious. I curled against the wall as if Wilma were there next to me. I fell asleep weighing what I had gained here against what I owed back home.

After the third night of pleading sick, despite doing all my work during the day, Wilma gave me such a curious look that I simply stared back at her, remembering that she had a stake in all this too. It was a look of hurt, I realized. I had been selfish. I hadn't considered how I could hurt Wilma, and now that I had, I didn't know what to do about it.

Wilma was usually out of the house during the day, taking the boy around to school and friends' houses and parks. But he was running a fever, so Wilma was home, where I kept running into her as I went about the cleaning. Normally this would have offered small doses of delight, but instead I hid in corners and did things out of order to try to avoid having to be in the same room as her. I would have to tell her, eventually, that I was leaving, but I was waiting until I had made up my mind, until I could tell Wilma with confidence that the decision had been made and there was nothing else to be done.

Left to my own impulses, I would have retreated for an unknowable length of time—days, weeks, months, I had done it before to people I loved. You remember. Like a desert woodrat disappearing into the sagebrush, I tried to hide my hurts and fears.

But Wilma hadn't grown up in a house full of angry silences, so I wasn't surprised when she came to my room the next night and asked if I wanted to walk to the beach.

I knew the quiet that Wilma left open on our walk was an invitation. I couldn't bring myself to take it.

We found a sturdy piece of driftwood to sit on. It sank down into the sand under our weight.

I traced shapes in the sand with my fingers and waited.

“If you've changed your mind, you can tell me,” Wilma said.

I drew my breath in. “My aunt is sick,” I said in a rush. “I think I have to go home.”

Wilma let out a soft sound of sympathy and wrapped her arms around me. I let Wilma rock me back and forth as the tears I had been holding back streamed down my face.

We let the quiet envelop us, sinking into silence as words seemed too hard to find. When we finally left, we arrived back to a loud house, lights blazing despite the late hour.

Mrs. Margolis rushed up to us. “Where were you?” she asked. I thought she was talking to both of us, but it quickly became clear, as she yelled and jabbed the air, that she was talking to Wilma. “Where were you?” she asked again and again, even after Wilma had answered. The boy, it transpired, had woken in the night from his fever. He had called out for Wilma and she had not been there.

“It is your job to look after him,” Mrs. Margolis shouted at Wilma. “That is what I pay you for.”

“I’m sorry,” Wilma exclaimed. She rushed over to the boy, who lay curled up on the couch, drowsing through all of the excitement. She brushed his bangs off his damp forehead.

“Did you give him a cool cloth?” she asked.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it,” Mrs. Margolis said.

“He’ll be fine,” I said, trying to intervene. “It’s just a fever,” I said. I realized too late that my words would only make things worse.

“Fired!” Mrs. Margolis shouted. She waved her hands about wildly, her silk dressing gown billowing in the air. I had never thought of Mrs. Margolis as a particularly elegant woman, but there was something to her pure rage in this moment that lent her greater composure. Wilma wilted.

I had just begun to wonder what this would mean for Wilma, for us, when Mrs. Margolis continued her furious shouting. “The both of you! Fired! I won’t stand it!”

“Me?” I said, bewildered. “Me too?”

“Both of you,” Mrs. Margolis said. “Out! Now! Out!”

Wilma and I looked at each other but did not dare speak. We went back to our separate rooms. I held my head in my hands and wondered what I would do. Fired twice. Quite a record I was building. I no longer had a place to stay in California. Back home, I had a house I could return to, at least.

I went to bed without deciding anything, half-wondering if Mrs. Margolis might change her mind.

George knocked on my door in the morning.

“She sent you?” I asked him.

“You can stay until the end of the week,” he said. “She’ll pay you, I’m sure, the full week. She’s not as cruel as she seems.”

I had nothing to say to him, but he lingered in my doorway. “I am sorry,” he said. “You two were the best we’ve had.”

I mustered my composure enough to thank him. As soon as he left, I burst into sobs.

When I calmed myself down, I went into the house and found Wilma’s room. I had only been there a handful of times—it was too close to watchful eyes. Now, such things no longer mattered.

“What will we do?” Wilma asked. “My mother will be so disappointed.”

I sat next to her without touching her.

“You’ll go home,” Wilma said. I startled to hear it said out loud.

I don’t know, I thought. I took Wilma’s hand and felt her tender skin and thought, again, I don’t know.

I tried to picture what my life would be like if I went home. I’d move back in with Cioci Ann. I would take care of her, whatever she needed. Surely that would be useful. You had your own household to run now. Bartek and the other boys were sons, and sons weren’t expected to nurse their mothers in that way.

Wilma’s knuckles were dry from how often she washed her hands. I loved these rough patches of skin, a physical imperfection that marked Wilma as human, just like me.

Wilma pulled her hand away from me. “You need to be with your aunt,” she said.

“I’m staying,” I said. Wilma had pulled this out of me without intending to. As soon as I said it aloud, though, I felt resolute about it. I couldn’t leave Wilma, especially not now. But also, I didn’t want to leave Wilma. What I had been wanting, without letting myself want it.

Wilma threaded her arms around my waist and drew me close. She tangled her fingers in the hair at the nape of my neck. I clung to her with equal longing, willing that nothing would pull us apart.

March 11, 1957

Dear Sofia,

I went to the museum at Smith today. You know how I hate that place—all smug girls who have never worked a day in their lives. But I was running an errand in Northampton and, I don't know, I just felt smothered by it all. The brown paper packages, the twine, the grey skies. March is the worst month. Have you been to the museum? I don't think I had—maybe I can almost remember a school field trip—but I was driving past and the sign out front said “free admission” and I thought jeez, I'd really like some beauty in my day. So I parked and I went in. Well, I immediately regretted that I wasn't dressed a little more nicely. The girls in there—you should've seen, Sof. Such fine fabrics on their dresses, and all the latest cuts of course. Not a hand-me-down in sight. I almost turned right around. But oh, I'm so glad I didn't. It was wonderful. I wish we could go together, though I suppose maybe now you've seen museums in California that blow this one out of the water. There were some names I recognized from school—William Turner with the most dramatic sky you've ever seen!—and plenty of others I didn't. I swear I spent hours in there. When I got home, Mama was all in a huff, because I'd lost track of time and was almost late for dinner, God forbid. I try not to upset her these days, since she's still recovering, but I can't be perfect, can I?

There was one painting that stuck with me, it's the whole reason I'm writing you about this. I hope I can describe it well enough. The canvas was enormous—taller than you or me, the full width of the wall. It depicted a gathering of women—a dozen, maybe more—in a bedroom. Some were folding linens over the bed, other were busy working at a table. I think they were supposed to be servants. Right in the middle of the painting, a few of the servants tended to a

red-haired woman seated on a chair. They were pulling up white garments that pooled at her feet. Her head tilted at a perilous, uncomfortable angle, and she held up a mirror in front of her face. She was preparing for her wedding day—I could just tell! I was drawn to the painting at first by its size and its stark colors—dark, gloomy. It suited my mood. A lot of black, hardly lightened by the presence of the woman; soot darkened their dresses. When I noticed the bride, I tried to decipher her expression. Was she happy, excited? It didn't seem so. She looked like she had given up. And then—then!—I saw the little label on the wall with the painting title: *The Death of a Woman*, it said. Can you believe it? I couldn't believe it. The woman in that painting certainly was not dead. I wanted to ask, but I didn't know who to approach. Was the painting really saying that to get married is the death of a woman? Well, that made me scared, and then angry. Why should it be the death of a woman, not a man? Why should it be a death at all, instead of something beautiful—the start of life? In all my huff, I forgot to check the name of the painter, so I'll have to go back to find out. I would like to see if you can look up the painting at the library and tell me what you think. It was truly an impressive work of art, despite my annoyance, and I'm sure I haven't described it properly.

Mama only gave me half a portion at dinner. She says I must stay slim to fit in my wedding dress, because we can't afford to get it tailored twice. Well, if she keeps starving me, I'll be too slim! I snuck two apples after dinner.

The wedding is in three weeks. Oh, I wish you could be there. But of course I understand, it's too far to come. Write me and tell me about all the devilish things you are getting up to in California. I send all my love and a smooch on your cheek.

Love,

Natalia

II.

NATALIA

Sofia's house sold. Natalia asked the realtor to handle the transaction with as little bother as possible. Whatever the buyers wanted, they could have. She didn't want to know the people.

She went to Sofia's grave the day after the closing went through on the house. The cemetery faced a busy road, with the bothersome noise of cars flashing by. Sofia was buried next to her parents. Natalia would have preferred that Sofia rest in her own family plot, a few rows away, but Sofia had made her arrangements long ago and she had wanted, apparently, to return to the parents who had been absent while she was alive. Natalia had no memory of Sofia's mother, and of her father, only the image of a quiet, bearded man who had come to Sunday dinners before following a friend to Canada. Natalia split the bouquet she'd brought into three, laying flowers at each of their graves. Baby's breath for Sofia's mother. Carnations for her father. She said a little prayer at each, coming to Sofia's last. Lord God, we entrust her to your mercy. You loved her greatly in this life. Now that she is freed from all its cares, give her happiness and peace forever. Amen.

Natalia laid the lilies, Sofia's favorite flower, beside the small grey marker with her name. Oh Sof, how could you leave me again, she thought. No wiesz, the world is such a mess. With Irena fresh off another divorce, and Wren only wanting to look backwards. Doesn't she see the urgency of the future? Anybody who watches the news knows we're in trouble. Wildfires in Russia, droughts in Africa. And Wren is the one who will have to live with it. Her eyes should be set ahead, not on our past.

Natalia had been waiting for Wren to bring up the suitcase again. She had an answer prepared, a clearer one this time: she hadn't known anything about it. What a curious surprise.

She had told Wren little white lies before, hadn't she? What was another?

But Wren hadn't asked yet. She had hardly called lately, which was unusual. Natalia suspected she was preoccupied with David. They were fighting, Irena reported. "Wren cries every time she calls," Irena said. "I'm worried."

Normally, Natalia would have worried too. For now, she felt more relieved that Wren was distracted.

At Natalia's age, losses were supposed to be bearable. Sad, yes. Hard, sure. But at least it was not her husband who had died. A widow was allowed to mourn. A cousin, though? Even a sister? What claim to sorrow did she have, long after the funeral flowers died, once the grass began to grow over the gravestone?

And it had—began to grow, that is, as spring arrived. When Natalia saw that, the second time she visited Sofia, she didn't want to get out of the car anymore. Time moved on. All that was left here were some old bones.

She drove home and got straight in bed. She refused to get up for dinner or to brush her teeth. She slept through the night.

Natalia had not felt this sense of abandonment when her parents died decades ago, one after another, worn down by factory shifts and a new country that hadn't yet delivered on its promise of the good life (may the Lord grant them eternal rest). She hadn't felt this way when her brothers died of heart attacks (eternal rest, Lord) or her best friend Midge, who finally lost to breast cancer last Christmas (eternal rest).

At her age, people died. She checked the obits every day and added names to her Sunday intercessions. There was no use in dwelling too much on death and no sense in counting on anyone to be around tomorrow. Not even Frank, whom she could hear now brewing coffee in the

kitchen. She had long ago squared herself against the likelihood that she would outlive him—most women did outlive their husbands, so why should she expect any different?

“Do you want your coffee, honey?” Frank called out.

“I’ll get it!” she bellowed her reply as loudly as she could. Frank wouldn’t have his hearing aid in yet. Good Lord, she better get on with her day. Właśnie, właśnie. Frank, she knew, would have already set her mug out on the counter. She resigned herself to feeling low today. She stuck her feet into her worn slippers: fuzzy, beige, with hints of the pink they’d once been, imprinted with her heels. She shuffled into the kitchen.

Frank sat at the kitchen table reading the paper. Around him, old papers and junk mail piled on the table.

“I’ll tidy up today,” Natalia said. She pulled the half and half out of the fridge and let it swirl in her coffee. Frank nodded.

Natalia sipped her coffee, then added another splash of half and half. “Coffee’s a bit strong this morning, no?”

“New brand they just started carrying.”

Natalia pursed her lips and hummed in the back of her throat, a sound that would indicate she’d heard him without obligating further conversation.

“What do you think?” Frank asked.

“I don’t see what’s wrong with Folgers.”

Natalia sat in the chair next to Frank and pushed the piles of paper out of the way so that she could set down her mug. Frank handed her the front section of the paper. She could feel him smiling at her, searching for her gaze to meet his, but she kept her eyes on the paper as it passed into her hands.

“We’ll stick to Folgers next time,” he said.

The paper was full of crap, as usual. The superintendent grinned in a photo of the groundbreaking for a new high school. But where would these students get jobs when they graduated? For years kids had been leaving town, and they never seemed to come back. The state senator, a Democrat she’d voted for many times, was hosting a breakfast to fundraise for his re-election. The weekly birdwatching column appeared above the top fold. Over the years, the Sunday paper had grown thinner and the weekday papers had practically shrunk to a flier. Natalia and Frank kept their subscription mostly out of habit, to have something to do every morning. Today, though, Natalia had no patience for the migrating pine warblers who had apparently arrived in great numbers this year. She tossed the paper on the table without returning it to its folds. She sipped the too-dark coffee and wrinkled her nose. In a mood like this, nothing could please her.

She stood and poured the rest of the coffee down the drain. The dishwasher was full, so she had to rearrange the other mugs and cups to fit hers in. She should have started it last night. Frank could have noticed and run the dishwasher overnight, like they always did, because its loud noise was a nuisance. But he hadn’t, so now she filled it with detergent and turned it on.

Frank didn’t seem to notice until the swishing sound of water cranked up. “Running the dishwasher now?” he asked.

“It was full,” she said.

“Dang it, it slipped my mind last night. Sorry, honey.”

Natalia pulled out the broom and began to sweep vigorously. Frank was too quick to apologize. There was no satisfaction in picking a fight with him, try as she might. Running the dishwasher hadn’t slipped his mind. He had never put that task in his mind to begin with. She

was the one who started the dishwasher when it was full. She swept in front of the stove. She lifted the mat by the sink and swept under it. She pushed the broom around the legs of the table and chairs, avoiding only the radius around where Frank sat. She wasn't mad at him, exactly. Dust and stray hairs and hardened crumbs gathered into a small pile at the center of the kitchen, waiting patiently to be swept into the dustbin. Natalia dipped her body slowly toward the floor, then leaned the broom against the cabinets so that she could use one hand to brace her back as she rose. In the other hand, she held the dustbin steady.

The trash was full. Natalia sighed at the sight of the dustbin detritus landing on top of a week's worth of waste. She lifted the full bag—not so heavy, they used a small bin. Most of their waste went to the compost bin Natalia had insisted on setting up a few years ago, after watching a CNN exposé on landfills. She swapped her house slippers for outdoor shoes.

The chilly morning air hit Natalia's skin like an awakening through her nightgown. She deposited the trash in the rolling bin that Frank would wheel to the end of the driveway next Tuesday. Task complete, she couldn't bring herself to go in. Sunlight filtered in between clouds. The grass lay limp against the ground, waiting for noontime to warm up. The trees budded in shades of light green. Natalia sucked air into her lungs, then blew it out in a sharp, quick exhale.

After a few minutes, the door cracked open behind her. "Honey, are you coming back in?" Frank called.

"In a minute." Natalia rubbed her arms for warmth. Frank stepped out beside her and laid his hand on her shoulder. If he had followed her gaze, he would have seen a robin alight on the neighbor's tree. Instead, she felt him watching her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

What an intrusive question, she thought. She let it hang in the air so that he might sense her discomfort.

“Sofia is dead,” she said eventually.

“I miss her, too.”

Natalia’s response flowed out immediately this time, as though she had no control over it.

“You miss her. I don’t know how to live without her.”

Frank patted her shoulder. “Honey, I know it’s hard. But you’ve done it before, haven’t you?”

“I can’t believe you,” Natalia hissed. Just like Frank, to make a trivializing comment about something he knew nothing about.

She took one last long breath of the cold air, holding it in this time, letting it burn in her lungs. Then she marched inside, leaving Frank out there alone. Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned, she mouthed reluctantly as she slammed the door shut. An old habit, to repent immediately after a fight, when she felt least guilty. Get it over with and move on.

Natalia let the sharp tweak of memory pull her. She remembered the duck. That time Sofia visited—it must have been around 1980—Natalia had planned to roast a duck. She thought a whole duck would be appropriately extravagant to welcome Sofia home. It would convey that yes, Natalia had grown cosmopolitan, had become the kind of wife who cooked the latest recipes she found in magazines, never mind that she couldn't remember the last time she had paid any attention to the glossy pages that beckoned at the supermarket checkout.

She had worried over whether Sofia would like mashed potatoes or boiled broccoli as a side. She had decided to make both.

She had put in for time off at work, so she could pick Sofia up at the airport. She told Frank that he would need to take the day off, too. She didn't want to make the drive alone and she thought a welcoming committee, rather than just a single, rather worn woman, would make a good impression.

She made a hair appointment to freshen up her perm.

She asked Magdalena and Irena to please be available for dinner the night that Sofia arrived. Magdalena, home from college with nothing to do, was excited for Sofia's visit. Irena didn't seem to hear her mother at first — at least, she didn't respond, which could have just as easily meant that she was ignoring Natalia, not an uncommon occurrence. When Natalia repeated herself, Irena nodded and murmured something Natalia couldn't understand. Natalia decided to leave it. At least Irena stayed where Natalia could watch her, not like Daniel, off in Tennessee doing God knew what.

The day before Sofia was due to arrive, Natalia went grocery shopping. She spent most of a week's worth of grocery money on a duck large enough to feed five. Next week, they'd eat butter noodles.

Only when she got home, took the bird out of the shopping bag, and felt its heft in her hands, did she realize that she had no idea how to roast a duck. Was it the same as a chicken? She thought about knocking on the neighbor's door to ask for a recipe, but imagined all the things that could go wrong trying to roast a duck for the first time: bad seasoning, too dry, undercooked, an oven fire. This was not the moment to try something new. She stuck the bird in the freezer, to deal with later.

"Pierogis," she told Magdalena, who lay on her bed entirely absorbed in a book.

Magdalena nodded encouragingly until Natalia told her she would have to help.

"Irena always does the pierogis with you," she whined.

But Irena was out with friends. Her teenage rebellion, Frank was calling this phase, trying to calm Natalia's fear by reminding her that almost every child went through it.

Magdalena had been easygoing all her life, even as a teenager. Natalia didn't like to compare her children, but if pressed, she would have had to admit that Irena's stubbornness had always impressed her more than Magdalena's people-pleasing. She'd felt closer to Irena for the willfulness she saw in her. Now, though, Magdalena's amenability meant that she didn't have to try very hard to convince her to help knead and roll the dough while potatoes boiled in a pot of water.

"I'm sure there's no decent Polish food out in California," Natalia said. "She'll have missed a good pierogi."

She asked Magdalena to mash the potatoes with cheese while she cut circles in the dough. They placed a dollop of filling in each.

“Careful with your crimping,” she told Magdalena. “They should look perfect.”

When they were done, she rested the tray of pierogis in the fridge, ready to fry up for dinner the next day.

Natalia and Frank left the house before dawn to get to the airport. The drive was quiet. Frank kept the car moving steadily in the right lane, letting faster cars overtake them without getting rattled about it, as Natalia might have. Frozen water and dark, bare trees lined the highway. Natalia considered whether Sofia really meant what she had written in her letter, that she was thinking of moving back home. Sofia had been in California for more than two decades now. She never called. Every so often, she sent Natalia a postcard from a new part of the country that her job as a stewardess took her to, a destination Sofia had certainly returned from long before the postcard even reached Natalia. Most of the postcards had no more than a line or two and, always, “Love — Sof” scribbled on the back. Sofia seemed to consider the photo on the card to be the main point, though Natalia would not have minded hearing about her travels.

Natalia sent long letters to Sofia’s address in Los Angeles in return, sometimes including photos of the children. Magdalena grinning in her first communion dress. Irena sitting straight-backed at the piano, which she’d taught herself to play. A candid Frank took of the two girls lounging on the couch, legs sprawled across each other’s bodies, which he said reminded him of Sofia and Natalia when they were teenagers. Daniel’s high school graduation.

A few times, early on, Sofia had visited. Even that very first time she came back, when she had been gone less than a year, when Cioici Ann had been so ill, Natalia found Sofia almost

entirely unrecognizable, from the way she carried her shoulders with such erect elegance to the California slang that peppered her speech. She knew her cousin was in there somewhere, but she couldn't always find her.

They arrived several hours early, as Natalia had intended. She felt uncomfortable at airports, never having been on a plane, and she didn't want to get lost or be late. Sofia's flight was delayed, two hours, then three, then four. Frank went out to the car to take a nap. He walked the airport slowly, stretching time and his legs. Natalia sat for four hours in a hard-backed row of fixed seats in the arrivals hall. For four hours, she jittered her legs and looked intently at every face that passed, just in case Sofia somehow arrived early. She got up once to use the payphone to call home. Neither of her daughters picked up, so she left a message. "I need you both home by five for dinner with your aunt, no excuses," she said.

Finally, there she was. She hadn't noticed Natalia yet. Sofia walked with purpose, but not with any hurry. She stepped to the side and set down her suitcase. She patted her bob, pulled out a tube of lipstick, and applied it without a mirror. The word that came to mind: effortless. Natalia stood gripping Frank's elbow. She wondered how Sofia would perceive her. Her legs were thicker but she'd worn her best skirt suit. Perhaps that had been too much. Sofia had on blue jeans.

"There she is," Frank shouted. He waved her over and shuffled them both out of the terminal.

In the car, Natalia tried to find her way back to Sofia. "How was the flight?" she asked.

"You already asked her that twice," Frank reminded her.

Sofia laughed it off from the back seat. Natalia picked at a loose seam in the upholstery, wishing she had just turned the radio on instead. It was too late to do so now, though — Sofia might find it rude. She cast about for something to say. “It must be colder here than you’re used to,” she offered.

“Will I see any snow?” Sofia asked.

“They’re talking about a storm in the weekend forecast,” Frank said. “Eight or ten inches, maybe. Good thing you made it in now.” Natalia could hear a hint of glee in his voice. Frank had missed the message that storms were only fun for children who could play in the snow, not for adults who had to shovel driveways and scrape ice off cars and arrive late to work.

“I’ve missed those nor’easters!” Sofia said.

Natalia let out a small huff of indignation. Between Frank and Sofia, she felt like the only responsible adult in the car. “I hope you brought mittens,” she said to Sofia.

“Nonsense,” said Frank. “We have plenty she can borrow.”

“My beautiful goddaughter!” Sofia exclaimed when Magdalena opened the side door to greet her. Natalia caught herself bristling at the way Sofia slid back into easy intimacy with her daughters. Magdalena blushed, letting Sofia sweep her into a hug.

Sofia held her out at arm’s length and looked her over. “You have your mother’s cheekbones,” she said approvingly. “But, luckily for you, not her figure.” Sofia winked at Natalia and Natalia rolled her eyes, for Magdalena’s sake, hoping that irreverence would make it seem like she didn’t mind how Sofia saw her: as a lumpy, disappointing housewife, as far as Natalia could gather.

Sofia set her bags down in her room and came out with a sack of round, nearly fluorescent oranges. “Oranges from Orange County,” she said.

Natalia arched her eyebrows. “What will we do with those?” she asked.

Magdalena responded by grabbing one from the sack and peeling it open. Frank went rummaging for a bowl to set the remainder in.

Natalia pulled Magdalena aside. “Where’s Irena?” she whispered. Magdalena shrugged her shoulders. Natalia searched her face in case Magdalena was hiding something, but she honestly did not seem to know where her sister was.

“You must be tired after all that travel,” Natalia said to Sofia. “Why don’t you go lay down, get some rest before dinner?”

“Only if Magdalena comes to tell me all about her life first,” Sofia said.

Magdalena followed her aunt gladly.

Natalia chopped onions and listened for the sound of Irena pulling into the driveway. She set the table and kept an eye on the door. By the time she was frying pierogis and ready to call the others to the kitchen, there was still no sign of Irena.

She rang the small glass bell she kept by the stove to signal that dinner was ready. Frank emerged first, then Magdalena, then Sofia, blinking sleep out of her eyes.

“Did you rest?” Natalia asked.

Sofia nodded. “Dinner smells delicious,” she said. She came to look over Natalia’s shoulder. “Pierogis?” she laughed. “How very Polack of you.”

Natalia face reddened. She thought of the duck fossilizing in the freezer. She imagined, briefly, an alternate world in which she could tell Sofia off without fear that she'd break something irreparably. Instead, she let only an ounce of anger out. "Must you?" she asked.

Frank caught the sharpness in her tone and tried to make peace. "You probably haven't had a good pierogi in a long time," he said to Sofia. "Wait until you try Natalia's."

Natalia brought the platter over to the table. She asked Magdalena to pull out an extra chair for the fifth place setting.

"But Irena isn't here," Magdalena said.

"She'll be here soon," Natalia said. She spoke at Sofia. "I'm sure she was stuck at the library studying. She gets very good grades."

Magdalena rolled her eyes. "Always studying, that one," she said, quietly enough that she could pretend she was trying not to be heard, but loudly enough that everyone could still hear her.

"What was that?" Natalia asked her. She was surprised. Unlike Magdalena to make snarky comments. That was usually Irena's role.

"Let the girl be," Sofia said, reaching out to pat Magdalena's arm.

After dinner, Natalia carefully made a plate for Irena, covered it in Saran wrap, and put it in the fridge. "She'll be starving after all that studying, I'm sure," she said to Sofia.

Sofia and Magdalena helped Natalia wash the dishes. Frank left to watch TV.

When the dishes were done, Natalia and Sofia sat back down at the table. Magdalena hovered. "Sit with us," Sofia said, tapping the table.

Outside, the night got darker and a light snow began to fall.

“Where do we begin?” Sofia asked.

Natalia laughed, softly, not sure how to respond. She had planned every moment she could up until this one. Now, they faced the rest of the night untethered.

“Around the kitchen table, like always, right?” Sofia said.

Natalia cracked a smile, offering an opening that Sofia pried at.

“Do you remember what your mother used to say about the kitchen table?” Sofia asked.

Natalia burst into laughter.

“What did she say?” Magdalena asked.

“We can’t tell you!” Sofia exclaimed, which made Natalia laugh even harder. There it was: a spark of recognition in their shared glee.

It was nearly midnight before Irena came home, bursting into the kitchen in the middle of a story from Sofia about the time she ate at the top of the Space Needle. Irena was still shouting to her friends in the driveway as she pulled the door shut. Natalia got out of her chair. “Shhh,” she said fiercely. “Your father is sleeping.”

Irena was unsteady on her feet as she entered the doorway.

Natalia took Irena by the elbow. “Where have you been?” she whispered. She sniffed.

“Are you drunk?”

Irena only looked at her mother with unfocused eyes.

Natalia glared back.

“Magdalena, can you please help your sister to bed?” Natalia said, without taking her eyes off of Irena. “She appears to have made some poor choices tonight.”

Magdalena stood up and looked at Irena uncertainly.

Irena walked over to the cupboards, pulled out a glass, and filled it with water from the sink. Her cool gaze swept the room, landing eventually on Sofia. “So you’re here,” she said.

“Did you mean to say hello and welcome?” Natalia reprimanded.

“The one who left,” Irena continued. “The one who up and left the family. What are you doing back?”

Sofia looked at Natalia as if to ask where Irena’s anger was coming from. Natalia shot Irena a dreadful stare.

“Go to bed,” Natalia said. “Now.”

Magdalena finally snapped into taking some responsibility in the situation. She grabbed Irena by the hand and pulled her into the bathroom to clean her up for bed.

Natalia sat back down and put her head in her hands. Of all the times Irena had surprised her with some new resistance, this was the most unexpected yet.

“What was that about?” Sofia asked.

Natalia lifted her head out of her hands. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “But I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Sofia said. She pulled open the junk drawer. “Do you still keep cards in here?” she asked, digging around the piles of rubber bands and scrap paper until she found them. “Want to play?”

Sofia beat Natalia in several rounds of gin rummy. Finally, as they got too sleepy to stay awake much longer, Natalia asked the question she had been waiting to ask.

She rushed it out: “Why are you here?” She couldn’t help the undertone of desperation.

Sofia gathered the cards on the table and wound a rubber band around them. “I thought you were glad I came.”

“It’s been fifteen years, Sof. I didn’t know if you’d ever come home again.”

Sofia took the rubber band off the cards and wound it around her fingers. She glanced up at Natalia, then back down. “We’re thinking of moving.”

“We?” Natalia hoped for a different answer than what she knew to expect.

Sofia fidgeted with the cards. “Wilma and I.”

Natalia had never asked many questions about Sofia’s roommate. She knew they met at Sofia’s first job out in California. She knew they had lived together ever since. Natalia hated the feeling of having been replaced in Sofia’s life by Wilma, so she tried to ignore this other woman.

“Moving where?” Natalia asked.

“We’re tired of the city. It’s too much. I was thinking...maybe we move back here.”

Natalia got up. She began to put away the dishes from the drying rack. This should have been welcome news to her. This was what she’d longed for. But if Sofia moved back here, she would see. That things weren’t so cheery as Natalia’s letters made them out to be. Like tonight. There would be no hiding her unruly children, her mundane life, her sagging skin. In her letters, she could pretend things were better than they really were. Not that her life was anything terrible, no, she was happy enough. But she couldn’t imagine it would satisfy Sofia.

“You’ll get bored,” Natalia said.

Sofia laughed. “That’s what we want. A little boredom would do us good.”

“Why this ‘us’? Why does Wilma want to move with you? Doesn’t she have her own people?”

“She does.”

“Well, then?”

“Natchu, come here.” The calm in Sofia’s voice rattled Natalia. She finished placing the glasses on the shelf, then returned to her seat.

Sofia reached out to take her hands. Natalia squeezed. There was still comfort in having Sofia here, even if it wasn’t perfect.

“You know about Wilma,” Sofia said. At first, the comment didn’t make much sense to Natalia. What was there to know? Natalia thought back to Sofia’s letters over the years. Wilma went everywhere with her, it seemed. Sofia cared for her. They shared a home. Natalia had never considered what this might add up to. She couldn’t even put a word to it. That Wilma was, perhaps, more than a friend.

“No,” Natalia said.

Sofia waited for Natalia to say more.

“I don’t think I do.” Maybe she could cling to ignorance.

Sofia pulled her hands away.

“I love Wilma,” she said. “We’ve been happy together.”

“Not here. You won’t be happy here.”

“People are more open-minded than you think, Natchu.”

Natalia shook her head. Sofia didn’t know anything. The neighborhood rumor mill would go into overdrive. Sofia might never find a job here. Even Natalia might get questions at work. She would never be able to face the church ladies if they knew. Shameful.

“No, Sofia. It won’t work out. I’m sorry. It just won’t.” Natalia stood up, putting an end to the conversation. She felt Sofia withdraw. Gone, the ease, the confidence. Now, silence.

“Did you see the towels in the bedroom?” Natalia asked. Sofia nodded. “Good. I’m going to bed. Knock if you need anything.”

She had to leave the kitchen, or she wouldn't have been able to bear what she had done. She walked across the linoleum floors that she had scrubbed three times in order to have them shining clean. She paused at the door to the bedroom Magdalena and Irena were sharing tonight. She could hear Magdalena's breath heavy with sleep. She heard Irena's, too, softer and shallower. Her girls had grown up crawling across these floors, sitting at this table, filling these rooms with their outbursts of joy and anger and wonder and sorrow. She had known every sound, every motion, every impression they made. It had always been enough. It was, at least, what she had. To let Sofia back in might have thrown it all off balance. And Wilma—God, no.

Sofia stayed a few more days. She didn't cut her visit short, but she avoided Natalia as much as possible. Natalia tried not to show how that hurt. After she left, she stopped replying to Natalia's letters. Not even a wordless postcard. Ten years passed like this. Ten long years Sofia kept her silence.

SOFIA

Natchu, are you sure Irena yelled at me like that? I remember it differently. I thought it was you who whispered the accusation under your breath, after I teased you about the pierogis. I can picture you standing by the kitchen sink, flushed, murmuring so quietly I had to read your lips, “This, from the one who up and left.”

Maybe you’re right, maybe it was Irena who said that. Or maybe it doesn’t matter. I didn’t mean to insult you with the comment about being so Polack, though. I thought we would laugh about it, the way we used to. I guess I thought it might be easier for us to fall back into our old habits than it turned out to be.

We never talked about what happened on that visit, not then, and not later.

At first, of course, your words hurt me. I really had let myself hope that you would be accepting. I knew that if Wilma and I moved to Windham, we’d have to be careful. We were used to that. But I thought I could trust you, of all people.

I always thought Frank must have suspected something. He asked me, a day or two after our conversation, if something was wrong. I told him I was feeling ill, and he showed me where you kept the aspirin.

It was a relief to get back to Los Angeles, but then I had to face telling Wilma. She was waiting for me the moment I opened the apartment door. A kiss, and a hug, and she asked, “Well?”

I had gotten her hopes up too. I had told her all about our childhood, how close we were. She knew how much we loved each other. I didn’t want to ruin you in her eyes. So I told her I hadn’t liked being back home. “Too many memories,” I said. “Too many ghosts.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. She was never one to let me get away with hiding.

I told her about running into Mrs. Broz in the grocery store, which had really happened. You were off picking out apples and I had wandered over to the deli. They had everything I could never find in California: sizzling kielbasa, fat gołąbkis. I almost ordered a gołąbki to eat on the spot. Then Mrs. Broz walked up to the counter. I swear she recognized me. She ran her eyes fully up and down my body and turned away without a word. I didn't want to be in a town that didn't want me, I told Wilma.

“You're going to let one rude old lady convince you of that?” she asked. “What did Natalia say?”

“I didn't ask her,” I said.

“You—what?”

“It just didn't feel right.”

Wilma sighed in frustration. She thought I had been cowardly, I could tell.

After I returned to California, you kept sending me letters, yes. And I didn't respond to a single one, it's true. The first few letters sounded as normal as ever. I threw them away. I had saved every other letter you sent me over the years, but I couldn't bear that you could go on so casually after such meanness.

When Wilma and I made our plans to move to Minnesota, I knew I had to tell you, but I didn't want to break my silence. I can't think what made me choose Irena to write to, except that she seemed least likely to ask questions.

In your next letter, you apologized. Do you remember? I still didn't reply, I know. But I kept the letter.

We moved into spare rooms in the farmhouse Wilma grew up in, at first. Spare, in the sense of extra, and spare, in the sense of utilitarian: these were both. We had our own separate rooms, but Wilma's mother didn't seem to mind that my bed was never crumpled.

Their family welcomed us, Natchu. Wilma had an aunt who lived with a woman, so we weren't the first lesbians they had seen. The aunt lived far up north, almost on the border with Canada. We went to visit her once. She seemed at peace, living a twenty-minute drive from the nearest house.

That life wasn't for me. We were looking for some quiet after Los Angeles, but I still wanted neighbors. After a few months, we found a small ranch house for sale in the next town over, right in the downtown. Wilma put her name on the deed, and we split the mortgage payments. Wilma found secretarial work at a small law firm. I got licensed to drive school buses and found myself surprisingly content to follow the same route in one direction every morning and in reverse every afternoon. The children called me Mrs. P and brought me Christmas cookies decorated by their mothers.

It was foolish, probably, to buy a house. We already knew about Wilma's diagnosis by then. But we hoped that she would fight the cancer off. And she did, for a good long while. That house became a home to us in a way that the apartment in Los Angeles never quite did. We got most of our furniture from Wilma's family—a table from her brother, bed and dressers from the farmhouse, knickknacks and kitchenware from her sister. We planted tulips the first spring. They're probably still coming back even now.

At first, the welcome we received from Wilma's family made me feel even more furious with you. But time passed. I couldn't stay angry.

Some people do. They tend their anger toward those they once loved, for years and years. I don't blame them, exactly, and I don't mean to suggest that it's never justified. There are some cruel people in the world, Natchu, you know that. But sometimes I wonder who they think they're protecting, the ones that stay angry.

So I let go of the anger, eventually, but what lingered underneath was fear—an insidious, persistent fear that would follow me the rest of my life. I just didn't want to go through rejection again. When Wilma insisted on coming home with me, that one time before she passed, I told her we would have to act like friends. It didn't matter to her, she said. She just wanted to meet my people. This was close to the end, when we knew she didn't have long left. You were polite to each other. You talked about chicken recipes and Jimmy Carter. I'm glad Wilma insisted on that visit. She was right. It brings me some peace knowing you met each other, at least. With the women who came later, after I moved back, I was careful to make sure they never crossed paths with you. I didn't think it was worth it.

May 15, 1980

Dear Sofia,

We've had five straight days of rain this week and I'd like to talk to whoever said that April showers bring May flowers. Our poor little buds in the garden are looking awfully scraggly.

Daniel wrote from Wyoming asking why he hadn't heard from his mother at all this month. I write him every week, you know! My letters must have been getting lost. I looked closely at his return address and I can't quite tell if it's a 5 or a 6 in his new house number. He moves around faster than the seasons change. I wonder if my letters to you are getting lost, too? Did you get the last few? Well, I know you're terribly busy and not home all that often. Probably you don't have time to respond.

I've been wondering lately what will happen when Magdalena and Irena leave the house. They won't stay forever, you know. As much as I might wish that. Maybe not much will change—I'll still have work, and Frank. We haven't lived just the two of us since we were newlyweds. I'm worried it'll be lonely.

Oh dear, I didn't mean to turn this letter into a lament. I bought a nice pink blouse downtown yesterday. It's just perfect for spring.

I'm glad you came to visit, Sof. The girls can't stop talking about California. I guess you sold them on the West Coast!

There's Frank calling us to dinner, so I'll dash off here. I hope your weather is better in Los Angeles.

Love,

Natalia

III.

NATALIA

One Sunday in early May, Anna Jeskiewicz reached across two rows of pews to grasp Natalia's hand during the sign of peace. Natalia was surprised such a slight woman could stretch so far.

"Peace be with you," Anna said. "Find me after mass."

"What's that about?" Frank whispered, after he'd finished greeting the family behind them with solemn handshakes. Natalia shrugged.

She waited for Anna on the steps outside after Father Mark processed down the aisle and the congregation followed, pew by pew. Anna suggested they sit on a bench by the statue of the Virgin Mary.

"She needs a touch up on her paint," Natalia observed. The blue had started chipping toward the bottom.

"Don't we all," Anna replied.

Natalia asked after Anna's children—doing well—and grandchildren—also well—and waited for Anna to reveal why she needed to speak with her. This was Anna's way, everything on her own time. No use in trying to rush her.

"You weren't at the Easter egg hunt this year," Anna finally said.

Natalia had begged off her usual duty: bringing enough cake that all the children could have a slice. She hadn't been feeling up to it this year.

"That was a month ago," she said. "What's the matter?"

"And you haven't signed up for meal delivery to the rectory lately."

Couldn't Father Mark make his own meals, after all these years? "No," Natalia said.

"We need you for the Polish picnic."

“Ah.”

“You’re not planning to skip that too, are you? What’s gotten into you? You know we all depend on each other around here. And none of those young mothers are stepping up these days. They all claim to be busy with their children, with their ballet lessons and sports teams, with work, with I don’t know what. It’s all excuses if you ask me. But it means that those of us who can give of our time, must. It’s more needed than ever.”

Natalia felt a pang of guilt. This was Anna’s intention, of course. Guilt had always been her preferred tactic. Natalia had seen it in play many times over the years, but Anna had never had to use it on her. She’d always been a reliable church volunteer. She loved the work, usually. “I haven’t felt up to doing much, lately,” Natalia said.

“You’re not depressed, are you? Because that can happen to us. Look at Nelly. I keep telling her, get the pills. They help.”

“Nelly can’t even leave her house anymore, no wonder she’s depressed. That osteoporosis caught up with her. I’m not that bad, am I?”

“No,” Anna assured her. “I’m just saying. If you’re feeling down, you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

She would, normally. Over the years, Anna had been a reliable confidante. Just a few years older than Natalia, old enough so that whatever Natalia was going through with the children, Anna had probably already been through it, but close enough in age that Natalia could trust her advice not to be too Old World.

This was different, though. Natalia couldn’t point out a reason for the malaise. Except the obvious one: Sofia, gone. That, plus she’d had a few moments of confusion recently. She made dinner for Irena on a Monday night and called her annoyed when she didn’t show up. Irena

swore they'd made plans for Tuesday. Another time, she felt certain she'd talked to Magdalena on the phone the night before, but Frank insisted it had been Irena. Each time, she'd brushed it off.

“So you'll help out with the kitchen, then? I'm lining everyone up. I'd like to arrange our first planning meeting for later this month.”

“You can never start too early,” Natalia said.

Anna smiled at hearing her favorite saying repeated back to her. This smile was dear to Natalia, so familiar. The dimple above Anna's lip hadn't softened a bit with age.

“It's the fiftieth anniversary, you know. So we should do something special.”

“Let me know when the meeting is,” Natalia said. “I'll bring Frank.”

The division of responsibilities would be as usual: the men would take care of the tables, tents, and chairs; they would set up the beer tent; they would plan for the polka band. The women would make the sincere pleas at Sunday mass for special contributions in the offering plate and prepare all the food.

When they came together for their first planning meeting in the church basement, Anna, who led the women, and Chester, who led the men, announced that in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary, they were hoping to bring in an award-winning polka band from Wisconsin. This would require extra funds, though. The local men who usually played—Frank among them—did so for free. Accordingly, they would host a special pierogi sale the month before the picnic.

At this, Mila Adamek raised her hand. “You mean we are baking twice, this year?”

Natalia was just glad she hadn't been the one to ask. Anna glared at Mila as she responded. Yes, they would be baking twice this year. Her tone admitted no room for resistance.

Natalia helped Anna prepare the order to the food supplier: industrial-sized bags of flours, sacks of potatoes, packages of cheese. They assigned women to baking shifts in the days leading up to the sale and deputized grumpy Mila to write the notice for the church bulletin. Natalia was surprised to find that getting back to work felt good, just as she suspected Anna had known. If Sofia were still alive, she would've brought a package or two of the pierogis over to her. Sofia would've complained that she couldn't eat potatoes for every meal, but she would have gotten out her frying pan immediately. Maybe it is true what they say, that we keep the dead alive in our prayers. Or is it in our stories? Natalia preferred prayers: she mentioned Sofia first in her intercessions each Sunday.

Natalia felt even better when they surpassed their fundraising goal, selling out of every last pierogi they had baked. They all felt buoyed for their next round of baking, and even Mila had to admit it had been worth it.

By the time the second round of preparations reached its fifth day, Natalia thought she might be just fine if she never had to roll out another sheet of pierogi dough in her entire life. Surely she'd done her duty to the cause. They would simply need to pull in the younger women, despite their excuses. "We're getting too old for this," she whispered to Mila, quiet enough that Anna wouldn't hear. Mila raised her eyebrows in a look of agreement.

The morning of the picnic arrived with irrefutable sunshine. Natalia thanked God for the good weather in her morning prayers. Apparently God had sent the rain to Wisconsin, though. Or maybe it was thunderstorms in Chicago. Anna wasn't quite clear on the details when she called Natalia to tell her that Frank should bring his accordion. The band had rebooked on a later flight. Hopefully, they would arrive in time to play a closing set.

“Tell her our fee is even higher than theirs!” Frank shouted when he overheard Anna through the phone. “But she’s in luck.” He gestured at the table, where his accordion case sat at the ready. “I just so happen to be tuned up and ready to go.”

Secretly, Natalia knew, the men would be pleased. They had all felt a bit hurt to be kicked out of the bandshell this year.

Natalia stood at the kitchen window all morning taking orders. Anna had appointed her in charge of the cash box, which would hopefully fill the coffers of the weeklong summer Bible camp. Bless your children, Lord, she whispered every time she had to empty change into the white envelope she kept under the shelf.

Frank made a fine band with Tom Lankowski and Earl Chlebek, rotating out for a youth dance performance at noon. The children were bowing to the last round of applause when Irena arrived with Wren in tow. Irena’s hair now sparked blue at the tips. She wore a T-shirt that read “The Future Is Female.” She had her arm wrapped around Wren, who looked desperate to escape this embrace. Wren had just moved back home, fresh off graduation and a breakup with David.

“Girls!” Natalia called out, and they walked over to her window. Wren wriggled away from her mother, but Irena grabbed her hand and held it tight.

“Good turnout this year,” Irena remarked.

“Your father will be back on soon,” Natalia said. “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have cabbage, please. And kielbasa,” Irena said. She waved at Anna, who stood behind Natalia overseeing the frying pans.

“Good to see you, Irenka,” Anna called out.

“Cheese, please. And kielbasa too,” Wren said.

“Go find us a seat,” Irena said to Wren. “I’ll wait for the plates.”

Natalia and Irena watched Wren amble over to the picnic tables. She chose one at the farthest edge, where no one else sat.

“What’s the matter with her?” Natalia asked. She had been trying not to ask Wren too many questions, as Irena had requested. Instead, she battered Irena with them.

“It’s the breakup, Ma. She’s still processing it.”

Wren had put her head down on the table as though she were a child asleep at dinner, rather than a grown woman at a church picnic. The band from Wisconsin pulled up in a taxi van and the whole crowd let out a cheer. Wren didn’t even look up.

A tsk escaped Natalia’s lips. “Let me go talk to her,” she said.

“I don’t know—”

Natalia cut off Irena’s protest. She called Mila over to watch the window. “You wait here for the food,” she instructed Irena, ignoring the eye roll Irena returned.

She marched over to Wren, who didn’t open her eyes or lift her head until Natalia called her name.

“Wren, baby.”

Wren came to life slowly, blinking at the bright sunlight.

“Yes, Babcie?”

“Honey, you can’t wallow forever.”

Wren stayed silent. Her eyes responded with tears. Oh Lord. This was worse than Natalia thought. Wren’s sadness was strange to her, as though these young women hadn’t benefitted from all the supposed freedom that feminism was supposed to give them. It had come too late for Natalia, but she had hoped it would do something for the next generation. Instead, it just left Irena twice-divorced and Wren pining over a man who had dumped her.

At Wren's age, Natalia had been married already. She liked that women no longer paired off so young anymore. Smart of them to wait, to get to know themselves better. Having a baby at twenty-two was the hardest thing Natalia had ever done, even if everyone around her had been doing the same. Or maybe the hardest thing had been having three.

"Where's my mom?" Wren asked.

Natalia gestured over to the kitchen window. The point was, Wren didn't seem to be enjoying her freedom, if she was this upset over a boy. She had to get over it.

"I'm sorry," Wren said. She sniffled her nose.

Natalia wiped at Wren's smudged eye make-up. "You have to be strong, moja wnuczka."

Wren nodded.

"You'll find someone else. You just try again."

This brought the tears back.

"Come with me," Natalia said. She led Wren over the kitchen, where the women were piling plates extra high for the newly arrived musicians. "Ladies, she's here to help," she announced. Anna crowed with delight. She showed Wren over to a skillet and started her frying. Wren cracked a small smile, and Natalia gestured at Irena, as though to say, *see? I knew what she needed.*

Over at the bandshell, the band from Wisconsin played a faint warm-up. Natalia recognized the tune of her favorite polka, one she had taught Daniel to dance with her when he was young. Maybe she'd step out of the kitchen for a round or two with Frank. She watched him tapping his foot at the picnic table. Yes, she'd ask him to dance.