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So, We Go

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SO, WE GO

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Karen E. Kudej

B.A. University of Chicago, 1994

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ABSTRACT

So, We Go is a collection of eight short stories, which focus on themes of loss and longing, finding and acceptance.

TEN KINDS OF PEOPLE

My mother had a sister. Then she didn't. Then she did. Her name, I learned, was Alice, and she called me one evening as I sat at the kitchen table grading a quiz on quadratic equations. Aunt Alice, a ghost from my mother's past, come to life to tell me that my mother was dead.

Audrey, my girlfriend, whose smile makes the world seem better than it actually is, answered the phone and brought it in to the kitchen.

"Who is it?" I asked.

Audrey shrugged and handed me the phone. "It's not your mother..."

That was a joke we had because my mother never called. Not for my birthday, not for Christmas or other holidays, not ever — she was afraid Audrey would answer. Instead, she sent generic cards from the gift shop where she worked, with only the addition of "Your Mother" in precise cursive letters. I called her on occasion, usually when prompted by my Dad's girlfriend, Betty, or by Audrey, who talked with her mother daily. I had

only mentioned Audrey to my mother once. She had interrupted me and said, "I'd rather not hear about your personal life."

"That's the only kind of life there is." I told her. She asked me about the weather in Oregon. I asked her about the weather in Michigan. The conversation ended as they all did, with me saying, "Good bye, Mother," and her saying, "Thank you for calling," with the same polite detachment I remember her using when telemarketers called – "Thank you for calling, but I'm not interested."

Whenever the phone rang, I knew it would not be my mother. I never suspected it would be my aunt.

"Theresa?" A hesitant voice fluttered over the line.

"Yes...?"

I heard her take a quick little breath, like a swimmer taking in air before going underwater. "This is Alice Burgmont. Your mother's sister. Your aunt. I found your number in your mother's address book."

Audrey must have seen the look on my face because she put a hand on my shoulder and mouthed, "Everything okay?"

My mother only had one sister. She had been a nun, and her photograph hung in the hallway of my childhood home along with my school pictures. The first time I asked about her, my mother told me she was dead, or rather, that she was in God's hands, a phrase she used to describe Grandma and Grandpa, President

Kennedy, and Swimmy the goldfish, my only childhood pet. My mother often stopped in the hallway and stood for long moments in front of her sister. As a child, I had wondered if she would have been a different mother if her sister had been alive – if she wouldn't have washed dishes immediately after they were used; if she would've left my school bag in the hallway long enough for me to finish my after school snack; if she would've come to watch my basketball games. I wanted her to ask me, just once, how I was doing and not "Is your homework done?"

The last time I asked about the nun in the photograph, my mother had just finished pounding a new nail in the wall for my sixth grade picture; she paused to straighten the frame.

"What was her name? Was she older than you? What happened to her?" I kept my voice low and solemn. My mother sighed and brushed my hair back from my face, a rare gesture. I was almost as tall as she was, almost eye to eye, and I thought she was finally going to tell me.

"Theresa, honey, I need to get dinner ready now." She hung my picture on the new nail and walked off to the kitchen without giving her sister a name.

It didn't matter – I'd already named her. I called her Maria, after Julie Andrew's character in *The Sound of Music*. My mother had the album, and I listened to it over and over while I daydreamed about Maria, my aunt, coming to the house and

teaching me songs, and playing games, and taking me and my mother on outings to the zoo and the museum like my father did before he moved out. In some daydreams, she brought my cousins with her, as numerous as the Von Trapp children, and we all went to the park near St. Michael's church for a picnic. My Maria wore her habit, and as in the picture, her face was framed by her wimple with her hair, which I imagined to be long and curly, like mine, neatly tucked away.

That's how I pictured her on the other end of the line: Aunt Alice, in the Von Trapp family house, wearing her habit. I was a little girl again, sitting on the floor in the hallway, leaning back with my feet up on the wall, wishing my mother were someone else.

"Aunt Alice," I said. I could hear her crying softly into the phone.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Your mother passed away last night. It was the cancer. It finally got her..."

I'd spoken to my mother a month or two ago. She hadn't mentioned being sick let alone having cancer.

"You didn't know. She didn't tell you." I understood Alice's words to be both a question and a statement. "Oh," she said, "why did your mother have to be so stubborn?"

After getting more details from Alice, I hung up the phone and stared down at the math papers in front of me. I had jotted

her phone number and address along with details about the funeral in the margins of Daniel Torrin's math quiz.

Audrey gave me hug when I told her.

"I guess your dad and Betty can get married now," she said.

All I could think about was a joke that another math teacher once told me. There are ten kinds of people in the world – those who understand binary and those who don't. One. Zero. One. Zero. I had a mother, now I don't. I didn't have an aunt, now I do. Ten kinds of people – a mother and an aunt.

"Your mother always had her secrets," my father told me when I called him with the news. "My God," he said, and I wondered if I detected relief about Mother's death underlying his surprise at the existence of Alice. Maybe Audrey was right; maybe he had been waiting for a chance to marry Betty. He hadn't known any more than I had about my mother and her family.

My parents met at a grocery store. As my father told it, my mother approached him in the canned goods aisle. He was examining the shelves and felt her standing behind him. He turned and smiled at her. She asked him to reach a can for her on the top shelf. Later, my mother told him she had been drawn to him for the careful way he had picked up each item and examined it before putting it in his cart. He told me he had misplaced his glasses that day and had only wanted to make sure he was buying the right things.

My mother was 32 at the time. My father had just turned 35, had never been married and was anxious for a family; he had already started saving money for a child he didn't have yet. He liked my mother's decisive manner and efficiency. Their wedding had been small. My father was an only child. His mother had died but his father was on hand to serve as his best man. My mother had alluded to a sister, but like me, my father assumed she had died, and he learned, as I did, that when my mother did not want to talk, she would not. Her parents sat at the back of the church and left immediately following the ceremony.

I inherited everything from my father. His height, his dark curls, his desire to leave my mother. When I was in fourth grade, he picked me up early from basketball practice one day. His car was packed full of boxes and he took me for ice cream. We sat outside Baskin Robbins on pink, sticky chairs bolted to the sidewalk around a pink, sticky table. As I licked at my cone, my father told me he was moving out.

"You mean like a divorce?"

"Well, not exactly," he said, "Your mother doesn't want a divorce. But I've rented an apartment. And you can visit me whenever you want. She just...Your mother and I...We don't communicate very well. You know how she is. This'll be better for all of us."

If his absence ever affected my mother, she never let on. The only change was the job she took as a salesclerk at the gift shop in the strip mall next to the church. And she began saying grace before meals, something my father had not been enthusiastic about. "A person has to take care of business," she liked to tell me when we sat together eating dinner.

My father had been the point of intersection between two lines; when he moved out, my mother and I diverged – she to her world of order, work and church functions, me to my schoolwork and basketball and friends.

Audrey offered to fly back with me for the funeral. We could have left the dog with my Dad and Betty, but spring was a hectic time for Audrey's gardening business, and I felt this was a trip I needed to make on my own. I hadn't been back to Michigan for over 15 years. I had even stopped telling people I was from Michigan and considered Oregon my home, even though I was not a native.

I flew into Detroit Metro and rented a car for the week. Driving out of the airport, I was struck by how low everything looked. Few buildings stood above five stories, the trees – maples, birch, oak – didn't come close in height to the towering Doug-firs and hemlocks that dominated the Oregon landscape, and the land was flat with no hills to break-up the sky.

Several of the women from the church had been looking after my mother's house while she was in the hospital, and Alice arranged for them to leave the keys at the rectory at St. Michael's where my mother had been a loyal parishioner for over thirty years. I wondered if she had seen Father McClarty before she died. I wondered if "Bore false witness to daughter" was on her list for confession and if it would be considered a venial or mortal sin.

The rectory was a modest brick house next to the church. After eight years of catechism on Tuesday evenings and Mass on Sundays, I could have sketched the layout of the church and its adjoining classrooms; but I had only been to the rectory once to meet with Father McClarty in his office regarding confirmation. All candidates were required to meet with him. He sat behind a dark wood desk in his dark green-carpeted office and asked me questions about my faith. I recited the answers we had been taught to give in our preparation class, "Yes, I believe in one God, the Father the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;" "Yes, I believe in Christ our Lord and Savior;" "Yes, I am ready to accept a life in the Holy Spirit committed to the beliefs of the Catholic Church."

When we finished, Father McClarty had leaned back in his chair and added, as though in warning, "Your mother is such a

wonderful example of Catholic stewardship. I hope you'll follow in her footsteps."

If I had been courageous, I would have walked out of the rectory, walked out of the Catholic Church, gone home and yelled and screamed or even just talked to my mother, maybe something would have turned out differently. Maybe she would have told me my aunt was alive and living not more than an hour away. Maybe she would have called to tell me that she had cancer and was having women from church drive her to her treatments. Instead I was confirmed.

I continued to attend Mass with my mother on Sunday – aside from dinner, it was the only time we spent together. By the end of my first year in high school, I'd had enough. I began sleeping in on Sundays, telling my mother that I'd attend the eleven o'clock mass. My mother went to the nine o'clock service – she was one of the regular readers. I left for church shortly after my mother arrived home.

"Don't tell me what happened," I told her. "I want it to be a surprise." I rode my bike to church, but instead of stopping and going in to sit for an hour on a hard pew listening to Father McClarty, I kept going, pedaling past the cemetery, past the strip mall where my mother worked when I was at school, past the enormous Presbyterian church where many of my classmates went. I biked all the way to Bicentennial Park and watched

families, real families, enjoy a Sunday picnic. Sometimes, there'd be big groups, family reunions, with lots of people. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. Lots of kids. The families would set up underneath the picnic pavilions, and I would bike around them. Sometimes, someone would offer me food, and even if I wasn't hungry, I'd stop to eat with them and pretend they were my family. After a while, I'd bike home, past the church to make sure mass had ended. Like my mother, I knew how to take care of business. If my mother ever doubted me, she never questioned. Now I knew she had her own secrets to worry about without delving into mine.

I rang the rectory doorbell; I wished I had asked to have the keys left under the mat at the house. A young man with blond hair in need of a trim answered the door.

"You're not Father McClarty."

He held the door open for me. "Father McClarty moved up in the archdiocese. I guess you could say I'm the new guy, Father Mike. And you must be Louise's daughter?"

I stepped into the entryway. I could see a light on in the office. I couldn't imagine sitting across from Father Mike. Father Mike at St. Michael's.

"Your mother was such an asset to this community. If there's anything I can do. Would you like to sit? There are a

few donuts leftover from Sunday. I could make some instant coffee..."

I wanted to tell him that my mother was a dog in a field. Once, my father and I were driving from Portland to Eugene; he was taking me to look at the university there.

"You know," he said, "see that dog out there." We were driving past farmland, and he pointed out to a dry field where a lone dog trotted parallel to the freeway. The dog was in the middle of the field; a house was in the distance; there were no people around. The dog stopped to sniff at something, moved on, and stopped again, and then we were past it.

"Your mother reminds me of that dog. Who knows what it was doing out there. Burying a bone? Hunting a gopher? It's just doing its own thing. Maybe at night it'll go back to that house, but it'll just be there. It's real life is out in that field by itself doing who knows what."

And what he said made sense. My mother was just as distant as a dog out in an empty field with cars rushing by on the freeway filled with people who would never know anything about it.

I thought about telling Father Mike about the dog in the field. But what difference would it make? If he saw my mother as an asset, well, at least that made one person.

"I'm tired now," I said, "from the trip. I just need to pick up the keys."

"Of course," he said. "Let me get them for you." He went into the office and came back with my mother's house key.

"If there is anything I can do. If you need to talk..."

"Thank you," I told him. "I'll let you know."

I left the church, drove past the strip mall and turned down the familiar street to my mother's house. The neighborhood trees were bigger than I remembered. A "For Sale" sign was up on the front lawn. It didn't surprise me that Mother had thought to put her house on the market. I was sure she had a long list of things to do: cancel newspaper, make funeral arrangements, contact estranged sister. I wondered if I had been anywhere on that list, if she had run out of time before she could get to me.

I unlocked the door and put down my suitcase.

Nothing had changed from my childhood – the entryway floor still had the dark linoleum made to resemble marble with veins of white running through it. The dining room had lime green carpet with a matching valance above the bay window. The house smelled of pine cleaner. Had my mother been home, she would have moved my suitcase into my bedroom before I could get my jacket off, just as she had done with my school bag when I was younger.

The entryway opened into the kitchen. Two flower arrangements sat on the kitchen table – one from the women’s group at St. Michael’s, the other from my mother’s co-workers at the gift shop with a card that read, “Deepest condolences for your loss.” The house was quiet, as I remembered it being after my father left, even when my mother and I were both home. In the evenings, she sat in the living room reading the paper and working her crossword puzzles. I hid in my room doing my homework, talking softly on the phone to a friend, or reading a book and silently turning the pages. Or my mother would be in the kitchen, cleaning up after dinner while I watched television with the volume low to avoid her attention – she would never yell from the kitchen; instead, I would look up and see her standing in the doorway: “Theresa, have you finished your homework?” Her tone was formal. Our house was quiet, a stark contrast to my friends’ houses where siblings yelled and tumbled after each other, in and out of rooms with doors slamming, the TV on, their mothers asking me how I was and how did I like my classes; and the quiet was unlike school where I was jolted awake each morning by the noise of voices in the hall, the scraping of chairs, doors opening and closing, loud and pulsing with an energy that I absorbed so I could take it home with me and hold it inside, wild and riotous to protect me from becoming my mother – a woman who went through the motions of life but had

stopped living it long ago, had stopped yelling and laughing and talking and feeling – I thought it must have been an awful thing to lose a sister.

But she hadn't lost her sister – not to death anyway.

I walked through the house, looking at everything my mother left behind. I had lived there so long ago that I no longer thought, this is where I used to eat dinner, this is where I used to sleep, this is the chair I would sit in sideways, watching TV with my legs draped over the arm whenever my mother wasn't home to scold me. Instead, I examined everything with the fascination of an anthropologist studying a lost culture. Here was the table where my mother sat alone and said grace before eating her meals. Here was the living room where my mother paged through the newspaper, shaking her head in disapproval of the world's events. Despite working at a gift shop that was full of knick-knacks and figurines, my mother kept her house free from what she called "dust collectors." I wandered down the hallway to my mother's bedroom. Here was her bed where she knelt to say her prayers. I opened the closet. Here were her dresses that required her to reach her arms around her back to zip them. And under the bed was the hammer – the same one she used to hang my school pictures – which she kept in case of burglars. What was she going to do? Pound them to death? The bedspread was tight and neat. The nightstand was bare except for a lamp and a small,

clear glass vase of dried lavender. Mother's room always smelled faintly of lavender.

In the hallway I stopped at the photographs hanging on the wall. Though Betty had made me send my junior and senior pictures, the pictures of me ended with my sophomore photo. And there she was. My mother's sister. My aunt. Not Maria, but Alice. Not a strand of hair hung loose below her wimple. She looked young – much younger than I ever remember my mother being. Now that I knew she was alive, I wouldn't have been surprised if the picture winked at me, and I half-expected to see the corners of her mouth turn up in a divine smile. Alice Burgmont. Aunt Alice. Sister Alice. I had never seen a resemblance between the photograph and my mother, but now I noticed a similarity in the eyes. The woman in the picture and my mother both had the same eyes – eyes that looked startled, as though they were surprised at how their lives had turned out.

I returned to the kitchen. On the day I told my mother I wanted to move to Oregon with my father, she had been in the kitchen. She had just finished the dinner dishes and was wiping down the counters. The sink gleamed. The floor shone; I think she had waxed it that morning. The room no longer smelled of dinner, but of pine-scented cleaner. She looked up at me – I was taller than her by half a foot.

"If that's what you want," she'd said. She hung her dishtowel neatly over the handle of the oven door and disappeared down the hallway to her room.

The house hadn't changed. I opened the utensil drawer. My mother hadn't changed. Each spoon, fork, knife was in its proper slot in the plastic organizing tray. The spoons and forks nested together as if there had been only one spoon, one fork. Even the knives, which couldn't be nested, were neatly stacked in two parallel piles. I knocked the spoon stack with my finger and the spoons shifted apart. I picked up a few forks and dropped them backwards in their compartment, listening to the sound of metal on metal as the forks fell, the sound of a wind chime cut short. I closed the drawer. With the silverware hidden away, the kitchen returned to impeccable order, and an unsettling quiet engulfed me like a fog. I realized I was gritting my teeth. I tried to relax, and in doing so, reached out and rested my fingers on the drawer pull. I had a memory of playing basketball and a moment when I realized I was making a bad pass. The ball was about to leave my fingertips; I could see the defender moving between me and my teammate. I wanted to stop the ball, to prevent its interception, but it was too late, my arm was already in motion, the ball was about to spin away from me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

My fingers were already wrapped around the drawer pull. I realized what I was doing when it was too late to stop myself. I yanked the drawer out of the cabinet, spilling the silverware with a noisy crash. The momentum had me. I kicked at a spoon that had come to rest near my foot, and it slid across the floor. "How's that for order?" I said aloud.

I opened the next drawer, cooking utensils, and I dumped it on the floor. The sound was not quite as loud, but still satisfying. "How's that?" I asked. I felt like a storm – not a Pacific Northwest storm with rain and wind, but a full-blown Midwest storm with rain and wind and lightning and thunder that shakes the house and rattles the windows. I opened the cabinet and pulled out a saucepot, the soup pot, the frying pans, flinging them against each other, listening to the metal vibrate.

My mother's sugar bowl sat on the counter. White porcelain with delicate blue flowers. It was pretty. I used to play with the sugar, spooning it up and slowly tilting the spoon, trying to let the crystals fall back into the bowl one grain at a time. I heard my mother's voice, "Theresa, honey, don't play at the table." Now, I picked up the sugar bowl and turned it slowly, attempting to recreate my childhood game. I was crying now, and when the last grain fell, I threw the empty bowl as hard as I could. The bowl cracked into pieces when it hit an upturned pan.

I opened the refrigerator and grabbed a plastic squeeze bottle of ketchup. I dropped it on the floor and stomped on it. The lid popped open and ketchup shot across the room.

"Now what are you going to do, Mother?" I shouted. Someone had left a casserole, covered in foil. I turned it upside down. Nothing happened, so I gave it a shake. The foil gave way, and a mess of noodles and vegetables plopped onto the floor. I pulled out a box of baking soda and shook it onto the floor. In the pantry, I yanked out cans, spices, the cereal box. My mother's stupid cereal that she ate morning after morning. Special K. What kind of name was that? I emptied the box on the floor and crushed a pile of flakes under my shoe. "Now what?" I asked. "You can't hide this mess." I made my way around the room, opening cupboard doors and tossing out random items. I pulled out another drawer. Dish towels and potholders fell noiselessly to the floor. The silence stopped me. I stood, my breath heavy from the effort of destruction, and I looked at what I had done. It was far from the order I had always known the kitchen to have. And the funny thing was, I was too late. My mother was gone. This tantrum had been for her benefit, but she wasn't even around to see it. She wouldn't have to clean up the mess – I would. I started to laugh.

I was still laughing when the phone rang. I realized I had forgotten to call Audrey.

"What's so funny?" she asked when I picked up the phone.

"I just trashed my mother's kitchen."

Audrey was silent.

"I feel better now." I told her.

"I saw Tim and Sarah at the dog park this morning. They say hello."

"We should have them over for dinner sometime after I get back."

"Are you nervous about meeting your aunt tomorrow?"

I had wanted another relative for so long, but I hadn't thought about my aunt for years, and now here she was. I had no idea what Alice knew about me, how much contact she'd had with my mother over the years, why my mother kept her from me all this time.

"Maybe she sold your mom's car for drugs," Audrey said.

"She was a nun."

"Nuns are only human like the rest of us..."

After I got off the phone, I went down the hall to my old bedroom where I had put my suitcase. Instead of sleeping in my room, I went into my mother's room with her neatly made bed, the sprigs of lavender, and the hammer under the bed. I un-tucked the sheets from the mattress, crawled under the covers, and fell asleep sooner than I expected.

*

Alice lived in Thornville, only a half hour drive from my mother's house, beyond the sprawl of the Detroit suburbs. I left the mess in the kitchen. I felt better knowing it was there, and I half-hoped the realtor would bring someone by to view the house while I was gone.

I got on the freeway and drove past the back of strip malls and chain restaurants, past a new industrial park and a string of mini-storage buildings. I stayed to the right as trucks and other cars sped by in the fast lane. I felt like a character in a movie, a long lost niece on her way to see her long lost aunt. Eventually, the traffic thinned and the buildings gave way to patches of farmland. I found myself searching the fields for a dog.

I exited the freeway onto state highway 24 and followed the directions Alice had given me to her house. The sun was warm through the windshield, and tulips and daffodils bloomed in front yard gardens. I turned on Alice's street and slowed to a stop in front of a small ranch; I double-checked the house number – 5779 – a prime.

The yard was newly mowed; the house was small, white with black shutters. Flower boxes filled with brilliant red geraniums hung along the porch railing. Alice and my mother could be very much alike.

I got out of the car and stood on the driver's side, looking over the top of the car. I wished I had take Audrey up on her offer to come with me. The curtains on the front window parted and fell back into place. I walked toward the house. Alice stepped out onto the porch and met me at the driveway.

"Theresa?" she said. She wore a plain, navy skirt and a white button-up blouse – more a schoolgirl's uniform than a nun's attire. Her hair was pulled back in a loose bun and was the color of my mother's – dark with prominent streaks of gray. I had expected her to look younger, like her picture, though I immediately realized that notion was absurd. The smooth face from her photograph was lined with wrinkles she didn't try to conceal.

"Theresa..."

"Alice." I corrected myself. "Aunt Alice."

She smiled with her lips pursed together and clapped her hands to her sides. She was smaller than my mother, and seemed more fragile. I bent to give her a hug and was surprised at the strength with which she clung to me. We stood in the driveway, her arms around my waist as though she was a child and I was her mother; I draped my arms on her shoulders. At last she released me and took a step back.

"Well," she said. "You're tall." Her voice was soft and fluttering, as it had been on the phone. "I've waited so long to meet you." She took my hand. "Come, let's sit on the porch."

Alice led me up concrete steps and pointed to a wooden chair with faded blue paint. A dog yapped from behind the screen door.

"Sit, sit," she said. She opened the screen, and a little white fluffy dog raced out. "This is Sophia," my aunt said. "No barking, Sophia. No barking. This is your cousin." Sophia scurried over to me and sniffed at my pant leg. I bent to let her sniff my hand. She eyed me and retreated to Alice's feet. I sat down in the chair. A tray table was set up on the porch with two glasses of ice, a big mason jar of sun tea with floating slices of lemon, and a sugar bowl identical to my mother's. I traced the blue pattern with my finger and wished I hadn't broken the other one.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" asked Alice.

"My mother had one just like it," I said. "I broke it. On accident."

"Well, that's what happens with children. I'm sure you didn't mean it."

Alice picked up the sugar bowl. "They were gifts to us, from our Aunt Ida. Ida B. Starker. She once told me that her

initials were 'I B.S.'" Alice giggled and covered her mouth with her hand.

She put the bowl back down on the tray, filled a glass with tea and handed it to me. I carefully spooned in some sugar. Alice poured a glass for herself and sat down. Sophia jumped up on her lap and settled down. I realized that the geraniums were artificial.

"All I know about you is that you were a nun. My mother had your picture hanging in the hallway," I said.

"Oh, yes. That picture." Alice nodded and ran both hands over Sophia's back. "I was only eighteen then. I had just joined the convent of St. Mary's...such a pretty convent. There was a pond on the grounds. With fish. Oh, how I loved those fish."

Alice spent a long time talking about the fish. How she liked to walk to the pond and watch them float beneath the surface, orange and white and shimmering. "I was only there for a year. Then I had to leave." She told me about her job as a secretary at the Catholic school affiliated with the convent. She had never married and had retired a few years ago. She told me about the school staff, and the students, and the church services.

"The school has a beautiful carillon," she told me.

I told Alice about teaching math in Oregon, about my dad and Betty, and even about Audrey. She didn't flinch when I told

her Audrey and I had been together for nearly seven years. I watched carefully for a reaction. She simply nodded and said, "Well, that's nice for you."

She took a sip of her tea and stared off at the road. A car sped by. "Cars drive too fast here," she said, "One day some poor child is going to get hurt...I prayed for your mother. That she would get over this..."

"Alice," I leaned toward her slightly. "What happened?"

She sighed, and her sigh was so much like my mother's that all of my muscles tightened.

"Would you like to come in and see some pictures?" she asked. "Of your mother. When we were girls." That was her answer. She was like my mother after all.

"Sure. Sure, I'd like that." I followed Alice and Sophia into the house. The entryway opened up into the living room. Boxes were stacked around the perimeter of the room, under the coffee table, to the side of the sofa.

"What is all of this stuff?" I asked. "Are you moving?"

"Just some things I got on sale over the years," she said. "I can't pass up a bargain. You never know when you'll need a gift." She covered her mouth and made a sound like a giggle. "I'll get the photo album." She headed off down the hallway, which was narrower than it should have been due to more boxes. Sophia ran after her.

Some of the boxes were cardboard shipping boxes and looked as though they had never been opened. Other boxes looked as though they had just been removed from a store's shelf. I noticed several boxes of five-piece enameled cookware sets in various colors. The television was on with the volume muted, turned to the home shopping network; I watched as a saleswoman gestured at a vacuum cleaner.

I looked around the room. The boxes contained Corelle dish sets, Franklin Mint commemorative flatware, ceramic mugs with kittens, a clock radio. I noticed a beaded car seat covering, a silver pen set, an inflatable mattress, an assortment of plastic drinking glasses. Some of the stacked boxes had an intentional, statuesque quality, and they all seemed clean, as though the stacks were regularly dusted. I wondered if the rest of the house was as equally crowded. A geometry story problem. If Alice's house has 850 square feet with 8ft. ceilings, and it is filled with boxes, how much room does she have to live in?

I had never experienced claustrophobia before, but standing in that room, amid the boxes, I began to sweat. My breath quickened. To calm myself, I focused on four framed photographs sitting on top of the television. They reminded me of school pictures, but in each one, a small, white dog posed for the camera. At first I thought the pictures were all of Sophia, but when I looked closer, I realized each dog was different. Between

two of the frames was a roll of customized address labels. Instead of Alice's name, the labels read "Sophia Burgmont." I heard Sophia's collar and turned to see the dog running in front of Alice. Alice looked tiny in the hallway, clutching a photo album with both hands.

"Ah," she said. "Those photos."

"Are these all dogs that you've had?" I asked.

"Those are all my little Sophias. Such a nice name isn't it?" Alice asked. The woman on the television was showing a steam cleaner and poured what looked like red wine onto a carpet sample.

"It's so nice out," I said. "Shall we go back out on the porch?"

I moved toward the front door, but Alice sat down on the couch and put the album in front of her on the coffee table.

"I think it'll be easier for us to both see in here." I had no choice but to move around a stack of boxes and sit down next to her.

Alice opened the album and I began to relax. In the first picture, my mother, a stern-faced little girl, sat in a chair with baby Alice on her lap.

"I was the youngest," Alice said. "Your mother was very serious. She laughed and smiled sometimes, but not for photographs. Never for photographs." Alice flipped through the

album past pictures of Alice and my mother in identical dresses sitting on the steps of their first house. My mother, Alice and their parents standing in a driveway in front of an old car. Alice on a tricycle with my mother standing behind her. Here were all of the photographs missing from my mother's childhood. Alice pointed out distant relatives. Aunt Ida and Uncle Joe. Various cousins. I knew nothing of any of them.

"They lived in Chicago," Alice said. "We didn't see them very often."

Alice pointed to a picture of my mother at a picnic table with Alice next to her. Though she was not smiling, it was the only photograph in which Mother looked relaxed. Alice is frowning. Each of them had a slice of cantaloupe.

"Your mother loved cantaloupe. Cantaloupe and cottage cheese." I'd forgotten about my mother's fondness for that. Late summer, when cantaloupe was in season, was the only time my mother would vary her breakfast. She'd forgo her Special K to eat cantaloupe and cottage cheese. I didn't care for either.

Alice leaned back. "I don't really know why Louise stopped talking to me," she said. "Maybe it was because our mother liked me best. And Louise, she and Mother were too much alike. Stubborn." Alice paused, then said softly, "Louise told Mother I was pregnant."

I looked at Alice. Her head was bowed and she wouldn't look at me.

"The nuns made me give her up. I was only nineteen. They wouldn't even let me name her."

On the television, the saleswoman had moved on from the steam cleaner and was gesturing at a pearl necklace on a table. Her mouth moved to form soundless words. Somewhere, I had a cousin. I wondered if Alice left the volume off all the time, or only when she had visitors. If she turned it off at night, did she find comfort in knowing that the television was on while she slept with the photographs of her four Sophias standing guard on the set? Some of the boxes were stacked higher than our heads as we sat together on the couch with my mother's face looking up at us from a long ago summer. The room, with Alice and her boxes, was too small for me. I stood up.

"I should go now," I said.

"You can't stay for lunch?" Alice asked.

I backed toward the door. "No, I really. I can't. I'm sorry. Perhaps another time. Something at the house. I forgot."

I turned abruptly and collided with a stack of boxes as though it had been a person who stepped in front of me to block my path to the door. The upper boxes crashed to the floor with a clatter.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I'm sorry." I bent down to the fallen boxes.

"Are you alright?" Alice asked. "I shouldn't have put those there. Oh, dear. My friend Mary told me to move those the last time she was here." She got up and took a box from me. She moved it to a stack on the other side of the room. I was glad to know she had a friend.

After the last box was replaced, I stepped carefully to the door. Alice followed me.

"Wait," she said. I stopped and looked at her. She smiled, a gentle smile unlike anything I had seen in my mother.

Alice turned back to her boxes. She took a small one off the top and started to offer it to me. The gesture was both sweet and disturbing. I opened my mouth, thinking to decline, but she withdrew her offering before I could form any words. She put the box back down on the top of the stack.

"Wait," she said again and went off toward the kitchen.

I had Audrey, my father, Betty. Alice had boxes of stuff that she didn't need and a dog with the name she would have rather given to her child. A part of me wanted to take her with me. Alice wasn't a dog in a field. She was a field itself, long and furrowed, stretching as far as one could see.

I went out onto the porch to wait for her. Alice returned a moment later with Sophia trailing after her.

"I want you to have this." Alice held out a small pitcher, a creamer with tiny blue flowers, a match to the sugar bowl.

"Thank you." I took the creamer from her and cradled it in my hands.

"Your mother loved us, you know," Alice said. "Especially you. A mother always loves her child."

I started to cry, and so did Alice. We held each other on the porch until Sophia started barking.

"Shhh, Sophia," Alice said.

"I'll see you at the funeral?" I asked her.

"Tomorrow," she said. Her eyes were puffy, and I knew mine were, too.

I got into the car and watched Alice standing on her porch, Sophia next to her, waving to me as I drove away.

Back at my mother's house, I tackled the mess in the kitchen. I washed everything – pots, pans, utensils – and put things where they belonged in the cupboards. I cleaned up the food mess. I wiped down the cabinet doors and mopped the floor. Alice was not like my mother. She was Alice with her boxes and her missing child. My mother was dead, and I had an aunt; it was a fact, just as the sum of all angles in a triangle equaled 180 degrees. I imagined Alice, sitting in front of her television, an order form on her lap. She uses the TV guide as something to write on

as she fills out the form with her Sophia sitting on the couch next to her. The daylight is fading and Alice's television glows blue and flickering and the boxes form tall shadows on the wall. I sit in the clean kitchen of my mother's house with the creamer on the table next to the pieces of the broken sugar bowl. Maybe I can glue it back together. Ten kinds of people. One. Zero. My mother is gone, but I have an aunt.

NEW BOHEMIA

In warm seasons, spring and summer, the houses on South St. Louis Street in Chicago's 10th district felt too close together with one window looking into the next, but in the chill of a February morning, the nearness of the houses made them appear huddled together for warmth. Inside one of these houses, Barbora Novakova, nee Viktorova, leaned on the table to push herself up from her chair. She shuffled over to the stove with her hands resting on her belly. Her hands were big like a man's despite her delicate features – a slight nose, gently curved hips accentuated by her pregnancy, narrow shoulders. Jan, her husband, called her his Bohemian sparrow.

Barbora opened the stove door, added a small scoop of coal to the embers inside and stood a moment to warm herself before stepping away and closing the door. The kitchen window looked out on a small yard they shared with the neighbors behind them, a Polish man and his family. There were eleven of them, crowded together in their small house: the Pole, his mother, his wife and two sisters, and six children – all girls. Barbora had yet to determine who was the wife and to whom each child belonged;

surely they could not all be his. The Pole's mother, who took care of the youngest children while the others worked, was hanging clothes on the frozen line.

Barbora sat down at the table and pulled her shawl around her shoulders. Her older sister, Antonia, had been coming by daily to keep her company and to help with housework. Barbora hoped she would arrive soon. Today they would finish sewing the baby's blanket.

Antonia lived a few blocks away across Kedzie Street with her husband, Josef Kozel, a man gray at the temples with a soft voice that Barbora had to strain to hear. Josef worked at a shoe store downtown. He was kind, but lacked ambition, and Barbora was glad she had married a man like Jan; Jan was a butcher who now worked for his uncle, but he was saving money to open his own shop. He already had a name for his business, New Bohemia Butcher Shop. Jan called Josef a man of "one legs," one leg in America, one leg still in Bohemia where he sent money each month.

"When I'm my own boss," Jan told Barbora, "I'll buy you a new dress, like the mayor's wife has."

Barbora hoped that one day Jan would wear a suit with a tie instead of his butcher's apron and bloodied trousers, they would live in a house far from the stockyards, and she would have a maid to help her with cooking and cleaning; but for now, her

body felt heavy. Her feet ached. She was anchored to the table, to the kitchen in the house on South St. Louis, far away from her own mother. Far away from her girlhood in Bohemia, thought Barbora. The distance seemed greater than a train ride and an ocean away. As a girl, she had never dreamed of living in a city in America – she had only dreamed of not living on a farm, of not being a farmer's wife, of not having to scrape dirt out from under her nails before going to bed at night. She didn't like the rubbery pull of a cow's teat, the smell of manure, the crude manners of the farm men. It surprised her to think that she did miss the barley fields with soft green stalks waving into gold as the plants grew from spring to autumn and dried into dull wisps by the time the first snows began to fall.

One late summer afternoon when she and Antonia were girls, they had been walking home from the village. Antonia had taken her hand and led her through the barley field near their house; the late summer stalks scraped at her arms and closed behind her as she followed her sister deeper into the field. At last, Antonia stopped and let go of Barbora's hand.

"Let's hide here," she said. They flattened out the barley around them and sat down, hidden from everything but the high clouds dotting the sky and the butterflies that flitted about the barley tufts.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Antonia asked. "I want to marry Karel Postelnik." It was the first time Antonia had mentioned liking a boy.

"Now?" Barbora asked.

"No, silly, when we're older. Let's find out if I will." Barbora watched her sister pick a stalk of barley and pull the yellow grains out of their spiked husks. She piled them into one hand and closed her fingers around them.

"*Raz. Dva. Tri.*" Antonia shook her hand three times, letting some of the grains fall loose from between her fingers. She opened her hand and counted the number of grains left. Eleven. "I'm going to marry someone with eleven letters in his name. Oh. Karel Postelnik has too many letters. I'll have to marry someone else." She started counting out names. "How about Jiri Novotny?"

"I'll try, too," Barbora said. She picked up a stalk and plucked out the grains.

"Only shake three times, and don't hold your fingers too loose," Antonia said. "You don't want to marry a man like Helmut with no last name." Helmut was a hermit who lived in the forest around the village. Barbora feared him, though their father told her he was harmless. Some villagers said he lived in a den like a bear. Barbora had only seen him once, a dark bearded figure walking through a distant field.

Barbora clasped her fingers around the grains and shook. Then she opened her hand and counted.

"I've got fourteen."

"You get Karel. You lucky girl."

Barbora had not thought of marriage before.

"I don't want to marry Karel. He wants to be a farmer. I want to marry a rich man who'll buy me lots of new dresses and take me to the city."

"You won't find a husband like that here," Antonia told her.

"Then I'll just have to go somewhere else to find him."

She hadn't thought about America then, and even Prague had seemed a long way off from their village south of Pilsen. It wasn't until later, with the arrival of letters from her cousin, Franta, that America became her destination.

Barbora opened her sewing basket and took out a needle and the unfinished baby blanket; she fingered the rough edges. When Antonia arrived, they would finish sewing the seams.

The coal shifted in the stove. Barbora counted out the letters in her husband's name, J-a-n-N-o-v-a-k. Nine letters. She would need to hold her fingers very loose in order to allow only nine grains left in her hand. She counted out H-e-l-m-u-t. Only three letters less than her husband. She wondered if Helmut felt lonely in the forest, as she did in the city.

The barley fields were far away, as was the farm, and the marble quarry that made her father one of the wealthier men in their village and helped pay for Barbora and Antonia's passage to Chicago. Barbora's mother had cried for days before they left.

"But, Maminko," Barbora had tried to console her, "There are no husbands here for us, just poor farmers. You know it. Cousin Franta will take good care of us. You know he will. And America is where all the good Czech men are now." Her mother clasped her hands tightly.

"Do not forget you are a farmer's daughter. And no matter where you go, you will always be a Czech."

"Of course I will always be Czech. And father is more than a farmer. But in America, I'll be a Czech married to a rich Czech, not to a poor farmer. You know what Franta writes. He says there are more Czechs in Chicago than in our entire parish."

Franta had been right about the Czechs in America.

On one of her first days in Chicago, a winter day, just like today, she and Antonia left their cousin's house where they were staying to wander the strange grid of streets, which despite the cold, seemed to flow with people and horse-drawn carts. And down the center of the street ran an electric trolley, just like in Prague. She wore her black wool coat – it

barely fit her swollen body now – and she and Antonia pulled their stoles tightly around their shoulders to hold in the warmth. The buildings were tall, boxy, and modern. And they were spread out, not crammed together with one wall abutting the next. Barbora walked leisurely, arm in arm with her sister, down Cermak Street, surprised to hear so much Czech.

“It’s as though we have never left our homeland,” Antonia said.

They had stopped at a photographer’s shop to have their pictures taken to send home to their parents, proof of their safe arrival. Barbora kept a copy of one of the photos at the bottom of her sewing basket. In blue ink, the photographer had written her name on the paper frame around the picture. Miss Viktorova. Barbora took the photograph out of her sewing basket. She felt a stranger was staring up at her. Miss Viktorova dreamed of going to the theater, to music concerts, to dances in great halls where one could dance until morning. She wore elegant dresses and rode around town in carriages pulled by sleek horses not sweaty from work in the fields.

Somehow, in the past two years, she’d become Mrs. Novakova who woke each morning with her husband’s arm heavy across her body and now spent her days waiting for something extraordinary that never happened. An undefined longing filled her and grew like the child inside her, pushing out the skin of her expanded

belly. She felt as though she would expand to fit the entire kitchen without knowing quite what it was she was longing for.

Antonia had not yet arrived. Barbora stood up, as restless as the baby inside her. She had not been out for several days, and though her feet ached, she wanted to leave the house. She took her wool coat from the hook, and found her gloves in the pockets. Jan had shoveled the porch steps that morning. Barbora had watched him work through the front window.

A cold wind stung her cheeks, but the air refreshed her as she started down the street marked with frozen prints of horse hooves, footsteps, wagon wheels. At the end of the block, Barbora paused; she realized she didn't have a particular destination. Further down the street, she could see people walking along Kedzie, heads bent down against the wind, eyes on the ground. The baby prevented her from leaning forward. She started towards Kedzie, crossing over 22nd Street, but when she looked left and noticed the steeple of St. Azbeta's rising up behind the houses, she turned and made her way carefully to the church.

She needed both hands to pull open the heavy door of St. Azbeta's. Barbora eased herself into a pew not far from the door, relieved to be off her feet. She attended mass weekly. Jan came with her, but he didn't take communion, and she'd often have to nudge him during the homily to prevent him from dozing

off. The church ran a Czech language school for boys and a small class, led by Father Peter, was gathered in the pews at the front of the church.

Father Peter's low voice chanted over the boys in the front; Barbora could not make out the words over the clank of steam radiator pipes, a soothing sound that mixed with the faint aroma of incense.

She couldn't help thinking that something was missing in her life. If only she could think of what it was, things might be different. If she and Antonia had boarded a different ship in Bremen, would they have landed in a different America? She, and Antonia too, would live in mansions on the city's north side. They would attend not dances but formal balls held in great rooms with music played by an orchestra instead of a makeshift band. She could not define what she had expected from marriage. She only knew she had not expected Jan and sore feet and the changes in her body that the baby brought.

When she was a child she had wanted to visit Svata Hora, the holy mountain, with the church of the Virgin Mary in the town of Pribram. A classmate, Hanka, had told her about it – the long, covered staircase with the saint-lined balustrade leading up to the cloisters as though ascending into heaven; the ornate, white stucco ceilings, golden angels, saintly frescoes, and the painted statue of the Madonna herself, holding baby Jesus in her

arms, both of them crowned in gold. Hanka changed whenever she spoke of Svata Hora – a calm seemed to wash over her as though she had been touched by an angel; Barbora envied her. For months Barbora thought of nothing else. On Sundays as she sat with her family in the small village church with its simple wooden cross and gray, stone walls, she closed her eyes and imagined the other church, high on a hill, more holy, more blessed, more reverent. She talked of little else. On her tenth birthday, falling on a Sunday, her father hitched up the horses and in the gray dawn of May, the family – mother, father, Antonia, Barbora, Jakub, and baby Honza – rode out through the village, up and over gently rolling hills to Pribram and the church. Barbora could see it in the distance as they approached. She ascended the steps with her family, up, up, up to the courtyard of Svata Hora. The chapel was beautiful, as Hanka had described it, with golden angels and light streaming in colored beams through the high windows. Barbora sat through the mass, waiting to feel different, to feel older, holier, calm. She waited for peace and love to overcome her. But nothing changed. After mass, the family went home, the horses plodding along the dusty roads. That is how she felt about her marriage. She couldn't help feeling that marriage should have lightened her, satisfied her. She loved Jan, she thought, but marriage felt like a burden. From the day in the field with Antonia, marriage had been her

goal, but now that she was married, her life seemed foreign. She felt as though she had boarded the wrong train from New York to Chicago and lost herself along the way.

The radiator clanked again. Father Peter was silent. The boys in the front pews stood up and filed out a side door that led through the vestry to the adjoining room used for classes and meetings. Barbora whispered a brief prayer for the safety of her parents and brothers in Bohemia, for her husband's success, for her sister's happiness with Josef. She then prayed that she could go back in time to her arrival in Chicago to start again. As she stood to leave, she felt guilty for wanting more than she had. She paused and touched her hands to her belly.

"I have a good life. I must be satisfied," she told herself. After the baby was born, she would have Jan take her out to see a play.

Outside, a light snow fell from the flat sky – a gray snow, stained by the soot from the factories to the south. It was said that a river near the stockyards bubbled year-round from the rot of carcasses. She wondered if Antonia had arrived and was waiting for her at the house. The baby shifted and Barbora felt her abdomen cramp, a feeling not painful as much as it was surprising.

"Oh," She took a few deep breaths and rubbed her belly. When the cramping passed, she took a few careful steps, then continued home as quickly as she dared.

Antonia was not at the house. Barbora started to lift her coat off of her shoulders and another cramp hit her. She heard herself rip, though she wasn't sure that she heard with her ears as much as she felt a sound shudder through her body. She dropped her coat and felt warmth spreading down her legs.

The baby. She needed Antonia. Barbora opened the front door and saw a boy with his hands shoved deep into his pockets passing the house.

"You, boy," she called to him. He stopped and turned back toward her. She could see his breath crystallize and drift away, disappearing in the air. Mirek Chudak. He lived down the street.

"Mirko, get your mother and run for the midwife." He looked at her with surprise. A clear puddle was forming around her feet.

"Go," she said, "Hurry." She waited until he turned and ran toward his house before she closed the door and eased herself to the couch.

Mrs. Chudakova arrived and helped Barbora to the bedroom. Soon, Mirek returned with the midwife, an old Slovak woman who lived around the corner. Everyone called her Baba. She smelled of garlic and whiskey, but she was known in the neighborhood for

her skills with deliveries, even when the baby was not facing the right direction.

"Mirko," Mrs. Chudakova said, "Go fetch Mr. Novak at Prazek's market."

"No. Antonia." Barbora sputtered out her words. She wanted her sister, not Jan. Not her husband. "Find my sister, Antonia."

A jolt of pain shocked Barbora's body, and she rolled back her head and eyes.

"Jezus Maria," she called out. Baba moved her to a squatting position. She was no longer in her body, no longer leaning on her bed. She was outside of herself, staring down at the room with Baba and Mrs. Chudakova while at the same time staring at the rumpled bed sheets.

"Push," said Baba. "You must push."

The pain subsided for a moment before overwhelming her. She was not in her bedroom, she was not in Chicago, nor was she in Bohemia, in the barley fields. She was nowhere and no one. Not Miss Viktorova. Not Mrs. Novakova. She buried her head in the bed sheets.

Dimly, she knew Jan arrived home; Baba shooed him out of the room. She was aware of Baba's voice, a damp cloth on her forehead, a faint smell of blood. She had a vague feeling that Antonia had arrived. And then she was aware of nothing but the bed sheets crushed in her hands.

"Push," said Baba. "Almost out." Barbora screamed and felt everything go: the baby, her breath, her past. The baby was out. The pain subsided to a throbbing ache followed by dull, quivering contractions. She was exhausted.

"The placenta," Baba said. " You must give the placenta." Gradually, the contractions stopped, the pain ebbed, the placenta slipped out of her. The birth was over.

Mrs. Chudakova dabbed her forehead with a damp cloth.

"There, there, you did it." Barbora heard her sister's voice and a wheezing cry, a sound like a hungry cat.

"Antonia."

"Shhhh," Antonia told her. She helped Barbora into the bed. "Rest. Rest."

Barbora closed her eyes.

She heard Baba say, "It's a boy." She heard the snip of the umbilical cord. She heard the splash of a washcloth in water. The baby continued to cry.

"Is that cry right?" asked Mrs. Chudakova.

"Sometimes the baby has liquid in its lungs. It should clear up in a few days."

The baby quieted. Barbora lay in the bed, her body sore and tired. She didn't know how long she had labored; the room was dark, lit by the soft glow of the kerosene lamps. Baba bent over her to place the wrapped baby in her arms.

"*Tak.*" she said. "A boy. It's good luck."

Barbora looked down at her son, at his flushed face, his pale, milky eyes. He had patches of dark hair slicked to his head and a soft, rasping breath like a kitten's purr.

The bedroom door opened; Jan came into the room with a big grin on his face. "By God," he said, "a boy. A boy."

"What will you name him?" Baba asked.

"An American name," Jan said. "James. Or William. Or Robert."

Barbora looked at her son's wet patch of dark hair, his tiny face. "His name will be Karel," she said. "Karel Novak."

Except for his wheezing breath, little Karel was a quiet baby. Now that Barbora could hold him in her arms and watch him sleep, he seemed even more foreign to her than when he had been inside of her, hidden away. He was out in the world, and she was responsible for him. She felt awkward holding him in her arms, watching his tiny mouth move in his sleep. She wondered at the way his warm little body seemed to melt into hers. When he was awake, she watched his eyes move as he tried to focus on his new world.

"Yes," she told him. "This is a new world for both of us. Our new world. Our new Bohemia." When he was awake she sat in the kitchen with him, next to the stove, and told him about

winter and the tiny flakes of snow falling outside and the etchings of frost on the windows, and tried to help him suckle. She worried about his bubbly breath. She told him about spring and the city and the mud in the streets. She told him about her homeland, different from his homeland, and she sung him soft lullabies of lush fields and huntsmen and plum trees and stags. The lullabies calmed her.

When Jan came home in the evening, he cradled Karel in his arms and told him about the butcher shop they would own together. He told him about Beran's Pub where they would stop one day on the way home from work for Karel's first beer. He told him about baseball, and American schools. Maybe someday, instead of their own butcher shop, they could own their own company. They could sell their sausages all around the country. Even around the world. Why not? Barbora watched her husband and son and felt lighter than she had since her wedding.

Antonia came by to help with the cooking and cleaning and laundry. Baba stopped by to check on Barbora and the baby at the end of the first week. Barbora's breasts ached with milk because Karel would not eat much.

"This breathing," she asked, "has it not cleared up?" She gave Barbora some herbs to put in her tea, something Barbora's mother would have done for her.

"This will enrich your milk and maybe clear his lungs," Baba said. She showed Barbora how to make a mustard wrap to apply to Karel's tiny chest.

A few evenings later, Karel's wheezing became a bubbly cough. His tiny hands curled and uncurled as he cried. Barbora and Jan sat up all night with him in the kitchen, taking turns trying to comfort him. By early morning, before dawn, the coughs became gasps.

"Hurry for Baba," Barbora said. Jan left the house without his coat.

Jan was gone for a long time. Shortly after he left, Karel went quiet. She sat down in the rocking chair with him and studied his pale face; his head was topped with a tuft of downy hair. She thought she could see a bit of her father through the shape of Karel's chin. He no longer felt foreign. He was a part of her and she loved him more than she had loved anyone in her life. She began to hum him a lullaby and was still humming when Jan returned with Baba. She reached for the baby, but Barbora would not let him go. In Jan's face Barbora read confusion, then recognition as she watched him comprehend the baby's silence. He sunk to his knees in front of her, leaning toward this son who would never work beside him. Baba whispered a soft prayer.

On the Sunday after the funeral, Barbora woke to Jan snoring beside her. She eased out of bed, washed her face in the basin. The water was cold and she thought of the wind and of Antonia holding her hand at Karel's grave and of her cousin Franta standing next to Jan, both of them in dark suits. She felt too young to wear black for her own child. She walked around to Jan's side of the bed. When they were first married, Barbora would tug at one end of Jan's mustache to wake him, but now she reached out and nudged his leg under the feather *pedina*.

"Jan," she said, her voice still weak from days of sobbing. "Jan, Get up. We are going to church." Jan stirred under the covers and turned away from her. Barbora nudged him again.

"Get up, get up," she commanded. He propped himself up on one arm, lifted his head. He rubbed at his knuckles, and Barbora wondered if he had been fighting. He had come home late last night and smelled of beer. She turned her back on him and began to put on her new dress; it was black and they were going to church.

EAST TO WEST

I was raised in Sutherland, Nebraska, population 1100, just off of Interstate 80. All roads out lead east and west. So, from the time I learned the compass points in third grade, I figured those were the two ways my mother could have gone the day she disappeared, leaving me, her healthy baby son, as collateral in the arms of an unsuspecting salesman while she took a new car, a 1967 Dodge Dart, for a test drive. She must have liked the feel of it, because she never came back. After she'd been gone for an hour, the salesman called the police. I spent several days with the police chief and his wife before my grandparents finally came to claim me.

I was only ten months old at the time – I have no memories of my mother. If no one had mentioned anything to me about it, I would have grown up assuming that my grandparents were my parents. But I was a front-page story in the local newspaper, and secrets are hard to keep in a small town. So, while I grew up without a mother, I grew up knowing the story of her, knowing that she had left me behind as she drove off, in a car that wasn't hers, never to be seen again. Everyone else in town had

heard the story, too. That's how I knew what Marshall was thinking when I asked him for the keys.

We stood on the gravel lot looking up at the shiny truck tractor – a red Peterbilt with a flatbed trailer. It wasn't new – Marshall had been driving it coast to coast for nearly five years – but if it drove as good as it looked, I'd be in business. Jake Bartos, Owner/Operator. I could schedule my own routes. I could make as much or as little as I pleased without worrying about somebody else because I'd be my own boss. I could carry the loads that I wanted to carry. No more company driving.

Marshall stood next to me with both hands – his good one, and his gone one – shoved in the pockets of his overalls.

"She's a looker, alright," he said. I knew he waxed the rig himself. I could picture him climbing on it to reach the hood, holding on with his good hand and using a cloth to buff the wax with what remained of his other arm. His left hand got crushed so bad in an accident at a loading dock that the doctors in Lincoln had to take it off at the wrist.

Marshall didn't want to sell the truck, but he couldn't drive it anymore, not without his hand. The settlement he got for the accident was okay, but it'd run out sooner or later.

I climbed up and looked in the cab. It smelled of a new air freshener and the dashboard sparkled. Cleanest cab I'd ever seen

– used or not. I got in behind the wheel and looked down at Marshall.

“Nice, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Let me see how she runs.” I held out my hand for the keys. Marshall hesitated and looked off toward the field as if he hadn’t heard me.

“Give me a break, Marshall. I’m not going to steal it.”

“You never know what might run in the family,” Marshall said. He tried to say it like a joke, but he didn’t smile. He fished in his pocket for the keys and handed them up to me.

“Christ,” I said. “Get in.” His shoulders relaxed. He jogged around the front of the truck and climbed up into the passenger seat.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Buckle up.” He reached for the seat belt with his right hand and pulled it across his body. With his other arm, he tried to hold the buckle in place. I didn’t know if I should offer to help him or not, so I rolled down the window and adjusted the side view mirror until I heard the buckle click into place.

“Ready?” I asked. Marshall nodded. I turned the key in the ignition and the engine hummed to life.

“Ahh, I miss that sound, Jake. I miss it like I miss my hand.”

I drove to the freeway. Marshall rolled his window down and let his good hand hang out the window. I was only planning on driving to the next exit and back, but Marshall told me to keep going.

"Take her to Ogallala and back," he said. "You got the time for it, don't you?"

"Sure," I told him. "We'll go to Ogallala." We both knew that driving a truck without a load was money down the tubes, but it felt great to drive with no timeline to meet.

I couldn't tell you how many times I'd covered that stretch of road west out of Sutherland. Marshall too. And it was easy to fall into the trance of driving, easy to let thoughts wander along the ribbon of roadway that stretched out 1500 miles ahead and 1500 miles behind.

"You want to listen to the CB?" I asked.

"Nah, I don't feel like hearing who's out there." Marshall stretched out his legs and looked out the window. My thoughts led me, as they did whenever I was on the road, to my mother.

When I was young, I imagined that something terrible had happened to her – she crashed into a ditch and died instantly, and that was why she never came back for me. I used to have bad dreams of her driving off a cliff while calling my name to save her. In the middle of the night I'd be certain I could hear a cry of "Help me, Jake, help me..." I'd wake up in my room at my grandparents' house – the room that had been hers – with my heart beating and the branches of the tree outside bobbing in the wind like nothing had happened.

In second grade, Danny Spodore asked me about her. "She crashed in a ditch and died," I told him.

"Well, then how come they never found the wreck?"

I modified the story. She crashed into the Platte River and was washed downstream, car and all. It could have happened. One year when the Platte flooded it carried away entire barns full of hay, and my cousin Eddie swore up and down Sunday that floodwaters could carry away a tractor and the farmer driving it.

The next day at school Danny told me, "My mom said your mom was a tramp and she drove away with some guy so I should be nice to you. Do you want a piece of gum?" That was the first and only time I got in trouble for punching a kid at school. Danny wasn't nice to me after that. He pretty much steered clear. But that was okay by me.

I came up with all kinds of stories. She had witnessed a Mafia crime and was in the Witness Protection program and she couldn't ever contact me. She got a terrible brain disease that made her crazy. She was abducted by aliens.

Whenever her name came up, I automatically stopped what I was doing and listened carefully, hoping to learn something about her. My grandparents showed me pictures of her, told me about the time she tried to runaway when she was five, but mostly when I asked them about her, they looked away from me.

"Your mother," they would say, "always did what she wanted. Only ever thought of herself. You've been better off without her, Jake."

When my aunts or uncles gathered together, talking about old times, I'd occasionally catch bits of my mother in their stories. "Remember that time when Katherine..." And my heart would beat faster, my face would flush, and I'd soak it all in.

I even enlisted the help of my cousins whenever I could. I'd beg them to ask my aunts and uncles about her, and they'd come back with simplified, child-sized versions of what their parents had told them. "Your mother was always getting into trouble," one would say. "Your mother was very irresponsive and she never ate her vegetables," my youngest cousin informed me.

As for my father, no one knew much about him, though, my Aunt Junie hinted he was a young farm hand who passed through town one harvest season. There is some speculation that my mother had hoped her pregnancy would make him stay, but he was gone before I was even born. He would have had to travel one of the east-west roads out of town, too. I wonder about him, but I have nothing to go on. I've studied my own face in the mirror – my thin mouth, my angled nose – and I've compared my features to photos of my mother's face, my grandparents' faces, trying to draw out the features I might have got from him. But I think more about my mother. My father left the mere idea of me – my mother left me flesh and blood.

I can picture her smiling as she hands me to the salesman.

"Don't you have a car seat?" she asks. "I can't take him in the car without a car seat. Here. You hold him. I'll be right back."

When I was in high school, I went to the public library to research Sandhill cranes for a school report. Mrs. Wessels, the librarian, showed me how to use the microfilm system, and when I was browsing through the drawers of film, I found the archives for the Courier Times. I abandoned my crane research and scrolled through page after page of news about local farmers, new businesses, community events, until I found the article about my mother and me. Seeing it in print, seeing her high school picture next to the headline, "Woman Disappears Leaving Baby At Car Dealership", made it even more real in my memory. I found several follow up articles that had run on subsequent days. The car dealership promised not to press charges if she returned the car. I printed a copy of the first article and I folded it into my wallet. I still carry it along with a picture of her.

Before trucking school, before I could even drive, I started riding my bike along the roads leading out of town. I biked past houses, out along the fields of corn and wheat and soybeans. Once when I was eleven, I biked all the way to Paxton, 15 miles; I was so tired by the time I stopped that I had to call Grandpa to come and get me with the car. I didn't think about my mother on those rides, at least not consciously, but I began to see how big the world was outside of Sutherland. Each car that passed me, each farmhouse in the distance, each mile of road that I pedaled meant more people, more places my mother could be.

When I turned 16 and got my license, I started going farther, driving east and west on the main roads. I talked my friends into driving miles away to neighboring towns. Because Sutherland was so small and there was nothing much to do there, my friends were more than happy to follow me out of town, to Ogallala and North Platte. I even convinced a few of the guys to go with me to Lincoln a few Saturdays, four hours away. If she'd been that close, someone would have found her by now, but I couldn't help scanning the weekend crowds along Main Street, hoping to recognize her face, a face I knew only from photographs.

And then I started trucking. I figured it would be a good way to cover the territory while having a place at home. I drive from North Platte to the Atlantic through New York, Boston, Philadelphia, D.C.; and from North Platte to the Pacific hitting Denver, Reno, San Francisco. East to west, west to east, because I know those were the ways she would have gone.

Marshall shifted in his seat. In the side view mirror, I watched as a car came up on our left. As it passed, I glanced down into it. A man was driving. I turned my eyes back to the road ahead. Sometimes I can see in, sometimes not – but I can't help looking. When I'm on the road, I watch the cars pass me by and wonder if she is in one of them. I watch faces come and go at truck stops and rest areas and wonder if I've just missed her. I wonder if she is in one of the houses springing up along the highways – big, monstrous houses with views of the road.

Marshall and I drove on in silence. I'd already decided that I was going to buy the rig.

We were one exit away from Ogallala when a green Ford Explorer pulled up next to us. I looked over and I saw a woman sitting in the passenger seat, hair pulled back. At first, I thought it was my Aunt Junie, but I didn't recognize the vehicle and realized it couldn't be her. She'd be at the medical clinic now where she worked as a nurse. I pressed the gas pedal gently to keep up with them to get a second look. It wasn't Aunt Junie, but the women in the Explorer sure did resemble her. Marshall noticed the acceleration and turned to look at me, but he didn't say anything. I eased back a bit and the Explorer edged in front of me. It had California plates. Definitely not Aunt Junie, but I started to wonder if it could have been my mother. I thought I'd recognize her if I saw her, that there'd be no doubt in my mind, that I'd recognize her as I'd recognize my own face in the mirror. But time had passed. The only pictures I had were over 30 years old. And people don't always look like their pictures.

"Jake. Hey." I hadn't realized Marshall had been talking until he said my name.

I looked at him.

"Jake, what are you doing? You just passed our exit."

"Oh, I was thinking..." I didn't know what to say. I could still see the Explorer ahead of me, slowly increasing the distance. I gently increased my pressure on the accelerator, not wanting to lose them. What if it was my mother? Could it possibly be her?

"It's easy to get lost out here," Marshall said. "Once, I drove thirty miles past my exit before I realized what I'd done. I had to haul ass to get to the dock before the warehouse closed for the day."

I barely heard what he was saying. I had waited so long to find her. Maybe it was her in that car ahead of me. It probably wasn't, but I'd heard of crazy stories of siblings adopted into different families who ended up finding each other by chance forty years later. Sure it was a long shot. But what if it was her?

"I thought I saw someone I knew in that car. Someone I haven't seen in a long time."

"Oh, come on," Marshall said. "It's hard to see in those things."

"She was sitting in the passenger seat," I told him.

"Did she dump you?" he asked.

"What?" No one had referred to what she had done as "dumping" me before and I tightened my hands on the steering wheel.

"You know," he said. "Did she dump you? You get too fresh with her, lover boy?"

"It's not like that," I said and relaxed my hands.

Ahead, I saw the Explorer's right blinker start to flash. I knew a rest area was coming up soon. The woman couldn't possibly be my mother. What were the odds? I'd always looked for her, but I never really thought I'd find her. But what if it was her? I pictured her getting out of the car. Face to face, I was sure

I'd know. I imagined standing in front of her when she got out of the Explorer. She would recognize me first.

"Jake?" she'd say. "Is that you?"

"They're getting off here." I eased off the gas and put on my blinker.

My heart started pounding. The scene blossomed in my mind. She would embrace me and cry.

"I didn't want to leave you, Jake," she'd say. "I thought you'd be better off." I would show her the photo I carried in my wallet. I'd tell her I wasn't angry.

I started to feel hopeful. Maybe, after all this time, fate was working for me. I envisioned the entire chain of events leading up to this moment from my mother leaving me at the dealership to my grandparent's stories about her, and my bicycle rides and truck driving school. Marshall was a part of it, too. If he hadn't lost his hand, he wouldn't be selling his rig, and if he wasn't selling his rig, I wouldn't be on the road at the exact moment when she passed.

"It's her," I said aloud. "It has to be."

"Who?" Marshall asked.

I followed the Explorer up the exit ramp. They took the left fork for cars. I had to stay right for the truck parking.

I pulled into a spot and cut the engine. I could see the Explorer across the grassy picnic area separating the trucks from the cars. All these years, all the time I spent looking for her. I climbed down from the cab.

"What are you doing?" Marshall asked.

I tried to stay calm as I started across the grass.

A man got out on the driver's side, stood, and stretched. I walked toward them, lengthening my stride. The passenger door opened, and I froze. This was it. The woman got out. I could hear Marshall behind me, calling my name.

"Katherine?" I said. "Mom?" The woman looked up at me. Her face was entirely unfamiliar. It wasn't her.

"What?" she asked, looking at me with alarm. I stared at her, noting everything that was wrong – cheekbones too high, brown eyes, wide mouth.

The man moved in front of the Explorer and took a step toward me.

"Do we know you?" he asked. "Can I help you with something?"

I turned to look at him. Marshall came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought..."

"C'mon, Jake." Marshall led me to the men's room and waited outside while I went in and splashed cold water on my face. I hoped the man from the Explorer wouldn't come in. I had been so close.

By the time I came out, Marshall had gone back to sit in the truck.

"Sorry," I told him. "Sorry about that."

"You know," Marshall said, "sometimes I can still feel my hand. It throbs, especially at night. I know it's gone, but sometimes I can feel it like it was still there."

The Explorer had already left the rest area when we got back on the freeway. I had to drive another ten miles before reaching an exit where I could turn around and head us back to Sutherland. Marshall turned on the radio.

"Sounds good, doesn't it? I put in new speakers about a year ago."

We drove the rest of the way home without talking. I knew my mother was long gone. I suppose she just got fed up with her life and disappeared into a big city where she could start over from scratch. I picture her settled somewhere now, maybe with more children, maybe not. I tried not to look into the cars that passed, but I did anyway. I couldn't help it.

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

Imagine walking down South St. Louis Avenue on a spring evening when the moon hangs half-full above the row houses. If you can walk in a straight line and are not still humming the last tune you heard at the saloon before stepping out into the cool night, you might notice the light in a window of a house partway down the block. The light is not electric, or even gas, but a flickering flame of a kerosene lamp, set like a beacon on the sill. And if you slow your pace as you pass this, the only light on the dark street, perhaps you will notice a woman, a bundle in her arms, pacing back and forth behind the lace curtains. You might suppose she is comforting her baby. Perhaps the child is teething or has a touch of the croup, and the woman is letting it suckle a cloth dipped in a tonic of warm milk and whisky. You imagine her husband snoring upstairs, and remembering someone who might be waiting for you to arrive home, you may pick up your step and disappear into the darkness.

Should you happen to be in no hurry, you might pause a moment in the lamp's glow to wonder about the room inside and the dim woman behind the curtains. If you could wish yourself

into a shadow, you would slip through the window with the moonlight to see Barbora Novakova pacing between the entryway and the kitchen. She pauses by the front door, thinking she hears footsteps, but the noise passes and she resumes her pacing. The bundle in her arms is baby Viktor. She cradles him to her breast, not because he is crying, but because he is finally quiet, and his sleeping weight is comforting as she waits for her husband, Jan.

The pendulum wall clock in its oak casing chimes half past midnight, a single tone that fills the house. She walks slowly from the entry through the front room towards the kitchen and softly curses Jan for being so late.

"That swine," she hisses to the night. He and his cousins have formed a band to play traditional Bohemian folk songs at weddings. They call themselves "Bohemian Butchers" because each of them works at a butcher shop during the week. The name is also a joke because they are mostly self-taught musicians and have been known to butcher a song or two with their lack of skill. No one minds, because the band can be hired for just a few dollars. Jan plays the mandolin. When he tunes it, he holds the instrument up to his nose rather than to his ear. "Smell those sounds," he says, "just like the old country."

His grandfather gave him the mandolin and taught him how to play when he was a boy. The instrument is beautiful, with a dark

cherry bowl and a blonde maple face painted with a village scene above the strut. Jan can only play basic chords – he doesn't have the patience to practice – but he loves to play for an audience.

For the past several Saturdays Jan has left Barbora at home with the children for much of the day, but tonight, he is particularly late. She wonders how he spent his day. She pictures him laughing and eating wedding *kolacky* as he jokes with his cousins, Radim and Marek, in between songs. She imagines a dance floor, come alive with polka and folk songs – songs she sings to her sons so that she won't forget them. Jan has been out having fun while she is stuck at home.

Barbora is tired. She set the bread to rise that morning, she did the laundry – mostly Viktor's diapers and Jan's work clothes – and hung them to dry on the clothesline behind the house. Viktor fussed all day and her older son, Vaclav, was not much better. He clung to her in line at the grocers and whined for a pastry. On the way home, baby in one arm, groceries in the other, she turned to see Vaclav crouching in a mud puddle, soaked and dirty. He cried all through his bath as she scrubbed him clean. Thankfully, he, too, is now sound asleep, tucked in his bed upstairs.

When Barbora reaches the dark kitchen she pauses to shift Viktor from one shoulder to the other. She can make out the dim

outline of Jan's dinner on the table. The potato *brambory* have long been cold and even in the dark she can see the greasy shine of the boiled sausage.

"There is his breakfast," she tells the shadows. The darkness makes the room ugly. The squat coal stove hunches in the corner like a beggar, a poor cousin to the white enameled wood stove that she learned to cook on in Bohemia. She knows the house was built in the 1880s and trusts it was a fine house then. But now, the house looks its age. The walnut floors are scratched and stained. The most-traveled boards are worn into distinct paths. They creak underfoot. The washbasin is chipped; the wall shows signs of slow cracks. She feels that she, too, is aging with the house while her husband is away.

She closes her eyes and stands in the quiet kitchen, trying to summon up the distant contentment she felt earlier that morning with her boys gathered around the table. The kitchen still holds the faint aroma of caraway seeds from the morning. Four-year-old Vaclav sat at the edge of his chair sipping his milk tea. His small legs dangled far above the floor. Baby Viktor played with a wooden spoon on the rug, a string of drool hanging off his chin. And although she wished he was not going out, Barbora had to admit that Jan, eating his fried egg at the table, looked so nice in his costume – black trousers, white shirt, and navy blue felt vest embroidered with vines of bright

green, red and yellow piping. Jan was cheerful on what he called his "music days." I would be cheerful, too, thinks Barbora, if I went to weddings all the time.

The last wedding she attended had been her own. She opens her eyes and counts the years. Seven. Seven years and now she has two sons. Ten years ago, she thinks, I was yet in Bohemia. She remembers her childhood home outside the village of Breznice. Rooster crows woke her each morning and the sun rose over fields of hay and barley.

In her village, when there was a wedding, everyone in the town was invited. All the kitchens in the village were busy with women baking sweet poppy seed buns and wedding *kolacky*. The bride's closest friends helped her weave a rosemary crown. But in the city, there are so many people. So many languages. Standing in the dark, her world shrinks to the size of her kitchen.

That morning, after finishing his breakfast, Jan leapt up from the table.

"My sweet wife," he asked, "may I have this dance?" He bowed low and reached for her hand.

"Wait, wait," she said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "You'll get flour all over your trousers."

He waltzed her a few times around the small kitchen, and she couldn't help but laugh and sing along with him. The boys

watched them and clapped. "You see," he said, "our kitchen is as good as a dance hall." He bowed again and kissed her hand before releasing it.

"It would be nicer if you would give it a new coat of paint," she said.

Instead of answering her he bowed. "I am off to join the boys at the Kasperek wedding."

"You'll be home for supper, won't you?" Barbora had asked. "You promised this time you wouldn't be so late. The beer is for the guests, not for the musicians."

Jan had smiled. "My wife, I assure you, I'll be home before dark."

As she turns to leave the kitchen, Barbora recalls Jan's words, and her anger melts to worry. Why is he so late? Last week, the local Czech language paper, *Bohemian Herald*, had reported on a man beaten nearly to death by an Italian gang after an argument at a tavern. Jan could be lying in the dirty street, his shirt bloodied, his vest torn. It didn't take much for men to start a fight, and Jan had a big mouth. She reasons he is with his cousins and if anything happened to him, they would come for her. By the time she reaches the entryway, her worry has abated and her anger rises again. "If he comes home drunk...", she threatens the darkness.

Viktor wakes and squirms, pushing his hand against her shoulder.

"*Tak, tak.* Hush, *milacku.*" Barbora tucks the blanket around him. She sits down in the rocking chair and gently lulls him back to sleep. She wishes she could sleep, too – but not until Jan returns. That is her life. She cooks for him. She does his laundry. She mothers his children. And she waits for him to come home.

Shortly after the clock chimes one o'clock, Barbora hears Jan at the front steps. From the rocker, she watches him open the door slowly and creep in. He takes off his hat to hang on the hook next to the door, but he misses, and the hat falls to the floor.

The floorboards creak as Barbora stands from the rocker. Jan turns toward her.

"My wife," he slurs cheerfully, "weddings are so grand. Let's get married." He steps toward her. One side of his shirt is un-tucked. He is carrying his mandolin without its case, and she can see a broken string, a sign of a good time. She can't blame Jan for being late – she would stay out late, too, if she had a choice.

"My wife," he starts again. Without a word, Barbora hands Viktor to her husband and takes the mandolin from him. She has never held the instrument outside of its case, and it is lighter

than she expects it to be – much lighter than Viktor. She carries it to the front door, which stands open behind Jan, and looks down the silent street. The night air is cool and damp; the dust of the day has long since settled. Somewhere behind the dark silhouettes of identical row houses lies an unknown city. But, this street, this house...this is her world. She runs her fingers across the remaining strings and listens to the dissatisfied chord. Then, holding the mandolin by its slender neck, she smashes it against the front steps. The dark cherry bowl splinters, and the strings vibrate with a protest of notes. She drops the pieces onto the ground.

Barbora closes and locks the front door, walks to the lantern and extinguishes the light. Now is the time to slip away as shadows merge into night. The moon hangs half-full above the row houses, and you, like Jan, have sobered. You hurry away down the street with the instrument's last notes echoing in your mind. Barbora climbs the stairs to the bedroom. Jan stands dumbstruck in the entryway, unable to react with Viktor asleep in his arms.

END OF THE LINE

The first thing Hana Kovarek saw upon putting on her glasses one Monday morning was a squirrel falling from a tree. It had been climbing in the finer branches of a large maple in the neighbor's yard, and as she sat up in bed and looked out the bedroom window, she caught the squirrel in mid-fall, its legs splayed out, its tail flaring like a plume of rusty smoke. The base of the tree was behind a fence, and Hana missed the landing.

Todd, her boyfriend, was still asleep next to her with his brown hair matted against the backdrop of pale yellow pillowcase; she watched the bedcovers rise gently around him as he breathed.

"Did you see that?" she asked as she poked him from his sleep. "A squirrel just fell out of the tree."

"Huh?" He looked at the clock on the nightstand and rolled away from her, covering his head with the pillow. "Wake me when you get out of the shower, okay?"

Hana had heard of squirrels falling from power lines, after being electrocuted, she presumed. But from a tree? Squirrels

lived in trees. The fall seemed unnatural. The image stuck with her as she showered, brushed her teeth, and dressed for work. Todd was up and eating a bowl of cereal in the kitchen by the time she got out of the bathroom. He stuffed large bites into his mouth and chewed vigorously. He once told her he liked to eat his cereal as quickly as possible so it wouldn't get mushy. She had a hard time watching him eat like that three or four mornings a week. That was how often he slept at her house. She had only slept at his house twice; both times she made him clean the bathroom, including the toilet, before she used it, and after she closed the door on him, she cleaned the toilet again in case he had missed anything. She hadn't dared pull back the shower curtain to see what state the tub was in.

Todd put his bowl in the sink and gave her a peck on the cheek. His face was rough with morning stubble. Early in their relationship Hana had encouraged him to shave at his own house; she didn't like the idea of little hairs littering her bathroom sink.

"I'll call you later," he said. She nodded and watched him leave. He was reliable. He would call her that afternoon at 3:30. That was when he always called. She guessed someday they'd get married, though they hadn't talked about it yet. Her parent's liked him.

Hana finished her cereal, washed both bowls, and headed for work. The morning was clear – a rare spring day without a cloud in the sky, though she carried her umbrella in her bag – just in case. She didn't see any squirrels as she walked down the hill to the MAX station where she caught the commuter train to downtown. As the train rattled along the tracks, Hana replayed the squirrel's fall over and over. In some versions, the squirrel flailed its limbs, a look of terror on its rodent face, its yellow teeth punctuating an open mouth. That thought mutated to an image of Todd's mouth as he furiously crunched his cereal. Or it could have been exhilaration, a gleam in the squirrel's eyes to suggest the jump was intentional and without regard for consequences. Maybe the squirrel simply had been surprised like her toddler niece when she lost her balance and fell backwards.

She should have told Todd more about it. She should have looked over the neighbor's fence. Now, she'd have to wait until she got home.

The office was quiet when Hana arrived. Only Bob, her department manager, was in; ever since his divorce, no matter how early it was, Bob would be in his office. Hana wondered if he slept there. His head was down on his desk, and she couldn't tell if he was crying, sleeping, or merely resting before getting started on the week ahead.

Officially, Hana's title was a "Conference Associate" for the Education Resource Clearinghouse. At the next company banquet, she would be awarded a silver pen with her name embossed on the casing. Five years of service. She could name every conference venue in town and knew by heart how many people each venue could accommodate, if they allowed outside food, if they required clients to use their in-house A/V equipment. She knew who to call to get the best deal on table skirts and coverings. She knew which vendors to avoid, and she knew the best strategy for printing mail merge letters to large groups of people. She liked efficiency and order. The first thing she did after sitting down at her desk was to write up a to-do-list. Today's list included calling the Marriot to find out when their Olympic room was available in August; confirming the number of vegetarian meals for a small conference taking place on Thursday; and sending letters to vendors for the big Education and Technology Conference that was coming up in October. The ET conference was the department's largest and most visible event; thousands of educators from around the country attended.

Unofficially, Hana was Janet's secretary. Janet was responsible for finding speakers, subject matter, and funding for the conferences. She took credit for the planning, even though Hana handled most of the logistics.

The offices of the professional staff were along the outside wall of the floor and had large windows looking out at the city. Hana's desk was out in the open. She had a U-shaped workspace separated from other support staff by desktop bookshelves. She could peer through one bookshelf to see Mark, who worked on content for the conference team webpage. Mark liked to refer to the ET Conference as the Alien Convention.

"It was the strangest thing," she told him when he arrived at nine and sat down at his desk. "Have you ever heard of a squirrel falling from a tree?"

"Sure," he answered. "Squirrels fall from trees all the time." She could see Mark's dark eyes looking at her through the shelves.

"They do?" she asked.

"Yeah, after someone shoots them." At one time, before she met Todd, Hana had found Mark attractive. But she observed that his looks diminished each time he opened his mouth. She was glad she had listened to her friend Marissa's rules of dating: never date a roommate, never date someone who makes less money than you, and never, under any circumstances, date a co-worker. Each time Marissa experienced a dating mishap, she added a new rule to her list. Currently she was working on "never date anyone who still lives with his mother."

Hana opened the file with the vendor letter. It was same letter she used last year with the only variation being the dates and the cost for a table. She meant to re-check it for errors. Instead, she thought about a night when she drove three laps around the city just to see her favorite views of the skyline. She drove I-405 down to I-5, across the river on the Marquam Bridge where the freeway curved and the city glittered with lights. She continued up I-5 to the Freemont Bridge where she could see the twinkling of lights in the west hills and the city again – more distant from here and elegant, she thought. It did not seem right to drive the same route for no reason other than the view, even though it was a night when she and Todd didn't have plans to get together, and she was going home to watch television. She thought about driving to his house, but instead took a third lap. The lights shining against the darkness made the city seem so clean and orderly. Order held everything together.

Hana struggled to concentrate on the vendor letter. She realized she had missed her morning coffee. Every morning on her way to the MAX station she stopped at a coffee shop for her daily nonfat 16oz double latte. This morning, she had walked right by it. As a quick fix, she decided to brave the coffee in the break room.

She had to pass the copy machine, and Larry was standing in the middle of the hallway with his hands on his hips.

"Hana. Hi." He gestured at the copier. "It's not working."

Larry was also part of the conference team, but he had fewer responsibilities than she did. His job was to make copies, help with mailings, order supplies, assemble information packets and handle all non-technical audio/visual needs like flip charts, easels, and overhead projectors. He was older than Hana by at least twenty years and had transferred to her department from Rural Education. He was a nice enough guy but tricky to work with because his problem solving skills were dismal. He used to work as a mortician, but the stress got to be too much for him.

"You get called at all hours," he told her once. "And let me tell you, sometimes it's not easy making the dead look presentable. People think gravity is tough to overcome now, wait till they're dead. That's when gravity really gets you."

Hana guessed the fumes from the embalming fluids hadn't helped him any either.

"The copier jammed. I don't why. It started out just fine."

The copier door was open. Hana knelt down and turned one of the knobs. She could see a sheet of crumpled paper tangled in the machine and reached in to get it.

"Hey, if you ever want to change careers, I could put you in touch with the county coroner. He's an old friend of mine. Assistants make forty dollars an hour."

"Really?" Hana asked. That seemed like a lot of money.

Larry added as an afterthought, "Yeah, you have to be able to stand the sight of maggots though."

She pretended that she hadn't heard him. Instead, she pulled the paper out of the copier and handed it to him.

"It doesn't like staples," she said.

His eyes widened. "I don't know how that got in there."

Hana left him to puzzle it out on his own.

The break room was empty. Florescent lights buzzed overhead. The coffee pot was half-full. She poured herself a cup; she could tell by the smell that it was going to taste bad and added an extra sugar packet along with some non-dairy creamer even though she had avoided the stuff ever since Todd had told her how flammable it was.

She took a round-a-bout way back to her desk to avoid running into Larry again, and found herself thinking about the squirrel. She would never have thought to imagine a squirrel falling – that and the fact that she saw it just after putting on her glasses. What were the chances? It seemed so random, so unexpected, and ominous in a way. The phrase "falling squirrel of the apocalypse" entered her thoughts, and she tried to figure

out the connection in her head between "four horsemen" and "falling squirrel."

A message from the executive director had appeared in her email inbox. The email was a reminder for an all-staff meeting regarding some organizational policy changes. The meeting was set for that afternoon. Although the email made clear that the meeting was mandatory, Dr. Williams concluded with the line, "Your attendance will be muchly appreciated," as if attendance was voluntary. As if "muchly" existed as a word anywhere in modern times outside the Oxford English Dictionary.

Dr. Williams had a doctorate degree in education and insisted her name be prefaced with her title. Her writing skills were atrocious and her signature consisted of three inverted humps followed by an inch long wave of a line. Mark shook his head when he saw it.

"So easy to forge. Too bad I'm an honest citizen."

Hana found it difficult to respect Dr. Williams, and not just for her lazy signature. She addressed everyone as either "Sir" or "Hon", depending on the gender, and Hana was certain she didn't know the names of most of her staff.

Hana stared at the email, particularly at the term "muchly appreciated." The harder she stared, the funnier it looked. She wondered if Dr. Williams experienced trauma with sod as a child. "Mulchy appreciated." Hana doubted that "mulchy" was even a

word, though it sounded more convincing than "muchly." She looked at Mark through the bookshelf.

"Did you see the reminder email?" she asked.

"I muchly did," Mark answered.

"Do you think she means mulchy?"

"Can you use that in a sentence?"

Hana thought for a moment and said, "My garden is pathetic, but if I cover it with compost and bark dust it will be mulchy appreciated."

"I don't know about that," Mark said. "Don't quit your day job."

Sometimes she thought about quitting, but she didn't know what else she'd do. The clearinghouse offered great benefits, including a retirement plan, and she had house payments to make, her car to pay off, student loans.

She tried to focus on something else and started to write up a list of supplies she needed Larry to order. Her phone rang, and when she answered it, she said, "Hello," as if she were answering her phone at home. She looked up to see if Mark had noticed, but he was hunched over his keyboard.

"Hana?"

She recognized the voice.

"Dell." Of Dell's Audio/Visual & More.

"I'm just getting back to you about that projector. Are you sure you don't want rear projection? In that room, it would work really well." Ever since she started working with him, he'd been pushing rear projection. It was almost twice as expensive as standard front projection. Janet thought it was a waste of money.

"Half the people in the room don't pay any attention anyway." That was Janet's favorite catch line. Hana realized that Janet hadn't come in yet and remembered she was out for a meeting with someone from the Department of Education in Salem.

"Let's give it a try," she told Dell.

"Okay? Okay you mean yes? Rear projection?"

She couldn't believe how happy he sounded.

"Sure. Rear projection. We'll do it."

Dell continued to jabber on the line. "This will be great. You won't be sorry. Oh yeah."

She hung up the phone. Hana felt as though she had separated from herself and someone else was sitting in her chair. Janet was going to kill her. Maybe she could make up the cost difference somewhere else. A lighter lunch perhaps.

Her computer sat squarely in front of her. Her inbox and outbox were aligned with the corners of her desk. Everything was the same. Yet she felt different. The break room coffee was bitter, even with all the sugar she put in. She considered

calling Marissa, who worked at a law firm a few blocks away, to see if she wanted to meet for lunch, but she didn't feel like listening to Marissa talk about her new boyfriend. Hana remembered a time when she could make people laugh. Now she listened and organized things. It wasn't very funny.

To make herself feel better, she called Ingrid Burstein and told her that her session was cancelled because not enough people signed up for it. That was not true. Ingrid was actually quite popular as a presenter, but she was very high maintenance. This year she had insisted on having fresh-squeezed lime juice with honey and soda water in her room. Last year, it had been hot – but not too hot – water, ginger ale and lemon.

Ingrid had clearly been surprised by the news.

"Not enough people?"

"Yes," Hana lied. "Only five people signed up for you. We've had to cancel other speakers, too. It's the economy. People don't want to travel. Sorry." She hung up before Ingrid could ask more questions.

It was grounds for being fired. But she also felt a sense of lightness, as though she had left herself sitting at her desk and someone else had replaced her. Someone who knew what she wanted to do and did it.

Hana looked at her to-do list. She had not accomplished one thing on it. Surprisingly, she didn't care. How had she spent

her morning? She picked up the phone and called the Marriot. When she had booked the Olympic room, she hung up the phone, picked up a red pen and marked that item off on her list. One thing done. On a good day, she'd have half her list done by now.

Hana left for lunch at her usual time, 11:45. She liked to go a little bit before noon to beat the lines at the food carts surrounding the downtown square. Monday was her day to get a taco salad at the Honkin' Huge burrito cart. She sat on a bench and watched the pigeons scavenging for food in the middle of the square. They bobbed on pink stick legs with a mixture of curiosity – is that food? – and stupidity – is that food? As she ate she wondered if she should be worried about the morning's lack of productivity. She had, in fact, been counter-productive. How would she explain it? She'd have to call back Dell and Ingrid to set things straight.

When she finished eating, she got up to go back to the office. The square had filled up with people on their lunch break. A group of kids, all in black, was playing hacky sack in the middle of the square. A man stood on the corner with a sign that read "Jesus Saves." The lines for the food carts were at least five people deep. Everything looked ordinary with each person going about his or her day. Everything was fine. But she didn't want to go back to work. She always went back to work

after lunch. She had already broken the day's routine. Why stop now?

Instead of returning to the office, she headed to the MAX station and boarded the westbound train, choosing a seat in the middle, facing the window on the opposite side of the car. She noticed, for the first time, that the seats were fairly comfortable. As the train left downtown and gradually approached her stop, she wondered what would happen if she didn't get off, if she just kept on riding to the end of the line. When the doors opened at her stop, she remained seated.

She rode all the way to the west end of the line, then back, passing her stop again and going all the way to the east end. The line ended way out in the suburbs and she got off to find a restroom. The stop was much quieter than the one she waited at each morning. Buildings were lower, and she could see Mt. Hood hovering in the not so distant horizon. While she waited for the next train to pull up, she wondered what it would be like to live out here, at the end of the line. She was the only one at the stop wearing a suit jacket that matched her skirt. There were a couple of high-school aged kids, skipping school, she assumed, and a mother with a baby in a stroller. A man in faded jeans and a tee-shirt smoked a cigarette at the end of the platform.

She re-boarded the train and continued to ride for the rest of the day. She tried not to think about anything. Instead, she ignored any thoughts about work that drifted into her mind and focused on the people getting on and off the train. Mothers with small children, kids on their way home from school, men in pressed suits and women wearing sensible pumps. Her favorite part of the ride was crossing over the river on the Steele Bridge. Sometimes, she could see small boats below her. And birds – lots of birds. Ducks floated in the river, gulls soared overhead, and at dusk, pigeons flocked to the bridge to roost in the girders. At one point, she realized she had missed Todd's afternoon call and decided he would be surprised more than worried when she didn't return her call. She wondered if anyone at the office had noticed she was gone.

For the first time, she had a seat during rush hour traffic. Lights flickered on around the city. She watched the evening crowd, people on their way to and then from restaurants, bars, late shifts at work. She had never sat on the train and watched things before. She was amazed at all of the trees in the city. She knew most of them were Doug-firs. She had dated a guy who told her again and again that a Doug-fir was not a true fir. She started counting after she heard him say it for the third time. Marissa called him Doug even though his name was Steve. Whatever happened to him, Hana wondered. He was like that

squirrel. He fell out of her life and disappeared. Maybe she'd never know what happened to either of them. It'd be too dark now to see into the neighbor's yard.

Shortly after midnight, the MAX stopped running. Hana had fallen asleep and did not remember reaching the end of the line. She woke up on a quiet, empty train feeling more content than she could ever remember feeling. She felt so content, that she did not want to get up when the driver told her she needed to leave. Instead, she just sat there, smiling at him because she didn't know what else to do.

CHICAGO 1921

If the flow of the Chicago River had not been reversed in the latter part of the 19th century, Roman Pavlak's body might never have been found. He would have been carried out into Lake Michigan where he would have sunk down to the cold depths of the late summer lake. But in 1921, while gangs were staking out their bootlegging territories, the Chicago River carefully sucked water in from the lake through a series of locks, carrying it, along with the city's sewage, toward St. Louis.

Henry Smallhouse worked as a bridge tender in the East Tower of the Lake Street Bridge over the Chicago River's south fork. He took the dawn shift, relieving Max Harwell of the night shift at 5 a.m. Henry liked this shift. He had worked it for almost seven years. He liked to watch the water on the river light up with the sun as it rose behind him. The western sky turned from black to purple to periwinkle and finally to blue as more and more pedestrians and buggies and automobiles crossed the bridge. As the city awakened, the elevated train rattled over the bridge's upper deck, a clackity rumble that shook the floor beneath him. Henry's job was to wait for ships traveling

down the river. He engaged the mechanism for raising the bridge – a sensitive, complicated system of pulleys and levers – and signaled the ship captain when the passage was clear. Henry was the one to first spot Roman's body as it bobbed, face down, in the morning sun. A shame to see that, he thought, a shame. Henry reached for the telephone.

"Jimmy," he said to the dispatcher, "we've got another one."

Barbora Novakova set a plate of cold boiled potatoes on the table. The August morning was already too warm for cooking. Breakfast would be the cold potatoes and leftover ham. Twelve-year-old Vaclav sat at the table, closest to the back door, chewing thoughtfully. Viktor, several years younger, started to ask for some tea, speaking in English. Barbora smacked him lightly on the head.

"In Czech," she said. "At home you will speak Czech." Viktor frowned.

"*Ja chci caj,*" he said. Vaclav stuck out his tongue at his younger brother.

"Oh, go easy on him," said Jan. "The boys need to learn good English. It wouldn't hurt you to learn some, too."

"Jan, we may be in America, but we are Czech and at home, our boys will speak Czech." She set a cup of tea down in front of Viktor.

"Dejkuji," he said.

"Prosim." She ruffled his hair. "That's my Czech son."

Part way through breakfast, someone knocked on the back door. Vaclav leaned out from his seat and unlatched the door to let in Anna Pavlakova.

"Is my Roman here?" She was still wearing her night skirt under her apron, which was embroidered with pale blue butterflies. Her hair, usually pulled back in a neat bun, hung loose in strands. "Have you seen him? He didn't come home last night."

Anna was Roman's young wife. They did not yet have any children, and Anna fawned over him like a mother hen. This was not the first time she had come looking for him. Anna creased the folds on her apron. "I don't know if I should be angry or worried."

"I haven't seen him since late yesterday morning," Barbora told her. She looked at Jan, who put a piece of ham in his mouth.

"Oh, don't worry about that rascally cousin of mine," Jan said between bites. "Perhaps he's out buying you something nice. I'm sure he'll turn up."

"More likely he's out buying something for himself," Anna said. "He's probably under a table somewhere..."

Barbora saw Jan turn to look at her. She knew he didn't want her to mention the still in the cellar. His father had taught him how to brew *slivovice*, a potent plum schnapps, before he was old enough to drink it. And now, if he was making some larger batches to sell on the side with his cousins, well, who could blame him for wanting to make some extra money? When the weather was not so hot, Barbora didn't mind helping mash the fruit. How could the government think it could stop men from drinking?

"Anna." Barbora touched her gently on the arm. "Go home and dress yourself properly. If we see Roman, we'll be sure to send him home. He's probably there now."

"Thank you," Anna said. "I'll go try Uncle Pavel's house. Maybe he's there." She left through the back door, letting it slam after her.

"Jan," Barbora asked, leaning toward her husband, "when did you see Roman last? He picked up a few bottles here yesterday morning."

"Oh, I don't know. He'll turn up. You know how young men are."

"Well." Barbora reached over and tugged a graying end of Jan's moustache. "If Roman is anything like you were when you were young, Anna will have nothing but trouble."

In the mid-morning, after Jan left for work and the boys had gone out to run wild in the neighborhood, Barbora stood in the yard behind the house hanging the laundry. The day was already warm and the humidity was building. Barbora pulled a shirt from the laundry basket and pinned it on the line. She hoped the breeze would continue to blow from Lake Michigan. When the wind blew from the stockyards, the rancid smell of slaughter clung to her nostrils and stuck to the clothes – the smell could be particularly bad on humid days. Barbora picked a few wooden clothespins out of her apron pocket. She wondered if the smell of the stockyard ever carried all the way to the north side of town, where fine ladies and gentlemen lived in their elegant brownstones. She had been up there once, the day Jan had proposed to her at the Lincoln Park Zoo. They rode the trolley up and spent the afternoon wandering along gravel paths at the zoo and then had ventured into the surrounding neighborhood. Everyone spoke English, and she had felt like she was in a foreign city. In their neighborhood on the city's south side, everyone spoke Czech or Slovak or Polish. She had been in

Chicago for almost twenty years and had never needed to use a word of English.

Barbora held up a pair of her oldest son's knickers. Vaclav was growing quickly. Soon he would wear trousers and the knickers would get passed on to Viktor.

A crow flew across the yard and landed on the neighbor's roof. The darkness of its feathers reminded her of Roman with his head of dark curls. She wondered if he had turned up yet. He had stopped by at about this time the day before to pick up some bottles of *slivovice* from the basement. Jan brewed the stuff, but Roman and his brother, Marek, were responsible for delivering it to various establishments in the neighborhood.

Barbora had been scrubbing the kitchen floor when he arrived.

"I'll just be a moment, Madame," he said. He bowed low to her, in jest.

"Don't you track dirt across my clean floor," she said.

"Not a problem." He was carrying two empty satchels. He put one down on the floor, stepped onto it, placed the second satchel, stepped on it, picked up the first. He proceeded this way across the kitchen floor. "Not a speck of dirt on your floor," he said and disappeared down the cellar stairs. When he came back up, his satchels were full with bottles of *slivovice*, so he had nothing to step on. Barbora laughed.

"I guess I'm stuck now," he said when he realized his mistake. Barbora tossed him a couple of rags to use as stepping stones, and he made his way to the back door, pretending to lose his balance and threatening her clean floor with every step.

Barbora remembered watching him leave the yard with his satchels weighed down with the bottles.

"See you soon," he said.

"You be careful, Roman Pavlak," she'd called after him. He'd tipped his cap at her and was gone.

Barbora looked up at the crow, preening itself on the neighbor's roof. It shook out its feathers. She hoped Roman hadn't been caught. The Czech language paper ran stories daily about raids on speakeasies and arrests that were made. When Jan came home, she would ask him to take apart the still, just for a little while.

Frank Volchek sat in his office off the kitchen at the Little Bohemia Restaurant. The restaurant had been in his family for nearly 20 years. His father had been among the first wave of Bohemians to come to Chicago. He had worked in the slaughter houses and then as a meat distributor. He worked and he saved and he opened the restaurant, close to Boty's Shoe Repair and Strechek's Bakery, down the street from the Savings & Loan building.

Volchek thumbed through his account books. A small fan on his desk did little to cool him. There had been a time when it was enough to open at six o'clock and serve only supper. But now, to make ends meet, he had started to open the restaurant at noon to attract a lunch time crowd for lighter fare – garlic soup, boiled sausage, fruit dumplings. From the kitchen he could hear Jiri, the prep cook, dicing potatoes, carrots, onions with a steady chop, chop, chop. Volchek's wife, Irena, would be in soon to start the main courses for supper. The restaurant survived the Great War. He supposed it would survive Prohibition.

Mr. Cerny, the head waiter, knocked on the open office door.

"Frank, a gentleman is asking for some Prague lemonade." Volchek wiped his brow with a handkerchief and leaned back in his chair.

"Do you know him, Karel?"

"He's been in a few times lately, but he's not a regular."

Volchek looked at the pencil on his desk. "Tell him we don't have any."

Mr. Cerny nodded and headed out to the dining room.

Under a false bottom in his desk's file drawer, he had four bottles of *slivovice*, known to his trusted customers as Prague lemonade. Roman Pavlak had delivered them the day before and had

fortunately arrived late enough to miss the two men who visited Volchek in his office. They wore neat suits, and at first, Volchek took them to be salesmen. But after shaking his hand, the taller of the two men said, "We hear you've been selling spirits."

"Nonsense," he told them. "Spirits are illegal." He spoke with confidence, but he felt his face flush. He hoped the men didn't notice.

"Oh, well we heard about some spirits," the taller man repeated. "But sometimes, our sources can be misinformed."

The smaller man, who remained silent and stern-faced, picked up a pencil from Volchek's desk and held it with both hands. He examined it carefully, turning it between his fingers as the other man continued.

"This is a nice place here. It'd be a real shame if something bad happened."

"Well, I certainly don't anticipate any trouble," he told the man. Volchek's could feel perspiration forming on his forehead.

"That's real good," the taller man said. Volchek followed his eyes to the pencil that the other man had shifted to one hand and was spinning between his fingers.

The smaller man gave Volchek a half grin and set the pencil down gently on the desk.

"You have a nice day," the tall man had said, and the two men had left the office.

Volchek stood and walked to the back of the restaurant for some air. The delivery door was propped open in a futile attempt to encourage a breeze into the kitchen. Volchek had been up all night thinking about the two men, their hard faces, their neat suits. Yesterday had been a lucky day. Who knew what would have happened if Roman had showed up when the other men were there? Even more disheartening was his mother-in-law who claimed to be able to read the future in tea leaves. That morning before he left for the restaurant, she had tugged at his shirt.

"You, Frank, you be careful. The tea. It looks bitter today." He didn't believe in the old woman's claims, but today, he wondered. What if she was right? What if he did need to be extra careful? He decided to leave the bottles hidden for a while.

Anna spent the day visiting all the places she could think of where Roman might be. His brother's house, his cousin's, his father's butcher shop, the field where boys played baseball. Although no one had seen him since earlier the day before, she had a feeling of having just missed him, as though he was moving around the city, one step ahead of her. In the late afternoon, she stopped by the butcher shop for the second time. Uncle Pavel

stood at the counter, weighing pieces of stew meat on a scale. He rubbed at his ear with the back of his wrist.

"Roman hasn't been by today," he told Anna. "He was supposed to be here."

Jan came out from the back of the shop. "No Roman yet?" he asked. "Go by the Little Bohemia Restaurant. Ask Mr. Volchek if he's seen Roman. Come back here after."

Anna had been to the Little Bohemia Restaurant once before. Roman took her there before a dance. She remembered eating pork roast with sour cabbage and the lightest dumplings she could ever imagine.

A few customers sat scattered around the restaurant. When Anna entered she saw a dark-haired man taking an order at a table and she thought for a moment that he was Roman. Perhaps he had broken something and was working it off. She was about to call out his name when he turned, and she saw that it wasn't Roman at all, but an older man, the waiter.

"A table, Madam?" he asked her.

"No." She was unsettled by her mistake and her eyes could not focus directly on the man, but worked around his face, concentrating on his dark hair, which she realized was not like Roman's at all.

"Is Mr. Volchek here? I'd like to speak to him please. My name is Anna Pavlakova."

"Just a moment, Madam." He turned and walked through a door at the back of the dining room.

Anna stood in the restaurant. A fan turned slowly on a chair by the door. A fly buzzed between the front plate glass window and the lace-trimmed curtains that were closed to filter the sun.

After a moment, a rotund man with a bald crown framed by straight, silver hair came out from the back.

"I'm Volchek." He bowed his head in greeting. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you have seen my husband, Roman Pavlak? His cousin Jan thought he might have come by here. He hasn't been home since yesterday morning."

Volchek paused for a moment. He did not like that Roman was missing and resolved to get rid of bottles of *slivovice* altogether. "Roman was here at lunch yesterday, but I haven't seen him since."

Anna started to cry. Volchek put a hand on her shoulder.

"There, there," he said. "I'm sure he'll turn up." He wished he could be more reassuring, but in his mind he was picturing the two men who had been in the day before.

"Madam," Volchek pointed to a table. "Won't you sit and have some soup. My wife makes excellent potato dill soup. Have you eaten anything today? It'll make you feel better." Volchek

nodded to Mr. Cerny who hurried back to the kitchen. Anna sat and sobbed at the table. Irena brought a bowl of soup out of the kitchen and sat down with Anna. She sent Volchek away with a wave of her hand.

Hot summer nights in Chicago often end in storms – if not a thunderstorm that breaks the heat of the day, then a lightning storm over the lake with flashes of light illuminating Lake Michigan with unsettling silence. Niall sat in the car, waiting for Patrick to come back. He watched the sky flare up to the east and hoped for some rain to cool things off. He had felt too hot for days. He rubbed his sore knuckles. He wasn't sure, but yesterday, he may have killed a man. At the very least, he and Patrick beat him badly. And the river probably finished the guy off.

“That's the nature of the bootleg business, my friend,” Patrick had told him. “You show one of 'em that you mean business, and before long the rest are eating out of your hand. We'll go back to that bohunk restaurant in a couple of weeks and I can guarantee you a sale. Stick with me. You'll be able to get your own automobile in no time.”

Niall wasn't sure he liked the bootleg business, but it was better than shoveling guts at the stockyard. Niall watched as a man and a woman turned the corner and headed along the sidewalk.

They made for an odd pair. The man had a wide handlebar moustache. The woman looked too young to be his wife, too old to be his daughter. She was wearing an apron with blue butterflies on it and had beautiful hair that hung haphazardly around her oval face. Both the man and the woman wore serious expressions, their eyebrows drawn together. As they passed the car, Niall could hear them talking in a language he recognized as Slavic. Polish or Czech perhaps. The pair seemed to be in a hurry and soon disappeared down the street.

A crack of thunder shook the sky. A few moments later, rain began to fall. Niall put his hand out the window and let the drops cool his knuckles.

PAPILIO TROILUS LINNAEUS

The summer Grandma Potter went missing was the hottest on record according to the Forest Service office over in Butte Falls. Pete and I had graduated high school that June on a day so hot our entire class wore bathing suits under our gowns and went straight from the school to the river after the ceremony. The next day, I started my waitressing job at Bessie's Diner. I'd worked there every summer since I was fifteen.

Thursdays were usually busy. The locals from town spent the first part of the day getting their bait shops, motels, and RV camps set up for the weekend crowds that started pouring into Caston on Friday afternoons. No one wanted to deal with cooking after cleaning all morning long, so come mid-day on Thursdays, the diner was normally packed. But in the heat, nobody wanted to be bothered with eating much of anything unless it came right out of a refrigerator and could be eaten in front of a fan.

Even though Bessie turned off the griddle after breakfast and decided we'd serve only cold sandwiches and salads for lunch, the grease still clung to the air and made me feel sticky whenever I went back to the kitchen.

The diner was fairly quiet. An older couple sat at a table picking at their sandwiches and not talking to each other. Three women sat in the booth near the door. Their car, with Ohio plates, was parked outside next to my truck and was packed to the windows with bags, hiking boots and sun hats. Frank and Earl sat at the counter in their usual seats. The two of them were fixtures at the diner. Some people thought they were both sweet on Bessie and didn't want to leave the other alone with her. Bessie was quick to put out any smoldering rumors.

"I'm holding out for a rich, younger man," she'd say. "I don't work so hard keeping up my looks for those old birds." For Bessie, keeping up her looks meant making sure her graying hair was tucked neatly under a bandana and her nails were kept short but evenly painted with fingernail polish. She painted her nails on Sunday evenings and had a fresh color on Mondays. "Just because we live off the beaten path doesn't mean we gotta look like we do."

Some folks wondered if Frank and Earl weren't sweet on each other. Often, the two men showed up together, and they almost always left together. No matter the heat, Earl wore a black baseball cap with a white and gold CAT construction logo stitched on the front and drank hot coffee, no cream or sugar, refill after refill. Frank, who was slightly less set in his

ways, drank tea – hot in the winter, iced in warmer weather. Occasionally he would drink lemonade.

I stood behind the counter, chopping cabbage for coleslaw. Frank started up on one of his favorite topics of conversation, the benefits of tea over coffee.

“I read in a magazine the other day that tea keeps your plumbing healthy. Reduces tumors in your pipes.”

“That’s not the kind of tea you drink. That’s that green stuff from China.”

“No, this study was talking about black tea. Your standard orange pekoe like Bessie’s got right here at the diner.” He tapped the countertop. “It’s good stuff, and good for you. You should try it sometime.” Earl was so set in his ways that any suggestion he change was taken with great offense.

“I’ve been drinking coffee for over sixty years and it hasn’t hurt me yet, so you can take your studies and...”

“Refill, Earl?” Bessie grabbed the coffee pot and topped off his cup.

“Yeah, well, at least you drink yours regular, I guess,” Frank said. “Not that ex-presso stuff.” The men fell silent, and Bessie gave me a little wink before going back to the kitchen.

“Order up,” she called.

I carried out the sandwiches – two tuna salad, one turkey cranberry – and set the plates down in front of the women in the booth. I guessed they weren't much older than I was.

"What part of Ohio are you from?" I asked them. They looked at me with surprise. "I saw your license plate," I explained, pointing out the window toward their car.

"Toledo," one of them said. "Not very exciting."

"Do you like living here?" a second woman asked.

"It's like being anywhere else, I guess." The woman looked disappointed by my answer, but what could I say? People worked, watched television, went fishing, talked about the weather. People lived their lives. What else was there? I left them to their sandwiches and walked back to the storeroom to find Toledo on the map.

Bessie had an old road map of the United States tacked up on a bulletin board. She had to hand write Caston on the map because we were too small to show up otherwise. We used pushpins to mark where our visitors came from. The map didn't tell me much about Toledo – only that it was at the western end of Lake Erie, close to Michigan and not far from Canada. The network of roads was denser east of the Rockies and there were fewer forested areas. I'd never been out of Oregon.

The three women finished eating and left. I cleared their table and watched them load into their car. I wished I had asked them where they were going.

I finished the coleslaw, wiped down the tabletops, and experimented with a batch of iced coffee that both Frank and Earl refused to try. Eventually they left and the diner was quiet.

We had only seen a handful of customers since lunch, so at 2:00 Bessie told me to top off the ketchup bottles and to go on and find some shade.

"Are you sure you don't need me?" I asked.

"No, hon, I can handle it from here." I hung up my apron in the back, thanked Bessie for letting me off early, hopped in my truck, and headed to my favorite swimming hole at Saddle Lake.

As I drove through town, I saw Pete standing outside of Caston Hardware. His dad owned the store and his grandfather ran it before that; Pete would eventually take it over. I pulled up to the curb.

"Hey, champ," I said, calling through the open passenger-side window.

"What's up?" he asked. He walked over to the truck and leaned in. His brown hair hung over his eyebrows.

"Bessie let me off early. I'm going swimming. Wanna come?"

"Nah." He brushed his hair away from his eyes. "I'm waiting on a load of lumber. Wish it wasn't so hot, though. Did you hear Grandma Potter's missing?"

"Missing?"

"Yeah. Mom took some lunch over for her and she wasn't there. She couldn't have gone far, but nobody can find her."

Grandma Potter lived in a small house a few miles outside of town. Everyone referred to her as "Grandma" even though no one remembered who her blood relatives really were. Some folks said she was nearing a hundred and was part Klamath Indian. Others said she was the daughter of an unlucky gold miner who arrived too late for the gold rush in the 1850s. Grandma Potter said nothing to confirm or disclaim these suggestions.

"I'm old, that's what I am," she'd say. She swore she'd spent every day of her life in Jackson County.

"Haven't you ever wanted to see what it's like in other places?" I asked her once.

"Do all people need to breathe air?" she asked. "Do we all need to eat and have shelter? Do we all feel pain and sometimes happiness?"

"Yes, but..." She held up her wrinkled hand to silence me.

"People are the same everywhere," she said, "and I'd just assume stay where I am. I was born in these woods, and I'll die in them. That's enough for me."

It was not uncommon to see her walking along the highway, wearing a hunter's orange vest for safety with her long gray braid of hair dangling down her back. She used to walk into town for her groceries. In fall, she'd hunt for mushrooms in the woods. But lately she'd been slowing down.

"She's probably out on one of her walks," I said.

"Maybe," Pete answered. "What are you doing later?"

I shrugged.

"Come over, then." He backed up onto the curb. "Bixby's coming out." Bixby was Pete's older brother who lived in Bend and worked at a mountain bike shop. He'd bring a half keg of beer from the Deschutes Brewery, and a bunch of us would go over to the Diller house to hang out in the yard all night, talking about nothing until the keg was empty.

"Yeah, okay," I answered. Pete slapped the side of the truck as I pulled away from the curb.

I drove along the winding highway toward Saddle Lake, past dry pines, mail boxes for lone houses set back from the road, past Grandma Potter's house and blazes of fireweed. I thought about Pete. Most folks in town thought we were an item – as regular a pair as Frank and Earl – but we were just friends. We'd known each other all of our lives, and when I was little, I thought I'd have to marry him. Once, I came in the house in time

to hear my Aunt Lacey say to my mom, "Aren't they something? She's going to marry that boy."

The way she said it was a pronouncement, and I thought, I'm going to marry Pete. The idea frightened me, that my life could be set while I was so young, and that I had no say in the matter. I started crying, and Mom and Aunt Lacey turned around to see me standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Mom's eyes scanned up and down to see if I was bleeding.

"Audrey." She knelt down in front of me. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to marry Pete." I sobbed and fell into her, wrapping my arms around her neck. Instead of the consolation I expected, she laughed as she hugged me back.

"You don't have to marry him," she said. "You can marry who ever you want."

"But Aunt Lacey said that I was going to marry him."

Aunt Lacey laughed. "You don't have to marry him," she said. "But maybe you'll want to when you're older. You don't have to worry about that now."

"You can marry whoever you want. Nobody's going to make you marry Pete." Mom wiped my nose with a corner of her dishtowel and sent me back outside to play.

Just past mile marker 48, I turned off the main highway and then down a little-used Forest Service road, stirring up a sky-full

of dust. By the time I got to the lake, a layer of dirt coated my greasy skin. The water felt good, and I waded out past the salamanders that swam in the shallows to where I could float on my back. I watched clouds drift by, too high to hold any rain.

I tried to imagine marrying Pete, but I couldn't see it. I expected us to always be friends, but I didn't want to marry him, or even kiss him again. We had kissed each other once, sitting in his truck in the high school parking lot after a basketball game. He caught me off guard. He must have been planning it all night, because he was nervous.

"What's up, champ?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "I guess..." And he leaned over and kissed me. His lips felt rough and he poked at my partially opened mouth with his tongue. It wasn't what I expected in a kiss, and it didn't bring on the flush of warmth I felt when watching people kiss in movies. My toes didn't tingle, my ears didn't burn. It felt strange. We kissed for a little bit, then I pulled back from him.

"Knock it off, Pete, let's get going." He leaned back and grinned at me, his goofy Pete grin.

I thought about my parents, my Aunt Lacey and her ex-husband Phil. Bessie. Pete. Grandma Potter. They didn't seem to find anything strange about living in one place all their life. I thought about the women who had been in the diner. Wherever

they were going, chances were good it was somewhere I'd never been.

After a while, a breeze kicked up, and knowing that the hottest part of the day had finally passed, I gathered up my things, got back in my truck, and headed back to town. I had only gone about two miles from the lake when I rounded a bend and was surprised to see an RV stopped along the road. As I got closer, I could see two women crouched down, looking into the RV's grill. I slowed to a stop next to them.

"Did you overheat?" I asked, leaning out the window.

The older woman pulled herself up stiffly and answered, "It's a *Papilio troilus* Linnaeus." The younger woman turned back to the grill, poking at it with her finger.

"What?" I knew a bit about cars and trucks, but I had never heard of a papilio troi whatever.

"A *Papilio troilus* Linnaeus," the woman answered. "A Spicebush Swallowtail. It's a butterfly." She wore khaki shorts and a pale blue button down shirt. Her hair was dirty blond mixed with gray. Not salt and pepper, but salt and sand, the color of an ocean beach. She wore bifocals and tilted her head up slightly to look at the grill through the bottom of her lenses.

"Are you sure, Mom? Are you sure it's not a Pipevine? Look at this piece here." The younger woman pointed at the grill.

"Besides, it'd be unusual to see a Spicebush out here. What would it feed on?"

She looked to be the same age as Pete's brother, Bixby. She wore a t-shirt with the Oregon State University logo, a fierce, buck-toothed beaver. Her hair was cropped in a short bob, browner than her mother's. She didn't have glasses, but she was starting to develop the same pattern of wrinkles that softened her mother's face.

The older woman squatted back down in front of the grill. I sat in my truck, watching mother and daughter discuss the butterfly.

"Is your vehicle okay then?" I asked. "I can give you a ride back to town if you need it."

They both looked at me and stood up.

"The RV is fine," the younger woman said. "I just swerved to miss a pothole and I hit a butterfly. I think it's a Pipevine Swallowtail or a Spicebush. Either way, it would be highly unusual to find either of them this far west. I've never even heard of them west of the Rockies, let alone this far out in Oregon. This could be a real find. Or maybe it's just a Tiger. The young ones can look like a Pipevine."

"I'm pretty sure it's a Spicebush," the older woman asserted. "I saw a speck of orange just before you hit it. Pipevines and young Tigers don't have the orange on their hind

wings." She turned to me. "We're headed to Saddle Lake. A friend of ours in the Forest Service recommended it for its butterfly population. Are you familiar with the lake? Are we close?"

I was glad the conversation was turning to something I was familiar with.

"Yeah, I'm just coming from there. It's about two miles up this road. I never really paid much attention to the butterflies though."

The older woman's eyes gleamed. "Oh, they are fascinating, fascinating. I just love them."

The younger woman had gone into the RV and now came out with a little white box. She carefully scraped the remains of the butterfly off of the grill into the box and poked at it with the tip of a pencil.

"There, now we can look at it more closely later. Would you like to see it? It's not a very good specimen, but you can still see some of the color." She walked over to the truck and held out the box cupped gently in her hand.

Even damaged, the butterfly was beautiful. Pieces of velvety black shimmered with traces of deep blue unlike any color I'd seen before. I could only imagine what it would look like whole.

"See here, how the wing glistens in the light?" I was entranced by her voice. It was low and calm, like a pebble

dropping in a pond, the sound rippling out like rings of water. I looked at her face. Our eyes met and my stomach dropped. She smiled, and the coolness of the pond left me.

"The Pipevine feeds off one of a variety of vine plants that are toxic to animals. It's their way of protecting themselves. They give off a bad smell and predators know not to eat them. The markings of the Spicebush mimic those of the Pipevine. That's their defense, imitation."

I stared at the butterfly in the box for a long time. I could sense the young woman watching me. Eventually, she stepped back from the truck.

"Well," she said, " I suppose you have someplace to go." She put a lid on the box. "Thanks for stopping."

"Thanks for your help," said the older woman, though I hadn't helped them at all.

I gave them a wave and headed on down the road, driving slowly at first so as not to leave them standing in a cloud of dust.

I looked for butterflies as I drove, but I didn't see any, only the dust-covered trees and weeds growing along the road. I worried I'd been traveling the same paths so many times I was blind to things that I passed every day.

After supper, I went over to the Diller place. Driving through town, I tried to imagine seeing the buildings for the first time, as if I was a visitor and not someone who'd seen them every day. What would that mother and daughter think of Caston? I couldn't get past the familiarity of it.

Several people were already gathered in the Diller's backyard. Pete's folks had gone to bingo night at the Elk's Lodge in Selma. They didn't care if we drank anyway. We sat in lawn chairs around the fire pit. Bixby was pouring beers into Mason jars like he was a king. The air smelled of pine and wood smoke. Every now and then, Pete reached back in his seat and grabbed another log from the tarp-covered pile to put on the fire. Joe was there with his girlfriend, Missy, who graduated with Pete and me. She was wearing her denim jacket with fringe, and she was drinking a soda that she'd brought. She and Joe were getting married in early September, before she started to show too much.

Joe brought his own beer, a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

"I don't drink that microbrew crap," he said, popping open a can.

Grandma Potter was still missing and we talked about her awhile. She'd babysat for all of us. Some folks had started to wonder if she hadn't gone off to die in the woods like an old coyote. Then the talk turned to old teachers, reminiscing about

drinking on the roof of the school, of sneaking through the state park at night, growling like bears. We talked about the heat wave and what it might mean for the fishing season. I didn't mention the women at the lake. Eventually, the stars came out, and a sliver of a moon rose over the trees. People started heading home. Soon, it was just Bixby, Pete, Joe, Missy and me left to keep the fire going.

"Pete, you should come live with me in Bend," Bixby said. "It's a great town."

"No way. I want the hardware store. I'm gonna change the name," Pete said. "Pete's Hardware and Sundries."

"Sundries?" Bixby laughed. "How about Pete's Hardware and Undies?" While Pete defended himself against teasing from Bixby and Joe, I had a vision of me and Pete, married and living above the store. I'm pregnant, sitting in the front window watching cars roll through town on the way to somewhere else, some place I'll never see. I wasn't sure what I wanted out of life, but I knew it wasn't that.

"I'm going to Ohio," I said.

Everyone laughed, as if I had been joking.

"I'm serious," I said.

"Yeah, right," Pete said. He took a swig of his beer. "I'm going to Tijuana." He let out a large belch.

I looked at him.

"You're not kidding?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Hey, that's cool," said Bixby.

"What's in Ohio?" Missy asked. "Are you crazy?"

Maybe I was. I had blurted out Ohio without thinking about what I was saying.

"I don't know," I said. "I just want to go there." I realized it wasn't so much Ohio that I wanted to go to, but somewhere different, and Ohio seemed as good a place as any. Pete shook his head.

"Aw, it's just the booze talking," he said. I didn't say anything. Maybe I wouldn't go to Ohio, but sitting around the fire, I knew I wanted to go somewhere. I wanted to be the visitor passing through town, seeing things for the first time.

The stars had come out, and part of the moon. Joe took the last can of Pabst out of the cardboard case. He folded the case and tossed it onto the fire.

"This is the best part," he said.

"It's certainly better than that beer," Bixby said.

The box burned with a blue flame that reminded me of the butterfly wing. I watched it disappear, swallowed up by the yellow orange of the fire.

*

At the end of July, a pair of fisherman got lost not far from Saddle Lake and found what was left of Grandma Potter. The county sheriff reported a natural cause of death. I drove up to the lake after I heard. I half-hoped to see the RV parked along the road, but it was gone.

My truck was packed with some of my clothes, my sleeping bag, a few books. I didn't have a plan, but I felt better having everything I might need in the truck. I started toward the water but caught a slight movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw a butterfly flitting around some yellow flowers along the edge of the road. I stepped toward it for a closer look and glimpsed white wings with pale black lines and a rusty outline. The colors were not brilliant and shimmering, but quiet and soft.

The butterfly moved away from the road and I followed its fluttering wings into the trees. I stepped carefully through ferns and Oregon grape. The butterfly moved from one patch of sunlight to the next. Within the shade of the forest, the heat of the day was tempered and the air fragrant with warm pine. I watched the butterfly move up toward the top of a tall Doug-fir and lost it in the glare of the sun through the canopy. I'd been to the lake countless times, but I'd never bothered to step into the woods; I'd been in too much of a hurry to get in the water.

The ground was soft underfoot, centuries of leaves and needles and cones from the alders, Doug-firs, hemlocks. I started thinking about how long the trees had been there in order to get so big. Doug-firs could live to be over 750 years old. The forest wasn't going anywhere, and knowing that I could go away and then comeback to it made we wonder why I was staying.

I stepped out of the forest and sat down at the lake's edge. I sat for a long time and watched strider bugs skimming along the surface of the water. I was hot, but I didn't feel like swimming. I thought about Grandma Potter. I imagined pushing through rhododendrons to reach a downed tree, a large Doug-fir with a few seedlings sprouting out of it. I'd step up on the log and looking down, I'd see Grandma Potter curled up on the other side. If it weren't for her long, gray braid of hair, I wouldn't recognize her. Her body, swollen, is curled up in a fetal position on a small wool blanket that I recognize from her cabin. The visible skin on her face and hands is patchy – part waxy like milkweed flowers, part blackened – and clusters of insects find life in her decay. I imagine her giving birth to sorrel, ferns and mushrooms. If I had found her, I would have left her instead of hauling her away to the coroner's office.

Dragonflies buzzed across the lake. A breeze ruffled the surface of the water. I sat for so long, I could have sprouted roots and planted myself on the lakeshore, but that's not what I

wanted. I thought about Pete and his hardware store, about my parents and Aunt Lacey. I thought about Bessie and the diner and Earl and Frank. I could picture all of them one day wandering off into the woods like Grandma Potter, but I couldn't picture myself doing that – not without knowing what I might be missing. I got into my truck and headed back to the main road. It was time for me to go, and Ohio was east.

SO, WE GO

On the Sunday after his father's funeral, John worked slowly through the morning chores – chores he'd been doing for the nearly thirty years since his family moved to the farm. The barn, set back from the house, seemed particularly quiet without his father there to make comments about one cow or another or about the status of a pregnant ewe, the weather, the crops. Woodrow, the largest of the two draft horses, snorted in his stall. Wilson, the other horse, stood silent. The sheep clattered to their feet when John opened the door to let them out into the barnyard. He was aware of his own footsteps and of his own breath mixed with the breath of the animals as they shuffled out to graze. The stairs to the upper barn echoed under his boots as he went up to get the feed. The upper barn was even quieter than the lower portion where the animals were housed. He counted the bales of alfalfa and straw stacked in the loft. Yes, there were enough bales to last him to the next cutting. His father had been good about calculating how much to keep and how much to sell.

By the time John finished filling the troughs with water and distributing hay and grain, his mother had not yet come out, so he milked the cows himself, pouring each pail into the tin milk can. The farm was his responsibility now. The farm and his mother.

The morning sky was flat gray. The sun had fully cleared the eastern horizon and a slow fog lifted up from the fields that stretched back thirty acres to a stand of pines, barely visible in the distance. Michigan farmland did not sprawl out until field met sky; rather, forested land offered an intermission, holding field and sky together at the horizon. John walked across the yard from the barn to the house.

Fourth of July, corn's knee high. But now it was the end of August and the corn was tall enough to hide him if he ducked a bit. What does that get me? he wondered. It'll be time to harvest in another month. He knew he could hire the Folter boys down the road to help him, and maybe his brother Victor in Grand Rapids could take some time away from his family to help out, too. Victor was forty, a construction worker with three kids. He married a Slovak girl from a neighboring farm, and she took him away from the community, leaving John behind to look after their parents and the farm.

At the pump next to the house, John stopped to wash his hands. The two-story farmhouse hovered over him, and he turned

to look up at it. The upstairs windows looked like side-ways eyes with black shutters for lashes. The back door gaped at him like a toothless mouth, waiting to swallow him up. It was too big for him and his mother. Except for his own room, the rooms upstairs were closed off, used only for storing apples in the fall, or for Victor's family when they came to visit. John had spent most of his life in this house. Was it too late to start over? His parents had started over in their forties, buying this farm. John remembered coming home from a baseball game with his brother Victor when they lived in Chicago; then, he answered to his given name – Vaclav, a name he traded for John when he started school. From the yard they could hear shouting, and for once, they were glad their parents were speaking Czech so the neighbors couldn't understand them.

"It'll be for the boys' own good," his father yelled. "You don't want them running around with these gangs, do you?"

John and Victor froze. They didn't often hear their parents fighting, and they were all the more interested because of their father's reference to them.

"The boys? The boys? What about you? Got yourself into a hole didn't you? You are the one in trouble with the gangs. Don't think I don't know what you've been doing with all those extra bottles of *slivovice*. Oh no, we're staying right here. We're too old to take up a farm."

The boys crept to the back door. John had wanted to go in, but Victor held him back.

"But we both came from farms," their father argued. "It's in our blood. You don't forget those things. Think of the fresh air, the smell of the earth..."

"The smell of cow shit. I want to forget those things. I left Bohemia to get away from farming, and now you will make me go back to that life? If we need to leave, then why don't we go back home. You can get a good job in Prague."

"It's too late." Their father's voice lowered and the boys pressed their ears to the door. "I've already bought a place."

"You stupid dog!" Their mother's voice rattled the windowpanes.

"C'mon," Victor said, "we'd better come back later."

John wondered what his life would have been like if the family had stayed in Chicago. If they hadn't sold the house on South St. Louis just off of Cermak where the trolley ran, if they hadn't packed up everything they had and taken the train north to Michigan, would he have become a butcher like his father? Surely, he would have found a wife in the city. He could have married Susana Brabcova, the girl with the long braids who lived down the block. He wondered what she looked like now, what her husband was like, how many children she had – surely she was married and had children.

John went in the back door to the kitchen and found his mother waiting for him. Under her apron she wore the same black dress she had worn to the funeral earlier that week. She put a plate of eggs and toast on the kitchen table.

"Ma?" He gestured to her clothing, but she ignored him.

"*Jist.*" Eat. She spoke in Czech, the only language she knew. "Eat and go get cleaned up," she told him. "We're going to church." Her blue eyes focused on him and her mouth pinched in determination.

He shrugged in concession and saw her hands relax – she had been clenching them at her side, as though prepared to fight. John poured himself a cup of coffee. He noticed his mother had put his plate at the head of the table, where his father used to sit. He felt self-conscious about pulling out his father's chair and turned to see if his mother was watching, but she had her back turned and was wiping down the countertop.

John sat down to eat. Aside from his father's funeral, he hadn't been to church for over four years, ever since Father Browning refused to bury Tom Spadek in the St. Cyril and Methodius cemetery. Tom was a good friend of John's father. He shot himself in the head. His wife, Louise, found him dead in the barn.

John went with his father and Louise to speak to Father Browning. The four of them sat in the rectory office, a small

room in the building across the road from the church. It was the first time John had been in the rectory. He remembered looking out the window at the white clapboard church, its steeple poking up from the gabled roof.

"The cemetery is consecrated ground," Father Browning said. "He can't be buried there. Suicide is a sin. You can understand that, can't you?"

Louise clutched her rosary in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. She did not look at Father Browning. Instead, she focused on her rosary and softly recited a Hail Mary.

"Look at this poor woman," John's father bellowed at the priest, pointing at Louise. "What about this family? Tom's parents are buried here. Would you deny them their son? They helped build this church, for God's sake." John's father stood up and leaned on the desk. He was not a big man, but he could be fierce.

Father Browning held his composure. "I am very sorry for the family. We can do a mass for him in the church, but he'll have to be buried in the county cemetery in Wayland."

"It's a scandal," John's father screamed. "Is this the way you treat an honest man and his family?"

Louise continued saying the rosary as if she were alone in a pew in an empty church.

Father Browning stood up and looked at John. "John, you understand, don't you?"

"Pa." John put an arm out to calm his father. "Pa, let's go."

His father shrugged him off. "We will never, ever set foot in this church again." He offered his arm to Louise, who was now whispering the Lord's Prayer, and that was the last time John saw Father Browning. The Sunday church visits abruptly stopped.

The church had a new priest now, Father Stockton, a timid man with rounded shoulders and thinning hair that he combed over the top of his head. When John met with him, in the same rectory office, to discuss his father's burial, he thought about how his father could have intimidated Father Stockton into burying Tom, and he couldn't stop thinking that his father would prefer to be buried at the county cemetery with his friend. When he had mentioned this to his mother, she hissed at him, "He will be buried at Cyril and Methodius." So, in death, his father returned to the church.

John ate his eggs and told himself he shouldn't be surprised that his mother wanted to resume her Sunday visits. Church was the only place where she had a regular opportunity to speak Czech with folks outside of the family, and she had always been a religious woman.

When he finished breakfast, John went upstairs to put on his dress clothes, a black pair of trousers and a faded white, button-down shirt. He combed his hair, noting the strands of gray, and took his wallet from his dresser.

Downstairs, his mother had hung up her apron and was putting black gloves on her large hands. John wondered at the size of his mother's hands. Maybe they weren't so big, but the rest of her was so tiny that they were noticeable. She was embarrassed by them and wore gloves in public. "It's only proper," she explained.

John got the truck key from the hook beside the door and went outside. He watched the gray silhouettes of the sheep making their way out into the pasture. A couple of cows stood in the barnyard. While he had been upstairs, his mother had gone out and opened the chicken coop and hens were wandering in the yard.

John crossed the damp lawn to the tar-papered garage and lifted the board that held the doors shut. He leaned the board against the left door and opened the one in front of the pick-up truck, a brick red Ford.

John backed the truck out of the garage and let it run while he waited for his mother. She came out of the house and climbed in the passenger side without saying a word. He didn't speak either. He glanced at his mother. She was such a tiny

woman. Her face was fixed straight ahead and she sat too close to him, as though leaving space by the door where his father used to sit. John could picture his father, his right shirt sleeve rolled up to just above the elbow so he wouldn't get it dirty, his bare arm resting on the open window. He'd slap the side of the truck with his palm. "Let's go, son," he'd say, his lips barely visible beneath his handlebar moustache.

John paused a moment until he realized he was waiting for his father's command; he put the truck in gear. The gravel crunched under the wheels as he drove to the main road. At the end of the block he turned right and went past the old Spadek farm; the house sat on a small hill back from the road, surrounded by fields. A new family lived there now. After Tom's death, Louise Spadek moved to Grand Rapids to live with her daughter. John wondered what his mother would do if he wasn't around. She'd probably have to go live with Victor. She'd probably like that better than farm life anyway, though his mother seemed so sullen at times that it was hard to think that she'd like anything.

His mother used to tell stories of Bohemia and the golden city of Prague, of the countryside and the people of her tiny village. She sang folk songs, too, about peasants planting fields of barley, woodsmen returning from their hunts, young girls waiting under apple trees for their young men to pass by.

John remembers sitting in the kitchen on Saturday afternoons, listening to her sing while she make bread. His memories of those songs stop in Chicago. She didn't sing at the farm, though recently he had heard her humming to herself as she worked in the kitchen.

John turned into the church lot and found a spot near the cemetery gate. He got out and walked around to the passenger side to open the door for his mother. She held a small purse and John knew there was nothing in it but her pocketbook, a handkerchief, and the small black bible that she always carried with her. She read it to herself during the service. The mass was in Latin, and she didn't understand it any more than she claimed to understand English.

His mother began walking toward the church. She turned once to look at him when she realized that he wasn't following her. He lowered his eyes and shook his head. "I'm not going in, Ma." She paused for a moment, then headed into church by herself.

He didn't have anything against the church; he certainly didn't bear his father's grudge. But he felt that religion should be a private thing, and he didn't get much from the rigid structure of the Catholic Church.

The cemetery wasn't much bigger than the church lot. The fence around it was low and simple, a thick-gauge wire grid stretched between wooden posts – the same kind of fence they

used on the farm, but without the barbed wire at the top. Nothing but poor farmers buried here, thought John. He could see the mound of dirt in the far corner that marked his father's grave. He lifted the metal horseshoe handle that opened the gate and entered the cemetery. He took his time getting to his father, pausing to read the other headstones. The Martineks, the Tichons, Tom Spadek's parents. He knew all of those families. They had all been in the area for decades, even longer than his family – and his family had lived there for almost 30 years. The dates carved into the stones identified fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, grandchildren. Some families already had three generations buried here.

When John reached his father's grave, he stopped. The marble headstone wouldn't be ready for another month. Instead, the grave was marked with a makeshift wooden cross that moved from one new plot to the next in the cemetery. Some of the flowers from the funeral bouquets were wilted, but the daisies in the bouquet were holding up well. "What now, Pa?" he asked, staring down at the dirt that covered his father. "What am I supposed to do now?"

John took in a breath. The morning fog had thinned and it looked like it would clear up to be a pleasant day. In the distance, he could see the tips of two pines jutting above a row of maples and oaks. They reminded him of the cathedral spires he

had seen in Europe during the war. John had been with the Corps of Engineers, rebuilding roads and bridges, mostly in France. He'd served with a fellow who lived in Chicago. Dooley was his name. He had offered John a place to stay. "Yeah, my aunt has a room in her house that she rents out. You could get it for cheap. She likes soldiers. Chicago's a swell city." John meant to stop by the farm just for a visit to see his parents and to pick up his things before going on to the city. But the corn needed planting and his father asked him to help. Then the old corncrib blew down in a storm, and he stayed on to rebuild it. Who else was going to help?

Twenty years later he still got up with the sun each morning to go out to the barn. He still spent his days plowing fields, pulling weeds, scraping dung out of his boots before going in the house. Hell, he still pumped his water from a well and used an outhouse.

He wished he had left long ago, or better yet, he wished his father hadn't moved the family in the first place. Not only did he have the farm to deal with, but his illiterate mother. She could read Czech, but what good did that do her when everything was in English. She could not properly pronounce his name and called him "*Dzan*."

After the stock market crash, before the war, strangers would stop by the farm looking for work in exchange for food and

a night in the barn. Once John had come in early from the fields to find a man trying to talk to his mother in the yard.

"What's the matter with you?" the man asked her. His tone was pleasant, and he was smiling, but his words were caustic. "Can't you speak English? You stupid bohunk," he said sweetly. "You are really dumb aren't you?" He nodded, and John's mother nodded and smiled back.

"What is he saying, Dzan? What is he saying to me?"

John gave the stranger a cold look. "You better be moving along now, Mister."

"Hey, buddy," the stranger said, "I was just having some fun. I didn't mean any harm. Look. She's alright, she doesn't know what I was saying."

John stepped towards the man, forming a fist. "I know what you are saying and you better get going," he said sternly. The man was almost a head taller than John, but he backed away.

"You should teach this boy some proper manners," he said then turned and walked down the drive to the road.

"What did he want, Dzan?"

"Why don't you just learn English, Ma?"

"I am a Czech and I will speak Czech," she snapped. "Don't you forget where you came from."

"I came from Chicago," he told her in English.

"Speak Czech," she yelled at him. "At home you will speak Czech."

In the cemetery, birds flitted from tree to tree. A rabbit nibbled grass in the thicket outside the fence. A dog barked in the distance. The rest of his life spanned out before him, day in, day out, the same thing until he died and was buried here next to his father. The idea of going nowhere burdened him and made the breeze feel heavy. He could smell the rank odor of the nearby dairy farm wafting in the air.

A car drove by, and John turned and watched it disappear down the road. He couldn't stay. Maybe it wasn't too late. He hurried past the graves to the truck.

He got in and started the engine, backed away from the fence and pulled out of the parking lot. He felt good to be moving. He didn't know where he was going, but at least, at last, he was doing something for himself. Something he wanted to do. Let his mother figure out her own life. Let Victor deal with her and the farm for a change. He drove past Gun Lake and turned south onto Route 45. He felt more alive than he ever had. He could go to Chicago and look up Dooley. Or from there, maybe he could hop a train to New York, or California. The possibilities rushed by with the farmland. He could find Susana Brabcova.

Perhaps she hadn't married after all. He could get a job driving trucks and travel all over the country.

By the time he reached Kalamazoo, a half-hour away, John needed to stop for gas. He pulled into a service station and eased the truck next to the pump. While the tank was filling, a car pulled up to the second pump. A man and a woman got out of the front. The car had Illinois plates.

The man paced alongside the car. "Look," the woman said, "she's old, she doesn't mean those things she says."

The man looked up and saw John watching him.

"You got a mother-in-law, Mister?" he asked.

John shook his head.

"You're a lucky man."

"Don't listen to him," the woman said. She turned to her husband. "That's my mother you're talking about."

"That's right," the man answered, "and you've got to shut her up. I'm not going to put up with her harassing me all the way home. 'Slow down, you're driving too fast.' 'Watch out for that truck,' 'Use your blinker!' I nearly drove off the road when she yelled that in my ear. What does she know about blinkers?"

John paid the attendant and got back in his truck. The couple continued to argue. A woman, older than his mother, sat in the backseat and looked out at him. Deep wrinkles lined her face and her eyes sagged at the corners. She held his gaze with a sad expression like a dog being left behind. The woman's mouth

parted slightly as though to say, take me with you. John put the truck in gear and pulled forward. Instead of turning toward Chicago, he headed back home.

From down the road, John could see his mother standing in front of the church. He didn't know the time, but the sun was almost halfway across the sky. He turned into the lot and stopped the truck in front of her. He reached across the seat to open her door. He didn't look at her but could feel her watching him. He wondered why she hadn't started walking home. She climbed into the passenger seat and put her purse on her lap. She closed the door, not hard enough, and had to re-open it. The second time, she used both of her big, gloved hands to pull the door shut.

She patted him lightly on the arm. "*Tak, jdeme,*" she said, and then in English, "We go." They drove home in silence.

VITA

Karen Kudej was born in Livonia, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit; she was saved from suburbia by her grandparent's farm in western Michigan. She earned her B.A. in English from the University of Chicago in 1994. She has worked for various nonprofit organizations and has taught creative writing to children and adults. She currently resides in Portland, Oregon, but Michigan is on the horizon.